

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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## Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 2, Winter 2007

Harpur Palate .  
*Binghamton University--SUNY*

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## Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 2, Winter 2007

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.. Harpur Palate, Volume 6 Issue 2, Winter 2007

# Harpur Palate

Volume 6 Issue 2

GRILL  
& BAR  
RESTAURANT



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Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 6, Iss. 2 [2007], Art. 1

# Harpur Palate

Volume 6 Issue 2, Winter 2007



Binghamton University  
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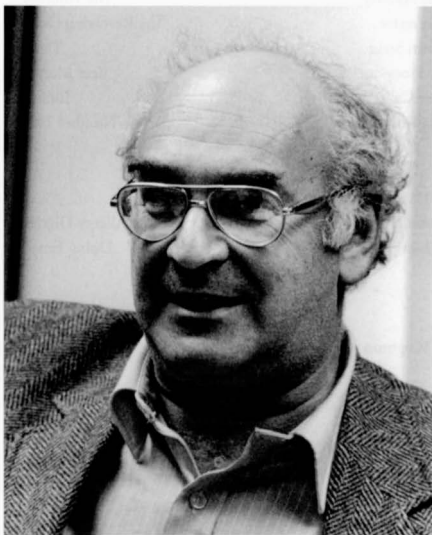
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## THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY



WINNER

DAGUERREOTYPE PORTRAIT OF WOMAN & BIRD

Maureen Alsop

A woman, a soldier, a bird—all born  
within cages, learned quickly to pipe songs  
which rose wildly upward  
into the sky's orange skirt, & changed  
into liquid. They were narrowed, eventually,  
by the weave between clouds.

\* \* \*

In the mind's well-lit alleyway, a wavering  
billboard holds  
the image of an 8-year-old girl  
& a bicycle that she is yet  
unable to ride. The wind pulls her leeward. She

is crossing now over crosswalk dust, &  
a shadowbroken shoreline.

When larks fall from the sky, an indiscriminate sound,  
a bellow, ruptures in the reeds—scrape  
of coccyx & lull. Wakeful wing-beats  
alternate with short periods of sailing.

\* \* \*

The heart's iris dilates, machinery lips  
swell. The monkey inside the child  
peddles madly to maintain motion's  
steadiness.

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How does she measure her motive  
to meet unconscious wing? She studies  
herself, steadies the mirror. She props  
her nipple into the cup of her palm;  
beneath her left breast, a nest  
of cartilage & wing exposed:

tremor & breath. Half dressed  
by moonlight, gazing, she sees  
her face backward.

In the unfurnished room, windows  
warped with winter frost, she glances  
the tremble & slip of leaves from the pin oak.

\* \* \*

The woman inside the girl  
will never know whether she's seen  
herself. She will grow from the radiance  
of the girl's warmth; the girl will depart  
without contemplation or shade. The woman  
will lie down with a soldier

who carries a letter in his left hip pocket—a letter  
from his brother who fell down the stairwell  
of the Osawatimie Sanatorium, during the war.

She has forgotten  
his face  
he is nothing but a wave  
capping at sea, or a stain in the linoleum, something  
occasionally referred to. Each winter

he unfolded the cramped paper  
& read to her. His ink thinned annually



bits of gravel drop from her pen. Horses are pulled  
out of her body blown open  
& spinning from the lungs . . .

Knotted faces in the box elders  
twist into the horizon. Filament  
roots silence her. A serpents' whistle  
advances through the glowing dust. The slack  
softness in the woman's jaw was the light  
turning its anchorage. Into what  
does she not sink? Slagheap & shoal

at the edge of town—a field where cicadas crackle  
from the treetops & the stars rattle.

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
FINALIST

CAMOUFLAGE

Lisa Titus Caloro

A hunted animal communicates  
better than the hunter, a man who only listens  
for a certain crackle in the forest of his mind,  
can hear a deer snort a mile upwind, but can't  
identify a heartbeat in the fingertips of a woman.

Lawn scattered with animal carcasses in various  
degrees of decay, hearts eaten by the kind of wolf  
only known in midnight's howlings, you're guided  
by a moon unable to sympathize with animal pain  
for she has given birth to too much joy.

The rage this causes stalks you, bites at your fingertips  
like the raccoon you tried to tame one summer who  
left you with a house-full of trash and a litter of helpless  
little angers you had no idea how to feed.

So when you start listing the three things a woman  
is good for, I stop listening, think of a tenderness  
only heard once: the night your truck smashed into  
a hulk of bear and it whimpered

a story more painful than its broken back;  
a tale you could never track like a coyote  
in a snowstorm, yielding to your fingertips, a woman's  
surrender, with one last, lonely cry.

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE

FINALIST

HOW YOU ARE GOING TO SAVE THE WORLD

Cynthia Grier Lotze

In the interest of all the things  
that are drying up, I submit  
for your immediate use: receding  
lakes, rivers running to nothing  
but the final sweat of rocks, the family  
Holstein in bones  
and a slack cow-coat and, finally,  
your uncapped pen, oxidizing  
ink in the elements. Things are nearly  
spent with your idling, and last week  
you stood too near a whole, dead  
fish under glass in the deli  
and a man looked at the pair  
of you, you and the fish; he was  
thinking you might be dead, too. Wide,  
dead trout eyes. *Help! I can't  
blink*, you thought. *It's all drying up!*  
Is this what the fish thought? As he was  
plucked from his puddle to set out  
flaking in a desert of beached  
seafood? But here's some  
news: It's not too late. For you,  
for the cow (perhaps it is  
for the fish), the river, the lakes, the man  
(who found himself wondering if  
he noticed you entirely because he felt  
like the fish, too) and, finally, the smooth,  
cool, gorgeous barrel of your abandoned  
pen. The wild, arid world

will spring to flooding under  
your kind hand. The rocks will  
weep and the cows will leap the pasture  
fence toward the sea, grow  
fins and teach the fish  
civil disobedience. All this because  
of you, the scratch of your pen again quietly  
sounding the clean, wet rasp of invention. Now  
is the tenth hour at least. Were it the eleventh,  
I wouldn't bother to say.

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
FINALIST

HOLY

Jane Knechtel

At first I was perfect.  
I spread myself out like a forest  
And hardly thought of home,  
Until she hung a star on my head  
And draped my limbs in fire.  
My needles dropped like bombs.

*The old dream, the old dream:  
A child in the living room,  
Wise men adrift on the roof.*

The hours drag by here.  
I am as beautiful and useless as manufactured snow.  
I annoy her now with my endless cries for water.  
At night she steps into the living room  
Like a girl looking for a dance partner—  
We sway in my imaginary arms.

*All the world is fast asleep  
Except the tree, except the tree  
And three lone wise men and me.*

My days here are numbered.  
She no longer comes to me at night.  
She wants to be unstirred again,  
Like a child who has given up believing in Santa,  
Or a woman who has stopped counting wars in her head—  
The idea of a tree consoling her unbearable.

*I am crying in the dream,  
Into the arms of a tree.  
Wise men are trawling the gutters.*

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE  
FINALIST

SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT

Madelyn Garner

Today as the sun cross-stitches  
the screen door into a tapestry of light,  
the cat, a shadow on the threshold,  
is oblivious to the squirrels  
scurrying along the vertebrae of a fence.  
Stilled slink. Only a twitch  
of ear proving for this click of time,  
she is alive. But you, my son, are not.

I consider the possibility  
of a parallel universe where an identical cat,  
defenseless against the slaughter  
of wheels, drags home viscera  
shiny as beetles, dies  
stretched before the threshold,  
breeze fraying her fur,  
ears no longer interrogating  
the existence of squirrels.

That is to say, time is a rondelet  
in the quantum garden  
of many worlds, our paths crossing  
and separating in alternate  
realities cloned from the same streaming  
particles, bursts of energy.  
My mind says *Yes*  
to infinite copies of you coming  
to the door, young  
and transcendent with good blood,  
bearing a kitten the color of shadows.

THE TROUBLES

Charles Haverty

In the morning, they took a taxi from their hotel on St. Stephen's Green to a car rental agency on South Circular Road. A man in an apron was sweeping up behind the counter; otherwise, the place was deserted. The man had a wrestler's build and severe black brows under a shock of white hair. When Michael and Rachel entered, he snatched off his apron, as if he'd been caught at something shameful. He leaned the broom in a far corner, draped the apron over the broomstick, and stationed himself behind a brass nameplate that read: "J. COOGAN." When he brought their reservation up on the computer screen, his eyes brightened.

"So you're from Boston then?"

Though the question was directed at Michael, he didn't wish to speak, not in front of Rachel. Overnight, words had become another currency whose exchange rate he couldn't calculate, and he'd fallen into thrifty silence. He didn't want casual conversation to counteract this knot of fresh poison between him and his wife, not yet. He wanted to taste it, savor it, like a rotten tooth. Rachel could do the talking. He wasn't about to make this any easier for her.

"You know it?" Rachel said. She was small and dark and, except for a peripatetic nausea—what she called her "morning, noon, and night sickness"—showed no signs of pregnancy. "Boston, I mean."

"Strictly by proxy. I've got a son there—or thereabouts." Assuming a stock Boston accent, he said, "Kid's a brick-layah in Doah-chestah."

"Bravo!" She was easily delighted, easy with strangers. "Have you been over?"

"Never had the inclination. But the wedding's in August, so I suppose I haven't much choice. He's marrying an Irish girl. Three thousand miles just to marry an O'Toole." He folded his

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hands on the counter in front of him. "So what brings Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly to Dublin?"

"My husband's people come from here," Rachel said, "and so we thought—"

"From Dublin?"

"Galway," Michael said.

"Is that so? Whereabouts in Galway?"

"I'm not quite sure," Michael said, but he wasn't anywhere close to sure, and the question and his answer made him feel fraudulent.

"Still, it's always exciting exploring one's roots, wouldn't you say, Mr. Donnelly?" Coogan said. "Kunta Kinte and all that."

"Actually, Ireland was *my* idea," Rachel said. "My husband here wanted to go to Venice. But we made a deal." In fact, they'd talked about Venice for as long as they'd been married; it was only with her pregnancy that she'd become taken with the sentimental impulse—a "craving," she'd called it—to come here.

"You made him an offer he couldn't refuse, eh?"

"I promised to do the driving."

"And what part of the island might *your* people come from, Mrs. Donnelly?"

"My people?" she said. "My people come from *Coney* Island—the kosher part. My people are Yids, Mr. Coogan, Russian Jews."

"Well now, I wouldn't be so sure about that." He leaned farther over the counter. "After all, you know what they say about the lost tribe of Israel."

"What *do* they say?"

"They say they ended up here. The Tribe of Dan, I believe they were called."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I believe it is. At Ballyshannon in Donegal. So there might be a bit of the Hebrew in all of us." He winked at Michael. "And a bit of the Irish, as well."

Even Coogan's most declarative sentences curled up at the ends, interrogatively, accusatively, and though Michael knew that

this brogue should touch some chord in him—clearly Rachel was a sucker for it—to his ears it sounded put on, played up, and he bristled at the agent's overfamiliarity.

"Which way will you be traveling then?" Coogan asked.

"South," Rachel said. "Down along the Ring of Kerry and then—"

"Well, that's pretty country all right—down to Bantry Bay and up through the cliffs and the Burren and all—but then there's the *people*, Mrs. Donnelly."

"The people?"

"Don't you know the natives in Kerry are infamous for eating their young?"

Rachel laughed, which only encouraged him.

"Really now, one can't tell the people from the sheep down there. No, you'll be wanting to go north."

"Well, I *wanted* to go north—County Down, Carrickfergus, the River Lagan—"

"Yes, yes," Coogan said blandly, "all the old songs."

"—but my husband wouldn't hear of it."

"No?" He shifted his sights to Michael. "And why's that, Mr. Donnelly?"

"I'd just as soon avoid any troubles," Michael said, making a point of the plural.

"Now don't be believing everything you read in the newspapers." A shadow passed over Coogan's face, like a cloud crossing the sun, and as he turned his attention to his paperwork, Michael saw that his hand was badly scarred, as if burned. A pale pink flush spread over the back of it and under the cuff of his shirtsleeve.

"Will the both of you be driving the vehicle?"

"Just me," Rachel said.

"Just you?"

"Just I. That was part of the deal."

"The deal?"

"The aforementioned shamrocks-for-gondolas deal."

"Ah yes, *that* deal." His black brows lifted. "The missus drives

in Ireland and the mister in Venice. Is that the deal then?"

"Something like that," Michael said.

"Then I'll be needing to see Mrs. Donnelly's driving license, if you please."

Rachel removed her wallet from her big black handbag and shuffled through it. Frowning, she returned to the handbag, laying out its contents on the countertop, item by item: her passport; an already dog-eared copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*; three rolls of antacids; a plastic tube of Dramamine; *Karen Brown's Ireland: Charming Inns & Itineraries*, its pages flickering with Post-its; a redundant Tampax in a weather-beaten wrapper; a plastic packet of Kleenex; two shades of lipstick; an Aer Lingus air sickness bag; a snap-shut sunglasses case covered in a red, black, and white ladybug pattern; and a half-eaten Snickers bar fuzzy with lint.

At last, she said, "I can't believe it. I must have left it at home—on the kitchen table when I was sorting out credit cards and such."

"Well, there goes the deal then, doesn't it?" Coogan said.

"Michael, I am *so* sorry."

Michael hated to drive, even on the right side of the road and the right side of the car, and the sudden prospect of motoring up and down Ireland filled him with dread. He'd heard countless horror stories about the roads, and Rachel's promise to drive had been the sine qua non of his agreement to come here. But he refused to give either his wife or the agent the satisfaction of showing his fear. Instead, he shrugged and said, "Just the latest in a series of betrayals," and though this was meant to wound Rachel, he found himself blushing.

"Really now, Michael," she said. "Betrayal? That's not fair, is it?" She was pushing him, daring him to take this further in the presence of this stranger. She knew he wouldn't.

"Now, now," Coogan said. "If you're in the market for a divorce, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place."

"After all, it *is* a Catholic country," Rachel said.

"That may be." Coogan frowned. "In any case, all I do is

hire out cars.”

Now Rachel blushed. “Oh, I didn’t mean—”

“Unless you’ll be requiring separate vehicles,” he said, brightening, “in which case I’m your man.”



“So, are you going to give me the silent treatment the entire trip?” Rachel asked.

Michael didn’t answer, but his quiet had taken on a different quality. Steering the little white rent-a-car through the outskirts of Dublin required his total attention, and for the moment his survival instinct displaced Rachel’s confession of the night before. He felt paralyzed behind the wheel, while the brightly painted doors of the row houses streaked along his peripheral vision.

“It’s a long, long way to Tipperary,” she said.

“Tipperary’s not on the itinerary.”

“It’s an even longer way to Galway.”

“I have to concentrate,” he said. “I can’t take my eyes off the road.”

“I wasn’t asking for eye contact,” she said. “Just a little conversation.”

“I’d have thought you’d be all talked out after J. Coogan,” he said.

“Wasn’t he a character?”

“You heard that Kunta Kinte business?”

“I heard it but I didn’t get it.”

“Come on, you remember,” he said. “Kunta Kinte? *Roots*?”

“Oh, now I get it. *Roots*. He was talking about *your* roots.”

“But with the accent on *Kunt*.”

“Oh really now, Michael,” she said. “You’ve got to put a leash on your paranoia.”

“My paranoia?”

“All right then, your anger. You’ve been hyper-defensive since we got here. After all, these *are* your people.”

His people. His parents’ parents were the children of

Irishmen. Anything worth remembering about Ireland had been left behind, or forgotten, a piece at a time, generation after generation, until all he remembered were small hours spent among small people in small, stale rooms. The smell of trapped gas, the odor of disappointment, the gravity of grudges. He thought of his grandfather's hungry eyes under brows as black as Coogan's, the network of ruptured capillaries stitched across the old man's cheeks and nose, ice cubes melting in the whiskey glass. He felt no connection to any of this, to any of them. He had no people.

They left Dublin and traveled down through Arklow, to Waterford, where they took a quick tour of the crystal factory and bought a set of wineglasses. But the roads grew narrower and narrower after Waterford, edged with stone walls or thickets concealing stone walls, and time and again he had to pull the car over to allow some bus or truck or tractor to pass ahead or behind him.

Finally, Rachel said, "You can't pull over every time another car comes along."

"Two solid objects can't occupy the same space at the same time," Michael said. "There's a lesson in Irish history for you, Mrs. Donnelly."

"There are two lanes, Michael. You're driving like an old lady. At this rate, we'll never get to Galway."

"I'd say you left your right to criticize my driving back in Boston—somewhere on the kitchen table with your driver's license."

"Can't you just let that go?" she said. "Please? I said I was sorry. I *am* sorry. Are you going to hold this over my head all the way to Galway?"

"You bet I will."

After a pause, she said, "Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

"This is all about Brian, isn't it? You're using this driving business as a way of punishing me for Brian."

"What are you talking about?"

"This is your chickenshit way of talking *around* the issue because you're afraid to talk *about* it."

"I'm not afraid to talk about it," he said. "It just makes me *sick* to talk about it." When this failed to draw blood, he said, "I remember him now."

"Do you?"

"He was there at Thanksgiving."

"I told you that," she said. "I told you that last night."

"He kept calling the pumpkin pie 'pudding.'"

"That's what they call it in England. Dessert, I mean. He wasn't being affectatious, he was just being British. He can't help that."

"No, I'm sure he can't," Michael said. He wasn't sure how far he wanted to go with this. "We played charades."

"That's right."

"He was on my team. I can't believe it. He was on *my* team."

"He liked you," she said. "He likes you a lot."

"Only, he pronounced it '*charahds*.'"

"That's how they—"

"Yes, he's British. We've established that. He insisted that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was spelled without the 'a,' as in Ernest Hemingway or Ernest Borgnine or—"

"So what?"

"So it got to be embarrassing after a while," he said. "Like that pudding business. Very insistent, your Brian."

"You know, he insisted on pulling the plug as soon as I told him I was pregnant. *He* did."

"Well, that was awfully crickety of him, eh what?"

"When I kissed him goodbye, he didn't—" Her voice dropped. "—he wouldn't even kiss back."

"I think it might be better if we didn't talk right now."

"He told me to tell you," she said. "About him, I mean. About us."

"No, I'd really rather you didn't share anymore, thank you."

"He told me to come clean."

"Not just now," he said.

"There are worse things, Michael. There really *are* worse things."

"Please."

"I mean, look at us. Here we are, tooling around the old country, with a backseat full of crystal and a bun in the oven. My oven, your bun."

"But how do you know—"

"Because I know."

"Yes, but *how* do you know?"

"Because we were careful," she said. "Ridiculously careful. He used a condom. I used a diaphragm. We even timed things to my—"

"I don't need to hear all this."

"It's *your* baby, Michael. *Our* baby. I can tell you the moment of conception." As if the idea had just come to her, she asked, "Shall I tell you the moment of conception?" She put her hand on his arm, but he shook it off.

"I'm trying to drive here."

"It was the night I wore the Chinese dress, after Pei and Andy's wedding. Remember? After the reception?" He felt her eyes on him. "You'll have to trust me."

He turned his head just long enough to register his skepticism, then slowed to let an orange tour bus growl past them, impossibly close.

"On this," she said. "You'll have to trust me on this. If you can't trust me on this, then—well, then we can't do this."

"What does that mean?" he said, accelerating. "What does that mean, we can't *do* this? Do what?" He shifted his weight in the seat and sat even more upright. "If that *is* my child in there, you're not going to *do* a goddamned thing."

"What I mean is that we can't do this *together*. I'm going to have this baby, with or without you. Either you're coming along or you're getting off. But if you *are* getting off, you're getting off right here. *Capiche?*"

"I'm getting off? Who's doing the fucking driving here?"

"Watch the mouth," she said. "And enough about the driving already. I'm pregnant, for Christ's sake. Be a mensch." She swept her hand across the windshield, taking in the countryside on the other side of the glass. "You can't turn all of this into a hell. You can't. I won't let you—for your own sake. I mean, just *look* at it, Michael. Isn't it gorgeous?"

"How would I know?" he said. "I can't take my eyes off this fucking road."



They stayed the night at a bed and breakfast in Youghal, on the southern coast, and got back on the road early the next morning. Rachel was sick and Michael had to pull the car over every half hour or so. When she wasn't throwing up, she was sleeping. The fields were full of sheep and a splash of red flashed in the corner of his vision, first, a single sheep, its fleecy haunches stained with what looked like blood, then whole flocks, similarly stained. What was this? Michael wondered. Something menstrual or ritualistic? Rachel could explain. She was a scientist, a biologist, and as he considered her compulsion to talk about her Brian, to spill her guts whether he liked it or not, it occurred to him that the affair had been another of her experiments and that she was, by nature and training, eager to share the results—hypothesis, protocol, and all that raw data, from which, together, they might draw whatever conclusion—as if, all along, it had been their joint venture, Rachel and Michael's. Over seven years of marriage, most of their adventures, erotic or otherwise, had been her doing. It was this sense of adventure that he'd first loved in her, that filled some missing part of him. Yet this same spirit of curiosity had led to her Englishman's bed and now took the two of them down these impossible Irish roads. He wanted to hate her, but he couldn't. She was his only guide through this hostile landscape, moving as easily among "his people" as her own, and as she slept beside him in the passenger's seat, he felt

closed in by such loneliness and panic that, in spite of himself, he blurted, "Rachel."

She opened her eyes. "What's the deal with the sheep?" she said, and went back to sleep.

They ate lunch in Bantry, under a black and white wedding portrait of John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara from *The Quiet Man*, and then they drove north, past flocks and flocks of red-rumped sheep, and checked into an inn in Dingle. Michael was happy and relieved to be out from behind the wheel, and it pleased him to watch Rachel dress for dinner. She put on a celebratory red dress with little pearl buttons down the back. A sun-shaped earring dangled gold above her right shoulder, a silver crescent moon over her left. In the restaurant downstairs from their room, a ruddy-faced young waiter took their orders, and as he turned to walk away, Rachel stopped him.

"I have a question for you, my good man."

"Ma'am?"

"What's the story with the sheep around here?" she said. "The rosy hindquarters, I mean."

Blushing, the boy backed away and retreated to the kitchen.

"Now you've done it," Michael said, and soon a middle-aged woman—the hostess who'd seated them—appeared.

"My son informs me that the lady has a question?"

"Listen," Rachel said, "I didn't mean anything—"

"No, no, no," the hostess said earnestly. "You're just a city girl with a healthy curiosity. There's nothing dirty about it, dear, nothing shameful. It's nature, is all." She slid onto the bench beside Michael. "You see, they go into heat, the ladies do, the ewes, and it's important to keep track of this—for the success of the flock, you know. One way is by marking them. And so the man—the ram—he wears a sort of bib, you see, and when he mounts the lady, the bib marks her behind with that red paint you've been wondering about." As she laid out the mechanics of conception, her tale took on the cadence of a bedtime story, and Michael was lulled by the lilt of her voice and fell a little in

love with her, though he could see by Rachel's dark blush that she wished she'd never asked the question. On and on she went, until her son returned with their meals, whereupon she got up from the bench, laid her hand upon Rachel's, and asked in a conspiratorial hush, "You're expecting, aren't you?"

