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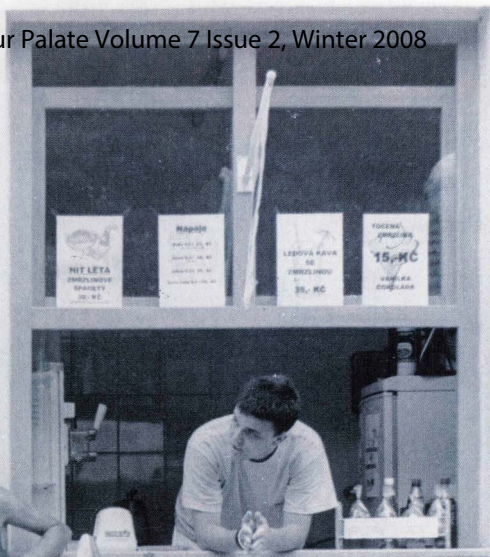
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Volume 7 Issue 2, Winter 2008



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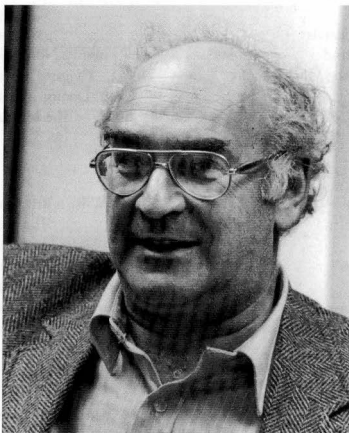
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THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY



WINNER

MOMENTO MORI

Jonathan Rice

Your daughter showed me the ones you kept
as proof that you sold those parents the pictures

they asked for, their instructions in brackets
at the glossy-white margins:

[*Blush/Powder*] an infant whose eyes could not be shut.
Another, a girl who would be ten this year, [*Dress/Blanket*]

glowed in her yellow gown, over-exposed
after the run red light and sutured mother. [*None*] worse

than the rest: gone in utero, its flesh still womb-water taut,
the wrested expression of its purpled face not to be believed.

Never an explanation. She said the parents were led
out a side door, released to the mornings or late afternoons

of their loss, to take themselves home before you arrived.
No one stayed for that. And the body, if what remained

could be called a body, was left alone in the darkened room
of failed birth, and that often, you had to wash it yourself:

lower it gently to the stainless sink, cupping the neck,
careful of the soft skull, the water warmed to your wrist.

Only now do I understand why you let us wander
alone so many nights through the warm fields and stables,

and know what you hoped for from the tallgrass pastures
while her father slept, drunk and barely rising

from the couch. I return to these thoughts when I wake
and stare with fear and then wonder at my wife's stomach.

In the morning dark I am waiting with a hand at her navel,
for the subtle kick, a heel swung out from the suspended dream.

There is nothing to do but wait. In the doctor's office,
we watch the shape of our child form in the black and white

resin of sound on the little monitor we all must look up to see.
The sonographer's face is as impassive as a mechanic's.

Then flow chart and pen scratch, the transducer lifted,
and our daughter recedes, kilohertz at a time.

Those first years after your daughter, I knew a girl
whose boyfriend was in the army, then gone for war.

He came home twice before mortars or the broil
of a blown-up vehicle kept him. The last time he left

she was sleeping. This was their agreement, since
she could not willingly let him go. Rumor was she quit

the pill weeks before his last furlough, then met him
at the airport and took him home. And of course,

of course she didn't tell. You'd have to know her
as I knew her then, to see how years piled under her eyes.

Her hair thinned with waiting. The boy was healthy
when he came, and she brought him around.

The other story followed. She could not leave him
in his crib to sleep, but woke to check his breathing

every hour, obsessed to know that he lived, even when
he wailed to be changed, or took to her breast, or began

to crawl a little. When she turned away, he was gone.
He'd been on the bed. He had been lying on the bed

near her. With her hand on his back, she'd counted
breath-falls and minutes of heartbeat. When he woke

she would tell him another story of his father
coming home. He was gone. She'd left to take a call

and come back and found him face down in the folds
of a plastic bag between the bed and wall.

When I'm driving home after work, and think of this,
I swerve to keep course, and sometimes wander

the aisles of superstores filled with gadgets and toys,
plush clothes pressed to the shape of six months,

nine weeks, one year, stand gawking at self-rocking cribs,
the crystalline rows of bottles and modestly packaged

breast pumps, pacifiers and bibs with lion or chicken or frog
or innumerable constellations of stars stitched in their corners.

After your daughter showed me the snapshots
of what had been lost, neither of us asked why

anyone would want such a portrait. To frame
and have blessed, or keep locked and untouchable,

preserved like a promise held in the silences
of unspeakable memory, it didn't matter

to us then. We walked out together, toward
the stream at the edge of your land. It was

summer. The heat was unbelievable, even in
the coolest place we knew. We pulled off our shirts

and spread them under us to lie down.
Though there was no moon, we did not kiss

or touch each other, wanting only our own silence
in the scald of such knowledge we should not have.

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE
FINALIST

ANYWHERE

Jennifer Chapis

In the dream I am waiting for you in a gingerbread mansion with a wall of windows overlooking a flowery hillside. You think I'm in another life overseas, but I have been cleaning and primping all day. From across the room I recognize the way you run downhill in hiking boots sideways. Against the glass in more excitement than I've known in years, I brace myself, for the tall brown spider has crept away. You were expecting this. Your face, dozens of countries pushing like a train. "Where are we?" I say. "I'm coming to you even when I'm not," you say. All around the house, unrecognizable paths leading us back. The wolf we're filled with will eat this place twice.

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE
FINALIST

PORTRAIT OF LONELINESS AS A CAROUSEL IN THE OFF-SEASON
Julie Marie Wade

Whether *riding gallery* or *merry-go-round*,
the difference merely semantic

& the wooden animals always looked sad &
the cartoon melodies could barely mask their sorrow

At night, in November,
the triage of autumn leaves forsaking snow—

a moment that, like all other moments, would pass before she could grasp it
like a boy she had kissed once under mistletoe

his face in the glow of lights from a neighbor's Christmas party—*oh, I'm sorry*,
he said, startled, not having realized that it was *she*, not having intended to kiss *her*

Each day dawned such a costume ball she had no use for Halloween, *masquerade* or *camouflage*—
the difference merely semantic—the breach in herself between who she was &

who she seemed *inexpressible* *inconsolable*
But here again, in the realm of kewpie dolls & bumper cars & music boxes,

all arbitrary fanfare & slow-settling fog as she followed
a trail of stale popcorn across the chalky hopscotch squares:

She remembered being Gretel in another life, ending up as she was not supposed to be,
pregnant at 15 or unsexed at 45—a world of extremes, of laying awake nights

clicking her retainer against her teeth, thinking how this word
meant also *to hold onto*, *to keep* but instead

her mouth was only meant to be changed And that difference, she knew,
was not merely semantic or purely poetic irony diffuse but subtle

So she had stumbled again onto the way we contain our
opposites, how we struggle to stop seeing ourselves & our world so clearly

Hence, the proliferation of all those funhouse mirrors,
the *spectacle* that inverts to become the *debacle* that enfolds

to become the *manacle*, chaining us to our own first intentions, forcing us to return,
which is called *anaphora* or *recursion* or *ring-around-the-rosie*,

depending on your discipline, depending on who you are
this time, & who you intended to be

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE

FINALIST

WHY SHOULD I STAND FOR JESUS

Scott Bailey

When I win four hundred dollars at the National Tobacco Spitting Contest, I buy a Civic, the paint peeling. I feel a Holy-Ghost freedom when I try to pass the fat, grinning, rich, daddy's boy who called me *Buckteeth Ugly*, laughing at my fake Reeboks, the ones Eunice bought with a sack of change at Dollar General. When he passes me in his silver Trans Am, bumper sticker *Eat My Grits*, I floor it; my motor blows, and I coast to the side of the road, fat boy flipping me the bird, driving on, most likely to Wards for a Big One.

I walk down a hill to a porch where an old woman is stitching a quilt; she tells me to take it slow, just as she is, sipping on a glass of warm milk, sitting in her rocker, waiting for her dogs, already in heaven, who met their fates on the road. I call Sam on her phone, a red rotary box, just like Louise's, which hangs on her wall under a stuffed sea bass that Rueben catches while honeymooning on the coast.

When Sam arrives, tractor chain in hand, I drive attached to his beat-up blue Chevrolet with dents from pulp-wooding, the truck that my cousin and I drive to downtown Magee, to Crazy Day—wooden ducks, benches with heart-shaped backs, peanut brittle, hotdogs and powdered doughnuts—that kind of crazy; people crowd the streets to show off fancy cars, sparkling rims, spoilers, Motorola antennas. We never score a date, only invitations for mud-bog, beer-guzzles.

After months of looking, we place a newer-model motor in an older-junk frame. Sam loans it to me after my brother wrecks his car, skidding off the road and hitting an oak; the body not completely totaled, so Ulmer and Sam repeatedly pull the car with a tractor into a pine until the body is beyond repair. When we realize that the pine won't live, the sapling my brother won as a prize for selling the most pies for Smokey-the-Bear Awareness Week, it's a cold morning before school, the day my classmates swear to a walkout.

When I crank the car, such God-awful screaming. I pop the hood to find guts, stool, hair, and fluffy tails splattered all over that newly installed motor. Another kitten, its butt bald without a tail, wobbles out from under the car that dies and won't crank, so I have to ride the bus, bus 125 where I got into fight with Tanya.

Four years prior she slaps my glasses off, calls me *sissy*. I slam her on the floorboard and commence to punch, then her tall brother's on my back, scratching me, kids screaming *kick that bitch's ass*. Till this day, I don't know if they were referring to me or to Tanya.

Her father comes to our house, and Sam whips me with a switch, tells her father that I won't cause any more trouble. I'm confused. I was just standing up for myself. But Sam says if I'm doing any standing up, I should be standing for Jeeezass. He drives a forklift at a plant all day. He knows the importance of standing. The walkout is a success. We make it on TV; Principal Bowen asks us to return to class, but we say, *Hell No! We Won't Go* all the way down Main Street.

I hear that Tanya has a lazy eye with stigmatism, like a team of horses pulling in two directions at the same time. She's married, wearing Dollar General makeup and feeding her kids baloneeee and welfare-cheese sandwiches. That serves her right, I think. Maybe, she'll think twice before slapping another sissy.

Who knows where she and fat boy end, but I know Ulmer's tilling gardens and Rueben's spilling heavenly seeds, that old lady taking it slow, stitching, sipping on a glass of milk alongside her dogs panting with purring kittens, all watching Sam driving a forklift, praying I choose to stand. I don't want to live or die. I want to be.

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE

FINALIST

WOMAN WITHOUT EYES

Jennifer Chapis

Her face like a house
after a fire's come through.

Her face. The staggering shine
where her eyes once were—

two dark mouths
agape, stunned honest.

We have stepped over her fish-like feet
(one trout, one belly-flopped bass)

ten times since the temperatures dropped.
The halls of her legs gray and spread out

at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Ninth Street.
Overhead, fractals in tree-branch icicles.

Heaven, help us engage a gaze like this—

The heart, it doesn't know what
to say—

belligerent, breathless,
artless

as a tongue without an end,

lung
frozen to the ground.

TO WRITE A ROMANCE

Sarah Domet

Visualize your hero. Think about real men you know or have seen whose characteristics you can blend to model him.

The hero is strong. Muscles bulge from him like tumors, in shapes you would think impossible—bananas, rope, guitars. His hair is wavy; his name is Sandy. You'd think that'd be the name of someone girlish—but such is not the case with this Sandy, not the case with our hero. In fact, his breath smells like testosterone. Testosterone smells like a mix of musk and seaweed and sweat so sweet you could put it in your tea.

Sandy is my boyfriend. No, no, my lover, or soon to be. He lives on a distant shore—Chicago. Near Lake Michigan. He sees me in a bar, drinking a martini, dirty. Or rather, a museum. It is a museum, and I am pondering a Pollock piece.

“Looks like puke,” he says, only funny. He is standing behind me, talking to my shoulder. “Actually, they say it has no beginning and no ending,” he adds.

His voice feels like a hundred pin pricks in my back. His voice is acupuncture. I tilt my head to the side in a way that says, I'm thinking, and I am thinking—just not about Pollock or his painting. I'm thinking about the voice and the pinpricks. Then I think about a documentary I saw in which Pollock left his wife and took a lover. I hate the word lover, sounds so canned. Carl left me for his lover.

“I love her,” he said. And I knew he did.

“I'm sorry,” he said. And I believed he was.

“I find the aesthetical qualities of vomit simply fascinating,” I say, but do not turn around. It's a dumb thing to say, and I'm afraid the voice has moved on to another painting, another woman. But then I hear a creak on the wood floor. I feel his breath on my ear; my ear has a fever.

“Quite fascinating,” he says. His voice sounds like a rolling

bowling ball, deep, an almost-growl. I turn around. Strike.

He looks like someone who should be in a gladiator costume. Someone get this man a sword, I think. Someone get this man a chain suit or a helmet—one with the thin nose guard that extends from the forehead. Get him sandals with straps that criss-cross around his bulky calves—I presume they're bulky. He is wearing pants, but I imagine them bulky. Are bulky calves a good thing?

Carl, my husband, is sinewy and tall. He looks like someone who would wear a lab coat. And he does; he is a scientist. But Carl left me for someone else, my Lamaze instructor. Carl left me for this someone-else-Lamaze-instructor five months after the baby was born. Carl took the baby with him, and I image he and Ms. Lamaze and the baby sitting around a table, all breathing in and out in syncopated beats, communicating through short and long breaths, their words the sound of empty air.

But this story isn't about that, not about Carl. I mentioned him only to say that, by comparison, the hero is much better looking.

"I'm Sandy," the hero says, and the room suddenly feels quiet—so quiet it seems that if I swallow, the sound might reverberate off the walls, tilting the framed art at thirty degree angles. With one of his hands, he shakes mine; his other hand cups my elbow, gently, as though it were a breast.

"Hi, Sandy," I manage to say, the words wrapping themselves around my tongue like a snake. I avoid looking directly in his eyes, or at his hands lingering on my elbow, my hands. Instead, I stare at his mouth, his lips, his slight hint of a mole below his right eye, which I have the sudden and uncontrollable urge to touch. And I touch it, lightly at first, with my thumb. The moment isn't as weird as one might expect it to be. It feels natural, actually, like dabbing a blob of mustard from the corner of someone's mouth or picking a strand of hair off someone's sweater. It feels necessary, a courtesy. A necessary courtesy.

"I've just moved here from Montreal," Sandy says. Canadian. Perfect. Already I'm in love.

Imagine yourself the heroine. You can make yourself anyone you want to be, anyone at all.

I am the heroine of the story—the hero's heroine, Sandy's heroine. I've always wanted to be a heroine, but just because you want something doesn't mean you can have it. I want a winning lottery ticket, for instance. I want a summer home in Belize. I want perky breasts that don't sag from the weight of dried milk. I want all of these things, but I have none. Desire is not synonymous with reality. Not at all.

As I see it, I have two lives—the pre-heroine and the post. Pre-heroine I was reserved, conservative, predictable but not boring; I cooked a lot. I packed my lunch every day, usually a salad, sometimes a sandwich—sometimes a small salad and half sandwich. I wore my seatbelt always, even when parked. I never ran yellow lights. I went to bed by 10:30. I was a wife; I was a mother. I was a good wife—I know this.

I suppose I still am a wife and a mother; I'll take it on a technicality. The divorce won't be finalized for at least another month, and I haven't seen the baby since Carl left holding her like a dish towel over his shoulder. I've thought about it, but I still haven't seen her. Not yet.

Since then, though, I'm spontaneous and fun and adventurous. I wear colors that would never match—purples and oranges. I visited the beach for the first time. I smoked my first cigarette. And I have night caps. I always wanted to be the type of person who had a night cap. And voila, now I am. Now there is Sandy. And I couldn't be happier. Really.

Looking back, how could I have wanted Carl? Clearly we were wrong for each other. I never did like the fact that he always read during breakfast—anything he could get his hands on: the newspaper, books, magazines, cereal boxes, egg cartons. And I didn't like the slight curve of his spine, as though his back bent from the weight of holding up his head, which was large. Carl was tall; sometimes too tall. Sometimes when Carl was standing beside me, looking down at me, I felt so very far away. "Hello,

I'm down here!" I'd want to scream, my voice echoing through the distance, and his head was floating somewhere in the sky near treetops and clouds—higher still, stuck in that invisible ozone.

But I don't wish to talk about Carl. Carl is associated with the old me. I want to think about the new me, the heroine. The heroine is much more interesting.

The new me looks fairly similar to the old me. I'm more or less evidence of the law of averages. My hair is medium brown, a medium length. I'm a medium height and a medium build. Medium all around in the looks department. But Carl once thought I was beautiful. And maybe he still does.

"Your eyes are the color of the ocean," Sandy tells me as he is still holding my elbow. We are walking through the corridors of the museum. I am aroused. I've never used that word aloud—aroused. I've never used a lot of words. Carl and I weren't like that. I'll have to adopt a new vocabulary for Sandy.

"I'm aroused," I say, just to be saying it. I feel like I'm not myself but another self who is also myself, but this one a stranger. The good thing about being with someone you don't know is that they don't know you either.

Sandy pins me up against the wall and presses his body against mine.

"Not here," I say and motion toward the American Gothic couple staring at us disapprovingly, pitchfork poised—two angry parents.

"I don't care who sees," Sandy says in one long huff of breath. The room is empty except for one catatonic security guard, an old man slumped on a stool in the corner, his chin to his chest in an artful slumber.

"But I hardly know you," I say. And I don't know why I'm hesitant. Carl doesn't want me; Sandy does. I'm a woman with needs, a heroine in search of a hero, a ying looking for some yang.

"I'm Sandy." And when he leans in to kiss me, I think about many things: the warmth of his lips, the way his tongue lifts mine

as though helping it out of my mouth. I think about kisses in general, so odd the way humankind is attracted to tongues and spit and orifices. I think about how much softer skin is on the inside of the mouth. I think of Carl, not in a vindictive way. I think of Carl sitting in his favorite arm chair doing the crossword puzzle with one hand, holding the baby with the other. Then I edit the baby out of the memory, and there Carl still sits, looking up at me tenderly, his thin whiskers reflecting in the morning sun, his face catching light like water.

"But you hardly even know me," I say. I wrap my arms under Sandy's arms and around his shoulder like a harness in a way that suggests that I'd like to get to know him.

"Tell me something about yourself."

"I was born in Iowa."

"Fascinating," he says, and he kisses my forehead.

"My favorite color is blue-green."

"Fascinating." He kisses my neck.

"I have . . ."

"Fascinating," he says, cutting me off, his mouth covering mine.

Why fascinating? I think for a moment too brief to be counted. Why fascinating? I am kissing back. Why fascinating? The heroine's loins quiver.

Fall a little bit in love with the hero, so you can write about him with passion. He is strapping. He is good. He is yours, yours, yours.

Sandy's fingers are tangled in mine. He is massaging my thumb with his own. His hands are soft. I massage his hand back until our thumbs are twiddling together in rhythm, as though our thumbs were tongues, our hands are one.

He is leading me through corridors of paintings, ornately framed; sculptures of cracked, headless bodies line the room, and I imagine their heads, chipped and misshapen, buried somewhere beneath the ground—forgotten heads that feel phantom pains

where their bodies must have been. Or maybe it is the bodies that feel the uneasy weight of headlessness, a naked shame.

At any rate, the statues stare at me from where their eyes must have been, stare as though I'm doing something wrong, as though they've seen this before, and they already know the outcome. And I half expect to follow Sandy's arm up to his neck, then to his face only to discover it has been Carl all along. But this is not the case. Still Sandy, which is a good thing.

If Carl were here, we'd no doubt be walking on opposite ends of the room. We'd leapfrog from exhibit to exhibit, never standing together longer than a "huh" and a "hmm . . ." which would be the extent of our conversation. Or, Carl would prattle on about the baby. "But the baby," he might say. "We better check on the baby," he'd say. "Is the baby hungry?" or "Should we change the baby?" or "Is she tired?" or "I hope the air quality is good in here. Seems like a lot of people are sneezing, which isn't good for the baby," or "Don't you want to hold her? You should hold her. Why won't you hold her?"

Baby, baby, baby. I never want to hear the word again. Except, maybe, from Sandy.

"Do you want to go to the miniature room exhibits, baby?" We've known each other for such a short time and already it feels right for him to call me baby. I'm okay with the word baby now; really, I am. "I'd like to see what a 17th-century bedroom looks like," he says, and we both look at each other, our cheeks lightly brushed with a flush at the mention of bedroom, as though to say it is to imagine a bed and to imagine a bed is to imagine bodies on the bed and to imagine bodies on the bed is to imagine us as the bodies on the bed.

"I'm aroused," I say again, and this time I mean it. He swings me out like we are ballroom dancing, and then pulls me back close to him.

"What do you do for a living?" I ask.

"I'm in real estate" he says.

"You buy houses?" I ask.

"I own houses." Sandy puts his forehead to mine and rocks it back and forth.

"I love houses," I say. I place my palm to his cheek and look directly in his eyes, squinting for intensity so that he knows I'm serious. "Can I see where you live?" It sounds a bit forward, even for the new me, but I've already said it, so it's too late.

"Of course," he says without hesitation, and for the first time I think that maybe love can be easy, two dimensional, uncomplicated—like a children's puzzle where the pieces are dramatically large, shaped and colored in obvious ways so it's easy to make connections. I wonder if it was this easy for Carl and Ms. Lamaze. I wonder if there was a moment of thought or doubt or hesitation that caused thought or doubt or hesitation. I wonder if I was on Carl's mind at all, just once. Just once, I hope.

"Then take me to your house," I say, my heaving chest heaving. Sandy squeezes me taut against his body, so tight I can't breathe. The hero has taken my breath away.

Give your characters flaws, something the reader can relate to. These flaws should be subtle, not overdone, and never detracting from their levels of attractiveness. Note: They should not be flaws that cannot be forgiven.

Sandy grins at me through his wide smile. I just noticed he has a mustache, thin but visible, which looks like two wings sprouting from his upper lip. Nobody can be perfect. But it will have to be shaved if the relationship is to continue. "But don't you want to see the miniature rooms first?" he asks. His teeth look like flat pebbles; his mustache has stray, red hairs.

I don't really want to, but I say okay. I don't come to the museum because of the exhibits; I come because it is quiet and because here I can look at the paintings, lose myself in a world without Carls, without Lamaze instructors.

I was the one who wanted the baby.

I wanted a baby like I wanted a Coach purse; I wanted one badly. To have, to hold, and to show off to my friends, many of

whom had both babies and Coach purses. I imagined pushing her in a stroller through the park, the grass a startling green; it looked like the moment in the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy opens the door of her black and white bungalow to find a world in full, dazzling color. That is what I thought the baby would be: seeing color for the first time.

But how can you really love something before it is born? How can you know if you'll even like something if you can't shop around first, pick out a color, a size, straps, interior pockets and the like. I wanted a baby like a Coach purse, but really I should have gotten a Coach purse.

