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Harpur Palate, Volume 7 Issue 1, Summer 2007: The Food, Hunger, and Appetite Issue

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Harpur Palate, Volume 7 Issue 1, Summer 2007: The Food, Hunger, and Appetite Issue

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The Food, Hunger, and Appetite Issue
Volume 7 Issue 1

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Volume 7 Issue 1, Summer 2007

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THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION



WINNER

THE BLUE DRESS

Lynda Myles

When I was twelve and living in the old neighborhood in Brooklyn in a three room bunker with my stupid mother and tyrant father, I was, among other things, a penny-ante shoplifter and a liar. In all modesty, I have to say I was a natural at both.

I never got caught either—if you don't count the time I stole my first and only big ticket item, a party dress.

Up until then, I'd lifted trinkets that sold anywhere from a quarter to a dollar—this was the 1950s—charm bracelets with ballerina shoes, dogs, horses and dice dangling off them; necklaces studded with colored glass; snake rings that climbed up to my knuckle; and earrings, my favorite being a pair of gold birdcages with a tiny gold bird on a perch swinging in each one. I still have them in the bottom of my jewelry box. When my mother came across any of these things during one of her search-and-destroy missions, I'd tell her I traded it with a friend for one of my comic books.

The only people I lied to on a regular basis were my parents, even though—or because—my father always made a big deal about never, ever telling him a lie. But once when I was little, like four, I got in trouble for being honest. He came home from work one day complaining that his mother, my Grandma Emiline, told him that I'd told her that Daddy and Mommy fight all the time. Without losing a beat, my mother jumped in with: "And she told my sister, Ivy, that you can't stand Lewis" (her husband). Both of them glared at me in a rare moment of togetherness. Never mind that Grandma Emiline, who didn't think my mother was good enough for her sonny boy—I'm not sure how I knew that then, but I did—had taken me aside during our regular Sunday visit and *asked* me in her wheedling way: "Tell me, sweetheart, do Mommy and Daddy fight a lot?"

I didn't have the vocabulary, verbal or emotional, at four to

explain to the prying old bat that “fight” was a limp euphemism for what went on in that apartment in Flatbush. If I did, I’d have told her that I lived in a combat zone where her son’s short fuse exploded regularly with the force of a land mine that my feckless mother kept tripping over and setting off.

Aunt Ivy, on the other hand, hadn’t asked me for my father’s opinion of Uncle Lewis. I’d volunteered it all on my own, having heard it expressed so often around the house, mostly in the form of a firebomb hurled at my mother, as in, “Your jerk of a sister and her moron husband!” I didn’t mention to my aunt that my father couldn’t stand *her*, either, but nobody gave me credit for that. The lesson I learned that day was, if you know something bad about somebody, don’t tell his mother or his wife. That’s useful information, even for a four-year-old. Another thing I learned was to stay out of my parents’ line of fire. That was never easy to do, but it got easier as I got older.

At twelve I had systems in place for escaping them. At home, I used the books I loved that were my real family. On the outside, it was sex. Above-the-waist and on-top-of-the-clothes, but still sex. My best friend Dotty and I would go to the movies on Saturday afternoons to pick up cute guys and make out with them during the serials and features. I’d only recently started to comb my hair daily and scrub the embedded grime off my neck and forearms; only recently stopped challenging boys to fistfights behind the school and started seeing them as possible objects of desire, whose cleft chins and tight butts suddenly made my pulse gallop, whose cigarette-scented mouths I longed to have glommed onto mine, and whose stubby hands I wanted to roam over my new breasts (outside the blouse).

I spotted Johnny Bruno a few rows down in the balcony of the RKO Keith’s at the same time he spotted me, and within a couple of minutes, we were sitting close, faces touching, his arm around my shoulder. (Dotty was down the row with his buddy, similarly engaged.) Whenever the screen got bright, I caught glimpses of Johnny’s thick, chestnut-colored hair, liquid brown eyes, white teeth, and smooth olive skin. His lips were soft, so

soft and sweet on my lips, on my throat, as his free hand gently massaged my starter brassiere. I was in a state of romantic lust. When the lights came up, he invited me to a party at his cousin's house the next weekend, and I said sure, figuring I'd find a way somehow to get out and meet him. But I needed a pretty dress to wear and I didn't have one.