When they got back to their room, Rachel turned to Michael and said, "Let's make love." It sounded unlike her, a self-conscious and quaint corrective to the nut-and-bolts bluntness of their hostess. She turned her back to him to him, dropping her arms to her sides. "Undo me, Mr. Donnelly, and then do me."

But as he worked at her buttons, he thought of her Brian, and a red stain spread across his vision, over Rachel and the bed and the room.

"Had you already slept with him?" he asked.

"What?"

"At Thanksgiving. Were you already sleeping with him?"

He felt the slow, deep intake of her breath under his fingertips. "We only did it a couple times," she said. "Three or four times really."

"That wasn't the question."

"No actual intercourse," she said, "not yet, not at that point. We'd fooled around some, but—"

"All right, enough."

"You asked."

"It was a yes-or-no question," he said. "I don't want to know all this."

She turned to face him. "That's the thing, isn't it? You don't want to know anything, not a goddamned thing." She began to pace the planked floor. "I mean, the fact that you didn't even *know* I was using a diaphragm—"

"That I didn't *know*?"

"That you couldn't tell, that you couldn't smell it or taste it."

"*Taste* it?"

"That you couldn't taste the whatchamacallit. That stuff." With the bed between them, she began to act out the mystery

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word in a frantic pantomime, scooping at the air like some dancing Shiva. "You know, the spermicidal jelly."

"What are you?" he said. "Are you crazy?"

"Brian could taste it. He said it made his tongue numb."

"Christ, you're worse than crazy. You're obscene. You really are."

"It wasn't just about fucking, Michael."

"Don't talk like a whore."

"Don't get ugly," she said. "I won't let you make this ugly."

"But it *is* ugly. It's seedy and vile and—"

"For a few lousy weeks I felt beautiful," she said. "I *was* beautiful. Of course, you couldn't see it, but for a whole month I wasn't invisible."

"You're not invisible," he said. "I can see his mark on you, his stain, his spray."

"Here then. Let's even things up." She grabbed her handbag and turned it upside down on the dressing table. From her wallet, she extracted one Euro note after another, wadding them in her fists and flinging them across the bed. "Go on out there among your people and fuck one of them. It's on me."

"They're not my people."

"Go forth." She chucked a fistful of change at him. "With my blessing."

"I don't need your blessing." His voice broke, followed by the rest of him. He wept like a child, and like a mother, she comforted him. They made love among the coins and soggy bills, and afterward they fell asleep in each other's arms and slept close all through the night, as the room was cold and the mattress sank toward the middle.



The roads got even worse after Dingle, winding up through the hills and closed in on either side by stone walls and high hedgerows, so that Michael was able to see only a short distance in front of him. Rachel was cheery and chatty, but he

couldn't speak. He had to keep his eyes glued to the road—an accident waited around every curve—and again he resented her cheerfulness, her absence of contrition, of remorse. They passed flock after flock of ruddy-haunched sheep without comment.

After a while she found a radio station that played American pop songs of the nineteen-sixties. A Beach Boys song came on—"Do It Again"—and though she didn't know the lyrics, she sang along anyway, making up words, scatting over its swells and dips and crests.

Michael said, "I've always heard this as a rather sad song."

"Sad?" She laughed. "It's the Beach Boys."

"I know it's the Beach Boys, but it's *late* Beach Boys. Nervous breakdown-drugged-out-Maharishi-Manson Family-locked-in-the-bedroom Beach Boys. It's the Beach Boys *doing* the Beach Boys."

"So where do you get sad?"

"Because what he's saying—what the guy in the song is *really* saying—is that he *can't* do it again. You know: California girls and surfin' safaris and all that fun fun fun stuff—that's all gone gone gone. That's all behind this Beach Boy."

"So what you're saying is that it's a song about loss," she said. "Is that what you're saying?"

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying. Profound, acute, irreparable loss." Rachel went silent, but Michael was on a roll. "See, he's thinking that he'd *like* to do it again, but he knows there ain't no *way* he could do it again. Because it can never be the same, ever again. Never ever."

Now Dionne Warwick was singing "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?" and though Rachel loved this song, loved to sing along with all those *whoa-whoa-whoas*, she kept quiet, until the instrumental break, when, in a flat, dead voice, she told him to pull over.

"Why?"

"Pull over," she repeated.

"Are you sick? Are you going to throw up?"

"Just do it."

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She was out of the car before he'd put it in park and walked across a field that sloped up a hill. He got out of the car and followed her.

"Rachel," he said when he'd caught up with her.

"You've never surfed in your entire fucking life," she said and walked on.

He didn't know what to say. Leaning against a lichened boulder, he felt suffocated by the same fear that had seized him in the car the day before, that same claustrophobia of self. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Who are you trying to impress?"

She stopped on another knob of rock. "Who do you think?" she shouted back. "He fucked me. I fucked him. I'm sorry. But I can't unfuck him. And I can't go on like this."

As she continued up the hillside, he watched the shape of her body under her heavy sweater—still her shape, still her body—and he remembered her in her Chinese dress, a trimester ago and an ocean away, somehow more naked in that dress than when she'd taken it off, and it struck him now that it was she who didn't belong here, who needed shepherding. She was the stranger here, a great-granddaughter of the Saint Petersburg ghetto lost in the hills of Kerry. No, it couldn't be undone, she couldn't be unfucked; but yes, there *were* worse things, and yes, he believed her: it was his child all right, his son, his daughter, held hostage in the plush prison of her womb, as he too was her hostage. She had biology on her side; he had two thousand years of Roman Catholicism on his. It wasn't a fight that either could win. A political solution was the best he could hope for.

"A truce?" he called up the hill.

She stopped and stayed put as he closed the space between them.

"A truce?" she echoed, softly now, civilized. "*Another* truce?"

"You want me to sign something?" he said. "I'll sign it. Only get back in the car? Please? We'll never get to Galway at this rate."



Rachel was sick on the ferry across the Shannon, vomiting over the side of the boat, and Michael held her as she stood shivering at the rail.

"I must reek," she said. "Do I reek?"

"No, you don't reek, not at all." He kissed her mouth. "You're lovely."

"Liar." She pressed his hand. "Oh, Michael. Could childbirth be any worse than this?"

"You just need some solid land under you, is all" he said. "And some solid food inside you."

But when they stopped for lunch in Kilrush, she hardly ate a bite. It was his grandmothers' cooking, the same overdone roast and chalky potatoes, only laid out cafeteria-style. A mist of gravy hung in the air. But these bland tastes and smells stirred something in him, as if their chemical constituents stimulated some sleeping region of his brain, and he went back for second helpings, for thirds.

On their way up the western coast, they stopped at the windy Cliffs of Moher. They left the car in a vast parking lot and followed the crowds to the cliffs. Far below them, on a broad shelf of rock, a man in an ice cream suit waddled vertiginously close to the edge, his red necktie scribbled on the wind. When Michael pointed him out to Rachel, she refused to look. "I can't," she said and pleaded to return to the car. A cloud's shadow rolled across the land and then out over the water. They started back toward the parking lot.

On the other side of a field, people were gathered, dressed in various shades of formality—a wedding. As Michael and Rachel neared the group, there was a shout and, looking up, he saw the bride's veil blow across the field behind him, tumbling toward the cliffs. He chased the veil right up to the cliff's edge, and snatching up the white lace, he heard Rachel's scream, followed by the splash of applause. He brought the veil back to the bare-shouldered bride. Lightly, the bride took the veil from him.

"My hero," she said and kissed Michael's cheek, and coloring, she turned to Rachel and kissed her, too. Her blush and black brows turned her eyes a bluer blue.

Someone said, "The blushing bride," and all of them laughed. The groom insisted on rewarding Michael.

"'Twas nothing," Michael said, waving toward the cliffs dismissively. "A whisper of lace, a seven-hundred foot drop—"

"No," the groom said with maudlin urgency. "Somehow we've *got* to repay you."

"Then let them eat cake," another man said, and gestured toward the wedding cake spread upon a folding table.

"I'm afraid we'll have to take it with us," Rachel said. "We're supposed to be in Galway before sunset." Michael felt a twinge of regret, a sense of belonging that carried over from Kilrush, a recognition of something familiar and familial in these faces and voices. He'd wanted to stay at least a little while longer.

The wedding cake was baked in the shape of the continental United States. The bride explained that they'd soon be emigrating to the States, where a teaching position waited for her husband at a Catholic college in Adamant, Vermont. Counterintuitively, they'd started cutting on the west coast and worked their way east, getting as far as the Mississippi River. The groom invited Michael to pick a state and he chose Massachusetts.

"Don't be a pig," Rachel said. "The east coast's still untouched. Missouri will taste just as good as Massachusetts."

But the groom picked up a knife and carved out the boxy scorpion shape of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and carefully placed it in a white cardboard box. Rachel tore a flap off the lid and scribbled out their address and telephone number. She pressed it into the bride's palm and told her look them up once they were settled in Vermont. Then she and Michael walked back to the parking lot. Behind them, a boozy chorus of male voices bellowed "Leaving on a Jet Plane."

Once they were out of the parking lot and back on the road, Rachel said, "You shouldn't have done that, Michael."

"What?" he said. "The cake?"

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"No, not the cake, you idiot—the cliff. For a moment there I thought—"

"What?" he said. "And make that baby an orphan?"

"I'm not joking. For one terrible moment—" She began to cry.

"Oh, come on now," he said. "That'll be enough of that."

"But you *were* a hero out there on the cliffs."

"Aw shucks, Mrs. Donnelly."

"Oh, shut up," she said. "You were. And you were my hero on the ferry. I could see how you'll be when the baby comes. I thought about this the whole time I was throwing up—no joke. I could see you in Lamaze class and driving me to the hospital and mopping my brow in the birthing room and talking me through it all. You'll be a good father, Michael."

"You think so?"

"I know you will. You'll be *such* a good father."

After a while she said, "It's almost suppertime."

"Hungry?"

"Ravenous. I lost everything in the Shannon, and then Kilrush—" She shuddered. "Ugh, Kilrush. Now there's a name for you, Mr. Donnelly."

"So eat."

"I don't want to stop."

"Eat some cake then."

She retrieved the box of cake from the backseat, broke off the tip of the scorpion's tail, and brought it to her mouth.

"Oh, I think there's rum in it," she said.

"Are you sure you should be eating that?" he said. "What with the baby and all?"

"Do you think there's that much? Rum, I mean."

"Enough that I can smell it."

"Howsabout I only eat Cape Cod then?"

"I'd say that was a reasonable compromise," he said.

"I promise to stop at the Sagamore Bridge."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart." She took a bite. "Oh, my God, it's *delicious*."

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"I don't believe they say 'delicious' hereabouts."

"No? Then what *do* they say?"

"I believe they'd say it was 'gorgeous,'" he said. "A gorgeous cake."

"Well, I'm eating Provincetown, and it's absolutely gorgeous." She broke off another piece. "You eat, too," she said with her mouth full. "I'll let you have the Berkshires. Open wide." She fed the piece into his mouth. "You like?"

"What's not to like?" he said.

"Then I'll let you have all the way to Worcester." She moved her fingertips to his face, traced the line of his jaw, and brought them back to his lips. Her fingers were sticky and sweet. "All the way to Plymouth Rock."

When they'd finished the cake, Rachel said, "Do you think we'll ever really see them again?"

"See who?"

"See *whom*," she said. "See the newlyweds. I like the idea of having Irish friends, of guiding them through the new world and all that. You all have that blush, that Irish blush. Something about the capillaries, some Darwinian something. Natural selection—but selected for what, I wonder."

Ahead of them, the roof of a big orange tour bus floated over the tops of the hedgerows.

"Still hungry?" he said.

"God, no," she said, "I'm stuffed."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Good."

The bus came bullying its way around the curve, but Michael's foot didn't leave the accelerator. He wouldn't budge. The bus bore down on them, its driver's face a mask of terror. "Michael," Rachel cried, not the full-throated scream she'd let out on the cliffs, but something breathless and orgasmic, and her cry got swallowed up in the roar of the bus and his blood. It was as though a tourniquet had been loosened, and as the little white car spurted through this sudden tunnel of orange and green, the

crystal glasses chattered and clinked in their box on the backseat and the bus's livid horn blared and faded among the hedges. Then the road opened onto a rocky landscape, swept clean by the same winds that had carved the cliffs, and Michael saw it clearly now, winding umbilically through the stony desert and up into the treeless hills and on and on toward Galway and his people.

"Now I want you to tell me everything," he said. "Every goddamned thing."

PRESS RELEASE

Jeffrey Dodd

The recent television exposé got it all wrong. As did *The Times*, *The Bee*, and *The Standard*. We did not cut a deal. This administration is committed to offering free ice cream sandwiches and kazoo to every citizen regardless of age, weight, or shoe size. When we've distributed the toys and treats, there will be a statewide celebration. We will announce a date for this party in *The Review*, *The Mirror*, and *The Sun*. Trust us. The preceding policy grows from thorough study in today's leading scientific journals. All of which say that dairy products and music lead to high levels of calcium and fun. Please understand that in order to achieve this monumental policy reform many of us will need to sacrifice other privileges and liberties. We urge you not to think of these sacrifices as a diminution of your rights. Rather, we hope you'll look forward, as we will, to the day when all the citizens of this land can join in one great kazoo choir, hum our great anthem, and lick our great melting sandwiches from the edges in.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Jeffrey Dodd

By now you will recognize  
that I have taken some liberties  
with the original and that when  
I describe the third most  
happening bar in town I mean  
this one; and when I mention  
those people who know what happens  
in the back parking lot I mean  
me, only me. This is true:

when I use the second person pronoun,  
it will in most cases refer  
to me. So, whether you or I buy  
the next round, I will pay for it.

When the bartender's knife  
glides through her index finger  
while wedging limes, my digit  
will burst with flame, and sunflakes  
will dull my vision for the moment  
it takes me to realize that you,  
not I, are at the heart of all this.

Because of this I can only try  
to stare you down when we meet  
at Harold's Hardware Hut, where you  
stop to buy new gardening gloves.  
And, when you are dissecting your Cobb  
salad in the local café, scribbling  
notes in these margins, do not be

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surprised if I wander over to stop  
short your blithe assumption  
that I do not properly distinguish  
between the two of us.

XXIII

Joshua A. Ware

Gnarled and knobby. A stump ruptures  
the kitchen floor.  
Fractured linoleum hefts pagan hymns  
heavenward. Ribbons weave oxygen stories.  
Tree-hands clasp a brother, embrace him  
to bark. Flesh to wood. Enjoin him to  
words  
made of pulp, the chapter of how man  
returned  
foisted authorship in the night. Tree-thieves.  
One brother to another cultivates  
the new American garden  
while asbestos dogs<sup>1</sup> howl behind digital  
barns.  
At the edge of civilization,  
he confuses hedgerows and earthbanks  
with oak and hollies. Beavers with sluices<sup>2</sup>  
Fingers bleed from binary paper cuts.

XL

Skull-face kids upend manicured lawns.

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<sup>1</sup> **tangential:** *adj.* 1. of or along a tangent. 2. divergent. 3. to brilliantly survey English literature under the paradigm of binaries, only to crumble under the weight of binaries. 4. peripheral. 5. understand that the chained bark no longer instills fear. Authorities outlawed flame-retardant materials due to asbestosis (a lung disease resulting from the inhalation of asbestos particles).

<sup>2</sup> **supersaturate:** *v.tr.* 1. beyond the point of saturation. For example, see Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land and other Poems*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1934. 47-54. *Editor's note:* Please, also see "meta-textual" for further information on this subject.

XXIV

Joshua A. Ware

If political leaders spend their time

playing canasta, burrowed away in  
back rooms of a mountain casino.

If a country's flag, stitched into an emblem  
of someone else's breakdown<sup>3</sup>, becomes

a trans-national asylum for the sick.

If a thesaurus navigates an archaic  
seascape, drifting limitless across  
a tumid wave train at an orgy.

If reflecting pools reflect back an image

in which the origin no longer exists<sup>4</sup>.

If words put to music sigh with computers.

If nuclear stand-offs could once again  
be the stuff that beauty is made of.

XL (CONTINUED)

There are no more quiet places to read.

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<sup>3</sup> Berrigan, Ted: (1934-1983) semi-famous American soldier who spent sixteen months in Korea.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, Jacques: 1. (1930-2004) deified French stimulant-abuser. 2. entry after "derrick" in the 2002 *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (revised second edition).

THE REVOLVING DOOR

T. J. Forrester

Sometimes the nurses call us by our full names. I don't know why. Maybe it offers insulation from the inevitable, or maybe dying creates such gravitas the weight of our first-n-lasts give the halls the resonance a hospice deserves. Like I said, I don't know why. I do know the nurses are the only ones in the place resigned to our deaths.

Demetri—silk thong aficionado—isn't dying until a Democrat is elected president. Michael isn't dying until the tech stocks rebound. Newly converted, he carries a Bible and preaches repentance. The only heterosexual in the northeast wing is Chad Quail. Michael disputes Chad's sexuality, claiming he crotch-watched while they had tea in the sitting room. Demetri, of the opinion no queer eye can resist a pink thong, swears Chad is straight but not narrow. Demetri is correct. How do I know?

I am Chad Quail, and I am the longest living resident.

We share a house on Jump Street in St. Louis, Missouri. Our rooms are small and spare and nearly identical. Mine is decorated in Ocean Delight, and I have a beachscape on the wall above my desk. I spend my time on a computer researching addresses of old lovers, an activity that brings little satisfaction. Michael, the broke stockbroker with the newfound righteousness, says writing letters is my way of staying alive.

Bah.

A rap at my door, and a nurse enters. That's another thing that comes with dying. Or should I say, *goes* with dying. Privacy. I could have been whacking off. Not that she'd care. The old biddy probably hasn't had a lover in twenty years.

She smells like strawberry shampoo and this morning, as though she ate too much for supper last night, her uniform bulges at her waist. Like the night nurse, and the weekend nurse, and the nurses who fill in, Mrs. Franklin speaks in a professional voice tinted with diplomacy.

"You missed breakfast," says Mrs. Franklin.

I shift the pad on my desk. Today, I addressed a letter to Skyler Langley, a young woman I remember vividly. She had brown eyes and boobs that hung to her belly button. Skyler wouldn't let me touch her boobs, although one time I snuck a grope when we were doing the nasty. They were mushy as mashed potatoes.

We met in a bar when I was bumming around Tampa, Florida, and two days later we were naked in her trailer with an eight ball of coke and a needle. I'd never put drugs in my arm, but she sweet-talked me and I'll never forget that rush. My heart beating like an insane drummer, my johnson so hard she rode it for hours. In the morning, we fought, I remember that, too, and she gave me a black eye and I think I broke her ribs. We were together for three months, then she left me and went into rehab. I never saw her again.

"Time for your cocktail." Mrs. Franklin holds a silver tray with two glasses of water and a cup brimming with pills. I motion toward the desk and she sets the tray near my elbow. At that moment, I am struck at how little we know each other. I suppose if she had a son, he'd be about my age. She grasps my elbow and props me in my chair. That's the thing about hospice nurses. They spend their days plumping pillows, buttoning collars, zipping pants, and when they see an out-of-kilter patient, they unreel their plumb bob and make an adjustment.

"I'm not a two-by-four." I purposefully tilt toward the floor, and she shoulders me upright.

"You take your pills by lunch and I'll sneak you an extra slice of apple pie."

"How are the homos this morning?" Yesterday, Demetri curled into a fetal position. He'd better snap out of it; his birthday is next week and I ordered a gift, a heart-shaped thong, from *Victoria's Secret*.

"Don't you worry, Chad Quail, you take those pills and we'll see about getting you that pie."

"My shoulder itches."

"Here?" Her fingernails ripple my skin, and my chin droops

to my clavicle. The touching . . . I miss it most. In here, no one touches.

"A little to the left . . . there . . . that's the spot." I yip and paw my stomach. I like it when she smiles.



*Dear Skyler,*

*How ya doin, snookems? Long time no see.*

I pause and ponder my chicken scratches, then flip a page and doodle. Sometimes I think about women I almost bedded but didn't, the ones who said "no" for whatever reason. Was that divine intervention, a voice inside their heads saying, "Tell him you're on your period, or you have a boyfriend, or you have the clap and it hasn't cleared up. Tell him anything but don't let him stick it inside you." Of course, way back then I didn't know I was sick, a small consolation, because I for sure knew I took chances with the needle. Plus, I despised condoms. So did my lovers. If I gave them something they couldn't shake, it was their fault as much as mine. And vice versa. I mean, let's get real, my illness isn't an Immaculate Infection. Someone gave it to me. Was it Skyler? That guess is as good as any.

*Dear Skyler,*

*Whatz up? Bet you don't know who this is?*

The doctors say I contracted the disease around twelve years ago. Out of the 172 women on my list, that puts approximately 90 in the danger zone. Sometimes I wonder if any of the infected passed it on, or how many have kids, and if they have the disease. But I can't dwell on it, I simply can't. That's why I write my letters, to keep my mind off things. I opt for my standard approach.

*Dear Skyler Langley,*

*I regret to inform you that . . .*

Skyler's letter is letter number twenty-one. The previous twenty, mailed over the last eight months, elicited three responses. I haven't read them. For now, telling my lovers is enough.



Wednesday is Loving Heart Mixer day, the noon hour when residents meet in the sitting room and stare at each other. It's winter and ice crystals coat the windows. Outside, snow swirls, and according to the Weather Channel, the air is a crisp 28 degrees. Inside, the air is warm and in the corner an air purifier hums. The chairs, sofas, recliners are arranged in a circle. A table in the center has chips and dip, and lemon punch in a crystal bowl. Michael and I are early—anticipating arrival of the other housemates—and he holds a Bible on his lap. His fingers, long and gaunt, riffle pages.

"See, it says it right here," Michael says, and his eyes bulge in flesh-tightened sockets. "The unrighteous will suffer mightily at the hand of God."

Michael and I are dying for the same reason, and while I think it's intriguing my favorite body part played a role, Michael doesn't appreciate the irony. To him, God is a mad scientist who conjures up diseases to punish sinners.

"Demetri's still in bed," I say. "I think this is it for him."

From the southwest wing, cancer patients stumble into the room. They are five strong, three women and two men, and all are bald-headed and scrawny, their white gowns large as tents draped over their shoulders. In a way, I envy them and their disease. To die without guilt is a gift.

From the southeast wing come the Alzheimer victims. There is nothing in their eyes, not even a reflection. Nurses with firm hands push the wheelchairs. I don't envy the ancients. To live without knowing is a fate no one deserves.