"We are not ready for a baby yet," Carl told me months before I was pregnant. "We should just enjoy our time together—travel some, look into buying a house."

"But my biological clock is out of control," I said. "It keeps me up at night with its ticking."

"Then get a digital clock," Carl replied with his crooked grin, "one that is quieter." He had never wanted children. I knew this years ago, before I married him.

"Can't you just be . . . content?" he asked.

"You confuse contentment and complacency," I said.

"Complacency isn't always bad, is it? Is it?"

Is it? I still think of the question.

I was the one who wanted the baby, but Carl was the one who loved her. I couldn't stand to hold her, to feel the warm, heavy weight of her body in my arms.

"Why won't you hold the baby?" Carl would ask. "She's your daughter, you know." Then, "What is wrong with you?" Then, "How can you feel nothing?" Then, "You are a cold woman," he said, and I felt cold, so cold I felt nothing at all.

I didn't have an answer for Carl; I didn't have an answer for it—for the baby. You can't force love, can you? You can't force it even for a child. Even if the child is your own.

But nothing kills a romance like a baby, in life as in fiction. Sandy is waiting by the spiral staircase. Sandy is waiting for me.

The conflict-resolution should culminate in a love scene, even if a permanent union is impossible. Remember the love scene. Close your eyes and visualize the hero's touch. Embrace his warmth; feel his arms wrap around you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you. Surrender to the passion.

Sandy leads me up the marble staircase; I am two steps below him; his hand reaches out behind his body like he is receiving a baton. Our hands connect. His palms are sweaty, and I notice a crescent-shaped sweat stain on the back of his shirt.

"Are you hot?" I ask, when I notice beads of sweat dotting his forehead.

"No," he says, then pauses. "It's kind of embarrassing, really. And I'll tell you this only because I feel like I've known you forever, a lifetime, and you make me feel like I can tell you anything. I mean, really anything. I mean, I really like you." Another pause. He smiles, and I notice brown stains between his incisors, which are sharp and uneven, one hanging below the other as though his mouth is tilted. Sandy lifts his hand off the banister, and I can see hand-shaped smudge marks where his fingers had been resting. "I have overactive sweat glands," he says. "It's bad." Sandy looks shrunk. "Real bad."

The first room is a colonial kitchen, and it looks very much like one: minimal, rustic, monochromatic. There is a fireplace with cast iron pots and pans hanging overhead. A simple wooden table sits in the middle of the room. A broom with a brush made of twigs rests against the wall, and two rocking chairs sit like skeletal remains in the corner.

"That's where we would have sat," Sandy says, as he imagines our domestic bliss through the centuries.

"Let's walk on," I say, and we do.

Down the hallway I hear voices talking in hushed tones. A couple stands near the Jacobean room, with its ornately carved furniture and checkered floor, which makes it seem modern, like a refurbished townhouse. The couple is standing in the shadows of the doorway, and I think I make out the silhouette of Carl.

I've been doing this lately—seeing Carl wherever I go. Well, not really Carl, but people who, at first glance, appear to be Carl. In the grocery store, he is squeezing the bread; at the bank, he is hunched over the teller station; at the Chinese buffet he is scooping sweet-and-sour sauce over a plate of crab rangoon. And I always imagine a baby draped over his shoulder or perched there, like a monkey or a parrot.

I wanted to love the baby; I did. But I didn't. I couldn't. It hollowed out my insides with its kicking and swimming, with its embryonic fluid, with its presence. It changed me. I'm not blaming the baby, but it changed me.

"Hold the baby," Carl would plead. "Just touch her. Hold her hand. Anything. Please." I'd sit on the corner of the bed with my arms crossed, drowsed like a zombie on pain medication.

"I can't do this alone," Carl said.

"Then let's give the baby away." Did I say that? Did I say that aloud?

I just want Carl back—Carl without the baby on his shoulder. Carl on Sunday mornings sipping coffee in bed. Carl cleaning out the attic. Carl watching television, his profile a blue glow in the darkened room. It is Carl, alone, that I want.

Sandy snakes his arm around my waist and starts to kiss my ear.

"Shhhh . . ." I say. I'm straining to hear the couple at the opposite end of the hallway.

"What?" Sandy whispers.

"Do you hear something—that couple down there. Do you hear heavy breathing?"

I think back to my Lamaze classes. Ms. Lamaze took such a concentrated interest in us.

"Breathe from your core," she'd say, pointing to her belly. "Breathe from your core." Then she would demonstrate, and she looked more like a convulsing cat than a mother-to-be.

"Now I want you to try breathing," she had said. She was talking to Carl, placing her hands on his stomach. And they kneeled face-to-face, breathing in and out in unison—two

breaths in, two breaths out, two breaths in, two breaths out—each sucking in the air that the other had just released, a quasi-kiss.

During labor, I opted for an epidural. But Carl stood by my side, breathing, in, in; out, out, breathing from his core.

“I don’t hear anything,” Sandy says, and I step closer. I hear it again. The quick in-out of breaths, patterns of inhales and exhales. I hear Carl’s laugh. I hear Ms. Lamaze’s voice. I hear the breathing, whistling like the wind through the miniature rooms, through 500 years of interior decorating.

“I want you,” I say, “it can’t wait,” and I push Sandy toward the replica of Louis XV’s bedroom. I’m blooming; I’m gasping. We are kissing as we gingerly step over the velvet rope. We are kissing, still, when we knock over the sign that says “Do Not Touch” and “No Flash Photography.” Our feet slip and slide on the waxed floor, and I can see scuff marks from my shoes. By the time we reach the bed, we’ve bumped into the hand-carved armoire, knocking a vase to the floor, shattering it. I unbutton his shirt, and I pull him down to Louis XV’s bed, which feels like it is made of wood. The flowered wallpaper is yellow and red, and I feel like Dorothy lying in the poppy field. I’m tired, so tired. I can feel Sandy on top of me. My eyes are closed, but I can see the hero, still; I can hear him in the distance.

HISTORIA (I)

Tom Christopher

This life is like the others: pleasure is cheap and abounds. Around us, terror glints like a pair of beaded slippers. The spirit seekers' endless drumming. Merciless shops and their hanging meats. Bad luck in the open spaces. Quietly, everyone weaves a crown of secret needs. The need to be flat on our back in the cornfield. The need to be kissed awake by the giant. It's a matter of inventing the curtain, then ignoring it. Like greeting the day beneath a sequined hat. Like smiling in the face of the silvery leaking. From the hills, we wait patiently for the robots to enter the city. If not tonight, they'll arrive tomorrow. Stay with us, the hours are howling away the dawn.

HISTORIA (II)

Tom Christopher

Fall has come whooping and flapping like an overeager villain.
Fall has come, and someone has glad-handed our yellow slicker.
Maybe it's true: the longer we stare at the world, the more we
resemble it—the bright plate of chopped tomatoes, the soggy
parade ribbonning the streets. A pleasing thought, but still no
proof of the mechanical tiger, no proof of the stars weeping and
sharpening their spears. Our life is a long and salty one. Patiently,
we mark another X through the list of quiet places, we shine
the light into the faces of the insidious dancers. Standing in our
windows, we imagine the world smaller—hissing rivers that we
will hide in our pockets.

FIRST CAVE

Josie Sigler

This man's fist sails toward my mother's face & misses

But opening my forehead the fist is insight: Given a world of false horizons
what medicine is reaching, anyway?

Go limp Go limp is what you learn in this army We were Members all:
mother, brother, girl

Crouched in the camp that was home Our bottoms hard against
the bar of the pull-out bed

For years I remember: my brother wore Rocket-Man pajamas:
& Nothing::The body
never lies::

A false horizon is a disease of the eyes The others died of diseases
of bad love::These unborn cried—*Carrying Capacity*

The body's truth changes over time

Her life was not big enough so she must Relinquish/Roots: like children singing:
You've no room for me I will not become

A fish trapped in a mountain pond (all love grows lonely)

How we lose touch in the dark when touch is what we've got::*People out there's a lot
worse off than you*, mother's-mother said, stirring her Metamucil::& the wound

Of protest closed over But she did not know She could not see
(I answered *No, no he doesn't touch me*)

It would take a year to say my name & list the crimes of an ongoing war
against the body

Instead I will show: My mother crouching, hands over her face My brother
in Rocket-Man pajamas & 8-year-old girl with blood in her eyes

screaming: God is when you are whole with

Heavy masts of ships turned into the wind become light: Stop
struggling::Turn yourself

Leave this girl her pagan ways & make the body a sacred
Fire in the cave Remains: Open as skin.

MARLENE DIETRICH 2007

Vidhu Aggarwal

(FLIPBOOK SHUFFLE)

between us	this is no place for a sofa	flip of cards
		under
	this hairy cushion is removable	
	it's just a glove	the thumb
		I want to say: it's love but something's
	slack and humid Darling,	
	I'm becoming human and everyone applauds	struck dumb in me, some dirt beneath the fingers
		flipping midair,
	when I finally pull off the stuffed head of the beast and heave	
it at your feet, it's just a shame	only to arrive later—limbs	
I'm not starved	shameless, hinged	
for luck or pain	always turning over another	
because beneath the gorilla	leaf	
suit		
erupts		
a voluptuous		
blonde	always	
crooning a voodoo lullaby	crying wolf or sheep,	

so *far-gone*
I can repeat as in please, oh, please
the words endlessly
I can shine through let me
this guttering song rearrange her and remember to

Shhh! now turn off those eyes
Can't you hear it?
once, twice
a voice over and under
noise always be a stranger—

VAN GOGH'S ASYLUM DAYS

Jennifer Sullivan

I follow that which Dickens offered
as a remedy to suicide: a glass of wine,

a piece of bread with cheese, a pipe
of tobacco. Still, open-armed and hungry,

sorrow sashays to me. Voices burrow
into my head, subtle and muffled,

a prostitute slipping out from the sheets.
The curtain of consciousness slithers

shut. I wake up hours later, face pressed
against the stale floor, taste of turpentine

loitering in my mouth. Soon,
the doctor will seize my brush

and canvas. Until then, I paint
with the fury of a madman. I paint

desperately, a yellow-eyed drunk
begging for one more drop of wine.

My tongue becomes the palette.

"A glass of wine, a piece of bread with cheese, a pipe of tobacco" is excerpted from a letter Vincent van Gogh wrote to his sister Wilhelmina on April 30, 1889.

THIS IRISH SUMMER

Jennifer Sullivan

The smell of peat lounges
among the hills, settles

in your messy hair, sticks
to my fingers. There are

nights when the moon
and sun sit together

above the Atlantic.
Your tongue spread

with mint and hash.
Cottage window open

to Fisher Street. Garden
of books on the bed

where you undress me.
We push until the swamp

of morning comes. Hips,
two beggars of bone.

EVE REVISITED

Susan Varnot

When they x-rayed her,
she was, again, the pared
white rib of Adam, moon-hung
below the cloud
flesh had become.

From the film, she could
have cut apart bones
to rearrange the ghostly
innards of the body.
She could reinvent herself.

It had been like this for years,
centuries: when he asked
her to outline her love for him,
she wanted to hand over
charts, strip

herself down to cells,
return amebic, docile, floating
until they joined
the dark
undone, un-begun.

THE SEED

Andrew Coburn

Lydia Lapham did not ask him in. Wearing gray suit and collar, Austin Stottle brought himself in with all his spiritual luggage and overly good face and planted himself in the overstuffed chair that had been her father's favorite. A month ago her mother had died and her father, as if duty-bound, had followed fast. Tired after a hectic shift at the hospital, she wondered how best to get rid of the reverend while he vainly anticipated an offer of coffee and cookies, which her mother used to provide. She was forced to view long, solemn features that dragged on and on under receding hair, while he drew from memory the image of the nursing school graduate uniformed in the whitest of whites and mimicking a bride without the fancies. She could've been a nun, bride of Christ.

"Matt needs you." The voice came as if from the pulpit. "He's eating himself up over you."

Matt MacGregor was a longtime boyfriend she had stopped seeing, a habit she had broken, a mistake corrected when she touched thirty on her last birthday and surveyed a waste of precious years. "Some things aren't your business," she said and stayed standing while he drummed dry fingers on the arms of her father's chair.

"Gauge your own grief, Lydia, and consider that Matt's may be every bit as great as yours. You've lost your parents, and he's lost his mate."

"We weren't married."

"Ah, but you were as mates, don't pretend otherwise."

But she never would've married Matt. No suddenness to his thoughts, no flashes, nothing nuanced about him. A pug nose caricatured boyish looks while a muscular build evoked days he'd played sports at the regional high school before joining the town's miniature police department. That was Matt. She had led herself on more than she had him. "Again, Reverend, it's none

of your business. I don't even want you here."

"We're all God's creatures," he said with utmost patience. "We must look after each other. Matt has a duty to look after you, but you won't let him exercise it. You'll end up driving him into the arms of whores."

"Tell him to wear a rubber."

"I didn't hear that, Lydia. It passed right over my head. Your lips remain sweet." He started to rise and then stayed put. "God's breath became the beauty of women. I've always believed that. That's why no woman is born without charm."

"Bullshit," Lydia said under her breath.

"We all have unworthy moments, men and women alike. When I was a boy I aspired to become a tailor so I could run a tape around a woman's bust. My uncle on my mother's side was a tailor and regaled my father with off-color stories. My father repeated them to my mother to remind her of her humble origins."

"Your father must've been a winner."

"My mother was a wise woman. When I said dirty words she reminded me that God has big ears. When I threatened to run away she packed a lunch and told me not to eat it all at once because it would have to last forever."

His voice was an irritant, and she was tired, on her feet all day hustling from one patient to another, dealing with demanding doctors. "I'm sorry, Reverend, but I must ask you to leave."

"Yes, yes, I understand. You look all in." He rose. "I'll tiptoe out."

She sank into her father's chair, drew her legs under her, and, half shuttering her eyes, heard her mother's voice somewhere in the house and glimpsed her father's shadow. In a flight of fancy she felt separate from her body and in league with her parents. *Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad.* She nodded off for a minute, maybe not even that, and woke to a stillness too intense to accommodate any more ghosts. *Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad.*

Switching on a light, she mounted the stairs on unsteady legs and used the bathroom. On the way out she clumsily banged

her shoulder against the door and then took deliberate steps into her bedroom. On the floor lay a sprung collar, the three segments of a gray suit, shoes, socks, and everything else. In her bed, covers pulled to his chin, was Reverend Stottle, eyes fervent with a calling.

"I've been waiting," he said.

Lydia turned, descended the stairs, and snatched up the phone. After misdialing, she reached the police station and asked for the chief. Chief Morgan came on the line a half-minute later.

"James, you'd better get over here."



Chief Morgan's lean face looked hard and permanent, as if it would never age more than it already had. He was forty-six, thirty-six when he lost his wife on the highway to a teenager without a driver's license. Reverend Stottle was a few months past fifty. With a firm grip the chief escorted him out of the house and marched him to a battered car bearing the town seal.

Reverend Stottle spoke abjectly. "Are you taking me to jail, James?"

"I'm taking you home. Get in."

The reverend gave a start when the radio crackled. Head bowed, he placed his hands between his knees. Chief Morgan settled in behind the wheel and twisted the ignition key. The motor groaned as if being asked to do too much. The reverend spoke solemnly. "I'm the scum of the earth."

"Don't overdo it, Austin." The motor caught, and the car shot forward. The chief clicked on the headlights, which froze a cat. He sped around it.

"You won't tell, will you, James? I'm on shaky ground at the church. My car's back there. People will know."

The chief took a corner. So far, for the most part, he had avoided looking at the reverend. "I'll have it returned to you."

"You're disappointed in me, aren't you?"

"That was my girl you were bothering."

"Not your girl. Matt MacGregor's."

"My girl."

"Yours? Really? James, congratulations. When the time comes, the church is yours free, even the organist, and I'll do the marrying. A deal?"

Chief Morgan ran the car around the village green, swerved into the drive beside the Congregational Church, and pulled up near the parsonage. "Good night, Reverend."

Reverend Stottle looked relieved and almost happy. "God will understand. He's male." He climbed out and looked back. "I owe you."



Matt MacGregor died at home of a gunshot wound self-inflicted while toying with his Magnum, a weapon he duly owned but was unauthorized to carry, Chief Morgan's strict orders. Consensus among breakfast regulars at the Blue Bonnet was that the gun was too big for the boy, who thought he was Clint Eastwood. "Hell, even Clint Eastwood isn't Clint Eastwood," said Millie, a waitress for some thirty years at the Blue Bonnet. "Same as John Wayne wasn't Wayne. Fakes, all of them." Millie had her own take on the shooting. "Suicide," she stated, and Orville Farnham, a longtime selectman, said, "Get out." She looked over her shoulder. "Think about it, Orville." The more everyone thought about it the more they remembered that Matt had always been stuck on Lydia Lapham and was crushed when she dumped him. "Suicide," Millie repeated. "And the chief shares the blame."

"It wasn't suicide," Chief Morgan told Lydia, who harbored a horrible suspicion that it was, and she regretted mean things she had written about Matt in her diary. Immature. Shallow. Premature ejaculator. Cowboy cop.

"A bullet in the gut isn't suicide," the chief went on. "It was an accident, a stupid one, but an accident pure and simple." She

needed the reassurance, and the chief, sixteen years her senior, was almost a father figure. Neither had planned a relationship, but he was lonely and she an overage orphan.

They came together in her house, all hers now that her parents were gone. In his embrace she called him Chief, and he said, "Make it James?" Naked, she was frozen milk, her nipples wintry points. He entered her with a sense of trespass and proceeded cautiously until she urged, "Harder, James. I won't break." After that he had the snort of a bull, she the low of a cow. Inadvertently, his voice tangling in her hair, he called her Elizabeth, the name of his dead wife, which didn't trouble her. She relished being two sides of a spinning disk, flesh and spirit drawing on a common muscle the way darkness and light swing off the same hinge. A little later, sharing a pillow, she said, "Are the stories true?"

Mostly true were accusations at the Blue Bonnet that he spent too much time in the Heights where newcomers lived in extravagant houses, monopolized the country club, and demanded extra police presence. Apocryphal were tales of women wowing him in their garter belts and sleeping with their wealthy spouses in their bed socks. "Use your own judgment," he said, lifting a wrist to check the time. She watched him swing long legs over the side of the bed and reach for sloughed-off boxer shorts.

"Why don't you wear a uniform? You used to."

"Never felt comfortable in one."

"Matt loved his. He was like a boy."

"And died like one." The chief donned chinos and a white shirt left open at the throat and squeezed into loafers in need of a shine. "Any chance I can come back?"

"Your call, James."

Alone, she sank her head deeper into the pillow and mulled over a life in which day-to-day things had little meaning and the episode with Chief Morgan was movie material, cameras whirring, improvisation called for. Eyes closed, she fell asleep and dreamed she was a girl again, few cares, no burdens, and many giggles, her fingers dug into a box of popcorn. The dream

broke, and she opened her eyes to find shadows in the room and the chief gazing down at her.

"I'm back."

She said, "You never left."



Reverend Stottle motored out of Bensington on a mission of mercy. Mrs. Dugdale, the eldest member of his church, childless, widowed, lay dying in Lawrence General Hospital. He entered the unkempt little city with foreboding, for he knew failure. Never had he penetrated the inconsolableness of someone who had lost a mate, a child, or a parent, and untrained in marital counseling, he had made messes of several marriages. But he'd always tried to do his duty and never shirked a responsibility, and that surely was in his favor, though it didn't prevent a shiver as he parked in the visitors' lot. Whose frigid hand was that around his heart? Satan's was hot, he'd been told at Bible College.

He didn't need to ask directions to the room, though he paused near the nurses' station, where an older nurse was mapping out patients to an aide. Emphysema was sharing 213 with Diabetes, Impaired Kidney was next door, and Anorexic had been discharged. The nurse looked up. "Can I help you, sir?" No help needed, and he strode on. The last time he had seen Mrs. Dugdale she was propped in a wheelchair like a rag doll, and he'd needed to look twice to determine that she was breathing. He saw that this time she was wired to a glinting monitor whose jagged streaks of hieroglyphics looked evil.

"It's Reverend Stottle," he said, approaching the bed. "Fear nothing," he went on, aware that lately he feared much. "You've had ninety-three long years, more than most people." Mrs. Dugdale's eyelids fluttered but did not open. Toothless, her face gathered around her mouth. The bed seemed to be swallowing her, as though she no longer had permission to exist. "Nothing is deeper and darker than aloneness." He spoke with thoughts of episodes in his own life, including a crisis of faith. When Mrs.

Dugdale's lids shuddered, he gripped one of her hands, a mess of bones gloved in loose skin speckled like a tiger lily. "Life is the light leading to the final darkness where we each shall lie alone."

Her lids went still. He released her hand and stepped back. In the subdued light her face shone luridly and revealed all her years. With a rush of emotion, he pressed a button on a cord and waited. Two minutes that seemed like twenty passed before the nurse who had spoken to him appeared.

"Mrs. Dugdale is gone," he said, flushed with purpose. "I saw her off."

The nurse pushed past him and bent over the bed. Her bottom was substantial, and the pink of her underwear blossomed through the white nylon of her trousers.

"No, Reverend, she's just asleep."

His face fell from a sense of betrayal. "Are you certain?"

"Quite."

He rode the elevator to ground level and went into the public lavatory. At the urinals he stood wedged between a burly security guard and a slender Latino and relieved himself with a dash of dignity. Afterwards at one of the sinks he splashed his hands with much ado when realizing they were not going to wash theirs. Watching them leave, he wondered whether Jesus had always washed his. In those days feet received the greater attention.

As soon as he stepped into the cafeteria he glimpsed Lydia Lapham sitting by herself, stark and lovely in her whitest of whites, and he made a beeline to her and seated himself before anything in her eyes could drive him away. "I apologize for what happened the other day. My only excuse is that I've been under much pressure doing God's work."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be doing it." Lydia lifted her coffee cup. "Let's not discuss it."

"I agree. It was an aberration. I'm here to warn you about the ugly stories going around town. People say Matt MacGregor killed himself over you. I defended you, and so did the chief. Rest assured."

Blood rushed into Lydia's face, anger into her voice. "It was an accident. Matt shot himself in the stomach."

"He wanted to suffer," Reverend Stottle said off the top of his head, as if God had guided him.

"No, Reverend, you want *me* to suffer."



"We need to talk," Lydia said. "Not here." They went for a drive in the chief's unmarked car, away from the town to a narrow road that followed a stretch of the Merrimack River bordered by a purple haze of loosestrife. A breeze delivered the fresh smell of lumber, the essence of a tree still in it, from an extravagant house being built near the water. "When I was teenager I had a crush on you. A lot of the girls did."

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"No." A groundhog fed boldly where roadside weeds were greenest. "Did you know there was a man in my life before Matt? Of course you did. Not much gets by in this town. He was a married doctor. His wife never knew, so I was the only one who got hurt. We've each had our losses, haven't we, James? When you lost your wife, why didn't you pull up stakes and go, just *go*?"