I hated asking my father for money. Not only because he hardly had any during most of my childhood; I hated asking him later on, too, after he'd made a pile in business. I didn't want him to have more control over me than he already had. The man scared me, even though I knew he had a soft spot in his heart for his little girl. I knew it, but I didn't like it. It's not that he hit me or yelled at me; he didn't. What he did was mess around in my life, read my mail from friends, forbid me to hang out with this one or that one. But mostly I hated and feared him because of the way he treated my mother, like scum, like a piece of garbage. I was the silent witness to it, guilty and angry, but grateful it wasn't me.

Only once did I do something. He was kicking her chair into the wall while she was sitting in it. She looked so frightened, I couldn't stand it. I jumped up and hollered, "Stop it, you son of a bitch!" Then I stood still, barely breathing, in shock. He looked shocked, too, like his best friend in the world had betrayed him. He packed up a bag and left. I told my mother not to let him come back, but after a while she did, and he did, and the battle went on.

Not that there was any love lost between me and my mother. She had no soft spot for me and would never dream of telling me to go out and buy myself something nice, so I felt justified in bullying her into giving me some cash. Of course, I only got fresh-mouthed with her when my father wasn't around. I sounded a lot like him with her, but I'd get in trouble for it if he heard me. Two days after Johnny Bruno's invitation, I came home from school and confronted her.

Me: Marion Spiry is having a party on Saturday night, and I need a new dress.

Her: What about that lovely pink one?

Me: It's a hand-me-down! It's ugly.

Her: It was expensive. Your cousin wore it to her graduation party.

Me: I hate it. It's horrible. I need to buy a new dress.

Her: The pink one looks beautiful on you.

Me: How do you know? You've never seen me in it!

Her: I can tell.

Me: No, you can't! You just don't want to give me any money.

Her: I'm short this week.

Me: You always say that, I don't believe you.

Her: You're very fresh. Ask your father.

Me: I won't! And you'd better not tell him! Just give me some money. . . .

And so on. All I could get out of her was five dollars. That night, the night before I went shopping for my new dress, we had supper as usual around the table in the kitchen dinette. My father, in his undershirt, was reading the newspaper as he ate. He loved the columns of Max Lerner and Eleanor Roosevelt in the *New York Post*, back when it wasn't a tabloid sheet. I was devouring *Wuthering Heights* for the tenth time, while picking at my mother's cardboard meatloaf and canned green beans. She was busy pretending she wasn't being ignored.

Her: Why can't we have a nice family dinner and just talk to each other?

My father glanced up for a second, amused, but didn't bother answering.

Her: Well, I just think it would be nice.

I kept my nose buried in my book, reading Mrs. Dean, the housekeeper's description of Cathy: *A wild, wicked slip she was—but, she had the bonniest eye, the sweetest smile, and the lightest foot in the parish; and, after all, I believe she meant no harm. . . .*

After a couple of minutes of silence, my father looked up again at my mother.

Him: Did you take the brown suit in to the cleaners?

Her: I didn't have time today. I'll do it tomorrow.

Him: I told you I need it for Friday, Camille.

Her: It'll be ready.

Him: How do you know?

Her: I'll tell them to rush it. Harry likes me.

Him: Harry? Who the hell is Harry?

Her: You know. At Kwik Klean.

Him: Kwik Klean stinks. I said to use Prosperity.

Her: They've gotten better, even Marjorie Tender says so.

Him: Marjorie Tender doesn't know her ass from her elbow.

Her: She happens to be a very smart woman, Ed.

Him: I asked you to do one simple thing for me and you can't even do that. What the hell do you do around here all day?