From the northwest wing, alcoholics file around the table and sit on the sofa along the wall. They appear as they always do, morose and foreboding, limbs swollen like boiled hotdogs. Their faces wear a perpetually surprised look, as though the bottle snuck up and hit them on the head. There are three of them, one less than last week. Death has voted another player

out of this cruel reality game.

"It's like *West Side Story*," Michael says. "We're the Crips, and the Lushes are the Bloods. The Chemos are the Mexican Mafia, and the Airheads are the Cosa Nostra—"

"Shut up," I say.

"Fucking faggots," one of the alcoholics says, and rocks back and forth. The anchor tattoo on his forearm, enlarged by swollen flesh, jiggles with his rhythm.

"Chad's not gay," Michael says, and I'm surprised Demetri's opinion of my sexuality dented Michael's hard-boiled brain.

A woman, her dome shining under the fluorescent lights, speaks in a whispery voice. "Can't we all get along."

The joint cracks up. I laugh so hard snot runs out my nose. Michael pounds his knee, and the sour alcoholic has tears on his cheeks. It feels good to cut loose, like we staved off the Grim Reaper for another day. Too soon, though, giggles subside, and a cancer patient lies on the floor and rubs her temples. Michael flips through the Bible. An Alzheimer patient coughs, and a nurse wipes spittle from his leathery lips. I blow a kiss at the drunk who called me a faggot. No one eats. No one drinks.

At 1:00, a voice on a speaker puts us out of our misery. "Ladies and gentleman, we hope you enjoyed the Loving Heart Mixer. Please return to your rooms and your nurses will be with you shortly."

Glass enclosures line the hallway and inside each cubicle, ash-filled urns, like respectful sentries, watch our passage. It doesn't surprise me residents who die here choose to remain here. We are modern-day lepers, the diseased limb society has severed. Up ahead, Michael slows and I sneak behind him and pinch his ass.

"Bitch." He slaps my hand.

"Just trying to make you feel at home."

"It doesn't help."

I am instantly sorry. Sexual overtures, even if they are made in fun, are a no-no among the dying. There is nothing attractive about two bone-racks slogging to their rooms so they can choke

down their next round of horse pills.

I make a right to Demetri's room and Michael continues down the hall. My friend, a knobby lump, lies under a blanket, and all I can see of him is a tuft of black hair. His breaths are slow and uneven, and I know he doesn't want to talk. We have a lot in common, he and I. He was a mason, myself a carpenter, so we both worked in construction. Both drifters, both flunked out of college. Me because of a woman, him because of a man. On his walls dangle a variety of pink thongs, and I suspect they are there to remind him who he is. I stand quietly for a few minutes, then leave without saying goodbye.



In the garden, late March tulips are aflame with sweet-scented petals, and overhead, clouds laze across the sky. Mrs. Franklin wheels me under an oak tree and says she'll come back in an hour. She doesn't expect a response and I don't offer. What is there to say? Michael and Demetri are dead, and I'm strapped in a chair. Under my hospital gown is an elastic diaper, an embarrassing development, but my biggest worry isn't my inability to control my bodily secretions. No, it's my fingers. Stiff and complaining, they make writing a chore.

Yesterday, I sent a letter to Joy Goochland. She was a bartender in Seattle when I was living out there and selling crank to college kids at this bar called La Casa Loco. She was around fifty-five, I think, fifteen years older than yours truly. I won't lie. Glands under my throat were swollen and I'd had trouble shaking colds, so I suspected something was wrong. I didn't dwell on it; the sex was too good to pass up.

"Chad Quail, you have a visitor." Mrs. Franklin has returned, and with her stands a black-haired woman wearing a lavender blouse. The woman's hair, stirred by the breeze, feathers across her forehead and she tucks the strands behind her ear. She is vaguely familiar, a former lover maybe, although I can't be sure. The curve of her throat stirs a memory too buried to surface,

but I know her, I swear I do.

Mrs. Franklin leaves, and the two-way silence is unsettling. I study the woman's face, trying to pick up a clue. She focuses on something I can't see, something I doubt anyone can see. When she speaks, her gaze sharpens and her words tumble. "You mailed my daughter a letter. She's dead, I want you to know that. Been dead six months. She's dead and she's not coming back."

The woman wraps her slender fingers around my wrist, squeezes until I wince and pull away. Her voice is hoarse, dark and dank, from a place I don't want to go.

"My baby's dead," the woman says.

I see her now, I see Skyler's face in her mother's, and I work spit around my mouth to loosen my tongue. The words don't come at first, and when they do, they are garbled.

"My name is Chad Quail and I'm a medical miracle. I should have died two years ago and the doctors don't know why."

"What?"

"I've seen seventeen Homos die and I'm still here. I've seen fourteen Chemos, seven Lushes, and four Airheads die, and I'm still here. I'm still here and I don't know why."

"Didn't you hear me? My baby's dead."

"Demetri died three days before his birthday. I still have his present in my room. Michael died on Valentine's Day and wanted to be cremated with his Bible. I'm still here, Chad Quail is going strong. He's outlived them all."

The woman's brown eyes, Skyler's eyes, no longer focus on me. She turns, and without looking back, walks down the curved sidewalk and disappears inside the hospice. My bowels relax, and sludge warms my crotch. I cross my arms and ponder the visit. What should I have said? Your daughter was a junkie and it's a toss-up who killed who. Bah. The blame game is for the uninfected.

I resist the urge to crawl after her and shake her and make her see she wasn't the only one with dreams. I had mine. Even married fresh out of high school. My wife's name was Dawn Matheson and I was crazy in love. She drove a red Jeep and had

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blonde hair down to her waist like one of those Amish women up in Pennsylvania. We spent our weekends rambling through the Appalachian Mountains in northern Virginia and planning our family. She wanted two kids, both girls, and I wanted six, all boys. When I daydreamed, I saw my boys, blonde-haired like their mother, growing up strong and happy. On a breezy autumn afternoon, we compromised and settled on four kids, two boys and two girls.

Three months into our marriage, at a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant, Dawn put down her Diet Coke and said she was leaving me. No reason, no nothing, although I later found out she'd had an affair with an insurance agent who worked at State Farm. The last time I saw her, she was stripping at this rundown club outside D.C. I went there on a Friday night and parked in the shadows across the street.

Inside, in corners far from the stage lighting, girls gyrated on laps, and hoarse moans mingled with whispers of three dances for twenty, or five for twenty-five. Dawn came right over when she saw me. She'd cut her hair and had a butterfly tattoo on her hip.

"What do you want?" Her skin was blurred and pale in the dim light.

"I'm in college," I said. "I'm making something of myself."

I had a few drinks, then asked her to spend the night with me, for old time's sake, but she snickered and said she only spread her legs for five hundred a pop. I staggered to my car and passed out in the backseat. My life turned hard after that—too much booze, cocaine, the occasional needle, bounced from lover to lover—but I'm not blaming it all on her. Some of it was my fault.



In the middle of July, the nurses hold a barbecue on the lawn, and if I worm up my pillow and look out the window, I can see residents in white gowns, some sitting in lawn chairs, others in wheelchairs, a few standing. Faces have changed but the illnesses

have not. The only constants in the joint are the nurses; the floors, the walls, and the ceilings; the Wednesday Loving Heart Mixer, which I no longer attend, and of course, me. It's going on two and a half years, and I'm still here. Fourteen more Homos have died. I can't keep up with residents in the other wings; lately the revolving door spins so fast I've lost count.

Nurses grill sausages and hamburgers and corn on the cob. A breeze drives smoke downward, and a nurse coughs and turns her head. Under the oak, my favorite spot, a cancer patient nibbles a hamburger, then doubles over and vomit spews from his mouth. He puts down his plate and wipes his chin. An Alzheimer patient chews a hot dog, the pace of her jaw reminding me of a straining locomotive. Chew . . . chew . . . chew . . .

To break monotony, I wish the hospice would bring in someone dying of something different, anything, I don't care. Give me a Muscular Dystrophy or a Lou Gehrig's Disease or a Parkinson's. Give me anything but what I've got.

I'm sick of it all, but mostly I'm sick of writing these letters. The response stack no longer fits in the desk drawer, and envelopes are stacked alongside the computer. I'm working on a letter, sending it to Judy Prescott when I'm done. My memory, once so clear, has hazed, and although she's the last lover on my list, I can't see her when I close my eyes. We met in a Greek restaurant in San Francisco, where I was waiting tables, and she was waitressing. She smelled like Juicy Fruit, I do remember that. I also remember she was half my age, and liked rap. We didn't last long. Oh! That's right. She had red hair, close-cropped, like she went to the barber instead of a stylist. I might have been her second or third lover, I don't know for sure, but she hadn't had many.

Today, I scratched out a consonant, a *t*, and tomorrow I'll add a comma and then the day after tomorrow I'll start on the message. The two words are barely legible, letters scrawled in starts and stops, but maybe she'll recognize her name.

Mrs. Franklin bustles into the room. She takes my temperature and wipes sweat beads from my forehead. I close

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my eye, a slow droop, open it, then force my lips apart in what I hope is a smile.

"Why, Chad Quail," she says. "Are you flirting with me?"

I nod.

She takes the pencil and pad and puts it within easy reach on the bed stand. Although she knows how difficult it is for me to work my fingers, she has not offered to write my letters. I don't hold it against her. Outside, a summer shower surprises the party, and the residents and the nurses scurry for shelter. Smoke from the grill whitens, then stops altogether. A patient in a wheelchair, a man with wiry white hair, turns his face to the clouds and spreads his arms to form a cross. His gown is drenched and water drips from his elbows. It is a symbolic gesture. In here, everyone, sooner or later, welcomes death.



Labor Day comes and goes, and I am still here. I've completed my letter to Judy Prescott and it's folded inside a stamped envelope on my bed stand. I must send it, but cannot. October and November, with their cold showers, rumble in and out of my life, and I am still here. It's been seven months since I received a response, and dust collects on the letter pile on my desk. I recognize some of the names on the return addresses—June Popular, Holly Mackinaw, Mary Sue Treadwell, Tyesaha Buttons—but some are unfamiliar and these I suspect are the fathers, the mothers, the brothers and sisters, the distraught husbands.

In December, Mrs. Franklin transfers to the Alzheimer wing, but she comes and sits with me in the evenings. I don't know why. One day, I jokingly tell her I'm on the Terminally Ill Reduction Plan, but we don't laugh. I weigh sixty-six pounds, and I'm all bone. Most of the time a white sheet covers me from neck to toe, but during the sponge baths, I can see, I can see what's happened to me. My ribs peel from my sternum in hard curves, and my arms, thin as straws, lay motionless at my sides.

My legs, despite daily physical therapy, have atrophied, and protrude from my pelvis like grisly crowbars. Chad Quail is so skinny he looks like someone attached a suction hose to his ass and sucked him dry. Where did he go? What happened to the 180-pound man, the sexy guy who could get any woman, what happened to him?

Now, with the Great Beyond closing in, when the guilt drawer opens I don't have strength to slam it. Sleep is my only reprieve, but I'm scared, I'm scared to sleep. Most days, I stare at the ceiling and think about the letters. They are the only unknowns in my life. The only dumpsters I've not crawled into.

It's evening now, and outside the oak leaves flutter and twist in the wind, some floating to the ground, others clinging to limbs. Mrs. Franklin is here, by my bed, the letters in her lap, and she reads somberly. I catch a phrase now and then, but my gaze is on the ocean mural above my desk. There's a small boy with a bucket and a red shovel, and he hovers over a sandcastle. Over his head, against the turquoise sky, a gull is in full flight. Mrs. Franklin's voice drones in the background.

*Go to hell.*

I imagine the sounds of the beach; the rhythmic crash of breakers on sand; the growl of the motorboat in the distance; the faint buzz of a seashell held to the ear.

*Thank you for having the courage. . . .*

I can smell sunscreen, mine? and cool, ocean air. It's salty, and clean.

*Bastard.*

The sand is gritty under my feet, and the sun is warm on my face. The water laps against my legs, then my waist, but Chad Quail will go no further.

*I forgive you.*

Mrs. Franklin puts down the letters. She holds his hand. She wipes his forehead. Chad Quail, are you ready to mail it now? Are you ready to mail this last letter? He studies the sky, the water; he smells the air; he feels the wet sand between his toes. He focuses on the young boy, the boy on the sand with the shovel

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and the pail, the boy with the quizzical look, the innocent, the boy with a future. Life is short, Chad Quail thinks, and slides into the surf. Yes, he says over his shoulder, yes, please, if you have the time, please send that last letter. The waves lap his face and he strokes hard for the watery air.

THE ALMOND TREE

James Doyle

Nothing is dead anymore.  
Even in winter, most of all.  
The snow wolves crisscross the tree.  
They are sentimental and imagine  
their paws are petals.  
But it is the ground  
that is not making any noise,  
for once. The wolves seem  
to have flesh in their mouths,  
but it is only food. They clean  
their teeth on the almond tree,  
which nods this way and that.  
There are bears sleeping away  
the same flesh, so it can't be  
very important. There is wind  
that comes and goes whenever  
the almond tree stops nodding.  
Though the scene is formal,  
it keeps resisting  
the temptation to put a moral  
in its story. There is no story,  
just this and that holding  
its own. Mouths open  
for the falling snow. The tree  
flexes its roots, now  
moving them closer to the surface,  
now deeper. The wolves  
are sleeping against the hollows  
of each other. Nothing  
is dead anymore.

It's ALL TOO MUCH

Mary Biddinger

He was too sick to make trips to the VFW Hall for cold, cheap beer.  
She was too awake to put on a fox fur vest and rouge from a snuff box.  
The alleys were too perpendicular to the roads, so the runoff went north.  
When the ossified creams and lead feather whisks hovered above her  
bed at night, he was there too: all peacock and cormorant, so peregrine  
he vanished from sight when the busses heaved through an intersection.  
And the wheat germ strewn on the windowsill? Precaution. Some days  
her words would be used against her, like salmonella. He was too rough  
in the head to shuttle the pennies into their paper sleeves, preferring  
pockets. She walked thirty blocks west before finding the river moved.  
He was too occupied by minutiae like Avogadro and the depth of tar.  
She marinated a brisket in South African pinotage plus a box of cloves.  
It's a mean sky. In minutes it will make you turn back over yourself.  
It's shifty. She remembers when a shift was always a dress meant  
to be lifted over face and shoulders silhouetted in front of a window.  
His shifts were always noted by the blue penmanship of a time clock.  
His idea of hand cream was tallow and peppermint. Bee balm. Pumice.  
She was all under his hands like milk from a faucet. He got so lost one  
winter in the woods that he rebuilt everything, burned it down all over.  
His hands were all over her body. She cried at the sight of salvia or rue  
in a container garden under a remote control awning. Is it true they both  
looked forward to funerals, for the whisky? Did they ever wander past  
the monument at the same time, separately? He learned the ridge of her  
neckline was the best place to remember months in the service overseas.  
Or the underside of a rowboat. The vulnerable, white belly of a catfish.

THE NEW MATH

Mary Biddinger

As if it mattered—  
the number of inches or limbs,  
volume of the fiberglass  
blown into rooms above our heads,  
the slippery elm boys felled  
and paraded to the tracks

in case we gave prizes for such  
things. You watermark the days  
with obscurities: annunciation  
is a dirty room without curtains,  
frostbite inevitable as pollution,  
cardinal shoving its fingers into

the damp hinges of ordinal  
and coming through the other side.  
There are places where all walls  
are made of glass. How this  
would make you cringe like drips  
of lake water on hot sesame oil

or a Texas girl left in the hills,  
my hills, the ones that knock you  
onto your heels when looking up.  
There are boards tied in trees  
to warn against climbing.  
The stream would leave you

heaving, and my laughter  
like rebar dropped onto concrete.  
Through ash and birch, bitchy jays  
wait for the goods. Do not tell  
me about your table, your dog's  
attention span, the exact way

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men hold their breath passing you.  
Lean into the cattails as if this  
was your last meal, the ephemera  
of triangles spun to lace, your beloved  
crimson dress slit with a clip point,  
a hook for every quadrant.

YLENA  
Benjamin Stein

*North*

Morning, and the sun has layers to burn through. Propane light still, for now. Ylena keeps it low, conserves the gas and the wick and what it takes to replace them.

She scrapes up a red-gray pile, a sifted ridge of dust. The same pile in the same place, every day. Where the walls don't come together all the way, just inside the corner. Her house is this: two patched-together rooms on a concrete platform; plywood leaning, for a door; a bucket for plumbing; folded rugs and blankets for a bed; one window, nearly opaque; one pile of clothes neatly folded, another bundled in a sheet. Nothing brought up from the South, nothing to make her think of it. In the past, she's told herself, *Forget*. Now she has.

The whole shack slanted there at the north end of the Mitrovica camp, 200 yards from the slagheaps left behind when the smelter closed. Mountainous, they flex and bulge like red muscles and she can see them from her window; everyone in the camp can see them from everywhere. Mountainous, but they shift. Wind throws their lead and arsenic and cadmium against everything, all the time. Brushing sounds on the outside of her walls. Dust gathers in the furrows of corrugated metal, dissolves in runnels above the river. And the water runs.

*South*

For years, it's her brothers leaving at dawn for early foot races in the street. Sometimes they pretend to forget to wake her. Sometimes their mother keeps her home, a widow's lonesome pull. Ylena makes it out, though, more and more.

Of the neighborhood children, they are the pivotal family. Four boys valuable in every sport. Ylena the only girl with sneakers. Even at ten, a good throwing arm. Her oldest brother, Raim, chooses the races, the games. Hard sprints or middle

distance. Or flinging pebbles against each other's heads. Ylena stands at the edge when a scrum breaks out, jabs a toe into the ribs of any boy not her brother who happens to roll from the pile. She stomps off, though, after too much tussling. Says she'll find someone else to race. Ends up home with Mother, watching the street from a window.

When her legs get long she is as tall as Raim, taller. When the boys race, she wins. She taunts them, sashays. The only girl.

The tallest boy, a young Muslim with soft yellow hair smooth above his lip, always wants to race her once more, won't take the taunting. Raim decides a lap around the block, just the two. He chucks her on the shoulder when she lines up alongside the Muslim boy. Hard brown lips mouth, "Win." Then, "One, two, three."

Ylena cuts hard into afternoon, a hallway of wind. The Muslim boy lags for the first straightaway, trails at the corner. Ylena gauges him, paces herself. He passes her at the second turn. But when she kicks, when she reaches. She's thickened wind. Alongside, their knuckles rap against each other's. They both breathe high and thick. There is something, though, not in her lungs but close. A flutter beneath her ribs. Just after halfway they turn together, slip into a bus terminal bathroom. Ylena folds her long legs around him.

### *North*

Ylena walks to the river with the bundle of laundry for washing. The sun high enough now, peering down. Her sneakerprints on the road like tracks in red flour. Grit scratches between her teeth. Her throat burns, but less than other days.

Two children, yellow-skinned and frail, take small steps in the opening between two shacks. Ylena waves. The small one, almost a baby, lurches then sits hard, leaves buttock prints. The other, an older sister maybe, lifts under his shoulders and he goes limp, lolls his tongue, plays.

The children here are asleep all the time. On birthdays, on festivals, they sleep or they sit on the ground, sift the dust in

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their hands, sway. Soupy lethargy and swollen eyes. Every few weeks, another drops away.

Once, as the camp first settled, a British doctor. Children are more susceptible, she said. Skin gone yellow is a signal, but it's the whites of the eyes you have to watch. It's anemia. It's nerve damage. Later, it's coma and renal failure. Ylena wondered about this failure. When she thought of it, she felt every organ sliding inside her. She imagined them drying out, seizing.

*South*

A park's grassy slope, air collecting damply on her arms. An afternoon, for once, without mother or brothers. Ylena, with her skirt smoothed beneath her. The Muslim boy, Khalid, his beard coalescing now. News of a war coming back from before they were born. Wrongness unearthed, holy duty and valor.

Ylena spins a leaf between her fingers, its veins firm and green. She scores them with her thumbnail. Khalid runs one hand through the grass, his fingers as small as hers.

A glancing kiss. A pulling away. A quarrel about third sides. A quarrel when she points out, "Islam doesn't seem to matter to you when we are naked together, and hidden." A disquieting twist behind the beard.

The fast onset of rain in summer. Those first heavy drops. The relief of a good drench, and running.

*North*

At the place where the other road comes in, there is a lot filled with garbage. A few low firebrick chimneys. Those men with wet rags tied over their faces, dark foreheads, dark hair. These are the ones who have always been here, who worked in the smelter, before the evacuees from the South. They hardly look at anyone anymore. They stand by the ovens, liquefy car batteries, sprinkle slaked lime from rubber-gloved hands. Soon, the choking smoke, oily and yellow. If the wind shifts, if a person takes the smoke for more than a breath, even with the wet rags, there will be another call to the doctor. The tree on the edge of the lot has

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black leaves. Ylena steps over a narrow ditch, three more batteries at the bottom, holes hammered in either side, draining acid.

She stops, kicks through a pile of garbage—mostly wet paper and the bundled red HazMat bags, heavy with the scum skimmed from melted lead. She looks to the slagheaps, their sprawl. She considers the HazMat bags, wonders how many it would take.

The lead melting men watch her over the tops of their rags. They squint in the sun. One wipes his nose on the cuff of a canvas coat.

Ylena finds a square of hard plastic, tucks it in the waist of her jeans. When she gets home, she will tack it over the space where dust comes through.

### *South*

Ylena's mother has been waning for a long time, since before winter. This morning, there are banks of lilacs in rows along the streets. The city was famous for them before. Now, only this quarter. On the other side of the razorwire fences and barricades, every tree has been removed. A clearing of sightlines.

When her mother's eyes open, they don't fix on things. They slide across the far wall. She knows the objects there: the row of official photographs, four brothers with the same knot in their jaws. And the row of urns, each below each, ceramic and sky-blue and small. She said once, before her sons were dead, "A war scatters people like wind scatters dust."

It's hot water with onions and brown powdered cubes stirred in. A change of blankets, a hoist now and then onto a pan.

It is the last morning her mother has and Ylena sits in a chair. In a room with a blue-sheeted bed, with electric light. She'll practice her reading aloud: words on packages from the kitchen, warning labels. Mostly only sounds. She'll run her hand for hours along the linen of her mother's arm, the wax of her forehead.

That evening the light is orange and Ylena slides the window. Lilac scent like sun and forgetfulness. The pock of small arms fire; an explosion. These are like the sound of dogs, or a car starting.

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Television in an adjacent room. They are familiar.

That evening, though, something new to bring nightmares: that viscous last rattle. *This*, she thinks, *this is a sound*.

## *North*

The River Ibar runs low between hills, at the far edge of camp. Springs open around it, roll among leaves and sparse grasses. By the time they converge, at the bottom of this gully, there is a thick rope of water and it cuts knee deep. This is the early river. Follow it a few miles, as far as the edge of the second camp, and it spreads, it surges.