The chief swerved slightly to avoid cyclists. "I nearly did. I wanted to go to a part of the world where it was already tomorrow. But I couldn't act, couldn't move. I was paralyzed."

After a silence Lydia said, "I suppose you and I are a juicy item at the Blue Bonnet. I know they're blaming me for Matt's death. They must be blaming you too."

"In a way Matt's lucky," the chief said. "He doesn't have to grow old. And who's to say that's bad. Look at Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Princess Di. Forever young."

"I'd call that a waste."

"I'm rationalizing."

"I know what you're doing." Gradually the riverbank grew tall with brush, summer at its fullest. Lydia lowered her voice.

"I can't take the town anymore, James. I'm leaving soon. I've a

job lined up at Bellevue Hospital in New York.”

“Bellevue? That’s a—”

“I know what it is. My penance.”

“For a crime you didn’t commit?”

“For whatever,” she said, and he maneuvered the car onto the shoulder of the road and twisted off the ignition. Birdsong wafted through the tick of insects and the heat of day. Spoiling the scene were crushed cola containers and McDonald’s wrappings. “Thank you, James. You’ve held me together.”

He took her into his arms as if to secure her. “Maybe if I hold you tight enough you won’t go.”

“Come with me.”

“I’d be a minnow out of water.” His smile was at once rueful and ironic. “What would I do? Work security at Bellevue?”

Three weeks later, kissing goodbye, each had a queasy feeling, as if someone were closing a book on them. Lydia said that as soon as she was settled in she’d write or phone. She did neither. And eight years would pass before they saw each other again.



On the village green a little girl with a porcelain face asked Reverend Stottle if there was really a God, and the reverend shot a finger skyward. “Those big fluffy clouds are God’s laundry. That’s how we know He’s up there. Always looking down on us. Loving us.”

“Why don’t I ever see Him?”

Reverend Stottle heard church bells in his head and saw himself wearing his first long pants. “If God wanted you to see Him, He’d throw down a rope ladder or give you magical seeds to grow a bean stalk.”

The answer didn’t go over, and the child appraised his gray suit. “Are you really a minister?”

He held up three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

He drove to Lawrence General Hospital in a Honda Accord purchased with money Mrs. Dugdale, long gone, had willed

him. At the hospital he roamed corridors with an eye out for women in johnnies and, if lucky, glimpsed a bare bottom or two, a harmless activity for which he forgave himself. He knew that if he strayed too far from righteous ways his dear wife Sarah would promptly set him straight. Thank God for Sarah. He also assigned some credit to the chief.

In room 202 he visited a woman whose childhood in memory was not in the least remote, but yesterday was. She chatted about songs she had liked and sang the words to "Mairzy Doats" while the reverend held her arthritic hand. When she broke wind, he pretended not to hear. "You're kind," she murmured.

He knew times when he hadn't been and hoped no one was keeping score. Black marks in a notebook. Years of good deeds down the toilet. He left the hospital feeling glum, his face torn between a grimace and a scream, as if something bad were going to happen. And within the week something did. His Sarah died.

Parishioners gathered to comfort him. His face stark, he told each he was a flower trying to stand up to frost. After the funeral he went to pieces and blew hot and cold about God. He took the pulpit on Easter Sunday and said, "I'd like to know why He created cockroaches. Roaches spread disease and give asthma to poor children. I'd like to ask why He gave our organist a fine face and her sister a banal one, not to mention a lisp. Was He being playful or plain cruel? And how about innocent babies born with Down Syndrome? With cleft palates? And what did Lou Gehrig ever do to deserve the disease he got?" Voice breaking, Reverend Stottle suddenly gripped the pulpit for support. "And what reason did He have for taking my sweet Sarah?"

Privately he told people that God was a terrorist.

Within the week the church board voted him an open-ended sabbatical and trooped into his little office to announce the decision as he toyed with a bronzed baby shoe that served as a paperweight. The date of his birth was stamped into the sole, making him his own unforgettable child.



The breakfast crowd had dissipated, the communal table of regulars vacant, when Chief Morgan seated himself at a window table and checked in on his cell phone. Meg O'Brien told him that gravestones had been tipped over during the night, and Eugene was on it. Eugene was his sergeant, and Meg, her voice a growl from years of cigarettes, was his civilian dispatcher. "I'm at the Blue Bonnet," he said

"I know where you are."

He was scanning the Boston papers over a second cup of coffee when Reverend Stottle joined him. The reverend's eyes were puffy, his face drawn. "They've put me out to pasture, James. They don't want me anymore. I'm just an old thing."

Morgan turned a page, away from civil war in Angola, killings in Kosovo. "I heard it was just a sabbatical. A leave of absence."

"Call it what you will. In the bigger picture, we're two widowers drifting in the same boat. We've lost our oars." He raised a finger to Millie, who anticipated his order, green tea and a buttered blueberry muffin. His eye sped to the page Morgan was scanning, a long run-over from Page One. "Sad," he said. "Poor Gorbachev has lost his Raisa, but that's what life is. Loss. Everyone loses someone. I wonder if President Clinton knows how lucky he is having Hillary. I understand his physical needs. I was there, James. Lucky I had Sarah. You lost your wife—how many years ago?—and you're still crying inside. Don't tell me you're not."

Morgan wanted to tell him to shut up and instead turned to the comics, to *Garfield*, often a laugh, to *Herman*, off-center and richly absurd, the way he often pictured himself, whether in a calamity of conflicting emotions or the shambles of a relationship. He seemed always at the end of something, never at the beginning.

The reverend was given his tea and a hot muffin absorbing butter. Sipping, munching, he looked forlorn and bewildered

with a glare of crumbs around his mouth. "I don't know if God is good or bad, James. Worse, I don't even know if He's there."

Morgan folded the newspaper. "Do I need this, Austin?"

"Perhaps not, but listen anyway. He spoke in a whisper. 'I've come to terms with my lust. Have you come to terms with yours?'"

The last woman Morgan had held close had a finely drawn face refurbished with Botox and complaints that her husband was a cold fish with an unfailing eye for flaws, especially hers. Morgan was relieved when she ended it with him. "Not really your concern, Austin."

"I'm worried about your soul."

"Worry about your own. I'll tend to mine."

Reverend Stottle made insufficient use of his napkin. "Do you hear from her, James? You know who."

"Not a word." He scraped his chair back. "She could be married, probably is."

"Do you think she's forgiven me?"

"She's a nurse. She's seen it all." Morgan was on his feet. "I've a town to take care of."

"Maybe the town takes care of you, James."



In the presidential election, Reverend Stottle voted for Al Gore and Chief Morgan voted for no one. Nearly a year later came the horror known as 9/11, and not long afterwards Lydia Lapham returned to Bensington, moved in with a widowed aunt, and reconnected at Lawrence General Hospital. Her first morning, a scrub nurse dealing with knives, scissors, a drill, and a saw, she had a miserable headache and cut herself on a scalpel. Unwilling to cry, she laughed. Later she had a reunion lunch in the cafeteria with Chief Morgan and saw a face leaner than she remembered, a few extra lines added in. He saw her as still fetching, though in a somber sort of way, and asked, "Why didn't you ever phone?"

"It was over," she said. "I was making a break from everything."

"And now you're back. Bring me up to date."

She used as few words as possible. There was a marriage that didn't survive the honeymoon and a child that didn't reach birth, after which she threw herself into nursing duties in Bellevue's trauma unit, where her first patient was wheeled in with a pulverized foot, bones ground into meal. Weekends she volunteered at a Brooklyn clinic and blew her stack at a male doctor giving elderly women perfunctory exams and young women exhaustive ones. "They didn't fire him or even reprimand him because they doubted they could replace him." Then came 9/11, a tiny taste of Hiroshima, history biting the USA in the ass. "Can't be real, I thought. Must be smoke and mirrors. But there was ash, James. Everywhere ash. And after that, all those workers at Ground Zero. We knew they were breathing in metallic air, no matter what Christie Whitman said."

Morgan spoke softly. "You OK?"

"You had to be there," she said and lost interest in her salad.

"I'm sorry about your marriage, your child."

"Thank you. And let that be the last we talk of it. I'm glad I'm out of New York, out of my cockroachy little apartment, though I'll probably miss it. How's Reverend Stottle? Has that silly son of a bitch been defrocked?"

"He's trying to straighten himself out. He lost his wife."

Lydia altered her expression to erase the nasty picture she'd drawn in her mind. Morgan didn't want the second half of his sandwich and asked if she did. She didn't. "Ten years ago, James, were you in love with me?"

"Did you doubt it?"

"You never said. I could only suspect. Do you believe in second chances?"

"I'm looking at one," he said. "Do you know you've never stepped foot in my house?"

"How about tonight?"

His house was more Gothic than Victorian and not in total repair, for he tended to let things slide. He waited on

the front porch. Near the rail among roses was a spiderweb to which a powdery moth was fastened like a miniature angel. He considered rescuing it but hesitated interfering with the balance of life, which he felt was tenuous enough. She arrived within minutes, the sky not yet dark. "I'm fifty-six years old," he told her, and she said, "I know how old you are." He said, "It may not be the same."

But it was.

Same sounds. Same sensations. Same intensities. Even Elizabeth crept into the act.



Reverend Stottle ran into Lydia near the Blue Bonnet and looked as if he wanted to clutch the moment. "I heard, I heard. You and James are planning to marry. Word gets around fast." His smile showed new teeth. "I promised James I'd do the marrying. No charge. A promise is a promise."

"I didn't say I wanted you to marry us," Lydia said evenly.

"I understand, but I've rid myself of demons. I fill in now and then for the new minister. When asked, I christen babies. I marry people. The parish has set me up in a condo near the cemetery, close to my sweet Sarah. When I lost her, I lost what was most precious."

"When you lose a child, you lose a world," Lydia said. Reverend Stottle wasn't sure he entirely understood, and she wasn't about to enlighten him. She wasn't even sure why she said it. Her voice stayed level. "It's impolite to stare."

He blinked. "You'll be a beautiful bride, a vision in white."

Two months later, married by a justice of the peace, Lydia and James Morgan honeymooned at a seaside hotel in Maine and then settled into the chief's revitalized house. New windows and wallpaper, new siding and roof. The kitchen was expanded to accommodate a breakfast nook overlooking a recently pruned crabapple tree. Lydia said, "I feel myself taking root here." Their love life was vigorous, the only off-note her concern that without

precautions she might get pregnant. "You're not always careful. James. And I don't want to lose another world." Lydia took time before continuing. "I'm forty and afraid, James. And the times we're living in are scary."

"According to the History Channel, we had scarier times. The Dark Ages were no picnic. Nor were Biblical days. Lots of slaughter, horrible plagues."

Their mouths moving toward each other, they let their lips brush. She whispered, "Just try to be careful."



On nights Reverend Stottle couldn't sleep he visited the cemetery to talk to his wife, sometimes lightheartedly. "I bet you don't know who turns the stars on and off." His gaze fell from the lit sky to Sarah's stone. "No one. They're on a timer." Sometimes he bitched. "What business did God have making me the way He did? He makes a mistake, I pay the price. Fair, Sarah? Fair or unfair?" Sometimes he suspected she turned deaf when he spoke, his voice no longer meaningful to her, her world oblivious of his, as if hers existed and his did not.

People more and more saw him as ministerial in a cartoonish way. His gray suits were shabby, his collars not always clean. Over muffins at the Blue Bonnet he confided to the town clerk that as a youth he had frequented prostitutes. "Fallen angels, I called them." Spelling the reigning minister one Sunday, he delivered a tirade against America's invasion of Iraq, "a deed done in the dark by a president who doesn't know his belly button from his weenie." Key worshippers wondered whether he was still Christian and made sure he gave no more guest sermons. One day, visiting someone at the hospital, he came face to face with Lydia Lapham, who for two years had managed to avoid him. He had forgiven neither her nor the chief for letting a stranger marry them, though he had come to terms with her keeping her own name.

"I don't hold a grudge," he said.

Lydia spoke in a busy voice. "Nor I, Reverend."

"I see you're still not pregnant, not necessarily your fault. If you allow me, I'll talk to James man-to-man. The problem could well be his seed."

"Reverend, please go away."

Deep in his mind, his face revealing nothing, he pronounced her guilty of bitchery.



Soon into the third year of the war in Iraq, the town clerk learned that his only grandson, nineteen years old, had lost both legs to a roadside bomb. TV crews from Boston descended on Bensington for local reaction, and some of the footage appeared nationally. Reverend Stottle, to his dismay, had not been interviewed. Chief Morgan, a Vietnam veteran, was and said he never thought he'd see history repeat itself so soon. Glimpsing himself on CNN, he changed channels.

"People forget," Lydia said.

They were in bed, pillows propped, his foot touching hers. For a reason he couldn't fathom, Morgan asked, "Do you ever think of Matt MacGregor?"

She said, "Tell me again it wasn't suicide."

"It wasn't suicide."

"Then I don't think of him." She squinted sideways at Morgan, their feet still touching. "Something you ought to know. I'm pregnant." The screen flashed more news, this from Fox. WorldCom's former chief, Bernard Ebbers, found guilty of fraud and conspiracy. *In Cold Blood* star Robert Blake acquitted of killing his wife. Morgan said, "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Are you scared?"

"Petrified. I'm too old."

Turning to each other, their breaths touched. He spread his hand over the heated width of her thigh and listened to her stomach making sounds between a drum and a chant. "So what do we do?" he asked.

As a child, Lydia had thought babies were brought into being by sleight of hand, by Mandrake the Magician, a wand waved, a bottom slapped, talcum at the ready, birth an infinite remove from death. Childhood was fairyland, Peter Rabbit, Little Bo-Peep. Her voice rode in on Morgan. "Let's sleep on it."



Reverend Stottle squatted on his heels and spoke to the stone. "Same ol', same ol', Sarah. Makes you sick. They're killing themselves and killing us, and we're killing them. Bush says 'Stay the course,' but he went AWOL in Texas. What would he do if his feet were on the ground in Iraq? Mess his pants. That's what I think. I can see you smiling, Sarah."

The air held a chill, and the reverend shivered. Moonlight blanched him. He figured that every graveyard is full of messages from the ground, all silently conveyed. "You're probably saying something right this second, Sarah, but I don't hear so well anymore. Could be wax."

When his eyes filled, he dried them with backward swipes of his hand. "Here's the latest from the home front, straight from the Blue Bonnet. Yesterday Lydia Lapham gave birth to twins. There's significance in that, Sarah. When James lost his first wife, she was six weeks along, and I don't think he told that to anyone but me. That was when I was trying to counsel him in his grief. So Lydia giving him twins sort of makes up for the one he lost. I heard Lydia was once married to somebody else and had a stillborn, but I don't know that for a fact. You can't believe everything you hear at the Blue Bonnet, but if it's true there's justice at work."

A sound alerted him as a shadow maneuvered between moonstruck stones. A messenger from God? From Sarah? Then he recognized the pear shape in a uniform that was no longer a comfortable fit. The voice was Sergeant Eugene Avery's.

"Chief know you're here, Reverend?"

Reverend Stottle rose from a squat to a standing position,

moonlight snagging on the outcroppings of his face. "James has more on his mind than keeping tabs on me. A family to look after, not to mention a whole town. Get with it, Eugene."

A few years ago Sergeant Avery had broken a toe that now predicted the weather. "It's late and gonna rain. You'd better go home."

"When I was young, Eugene, still in Bible College, I sometimes sneaked off to Boston's Combat Zone. Most exciting thing in the world is a prostitute with a pious face. Gives a Godlike presence to sex."

Sergeant Avery was jarred. "You telling me something I should hear?"

"I wanted her to dance like Salome."

"You say stuff like that at your wife's grave? Go home, Reverend. Go home now."

Home was a five-minute walk in the small hours, and presently he was back in his bed, in his underwear, and in a dream so tenuous he was equally in it as out of it. And Sarah was in it too, as if she had followed him home. "Sarah, I love you," he said. She was a half-revealed presence and both his present and his past. With affection, he remembered she had hiccougths the first time they made love. "Don't know what I'd do without you," he said, and, without warning, he woke. "Sarah, are you there?" She wasn't, but he knew where to look and fell back to sleep.



He should've shaved, would've looked better going into the Blue Bonnet. Millie served his usual and asked if he'd heard the news about that pervert congressman in Washington hitting on pages with instant messaging, *utterly lewd, disgustingly dirty*. "I'm quoting TV," she said. No, he hadn't heard. "The man probably needs help," he offered, and Millie snorted, "How about deballing?" Reverend Stottle didn't necessarily disagree, though he did murmur, "Everybody needs help."

At the library, he looked anonymous and abandoned. Seated, he scanned Newsweek with one eye while the other browsed Mrs. Wickelman the librarian, hair carefully colored blondish, hips flaring. Quite easily he pictured her in a hot bath, soapy knees protruding from the suds. Leaving, he timed it so that he was walking behind her, following her stride for stride, cheeks of her ass talking to each other. He joined their conversation with a quick little pat. She whirled and slapped his face hard enough to dislodge his denture. He had to suck it back in place.

Outside, his face stinging, the sun whacked him in the eyes, and he stood stunned for a moment. "You all right, Reverend?" someone asked, and he said, "Right as rain." He drove away in his Honda Accord, orange cones forcing him one way, then another. At home was a message from the police dispatcher, Meg O'Brien, her voice a bit of a bark. "Chief wants to see you."

The police station occupied the rear of town hall. Meg O'Brien looked up from her metal desk, her mouth a rupture of big teeth. Reverend Stottle imagined outsized roots anchoring them. His own mouth was a razor slash, his sudden smile a knife wound. "What's he want?" he asked and knuckled his left eye as if to unscrew it.

"You don't know? Of course you do."

He entered the chief's office with a hangdog look, stood before a battered desk, and fixed his gaze on an upright picture of the twins. Suddenly his voice gushed. "They're beautiful, James. Absolute angels. Always suspected you had a superior seed, and Lydia, she's a super mom."

Morgan's face was expressionless. "Mrs. Wickelman isn't pressing charges on condition you never set foot again in the library. If you do, all bets are off." Morgan paused dramatically. "Anything about that you don't understand?"

Reverend Stottle spoke with a dry mouth. "I've disappointed you, haven't I?"

"Better if you disappointed yourself. What's wrong with your eye?"

"I was rubbing it. I'm not myself, James. I miss Sarah."

"I know you do, but that's no excuse."

"And my health isn't a hundred percent."

"That's no excuse either."

The reverend's head listed on narrow shoulders, a sign he was thinking, brooding. Winter was coming. He remembered a long-ago winter when he and Sarah each wore a woolen cap with a red ball dangling from the tassel, a smile shivering on Sarah's mouth. "What am I going to do, James? You have a life, I don't."

"You have more than you think."

He moved to the door, looked back. "Why is it, James, you want to go one way, life makes you go another?"

"I don't suppose it's personal, Reverend."

"Only if you make it so. I guess that's the answer."



Election night he voted for a black man for governor and bet Sergeant Avery a dollar that the candidate, Deval Patrick, would win. Sergeant Avery said, "It'll be the easiest buck I've made." The Blue Bonnet, usually closed at seven, stayed open. When Millie served him a second cup of tea, he said, "As a flower bursts from a seed, so the universe burst from a seeming knot of nothing. A primordial bang created our world, Millie." She gave him a look.

"What brought that on, Reverend?"

"I saw James Morgan and Lydia today with the twins. James proved he has a powerful seed, a world-maker."

Millie rearranged the salt and pepper shakers. "Go home, Reverend. Get a good night's sleep."

Driving past the cemetery, he meant to stop but didn't, knowing he'd probably talk to Sarah later and give her an account of his day, though he was not always sure she was interested. After parking the Honda, he approached his condo but found he couldn't ignore an urgency. Stopping, he opened his pants and made a wine-yellow puddle that frothed and sparkled. "Ahh,"

he said, and someone passing said, "Disgusting."

In bed, windows open, he heard the wind flushing leaves from the street. The TV was on for election returns, but he wasn't paying attention. He didn't mean to die and had no intention of doing so. It simply happened, though for nanoseconds bits of his brain still sparked and time went haywire, veered through space, and spiraled him into a different domain.

Sarah, remember me?



At Drinkwater & Son Funeral Home, the chief and his wife stood at the casket and breathed in flowers. Cosmetics gave the deceased a demeanor of contentment as if, all things considered, death were a comfortable fit. Morgan said, "It wasn't personal, Austin. I'd bet on it."

Lydia said, "Don't rile him, James. Let him rest in peace."

BEN GRIMM IN RETIREMENT

Jonette Larrew

My body, composed of crumbling earth. Dandelions sprout
from my chest and belly. Members of the cabbage
family embed my soles, curly dock roots in my scalp.

A gardener comes along to weed
every morning, tugs Bermuda shoots
and scrapes mosses. Like long-delayed success at extricating
a seed hull stuck in molars,
like scratching the ear canal.

Rocks and sticks, twigs,
branches, pebbles, mica and quartz:
I heave.

They tickle. They grind. Some rocks stick
fast into the ground. Rain and snow only rinse
them, like cleaning teeth.

Pill bugs and night crawlers keep me soft and arable.
Beetles, ants, always scurrying through the capillaries
they've rebuilt. Lately, a mole
cricket riddles a network
of bores in my right forearm,
the ache in my wrist.
Earthworms will repair me in time. They always have.

DRESSING HEADS

Traci Brimhall

I pull my comb through a dead man's hair, a kettle steams
on the stove, two lamps light the low room.

The woman to my left

washes the sanguine collar from a severed neck, conceals bruises
starred like sakura on his jaw. On my right, a woman draws an awl
through an ear,

attaches the wooden name of an enemy dead. Heads rest
on their spikes; a quiet congregation. We smoke their slack skins
with incense, make them

smell like sandalwood, like forest beds. I hold
the face of a new warrior. Cutting the cord of his topknot,
his hair falls

into my lap like unspun silk. I twist it around my wrists,
keep him still while I tie him up again. Did he spend his short June
nights in the grass

catching fireflies, sliding his hand into a kimono
to tickle a girl's shins? Did he feed her litchis? Imagine her
fragile collarbones?

I caress oil into his temples, rub his razored cheeks,
open his mouth to darken the dye on his teeth, and when the other women
aren't looking, I finger

his tongue. My hand in his mouth: white, startling. I understand
the dead better than the living. The ugliest places on our bodies feel
the most pleasure

because they're the loneliest. I push the corners of his mouth.
I pinch his insensitive lips. Our first kiss.
Our first loneliness.