Ylena unbundles the laundry, wets a bed sheet, empties powder from a bright box of soap. Michika the witch is upstream, shaking out her underthings. She is the camp's closest thing to a doctor, strips bark and boils roots. Takes anything as pay. Anything but not nothing: once, she mashed weeds and powder down into a salve, for a woman with a rash blossoming along her arms and back. The woman took the salve, gave nothing in exchange. Michika poured a pan of oil into the road outside the woman's home. In the months since, both of the woman's children have turned yellow and died.

Ylena agitates slowly, her head down, fixed on the gathering lather. The witch's soap slides down to her, eddies at the edge of the stream. Ylena steps into clearer water.

## *South*

When summer starts, the war crosses town. Two days in the room with the bed and now, a wall fallen away. Two days in a leeward corner. Slow crawls to the bathroom, or to the sink for a quick sip. An attempt at lighting the stove; the gas lines, though, were blown out early: a bowl hollowed from the road. A lump of metal knocks a divot in the refrigerator.

Two days until a swarm of blue helmets comes shouting through the hole in the wall. Thick and lumpy and gas-masked—one for her and it bruises her forehead when they help her yank it on. A run between houses, crouched. A night of blue helmets

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and fogged-glass eyes.

She is stowed with the rest. In trucks with black-tarped beds. Ten or twelve refugees, down on the floor. They jostle amid bedding and clothing and cookware. Ten hours, more. Trundling detours when the road is cratered. No one knows how to keep a child quiet. A caravan of five trucks with machine gun Jeeps bookending. Insect-masked neighbors. Here is a grandmother who remembers songs. Here is a man; his shoulders smell like leeks. Here is Ylena, against the tailgate. She bends her neck, finds an opening in the tarp. The truck behind them is close and mossy. Its headlights are muted blue.

### *North*

Ylena's jeans are rolled and soaked to the knees; the air on her ankles makes her remember the Muslim boy, the way she hooked her feet at his back. His soft smile like a curl of hair in sun. *There are days*, she thinks, *when my throat burns less. There are days when the dust is mostly settled.* The laundry a wet nest collected under her arm, the open afternoon. The road home, thin and straight, from this end of camp to the other.

The rag-faced men crouch in a distant bunch in the road, away from the garbage lot. The witch crouches among them. The ovens churn smoke untended.

Ylena tucks the laundry closer, feels the wet at her ribs. Steps quicker.

The three men and the witch are in a circle around the girl. She is on the ground, in the street. Before, she was yellow but now she is blue. Jerking limbs, dogfroth mouth. Her little brother, frog-cheeked and dim-eyed, sits in the dust next to her, turns his head. Twists his mouth.

The witch wraps the girl in a black sheet, lifts her body, still twitching and taut. She carries her to the door of her shack.

The smelters' rags are pulled down around their necks. Here are yellow faces too. Here is shouting. Here is one of them lifting the boy from the ground. One of them running, the phone in the next camp, the doctor at the other end of the phone. But it's

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a dozen strides and Ylena knows he's slow; he's gasping, lungs like cured meat.

She unfolds her legs again. That heavy pouch of laundry thumps against her side. Releases it. It settles, unnestles.

It's those morning races again, that hallway of wind, close at her ears.

MARCHEN

Erica Wright

Find her creeping in the dark,  
singing the hour of pandering  
and splinters underneath nails.

She picks apart her hands.  
She'll not lose to wolves again.  
She'll soak her cuts in salt

when she returns to feign  
that she could break a man  
with all the skills acquired.

That she could throw a man.

THE DIVER

Jill Khoury

*A six-year-old girl found in a ravine survived for ten days . . . near her dead mother after a car crash. . . . The Indio Police department said the search was hampered by rugged terrain. Moreno Valley, Calif. (AP)*

1.

The landscape invites an epic.  
Grand orchestral sweep: strings shriek  
red as the Sangre de Cristos, timpani low  
and booming as the wounded  
mastodon's groan. You have plunged  
far below the smog-colored highway.  
There are no fire-roads or switchbacks  
to reach you. Something divine  
has flung you far from the city.

2.

The coyote and kit fox, there and gone  
in a flick. Butterflies loop and arc.  
The windblown soil wants to polish your skin  
soft as the inside of a snail shell.  
As you fall asleep you can hear  
the tiny rocks hit against  
the car's metal husk. This is and is not  
like playing house. A place for eating,  
a place for sleeping, the holy place  
where your mother roots herself  
among the Joshua trees.

3.

When your saviors finally come,  
 their limbs are sloppy and unsure.  
 Their boots send pieces  
 of the granite batholith  
 clicking toward you. The light  
 from their bodies is almost  
 too bright for your eyes to hold.

CARNEGIE BRIDGE

Julie Platt

They came from all countries just to stand  
on it, and when exam week blunted their necks  
like a coal shovel, they fell as through a dream  
of a forgiveness, a tea-warm  
sea. Train tracks cackled, catching  
them in a blood-black trench  
near the mill. This Indian boy drank  
a half-gallon of whiskey, wiped his mouth  
on his sleeve and followed his piss  
into the snow. His gray face told  
the evening news how sheer was his desire  
to mime the white boys' brays, to grasp  
the shiny shoulders of girls who flipped  
their tits for drinks while hooting back  
his broken English. My mother said this  
is what's wrong with America and turned  
the sputter of the screen to black in our wide  
kitchen, and I almost remembered the smell of dried  
cod skulking from the back room of the 7-11,  
how sharply she gagged on it and rushed  
me past the blank-eyed clerk. One night, she told me  
that my doctor's eldest son died in the garage  
with the car running, scratching "I'm sorry"  
on the back of an envelope. There must be crueler  
ways to measure lives, but the tests hadn't yet  
been scored when four engineering students  
from Indonesia leapt past the barriers  
and one poured gasoline on a sheet, cocooned  
himself, and struck a match. My own life  
shrinks back from its outlines, the swath

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cut so generously between the road and the ledge.  
What a coward I am at night, walking, putting  
one foot in front of the other like a drunk,  
trying not to touch anything.

AUTUMN

Hai Zi

*Translated by Dan Murphy*

use our bones laid on the ground  
on the beach write: youth. Then shoulder an aged father  
time is endless direction severed  
animal like terror filling up our poetry

whose voice can arrive at autumn's midnight permanently  
reverberating  
covering our bones laid on the ground—  
autumn comes.  
without a particle of forgiveness or tenderness: autumn comes

AUTUMN

Hai Zi

*Translated by Dan Murphy*

you carry water a wine jar and grain

autumn around for a 1,000 miles  
leaves tranquilly sleep the earth  
fruit falls into the bottoms of buckets  
letting out sad sounds

let the sickle lay flat  
bountiful harvest grasslands

autumn water rises  
up to the fruit fruit  
like an echo towards your breast

autumn bountiful basket  
heaven's basket  
filled—"fruit"  
at the sickbed's head are carved  
Arabia or the Ganges's  
eternal script

but fish are singing dreaming village  
water leaves form  
leaves hands

echo  
these two bountiful baskets symmetrical to each other  
breast  
hands

BEER MONEY

Valerie Fioravanti

Rose Anna wiped her palms against her apron, and the red striped seersucker stayed bunched in her fists as she paced her kitchen. The hammering from the barges anchored off the river had given her a headache that pounded to the carpenters' rhythm. With the bicentennial this year, Macy's fireworks were supposed to be extra spectacular, and Rose Anna's rooftop, a half-block from the river, offered the best view in the city. The barges faced the rich folks in Manhattan, but they were anchored in Brooklyn, and stayed close enough during the display that ash fell around them, dusting the streets as far as Manhattan Avenue. There wasn't a family in the neighborhood that didn't deserve this yearly front-row seat. Rose Anna only prayed that when the fireworks came, they all had something left to celebrate.

She lapped around the living room, the only thing in motion against the dead summer heat. She switched the television on and then off again—she wouldn't get caught up in soap opera problems, not when she had so many of her own—then returned to the kitchen so she could check the sauce simmering on the stove. Behind the pot was the same faded, stained paper she'd been scrubbing for fifteen years and could never rub clean. If the rumors were true and the brewery shut down, she'd be scrubbing that same paper and the nicked, bleached-out floor until she was just as worn-through.

Rose Anna lifted the lid, and the trapped air rose soft and warm over her face. It was the gentlest touch of her day. That was the reason she always volunteered to make the sauce, giving her sisters some freedom from their stoves. She stirred, then checked the oven temperature. Her thermometer read 200°, 150° lower than its setting when summer already gave the oven a head start. She kicked the door closed, stirred her sauce once more before replacing the lid, and sat down to drink her cup of tea and smoke. She believed hot drinks and hot steam cooled

you down eventually.

She took a long first drag of her cigarette, and exhaled a few of her jangled nerves. She had a reputation for being demanding—and maybe she was, compared to the rest of her family—but she didn't want much. A house. Nothing fancy. Two or three bedrooms, with a little yard so she could plant a garden, grow her own vegetables and herbs. Maybe plant some pretty flowers in window boxes, rest a small table underneath a shady tree. But she'd trade that tree for appliances that worked the way they were supposed to, without coaxing or special tricks or rest breaks between use. Rose Anna was as old as her stove, and she didn't have the luxury of breaking down. Just thinking about it made her suck through her cigarette faster, when she wanted to savor it, make it last. She and her Vince had agreed only one carton each month, so they could try to make that down payment, even in hard times. They had a special home buyer's savings account down at the bank, and they tried to put away a little something with each paycheck. With the kids growing like magic beans and something always needing fixing or replacing, their balance hadn't come to much yet. The thought of what might be coming made her light another cigarette from the butt of the first.

She checked her sauce again, then went to check on her kids from the windows at the front of the apartment. She had six rooms and four windows, two each at the front and rear. Perpetual twilight, just dark enough to hide the chipped paint and cracked walls, tears in the furniture and tape on the floor. Vince had promised her a house, but the brewery was the last place to work along the docks. If it closed, she might die in this shithole. And be grateful for it. It was hard to imagine something worse, but their luck seemed to be shifting in that direction. Vince was a good husband, responsible and hard working, but he was a broad-shouldered longshoreman with a sixth-grade education. The whole city was running short on opportunities for that kind of man.

Her sister Donna was supposed to be minding the kids. She

was clustered across the street with the other women, watching the brewery while the children played stickball between Webber's abandoned trucking garages. The brewery trucks were coming and going, and the kids were dodging them instead of breaking up the game.

Rose Anna banged on the window with her fist, but she was four floors up. The thought of a round-trip on the stairs in this heat made her want to lie down and nap, but her niece slipped on an oil slick right in front of an oncoming truck. Rose Anna's oldest, Vinny, pulled Lina away from the wheels. A dozen mothers had their heads turned in the opposite direction, worried about feeding kids that might be killed if she didn't get down there to hustle them off the street.

Rose Anna scattered the kids like chickens, clucking at them while she stomped through the street. They ran from her outstretched arms and reformed in clusters just beyond her reach. She called to her sister, but Donna was still gossiping with the other women.

Rose Anna muttered curses at them all, but she stopped when she saw the entrance to Schaeffer. There were men carting off kegs in their cars, in wheelbarrows, on go-carts, and little red wagons.

"Rheingold dumped the extra beer in the river when they shut down. At least Schaeffer's giving it away," Donna said.

"Lord help us, they're the last. Least they can do is get them all drunk and stupid on the leftovers," said Margie, the widow who lived in 33.

That didn't sound right to Rose Anna, but she didn't want to speak out against the group. At least not without a reason. Her niece, the only one from her husband's side, rode past on her bike and stopped by her cousin Tessa, Rose Anna's youngest. Tessa and Franca called Lina over, but she waved and kept playing stickball with the boys. Lina and Franca were best friends, as their mothers had been as children. Her nieces proved it was still good to live here, close to both families, in a neighborhood with second-generation friendships.

Franca's bike stayed glued to her hip while she talked. Rose Anna never saw her without it, and the purple paint, streamers, and pretty white basket with matching purple flowers had given both Tessa and Lina terrible bicycle envy. Not that Tessa had ever asked for a bicycle. Rose Anna wondered how many cigarettes it would take to buy something that fine, to see her own child's face riding by looking so red-cheeked and happy. Sometimes Rose Anna wanted better for her children so bad she wished she'd never had them.

Her apron was balled in her fists again. She sighed, shook out her fingers, and walked over to the girls. Tessa greeted her with, "We're not doing nothing, Ma."

"How's Nana doing, Franca? I haven't seen her on the stoop in a few days."

"Her gout's bad again, so she can't make it down the stairs."

"Tell her I'll get up to visit just as soon as I can. Could you ask your father to have a look at my stove when he gets a chance? The temperature's off."

"Yes, *zia*," Franca said.

Rose Anna patted her niece on the cheek and turned away. "Tessa, if you're not doing nothing, feel free to run upstairs and clean your room," she called out behind her.

She walked back to the women, who hadn't stirred. She watched the alley with them for a few minutes. A few men trickled out without any beer. Rose Anna tried to understand why some men carted off a dozen kegs and some men none. Seniority? Old Bill Hawkins was walking out empty-handed, and he'd worked at the brewery so long he said he hated the sight and smell of beer. That didn't sit right with any severance she could think of. If he didn't want to drink it, he could sell it later, right?

"They're not giving it away for free." Rose Anna kicked the curb, the nearest target. "They're letting 'em buy it for cheap with their salaries."

Donna, who knew when to ignore her sister, had also learned to trust her over the years. Rose Anna was harder to please than

the rest of them, and she was always the most right about things going wrong. "Did you pay the rent yet?"

Rose Anna said, "Come on, I need to think." Donna followed her across the street and sat down beside her on the stoop.

"You don't think they'd spend it all, do you?" Donna asked. Rose Anna's legs were shaking, making her hair bounce and shimmer in the light. "I mean, not their last, they wouldn't . . ."

"Yeah, like they've never drank it all away before," Rose Anna said, in that voice that made her sisters feel stupid in a way even their husbands couldn't manage.

Rose Anna grabbed Donna by the shoulders. "We need to get in there and get the money away from Fat Louie before their shifts end."

"He won't give us the money," Donna said. She tried to use the stupid voice, but it didn't work right.

"Not us." Rose Anna bit roughly at her thumb nail. "Vinny, Lina, get over here now." She pointed at Lina, the youngest child in the family. "Her."

Donna said, "But, she's a *beast*."

"She's got something. It'll work on Fat Louie."

"What, Ma?" Vinny kept Lina slightly behind him, shielding her. Rose Anna was proud that her boy was prepared to take the brunt of whatever he thought was coming. He was a good boy, and she thought he'd do right when he was grown.

"You know what Fat Louie looks like?"

"Yeah."

"I want you to go in and ask for your father's and your uncles' last pay. Tell him I sent you, and if he doesn't give it to you, I'll remember. Show respect, but tell Fat Louie I'll remember till I'm dancing on his grave."

"Ma . . ." Vinny stuffed his hands in his jeans and rocked on his heels, afraid she'd dance on his grave, too, if he disrespected her.

"You're taking Lina with you. She's your secret weapon. You tell him what I said, and you leave the rest to her."

"We should ask Grace about this," Donna said. Rose Anna growled at her. Her sister never knew humans could make that sound. But then, Rose Anna wasn't acting very human right now. Her own boy looked terrified, although little Lina, who Grace sometimes called Rose Anna Junior, seemed incapable of expressing fear. Even so, Donna tried again. "Rose Anna—"

"*Basta.*" Rose Anna said, dismissing her elder sister. She reached out for Lina and pulled her closer. "Listen, honey, I need you to stare, the way you do sometimes when we yell at you. I don't want you to say anything with that smart mouth you've got. You can't do that, *carina*, promise me, right? Just stare and don't blink like you do at Fat Louie and don't stop, even if your daddy or Uncle Vince or Uncle Hugo or Uncle Pete see you and try to make you go home."

Rose Anna pulled out Lina's barrettes and smoothed out her hair. She tucked her shirt in her shorts, and wiped the smudges from Lina's face with her apron. "Your dad or your uncles they might yell at you, but you just have to get stubborn like you do and keep staring. Nobody likes it when you stare that way. When you see Fat Louie—Vinny's going to point him out if you don't know him—you don't worry 'bout no one but him. You just stare, and if you do that, you'll start to make up for all the trouble you cause. You understand me?"

Lina nodded, too dazed by all the words her aunt threw at her to speak or blink. But she was doing exactly what Rose Anna wanted.

Rose Anna turned on Vinny, cleaning him up roughly with some spit and her apron. "You stay clear of your father and your uncles, and if you can't and you see them, you tell them I'll lock 'em all out if they cross me. Every last one of them." She slapped her fists on her thighs for emphasis. "You understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Go!" Rose Anna commanded.

Lina thought all her problems stemmed from not being born a boy. She spent a lot of time thinking about why she was always in trouble. She didn't think she was bad; she just wasn't very

good at girl stuff. She got angry fast, she talked back sometimes, and she had real problems staying clean. She thought the last part made them maddest of all, but it was the hardest one to change. Dirt was everywhere, waiting. She tried real hard not to talk back sometimes, concentrated on it until her head hurt, but they didn't like that either. They said she was staring, but she was just thinking hard, trying not to talk back. She wasn't looking at them at all. It was like she was all inside her head making sure she didn't say nothing but "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am." When she was in trouble that was all they ever wanted to hear.

She followed Vinny across the street and onto the docks, past the boarded-up envelope factory and in through the side entrance of Schaeffer's loading zone. Vinny made Lina duck behind some crates, wood that smelled like the blind alley where the bad men slept in cardboard at night. She wanted to leave, run away from the smell that made her want to be sick, but she stuck with Vinny like she was told. Aunt Rose Anna stayed mad the longest, and she always let Mama know just how angry she was. Mama didn't like that much. Nobody liked it when Aunt Rose Anna was mad. Besides, if she got sick in front of Vinny, he'd tell all the other cousins that she was still a baby.

Lina watched Uncle Pete pass by on a little truck with long metal hands. Vinny pulled her along the row of crates until they turned the corner and snuck up behind Fat Louie, who wasn't fat, but tall. His wallet was fat, because he was *The Bookie*. Lina didn't know what that meant yet, but she would. She had to be real careful who she asked or else she'd be called a baby. Then she'd get mad and just end up in trouble again.

Lina *hated* being the youngest.

Vinny said, "That's Fat Louie. He gives out quarters sometimes."

Lina nodded, impressed with this information. She was always the last to know something.

"What do you want, kid?"

"My Ma sent me. She wants you to give me all the paychecks for the family." Vinny wouldn't look up at Fat Louie. Lina knew

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that was a mistake. You weren't supposed to look afraid with grownups. Being in trouble all the time taught her that much.

"Why didn't she come herself?" he asked.

"I don't know. She's cooking or something."

"Get outta here, before your dad comes and knocks you on your ass."

"She'll be real mad. . . ."

"Dames are always mad about something, kid." Fat Louie patted Vinny on the rear. "Time you learned that."

Vinny stepped back as Lina stepped forward. She looked at Fat Louie, then looked inside her head even though she wasn't mad at anybody.

"Who are you?" Fat Louie asked.

Lina stared, mouth shut like she was told. As Fat Louie moved, Lina moved along with him, three steps to his one.

"She's my cousin," Vinny said.

"The whole freakin' neighborhood's your cousin. Whose girl is she?"

"She's my Aunt Grace and my Uncle Burt's kid. She's only seven."

"What's she doing?"

"I don't know, my Ma told her to stare at you."

"What for?" Fat Louie stepped back but Lina inched forward. He was taller than anyone in her family, and he didn't lean down to make it easier. "Is she doing that freaky evil eye shit?"

"If you give me them, I'll stop saying what my aunt told me to," Lina said. She liked the idea of being an evil eye girl.

"My Ma told her not to say anything," Vinny said.

"She told me to say it on the inside so you wouldn't find out."

Fat Louie tried to hide his body behind a too-small crate. "Your mother's a fucked-up bitch, sending a kid around to jinx me like this."

"She told me it would be doubly bad if you cursed." Fat Louie tripped on a box edge. Lina enjoyed making up lies to tell him. This was like ghost stories under the covers till you were too

scared to sleep in your own bed.

"You wait here," he said to Vinny. "You keep the little *strega* with you."

Fat Louie came back and tossed some envelopes at them. Vinny stuck them all deep into the front pocket of his shorts. He took her hand and walked with his other tightly clenched around the money.

Lina wrenched her hand free and skipped ahead of him down West Street. He might have the money now, but she knew that she got it from Fat Louie when Vinny, an older *boy*, was ready to give up and go home for a quarter. She sang, "I did it," over and over to the rhythm of her skipping until she saw Aunt Donna and Aunt Rose Anna circling each other, pacing the length of the stoop, their hands all wild and crazy like when Uncle Matt got sick and went away. She thought *I did it* one last time. The pleasure she felt drained from her, because something important was happening and they sent her. They didn't go themselves. They sent *her*.

Vinny caught up and then passed her, handing the checks over to his mother. She tucked them all inside her housedress. Vinny said, "You told her not to say anything and she told Fat Louie she was giving him the evil eye."

Aunt Donna laughed. Aunt Rose Anna said, "Brilliant," and showered her with kisses. Aunt Rose Anna's cheeks were wet and sweaty.

Aunt Rose Anna never cried. She was the mean aunt, the one who was never afraid. What was so scary about a tall man who got frightened by a little girl? What would have happened to her if Fat Louie wasn't afraid of her being an evil eye girl? Did they send her *because* she was so much trouble? She wished she could ask Vinny or even Tessa, but they wouldn't tell her. They liked it too much when she didn't know stuff.

"This goes a long way with me, *carina*, a very long way," Aunt Rose Anna said, before putting Lina down and wiping both their cheeks with her apron.

Lina wanted to know why Aunt Rose Anna was happy and

crying, why this once she wasn't in trouble, and if Fat Louie being *The Bookie* had something to do with punishing bad little girls.

"The kids aren't going to feed themselves," Aunt Donna said. She pinched Lina's cheek before she went inside.

Rose Anna stood, tugging at Lina's sleeve. "Coming?"

Lina shrugged her off. She didn't like how she felt, how things were so mixed up inside. It was a new kind of dirty.

Rose Anna sat down again. It was getting dark, and the brewery's strobe lights rumbled on. "When I was your age, every building along the docks had lights like those. Watching them light up was like having our own sunrise at sunset."

"I want to see that." Lina looked expectantly down the street, as if their combined will could make it happen.

"I wish you could." Rose Anna watched her niece's mood change, how she brightened at the prospect of a new experience. She would try to yell at Lina less, and she would get Grace to stop telling her she was "Too smart for her own good" all the time. There was no such thing, and it was time they all learned that.

Rose Anna's headache returned, although the hammering had stopped for the night. Lina stared at the docks. "You'll get to see the fireworks in a few days." Rose Anna brushed the hair from Lina's eyes, which was always tangled, despite Grace's constant effort. "You like watching them, right?"

Lina sprang off the stoop, startling Rose Anna with such quick motion. "Teacher taught us a song for the bicentennial. Want to hear?"