TO THE SNAPPING TURTLE WE KILLED IN JULY
Traci Brimhall

We couldn't risk the threat
of your mouth. When my cousin
pointed to your snout peeking
above the surface, Uncle got his rifle.
How could we trust your jaw
when last summer a boy
drowned with his mother watching?
Uncle aimed for your head.
Your body didn't jerk, but a slow
red stream uncurled in the water.
He got the rake, clawed you
to shore, flipped you on the sand,
the tender plastron of your belly exposed.
A damselfly landed on your eye, a sliver
of turquoise, and I thought yes,
carnivores are the most gorgeous killers.
Uncle posed for photos with his .22 in one hand,
and in the other, gripped you by the tail.
We knew July was your season,
so we spread out on the banks,
walked through bulrush
and Black-Eyed Susans, and found it:
the sandy mound you'd closed
with your back legs. We undug
your clutch. Three dozen eggs incubated
against each other like large, rough pearls.
Uncle crushed them with the rake,
slicing tines with broken yolks.
We dropped you on top and heaped dirt
on everything. I knew we wouldn't talk about
this part, only my cousin's keen eyes and how close,
perhaps, we'd come to loss, the same way

we talk about the boy who drowned
and not about his mother and how she rowed
out into the lake, and jumped in,
and pushed the boat away.

MARGARET GARNER EXPLAINS IT TO HER DAUGHTER

Traci Brimhall

I saved you, my dark Kentucky child. In soft hours
 we crossed the frozen Ohio, our laps full of snow,

the moon smooth and mournful as milk. Stars knotted the sky,
 ropes of hard light leading north, and we drifted through

a night of pine trees and blue dreaming. The cold breath
 of horses beat the air. Ice murmured with the weight of us.

When men broke our door, I put my finger to the unclosed
 spot on your skull, soft as bruised fruit. I knew

it would knit together, that you'd grow long and beautiful,
 and I knew each hair rooting, each word you'd learn was more

to lose. Someone would buy your body, your low songs,
 a man would call himself master and take you with rocks

in his kisses. The voices of men grew large as trees. I saw
 the knife on the table, thin as prayer, and I thought of lovers

carving initials into bark to say "This is love." This is love:
 I took your throat and I cut it. I cut it. I made you cross a new river

filled with bones, rocks and stars. Cup the light. Carry it north.

ALABAMA PASTORAL

Tarfia Faizullah

She forgives dusk, but not its descent.

All day she sells shoes,

watches hours burn into windows,

a taste in her mouth

like hyacinths. *For the last time,*

he had said, *if you reclaim*

Allah, you can be my daughter.

Now, she lives in a borrowed

house, where a spine of cockroaches lights

the floor and waits in stitched corners

for nightfall. This is the bent and broken

version: her nicotine-blue throat

choked quiet, a suitcase propped eastward.

She is a shadow box

in this new country, a pulled gather

of ginger root, wet-dirt ribbons.

Each day she waits: for her heart to curl, for night

to be emptied of dreams

of a West Texas sky shriven with thorns,

a father's uplifted hand—

for her face to turn away at last.

NATURAL HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD

Christian Knoeller

To be born on an island carved
by glaciers in the shape of a fish—
a flag tattered by wind

where ice came to rest
as the world began to warm.
The gravel beneath your feet

will never find its way home.
Farmers plow a dense crop
from under acres of sand,

stones that rolled a thousand miles
remember the route like a tattoo
misshapen by time.

Children pitch rocks
at eels in a creek
beside the ballfield.

By August, only a few pools
remain, thick with ooze,
where crawfish

lurk like refugees.
Even the muskrat's den
is exposed in midair.

Nothing moves.
The channel is littered
with cans and old shoes:

the sad harvest of a young
fisherman on the edge of town.
There are arrowheads

beneath the pitcher's mound
and wild chamomile in left field.
Sun lingers above a dugout.

Summer days line up
like furrows after wind
quits at sunup. Sky

is sweet with honeysuckle
the hour turtles return
to their burrows.

One has a date carved
on its belly. You can trace
the rings on its shell—

count off years.

RETURNING TO AÑO NUEVO
Christian Knoeller

As if it were not enough to have lived on the edge
of land where surf seems to merge
with its own distant reflection

and salt enters your pores with an old
intimacy known to seals returning
to this beach to reenact

their ritual skirmish courtship and
birth—of one substance with the gray
ocean sky and sand even

shore birds nesting in squat cliffs,
and pelicans on flexed wings
gliding, gliding

the same gray as the vacant windows
of an abandoned house across
the bay opening on darkness

structure gutted by fire yet still
standing somehow between dunes,
its pale green roof a perch

for raptors that hover now hunting
above heather beyond the pond,
where we walk among

last blossoms of lupine blazing
among its own bones, dwarf
reeds and beach willow

gone to seed beside the brackish marsh:
enough that breath climbs tidelike
then subsides.

THE MENSTRUATING MEN

Matt Zambito

puncture their penises with conch shells
and shuttle into the sea, dripping a trail toward
the surf. With waves waist-high, they pray, they

sigh and sigh. Salt burns, big
hands rising above their minds. Losing
some of themselves to something a cut above—

like pain, which tears off our eyelids, or the sea,
which swallows us like liquid God—
is the only thing with any hope (forget soap)

of cleansing. Otherwise, they're the shell, washed
and sloshed up on the shore by the accident
of ocean and moon, echoing the currents

for no one until a trembling fist lifts them shoulder-high
and slams them down onto the most tender flesh.

VIETNAM VISITS UNCLE BILL

Asha Vose

Uncle Bill never tells the truth exactly, but he does tell a story. The story pushes out of his tin-roofed, almost-house. It opens the broken screen door that bangs like a shotgun twice every time you close it, no matter how carefully you do it, even if your fingers are softer than moth's wings.

Inside his house in Nowhere, Mississippi we are sitting around an oak table, eating instant mashed potatoes and pork chops because Uncle Bill, an old-school bachelor, can't freeze an ice cube. We are heavy from the funeral. The bottoms of our Sunday black pants and skirts are stained mud red. We are relieved to hear a story that doesn't start, "Norma was a good woman." We carry the funeral in our pockets.

Uncle Bill leans over the table. His shadow stretches over the wood as he says, "In Saigon the lights bleed arterial indigos and varicose violets over the streets, and the stench of rotting fish pulses the sky first baby pink, then cement, and finally thrombosis blue. You cover your nose and mouth with your shirtsleeve, but nothing can protect you from that stench. It's a smell as though every dead thing on earth sat up and said, 'Ahh'." Over the dingy school-globe in my mind the story settles in Saigon, Vietnam. I picture thin letters over a pink, cardboard world.

Uncle Bill rests a moment and lights a cigarette. Years of hand-rolled tobacco have left him with a voice like smoky gravel. As a gentleman, he knows when to pause in his story, and how to let the smoke drift over him lazily and hang above his head. He clenches the cigarette tightly between his index and middle fingers. He turns the cherry toward himself and glances at the glowing ember eye.

"It's not like you see in the pictures," he says. "Don't believe those pixilated smiles. The women don't always wear straw hats and not everyone grows rice."

"At night we went out to let off steam. I had a knot in my stomach then, watching the night-women sell their precious dark, and wondering which girl might be the last I ever touched. We were out there all alone. We had that in common. We were the lost children of a shadow city." Uncle Bill leans back in his chair and looks out the window at the murky sky. "I am not afraid of the shadow city," he whispers.

As the words leave his lips and pass through the smoke they blacken and twist into the long curving outline of her. First the indentation of her waist is a column of smoke at the back of his head, her proud ribcage giving way to immature breasts and thin arms. The curling dark outline of her widow's feet appear after her torso, tomb-bodied, and long-fingered she steps from the smoke. Her long, night-colored hair spills over his shoulders. She leans in until they are cheek to cheek. She places a single translucent finger over his lips and whispers to me, "*my story*."

Mylai the beauty, I know this is her story. I fear her massacre eye. I fear her mother's kiss. I fear the tall embrace of her.

Uncle Bill trembles slightly as her finger caresses his lips. He can't see or hear her, but he feels something is wrong. He takes a long drag and pulls himself up straight in his seat.

"I was eighteen. After six weeks of basic training they sent me. The morning I flew in, the sky was the color of scrambled eggs. I'll never forget it. They made me a gunner for a Medevac. They wanted me to shoot the people that shot people who were wounded. Everything in the jungle seemed like a bad dream. The life expectancy of my job, Huey Medevac gunner, was two weeks," he said.

My brother Lua was seventeen. He was tall for his age and clumsy. He could fish better than all the other boys, but they still teased him. They always teased him because of his teeth. They used to call him, 'river rat', Mylai said.

"I had an M-16. It jammed constantly. When I picked it up, I thought the last thing I'd hear in my life would be click—click," said Uncle Bill. Mylai's smile turns down at the corners as she rests her head on his shoulder.

Then Viet Cong took him. There were no more fish. I went down to the river in the morning with my little wooden hooks and sat on the bank. In the slippery light every boy had a split-toothed smile, and every silver line lead back to my brother.

"I didn't see him until the Medevac had been shot down. Six of the guys weren't moving, stone dead. The pilot was out with a head wound; he was heavy on my shoulders as I was stumbling into the green, and I heard shots like hot thunder all around. I could feel the pilot's blood glue each hair to the back of my neck, tight to the skin. Up in a tree, I saw the sniper, a blink of black in the leaves," he said.

There is something the sniper doesn't know about Uncle Bill. Actually, there are several things: he doesn't know the taste of the crunchy pecan ice cream Bill will eat, or the satisfaction Bill will feel lying in bed in the hot afternoon as the breeze twitches the sheets. He will never feel the fur of the soft, soft dog Bill will keep tucked in his coat pocket in forty years. But the most important thing he doesn't know about Bill is that boys from Nowhere, Mississippi shoot like the devil.

"I pulled the pilot behind a rock and propped up my M-16. The whip-crack sounds echoed in the jungle for a long time. I had never killed a man before—sure foxes, squirrels, deer, but never a person. I carry that sound with me like a weight on my index finger," said Uncle Bill. "I didn't see his face. They sent me a letter. I was supposed to get a bronze star. I don't even know his name."

Mylai digs her nails into his cheeks and pulls her head off his shoulder. She releases his face, crossing her arms as she turns her back to him. For a moment, she looks as though she will just walk off. Her hair twitches angrily, as she turns and walks around to face him. She kneels in front of his chair and puts her hand on his.

His name is Lua, my little river rat, she hisses, and he has our father's eyes. Mylai's eyes are solid black as she turns to me.

They never gave you your star. They don't even pay you enough for coffee, old man! The bills fall like bombs on your table. No more

Agent Orange and no more money for orange juice, she sneers.

"We woke up one morning on the wrong side of a war," Uncle Bill says, as if he heard her. His story has etched the lines in his skin a little deeper and bleached the white in his hair whiter. It has deepened his gravelly voice to a croak and given his eyes a milky sheen. If it keeps up this way he will be blind before he finishes telling it.

They crawled into my home on their elbows and bellies, stabbing the yellow dirt then smoothing it back again. Her eyes are normal as she stands. She has released Uncle Bill's face, but the half-moon bruises where her nails were remain on his cheek. She brushes dirt off his shoulder, almost lovingly.

They took everything, she said.

He begins to say, "They said when we came home. . . ." but she looks at him brightly, dementedly, now all smiles as she cuts him off.

What if I could give back what they took away? she asks.

" . . . We'd be heroes," he finishes.

Mylai the Beauty, closes her eyes, places the very tips of her long fingers on his forehead, and breathes out a long exhalation of smoke over Bill.

Uncle Bill's wrinkles peel off in curls and glowing peach-soft skin grows in, his ears move up and shrink back. Wispy hairs thicken and grow black over his head, jaws move up and cheekbones re-emerge, but his smiling white-blue eyes are the same. He is twenty again. My uncle is handsome. I have seen the pictures, and I believe the smiles.

Mylai opens her eyes. She is translucent now, and when she turns I see the glimmer of moving smoke in her fingers held over his hand. She moves her lips next to his ear. Even though he can't hear her, she whispers softly, fervently to him as though every word were an incantation.

You met me on the bank of the river. You saw something flash in the water, and you followed the silver line to me. You gave me something dark; it melted in my mouth and tasted like love. The sky was the color of scrambled eggs. I'll never forget it.

You took me to the States to get married in your family chapel in Hattiesburg. I wore your sister's wedding dress pinned close to my waist and arms. We moved to Tupelo, Phoenix, and Charlotte. I was pregnant before the spring and our children bloomed as fast as rain: first Anne Marie and Camille, then Edward our little king, the little ones painted pictures with their fingertips. On Fridays you took out the trash, and on Mondays I brought in the milk, she said. She smiles as she cries, a dreamy smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. Her lips brush his ear as she whispers.

You never lived alone in this almost-house. You didn't marry Sandy the gold-digger that took your barbershop. You never watch children on the swings a little longer than other men. You didn't skid your car into a telephone pole that night, bursting it open in a ball of flames and glass.

She points down at his ankle. *Your bone wasn't charred black past mid-marrow, and the patchwork veins never healed over like blue cracks in your whitewash-tinted skin, she said. She slumps in front of him on the floor, overcome by the years of what might have been.*

"Heroes," Uncle Bill mutters still thinking of the war. "I don't even think they know what heroes are." He stretches his legs as older men sometimes do, as though they might meet resistance. He stubs out his cigarette. There is only the faintest limp in his right leg as he stands and moves to the window. The clouds have cleared and the sun shines faintly on his shoulders.

We are stuffed as the ducks Uncle Bill keeps on his mantle. Mother has served the black coffee that keeps us awake, but our eyes are closing. We are pointedly ignoring the dishes. Some of us are thinking of Norma's bathtub merlot and the twinkle-splash it made against the white tub wall as she stirred it. Some of us are regretfully remembering Uncle Bill's mattresses as too soft or quite hard. We are not fussing over Uncle Bill, telling him he should sit down or save his strength. We are tired of massacre eyes and cardboard worlds. We are ready for bed.

It seems as though his story is floating along in midair, drifting like a cloud. It wants to dip and dive or soar up into the

sky, instead condemned, it hangs. We wait in the silence, each of us listening to the sound of our own heartbeats. Uncle Bill, silhouetted against the streaming light of the sun, dust motes gleaming around his shoulders; the echo of blood sloshing during ventricular contraction, rapidly turning red-blue; Mylai spread like a fan on the dirty floor, shoulders heaving; the flow as the valve opens and blood rushes into the oxygen, turning bright red. It seems in this sunlight as though nothing will happen, as though nothing has ever happened. We can hear our blood turning blue.

Uncle Bill's story, the pulse-less thing, cannot manage to flat line and refuses to die. It sits around the room looking back and forth. It thinks, "What was that noise? What's happening over there? Is Uncle Bill OK? What's going on?" The heat has made it jumpy.

I am not sure how I know we are waiting for an ambush, but I can feel the tingle of adrenaline like needles in my fingertips. I want to yell, "Stop it! I can't go back to Vietnam. I'm half-asleep!"

But Uncle Bill has no choice. Vietnam, home of the bomb-children, isn't a place he goes. It is a place that creeps in on him, as he gets older, casually taking a few minutes in the supermarket when a display falls over with a crash.

Bamboo stalks explode up through the floor, ten feet tall, full-grown and yellow-skinned. Their leaves unfurl and twist over Uncle Bill's shoulders. He stands immobile as vines snake through the floor, scale his legs, and cinch in his waist. Undisturbed he gazes out the window and lights a fresh cigarette.

A bamboo pole smashes into my elbow and shoots past my head at an angle on its way. The bamboo is growing, denser and thicker, until the crimson light of Uncle Bill's cigarette is the only part of his outline I can see. I hold my throbbing arm to my side. The roof blows off of the house as though it were made of cloth, wrinkling as it flies away. The sun shines blinding white. Uncle Bill is speaking again. I try to hold onto his voice but he's muffled by bamboo. Tripwire criss-crosses the room like a spider

web. Each of the walls, one after the other, falls flat with a boom. Mylai is moving through the bamboo like a shadow. I strain to hear the soft growl of Uncle Bill's voice in the jungle. I want to get up and search for him, but I'm afraid of tripwire.

"There never was a shadow city," he says. From his voice I know he has found something he lost, and lost something he never knew he had. My eyes search for him in the bamboo; so uniform it makes me dizzy, yellow and black and green and yellow and black. The sun, the insufferable sun, has mutated into an interrogator determined to illuminate every crevice. I catch myself before I wipe the sweat from my forehead, the silver tripwire above my forearm winks up at me.

"I called it 'the shadow city' because I couldn't call it what it was. The other men called them Charlie for 'C', but I did it to have one name for those men, women, and children. I didn't want to see their faces. There were many of us, but one Charlie," he said. "I had pushed away all memory of that place and her."

Mylai steps from the bamboo and stands between Uncle Bill and me. Here in Vietnam he can see her. He turns his head and looks at her for the second time in forty years. "On the last day I saw you, you were running on the mainland away from the village and your hair flew behind you like a flag," he said.

The first time I saw you, I wanted to kill you, and take from you what your people had taken from me. But you had the rifle, she said.

"I could see you weren't afraid of me, but you didn't stop. You put her fingers together like a pistol and laughed a high laugh. 'Bang! Bang! Joe!' You said, as you ran into the bush. I knew we had taken something from you by the sound of your laugh that hung like a familiar weight on my index finger." His hand doesn't shake as he holds it out to Mylai. In an instant he is an old man again, but his white-blue eyes are the same.

"I could have believed your smile. I would have grown rice," he said.

You couldn't marry me now if you wanted to. You would be

trying to love all Vietnam in one skinny girl, she said. She turned and walked through the bamboo, fading with each step until she was another shadow.

Mylai's words echo in the room. We are back in Uncle Bill's house, heavy in our seats watching him look out the window. Vietnam left as quickly as it came. The bamboo fell through the floor and the floorboards filled themselves in. The walls righted and joined with the roof as it straightened. The dying light outlines Uncle Bill and his cigarette.

My uncle's story plummets to the ground shrieking. In its death throes it unravels long, brightly colored ribbons as it falls: fuschia, canary yellow, forest green, periwinkle. I catch a scarlet one as it spins out of control. As it slides between my fingers, I have a vision of where the story ends. It ends in Norma's house with her husband, Grandpa Vinson, a few months after their son had returned from Vietnam.

Granddad, his leathery hide silver in the moonlight, pulls his body out of bed at two in the morning. He grasps his shotgun with hands that do not tremble, not even during WWII when he had slept in a ten-foot deep grave. His knobby knees protrude from his large white shorts. He looks at his son waiting for him, silhouetted in the doorway. Bill is also knobby kneed and in his shorts, but sweaty, unable to sleep. Granddad knows there is nothing living in the darkness outside. He looks at his son. He cannot tell where the shadow ends and his son begins.

"I'm ready for Charlie now. You just show me where you heard them," he says in a soft voice. They walk out the front door and into the flowerbed circling the house, searching for something they will not find in Grandmother's irises.

THE ART OF DECEPTION

Chelle Miko

"No one notices corpses."

—Lyn Lifshin

Only up close do you discover this is not a floral tapestry;
Instead, Wang has snapped wing after silken wing

from the slender-bodied dead. He *contained them*
and *shut the lid*, then *pressed an eye to watch*.

Your eyes bore—as his must have—into the canvas
until your pupils become the size of a butterfly head,

your mouth drawn into an O. How neatly
he plucked appendages, how deftly he *coaxed*

each numbered death into focus: one by one.
Unaware, *his victims stumbled headlong*

into his netted thoughts, where they *crushed*
their bodies trying to fly, and were soon as still

as their assassin, who *smothered their breath*
then *discarded the heads and legs*, and thoraxes.

You step back. You've glimpsed another ghost
of inspiration: *other mouths, gaping and silver*

and gold, fillings mined from their teeth then melted
and sold as ingots, rings, and flatware. Your hand

brushes the serpentine necklace you always wear.
How smooth it is to the touch.

THE EARTH FELL FROM UNDER BECAUSE
THE TREE WAS CUT

—*W. S. Merwin*

Chelle Miko

The cockatoo swoops in
with a long scream that silences the crowd.
A furious red-tipped plume, it comes to rest
on the reedy shoulder of a girl, where it stops
its mean tune, even as she gives a small cry
at the claw, a thorn in her skin.

I watch the curious head swivel and bring an eye
so near the girl's that both of hers snap tight
as a locket.

My brother once pounced in
to the chicken coop to pinch an egg,
one eye on the startled hen,
who with a lightning quick pluck,
stole an ounce of vision
from his socket. And now the girl,

face-to-face with the brilliant bird
she's been clapping madly for, recoils,
as we all seem to, when the bird dips
its blunt hook of a bill, and filches one slick white
button, then digs its grip into the collarbone
under her blouse, and lunges back into flight.

The crowd's collective sigh assures me
soon there will be nothing
but the dark gloss of night. Even now, the throng exits
and keeps its distance from the stage,
as if a panicked hook were dragging a lid
across the nervous eye of earth, leaving us
as curled and shut tight as we were before birth.

THE SEED

Colby Cedar Smith

Here is the want
for fruit
out of season,

thump ripe
winter melon,
frost berries,
cold objects.

I am waiting for you,
small purple plum
transform my heart,
which is now a fist
shaped fig,
split and bruised

into a tree plump
and weighty, full
a hand held
in an upturned hand.

Even in the city,
it seems that others
walk in orchards
while I pull leaves
from aching bows

bite on bitter
greens, hold my
tongue hope now
for the ripening
that will come.

REUNION

Colby Cedar Smith

We watched our boat paddles catch
lilies and weeds
the breeding dragonflies
hovered on the skim
and bullfrogs stretched
throated rubber bands.

In the evening we ate
cracked dough with greens
a salad from dried berries
soaked in oil
your mother's sharp eyes
held me as we listened
to your father talk of Plato.

We slept on the porch
while the storm swept in
the lake rose
and pushed the water
through the screen.

I slept on itching burlap couch
that smelled of mildew
and shucked wheat
in the room where we once
played spin the bottle.

You twitched like lightening
mouth opened
half covered in a white sheet
a luna moth
touched the tips of her wings
to the door
wanting passage.

RELIABLE SOURCES TELL US

Eric Rawson

The difference between
Green and blue
Until recently was left

Up to the individual
Then to the language
And now finally we have

Standards
To explain practices
The sky is legally

Blue and the grass
Specifically green
With as you will remember

Yellow daffodils
Around the edges
And some birds of

Indeterminate hue
That eat crumbs
But won't touch the hand

Every so often
Something huge
Changes

Did we dream of this
Did we want
To know how it happened

This agreement about
The world falling
Into place not like

The puzzle it is but
Like an explanation
Of yearning or sickness

Each day
Is a fence
On the other side

Of which lies the everything
Else that gives form
To the desert

Or the freeway
By the playground
Where little friends

On the benches
Ignore their big pals
Driving off to

Places to return from
We can agree
That coming home

Requires a place
A way of talking
And an inscrutable

Cosmos
You might remember
That before anxiety

Replaced thunderstorms
No one made laws
They wrote them down

This made some of
The differences
Clear

A pear tasted like
A pear and not
Like furniture

A PROBLEM OF TAXONOMY

Miriam Bird Greenberg

In the low dusk
swallows swoop from their bearded
 nests in the eaves. The evening
primroses are in bloom,
 fragile vining flowers, and with them
the children have given themselves Hitler
 mustaches yellow with pollen,
are out by the mailbox
 doubled over in laughter at the goodness
of their good idea. Soon everyone
 will be indoors, scratching at chigger bites and elbowing
each other out of the way
 for the bathroom. Here we have a little problem
with taxonomy, I tell the kids. Only postmen
 can have facial hair like that anymore, I tell them. Credulous,
I take them for a walk. I point out
 the swaybacked barn where a mountain lion hissed at me
from the hayloft, the farm where a certain 4-Her
 had a sheep which gave
birth to two-headed progeny. Like the forked tongue
 of the snake, the split body of
a bifurcated carrot, all classed together
 in the 19th century *wunderkammer*,
again we encounter problems
 of taxonomy.