Rose Anna swallowed a sigh, and reflexively felt for the checks tucked inside her bra. "Sure, *carina*, sing me your song."

THE MAGICIAN'S TALE

Jilly Dybka

*for Vanteen The Magician*

I. The Early Years

A carnival came to town the same week  
I graduated from high school. I told  
my mother I was going. The head geek  
gave me a midway job. I'd watch the old  
magician's melodic hands. (A penny  
dose of spectacle for all the farm sons  
and housewives.) Then came the Army  
and Uncle Sam. The war called the Great One. . . .  
I'd hone my ethereal fingerings  
off duty with cards or a billiard ball.  
Back in the States, I had to pull some strings,  
but got through the College of Manual  
Dexterity and Prestidigitation.  
Poof! I became ZAMTEEN: The Magician.

## *The Sacred in the Mundane* Bruce Wrighton



*Yonda's pub (circa 1985), Johnson City, New York*

Lynne Schneider, Art Editor, *Harpur Palate*:

Tom Costello, a gaunt, gray-haired man, settled a flat, heavy black box on my desk. "You have to take a look at these," he said. "Pat Flery gave them to me a long time ago. They've been resting in my attic since Bruce died."

Bruce Wrighton won Kodak's "Top 100 New Photographers" award in 1988, a month before he passed away at age 38. Binghamton's Roberson Museum mounted a 130-piece solo show of his work in 2003 and the Laurence Miller Gallery in Manhattan displayed his work in 2006. Before I spoke with those who knew him, before I heard about his work with the SUNY Binghamton Archaeology Department—his painstaking developing process, his beat old station wagon always overloaded with photography equipment and his dawn and dusk rambles—I opened the box of his pictures. I agreed with Mr. Costello. You have to take a look at these. . . .



*Sullivan's Hotel—colloquially known as Swat's (circa 1983), Binghamton's Southside*



*Dormition of the Virgin Mary Orthodox Church (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Patricia Flery, Bruce Wrighton's widow:

Bruce was meditative. He had to be, using that large-format camera—you know, a great big box on a tripod with a black cape that covered his head and blocked out the light. Taking pictures with that camera requires long, patient exposures. Bruce took his time—to take the shots, to look. He was very interested in the way the human spirit expressed itself in every setting, how the relics of a bar spoke to the spirituality of the patrons. In a way, Bruce felt that those local, corner joints were places where people might find communion and also leave the world for a little while, much as they do in church.



*Living room altar (circa 1986), Johnson City, New York*

Peter Klosky, Director of Exhibitions and Acquisitions, Roberson Museum: Bruce's portraits, landscapes, interiors and architecture were all intimate images of personalities, whether there were people in them or not. I like to think Bruce even took portraits of architecture. And there are few artists who capture the bizarre humor of the [Binghamton] area—maybe Rod Serling in *The Twilight Zone* . . . or Ron Gonzalez.



*St. Cyril & Method (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Ronald Gonzalez, Sculptor, Professor of Art at Binghamton University: Bruce was the quintessential 20th-century photographer—one always felt the eye of the artist behind the photograph. Lugging that big black box all over, taking time to set up every shot, he was always looking. He understood the history of his craft, from *camera obscura* forward. He appreciated the Renaissance origin of his art. Bruce was old-fashioned in all the right ways, an ancient photographer of the modern urban still life.



*Tailor's shop (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Ronald Gonzalez, continued:

Bruce was drawn to people he couldn't be, fascinated by lives he didn't live, interested in something deeper than his own experience. He was the most open man—open-minded, open-hearted . . .

The tragedy of his dying so young is partly that he was just beginning to get a lot of things off the ground, to see where he wanted to go with his art and to start moving into those ideas.

And I miss him. I miss seeing him around town at dawn and dusk, hunting for light. I used to stop over at the Archaeology Department, where he had a darkroom. No matter how busy he was, he stopped work, stepped outside, sat under a tree or something, and took the time.



*Living room altar (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Thomas F. Costello, poet and entrepreneur, brother-in-law of Bruce Wrighton: Bruce was the second best cook in Binghamton, and he bore an uncanny resemblance to Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, except for the eyes—Bruce's eyes were round and open, the most open eyes you ever saw. But mostly, and first of all, you'd remember how warm and kind and generous he was. Remember that and then you can look at his work as he did, and you can laugh—as he did—at the sudden irony of life. Look at his work and you look through his eyes . . . You see, he was a frightened man. Still, he was never afraid of looking deeply at the paradoxes of his art, death, faith—he paid extraordinary attention to icons, to rituals, to people living their faith. He needed their faith as a bulwark against his fear—and then suddenly, for him, it wasn't just *looking*.



*Lydia Wrabitski's bedroom rushnik (circa 1985), Binghamton, New York*

Thomas F. Costello, continued:

Ronnie's sculptures, some like the dried and blackened remnants of living things, might even remind you of his cancer—but *who wants to remember?* In a few months only, Bruce withered to bones. I wrapped my arms around his body not an hour before he died and held all that what was left of him, his light remains. He was looking up at me, his face green like a lizard, blue eyes turned to gold. Then red and black . . . his amazing eyes.

Not long after, Pat put that black box in my hands—in the face of death, maybe you need a kind of erasure and then later you can start to remember again. I brought you Bruce's pictures now because they shouldn't sit in the attic any longer.

ORBITAL

Andrew Michael Roberts

Once your body was the deep white surface of the moon. Eons and atmosphere between your craters and me. Now, I touch it: light years away from that strange old us. I know you, but it isn't love, it's distance and hunger. It's shaped like sex. I put my tongue to you. I am always empty, this appetite that makes a decent lover. Can you stand it? I leave the window open and the traffic's song rolls over us through the screen. Its loud seeds stick in our sweat and sprout like spent notes. Listen, our singing skin. Our damp noise garden. You bite my face and sit up to fuck me with your hands in your hair. I strum your heaving ribs. Hollow. You smell like love. My clothes in their pile catch fire from a candle. We let them burn. You toss your stockings on and scream. That dark smoke a sour veil. The loud stick of glazed flesh and a taste of ash. The wayward velocity of names and sperm. Planets breaking apart. Your eyes are closed. You slap me, and your hand is a sharp collection of stars. Setting suns. Each illuminating one dead moon. Light years are passing. Try to undo me. Take my fist in your teeth and bite deep enough for me to never forget.

LOVE CRUSHED US WITH ITS BIG DEATH TRUCK

Andrew Michael Roberts

and kept driving, and night clapped shut again behind it. Now the house is holey. The bed. We lie here differently. Quiet like fruits. From above in the dark we look halved and opened up. We are covered in skin and tiny hairs.

I have done terrible things. I would sell my books. I would turn my houseplants ninety degrees every day. They would be healthy and well-rounded.

Are you still awake? Do you wonder if I wonder?

A fly in a waterglass is a kind of poorly designed boat. I hear the ply of hairy oars and think of standing and flapping. I think until I fall sleep. I fall and sleep the sleep of the drowned.

I AM AN IMPORTANT PERSON

Andrew Michael Roberts

Today we escaped. No alarms, no dislocations. It went like this: your face and its bad song fading out in the opposite direction. Mine telling me, *Don't look back*. And, *This is what you get*. My tongue this pink anvil. My lungs all fucked up. Still, I am full of enthusiasm. I can walk. I am tattooed intermittently, the strip malls dwindling, the city beginning to swallow me. It sucks at my eyes and smells of fish sauce. I shoot myself through space. I am railing at some invisible machine. I squint and achieve great velocity. Overhead the contrails hiss. Though in all the rush I miss the skinny bed of my past. The becalmed tick of empty rooms. The moment I lie down and let my spine lengthen out. Everything everywhere else is what I really want. What I forget is the night birds squawking. Every other dreamer in the world parallel or perpendicular to me or at odd angles, evading their own sick sleep. All the utensils in their silent slots. All the world's fingers and guns and their great collective potential. Oh foreigner, your city, your missiles. I swallow them like knives and it's not enough. I'm too attached to the world. Come closer. Kill me again.

THERE WAS SOMETHING

Derek Pollard

*after Kasimir Malevich*

Her stomach  
And the way  
The light  
Touches it

Lemon peel  
Lying  
At the bottom  
Of a glass

One hand  
Resting  
On another

Hair  
Gone golden

*Sunlight*

Lemon peel

All around us  
Another morning

FALLING

Heather Caliri

Harry first saw the melon in the fruit aisle. He had come to buy tulips for his girlfriend, but found himself in the produce section instead. There, he saw its smooth roundness, the subtle yellow striping, the rough button where it had been connected to its vine. He could see its self-assurance while surrounded by so many copies of itself.

*It knows what it is.*

He picked the melon up with both hands. It weighed at least five pounds. Its skin pressed against his fingers. It was unbearably whole. He glanced up at the sign. *Only forty-nine cents a pound?* Harry headed for the checkout aisle, melon in hand.

Exhilarated, he got in a checkout line to wait his turn. He was not a patient man, but he had the melon's weight to ground him.

Then he remembered he'd forgotten the flowers. His stomach tensed for a moment. Then he ran his hand over the melon's smooth skin and relaxed.

His girlfriend wanted to get married. They had lived together for a year. Her shoes stood at perpetual attention in his closet, all the toes pointing the same way. At first, he liked living with her, liked divvying up his bed, his closet, and his space with a woman. He felt guided by sharing, like a child rewarded for playing nice.

But lately, when he came home from his job, she'd be sitting at their kitchen table, looking at him. Asking questions. At first, they were simple. What did he want for dinner? What color should they paint the kitchen? Then, she got more demanding. She wanted to know where their relationship was headed. What he wanted from life. This morning, she'd left for work in a huff.

"We can't live like this forever, Harry. We're stuck in a rut. On the way to nowhere."

He knew if he asked her to marry him, the questions would stop for a while. But marriage would mean someday holding a baby in his arms and knowing it was both of them mingled together, permanently. The image troubled him. A fuzzy head, a soft belly, and tiny fingers that would clutch at his.

Harry had a sudden image of the girlfriend slicing into his fruit, exposing the clear, pink flesh. He imagined her taking a bite, and smiling as the juice ran down her chin. He gagged, and felt the acid burn the back of his throat.

It was his turn. He set the melon on the conveyor belt and watched it move away from him. The cashier greeted him and put the melon on a scale. The numbers flickered, and then settled at the melon's weight.

"Paper or plastic?" asked the bag boy.

"Neither," said Harry. He paid the cashier. Then he lifted the melon and smiled to feel its cool, firm skin again. Was it just him, or could he feel its subtle pattern underneath his fingertips? The secret pattern of the rind revealing itself for him?

The exit door opened for him automatically. Outside, Harry saw a little girl holding on to her mother's arm, using it as a swing. The girl wore a blue hat and smiled at him.

Harry smiled back, entranced by her. *She knows her mother will hold her up.*

He felt a whoosh in the pit of his stomach. The ground left him go. He'd stepped off the curb without realizing it. As he came back to earth, he stumbled. The melon flew out of his hands and hit the pavement with a thunk. It rolled a few feet, and then came to a rest.

Harry ran over to it and knelt on the ground. But when he picked up the melon, it had split open. He could see its crisp center exposed, and imagined the seeds working their way toward the rind, like his thoughts did sometimes, struggling to reach the surface. The melon was ruined.

A car honked.

Harry looked up. A bright, lime green VW Beetle had stopped five feet away from him. Motionless, breathless, wordless, he

stared at the car.

A man leaned out the window. "Get out of the street, you moron."

Harry looked around. There were other cars aimed at him along the pavement in front of the store. People gestured. He stood, cradling the melon. A throbbing head rush almost toppled him again. He saw black spots swarming across his vision like flies over dead fruit.

The man in the Beetle leaned on his horn. "Move, you fucking asshole!"

Harry threw the melon before he realized what he was doing. He saw its smooth skin turning in the sunlight as it arched over the black pavement and touched the clean blue sky. Then it plummeted towards the green car.

Harry started running before the melon hit. He felt the ground thump against his feet, electric pains flare up to his knee. He was hurting himself, pounding his legs too hard. Over his shoulder, he heard a sickening, metallic thud, yelling, a car horn.

Harry didn't turn around. Instead, he followed the white arrows painted on the asphalt. They told him which way to run.

WHAT'S ON A PLATE

Casey Lord

All meals have the earth in  
common, whole landscapes  
for breakfast, lunch. This is  
what it means to eat: a well  
at Parson's farm, rust from  
rain on silo roofs, doe blood  
from a barbed wire fence.  
Gravity pushes all things in  
to the dirt. We eat from there.  
Radio towers out in the country,  
words on waves in the ground now,  
a tractor's red reflectors, wind  
chimes, the breath of all who  
pass by. The earth must  
harbor breath from 20 years  
ago. My eyelash is in the soil  
somewhere too. There are  
dreams in the country and who  
knows what cows dream.  
Oak and dog bark and wild noise,  
there probably has never been  
a time when wind and four legs stood  
still. Midnight and 5 A.M., lonely hours.  
There've been bruises and sweet talk,  
cigarette butts and an unstrung aura  
that binds itself to dirt and the heads  
of everyone who's ever been,  
all of it gets folded in. And bare  
feet from daughters running  
perpendicular away from it all.  
The prints do not trace back.

LOBSTERS IN THE ATTIC

April Lindner

He won't eat corn till I remove the *risk*,  
his word for silk, won't eat the kernels touched  
by *risk*, though corn is mostly safe, familiar.  
For him, most food *is* risky: squishy, weird,  
spicy, touched by bugs, and when he asks,  
*Why are so many lobsters in the attic?*  
he means earwigs. Through his wary eyes,  
a lobster's just a monster arthropod,  
its creamy flesh offset by those antennae,  
and the green *tamale* I pretend to like,  
(the liver, slick and rich, a luxury).  
What passes his inspection? Purple jelly,  
yellow cheese, candy in any hue.  
Surely not this basket of mulberries  
freshly picked. I wash, searching for inchworms  
(find one rearing up, green question mark)  
look closely at the berry's clustered bumps  
like rampant cells. I have to force myself  
to eat a single one, its burst peculiar  
on my tongue. We learn to chew,  
mouths closed, the laundered napkins on our laps,  
learn to overlook the strings and bruises,  
the nerves and messy juice, and say *delicious*.

AFTER BUYING LUNCH FOR A GIRL MY AGE WHO I  
MET ON A GREYHOUND BUS AN HOUR AGO  
Chuck Carlise

She slides a ticket from her back pocket  
and shrugs. *I'm sure I'll be fine*—(12 dollars  
Canadian, a bus to Ft. Collins,  
then hitching to Las Cruces)—*it's not that  
I've never done this before—there's always  
a place to stay*. And I think of her last  
story—the ride from Flagstaff, valley grass  
high like small cornstalks when he'd stopped. The days  
passed visibly then, she'd said. *You could watch  
the sun's whole arc from that place—I stayed with him  
for a month*. She picks now at the red trim  
of her coat. “So why'd you leave, then?” The latch  
of her bag opens, shuts. She looks down at her route,  
but her eyes are distant, like she can't make it out.

DIAGRAM OF THE FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM,  
TRANSLATED

Kathi Morrison-Taylor

Both parents born in El Salvador, the neighbor boy, Enrico, has trouble with his homework, knocks on our door, asking for my husband's bilingual expertise. At twelve, he must study the reproductive system in a special class called Health. He hands my husband a cross-section of a woman, a map with arrows and blanks. Shyly, he says his parents know only the Spanish words. But I worry that they know less than that—tranquil in their living room, listening to the news under a wide-eyed portrait of Jesus, while their boy in the next apartment learns to pronounce *clitoris*, *vagina*, and *uterine lining*. What would Jesus do, faced with a worksheet like this? I find I need to leave the room so men can talk as men. My husband comes to consult me only when he is unsure about *fallopian tubes*. In a half an hour, they are almost done. Anatomically correct and American, the diagram has filled with terms doctors use. I can hear Enrico thanking my husband: *Gracias, gracias, gracias, señor*. His gratitude seems too great, as if he could know that when you learn a new word in no time you find it everywhere.

THE ALLERGY DIARIES

Jill Christman

Part One: The Beginning

Months before my first baby was born here in the middle of Indiana, I received an invitation from a university in Alabama to give a reading, and having no real idea what it means to leave a breastfed four-month-old baby, and imagining in my gestational brain this liquid marriage between my writer/teacher life and motherhood, I accepted the invitation. Go ahead and chuckle.

So a good two months before my scheduled trip, I started to panic. I wanted my husband Mark to fly down with me and hang out with Ella in the hotel room while I gave the reading, but he had to stay home to teach. Mark is, I suppose it should be said—although it never is, is it?—a *working father*, and he was going to be juggling an infant and three classes all on his own for thirty-six hours. While Mark himself seemed oddly serene, I ratcheted myself up to a skin-prickling level of preparatory fear. How could I leave my baby? But somewhere in Birmingham, Alabama, flyers had been posted with my face on them. Could I call up and say, *You know what? I'm so sorry, but I haven't seen Jill Christman for months. She's going to have to cancel.*

Sometimes Mark and I wonder what our lives would be like if I had actually gotten on the plane on that morning in February. How things would be different. And I wonder if my dread—even then, before I knew what I know now, before I'd scratched in additional Things to Fear like items on a grocery list—was common sense trepidation (i.e., any fool knows not to schedule an overnight journey with a four-month-old exclusively breastfed baby) or a kind of misguided presentiment? Was my maternal premonition a genuine thing? Did I *know* something was going to go wrong? The answer to this question matters, of course, and I will never know the answer. Of course.

In the preceding weeks, I pumped like a madwoman,

throwing back the black leather flap that dressed up the electric milking machine, this dairy barn in a bag, as a hip briefcase, and submitting to the only aspect of motherhood I truly loathe. Wedged between the counter and the refrigerator with my breasts suctioned into their respective funnels, I tried not to despair as I watched one mean droplet at a time trickle down the plastic tubing and into the waiting bottles. I hooked myself up three times a day and froze the milk flat in special breast milk bags, but even so, the supply was meager. I hoarded that stuff like Gatorade in a fall-out shelter. "Listen," I'd say to Mark as I sprinted out the door to teach, "I'll be home at five. If you can hold her off, hold her off, okay?" Poor kid.

So we arrived at the Sunday before my Wednesday journey and I counted the thin, stacked packages of life-giving, scream-stopping milk with the tip of my finger: thirty-six ounces. I had shortened the trip to thirty-six hours, but would one ounce per hour be enough? Lacking easy-to-read calibrations on my breasts, I hadn't the foggiest idea how much milk Ella consumed in a day or how much she'd need while I was gone. We didn't know if we had enough. We knew there was a chance Mark would run out of the frozen bags and be forced to peel open a can of formula.

That's why we did what we did, but I cannot tell you why we decided that seven P.M. on a Sunday evening was a good time to find out how well Ella would tolerate formula. We had nearly a case of the stuff stockpiled in the pantry because the formula companies had been sending it to us like sample packs of crack cocaine. The formula would arrive with shiny pamphlets about how "breast is best," but wonder of wonders, if all else failed, the formula would be there, fortified with DHA and ready to replicate nature herself. Mark picked out a can and mixed up a bottle. Here's what we wanted to know: Would she drink it? Would she get gas? Would it make her cranky? We didn't consider the possibility that it could kill her.



Sunday evenings depress me. Sunday afternoon moves in like a blue haze across the beach and I want to dig a hole in the sand and crawl in. This could be a peaceful time, but the pressure of the coming week bears down on this day. Living with an infant, I had hoped to learn that life doesn't have to be a rush. Maybe life can settle in with a warm baby and warm cup of tea and put her feet up. I wanted to learn that these moments of simply *being* were enough.

I'm still working on it. Sometimes when I nurse, I can stroke her velvet temple, as soft as a horse's nose, and get lost in my imaginings of her life. I can think *I am somebody's mother. This baby in my arms, this beautiful, beautiful baby, is my baby and I am her mother.* Other times, this isn't enough, and I want to nurse and *get something done.* "Could you grab me? . . ." became a mantra in our house. I'd need a book, some paper, a catalog, the grocery list, a pen, the bills, my grade book, and on and on.

Nursing takes a lot of time—during those infant growth spurts, nursing can take *all* your time: I swear, at three weeks, at six weeks, for days on end, Ella nursed without ceasing. I'd missed this possibility in the baby books and I don't recall anybody mentioning it to me. I understood why so many women throw up their hands in despair and go running for the formula cans screaming *Can this baby not be sated? Will I never walk again?*



So on February 29th—that bissextile window of opportunity that comes around only once every four years—it was my turn to succumb to the formula temptation. I hadn't pumped enough. I was a nervous wreck, my head full of images of my baby screaming in desperate hunger and my equally desperate husband scrabbling through peas and pork chops praying for one more fallen bag of frozen milk. We had to try the formula. Just in case. I was typing up some class prep, pulled up to the table in the dim dining room with Ella resting in my lap on the Boppy pillow. She woke up hungry, and I was ready to breastfeed

when I realized this was a good opportunity. "We need to practice with the formula. We could do it now."

Earlier, Mark had made a too-grim-to-be-funny comment that had been intended as a kind of hapless father joke, but turned out to be prescient:

"I'd die if she had a reaction to the formula and you weren't here to help. I'd just lie down on the floor and die. And then she'd die too."

"Honey," I'd said, "you would not. You'd get her to the hospital."

"I'd die," he repeated dramatically.

"You would not!" I started to panic. "You would not! You would take her to the hospital!"

"Jill," he said, "I'm kidding. I'm just joking. We're going to be fine. I'm going to take good care of her. You need to *relax*. If we lose our sense of humor, we're sunk, remember?"

And then we forgot all about this conversation until I suggested at seven P.M. that we should give it a try. Mark followed the directions on the can of Enfamil with Iron and filled a bottle. I didn't watch him mix it. He handed me the bottle and I put the nipple between Ella's little lips and she started to suck. She kept sucking.

"She likes it," I reported happily. "Excellent. She likes it!"

My fear had been that she might reject it. I am full of fear. But I never get it right. I am never afraid of the right thing.

Formula leaked down Ella's chin and into the fold of her neck. She stopped sucking and I removed the bottle from her mouth and checked the side—she'd only taken an ounce, but I figured that was good enough for our little experiment. Besides, I needed to finish typing the notes and I couldn't hold the bottle and type at the same time. Sunday afternoon's blue gloom had turned to black and the only light in the dining room was seeping in through the kitchen door. I couldn't see Ella's face. She was in shadow.

"Could you take her and change her diaper?" I called out to Mark. "I just need one more minute."

There must have been several seconds after I handed her off before Mark screamed. "What's wrong with her face? She's getting a rash!" I was up and moving toward Mark and the baby and the rash and then the next ten minutes are panic and screaming and running. On the well-lighted pad of the changing table, I could see the red circle around Ella's mouth, a ring of blistering welts; and even in the seconds I stood there, the welts multiplied and spread, onto her cheeks and down onto her neck, as if we were watching an accelerated film. *We need to wash it off! We need to wash it off!* And I was swabbing a cool, wet cloth over her face and neck, but nothing, and then she started to cry, from watching us, or from her own sense of something terribly wrong, we'll never know, but the cry sounded strangled, as if she were strangling, and that's when the gurgling began—a clog in the drain of the too-small throat of our baby.