The next night
everyone is setting off Black Cats
 in the abandoned motorhome,
dislodging the night-roosting
 chickens perched low and fat
in the branches of a nearby tree. Towards

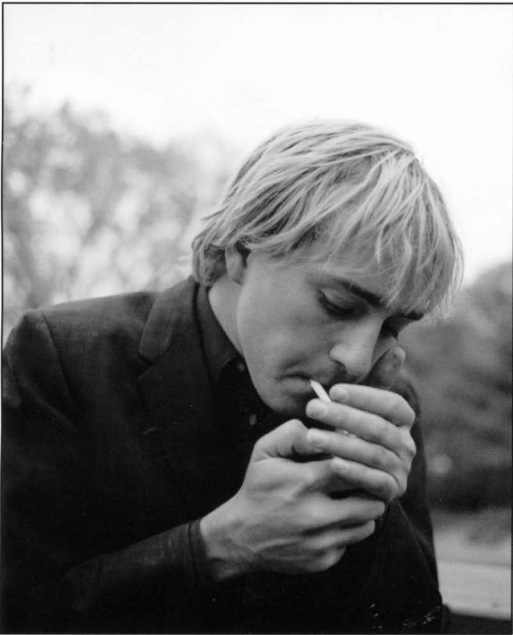
home I lure them, tell them the one
about my grandmother with the armful of sparklers
back before fire had been discovered,
and this was also when there wasn't a Fourth of July
and we all used the irregular Gregorian calendar
which skipped days.

She lit a green genie sparkler which flared
up lucent, only out flew an emerald
spark that caught the corner
of one bedsheet snapping in the breeze
inched, ignited, outwards
like a map of westward expansion and ran, clothesline
twine its fuse, till the whole line was eaten up with flames
smoldering into the dusk. Out howled the volunteer
fire department and pumped
water from the pond, but
too late:

Our clothes were burned
up, ashes, char, and sack cloth,
and our bedsheets too. That winter we slept inside
a cougar to stay warm, or sometimes just a goat
though cougars were warmer. A cougar, the kids wanted
to know, disbelieving the whole
thing. Behind me the old motorhome is engulfed
in flame, and here the children mutter among themselves
twirling the tips of their moustaches
which have grown verdant and luxurious
over time.

Portraiture

By Ellen Warfield
Leslie & Kirk Van Zandbergen
R. Rene Branca



Liam at the wedding (2005), by Ellen Warfield, silver gelatin print



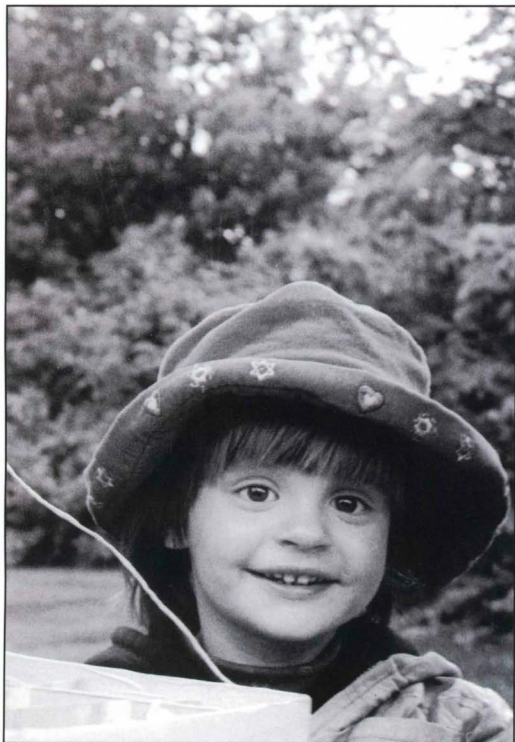
Těžítka (2006), by R. Rene Branca, 16" x 20", silver gelatin print



Untitled (Sanbornton, NH, 2007), by Ellen Warfield



Leslie & Kirk Van Zandbergen



Těžítka (2006), by R. Rene Branca, 16" x 20", Silver Gelatin Print



Leslie & Kirk Van Zandbergen



Sohani (2007), by Ellen Warfield, C-print



Leslie & Kirk Van Zandbergen

ACCIDENTAL SEA

Maureen Alsop

The sea was not an accident
but a silk red dahlia hidden
in the curio-cabinet, a dusty
boutonnière which lurked under a shrunken
ship inside a bottle.

When T. said he loved me
every teacup in the house grew
stained & suffered a chip, the asphalt rippled
like some kind of water. It lashed
at the hedges. And I grew hungry. Desire teetered
in and out of the white-lit house like flies.

I measure myself against every
wreckage. The courtyard

flutters with light; the trees a dappled
crisis of wind. Past the glamorous town, birds
die off and by midsummer a small vineyard
dries into thistle, moss, a stubble of weeds
and a mound of sand. No,

the sea was not an accident, but convolutions
in the rubble coursed against a heaving tide & the eyes
rimmed in drunkenness appeared larger, bluer.

WHAT MY LAST MAN DID

Andrea Lewis

Cate wriggles into the blue beaded dress. LaFitte's kitchen reeks of boiled mullet, old cabbage, burnt onions. The cook Josiah hacks pork ribs and tells his boy to feed the stove. The blue beaded dress is a gift from Huston—God knows where he found it. Robin's-egg *soie de chine* with cobalt beads clicking all down its length. "Blue for blues singing." That's what Huston said when he gave her the package, nervous, like a boy in a brothel. She hasn't told him yet she's pregnant. She's almost sure. The mullet makes her want to heave. But no doctor in Slaughter is going to check a fifteen-year-old high yellow for pregnant, so she'll have to wait and find a midwife.

A cockroach crawls across the calendar—July 1917—woodblock of a Shreveport & Texas locomotive gushing steam. Out front, in the saloon, the band warms up. Only Huston on piano is any good. The drummer, Franklin, hopped up on Raleigh Rye, keeps rushing the beat. The bass man, Alphonse, harbors the notion he can improvise.

The saddest Cate can feel is to conjure up her father wondering where the hell she is. She balls up all that sadness in her stomach, going through the kitchen to the saloon and out to the upright piano. Small applause. Huston beams to see her in the dress. She keeps the sadness in her stomach with the baby and starts "Chain Gang Blues."

If only she could sing it like LuLu. When LuLu sang "Chain Gang Blues" it wasn't so much a singer singing a song as it was the naked soul of a girl carving up her heart for a roomful of strangers. LuLu taught her the moans, curving slurs, bent blue notes. "Like a willow drooping." Everything else has to come from your gut. Most girls singing blues grew up poor. Cate figures nobody would listen if they saw her parents' house on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. Near the end of "Chain Gang Blues" she notices Duval is here again. Even in the gaslight she can see his parted hair and Sunday suit.



Wilson Duval sweats inside his best twill, tilts his chair against the wall, and watches Cate in her new blue dress that looks like a gift from Satan. At twenty-five, Duval—the youngest-ever sheriff of East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana—knows his mission: return Slaughter to the righteous. Some thought he was a joke until he cleaned up The Haze, where all the hoboes lived. Raided the place in April with his idiot deputy. Hauled in offenders, including Cate. First time Duval ever saw her. They thought she was a boy until the deputy knocked off her cap and all this hair spilled out.

Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show rolled into Slaughter that same day. As if the action in The Haze weren't enough for one lawman in a single day, Pawnee Bill's vast canvas tent burst into flames at sundown, funnel of sparks twisting heavenward and red reflecting off the clouds. From half a mile away, Duval could smell the burning flesh and hear the horses tethered up inside. Pawnee Bill himself proved a hero, pulling women—white women, colored women—from the flames, going back time after time until he didn't come out.



I stole Cate's dress off a high-nose white lady at the station. Stole her trunk and fenced the jewelry and a coat and alligator shoes. But the jiggly beads and shiny blue are Cate. Not just for the way she sings. Blue I'll bet you anything is the color of her soul. I never knew a girl so happy and so sad at once. Smiling, crying, yelling, loving, eating, singing. She's a runaway train no matter what.

Take my word, I won't be in Slaughter forever. Chicago. That's where the hot music and the smart niggers are. Me, I'm Chickasaw by blood, Huston by name. But it's niggers took me in and Uncle Midas taught me how to play. Chicago's where

we'll make the real money, make Cate famous. Me as manager. Bookings. Contracts. The business side. I'm not good enough on piano, I know that. I'm just honky-tonk.



Cate hated Sister Magdalene, her silent glide down corridors, her halitosis and her fleshy nose, her sagging chin pinched in a wimple stiff with starch. On Cate's first day at Sisters of the Holy Family, Sister Magdalene rooted through her suitcase and threw away a bottle of *Nuit de France* perfume, an ivory silk chemise and a pamphlet of love poems in French, which Sister Magdalene called filth. In the next bunk was LuLu. They joined in hatred of Sister Magdalene, hatred of five A.M. Mass, hatred of their parents who sent them there. Leaning over cornmeal mush and biscuits, LuLu talked about her fellow, Benedicte. Cate talked of where the walls were lowest and what time the abbess went to bed.



Of the four saloons in Slaughter, Cate picked LaFitte's when she heard the piano from the street. Even in bright day, he played like midnight in New Orleans. Dark. Drenched. Sad and hopeful both, like setting out, like LuLu and the rails.

Cate walked in quickly, before cowardice could stop her. Sawdust floor, smell of bad tobacco, bluebottles sifting heavy air. "You need a girl to sing." She didn't say it like a question. The drummer Franklin laughed so loud Josiah peered in from the kitchen. Cate gripped her hands behind her, let her eyes plead her case with the copper-colored piano player, his strange high cheekbones. Her audition consisted of twelve bars of "Wildcat Blues," repeated twice, and the piano player Huston nodded solemnly each time.



Duval can't pry his eyes from Cate. A slithering blue flame up there in her shiny dress, she starts "Stingaree Blues." She drops her voice to a growl for the part that says *You can't do what my last man did*. Inside Wilson Duval's Sunday suit, his apparatus strains against the twill.

He wants to know what the hell's a Chickasaw from Oklahoma Territory doing in his parish anyway? And who ever heard of one of them playing piano like a colored? And why did this Huston stand and watch that night while the tent burned down?

When they raided The Haze and hauled Cate in, she had on a man's flannel shirt of dove gray and a waist-bunched pair of dockworker pants. She excited Duval more profoundly than his wife ever had in proper skirts—or out of them. Cate looked like she might spit when he asked her where her people were. What he meant was "How much Negro blood?" and she knew it. With those oval eyes, she could be a princess from a South Sea isle. He let her go when the alarm bell clanged—the tent ablaze at Pawnee Bill's.

Three days later she was with the 'breed. Huston.



From the start, she felt safe with Huston. They have a room on Cypress Street. Huston's five years older and he's been around. He kisses like he's been to every world inside her. For a week he slept in clothes and kept a sheet between them. Asked if she'd ever done it. Now they do it every night and day, and Cate's afraid she'll get too happy for the blues. She's never planned one day into her future. Now she has a baby coming and a man to love.

Huston acts the boss around the boys but with her he's empty, scared. Wants to know how a little girl can sing so big. LuLu taught her. The twelve-bar blues, the rhymes, the chords. And why is she in Slaughter? LuLu's fellow Benedicte got them out of Holy Family on the freights. They ended up in Baton Rouge, LuLu singing in a barrelhouse. They were safe there for

a while. One night a man came in and asked for "Catherine." Within the hour Cate was in disguise and on a freight. Got off in Slaughter, in The Haze.



Duval remembers every moment of that first time he saw Cate. She said she was twenty, from Knoxville, surname Paradiso. All lies, Duval is certain. She is sixteen at most. He knows New Orleans talk and a fake name when he hears them. Still he wanted to kiss her sunburned mouth. When the idiot deputy knocked her cap off he got three scarlet scratches down his cheek for the favor. She smelled like a hobo's cook-fire, which was maybe why her voice makes Duval think of smoke. Smoke and twilight and that time of day a man should feel good about going home.



Cate could lie forever in the narrow bed with Huston. He's the only one she's told about her family. How her father used to bring his opera singers home to teach her voice. His singers all adored him. Maestro Rainer Schofeld of the New Orleans Symphonic and Operatic Orchestra.

Her mother? Her mother, the hypocrite, owned the Basin Street bagnio called El Paradiso and always wanted Cate to be on stage. Well, now she is. Her mother, the hypocrite, the too-beautiful octoroon, pretended no part of Africa could reside within her veins. Or her daughter's veins. All the Ursulines, priests, French teachers, dressmakers, tutors, cotillions, governesses, and European husbands in the world cannot deny the legacy of blood. On the street they didn't treat Cate white, so why pretend? The night she snuck into a barrelhouse on Perdido Street and heard a girl sing "Black Alfalfa's Jailhouse Shouting Blues," she decided the way off the slave ship was to get back on.

For her sins she went to Holy Family. Now she has the family she wants. LuLu—somewhere—Huston, the unborn baby, the band.



Two A.M. Duval sips cold tea at his table in the back. LaFitte's steams with every shade of sweaty skin—black, brown, yellow—copper if you count the 'breed. Amber honey if you look at Cate. No white women of course, but two white monte throwers from St. Helena Parish who keep a loud game going in the corner. On the other side of Slaughter, he'd have to bust it up.

He recognizes Daphne, the nigger girl who irons for his wife. She has given Cate an ostrich plume and fixed it in her hair. Cate starts "Bleeding Heart Blues" and Daphne dances by herself—or writhes like a heathen in a cheap cotton dress. A big buck gets up to grab her by the waist and grind against her. Cate groans the line, *Not a soul to ease your mind*. Duval's soul has not been easy since the night he questioned Cate. Sacrilegious dreams. Putting a gold ring on her finger. She wears an ivory satin gown. He carries her into a yellow clapboard house where rosewood banisters curve toward shadows and heaven.

Up on the stage, Huston stamps the beat with one foot while his fingers flick across the keys. Where does that 'breed get his money? LaFitte pays him a dollar a night and a few folks throw nickels. Yet Huston's always buying rounds or sporting a vulgar silver watch-chain on his vulgar white vest. He plays piano with those insinuating fingers, a nasty brown cigarette stuck in his slit of a mouth. No doubt those fingers have explored every inch of Cate. No doubt she's cradled his thick Chickasaw head and let his slit of a mouth slobber on her breasts.



I'll take a piss before we start "Evil Man Blues." There's a spot out back where all the men shoot it to the petunias. Funny how the stars looked the same in Oklahoma. Yes, I set the fire. That bastard Duval calls me 'breed but all my blood is Chickasaw. We didn't belong in Oklahoma. They removed us. You ever been removed? Men like Pawnee Bill—an Irishman from Pittsburgh,

the bastard—take Chickasaw and pay them pennies to demean themselves. They pretend to be Comanche. You ever seen Comanche and Chickasaw side by side? I set the fire. I didn't know the canvas would go up that fast. Next day, Cate comes to LaFitte's and tells us she can sing. Jesus Christ can she sing. I would not have done it if I knew her first. Loved her first. A girl like Cate, you treat her different. Yes, I set the fire. Doesn't mean I don't love Cate.



Daphne's proud Cate sits beside her for the break. The boy brings Cate her Coca-Cola with fresh-chipped ice. Daphne opens her Chinese paper fan.

"You are built for that dress, child." She touches the blue beads, adjusts the ostrich plume. "Are you gonna do 'Black Snake'?"

"Shit, it's hot." Cate holds her hair up off her neck.

Duval, out of nowhere, out of shadows in the back, pulls up a chair and sits like he's invited. "Ladies."

Cate lets her hair drop. Daphne says, "Why Sheriff, how's your wife?"

"I need to talk to the Indian," he tells Cate.

Daphne intervenes. "Then talk to him."

Cate stares into her drink. "He's out back."

"That's too bad. I'll have to talk to you."



Duval has never dared to take the dream beyond the rosewood banisters. He carries Cate forever up and up the curving flight of stairs.

He's ashamed he's struck his wife. She nags him like a banshee. Why does he go to LaFitte's? Why must he carry a pistol off-hours? Why can't she join Ladies' Aid? Why did the tent catch fire? Why can't she wear earrings to church?

He prays to God that he might love his wife again. He prays to God to guide his hand in being fair and helping folks. Didn't he assess a white man cheating coloreds out of indigo? Didn't he disarm the crazy mulatto by the tracks who swung a pitchfork and screamed of Armageddon? Isn't he fulfilling every aspect of his oath of office?



Daphne hears the whole room hush because Duval sits down with girls. This sheriff will do anything. He beat that poor mulatto to a bloody mess beside the tracks. A simpleton who went to Lamb of Our Redeemer Baptist. The old men in The Haze weren't hurting anyone. Duval just makes a show of helping coloreds. His wife's a frightened rabbit in their fancy house. But he better watch out with Daphne. She'll backtalk God if she gets mad enough. For some reason Duval says to Cate, "I know police in New Orleans." Cate sips her Coca-Cola, sweat-shine on her upper lip.

Daphne says, "Yeah; I know the King of Chicago, but what of it?"

"You think anyone in New Orleans would want to know about this fellow Huston?"

Even Daphne knows to shut up now.

"You think anyone in New Orleans would want to know about Cate 'Parra-dee-zo'?"



The baby's name will be Louis Paradiso. He will have the copper skin of Huston, Cate's abundant black hair, her father Rainer's Austrian green eyes. He will be so beautiful even Cate will concede she sees her mother there. He will be born January 30, 1918 in Charity Hospital on Tulane Avenue in New Orleans and return with his mother to her parents' mansion on St. Charles Avenue. Cate will inherit her parents' fortune, invest it

in a recording company, lose it in '29. She will take her life at thirty, leaving Louis on his own.



Daphne kicks Cate's foot beneath the table. Get away. Cate sets down her Coca-Cola and tries to stand. Duval stays her with one hand. He seems a middling white man, but he won arm wrestling and target practice both at Parish Fair. Some folks gasp to see him clamp her amber arm.

Huston strolls in from the kitchen. Daphne sees him read the room. He feels the thickness of the room and sees Duval and Cate. He doesn't change his walk. He comes through the thickness of the room like nothing's different.



"Huston, stay with me." The last thing my mother said. Then I watched her die. In a hell-on-earth called Sulfur, Oklahoma, when I was four years old I watched my mother die from liquor—curl up in a ball, white foam bubbling from her lips. We didn't belong in Oklahoma. She rolled into a ball at my feet on the dirt floor, her stomach blown up like a pig bladder full of water. I curled up with her, shit all over, she was naked, but I curled up with her, dead for a day, maybe two. The stench is with me still. The only thing good from Oklahoma was the Negro woman, Mrs. Lovett, took me in. And her brother, Uncle Midas. She had six black children of her own, and still she took me in.



Daphne's heard all the versions. Some folks said the bass man Alphonse put the dirk in Huston's hand. Others said he had it in his shoe and Alphonse merely pulled Cate to the side. No one knew Duval inside his fancy suit would have a pistol. Even when he took it out, no one thought he'd shoot. He was smiling.

He smiled at Huston and his little shiny knife.

Cate said, "Stop it," but it came out like a whisper. Daphne put herself in front of Cate.

Duval was smiling. "This is for the tent and not the girl," he said. Whatever that meant. Daphne never knew.

Two explosions. So loud Daphne thought Armageddon was upon them, like the simpleton said.

Two holes in Huston, one in the arm—it would have healed—and another right above the silver chain. As he stood there, puzzled, a crater of blood opened on his white vest. He took a table and five whiskey glasses with him when he fell. From his knees, he looked at Cate. She went to him. Helped him stretch out as if to sleep. No one spoke. No doctor in Slaughter would come to LaFitte's for a copper-colored man. Duval ordered everyone out. They all stared at him. He pocketed the gun and left.

Huston took till dawn to die. His eyes rolled up and his feet scrabbled in the sawdust. Josiah packed the wound with a poultice of honey, garlic, and cayenne. The bleeding would not stop. You could smell it when his bowels gave way. Cate stayed with him on the floor, knees crushing the cobalt beads into his blood.



Wilson Duval, the youngest-ever sheriff of East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, walks down the hard-packed clay of Main. The monte throwers, if he needs them, can testify the 'breed waved a knife. A 'breed who by the way belonged in Oklahoma.

Chuff of locomotive and the crossing whistle ride the breeze from north of town. Must be the freight out of Baton Rouge, the three A.M.



Cate wonders what happens to a girl when her body tries to make a baby and mourn the father all at once. Her body contains the

whole world. Her body contains nothing. Her body could be the iron-colored clouds that press heat into Slaughter on summer afternoons but refuse to rain.

She sees a skinny girl, far off, in a wrecked landscape of trains, tents, burnt sky. That girl grieves, rages, spits, scratches, strangles. But Cate remains alone on Cypress Street, hoarding energy for Huston's child.

PALE IMITATION OF A RUSTY OLD NIGHT CLUB PERFORMER
John T. Trigonis

I play this ragged piano every night, and every night you waltz away to
the beat of another song, leave me scenting the stale surround

for your fish-bone embrace. I become a paler imitation of Tom Waits, drunk
and broken-souled, watching brokenhearted itineraries slow

dance on shattered bottles of rusty Bud, each escorted by a crushed-smoke
concerto filtering its memories into the ceiling fan of this small,

downtown night club ticking and tocking for a bridge that may never come.
The rusted cheeks of loneliness, that sour milk taste of leftover

jazz, open mic amnesia peacocking amidst the barflies and brooders; here,
I remember each menthol-laced word you'd ever lit up against my

coarse, matchbox heart. Yet this piano is a ransomed Polaroid alibi tossed
into the musical ashtray wasteland, lost, and all I can do is play

for my soft, blue winter, switchblade romance; my sacrificial requiem, my
blacked-out supermarket conversations (with no one in particular);

my turbulent zoot-suit detective, half-eaten Joan of Arc; my wet dream on
the edge of a razor; my dirty protection, want of stability, of

rekindled peace; this, my one more encore performance invoking your sweet
animus home for more and more of our old, replayable war.

:: Harpur Palate Volume 7 Issue 2, Winter 2008

YES, IT IS DANGEROUS TO BE TWO WOMEN
capuchina taylor

*after Clare Kendry, a negro woman passing for white, to her husband,
John Bellews, who didn't know she was a negro*

I keep both hands in my pocket,
evading the heat, so when I reach out
my fingers to greet the men, there will be
no questions asked, just black eyes opened.

You never have understood
why I could sit so long
in the sun, flesh waiting to turn,
urgently wanting to be right.

Because I grew tired of wearing hats, hiding
my face and keeping my hair straight.
So I decided my fate needed to change.

I'd sit out on the roof, shameless and naked.
Sun licked my front and back like a cat
and I kept turning and turning over.

I know I should've told you sooner
but I didn't know how.

So I'd sneak up to town, walk with my lips
pouted out, like I was used to sucking on
watermelons, shouting loud. No one had
to know I was from Chicago.

How I loved those parties,
the men, each blue-eyed bobby
blinded by the scent of creamed, negro skin.

The who's who, never knew who you'd meet
at these Shangri-Las uptown, never thought
I'd see you there.

And my tongue froze, shocked into submission
then I was not a woman, but a negro woman,
your nig.

My skin had carmeled like the wheat
we made for breakfast, baking
one-half hour too long. We threw it away.

NOT GOLD SONGS

Peter Layton

This is a white cake
It is made of air and bones
And flies.
You may experience a distaste for it.
An un-taste.
Foreign, foul, feelings, while it
Drums upon your tongue.

And all the while an extremely annoying acquaintance,
From a bus you were on a time ago,
Is perhaps here.
Hat or head removed as an autopsy.
You mention that you do not know where,
You know, certain people are.
In stopping in mid-sentence.

Fingers in its pockets,
You may think it's finding its keys but no, it's
Merely saved the little ribbons
Of fortune cookie fortunes.
Funny ones or ones
Which unwittingly tell your fortune.
Just like everything you didn't wis to have happen, happened.

ON BEING TAPPED ON THE FOOT BY A BLIND MAN'S STICK
Bram Shay

The woman startled, whirled, in a moment of indignant
contempt, spied the source,
and as she stepped gingerly aside, you could see the glimmer
as she wondered if he could've done it on purpose,
and then the recoil
and the revulsion, as she realized
she was just something to get around,
like the park bench and the tree
and the border of the gravelly path trimmed with tulips.

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Adam Pellegrini

I am six years old
and late. My hair
is still pressed in different
directions from sleep, my
sweater vest is inside out.
My parents had
told me *only one more show,*
then it's time
before leaving for choir
warm-up, and I, being six,
had watched three more, realized
and rushed out,
had gone through
a neighbor's backyard
hoping it would prove
to be a shortcut and
that's when it happened,
there on that street, that morning
on my way to church,
I looked wrong
at an angel.

I didn't mean anything,
was probably just saying *good morning.*
It pointed at me,
screamed that I tried to rape it.
I didn't even know what rape was.
Angels all through the block came to their doors.
My parents had never
warned me about this neighborhood.
I ran, they floated.
I got in a car, puttering to

defrost in a driveway,
and they turned me towards a tree
as I rolled, stretching for pedals.
They grabbed me,
dragged me to a field,
hocked their angel spit in
my little face.
They wove the sky into a noose,
flung it over a cloud,
cried *human* as they hoisted me.

SELF-PORTRAIT ENDING WITH THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE BODY
Keith Montesano

Nothing living smothered in the rolled hay bales: nothing
but the sweat I can't feel, back halfway off the tracks and motionless
among weeds. I can't feel my eyes but know they're moving, the body's
shot for blood roiling my veins, to keep the frost thawed
into a thin pool around me, my eyes clamoring for white light,
the swell of ambulance, a mouth speaking: *Don't move him, blacked out—*

and I respect these neighbors, though I wonder if I was drowning
would they pull me out, dive into the ravine, frightening the wrens
gliding its frozen edges, and if they know why summer's heat
broke from this sudden winter, impeding the stalled flights
of the stalled birds' songs. Now the music: string-swell and downpour
of timpani heartbeats through the soft skin of my temple:

music of symphonies, traveling through Greece: our eyes toward ruins
in Delphi, jokes of our bodies flying off cliffs, the heart attack
crippling your mother before you wailed in the Aegean, and the hail
shrouding us the day we fell in love . . . it's all blurring together. *My dove—*
how you wished I'd call you those names: *candescence, my blaze . . . soar*
for me past weeds and the boxcars, past the burned, skeletal remains of houses

into the singe of my skin. I'm saying this now under the last setting sun
hoping you hear me. Remember my dream of fallen angels in mansions
left to rot in the middle of fields? How they wished for simple climbs
toward higher rooms: up winding marble staircases, yearning to run a hand
through a lover's hair? But only phosphorescence: forsaken lives
in empty rooms. Now my motorcycle whirring near me turns to snow

drifting down on your lashes, while your body turns to ash after rain
and the news of my death. I won't see the man after me, or a half moon
with the paleness of your neck, the lake house and streams from fireworks,
salt spray in our eyes, the split-second whip of sand dune

assaulting our skin like wounds never closing, or one of us with cancer
pining for the other our entire lives. But unlike those angels, I will rise

to call you, crawl from my skin in this pure form of ascension:
graze your sweat by the curtain-flutter of an open window, a chill of ice
in your bones on the coldest winter, and catch you as you're fainting
from the sickness I can't fix, eyes I dream of as I die, with a dusk
burnishing itself for the end of my world: the empty house
without our bed, her crib, the pungency of our singular oils.

THE AMATEUR RESURRECTIONIST

Carrie Shippers

He'd been dead six months. Mouthing the Latin she'd learned to wake him, she threw herself against his stone hard enough to bruise, then lifted her shovel and sank its blade. He emerged grave-smeared and grateful, spine crackling behind the split back of his jacket. He didn't ask about the funeral—who came or how many flowers, even how he'd died.

Together
they filled the hole, replaced its flap of sod.
She asked what being dead was like. *It's not like anything.* She'd thought he could cure her grief, but she felt it lodged low in her back, one more thing, like restaurants and snow, they couldn't share. In the dark, she dragged his hands against her body, but his skin was gray and cold. She couldn't sleep.

She told him everything—how much it hurt to live with only part of him, how that first knot of sorrow had climbed her spine and spread. *You aren't keeping me alive,* he said, *just around.* She buried him again, each clot of dirt grief's fist unclenching.

THE NATURE OF COINCIDENCE
IN NORTHWESTERN MISSOURI
Carrie Shippers

The guy in the front cell singing
I turned 21 in prison doing life without parole
is serving 6 months. He's 27,
and he once dated the warden's daughter.
The warden doesn't know that, even though
her daughter used to talk about his tattoos—
ragged Celtic band around left bicep, dragon
and syringe on right shoulder blade—
every night at dinner. He doesn't know
he knows the warden's daughter,
and if he did he isn't sure he'd mention

her naked in his twin-sized bed,
how at the last possible second she'd opened
her eyes and reached for her clothes.
The warden walks by his cell on her way
to the laundry and joins him for the chorus,
snapping a lighter between the bars
for the afternoon smoke. She doesn't know
about the unmade bed, the *no*, the notes
he wrote asking for another chance,
and he doesn't know she doesn't, doesn't know
the warden has a daughter or that the daughter
has a husband who's never been arrested.

When the warden comes back from the laundry
he will announce *I shot a man in Reno*
and she will answer *just to watch him die*,
the same words her daughter is singing,
three states away, as she steps from the shower.

SLOW FINALE

Bruce Bennett

I could not hold you; could not let you go.
You waited silently for me to act.
You waited patiently. I did not know

Which way to turn. I eddied in the flow,
snagged in the current, foundered on the fact.
I could not hold you; could not let you go.

My circling was mindless, endless, slow,
although my sense and senses were intact.
I maundered helplessly. I did not know

How to approach you. Beg forgiveness? Throw
myself about, disclosing what I lacked?
I could not hold you; could not let you go;

Could not explain. I watched you puzzle, grow
restless and distant, consciously retract,
no longer patient. Still, I did not know

The curtain was descending on our show;
your train was on its way; your bags were packed.
I could not hold you; could not let you go.
Our play was over, and I did not know.

LONG MARRIAGE 13

Karla Clark

Yesterday fish:

gray, slimy, on the end of that boy's spear.

Scraggly ironwood, shaggy sugar cane, red earth gouged,
broken where new monster homes dig in.

You can go to the drive-in for burgers. Watch whales
while you're stalled in hip-deep traffic above the Lahaina Roads.

How did this happen? We belong on this island
where everyone is too young or too old.

Yi, yi, there's a full moon. Let's drink iced gin
and get it on all night:

pretend this place is not full of violence:

pretend we're that far from home.

LAND OF LAKES AND SKY

James Doyle

Swimming from lake to lake, I notice
a ghost on the ice floes up ahead.

The trout swimming with me have fish lines
trailing from their mouths. The parasites

on their gills are squinting back at me,
as if I were the microscopic one. Maybe

I am. A tiny fixture on time's mechanical
gills, breathing in and out of season. Maybe

the ghost is another parasite, the lake's
low fog bank persuading ice back

to the state of water. My skin moves
on its own, the invisible ones only science

sees, darting by the billions in and out
of my pores. Maybe I move in a blur

across God's skin, the underside of currents,
translucent as jellyfish. When I lift

myself onto shore, God's eyes ascend
the sky, ascend the universe. They roam

the landscape of static time, crawl
like parasites a hall of mirrors.

YOUR FIVE DAY ACCU-WEATHER FORECAST

Viet Dinh

Tomorrow

You will see a tropical storm forming in the Caribbean: the mass of disorganized winds spiraling together, blustery tendrils creeping towards the Texas shoreline. Every station in Houston runs their "Hurricane Alert" promos with bombastic tubas signaling doom, doom, doom. Everyone loves hurricanes. They're big news.

But, really, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's center in Miami thinks that Caryn will blow out harmlessly to sea. And as you prepare the clips for the afternoon forecast, you're inclined to agree: the jerky still images from the National Weather Service surely head away from Texas.

Frank "Stormy" Michener looks at the graphics and says, "That's it?" Other than Caryn, this month has been boring: no floods, heat waves, tornadoes, or freak thunderstorms. It bothers him greatly. Even though he's a fixture at KPRN—23 years as the evening weatherman—that hasn't saved him from ratings slippage. Two years ago, management moved him to afternoons—a position he hasn't held for over 20 years, and in the last two months, he's lost five percent viewership across the board. Males (all ages) have been consistently low, and his one respectable number (females, 55-70) has plummeted. More disturbingly, his follow-up, Chuck Wrigley, Mr. Sports Afternoon Preview, ranks first—which means that people flip away from Stormy for two minutes and thirty seconds, then turn back for Chuck.

"Cassie, please tell me what I'm doing wrong?" he says. This past year, he's been given a joke writer, a wardrobe revamp, and a make-up consultant. On air, his cheeks look rouged into submission, as if he's embarrassed to be there. He thumbs past the current conditions, day's wrap-up, coastal conditions, and

before he reaches your HurricaneWatch animation, he asks, "I'm not unattractive, am I? I mean, as a woman, what's your objective opinion?"

Tell him that you've never really thought about it. But Mike Trevor, the morning weatherman . . . rrrrwoar.

"Ah-ha," he says, lapsing into contemplation. He puts his hand to his chin and rubs. This usually means that he wants new graphics, real-time radar, hideously complex 3-D mapping. He says, "I need some help with some promos Friday evening. Do you think you can help?"

Say, yes, you will. You'd be delighted.

Wednesday

You know that Stormy has always aspired to the anchor desk, that if it weren't for his degree in meteorology, he'd be in the anchor seat instead of Dave Bellamy. So for 25 years, he's stood before the sea-green Chromakey, pantomiming high and low pressure systems. On his desk, he keeps signed pictures of Pat Sajak and David Letterman—weathermen who "made it." He no longer conceals the clicker in the palm of his hand but holds it like a detonator. He's requested that you condense the United States so that he won't have to move his arms as much. There have been rumors of auditions behind his back.

He's gotten worse since the station axed "Stormy's Hot Spot." *Not enough human interest*, they told him. "We showed drowned cattle in Bangalore," he rages. "Mudslides in Belize, droughts in Mozambique. How much more goddamned human interest do they want?"

The morning brings more bad news: Cecelia Barton of Channel 7 has had her market share shoot up 10 points.

"It's the breast implants," he says. "The only way she knows it's cold is when her nipples poke out of her blouse."

Marketing's latest ploy is to have him report weather readings from public schools in the area. He grits his teeth and mumbles: "Sam Houston Elementary says it's a balmy 95 where they are."

He has trouble with Native American names: "Con-e-hu-gow-wa-con High tells us it's a scorching 97." You'll be fielding angry phone calls about that one.

Today's forecast: 80% chance of precipitation as Caryn swats the coast. Then, as if bored, she will move into the Gulf, leaving high waves for Galveston surfers in her wake. Stormy clucks his tongue inside his mouth, and the boom picks up his disappointed sigh.

After the wrap, he wonders what happened to schools named after presidents. "These kids today," he says, "they couldn't take a temperature with a thermometer up their ass. Give me a good computational analyst any day." He's talking about your infallible accuracy, your ability to glean truth from rows of raw data.

But you know as well as I: these charts and graphs are meaningless. Calculations and algorithms only stab at the unknowable. You can make sense of waveforms and isobar graphs, but somewhere in Kiribati, a butterfly flaps its wings and lands on a fisherman's eyes. He falls into the water, and his body heat raises the water temperature just enough to divert the jet stream off its path, and the trade winds follow, inch by inch, until they've swirled past South America and into the Gulf.

That Caryn will bring rain, this surprises no one. They think two to three inches before drifting out to sea. But I'll tell you now: something big is coming.

Thursday

When you arrive at work, Stormy will ask you out for coffee. Even though a travel mug is still hot in your hands, accept. As Stormy goes to his office for his wallet, Chuck comes in. He doesn't break his stride even when he nearly runs face-first into the sliding glass doors. He stops when he sees you. When he smiles, his teeth are so white they're fluorescent.

"So, Cassie," Chuck says, "how do you like this weather?"

He makes this joke every time, his delivery progressively energetic. Today, he's a jack-in-the-box; you expect him to

explode with "From way downtown, boom!" or "Oh, yeah, that's the ticket!" His nerves are understandable, however; station reassignments come down this afternoon. "See you in Studio B," he says. He mimes a lay-up and leaves, laughing.

Stormy passes him and mutters, "I hate jocks."

In the coffee shop, Stormy lays out his promo idea. He wants a montage of himself—Stormy through the ages—with his baritone narration emphasizing experience, familiarity.

"Channel 4's Doppler 3000 is killing us," he says. "And it's their old system with a coat of chrome slapped on it. 'Taking you inside the storm,' indeed." He stirs his coffee into Charydbis. "You're a better forecaster than all their gadgets put together."

But we both know your secret, don't we?

Stormy regales you with weatherman gossip. Shawn Huckaby, part-time evenings for Channel 2, has been around for nearly as long as Stormy, but took a 5-year leave of absence after getting busted snorting cocaine with an underage hustler. ("We all got a good laugh out of that one," he says.) And in addition to her breast augmentation, Cecelia got a matching nose shave; her nose used to cast a small but noticeable shadow when she was in profile.

"Oh," Stormy says, off-handedly, "you *do* know that Mike Trevor is gay too, don't you?"

Don't be shocked: graduate school for meteorology is the third-largest higher education breeding ground for homosexuals, behind the beautician's academy and the seminary.

Back at KPRN, prepare two predictions: what everyone thinks will happen and what actually will happen. When Stormy reviews the latter, he'll look at you cockeyed. "Caryn heading back towards land?" He strokes his cheeks, as if massaging away the wrinkles. "Do you realize how unlikely that is?"

This is the curse of all who traffic in the future: though what you say will come to pass, no one will believe you. Stormy trusts what can be quantified, and nothing NOAA has said indicates Caryn's return, much less her fury. I know: this is less for you and more for Stormy. Only so much airtime can be milked out

of a predictable disaster—but an unpredictable one? They give Edward R. Morrow Awards for that.

When you hand him the other prediction, the official NWS stance, he'll laugh and write off the truth as a joke. "You know," he says, "this is the only profession where people pay you to be wrong."

After Lisa Canady, the anchor, lobs her pre-scripted segue banter to Stormy, he's on his own. Watch him carefully. Think of how, even on his off-days, his forecast is more of a command than wishful thinking. His hands guide Caryn's swirl away from land; he's a high-pressure system unto himself. He's wrong, but you are awed anyway. Remember this well.

Outside, the sky has turned gray with cumulonimbi, like smoke from the siege of Troy.

Friday

Wear a black suit.

Pack an extra lunch.

It's going to be a long day.

The studio isn't free until after 11 P.M.'s "Last Live Look at the Weather," and you and Stormy wait in the wings as John Trevorino, the nighttime weatherman, finishes up. Chuck is also there. You wonder how Stormy has kept up; the crow's-feet around his eyes have deepened into talons. You can hardly recognize him in the archive tapes you've pulled. Twenty-five years ago, he was good-looking in a chubby-faced, Midwestern way. He hadn't yet developed his practiced Texan twang, but his excitement was unmistakable; he glanced at the monitors on either side of him as if stunned to see himself on screen. But, year by year, sadness creeps down the corners of his mouth, as if he's taken those angry calls about ruined picnics to heart. Perhaps this is why he wanted to be an anchor. There is comfort in reporting what has already happened.

All day long, storm clouds have hovered on the horizon; a lingering remnant from Caryn, says John. Off-camera, John

barely acknowledges Stormy. His avoidance means that Stormy will be moved to the weekends, where weathermen are born and where they go to die. Stormy doesn't know this yet, so there's still pleasure when he whispers to you, "John's wife is a bitch, too."

Stormy goes in front of the camera in his best suit. The crew is skeletal: these are the few who have volunteered their time, who have stood by Stormy through tantrums, through breakdowns. Stormy looks into the camera and says, "I've been with you for over thirty years now—" His voice is so commanding that even Chuck stops his play-by-play chatter.

Don't wonder if things could have been different, if you could have done more to convince him of Caryn's path, of his path, of yours, because before Stormy can finish, a messenger hand-delivers the official notice of his reassignment.

"We're in the middle of taping here," Stormy will say. You might want to close your eyes as Stormy's face flickers from annoyance to fear to fortitude. He tears open the envelope as if it's fan mail. Chuck steps forward, then back, as if knowing the inadequacy of *sorry*. If your eyes are still closed, you'll expect a sound: a sigh, a sob, a choke. But Stormy will only clear his throat.

"But," he continues, "I, and the KPRN weather team, will always be here for you, guiding you through the storm and into the future." He smiles, a gracious defeat. He stands up, right before the studio goes dark from a crack of thunder.

It's a brief darkness. When the lights come back, Chuck taps you on the shoulder and says, "Have you seen the weather? It's coming down like cats and dogs."

"What?" says Stormy. "Impossible." He connects to NOAA at the computer station and compares what he sees to the prediction you gave him yesterday. "Well, I'll be damned," he says. "I don't know how you do it," he says. There's pride on Stormy's face, an ineffable sadness. He puts an arm on your shoulder, like a father sending his daughter off to college. "I've got to go check on something. Can you put the rest of the promo together by yourself?"

Walk him to the front door. The automatic sensor is waterlogged. You will urge him to stay inside, but Stormy pushes the doors open anyway. Already, the sidewalks have been swallowed. You can't tell where the parking lot ends and the road begins. Stormy stomps towards his car, the water above his ankles. His ripples are indistinguishable in the rainfall, but they carry back to your feet. He turns and mouths something, but in the torrent, you won't be able to hear him. Maybe it's *Goodbye*. Maybe it's *Wait for me*. Maybe it's your own imagination. The world looks made out of marble, gray and white—splotches, crests, waves. Stormy gets in his car. The lights come on.

This is the last time you will ever see him.

Saturday

Ah. I see you are upset.

True, there will be deaths, but Stormy will not be among them. In six months, you'll receive a postcard—a line of men in neon thongs before an unnaturally blue ocean. They are smiling and tanned. They wear sunglasses. The message on back says, "My kind of tropical disturbance." The postmark is from Miami.

But on the night of Caryn's flood, you will spend the night on the second-floor studio. The ground floor will take on five inches of water. For most of the night, you help the crew move computer and camera equipment to the upper floors. More than once, you'll be on opposite sides of a monitor with Chuck. Blame any giddiness on a lack of sleep, if you like.

You and Chuck camp out in front of the anchor desk. He gives you the softer of the two emergency blankets. The rest of the crew have spread into private offices and hallways and are now landmines of grumpiness and fatigue. There, in the studio, away from windows, behind sound-proof doors, in the very heart of KPRN, you find that you have nothing to say to him. Chuck's suit pants and dress shirt are on a hanger. Your jacket is next to his. He gratefully accepts your extra lunch. In his t-shirt and

boxers, Chuck has a certain charm. His sports show enthusiasm is an act as much as anything else. You lie head-to-head, stretching away from each other, staring up at the trellis, at the kleig lights. Here, truth is illuminated. Here, information comes easily. Maybe death isn't as harsh when it comes from a pretty face, a face of fatherly concern, a sympathetic face. Chuck talks about how he always wanted to be a sportscaster, ever since he watched his first ball game when he was six, but you fall asleep.

You wake up at five-thirty in the morning. When you stumble into the hall, members of the crew are stretching. Someone has put on a pot of coffee. It gurgles like a semi-clogged drain.

Outside, telephone poles stick out of the water like pier supports. Tops of cars are visible as they float by. On the fifth floor, the programmers have made do with a steady stream of infomercials and live satellite feeds from the mothership. The overnight station manager is panicking; the morning news anchors have called, unable to make it out of their houses. Lisa Canady called from an emergency shelter.

"Chuck," the manager says, "you're going to have to do the news. And you—" The station manager looks your way—"will have to do the weather."

Now's not the time for nerves, dear. You've seen Stormy do this a thousand times, swiveling his head to follow the red on-camera lights—a game of visual tag. You've seen him conceal his screen switcher in his hand, keep an eye on the projection monitor. Remember that it's not a mirror; what you see is what the audience sees, and they're desperate for information.

Tell them that this is Caryn, that she's mean and here to stay for a while. Tell them it's best to stay inside until the water recedes. There will be balls of fire ants, and poisonous snakes from the bayou, and toxic oil slicks on the surface of the water. Do not run water unnecessarily; the sewer system is overtaxed. The remote traffic cameras will capture kayakers paddling down the Southwest Freeway, and Chuck will say, on-air, "Wow."

KOSODE (A SHORT-SLEEVED KIMONO)

Jeanine Stevens

Grass tips caught in an icy pond
a temple bell frozen in place

peach crystals in bare trees
how each person is embroidered

in remnants of late winter's
neatly swept russet ground

carrying sticks and birds in a
wicker cage, or sitting on a bench.

How easily the needle keeps
the silken threads separate.

In the folds, I find the feather
I was looking for, and there

in the seam, pieces of the crescent
moon from last night—fallen.

ARBOR DAY

Sara Tracey

The Bushmen of South Africa think that, by a glance of a girl's eye at the time when she ought to be kept in strict retirement, men become fixed in whatever positions they happen to occupy, with whatever they were holding in their hands, and are changed into trees that talk.

—Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

How many men I must have turned to trees those days
before I knew. An audience of teachers, brothers,
middle-school boyfriends
growing leaves while I sang, off-pitch,
in the sixth-grade girls' choir.
An orchard conjured in the cafeteria.
What words would they have for me now,
speaking through lips of creased bark?
What fruits would they bear?
What thorns?