The next minutes are a blur. Mark picks her up and runs. I turn circles around the house for seconds that seem like hours—time is all fucked up when your baby is gurgling. I scream that we need to call someone. We need to call the doctor. We need someone to tell us what to do. But Mark has Ella in her car seat and somehow the dogs are locked safely in the house and I am beside Ella in the backseat, leaning over her, listening to the gurgle, watching her face, *come on baby come on baby come on baby*, and Mark is backing up fast.

This is the moment I come back into my mind. There's nobody to call or to talk to—we just need to get to the hospital, and what is so miraculous about this moment is that we live only four blocks from the door of the emergency room. Only four blessed blocks. Ella's not crying anymore. I wish she would cry: red and swollen and gurgling. *Come on baby come on baby come on baby*. And Mark is yelling from the front *Is she okay? Is she okay? Is she breathing? Is she okay?* And that fast we're swinging into the half circle in front of the emergency room doors and I'm unclicking the seat and running with it inside while Mark drops off the car. I have the car seat with my baby's face in sight snug on my hip and I'm running through the revolving door even

though I'm claustrophobic and I hate revolving doors because that trapping door is the fastest way to the nurse at the long shiny desk at the back of the waiting room. I see only the face of this nurse, a man, because I know he's my way in. All of the other people in the waiting room look like wallpaper, their faces blending together in a smear of color and expression.

"My baby!" I scream. "My baby's not breathing!" Even in this moment of terror, I know what I am saying is not technically true. She is gurgling. I can hear the sound of air moving in her throat, passing through liquid or swelling or something, but I know that it is there. I do not know how long she will be like this. I do not know how fast this is all happening, and I have never known a more appropriate time for some high-volume hyperbole.

It works. Another nurse appears from behind the first one and runs to the front of the desk. She grabs the handle of the car seat and disappears with my baby through the flapping doors of the ER. There are no insurance forms to fill out. I print Ella's name and sign my own. That is all. "You can follow her," the male nurse tells me. I scream again. "My husband is right behind me. Tell him where we are." Flapping doors have never looked so much like a giant's mouth, a monster's slathering maw, and my baby has gone into them. Inside the doors, people buzz everywhere and my head is whipping, scanning. I feel animalistic, as if I'll smell my baby. That is how I'll find her. At the center of this hive, I see a cluster of people gathered around something on the floor and then I see her foot. Ella is on the floor of the nurses' station and they're drawing up shots.

"How much does she weigh?" someone yells at me, but it's been over a month since her last appointment, and I know she's grown.

I tell them this. "Maybe sixteen pounds."

The infant scale in the ER isn't working and the nurse is screaming. She is panicking. Now Mark is here too. I jump onto the regular scale and yell out the weight. Then I grab Ella and jump on. "Subtract! Subtract!" I shout because I cannot think. I cannot take 162 from 178. Numbers mean nothing. Give her

the goddamn shot!

"Sixteen!" Mark shouts. "Sixteen!"

And right there on the floor, the doctor plunges a shot of Benadryl into one thigh and a shot of steroids into the other. The needles look huge. Each one is as long as her thigh itself. When you're a baby in an ER, the proportions are all wrong. Everything is way too big. She is in my arms, wearing only a diaper, and her eyes roll back in her head and then close.

"What's happening? What's happening?" I scream. I think she has died. I think they have killed my baby.

The doctor smiles at me. "She's sleeping," he says. "It's the Benadryl. It puts them right to sleep."



All of the ER rooms were full and so we stayed there on the gurney in the middle of all the activity. This was fine with me because when the doohickey that measures the concentration of oxygen in Ella's blood started to beep and the number blinked and descended: 98, 92, 86, 65, 86 . . . I yelled and somebody checked it. The wire had tangled. The clamp on her toe had loosened. It's always something. Ella woke up and I offered her my nipple for comfort. Soon, an older woman—a volunteer?—was throwing a hospital sheet over me and the baby, shielding us as if I had begun a striptease right there in the ER. *Oh we're so sorry*, she mumbled. *For your privacy, for your privacy* . . .

"I'm fine," I insisted. "I'm okay. Listen, any scrap of modesty I might have had, I lost during childbirth. I don't care."

She continued tucking the sheet around me, trying to hide my breast. "I'm so sorry. We haven't had somebody out here since the new emergency room opened. Every room is full! Here you go."

"Really," I said, fighting an urge to peel my shirt off completely and do a little dance around the emergency room to assert my rights as a nursing mother in a hospital of all places. "I'm really fine." The whole scene felt so otherworldly to me. First, there

had been the panic of the reaction—*She could have died*, I kept muttering to Mark, *she could have died. My God. Thank God. You were great. You just ran with her. You were great. Thank God. Oh my God, what if we'd bought the house out in the country? Thank god we live just four blocks from the hospital. She could have died*—the period of calm after the first rush of trauma is not a time of ambitious language. All of my synapses were still swimming in the adrenaline of the moment and I could feel the runoff of the chemicals in my bloodstream, the pollutants circulating down my arms and legs, making my hands and feet feel tingly and not quite a part of me. The only part of my body that felt real and solid was my breast and the small electric pull of Ella's mouth on my nipple, connecting me to her and her to me. I was so grateful to be able to comfort her. Mark and I looked down at our resting baby, breathing fine now, and the beeping numbers of the monitor, assuring us that the oxygen was getting in. The room buzzed around us and Ella started to whimper. I threw the sheet over our heads and made a tent for the two of us, rocking and rocking, singing *Summertime, and the living is easy, catfish are jumpin'* . . .

Through the filtered light of our white world, I saw the rash spread farther down her naked belly and move onto her thighs. I threw back the sheet and sounded the alarm. The bald-headed doctor was back and ordering an IV. His fear was that Ella could be experiencing a secondary reaction. There was a room for us and we were rushed into it and a team came down from Pediatrics to put in the IV. I remembered one of the nurses as the one who had successfully drawn blood from a feverish Ella two months earlier after her Attila the Hun partner had failed, and I was glad, but when I saw her finger come to rest on Ella's head, palpating the tiny trace of a blue vein running out toward her temple, I felt my knees start to give. "I'm sorry, honey," I said to Ella. "Your daddy's going to stay with you. . . ." And I moved into the hall, to wait and to pray.

In the world outside our own, another family's drama was unfolding. Another baby, a tiny one, only two months old,

was turning blue in her struggle to get air. I overheard that her oxygen number had dropped down into the eighties. We two mothers, out in the hall, eyed each other warily. *Come on, little baby*, I thought. *Come on*. A nurse ran into the room with Ella, who was now screaming and screaming and screaming, and I heard her tell our nurse that the little baby needed an IV, her numbers were dropping, and I said, "Go, go . . . Go help her." What we were doing was a precaution. That baby was fighting for her life. I can't imagine that what I had to say had anything to do with hospital policy, but strangely, it seemed to. One of the technicians went to the other baby. I saw the mother talking to the father in panicked whispers out in the hall. He handed her a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his jeans. She fled out the front doors with a crazy look in her eyes. Later, we heard the helicopter on the roof and our nurse told us they'd come for that baby. RSV. Respiratory syncytial virus. They were taking her to Indy. *Come on, little baby*, I thought again, *Come on*.



At eleven o'clock, when they brought us up to our room in Pediatrics, I nursed Ella, all wires and toe clamps and beeping monitors, in the vinyl easy chair, as uneasy as such chairs get, and watched the tail end of the Academy Awards, shaking my head at the strangeness of it all and knowing that there would be no reading in Alabama. I would be going nowhere. Mark went home to check on the dogs and brought me back a sandwich. I convinced him to go back and get some sleep and then I considered my options: the uneasy chair or the hospital crib. There was no way I was going to put Ella in the monkey cage of that white metal barred crib alone, so I lifted her little body over the side and then I climbed in myself, curling my big body around hers, and still singing . . . *Your daddy's rich and your mama's good lookin', so hush little baby, do-on't you cry*. . . . We actually got some sleep, me and my breathing baby.



In the months following this first reaction, when somebody's mother or another suggested that we give some rice cereal, or peas, or bananas a try, I parroted back the doctor's orders that we give her *nothing* but breast milk until she'd been fully tested at six months: *The doctor told us to breastfeed exclusively until after the skin tests. She could die.* My dire warnings never really stuck and I repeated the doctor's orders many times—it's so hard to imagine healthy foods as lethal agents, isn't it? Before that night with the formula, food allergies were not part of my world. Sure, I'd heard stories about kids who were allergic to peanuts—information I stored in the inchoate place in my brain where I'd locked in my only other brush with an epinephrine injection: at a Connecticut cookout when I was maybe six, there was a kid named Tony, a Fresh Air kid from the Bronx who stayed with this family every summer, friends of my dads. We'd finished husking this giant vat of corn on the cob and we were playing ball on the edge of the yard while the adults dealt with things that weren't a six-year-old's concern—the grilling of burgers and collecting of condiments—when Tony was stung by a bee and started to have a reaction with swelling lips and bent-over wheezing. I remember group panic, the giant shot, and then the end of the party when Tony and our hosts left for the nearest emergency room.

What sticks with me is my horror at what I learned that day: Tony could have died. A bee, a little bee, could kill you. (A bee didn't kill Tony. A couple of years later he was killed by a gun in a Bronx warehouse. The story I heard was that the shooting was accidental. He and some other kids were playing with the gun and it went off.)

Now that I'm writing this, I wonder: was it Tony who had the venom reaction at the barbeque or was it his Connecticut brother? Maybe if I called my father he could tell me which boy it was, but here is the information mashed together in my mother-brain—things that can kill your kid: bees, guns.

Next to this, I add: food.

### Part Two: The Specialist

We left the doctor's office and walked down the hall in stunned silence. "What just happened in there?" Mark said. "I feel like we've just been robbed at gunpoint." As we crossed the parking lot of the medical building, I half-expected Alan Funt to jump out from behind one of the newly planted hedges and yell, "Surprise! You're on *Candid Camera*!"

Nothing. We meekly shut ourselves into the car, shaking our heads.

Mark repeated his question. "What just happened in there?"

The appointment with the specialist who had been so highly recommended by our pediatrician and for which we had waited one full month and driven one full hour had lasted two long hours. We got *nothing*. Here are the highlights, all of which when considered with the wisdom of time read like clues:

- 1) The allergy specialist, Dr. A, works alone in a small office with a large set of pristine children's books. I was attracted to the titles of these classic stories and when I pulled *Mrs. Tiddly Winks* from the shelf and opened it up to read to Ella, the cover actually cracked. The book had never been opened. In the corner of the office, there was a neat box of toys. No children. No other patients except an old woman sitting in a chair by the door reading a book. She was there when we arrived and she was there when we left. In retrospect, she could have been a hired actor: Patient Waiting.
- 2) When I called for directions, neither receptionist seemed to know where they were. Seriously. There's a major freeway not one mile from the office and they didn't know which exit we should take.
- 3) Both isolated receptionists were beside themselves with glee at the presence of a sweet baby in the office:

"We've never had one this little in here! Look, Evelyn, a *baby!*" The eyebrow I had curved dramatically in Mark's direction into a replica of the St. Louis Arch in response to this statement went unnoticed by both receptionists. In retrospect, of course, this is the point at which we should have acted. We should not have waited placidly with the Reading Woman, filling in forms and allowing ourselves to be moved like dutiful sheep . . .

- 4) . . . into a room with a round table and four chairs. The blinds were closed tightly against the sun and on the wall a poster danced with horses. When we refused her offer of a beverage, the receptionist asked again: "Are you sure? Well, if you change your mind, let me know. It's a long appointment."
- 5) Dr. A entered. Mark and I continued to smile passively as we made our greetings. Dr. A's advanced age—maybe seventy—was a poor match with those shiny books in his waiting room and our pediatrician's assurance that he was using cutting-edge techniques. Also, he was hideous. His ruddy face was covered with angry red boils, scabs and rashes, and I was thinking, "My *goodness*, Doctor. Can't you *take* something for that?" This was not a nice thing to think, I know, but I was in the midst of making a poor decision for my baby's healthcare—here was yet another "expert" who was about to mess with us—and on some level I already knew that, so I was acting out a bit.
- 6) The man had no sense of humor. That always makes me nervous.
- 7) He set a legal pad on the shiny table and started scratching at it with the ill-sharpened pencil he held in his gnarled hand. We began by telling him why we were there and

giving him the details of the February emergency room visit occasioned by Ella's first sips of milk-based formula: the hives, the gurgling, the anaphylactic reaction. He listened sedately, scratching away, turned the formula can over in his hand with little interest, handed it back to us, and then he started in on his questions. He asked us many, many questions.

*How many stories does your house have?*

*Two.*

*What kind of foundation?*

*What do you mean? Concrete, I guess.*

*Does it have a basement?*

*Oh. Yes.*

*So are you counting the basement as a story?*

*No. There's a basement and two floors.*

*What kind of heat? . . . What kind of mattress? . . .*

*Pillows? . . . Houseplants?*

*No. I killed them. Oh, yeah, we have a cactus, but I don't water that. . . .*

*Cleaning supplies? . . . Flooring? . . . And what about your mother? Is your mother allergic to anything?*

And on and on ad infinitum.

- 8) After an hour of this, Ella, of course, got bored and started fidgeting. Dr. A kept half a wary eye on her.

*Oh, look! She's a little red there.*

Indeed, there was a red splotch on Ella's neck. This was not uncommon. Ella is sensitive.

*Do you think it's your watch? Is she reacting to your watch?*

I don't know! Why don't YOU tell ME?

- 9) Finally, it was time for the physical exam and, we imagined, some sort of testing to determine what foods Ella was allergic to so that we'd know how to begin feeding her. He led us into the adjoining examination

room, mumbled something about not having a scale small enough for a baby, and then, while I sat in another chair holding Ella, he listened to her chest with an ancient-looking stethoscope. I swear it looked as if he were *playing* doctor. Then he looked behind her knees and her ears. He didn't say anything about what he was looking for in these places. Magic pennies? Oddly, he fondled Ella's fontanel with his fingertips for a long moment. (Afterward, Mark noted that perhaps Dr. A wasn't aware that babies were born with these soft spots and he was thinking *My God, this baby has a hole in her head! This is way out of my league!*) And, with that, after all of five minutes, with the baby still fully dressed, the physical exam concluded and we all filed back into the question-and-answer room. Dr. A spoke:

*So, he began, what were you hoping to get out of this appointment?*

This is when it hit us. We'd been screwed. But we persevered. Perhaps we could still get something out of this guy. I can't remember which one of us responded to Dr. A's asinine question. Probably both of us.

*Well, we were hoping to find out, you know, what she's allergic to. We were hoping to be able to start introducing her to some solid foods.*

*Oh! Well. Well. She's much too young for testing and I wouldn't want to try it in an office setting. Much too risky given the severity of her reaction.*

Nothing. We were getting nothing. He continued.

*You'll need to take her to Riley's Children's. But you'll want to wait until she's six months old.*

*She is six months old!*

*No. No.* He flipped back to the top of his legal pad where I could see he had scribbled her correct birthdate—November 6, 2003—and next to it "Four months old." We were sitting at a round table with Dr. A on the last day of April.

*That's when she had the formula, I corrected. She was four months old when she had the reaction. Now she's six months old.*

He looked sheepish. *Uh. Yes. Well, I was thinking that she had pretty advanced motor skills for a four-month-old!*

Holy shit. We persevered. At this point, I was standing, ready to leave, with Ella perched on my hip like a monkey.

*Is there anything else I should be doing? As a breastfeeding mother?*

*Yes. Well. Yes. You know, in other cultures, children are breastfed much longer. You should continue to breastfeed as long as possible and you should be eating a basic, common foods diet.*

*What do you mean?*

*Just a common foods diet.*

*And what would that be?*

*No exotic foods.*

*Right. And what, exactly, would you consider to be an exotic food?*

*You know, just those foods that aren't your more common foods.*

Double triple holy shit. I couldn't give up. I knew I was paying through the nose for this appointment. I wanted to start listing the most exotic foods I know—iguana jerky wrapped in steamed banana leaves? Deep fried breadfruit served with anise star dipping sauce? A Caribbean green fig and salt fish pie? But I restrained myself. I did.

*So, say, a shrimp? Would shrimp be considered exotic? Dr. A was a skittish iguana backed into the corner of the iguana trap.*

*Maybe exotic was the wrong word. Just stick to your more common foods diet.*

And that was that. We were done.

### Part Three: The Strict Avoidance Diet

After the debacle with Dr. A, we did indeed get Ella into an actual allergist at Riley's Children's Hospital in Indianapolis. The doctor checked Ella's charts, studied the formula can, and then she sent in a nurse with the constitution necessary to poke babies with pins for a living. Thank God there are people like her. I held Ella facedown in my lap while this remarkable woman made a map of Ella's food life on her back with a blotting purple marker. "Sorry, Baby," she said to Ella, and then, faster than a short order cook flashing her spatula across a griddle, she poked in her ten droplets: two controls (reactive and not), milk, casein (a milk protein), whole egg, peanut, codfish, coconut, soy, and wheat. Scratched with needles from the nurse's chemistry kit and left to sit next to a ticking timer like a soufflé in the oven—would the eggs and milk make her rise?—Ella cried and cried. Within minutes, mountainous welts appeared in four places, and when the doctor came back in, reading out numbers to the nurse, we finally knew something definitive about our daughter: she is allergic to milk, eggs, and peanuts. It had been the milk in the formula that had almost killed her that Sunday night. With just a skin test, there is no way to know how severe her reaction would be to eggs and peanuts, maybe a few hives around her lips or maybe an anaphylactic reaction. Food allergies have no cure, and so the only prevention is the Strict Avoidance Diet.

The nurse redeemed herself in Ella's eyes by presenting her with a plastic doll in a ruffled pink smock and a candy-pink plastic cell phone: little gifts for sick little girls. A year later, she still prizes these molded plastic souvenirs from Riley's. Weird. Our prize was another EpiPen Junior. We were warned to store it at room temperature and take it with us everywhere we went. Forever.



Ella's body is just doing its job—the allergic reaction that could kill her is in fact her body's bold gesture at self-preservation.

When I was twenty years old, my fiancé was killed in a car accident. Once I learned what it was for someone to be there, and then—smash—be gone, I saw the possibilities for loss everywhere. If my husband walks across the street to the drugstore, I imagine first that a truck takes him out in the intersection, and next, after much mental wrangling, that he buys the package of diapers and makes it home without incident. After I got a taste of sudden death, I started to build up my defenses against it. A therapist once told me that my chances of outgrowing chronic fear are small. *Your body*, she said, *wants to be ready. You don't want to be surprised again. This is normal. This is self-preservation.* This makes sense, but it's a hard way to live.

Somewhere along the way, Ella's immune system decided that milk, eggs, and peanuts are the enemy and created an antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE) to fight off the invaders. Allergies are the most essential kind of irony. Like my brain, Ella's body is afraid of the wrong things—so afraid that now these once benign forces have become deadly. A sip of milk sounds the alarm and Ella's body sends her IgE army out, digging into trenches along the mast cells—in the skin, the lungs, any soft mucus membranes. In their turn, these cells release histamines, and there is your allergic reaction: swelling, hives, wheezing. Every war is a series of action and response.

Here's another irony that I'm only now coming to realize: given that Ella was exclusively breastfed before she had her first reaction to that formula, she must have been sensitized to these foods either in utero or through breast milk. I drank the cow's milk, ate the chicken eggs, crunched the peanuts—and somehow, denatured or no, her body took up arms against these protein-packed foods. Never much of a milk-drinker, I had a glass with my dinner every night when I was pregnant. *It was good for the baby.* I boiled eggs, peeled them, and stood over the counter with a salt shaker trying to cram in that extra protein for the baby's developing brain. I finished off my snack with a handful of mixed nuts. I ate these rich foods to nurture my growing baby.

I breastfeed Ella for her health—the advantages of mother's milk could fill pages. Besides, she would have developed allergies on her own when we served up scrambled eggs on her high chair tray, right? Nobody really knows.

#### Part Four: May Contain Traces

Last July, not long after her first skin tests, Ella and I boarded a commercial flight in Dayton bound for Atlanta to visit my brother. I'd just gotten her strapped securely into her baby flight vest when a hotel and bar owner who ran his business in Dayton, but kept his primary residence on the coast of Florida, slammed down beside us in 23E. Filling his entire seat and about a quarter of ours, he waxed poetic on the glories of Miami Beach. A land, he informed me, like a *Playboy* magazine flipped open and sprung into flesh. A land where he keeps his 2004 Corvette. A land where he likes to drive with the top down.

I knew all this before we had even lifted off the runway.

In my former, childless life, I would not have had this information about 23E to share because I would not have been talking to this man. I would have nodded a cordial, but most likely silent, hello, and then I would have returned my nose to the book I was reading where my attention would have remained throughout take-off, in-flight and landing. When the drinks and pretzels arrived, I would have opened the snacks without consulting the ingredients and poured them out on a napkin so I could enjoy my six pretzels and continue reading.

But there is no reading when you travel with a baby, is there? Also, babies have learned no social restrictions. Consequently, when the drinks and pretzels arrived, I was chatting with my seatmate about the merits of maternity leave—don't ask—and prying Ella's fingers from the thick gold chain on his tanned and hairy wrist. It was extremely shiny. Who could blame her?

The man harrumphed at the pretzels and said something about peanuts and airlines and how this was the first time in a *long* time he'd traveled in economy class. He offered his pretzels to me and said, "I brought my own can of peanuts."

Oh dear, I thought. "Umm. Did you know that peanut allergies have risen something like fifty percent in the last ten years? It might not be the peanuts, they say. It might have something to do with the soil the peanuts are grown in. . . ."

"Yeah," he said gruffly. "Just another way for the government to control us. No peanuts! I'd say the chance of my sitting next to someone with a *peanut* allergy on a plane is about the same as my chance of getting hit by lightning."

Right.

"Well," I said, "*actually* . . . my baby is allergic to peanuts." Then I added, smiling, "But I do hope you don't hit by lightning."



Last night I dreamed that we forgot about the allergies and fed Ella a whole, peeled, hard-boiled egg. In the dream, Ella was munching happily into the crumbling yellow yolk when we remembered: *She can't eat that egg! Stop her! Take the egg! Wipe her off! Where's the EpiPen?*

In our waking lives, the chance of such a brain breach is small indeed. In our house, grated cheese is a biohazard, and given that Ella's skin has flared to a four for both yolks and whites on the skin prick test, I'd hand her an egg right after I saw a fat pig fly overhead, or, say, on the same afternoon that I scheduled a follow-up visit with Dr. A. But anxiety dreams are anxiety dreams. I've never *actually* shown up naked to teach on the first day of class, but last year when spring term began in the middle of ice storm clean-up and we were still without power, I did start a class with this announcement: "My basement is ankle-deep in water and we haven't had heat for a week, so you won't be getting a syllabus today. . . ." Things happen.