The boy whose birthday cake I couldn't eat,
my stomach lurching, his mutt's head
burrowed between my knees,
wrapped me in a shroud of weeping
branches. Safe in this shadowed place,
he whispered through branches, told me
that we loved his best friend
in the same, gut-curling way.

One boy bent his head to kiss me
in the back seat of an '89 Cutlass,
his fingers inching up the edge of my shirt.
His roots pierced the floorboards,
his branches held fast to my blouse.
I struggled out the back window,

watched cherry blossoms bloom,
and walked home topless.

My father, supine in a hospital bed
grew roots that sprawled, choked pipes,
left everyone gasping for breath.
Some days I find my mother tucked
against his trunk, her eyes closed
as he tells her what he's seen.

GESTURE AND EXTREMITY BEING EQUAL

Laurie White

"We are conceived of your conceits"

— Wallace Stevens

Our interruptions happen often
as the house settles us
in and down into chair
cushions and breadbox

You holding a toothpick
to your teeth never reaching closer
or picking at thin rubles

A disconnected circuit will change your
grip to ice tray
and pressure toward garnish

stamping out small lit fires
in cameras, in door knockers—
the play of bronze and
flame, pleasure of barrels

Being allowed inside
when it's too humid outside to swallow

Marjoram on dished asparagus stalks
while moisture collects on an underpass and drips follow
drips on to a boater who
amid so much of it
could not tell whether it came up or fell down

You saw him find instead,
prism lengths taken to their distance

Your sterile butcher paper
cold and wound to countertop
an intimacy between the near-rancids
and rump roast
As you removed the tips of three fingers
on the block at a cleaver, hack
sent you blushing against the glass cabinet
left arm against bones of fish covered in chill
and the muscle of other red flesh

Later you returned to us unmanaged
returned the hand to your coat pocket,
sateen against the diminished-to-joints

An evening needn't be so raveled or danced
only motionless you said

Later I caught you fiddling
with the hidden perforations in the jacket lining
making an illusion of your losses

Handing over the butcher's clock,
the floor full of trimmings and plush

from "ROBBERY AT THE MINT"
Cody Todd

for Victoria Chang

HANDOUTS

All day, the parade circles the city:

an elongated, costumed serpent
with the same chromed scales on a mirrored globe.

She fires pennies at the midgets, clowns, sinners,
and drag queens below the bridge top. Confetti
plumes swirl between every building. Transvestites

tumble to the ground with Lincoln's profile

branded on the small of the back. I aim

for a mime, held captive in his prison
of silence. Left and right, they drop like tin
ducks at a carnival firing range,

until we have no enemies left, just
the bloody glares of one another, above

a small pool of change at our disposal.

ANY KIND OF DEATH

Michelle Brooks

I'm ashamed of my teeth now—
they ache late into the night, have
trouble chewing big pieces of food.
Someday I might have to be identified
by these mangled friends like my
father was after his body was burned
beyond recognition. The coroner said,
teeth can survive any kind of death; it's
life that ruins them. A man broke my
jaw many years ago and nothing was
ever the same. He's probably choking
down his food just fine these days. Maybe
pieces get caught in his throat, send him
to slug down water, sputtering, *I'm fine, I'll
be okay in a minute*, to anyone who will listen.

COYDOGS

Susan Sindall

They raise blunt
ancient hatchet muzzles
to bark at the lake, at twilight.

Their teeth rip
at a shapeless corpse, frozen
into the ice. They drag

what's left
across the brittle white
with determined, joyless trots.

Furtive, bumpy-spined,
ugly, forceful neither-nors:
one sits on my living room rug.

Fox fur, deeply
pied with moleskin greys
and pale yellows, she's

close to my heels
by day. When her straight
muzzle parts in what I wish

were a smile, there
in the double rows of teeth,
evenly pointed

as if a child
had drawn the noon
sun's rays: two black tusks.

Her howl slightly
muffled, she brings
decapitated gifts,

mole-sized, then
watches from the foot
of my bed while I eat.

SCIENCE

Colby Galen Davis

we picked artifacts of bone
from the owl pellet's dry web

from the owl pellet's dry web
of mouse fur and flaking waste

of mouse fur and flaking waste
broke open with metal tools

we picked artifacts of bone

mouse bones piled on brown paper
start with the skull and sift through

start with the skull and sift through
we made new mice from old bone

we made new mice from old bone
pieced together with white glue

mouse bones piled on brown paper

FURIANT, NOT POLKA
Charles Freeland

I stack the driftwood in the corner and search my pockets for the pipe I dreamt once I smoked, but which has never since materialized, hard as I might try to find it. Things like this ache beneath the skin. But only for a moment. And then it is time to replace them with duct tape and VCRs and those skinny fish that bite when you are careless taking them off the hook. Sometimes, the mattress begins to look like a barrel organ. Or the monkey that goes with it. That lights its own cigars and makes hand gestures that mean one thing in the Piedmont. And something else entirely in New Orleans. I notice the area between lakes has always been a favorite haunt of men who have no clear idea of what it means to be men. Who suspect it has something to do with the way you pronounce your words. Or which words you choose in the first place. Such as "skein". And "rabbit". And that variation on the verb form that makes it some other part of speech. Or confuses your auditor if he is standing more than a mile away. This is the point at which the self tends to go on vacation. It leaves the cleaning-up to its friends and neighbors. To those who love the self, but worry about it because of the way it behaves. Take, for instance, that man who locks himself in his shed, trying to create his own language, trying to fashion it *ex nihilo* the way you might invent a mouse trap on a planet where there are no rodents. Not even nutria. He makes use of letters and commas and poison. But mostly he relies on rubber bands. And those pictograms that look suspiciously like skeletons in houses.

WRITING BY DEGREES PORTFOLIO

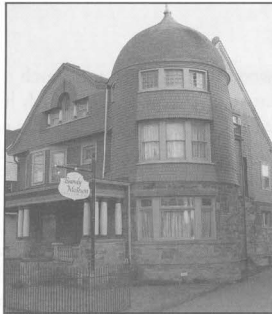


Photo by Kathryn Henion

WRITING BY DEGREES

Binghamton University's graduate creative writing conference is now ten years old. 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. 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.

This year's conference was held September 27, 28, and 29, at the historic Bundy Mansion near downtown Binghamton, NY, and featured fiction writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, poet Vijay Seshadri, and nonfiction writer Jo Ann Beard as keynote speakers. Panels included 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. What follows is select poetry and prose from the 2007 conference. The next Writing By Degrees conference will be held in fall 2008.

For more details, please visit our website at:

<http://writingbydegrees.binghamton.edu>

NECESSARY CONVERSATIONS

David Cameron

The playwright's mother was coming into the city for lunch. She said she'd arrive at his apartment, and together they could walk to a restaurant of his choosing. She hadn't been downtown in several months, and he supposed she wanted to assess his living situation. Had her boy's life changed for the better? He liked to believe his mother was being reasonable in her hopes for him. He wanted to be seen as a peer: like her, he was mortal, and as time went on he would have his few struggles and some of them would take a toll. He'd woken early to scrub the toilet, sweep up cat hair and gather strewn clothing into a single orderly mound. At noon, his mother walked in without ringing the bell.

Was the door unlocked for me or do you leave it unlocked?

I leave it unlocked for mothers and thieves.

I'm a mother.

They hugged. She took her shoes off, saying she needed to use the toilet before they got on their way. He heard the toilet flush, and he trusted that during the noise of water she was clicking open the cabinet above the sink. Was there anything incriminating in there? Nail clippers, painkillers, assorted creams . . . condoms, he realized. There was a box of condoms on the top shelf, half full. Suggesting to her that he was conscientious. If they suggested he was sexually active, she was being misled. He made a mental note to check the expiry date, though didn't they last for years? The same box of condoms could see a man through three consecutive, drunken and regrettable one-night stands, the years-long pause that might follow such indiscretion, and then into his next polite monogamous relationship which would itself last years. For example.

He heard the bathroom door open, then some soft footfalls, the hardwood creaking faintly. Then she opened another door. His study. He stood and stepped quickly along the hall and entered the room behind her. She had picked up a yellow legal

pad that was sitting on assorted manuscript pages. The top page of the legal pad was messy with dates and times and amounts. In several places a certain clump of figures had an X through it. He'd been crunching numbers. Rather he'd been massaging them, whispering pleasantries. He wanted the numbers to like him. He wanted them to say he could afford a weekend in New York.

Are you going somewhere?

No.

She set the pad down. Quite possibly at the exact same moment, he and his mother laid eyes on the bottle of rye next to his laptop. A slender vessel standing by the keyboard like a sentry. He had, he believed, finally convinced her that the act of writing was, at its worst, a nerve-wracking and tear-inducing experience. But he didn't know how much credence she gave to the mythology of creative types, the way they are said to be tilted those extra few degrees toward self-destruction. Was the muse truly so thirsty? Was her child a drunkard by vocation? It felt like a mistake that he hadn't spared her the sight. *He places apples and oranges prominently on the kitchen table but forgets to squirrel away his booze. . . .*

Who are all these people?

Along one side of his desk there were small stacks of photographs and postcards. He was collecting images of the human face, a hobby that began one recent day when he went into a nearby curio shop and discovered, lit softly by a tasseled lamp, a box of photographs. He'd zeroed in on those that featured people. A man standing by a patio barbecue with spatula in hand, friends at a restaurant (pushing together on one side of a booth so that all heads were within the frame), a couple on the edge of a woodlot in autumn. . . . Assorted single images from the lives of strangers. Twenty-five cents a piece.

You don't know them, she said.

She had fingered through the top two or three pictures of each pile.

I don't know them. They're just people.

She looked at him and smiled.

Shall we go?

A one-legged man in a black beret was balancing on his crutch outside the liquor store on Brock Avenue. His motorized wheelchair was parked nearby. They approached on the sidewalk.

Good day, ma'am, the man said.

His mother looked away.

Hello, sir. A little change?

He nodded at the man. They walked on toward Queen Street.

I guess you get to know them, she said.

Who?

As they turned east on Queen she shot a glance over her shoulder.

The . . . people.

He has a routine.

In minutes, he was reminded of how timid his mother had become, how green. She lived in the small city of Guelph, an hour's drive away, and she didn't have a car. Getting from her door to his required that she take two buses, the subway, and finally a streetcar. Not a simple journey for the homebody he thought she was becoming. Her life was a small enclosure within which she cleaned and shopped and mixed agreeably with a few individuals she considered friends. That was her life and it was everyone's life, yes. It's just that she seemed on guard amid the ordinary bustle of people on Queen. She was alert in a nervous way that he interpreted as an accommodation of bewilderment. She was stepping briskly, arms pumping, as though dawdling or appearing directionless would invite whatever dangers were particular to the streets of Toronto. She took his hand and squeezed it.

Do you have somewhere in mind?

It's just a simple café, he said. But nice.

Sounds great. You can tell me when we're getting close.

In the remains of a snow pile outside the Cadillac Lounge, he saw what was without doubt a spew of blood. It was a viscous rope. The distinctive red had become a distinctive brown. The Cadillac wasn't known for its drunken brawls, though one time, in a curious reversal, he saw a fight that had begun out on the street move inside. There was a foot chase that ended at the bar, whereupon the combatants started smashing each other with empty pint glasses. The man on stage had been playing bluegrass. He lowered his guitar and said, Can we get some help here?

You're writing, she said.

He looked at her. He didn't know whether she had seen the blood in the snow.

Are you writing?

It had been eighteen months since his play's short run had ended. It was his first—and so far his only—on a reputable stage. Response was warm. What was warm? An armpit. A bowl of soup the customer has pushed away. Yet soon enough he was taking the standard positive line: the victory was that the play had lived at all, and having done so would instigate grander things.

She had come to the premiere with a friend. She wore her favourite purple shawl and had arrived in the city early enough in the day to get her hair done. These things plus a few tears in the lobby afterward and he knew she was proud. Several people went to a bar to celebrate, and she ended up sitting next to a novelist friend of his. The novelist was a sociable man, but intense. At that point he had been working on a book for over six years. Perhaps seduced by the bourbon someone had treated him to, the virgin playwright announced that his dear acquaintance was supremely brave for giving his life over to the construction of something improbable. The novelist said the playwright was *his* hero for being as unafraid of sentiment as a preschooler. Everyone laughed. The playwright stole a look at his mother, wondering whether his fondness for the other man worried her. *Will he regress to the added brutality of being a novelist?* Relatively speaking, plays could be written quickly, and so the writer might produce more of them, and so his chances

of creating a smash hit were greatly improved. Perhaps on the way home she reassured herself with thoughts that as a writer at least he had chosen—was floating down—the more promising stream. His novelist friend told him once that the epic tale, as you go along with it, lost in this or that headspace or landscape, is not something that *comes together*, rather it feels as though it is *forever unraveling*, and the trick, or one of the tricks, is to be at ease while in the grip of what seems like a troubling chaos. He admired the novelist's calm.

He cleared his throat and glanced sidelong at his mother.

I have things I'm working on.

The playwright was in fact having a terrible go of it. For months he churned out one story after another as though he believed the best elements of each would mature and cycle back to him in time, somehow coalescing into a single striking narrative, the play that would guarantee his name. (To be loved and remembered. What other reason is there to roll out of bed and proceed once again to the sock drawer?) He had decided, in the previous two or three weeks, to be more precise in how he advanced a tale, more meticulous when making choices. This thinking had only altered his problem: he was working on the first act of a first draft of a story that wasn't showing itself. His would-be characters were giggling at him from behind impenetrable ruby curtains.

As they arrived at the café, a fire truck sped along Queen in the direction they had come from. They stood and watched it scream by. Then he held the door open for her. She was a reader, he thought. Stories made her cry. Stories made her angry when they derailed for no good reason. It occurred to him to ask for help.

They were the only customers. They ordered lattés and took a table by the window. A second fire truck sped past, followed closely by a third, their dual sirens wailing.

A fire, she said.

Maybe.

This is nice, she said. She prodded the foam of her drink with a small spoon.

Actually I've been struggling, he said.

I had a feeling. Are you depressed?

I mean with the writing.

What is it?

I don't know my people very well.

What people?

The characters in the story. I can put them in a room together easily enough, but I have no idea how they should behave. He sipped his latté and looked outside.

What's the setting?

It's just a room, he said. Sparsely furnished.

A coldwater flat. Oh boy.

It's not my life.

I'm sure. What else?

I don't know. Something's happening in the world outside.

Do you know what?

Not really, only that it's breaking down.

An apocalypse.

I guess. But really I'd like it to not be breaking down.

You want to be hopeful.

Not exactly. Whoever they are, they aren't building Eden. Some things will get better and other things will get worse.

Yes.

I just wish I could imagine a future that hasn't already been imagined.

Hope is good, she said.

The waitress, an attractive woman about his age, brought their chicken sandwiches.

The strange thing, he said, is how you deliberate at such length in order to create a terrible urgency.

She looked at him.

In a play, he said.

She looked back to the street.

Urgency is the thing, he said. I mean, what are they talking about and why does it have to be discussed right now? No moments can be wasted. *Time* can't be wasted. If time is being wasted, it's because wasting time is an aspect of someone's character, and the way he wastes time is going to cost him dearly, probably near the end of act two.

He stopped. She wasn't listening. She was his mother in the way her concentration drifted. He looked at her eyes. Once when he was much younger and staring at the very same mix of colours, and at the delicate black speckling, he had thought of fish. Each of her eyes was a tiny oval wedge of a rainbow trout that had broken the water for one brilliant second.

Everything has to matter, he said. And if it doesn't *seem* to matter, it has to resonate. It has to resonate backwards and forwards.

She wiped her mouth and gestured with the paper napkin.

I just realized that's the Queen Hospital.

Cam-H, he said.

She looked at him.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

The cluster of dull brick buildings across the street had always put him in mind of a military school.

I had friends who spent time at Gravenwood, she said.

What's Gravenwood?

It's one of those . . . facilities. A home. On a hill, right? Rolling lawns. A fence concealed by bushes. Mostly they're in novels. You're not mad, you just need a break. Though I'm sure some of the people they had there were mad. I mean in the usual sense.

I didn't know.

It's out near Kingston.

Naturally he wondered if she was talking about herself at a remove. *I have a friend who has this condition*. . . . It wasn't always an obvious ploy to mask the truth. And he wondered why she didn't specify which friends. He wasn't prepared to ask. Over time they'd had a handful of candid conversations about her past. He

was twenty when she told him about her first husband, that there was a life before the life she had with his father. The first man had died of an aneurysm at twenty-nine. She remarried quickly, and he, the someday playwright, was born less than a year into the next partnership. Hearing about the other man hadn't been a shock so much as simply compelling. It was a piece of news that had got him thinking. Maybe she was pregnant when the first man died: you didn't have to warp the timelines very much to allow it as a possibility. A few years earlier, in a light moment, he suggested this to her. She had laughed. Then she was quiet. He might have been exaggerating the long seconds that followed, but he had watched her eyes, and they were dark and unblinking and afraid to look into his. The notion had thrown her. She was sad in the memory of that man, sad that it would somehow make more sense had her son been from the first marriage. The boy would have been the product of a truer love.

The waitress came over to take their plates. A different kind of siren sounded from the east. It was an ambulance. Behind the ambulance was a police car. The waitress stood there holding the empty plates. His mother looked up at her.

What do you think it is? What's happening?

Something big, said the waitress. But we're here.

She walked away.

She's sweet, his mother said.

Two more police cars raced by.

Probably not a fire, he said. Not with the police this interested. A crime. A stabbing or something.

You know mostly it's men killing women, she said. Usually women they know.

Men kill men too, he said.

He had blurted it out. It was the best defense of his gender he could come up with, that as killers men don't discriminate.

I'm just relieved I made a gentle one.

She had smoothed out the wrinkles of her napkin and was starting to fold it.

Do you think I could manage here?

In Toronto?

As she folded the napkin, she was being careful to keep all of the food and lipstick stains to the inside.

I don't know, he said. There's the crime thing.

You always tell me it's nothing to worry about.

Yes. But I wouldn't be able to force you *not* to worry.

Her napkin was a small and thick white square.

You're my gentle man, she said.

She paid the bill when he was in the washroom. They put their jackets on, thanked the waitress, and stepped outside. The day was getting colder. They crossed to the south side of the street and walked towards the nearest streetcar stop.

The pictures in your room, she said. They're to help you know people.

I suppose. They're examples if nothing else.

They hugged as the streetcar arrived. The folding doors opened. She waved from the bottom of the stairs. After paying the fare she turned and waved again. She found a seat near the front of the car, waving a last time as it pulled away. He started for home, pushing his hands into his pockets. In one of them he found three twenty-dollar bills folded up tightly. In the other a little wax bag with two chocolate chip cookies, the kind he had seen in the display case at the café.

He called her at midnight. She was rarely asleep before then. It had become her practice to nod off with the help of television. On the screen at the end of the bed, Letterman was working through his monologue, smirking on our behalf about error-prone celebrities.

Thanks for the cookies, he said.

You need sugar, she said. So what happened down there?

What do you mean?

With all the sirens.

Oh. I never found out. Probably it was nothing.

I'm glad.

He was able to picture her precisely where she was. Her head depressed against two pillows. The duvet pulled up to her chin. Her mouth slightly open and opening further as, every fifteen or twenty seconds, the audience laughed.

DIGGING A HOLE

Christian Anton Gerard

Peggy, do you think—

*Yes, Jackson you're eating too much
bacon since you retired.*

Aw, c'mon. Look at it there.
You leave it lying out all day
pretty as a seventeen-year-old
girl. I have to eat it!

You have to eat seventeen-year-old girls?

No, but they're tempting—
see what I mean?

No.

Ok, look. I made the decision to marry you, and
in doing so, conceded my right and will to bone
seventeen-year-old girls, however, their
naiveté makes them oddly attractive—
follow?

No.

I'm not saying you're not attractive. Don't
take this wrong. Obviously I love you
and am highly attracted to you, but
you're ready. You were ready
when I met you and
ready when I married you.
You knew things about the world.

The bacon on that plate has set out
since this morning and is ready to eat.
It wasn't ready in the raw. In the butcher's wrap
that bacon didn't know shit, but it braved the world
in that pan and became ready.

But, remember how I growled a bit when
you opened the paper and the raw bacon
laid there all innocent and naive? I knew
that soon it would be ready for me.

*So you'd do a seventeen-year-old girl now
because you know one day she'll be ready?*

No Peggy. Listen to me.

I married you and I'd like to stay that way, but
my point is,
older men often find younger girls attractive
because older men know that younger girls grow
up to be ready. Most older men
don't actually do the younger girls. They
just appreciate their moment in life.

I'm not married to any food and so
now that I've finished breakfast
I don't feel guilty about an afternoon-delight
with bacon. I'm not cheating on
the eggs or grits. Both were great
in their time, but I'm moving on with bacon.

Jackson that's absurd.

*Our daughter's almost seventeen and
has seventeen-year-old friends. Should we
put up fliers with your picture and
make you go door to door?*

Aw for Christ's sake Peggy. I'm
an old man jabbering.

*You'd better be an old man
whose cock knows its place.*

You know what? I'll break up
with bacon for you. I will! We're
not even dating! I just—
You know I love bacon
after it's set out for a while!

*You're damn lucky Jackson. Damn lucky I'm
an understanding woman who loves your crazy,
but goddamn are you weird.*

Jackson reaches once more for the plate
and Peggy slaps his hand:

*No! You're done
for today. And tomorrow it's Mueslix
for you buckaroo. And don't give any tales
about how Mueslix is like me
'cause it keeps you healthy and regular.
I'm watching you,
you old coot. Now go change
clothes and take me to the movies.*

You think this type of fight
might mean make-up sex?

*Sure Jackson. Sure. Build a big pan
and we'll do it in the bacon grease.*

ATTACK OF THE 49 ½ FT. WOMAN

Alexi Zentner

Most of my husband's girlfriends run away as soon as they see me, but this one gets all mouthy, so I pinch her head off. Needless to say, this causes a riot. It's bullshit, really. We're in Wichita, and I've got to think that most of the crowd has seen worse; it's farming country, after all. Have you ever seen a man get tangled up in a baler?

Mickey, the ringmaster, doesn't dispute that the girl had it coming, and he even goes so far as to call my husband an asshole, but he still says that I've got to stop killing the customers. It's bad for business.

"You're not still giving me shit about Yuma, are you?" I say.

"I don't want to talk about Yuma," he says, and then shakes his head and tells one of the carnies to put more sawdust down over the bloodstained dirt.

Yuma wasn't my fault.

Stewart is waiting for me when I get back to my tent. He hasn't bothered to get the blower going to inflate my mattress, and when I ask him about it he doesn't look up from his book. He just takes a sip from his glass of gin, turns the page, and quietly says, "I don't think you deserve a bed tonight."

I know he hates it, but I pick up the couch with my left hand and then cup it in my right, holding it in front of my face so I can look him in the eye. He tries to ignore me, but I bobble it a little and he spills some of the gin on his pants. He finally looks up and shakes his head. "Come on, Ellie. I'm not in the mood. You fucking decapitated her. Her parents are going to shit a mongoose about this. You know how much this is going to cost us? For God's sake, they'd come after you with tanks again, if it weren't for the Titan Incidental Casualties Act."