We want to send Ella to daycare a few days a week, and every provider I've spoken with assures me they're equipped to cope with allergies, but what of the kid who stuck a Cheez-It in his overall pocket before morning circle? What if he decides he

wants to share with Ella by palming the illicit cracker discreetly into her chubby hand? What if she carries the bright orange square into the corner behind the foam blocks and pops it on her tongue—cheesy, crunchy goodness. What if nobody notices? Within minutes, somebody would have to notice and then that somebody would have to remember exactly what to do. I imagine myself down on my knees by the door frisking each entering toddler for contraband Cheez-Its. I don't think the other parents would take well to a wild-eyed, panicky woman giving their babies the pat-down even in the name of life-threatening allergies. I don't think I want to be that woman.



We went back to Riley this summer for what will be an annual visit, and just before the back-mapping, I had a flash of hope: "What if she's outgrown them?"

And Mark, ever the pragmatist, replied: "She hasn't."

He was right. She hadn't. But she might. Someday, she might. Her odds for outgrowing the milk and egg allergy are good: sixty percent. I've read about a lucky kid who outgrew his allergies at age twelve. His mother threw him a dairy fest with enough cheese pizza and ice cream to kill a cow—but happily, not a kid. Not this time. We hold out hope. Peanut allergies are more enduring, and only twenty percent of kids will outgrow these, but in 2003 scientists came out with a drug called TNX-901 that can actually treat peanut allergies. Still being tested, the basic idea for this expensive treatment (over \$10,000 per year) is that with monthly shots, a peanut-allergic kid for whom a lip-touching trace of peanut might have caused an allergic reaction could now eat ten or so peanuts without kicking in the histamines. This is not an invitation to throw a Peanut Buster party, but it could certainly save a life or two.

George W. has even signed a bit of legislation that will change our lives—in a good way. The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act stipulates that food manufactured on

or after January 1, 2006, must identify “in plain English” the top eight allergens: milk, egg, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, wheat, peanuts, and soybeans. One idea is that even a kid will be able to read labels to determine safe foods, but if you have food allergies in your family, you already know how these bold announcements—**Contains Milk, Eggs, Wheat**—save time and anxiety. If you don’t have food allergies in your family, maybe you haven’t even noticed. Before Ella, I read labels only occasionally, and then, just to see how fattening or sugar-laden some packaged food was before I bought it and ate it anyway.



At Riley Children’s, there are kids with leukemia and holes in their hearts and other horrors I know I cannot even begin to imagine. When we go in for Ella’s allergy appointments, we see parents with drawn faces pushing toddlers hooked up to oxygen machines in wheelchairs. Last time, we rode in an elevator with a boy, maybe ten, with the sallow skin, dark circles, and wispy hair of a chemo patient; his mother, standing by him with her hand on his shoulder, was so beaten down by suffering that she looked almost unreal. I think I could have reached out and pushed her—hard—and she would have just rocked back into position, expressionless, holding her hand on her son’s shoulder. This mother’s vigilance will not help save her son. She can monitor every morsel he puts in his mouth for the rest of his life and her vigilance will not make a difference. The cancer cells multiplying in her son’s body won’t care one way or the other. She can pray that the chemo works.

I pray that the chemo works, and I leave Riley with my heart in my throat, clutching my food-allergic daughter and thanking my lucky stars. I only have to hear about something once, reliable source or no, to be afraid. Garage doors? Skull crushers. Roller coasters? A big cover-up of accident statistics by those who make their living off the thrill of fear. Grapes? Known choking hazard, right up there with hot dogs but without the harmful growth

hormones. Pop Rocks? Don't even get me started.

Now, with Ella's allergies, I have this real and dangerous thing to worry about—but here's the miracle: my vigilance makes a difference. I can bake special cookies, study labels, type up meticulous instructions for her teachers, wipe her down and hold her up to the light to check for hives. These are things I can *do* to protect my daughter. My worrying *matters*.

Doesn't it?

E(YE)-MAIL

Patrick Lawler

The whole world is a mouth.  
The crunching. The stone whispers.  
Malleable. Opulent.  
The world crumbling under our toes.

No way to be quiet.  
The ink noise;  
the sound of each word entering the paper.

The chewing of the planets.

Swan genitals. Dove brains. Goose tongues.

It is as if the world were a mouth.  
I feel the living lips.  
Civilization comes down all around us—  
a soft mystified eyelid.

E(ROTIC)-MAIL

Patrick Lawler

an astronomer  
puts his eye  
to the universe  
for the first time

words  
if you let them sit  
outside the mouth  
long enough

eventually harden  
into things

look past  
the lid  
of the  
exquisite eye

constantly delivered

I wish  
I were made  
of tongues

THE GOODS TRAIN OVER THE TARENTUM BRIDGE

Sankar Roy

Those who cross the bridge  
to the mountain are also trees  
who wish to disappear  
into the woods

and those who come  
glowing phosphorous  
through the morning mist  
following a vulture's shadow  
are armored, amorphous bodies.

The scavenger claps its wings,  
somewhere mercenaries wear headgear  
waving blood—  
soaked cloths  
before bulls' eyes.

Someone throws a jackhammer  
towards the rusted blues, the wilted sun falls,  
mineral clouds peel off into powdery rain.  
The church bell from across the bridge expires gradually.

The goods train leaves with crates of packed meat  
for distant towns. No more groceries this week.

Those who cross the bridge  
will soon be lost in the mud alleys  
with a god who creates this mind.

Together they plan to build a tree house.  
Together they sharpen a stone knife.

"A SLOGAN WILL NOT SUFFICE . . ."

—Charles Olson

John Pursley III

If this is the poem, it is also the brick  
For which the building has begun—

To be flung from  
a crowd, gesturing,  
Its fingers  
pulled tight into many fists,

Which, glancing now,  
abound the body
From all sides. No music proliferates.

WRITING BY DEGREES PORTFOLIO

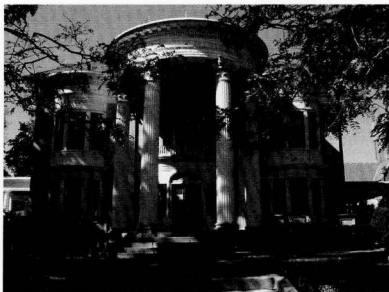


Photo by Kathryn Henion

WRITING BY DEGREES

Binghamton University's graduate creative writing conference is now in its tenth year. Once an on-campus event of local colleges and universities, Writing By Degrees has expanded to host panels with writers from all over the globe, with readings taking place at the Decker Arts and Cultural Center, a restored classic revival mansion near downtown Binghamton. Recent guest readers have included Lee K. Abbott, Steve Almond, Lydia Davis, Sascha Feinstein, B.H. Fairchild, M. Evelina Galang, Judith Harris, Timothy Liu, Sena Jeter Naslund, Suzanne Paola, Neil Shepard, and Michael Steinberg. Panels include topics such as prose, poetry, creative nonfiction/memoir, creative writing pedagogy, and the business of literary journals, as well as exceptional readings of graduate fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. The next Writing By Degrees conference will be held in fall 2007.

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

[ABSENT AS IF POSSESSED AS IF NOT QUITE THERE]

Jennifer Merrifield

Before it burns, a house is just a house with people  
and collections like carousels to spin and sing

and talk about. Desire  
soft and pointy, blushing

at the end like a leaf's last supernova. She doesn't care.

*So a song says there are visions  
of love, a sky and trying to land—.*

Before it scratched, the record was a record  
like all the others: manufactured

from edge to center. She knows it's true.

From a distance, even binoculars fail  
to see how each leaf turns *for* the branch.

Wires cut the sky and somewhere inside them:  
electric crackle. Monotonous. A statistician

at the whiteboard, her numbers aren't cooperating.

She's heard that nature is mathematically contrived.

When the leaves wobble their stems to agree  
it's really his head yessing those numberless *no's*.

Trying to comply with her proximity.

(She wants to be a softer five-edge point.)

She's certain a telescope could show the slight  
in each not-yes, their bodies' latitude

plotted against  
the longitude of every hard-come truth.

Their star charts torn up, taped back, folded  
to one effigy: origami bird/star, happy roundabout,  
she glues it to the lowest leaf.

Their front door open, watches for the nod—

## NUMBER TWO

Vanessa Russell

Tranquillity Bloom is the only person left in Sunday school now. It's her and her dad, Horace Bloom, facing off. She is one month past her baptise-by date and is secretly surprised that she has lasted this long, especially after her father fastened her with a stern look and said: "What will you do when Jesus comes back?" and she found herself digging in instead of folding like the rest of them.

"I'd say: 'You took your time.'"

"But he came."

"But he hasn't."

"But he will."

"But he hasn't."

And so on.

Eventually Horace stops to take out his hanky and blow his nose. Tranquillity cracks her knuckles as she waits for her father to rasp the hanky against his white moustache stubble, put it away in his left trouser pocket and start again at number one.

Horace blows his nose, rasps the hanky against his white moustache stubble, puts it away in his left trouser pocket and starts again at number one. Tranquillity's eye twitches. She wishes she didn't have to interject, but number two is upon them again.

The Time of the End in three easy-to-follow steps:

1. Establishment of the state of Israel. Status: Completed, 14 May 1948.
2. Russia invades Israel. Status: Imminent, Saddam Hussein has just invaded Kuwait and is currently pointing swarms of missiles at Israel.
3. Jesus returns and makes the baptised believers immortal. Status: It's all dependant on number two.

Horace tosses today's newspapers at Tranquillity. Sunday, 13 January 1991. Tanks are being oiled, troops are kissing their wives goodbye, and Prime Minister Bob Hawke is golfing in Ascot Vale as the world waits for Saddam Hussein to withdraw his troops from Kuwait before the expiry of the United Nations deadline. Hussein has until Wednesday, 4 P.M. (Eastern Summer Time) to quit Kuwait, or the U.S.-led coalition will go in there and kick out those godless Muslims themselves.

A block away from Sunday school, Coles New World is jammed full with shoppers buying emergency rations, and the petrol station has a snaking, snorting line of cars that are being filled before petrol goes up to ninety cents a litre. A group of sixty-three students from the uni run a "No Gulf War" protest march down Sturt Street, but are forced up onto the footpaths by drivers who don't want to waste their last cheap tank of petrol idling behind a bunch of hippie pinko slackers who are wasting taxpayers' money.

Horace couldn't be happier. It's the Middle East! It's an invasion! He is especially buoyed by a lead article in yesterday's *Saturday Extra* which set out in print the "what if" questions he has been putting to Tranquillity ever since Iraq invaded Kuwait last August.

"What if Iraq launches a missile at Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city?" he reads. "What if the missiles were armed with a chemical device? What if Iraq moves forces into Jordan to threaten Israel? What if? . . ."

"Did you write this article, Dad?" Tranquillity asks.

"The fulfilment of prophecy is writing itself."

Tranquillity shivers. So far, she has been able to ignore this war. It's the Persian Gulf; it's nothing to do with Israel and, as long as it has nothing to do with Israel, it has nothing to do with the fulfilment of any prophecy.

Still, she's been a little out of balance since the situation escalated. Last October she took up knuckle crunching when Hussein threatened to hit Israel with a missile. In November she developed an eye-twitch when Israel said it would hit back at

Iraq if it got bombed. Six days ago she started spurting diarrhoea when Hussein said he would take death to every corner of the earth. It's getting harder to remain sure that number two will not be fulfilled any day.

Horace puts a wooden box between himself and his daughter on the preparatory class table. Tranquillity knows that the box contains an alphabet of felt letters. Horace believes that Tranquillity will not be able to turn away from the sign-of-the-times.

And she can't. She watches him fumbling with the letters, trying to arrange an advertising sign for the hall window that will scare both her and the public into immediate baptism. He scratches his nose. He gulps. He takes out his crumpled hanky and mops at the hair oil that slides down his forehead. He's stuck: he's got sign-block.

Admittedly, this sign will not be his crispest effort, but for the last four years he has been inhibited by his greatest, most successful sign ever: GOD HATES HOMOSEX!

The homosex sign was vandalised within two hours of assembly with a silver spray-canned rebuttal: GOD HATES FUNDAMENTALISTS! Horace got onto the front page of the *Advertiser* and in the photo he pointed at Romans 1:26–27 (although the reader had no way of knowing this, his Bible being reduced to the size of a pixel). The vandalised sign alone made page seventeen of the *Herald Sun*, Horace was labelled “outrageous” in a letter-to-the-editor in the *Age*, and a highly-codified sympathetic piece was aired on “Hinch”.

Horace got seventy-three visitors to his “God Hates Homosex” lecture: forty-five visitors were from the gay lobby who interjected and heckled, but became sick and quiet when he quoted substantiating verses; and the remaining twenty-eight were former Brethren and Sisters who had left twenty years earlier when the Six-Day War failed to bring number two.

Not one visitor returned the next week, despite Horace hiring a hot air balloon and securing it to the pinnacle of the hall.

The lack of public attendance may have been directly linked to the lecture topic, but Horace remains convinced that the stone that toppled Nebuchadnezzar's statue was, and still is, a highly interesting subject.

After five false starts, Horace assembles a sign in front of Tranquillity: MIDDLE EAST INVADED! GET BAPTISED NOW! Tranquillity licks her lips and swallows. He's got her.

"It's not going to happen," Tranquillity says.

Horace doesn't flinch. Normally this kind of blatant flibber-flabbing sends him into a rage so godly that it only shows in a flush high on his cheekbones. His facial tones remain perfectly even.

"It doesn't say in the Bible what exactly will happen to the unbaptised Responsible," he says, "but it does mention weeping and gnashing of teeth. Are you familiar with sackcloth? Very itchy I believe, especially when you slit your skin and rub ash into it."

"Scare tactics, Dad. They may have worked with the other eight losers, but I'm not fooled."

"I suppose you need proof?"

Yeah, she needs proof: like the hairy face of Jesus in front of her. Like Grampy Bloom, resurrected, offering her a flat, round peppermint. Like a burning bush. Like an angel dressed in taffeta and Jiffies beckoning her towards the heavens. Like the Russian invasion of Israel.

"Give me number two," Tranquillity says, "Russia invades Israel."

"Coming right up," says Horace and rustles the newspaper.

Tranquillity feels her bowels gurgle and she wants to leave, but it is much too late.

Tranquillity was four years old when she first started Sunday school. In kinder class she was taught by Olive Whalen, matriarch of the only other family in the congregation, and mother of buck-toothed, desert-booted, man of butter, Daniel Whalen. Tranquillity was barely conceived before Olive

nominated Tranquillity as the clean, insider wife for Daniel, but she couldn't, not if he were the last person before the end of the earth.

As the kinder class teacher, Olive Whalen cut thick, paisley-patterned wallpaper samples into the shapes of Hebrew tunics. Tranquillity stuck these down with paste so creamy that Olive spent as much time slapping away the white plastic applicator from Tranquillity's mouth as teaching her who the men in the paisley tunics were.

Tranquillity's favourite tunic belonged to the great guts Eglon, King of Moab, who was so fat that when Ehud stuck a half-metre-long dagger into his belly, the dagger got sucked in, haft and all, never to be seen again. Her least favourite tunic belonged to the Apostle Paul, who was the direct cause of her itching, behatted head.

The Sunday school year always ended at the end of December with the not-Christmas recital. As Tranquillity was the youngest of the congregation, kinder class was made redundant as soon as she performed and Olive permanently packed away her wallpaper samples, her paste, the table, and the chairs they sat in.

After each not-Christmas recital, Tranquillity's eight brothers and she moved down the Sunday school plank in a yearly shuffle that pushed them, one at a time, from eldest to youngest, into the baptismal bath.

At the end of Tranquillity's kinder year, she stood on the edge of the church's stage with nowhere to go. A tarn of parquetry lay below and an impenetrable red-felt curtain was closed behind. Sister Elsie placed her arthritic claws onto the piano keys and played the melody like it was a rough sea.

"Jesus loves me, this I know," four-year-old Tranquillity sang, stuffing her hand in her mouth, best dress on. Horace conducted, thumbs and forefingers joined, fingers uplifted like a cockatoo's crest and jiggled to the 1-2 beat of Sister Elsie's piano playing. The eighteen-strong congregation behind him swayed from side-to-side, trying to see past his jiggling behind.

Then it happened. She let go.

"For the Bible tells me so," Tranquillity sang, then retched on her fist and stopped singing. Horace's thumbs and forefingers separated and froze. Seven of her eight elder brothers giggled, and her mother tilted her head and bit her lip.

Tranquillity's eldest brother, Reuben Bloom, took some Wet Ones from his pocket and started to mop up.

There was a screech of feedback from the stage. Reuben froze.

"Reuben Bloom," said Horace into a microphone, "Are you Responsible?"

Reuben couldn't deny it; he had gone through ten years of Sunday school. He had been taught God's plan as set out in the Bible, and he knew all of the rules.

"I guess."

"What happens to the Responsible if they are not baptised when Jesus returns?"

Reuben squirmed.

"You're dead," he said; "it's worse than being Catholic."

"The Iran-Iraq War is raging! The fulfilment of number two is only minutes away."

"The war began four months ago."

"These are perilous times! Do you deny that the time of the end is at hand?"

The curtains jerked open to reveal the baptismal bath. The bath was homemade, thirty years old and made with a swimming-pool liner cut to fit its coffin-shaped frame.

"What will you say to Jesus when he returns and finds you unbaptised?" asked Horace and began to roll up his sleeves.

"Don't drink, don't smoke, don't gamble," Reuben recited to himself as he trudged towards the bath, "don't fornicate, don't adulterate, don't vote, don't join clubs, don't go to the theatre, the movies, the football, don't bring friends home, marry Outsiders, read novels, wear scarlet, believe in hell, heaven, angels with wings, Christmas, pagans, Catholics, or the devil. Do get baptised, marry inside, convert your children, and wait

for number two until death do us part or our Lord Jesus Christ returns, amen.”

Amen.

Ten years afterwards, on the night of Tranquillity’s preparatory class not-Christmas recital, Iraq said it would never give up Kuwait and would use chemical weapons if attacked. As Tranquillity stood in front of the red curtains her bowels gurgled.

A screech of feedback came from behind the curtains.

“Tranquillity Bloom,” said Horace into the microphone. “Are you Responsible?”

The stage curtain jerked open and the baptismal bath rocked as the water inside swacked against its sides.

“I haven’t brought my bathers,” Tranquillity called as she teetered on the stage’s apron.

“Never mind,” said Horace. “You can wear a gown.”

The baptismal gowns were white-cotton neck-to-knee shrouds that went completely see-through when wet.

“I’m not wearing a gown.”

“You can go in fully-clothed. Your mother went in fully-clothed.”

Tranquillity turned to look at her mother. Violet Bloom was holding her forefinger in front of her face and counting her children. Each time she only came up with eight.

“I can’t,” Tranquillity said, turning back to her father, “Because . . .”

Because she didn’t want to turn into “Sister Tranquillity” and say “ooh” every time she said a naughty word. Because she didn’t want to drink the sacramental wine that was bargain basement because her dad was worried they’d get a taste for it. Because she didn’t want to listen to a crusty Brother exhort, lecture, give Bible class, Mutual Improvement and Youth Group talks about the significance of shoe-latches. Because she didn’t want to be gagged from speaking even when a Brother asked if anyone had any questions. Because she didn’t hate homosexuality. Because she didn’t want to have to disappear if her marriage failed.

Because she didn't want to get baptised and be forced into marrying Daniel Whalen. Because, mainly, she did not believe in number two.

"What will you say when Jesus comes back?" Horace called.

"I'd say, 'You took your time.'"

"But he came."

"But he hasn't."

"But he will."

"But he hasn't."

And so on.

COTTON FIELD

J. Matthew Boyleston

My car clicked off, I climb barbed wire  
And sludge into the muck of a freezing field  
My family owned for years. Before he tired,

My grandfather drove a baby blue Ford  
With a pistol beneath a pillow, to scare the crows.  
His mouth ran like he drove: all day. Peeled

Pear after pear, hollered at his sows,  
Bragged of cancer, smiled big, and came  
Close to being a silly man. I was

Embarassed whenever I heard his name,  
But found out soon that there's a hitch:  
All fields are born into the world the same—

As land shaved of baby pine and scratch,  
And end as broken cotton on frazzled branches.

DOING FENCE

Meg Thompson

Those Mornings, Before We Did Fence

When the day was still new, still cool, we already guessed we'd go to bed with sunburns tight on our shoulders and necks. All of us sisters: fair-skinned with strangely placed freckles. Flecking the lips, inside our ears. Carrie and I have red hair. Amy and Rachel, younger than us, are dark blondes, about the color of wheat. After breakfast, we passed sunscreen around the kitchen, slathering it on each other's hard-to-reach places. The room filled with the scent of cocoa butter. Even today, whenever I smell sunscreen, I think of our kitchen, the palms of my sisters' hands thick with lotion, slapping it on my back. We've all had burns that blistered, we've been afraid of the sun. I remember our daybreak mantra as summer heated up: *Don't trust the cool, it's August*. When we all lived at home, our low-pitched voices filling the rooms, it was so easy to talk to each other.

Now, mornings in my own kitchen, I notice how small a room it is, how quiet and empty. I wash dishes. My fingertips soften and crinkle like laundry in the warm, lemony water. My nails are clean, pink-white, and I miss, strangely, using a hairpin to scrape out the grime that built up when I pried fence posts loose from the earth, carried them in a bouquet of long, dirty poles to the bed of a pick-up. I rinse a mug and gaze out my window to a wide sea of gravel, the parking lot. It's a sea that slopes into a steep hill, like most terrain in West Virginia. For a half-moment I hate that I grew up on a farm, how I had the luxury of opening the door and running for a minute in any direction, knowing the land belonged to us. I can't do that anymore, and when I long for a yard, I dry my hands, press both palms to the small of my back and lean, stretch, in the newborn morning. I think about where I will move to next, what the weather will be like there, if I will be far away. I think of my sisters. Our bare feet on the kitchen's stone tile, the sun just beginning to warm up

the house. Women in the morning. Our legs unshaved, hair unwashed. No bras. Our mom raised us to be feminists, but I think she regrets it. Now she calls Carrie, Amy and me every week to read engagement announcements from the newspaper. Rachel, a senior in high school and the only one still at home, listens from the kitchen table while she does her physics homework. Sometimes I hear her make a sarcastic remark, but our mom, a farmer who wants grandkids more than a retirement plan, is not deterred. Sometimes when she calls I cite divorce rates, the statistics, how it has become more common nationwide to wed *later*. Sometimes I let it go. Our dad, less vocal, only had to say once, in his small, deep voice, his lips barely off the coffee mug, that he wouldn't mind holding a baby again, for my staunch feminist principles to dissolve. I ached, for a minute, anyway, to be pregnant.