I rub my finger on his leg, and he grimaces like I'm hurting him, but I know I'm barely touching him. "Big deal. I can

afford the fines," I say. "I've got that demolition job next week in Kansas City. That'll cover it."

"Do you really want to be doing this for the rest of your life?" he says. "What about saving for retirement?" He holds out his hand and then lets go of the glass. We both watch it tumble, the gin streaming out of it and dissipating in the air. When it hits the dirt, forty feet below, the tinkle of the breaking glass sounds muted.

"You don't seem to mind the money," I say. "You haven't had to work a day since this happened."

"Yeah, it's a fucking fantasy land," he says, and then picks his book back up, as if he's going to keep reading.

I love when he pouts. There's something about the way he bites his lip under his teeth that gets me all rumbly and ready. I move my finger over a little, off his leg, touching him the way he used to like it, but he makes a point of staring at the book, as if he's actually reading.

"What's wrong?" I say, though we both know it hasn't been the same since I got caught in the particle accelerator. "Have I gained weight?" I say, trying to joke.

He looks up from his book and gives me the old up and down. He doesn't say anything, but in his not saying anything it's as if he is really saying, "yes, you've gained weight," so when he does say something, when he says, "are you going to put me down now, or are you going to pinch my head off instead?" I really do think about pinching his head off for a second.

Instead, I put the couch down. It's possible that maybe I let go of the couch when it's still a few feet above the ground, and it's possible that I maybe hear the sound of the wooden frame cracking as it hits the floor.

I lower the tarp that's hanging from the ceiling so that the spray of my shower won't get all over our living area, and then I strip down. Mickey keeps promising me that he'll figure out some way to get me a proper bath—I'm tired of chlorinated swimming pools and muddy-bottomed lakes—but tonight the fire hose feels good. It's hot enough in Wichita that the cold

water is more refreshing than bracing. I soap up and take a nice little look at my stomach, my hips, my boobs. I don't think I've gained weight at all. If anything, I've lost a few pounds, toned up since I grew. And I swear to God, my breasts are perkier, which seems to break all of the laws of gravity. What it is, I think, is that I'm getting a lot more exercise, what with all the traveling, the shows, the demolition work on the side. I think I look good. I'm height and weight proportionate. If anything, I'm kind of petite. Like the kind of pretty, pert-nosed blonde woman that certain men used to dream about in the fifties. Only ten times as big.

Later, Stewart apologizes and says he was a little freaked out seeing me pop the girl's head off, and I apologize to him in turn and tell him that I was jealous. Neither of us actually says anything about having make-up sex, but while I'm setting up my bed, Stewart changes into his wetsuit and gets out the jackhammer without me even asking.

He can be really thoughtful that way sometimes, like when Mickey fucked up the booking and we were in Yuma, Arizona the same time as Harley McQueen and her circus. Harley seemed really nice when I first met her, but there were all these things she slid into the conversation. Nothing I could really call her on, but the sort of snide little remarks that cut me down. She wasn't as bad the few times when it was just the two of us, but when we all got together—Mothra, Gargantua, The Amazing Colossal Man—it's like she couldn't help herself. For instance, she couldn't go a day without casually mentioning that she was a giantess because of a nuclear waste spill, like nuclear waste trumps a particle accelerator. We're both 50-foot women, does it really matter why? And that's the other thing. Harley couldn't let it go that she was just a little bit taller than me. She was always really subtle about it, saying things like, "You'd look great in that flowered, blue dress of mine, but oh, it's probably too big for you." It was ridiculous. First of all, she's only five inches taller than me, and anyway, before the chemical explosions, the atmospheric anomalies, before there were a dozen or so of us

titans, she was already like six feet tall, so it's not as if she had to grow as much as I did.

It's funny, because when I first realized she was a bitch, when we all used to hang out together as a group, I thought that maybe she was just lacking in self-confidence, or that she was threatened because she wasn't the only woman among the titans anymore. Maybe I was naive, but I tried to give her the benefit of the doubt, and I decided that if I made a real effort to be nice to her, to kowtow a little, that she'd relax and stop with the snippy comments. Sometimes I still disagreed with her—I mean, Jesus, how many times can you eat at Han's Chinese Buffet before you want something a little more upscale?—but mostly I went out of my way to back her up. If she said something in front of the other titans and I agreed with it even a little, I'd say, "I think Harley's got a good point, some people really do need to get stepped on." And when she wanted to sleep with Mr. Mammoth Man and she started wearing short skirts and tops, I'd say how sexy she looked, even if she did look like a cheap little whore with that belly roll of fish-pale flesh bulging out when she sat down.

But of course, she took my being nice as some sort of a weakness. Instead of keeping her little jabs quiet and subtle enough that I couldn't really complain about them, she started saying things outright to my face and rallying people against me when I wasn't there. She even told people I sat on that nest of bald eagles on purpose, even though she was the one who had told me that it was okay to sit on the ledge.

Things cooled down for a while, because we were all touring separately, but then all of a sudden we were both in Yuma, and I found out she had stolen my poster. She didn't even have the decency to call me and ask—I would have said yes, sure, if she had called me, it's just a poster—and I found out from Mickey, who had gone over to check out the competition. He'd torn one of the posters off a wall downtown and showed it to me, and sure enough it was a blatant rip-off: Harley in the white skirt hiked up on her thighs, the white-cupped, cotton bikini top, the flowing

hair, even the seductive, half-closed eyes. The only difference from my poster was that instead of straddling an overpass and holding a car in her hand, like me, Harley was standing over elevated subway tracks and holding a businessman in a suit and tie. The worst thing, though, was that she'd stolen the tag line, too—Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman—with the letters in crimson, except that the number fifty was popping off her poster, filled in with black and emphasized, like it wasn't just about getting paying customers in, she wanted to send me a message.

I suppose I got a little drunk and threw a water tower at Harley, and we went on a bit of a rampage. We knocked down a couple of houses and maimed a few people, rolling around, punching each other, pulling hair, all of that, until the Air Force scrambled their jets and broke it up. Afterwards, Stewart was really sweet about the whole thing. He told me that the way Harley acts isn't about me, it's about Harley. He pointed out that Harley's husband had been cheating on her even before Harley got doused in nuclear waste, and anytime he was interviewed, the ex-husband referred to Harley as a giant freak. Stewart didn't say anything about his own indiscretions before the particle accelerator, but he did say that no matter what he did during the day, he was always back with me every night. He said that he knew I was still the same person, only bigger, which made me cry. Stewart let me carry him back to the tent, even though I know he hates it when I carry him while I'm drunk. I think he's afraid I'll accidentally squeeze him.

Stewart's mostly been supportive about my career. I think about the time the Japanese magazine put together a photo shoot for the two of us, and in the end, they airbrushed him out. Later, I overheard him telling somebody that he was kind of glad, because I looked so good in the picture that he didn't want to be a distraction. Stewart's the one who encouraged me to start reading my poems during my act, so the audience would know I was more than a physical marvel, though I'm really a language poet, so sometimes I think it goes over the audience's head. And if it weren't for Stewart there's no way I would have

entered that chapbook competition.

So the day after I pinched the girl's head off, when her father storms into the tent in the middle of my show, I'm not even a little pissed off at Stewart, even though I know he already has another girl lined up for after the show; the girls can't seem to resist him, the way he looks in his lion tamer's suit—complete with jodhpurs and a pith helmet—flicking his whip at me, like he's controlling my anger.

The father has some sort of a hunting rifle, even though everybody knows that bullets bounce off the skin of us titans. I had just plucked some teenaged boy out of the crowd and I'm holding his shirt between my thumb and my finger so he's dangling there in the air, kicking his feet and windmilling his arms, screaming in terror while people in the audience are either gasping, laughing, or cheering.

The shots don't feel like much, as if somebody is trying to pluck a hair from my arm, and I'm concentrating so much on the boy, pretending like I'm going to eat him, that I don't even realize the father is in the tent and trying to kill me. But then the people who are laughing and cheering start screaming, and I hear the sound of the rifle bouncing up to me. I put the teenager down in the grandstand again and turn to the father.

I don't know who he is at first, which isn't that surprising. Every few months some local decides I'm a monster that has to be killed; even though I don't like the bones snapping and the squishy feeling, I usually just step on them and end the whole thing. For some reason though, I don't step on this man, I just watch him point the rifle at me and shoot and shoot and shoot. One of the bullets hits me in the eye, and that smarts a little and makes me tear up. I reach down and pluck the rifle out of his hands, crushing it.

The man is crying and screaming at me, and he looks so small and insignificant in his rage, that I forget for a moment that he is human, like me. And that's when I realize that he is the father of the girl whose head I pinched off the night before; suddenly he looks so sad, so forlorn, so alone, that before I can even think

about it, I pick him up, cupping him in my hands.

The screaming from the crowd pitches up, and I know they must all have heard about this man's daughter, and they are thinking that I am going to kill him too. But I don't want to hurt him. I'm terribly gentle, all too aware of my fumbling fingers. I cradle him against me, trying to comfort him. He beats at my breast with his fists—I can feel his anger, a tiny, physical, little thing—and I just hold him, containing him. When I feel him stop, I look down and he's curled up in my hand, his eyes closed, like he is either praying, or waiting for me to kill him. I don't look down on him with curiosity or pity; I understand that even though he just tried to kill me, he isn't some murderous monster, but only another person who is mourning for what is lost and can never be regained.

YOU, DOCTOR MARTIN
Jennie Ray

1.

You, Doctor Martin, caught my hand—ill flamenco sounds immediately. The winter car and I, we held backdoors. You, Doctor Martin, telling me

2.

to shave my head if I am very Jewish; your obtuse pronunciations, by now, are holding my hands. This is not ordinary and okay for us. In this combination,

3.

I do not count the days I multitasked manuscripts while you, stuffed envelopes while you. Every day I didn't count you. You swim like netted bait

4.

across my eye. My ears, nose, mouth all turn to eyes to see you sharper—then ears to hear you say 'My hand fits so easily upon your prettiest

5.

sweater, over your tiny waist'. Now I feel thirty years of your lost women line up behind my car window. I feel them, foreign cuisine of touches. And when

6.

you cupped my slight breast, 'Those women laughed'—

THE MIKVAH

Jennie Ray

Bay window: a window blighted by motivated itch
when one is not yet born—and a window
which allows for the *main entry:* need
 part of speech: noun
 definition: want.

I, myself, am my mother,
brought forth, a bawling hen fruit,
from my own chock-a-block belly.

Now I have all of this unretouched sand
that used to be a window—enough sand
to fill a garage, close the door, bring in the barn
fan, and manufacture dunes as carnival prizes.

Of course, I opt to satiate a glutton pool,
plug all of its filters, and become that British duck,
except he uses money.

Apple-polish, now, my profoundly female
body—

Parts not useful for B e g u i l m e n t.

Carry my large mirror up the five stairs,
saunter to the dive board's edge,
hold mirror to face in the daylight.

This is my bath. This is my beat
to understand, to care about.

Sand single-files into my mouth like the purple tobacco
always in my dream. Sand keeps me sealed up for me,
embalms Dargerian world.

The thought of what you wasted!

I'd laugh if I were not sedimentary,
arms in the direction of a blast,
as just an ordinary woman.

Look around at this woman-created beach! Some ordinary.

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Karla Clark lives in northern California. Her poetry has been widely published, among other places, in *Arts & Letters*, *Nimrod*, *South Carolina Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Hampton-Sydney Review*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Runes*. Her poem "Venetian Ghetto" was the winner of the Anna Davidson Rosenberg Prize in 1998 in the category of emerging poet. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her new book, *Calendar Art*, is newly out from Conflux Press.

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Andrew Coburn is the author of 12 novels, three made into French films. His work has been translated into 14 languages, most recently into Italian. His novella, *My Father's Daughter*, was recently included in a collection of American and British writers. His short stories have appeared in several literary journals. Early in his career he was a reporter and editor for a suburban daily and later a book reviewer for the Boston Globe. He and his wife, Casey, live in Andover, Massachusetts.

Colby Galen Davis grew up in Grayling, Michigan, the self-proclaimed "Heart of the North." She recently graduated from the University of Notre Dame with an MFA in Creative Writing. She has since moved back to Michigan to work, write, and live happily ever after with her fiancé. The poem "Science" is based on the form Crown of Sevens, created by Kate Rushin.

Viet Dinh received his MFA from the University of Houston and currently lives in Wilmington, Del. A recipient of a 2008 NEA grant in literature, he has published stories in *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *Five Points*, *Fence*, *Black Warrior Review*, and the *Threepenny Review*, among others. He does not claim to be able to tell the future.

Sarah Domet is a Ph.D. candidate and Taft Fellow at the University of Cincinnati, where she served as associate editor of *The Cincinnati Review*.

James Doyle's new poetry book is *Bending Under the Yellow Police Tapes* (Steel Toe Books, 2007). He has poems coming out in *Quercus Review*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Coe Review*, *The Pinch*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Cimarron Review*.

Tarfia Faizullah is a 2nd year poetry MFA student at Virginia Commonwealth University and the associate editor of *Blackbird: an online journal of literature and the arts*. Her poem, "Ramadan Aubade," was a 2007 AWP Intro Journals Award winner, and is forthcoming in *Mid-American Review*. Her other poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in journals such as *The Adirondack Review* and *Green Mountains Review*.

Charles Freeland teaches at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. Recent work appears in *Jubilat*, *Margie*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Juked*, *Mad Hatters Review*, and *Cream City Review*. He is the author of a chapbook, *Where We Saw Them Last* (Lily Press).

Christian Anton Gerard currently lives with his wife, Lucy, in Norfolk, Virginia, where he's an MFA candidate at Old Dominion University. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Harpur Palate*, *Whiskey Island*, *Triplopia*, and *Blood Lotus*. If the money's right, he can find his way around any kitchen and never hesitates to make his self-proclaimed world's-greatest-grilled-cheese.

Miriam Bird Greenberg has taught ESL in Japan, traveled by train through southern Siberia, and hitchhiked above the Arctic Circle. Her poems are forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Smartish Pace*, and the *The Yalobusha Review*. She's finishing her MFA at the Michener Center for Writers.

Christian Knoeller, Associate Professor of English at Purdue, has new work appearing or forthcoming in a number of journals including *Midwest Quarterly*, *Spoon River Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Permafrost*, and *Poetry International*. He is currently working on his next collection, *Another Indian Summer*.

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Jonette Larrew lives in Carrollton, Georgia.

Peter Layton writes his poetry from Lakewood, California. He is a sometimes teacher and student and moves around a great deal, generally in the Los Angeles area.

Andrea Lewis writes short fiction at her home on Vashon Island, Washington. Her work has appeared in *Ontario Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and *Pebble Lake Review*, and is forthcoming in *The MacGuffin* and *War, Literature and the Arts*. She is a co-founder of Richard Hugo House, a center for writing, reading, and the literary arts in Seattle.

Chelle Miko resides in the Finger Lakes region of New York State. Her poetry publications include *North Dakota Quarterly*, *32 Poems Magazine*, *Poet Lore*, *North American Review*, *Anon*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Nimrod*, *Eclectica*, *The Paumanok Review*, *RHINO*, *Swink*, *The Comstock Review*, *Snow Monkey*, *13th Moon*, *Moondance*, and others.

Keith Montesano currently teaches English at Virginia Commonwealth University. Other poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Third Coast*, *American Literary Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Florida Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Eclipse*, and elsewhere.

Adam Pellegrini is shipwrecked at a dead-end job . . . for now. You can find his work in such periodical literature as *Pebble Lake Review* and *Paterson Literary Review*. By this time next year he'll be nestled into a fine MFA program somewhere in the United States.

Eric Rawson lives and works in Los Angeles. His work has recently appeared in a number of periodicals, including *Brutarian*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Crazyhorse*.

Jennie Ray lives in Ithaca, New York, where she is an MFA candidate in poetry at Cornell University. She is assistant editor for the literary journal, *Epoch*.

Jonathan Rice's poems have recently appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Potomac Review*, and are forthcoming in *Gulf Coast* and *New Delta Review*, among others. He is the recipient of *Harpur Palate's* 2008 Milton Kessler Memorial Prize for poetry, *Yalobusha Review's* 2008 Yellowwood Poetry Prize, and his work was selected for the AWP Intro to Journals Project for 2005-2006. He received his MFA in poetry from Virginia Commonwealth University, where he teaches writing.

Bram Shay lives in New York City and is a writer of fiction and poetry. His stories have appeared in *Fourteen Hills* and *Washington Square*. He received an MFA in creative writing from New York University and has worked as a teacher and editor. Currently he is contemplating a novel, a book of poems, a clutch of short stories, and a web comic.

Carrie Shippers received her MFA from The Ohio State University. Recent poems have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Barrow Street*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. Her chapbook *Ghost-Writing* recently was released by Pudding House. She is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Josie Sigler's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *The Spoon River Review*, *MARGIE: The Journal of American Poetry*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Cutthroat Magazine*, *Poet Lore*, *The Louisville Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and others. She is pursuing a Ph.D. at The University of Southern California, but she lives on Mount Desert Island, in Maine. She's attempted in her work, as Dorothy Allison says, to "Give some child, some thirteen-year-old, the hope of the remade life," to nourish the covenant of truth that's sustained her thus far.

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Susan Sindall's poems have been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Seattle Review*, *West Branch*, *Salamander*, *Pivot*, *The Bridge*, and *Agenda*, among others. Her manuscript was chosen as a semi-finalist at Sarabande Books in 1998. She has been given awards from The MacDowell Colony (1987, 1989), The Ragdale Foundation (1998, 2000), and The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (1994, 1996, 2001). In 2005, she received an MFA from The Warren Wilson Program for Writers. She is managing editor of *Heliotrope*, whose Volume #8 will appear next year.

Colby Cedar Smith holds a master's degree in Art in Education from Harvard. Her chapbook, *Seven Seeds of the Pomegranate*, was published by The Penny Press at Colorado College in 2006. Other recent work is out or forthcoming in *Redivider*, *RUNES*, and *Memorious*. She lives in Geneva, Switzerland, and makes her living as a travel writer, editor, and teacher.

Jeanine Stevens was raised in Indiana. She currently lives in northern California. Her poems have appeared in *South Dakota Review*, *Poetry Depth Quarterly*, *Timber Creek Review*, and *Pegasus*. Other work will appear in *Quercus Review*, *Red Hawk*, and *Poet Lore*. Her latest chapbook is *The Meaning of Monoliths*. She has received poetry awards from the Mendocino Coast Writer's Conference for a collection, and the Stockton Arts Commission.

Jennifer Sullivan is a poet from Akron, Ohio. She is currently earning an MFA as part of the NEOMFA program. Her poetry has appeared in *Nimrod*, *DIAGRAM*, *Ohio Writer*, and *Main Street Rag*, among others.

capuchina taylor lives and writes in St. Louis but is originally from Germany. She is currently in the MFA program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. This is her first publication.

Cody Todd was born and raised in Denver and currently resides in Los Angeles. He earned an MFA from Western Michigan University and is currently a Virginia Middleton Fellow in the Ph.D. program in Literature/Creative Writing at the University of Southern California. His written work has been published in *Salt Hill*, *Grist*, *Lake Effect*, *Third Coast*, *New Delta Review*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *To Frankenstein, My Father*, is forthcoming from Proem Press.

Sara Tracey received her MFA in poetry from the Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts Program (NEOMFA) in December, 2007. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Wicked Alice*, *Lily*, *FRiGG*, *Softblow*, and *Hobble Creek Review*. She is an associate editor of *Barn Owl Review*. In 2007, Sara received the University of Akron's Sam Ella Dukes prize in poetry and was selected to participate in the Wick Summer Fellowship in Bisbee, Arizona.

John T. Trigonis is an aspiring poet, screenwriter, and independent filmmaker. Aside from his artistic endeavors, John teaches English, Creative Writing, and Humanities courses at various universities across New Jersey.

Lesli and Kirk Van Zandbergen got their photography education at Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, and have combined 50 years of experience making things look better than they really do. They make their home in rural northeast Pennsylvania and have their studio in a renovated 1830s timberframe barn. When not on commercial assignment they like to photograph the critters they live with, which include a dog, cats, llamas, and of course, chickens.

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Susan Varnot's poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, *Nimrod*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Weber Studies*, and *Zone 3*, among other journals. New work is forthcoming in *Asheville Poetry Review* and *Runes*. She lives in California, where she teaches at UC Merced.

Asha Vose holds a degree in English Literature as a result of her studies in Wales, UK, and at the University of Tennessee. She is a freelance journalist whose nonfiction has appeared in *Eva Mag*, *Metro Pulse*, and *The Knoxville Voice*. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, Julie Marie Wade has received the Chicago Literary Award in Poetry, the *Gulf Coast* Nonfiction Prize, the Oscar Wilde Poetry Prize, and the *Literal Latte* Nonfiction Award. She completed an MA in English at Western Washington University in 2003 and an MFA in Poetry at the University of Pittsburgh in 2006. She now lives with her partner Angie and their two cats in rural Ohio, where she teaches humanities at a college preparatory boarding school.

Ellen Warfield was born and raised in Manhattan. She received a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1999 and has worked professionally in the photo industry in New York and Los Angeles ever since. She has mounted gallery exhibits in New York and her work has appeared in such publications as *WWD* and *The New York Times*.

Laurie White is pursuing her MFA in Poetry at the University of Montana, and serves as a poetry editor for *CutBank*. Her prose poems have appeared in *Quarter After Eight*.

Matt Zambito lives in Model City, New York, where he edits and maintains a social activism website. He has received grants and awards from the Ohio Arts Council, the Greater Columbus Arts Council, and the Academy of American Poets. New poems appear in *West Branch*, *New York Quarterly*, *New Delta Review*, and *Columbia Poetry Review*.

Alexi Zentner's short story, "Touch," was selected for the O. Henry Prize Series 2008 (Anchor Books, 2008) and his fiction has appeared in *Tin House*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Rake*. He is currently a student in the Cornell University MFA program, and lives in Ithaca, New York, with his wife and two daughters.

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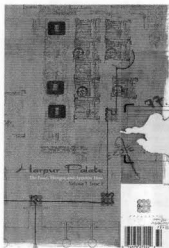
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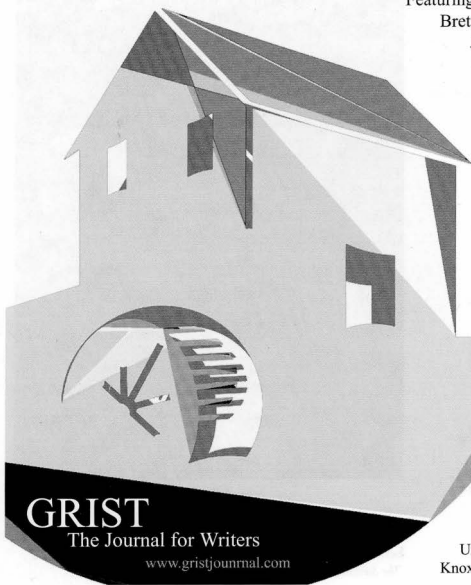
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