The summer after Carrie graduated high school, she surprised us all and moved to Charleston, South Carolina, for a degree in culinary arts from Johnson & Wales University. All I need is a hint, the smell, ham and cheese sandwiches searing in the broiler and I remember how she used to make us lunch every day, hair in a loose braid over her shoulder. The day after Carrie left Ohio, our mom, arms crossed and gazing out the window to her eighty head of sheep milling in the field, said she would never let any of us leave the state again.

Our Family has a Hard Time Understaing Boundaries  
We have such a hard time our livestock might as well be free-range, because the fences we make never seem to work. There is even a popular family joke that asks where mom is. The punch-line is: doing fence.

According to my rough calculations, our mom has spent years of her life setting up fences, dividing fields to keep livestock in and coyotes out. She is, still, terrible at it, as are the rest of us. In addition to not being able to build them, we also can't remember where they are. How many times did I run full-force into an electric fence playing hide-and-go-seek? My body stilled

in the bend of the wire and a current surging from my waist, a jolt like cinching your belt too tight.

About once a month someone knocked on the door to tell us the sheep were out, the pigs were out, the cows were out, or there was a flock of white geese in a huddle on the road that didn't want to move. Sometimes the person would help us shepherd the flock back to their home. I remember a woman in high heels running through the barnyard because she feared for the life of the pretty, pink hog she saw ambling along the side of the road. When she got back in her gleaming, black Mercedes, she didn't seem to care about the clumps of manure on the bottom of her shoes, and I suppressed the urge to ask where she'd grown up.

Sometimes I wonder if we weren't that bad at building fences, but our livestock was just particularly clever. Then I think about the logic of sheep. With no way to defend themselves, they are afraid of everything, even water with ripples in it. Once my mom told me that when barns catch on fire, the animals have to be forced out. They don't want to leave. They can sense panic, but the barn represents safety, even when it's being destroyed. I wanted to ask why then, if our animals so loved their home, they were always trying to get away from it.

I have a thousand memories of running down the road, laughing, my arms stretched wide, to guide sheep back into their pasture. We come from generations of farmers. Our mom can take one sweeping look at a flock and tell you which ewes have worms; which have full, meaty loins; which are pregnant and likely to prolapse. And once, when our dad broke his leg he devised a pulley system on his tractor so he could still get himself up into the seat. During the blizzard of '78, the white-outs were so bad, so constant, he tied rope from the garage to the barn, following it hand-over-hand so he wouldn't get lost in the fierce, white wind. But we can't build a straight, reliable fence line, string a length of wire through a row of posts, to save our lives.

There were times, usually when it was raining, that I wished we could figure out how to keep our animals in. But most of

the time these escapes made me feel happy, even lucky. I would be mowing the lawn, circling around and around our house, when a pack of baby pigs would dart out from behind the lilac bush and sprint down the driveway, their tiny hooves in a whirl of dust and stones. I couldn't hear myself over the whir of the motor, but I told them to run. Go, I said, just come back sometime and visit.

### At Heart, I am a Hypocrite

I am also a homebody, but for some reason I love to talk about rootlessness. I say that I would move anywhere, but what I really mean is I would move anywhere in the Midwest. Part of the reason is the climate, another is I just can't drive over certain fences.

Sometimes I think the only reason Carrie could leave Ohio was because she never got her driver's license, so she didn't have to leave by herself. Our dad went with her, drove the 700 miles to her apartment in Charleston and dropped her off. I could never do that. I need the weather of each season, every year. I need to know that where I live, I will watch the season melt into another and overlap. The idea of having nine winter months out of the year, or even summer, makes me uneasy. I need, also, the greens, the acres of alfalfa shaking in the breeze, trees I can't fit my arms around, and deep, healthy grass. The first time I saw Spanish moss, swaying gray beards in the streets of Charleston, I felt strangely betrayed and never so glad to live in Ohio.

I visit Carrie at least once a year. I know the trip by heart, and it takes me about ten hours. Last October, I went down because she needed my signature. She was applying for a passport, and because she never got her license, she needed an immediate family member to come to the post office with her, present a valid driver's license, and sign a document promising she wasn't a terrorist. We sat in the Charleston post office for an hour and a half, just waiting for the family ahead of us to get their passports. When it was our turn, it somehow took 25 minutes for me to write my name and Carrie to pay \$200. It occurred to me how

the U.S. Government is similar to our mom, desperately trying to keep us home and making us feel guilty when we finally trample the fences, leave, and on top of all that, fail to reproduce. That last one is probably more societal than governmental, though.

After the papers were signed, we went to eat at a French restaurant. Carrie wanted to take me to a place I'd never been. When I opened the menu, I searched, instinctively, for something inexpensive and familiar. I tried to order a ham and cheese sandwich with a Miller Lite but she wouldn't let me.

"Get something you've never had before," she said.

Carrie and I both think the other one is daring, adventurous. She thinks I am because our phone conversations often begin with where I recently visited: Chicago, Lansing, Madison, Shenandoah, Washington, D.C. And it's true, sometimes I just pick up and go, but I don't like to leave for long periods of time. When she asked me if I would come down so she could get her passport, I said yes, immediately, without even thinking about it. The places she travels to are richer, more wondrous: Amsterdam, New Orleans, Disney World. She has told me she doesn't want to live in Charleston forever, and I believe her.

I ordered a salad with shrimp and scallops. We drank raspberry rickeys and got drunk in the middle of the day. When we walked home I threw my bare arms in the air and raved about wearing a tank top in October. At the time, I thought I could live like that. I said I wanted a house on the beach and to wear flip-flops year-round, but it was just the moment. I didn't mean it.

### One Time We Were Doing Fence Along Biggs Road

It was mid-day in August, everything soft with heat, our freckles dark orange from the sun. In two years Carrie would be in South Carolina learning how to make flowers out of cake frosting.

A mile of Biggs is surrounded by our fields. In the summer, the road is a warm, gray ribbon, burning straight through a field of yellow-green. Underneath the road, half a mile from the railroad tracks that cut across the fields and divide Biggs Road, is a dry, rusty tunnel just wide enough for the squirming bodies

of the two who lost the coin toss, Amy and me.

First we shut off the electric fence. One flick and all the wires connected to that power source lost their juice. Using the tunnel, our job was to link up the fence in the south field to the fence in the north field. Amy stood in the south field, I stood in the north. With one hand we waved to each other, pretending we were far away, though it was only 20 feet. With the other hand we each held onto our respective wire. Carrie and Rachel watched for cars, told us when to go. We didn't want to be in the tunnel when a car passed above us.

*Go.*

My sisters' voices sounded so calm in unison. But we're all like that, terribly calm, even when we don't have to be. I got down on stomach and elbows, started writhing through the tunnel, wondering about the lives of earthworms and moles. This, I thought, is why farmers have lots of kids. They need small bodies to crawl around under roads. I kept a fierce grip on the wire, which was insulated in case it touched the walls of the tunnel after we turned the fence back on. I could barely see Amy's body wriggling through the half-dark. As we got closer, I could make out her face. It was smeared with rust. She must have wiped her forehead with her arm. Her eyebrows looked singed, rust streaked down her cheeks like dark tears, and I started to laugh.

It took us four tries before we were able to connect our wires. The first two times it was Amy who lost her grip and the wire zipped back out of the tunnel. We crawled, backwards, into the sunlight. I thought about birth. The third time it was my fault. I claimed delirium, but really I wanted to do it again. I wanted to make my childhood last as long as possible. I wanted to keep all of us together, even if they were mad at me for making them stand out in the sun, even if crawling in and out of that tunnel meant it would take days to wash the rust out of my hair. I didn't want it to end, but I learned, crawling underneath the road, imagining the earth rumbling with the weight of passing cars, that when you finally make contact, hook one line of fence

to another and twist them, more tightly than necessary just for good measure, you should be glad the other person wanted to meet just as much.

### Sometimes All My Sisters Call Me On The Same Day

It makes me feel like I'll never need to eat, grocery shop, walk slowly through each aisle wondering what I don't have. It's not planned; it's not every Wednesday after it gets dark, or every other Sunday afternoon. It happens, like waking up happens. Amy calls Carrie. I call Rachel. Amy calls me. Rachel calls Carrie. It lasts the night. By 11:30 my ear is damp and red, my shoulder aches from squeezing the phone to my cheek so I can wash dishes with both hands. I rummage through my kitchen for soft, noiseless foods, so I can eat without distracting them: yogurt, raisins, and when I'm desperate, marshmallows. Their voices drift into me like radio songs. I imagine them at their homes doing the same things. I walk around my apartment, grazing the walls with my fingertips. I sit on the futon with my legs tucked up under me. I sprinkle fish food in the tank, watch Allison and Jealousy, a painted glass and a tetra, flutter to the surface, their sheer bodies thin as dimes. We are content, for hours, talking about nothing.

"I wore that sweatshirt you gave me."

"The one that says *Proud to be a Farmer's Daughter*?"

"Yeah, big hit with the ladies."

"You mean Mom."

Our favorite conversations, those rare times when we're all home, Christmas, a week in the summer, revolve around pointing out who is most like Mom, who is most like Dad. Rachel chews gum a half-stick at a time. She is like Mom. Amy's good at math. She is like Dad. The one way we all differ from our parents: we lack their ability to tan. Our dad's farmer's tan: a sight to behold. Our mom's tan, less strange, covers more ground because of her shorts and sleeveless shirts, clothing items our dad has never owned.

I Never Believed My Mom  
When She Said We Couldn't Leave Ohio

At the end of the summer, Rachel will leave for a college she's yet to choose. She and our mom have been traveling, visiting schools, sitting in auditoriums to listen to financial aid seminars, Mom whispering to other parents at every one: "I could *teach* this class by now." Secretly, I want Rachel to go to my alma mater, Muskingum College, because I selfishly want someone close by. She would be only two hours away, right off I-70 in New Concord, Ohio. A dry town, hills swelling the landscape. It is a drive I would make in the fall anyway, to see the leaves burning yellow and orange, falling off trees and sweeping across the fields like flames.

Amy will graduate in two years from Kent State, a university 40 minutes from the farm. She plans to move west. She started in art education, but she dropped it for fine arts with a focus in printmaking. No one was teaching her how to teach a kid to draw, just how to teach inoffensively and multi-culturally so she wouldn't get sued. She saw her future: a closet full of crafty, holiday-inspired sweater vests, drawers brimming with ruler socks. I imagine her as a museum curator, hands clasped behind her back, gazing around a room of Warhols. Over the phone she tells me that in her sculpture class she is building two sheep, one out of steel wool, one out of lamb's wool sweaters. I asked her what she would use for the eyes.

"It won't have eyes. It's just a form."

I didn't understand. The thought of a fake, blind lamb depressed me. It wouldn't be able to stare. I imagined it running into the walls of some art gallery, trying to get outside.

I like to know at all times where the walls and fences and boundaries are, but sometimes, deep in the lull of highway driving, contemplating mileage and when I need to stop for gas, I pass over state lines without even noticing. There isn't a jolt like the one I used to experience playing hide-and-go-seek. I move from one landscape to the next, knowing the mountains are softening, or rising, depending which direction I'm headed.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Maureen Alsop's poems have appeared or are pending in various publications including *Barrow Street*, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, and *Typo*, among others. Her poetry was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She holds an MFA from Vermont College.

Mary Biddinger teaches poetry writing and literature at the University of Akron, and serves on the faculty of the NEOMFA. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in a variety of journals including *Crazyhorse*, *The Iowa Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, and *Ploughshares*. Her first book, *Prairie Fever*, is forthcoming from Steel Toe Books (spring 2007). She is an associate editor of the literary magazine *RHINO*.

J. Matthew Boyleston is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Creative Writing and Literature at the University of Houston. A native South Carolinian, he received an MFA from the University of South Carolina and has taught at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania and in Dublin, Ireland. His poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in the *GSU Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and the *South Carolina Review*.

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Chuck Carlise has lived in nine states and the coast of Sicily, and has been a bartender, copyeditor, parole office receptionist, political activist, and lecturer at University of California, Santa Cruz. He studied literature at Wittenberg University and UC–Davis and was awarded the 2003 C. T. Wright Poetry Prize by the Academy of American Poets. His poetry has appeared in *Red Rock Review*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, and *Poet Lore*, among others. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

Jill Christman's memoir, *Darkroom: A Family Exposure*, won the AWP Award Series in Creative Nonfiction and was published by the University of Georgia Press in 2002. Recent essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *River Teeth*, *Mississippi Review*, *Under the Sun*, *Literary Mama*, and other journals. She teaches creative writing at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, where she lives with her husband, poet Mark Neely, and their daughter.

Jeffrey Dodd is a graduate of the MFA program in Creative Writing at Eastern Washington University in Spokane, Washington. His poems, interviews, and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *The MacGuffin*, *Meridian*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Willow Springs*, and *Redactions: Poetry and Poetics*.

James Doyle's new book, *Bending Under The Yellow Police Tapes*, will be published by Steel Toe Books in 2007. Doyle is married to poet Sharon Doyle. He has poems coming out in *River Styx*, *West Branch*, *Atlanta Review*, *Xavier Review*, and *Appalachia*.

Jilly Dybka lives near Nashville, Tennessee, where she works in information technology. Her poems have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *La Petite Zine*.

Valerie Fioravanti has published fiction in *North American Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *Cimarron Review*, among others. Her work has received multiple

Pushcart nominations and special mention in Pushcart Prize XXVIII. "Beer Money" is part of a linked collection entitled *The Brooklyn Shuffle*.

T. J. Forrester's fiction has appeared, or is forthcoming in *The MacGuffin*, *Night Train*, and *The Storyteller*, and in many other journals as well. He has a story in the anthology *Rebellion, New Voices of Fiction* (finalist USA Book News 2006 Best Book Awards). He's received three Pushcart Prize nominations, and his first published story won a People's Choice award.

Madelyn Garner has been a member of the educational community as a creative writing instructor, Advanced Placement English teacher, textbook editor, and administrator. Recipient of numerous awards, she recently was honored with a D. H. Lawrence Fellowship in New Mexico. Madelyn's poetry has appeared in *Margie*, *The National Forum*, *Zone 3*, *Calyx*, *Borderlands*, *Georgetown Review*, and *Saranac Review*.

Charles Haverty's stories have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *The Gettysburg Review*, *AGNI*, *Colorado Review*, *Ecotone*, *Salamander*, *Meridian*, *Cimarron Review*, *Ballyhoo Stories*, and *Fence*. He lives in Lexington, Massachusetts.

Jill Khoury is a writer and artist living in Pittsburgh. She teaches writing at Duquesne University. The magazine *mannequin envy* recently featured her words and images, among seven other contributors, in their summer 2006 issue "Visual Arts and Poetry: The Silver Braid." The journal *Breath and Shadow* recently nominated two of her poems for the Pushcart Prize.

Jane Knechtel has Masters degrees from University College, Dublin, and Lewis & Clark College. She has worked as a counselor for over seven years, primarily in community mental health centers. For the last six years, she has been studying poetry writing at The Attic, a writing studio in Portland, Oregon, and

raising two sons. Recently, she won the Parnell Prize in Poetry and the *GSU Review* Editor's Choice Award.

Patrick Lawler has published two books of poetry: *A Drowning Man is Never Tall Enough* and (*reading a burning book*). His third book, *Feeding the Fear of the Earth*, won the *Many Mountains Moving* poetry book competition and has just been published. He has received an NEA Fellowship, two grants from the New York State Foundation for the Arts, and a Saltonstall Award. At LeMoyne College, he is a creative writing instructor and is also Associate Professor at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry where he teaches writing and nature literature classes.

April Lindner's first poetry collection, *Skin*, received the 2002 Walt McDonald First Book Prize from Texas Tech University Press. Her poems have appeared in anthologies and textbooks, including *Good Poems*, *Poetry: A Pocket Anthology*, and the forthcoming fifth edition of *Western Wind*. She also has been published in numerous journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *The Paris Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Carolina Quarterly*. A 2002 Walter E. Dakin Fellow at Sewanee Writers' Workshop, Lindner is an Assistant Professor of English at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

Casey Lord currently lives and writes in Green Bay, Wisconsin. She earned an MFA from Minnesota State University and now works for Pearson Educational Measurement and teaches writing part-time. She has published poems in *The Minnesota River Review*, *Mankato Poetry Review*, *Blue Earth Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and *Red Rock Review*.

Cynthia Grier Lotze writes and teaches English in Richmond, Virginia. She recently completed her MFA in poetry and hopes to put it to good use some time soon. Her work can be found in the journal *Visions*, the novel *Juxtaposition*, and the documentary film, *One Nation Under Guard*.

Jennifer Merrifield's poetry appears in recent or future issues of journals such as *Natural Bridge*, *LIT*, *Columbia*, and *Fourteen Hills*, and is anthologized in *White Ink* and *Wild Sweet Notes II: More West Virginia Poetry*. An MFA candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University, she is the recipient of the 2006 *Columbia* Poetry Prize.

Kathi Morrison-Taylor's poems have been published in a number of literary journals, including *Seattle Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *New York Quarterly*. Most recently, her poems have appeared on-line in *Innisfree Poetry Journal* and *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*. Originally from the Pacific Northwest, she currently lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband, children, and a large calico cat.

Dan Murphy received his MA in Chinese from University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has lived in Harbin, Kunming, and Beijing while studying the Chinese language, including as a matriculated student in the Chinese Department at Beijing University, where Hai Zi went to school. Most recently he received a Freeman Foundation Fellowship to study for a year in Nanjing at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center. He hopes to publish a full-length book of Hai Zi translations in the near future.

Julie Platt received an MA in English and Creative Writing from Ohio University, and is currently an MFA candidate in Poetry at Bowling Green State University, where she serves on the staff of *Mid-American Review*. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Cream City Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *RHINO*, and *Santa Clara Review*.

Derek Pollard is currently on faculty at Monmouth Academy in Howell, New Jersey. He is also an associate editor at New Issues Poetry & Prose, and a contributing editor at *Barrow Street*. His poems and reviews appear or are forthcoming in *Ambit* (UK), *Colorado Review*, *Court Green*, *No Tell Motel*, *Pleiades*, and *Quarterly West*, among others.

John Pursley III teaches poetry and literature at Delta State University, where he is the faculty advisor for the undergraduate literary journal, *Confidante*. His recent work appears in *American Literary Review* and *Poetry*. Two chapbooks of his work, *A Conventional Weather* and *When, by the Titanic*, were published in 2006.

Andrew Michael Roberts is the author of *Give Up*, a chapbook of prose poems from Tarpaulin Sky Press. He teaches creative writing in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he is a Juniper Fellow at the University of Massachusetts. He is coordinator of the UMass Visiting Writers Series and the Juniper Summer Institute for Young Writers. His work appears in *The Iowa Review*, *LIT*, *Gulf Coast*, *Pool*, *Mississippi Review*, *Quick Fiction*, and *Seattle Review*, among others.

Sankar Roy, originally from India, is an engineer, MBA, poet, translator, essayist, and multimedia artist living near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is a winner of PEN USA Emerging Voices, author of two chapbooks of poetry from Pudding House—*Moon Country* (2006) and *The House My Father Could Not Build* (forthcoming, 2007). He is an associate editor of international poetry anthology, *Only the Sea Keeps: Poetry of the Tsunami*. Sankar's poems have appeared or forthcoming in numerous print and online journals including *Bitter Oleander*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Controlled Burn*, *Diner*, *Runes*, *Rhino*, and others. He is a co-founder of Poets for Humanity.

Vanessa Russell is completing a Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. She has had work published in *Island*, *Idiom 23*, *Australasian Short Stories*, *Strange Shapes*. She is currently enjoying a Ph.D. exchange at University College Dublin, and is living in Dingle in the beautiful County Kerry.

Benjamin Stein will receive his MFA degree from West Virginia University in the spring of 2007. His work is forthcoming from *Cranky* and *5\_Trope* and has appeared in *RiverTeeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative*. He grew up in Buffalo, New York.

Meg Thompson is finishing her MFA at West Virginia University. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Poetry Southeast*, and *RHINO*. She is working on a collection of essays with an agricultural edge.

Joshua A. Ware teaches writing at the University of Colorado at Denver. In conjunction with digital artist James Carl-Valdez Gain, he is at work on the multi-media extravaganza *Fried Turnips for the Emissary*.

Erica Wright was the recipient of the 2003 Thomas Wolfe Award in Poetry as well as a fellowship from Columbia University where she received her MFA. Her poetry and other writings have appeared in *Paste*, *The Independent: Film & Video Monthly*, *Pequod*, and *Disquieting Muses Quarterly*, among other publications. She is currently working on her first collection and teaching at the City University of New York.

Bruce Wrighton, (July 6, 1950 – October, 3, 1988), was born in Ithaca, New York. He earned a BA in History at the University of Rochester and studied at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. After moving to Binghamton, New York, he worked as a waiter, then as a line cook, while freelancing as a photographer for the SUNY Binghamton Archaeology Department and for the Roberson Museum. Shortly before he passed away from pancreatic cancer, Bruce won Kodak's "Top 100 New Photographers" award in 1988. Binghamton's Roberson Museum mounted a 130-piece solo show of his work in 2003 and the Laurence Miller Gallery displayed his work in Manhattan in 2006. Bruce's photographs were donated to *Harpur Palate* by Thomas F. Costello and printed with permission from Patricia Flery, the artist's widow.

Hai Zi, 海子, born Cha Haisheng, grew up in poor circumstances in rural Anhui province. At age fifteen, he was accepted by China's most prestigious institution, Beijing University, and traveled for the first time from his hometown to the capital. Between 1984 and his death in 1989, Hai Zi wrote hundreds of short poems, several long poems, lyric plays, and literary criticism. In just forty-three years since his birth, we have seen the publication of his selected works, complete works, numerous essays critiquing his poetry, and two full-length biographies, all in Chinese. Hai Zi is considered by many to be one of the most important Chinese poets of the last 100 years.

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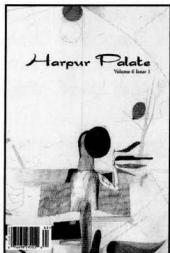
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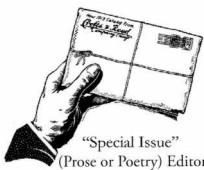


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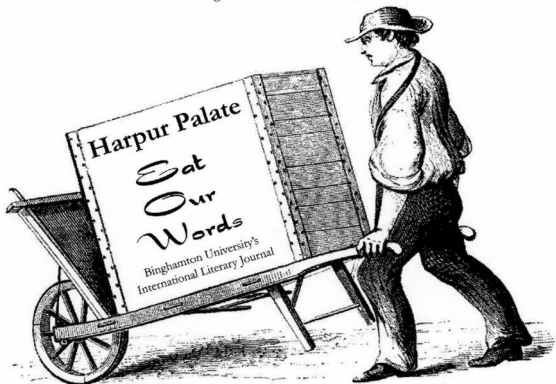
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