Her: I resent your tone.

Him: You resent my tone, Ca-meele? (He made her name sound like it tasted bad.) I resent your stupid face.

I burrowed deeper into my book: *She was much too fond of Heathcliff. The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him. . . . Johnny Bruno . . . Johnny Bruno . . . Johnny Bruno. . . . My nerve-endings tingled, remembering his touch.*

Her: For your information, everybody in the neighborhood thinks Kwik Klean is the best.

Him: They stink, they stink, they stink! Can't you get that through your thick skull?

Cathy's father was a jerk, but she wasn't afraid of him. I admired her for that. Cathy was: *doing just what her father hated most—showing how her pretended insolence . . . had more power over Heathcliff than his kindness. . . .*

Her: You show me some respect, Ed, if you know what's good for you!

Him: Sure I'll show you respect. Here's what I think of you. . . .

He swiped a pitcher full of daisies off the table. Broken glass and water went all over the floor. She jumped up, shrieking, grabbed a towel and started mopping up.

Her: You're crazy! There's something wrong with you, Ed!
I'm going to call the police. I'm going to call your sister Harriet and tell her the way you're acting!

Him: You miserable bitch, you can't do one single thing right! . . .

I was getting so wound up I thought I'd explode into pieces like the glass, so I marked my place in the book with a napkin and got out of the dinette, which was also my bedroom, since I slept on a folding cot under the window. I went into the bathroom, locked the door, and ran all the faucets in the sink and bathtub to drown out their miserable rotten voices. Then I sat on the closed toilet and kept reading: *'Why canst thou not always be a good lass, Cathy?'* And she turned her face up to his, and laughed, and answered, *'Why cannot you always be a good man, father?'* Ha, ha, served the old bastard right. Outside the bathroom door, I could still hear them yelling.

My father never struck my mother with anything but curses and decibels, I'll give him that much. He raged, broke stuff, and like I said, kicked chairs with her in them, but not her. Believe it or not, he charmed most people. He was handsome, smart, could be generous, and loved a good laugh. When I was little, he'd make up adventure stories about a boy named Arthur that left me giggling so hard I'd pee my pants. During one of their fights, my mother actually did call the police, instead of just his sister, Harriet. From behind a car across the street, where I hid after I ran from the apartment, I saw him come out of our building with two cops, a hand on the shoulder of each of them. He was smiling, and as I watched, he said something that made them laugh.



With my five dollars in my purse, which was a little leather box with a shoulder strap that I got from an army-navy surplus store—soldiers supposedly used them in World War II to carry bullets—I got on a bus the next day after school and rode to Miller & Krause's department store on Nostrand Avenue. In the Junior Miss department there were some dresses for \$5.00 and under, but I didn't like any of them. My eye landed on a dark blue satiny number that seemed to shine out from the dull stuff around it. When I got closer I saw that the blue fabric had silvery highlights. The dress had long sleeves, a formfitting top with a scoop neck, a tight waist, and a skirt that flared out. It was beautiful and it was my size. The price tag said \$13.99.

I looked around. There was one saleslady behind a checkout counter in the next department, but there was nobody visible in Junior Miss. I took the satiny dress and two of the cheap ones over to the fitting room. No salesperson was there either and no customers, so I let myself into a cubicle, whipped off my cardigan, blouse, and skirt and stepped into the blue dress. I pulled it up and zipped it. It fit perfectly. It actually made me look like I had a real figure with hips that were bigger than my waist and real knobs on top, instead of a couple of chest buds.

I stared at myself in the mirror, picturing dressy Cuban heels and nylon stockings in place of the white droopy cotton socks and scuffed old penny loafers I was wearing. I saw myself walking up to Johnny Bruno in front of Castelleneta's Pizzeria where we'd arranged to meet to go to the party, my hair fluffy from the pin curls I'd slept on all night, my lips bright pink from the lipstick I'd pocketed at the five-and-ten.

"Do you need any help in there?"

The woman's voice outside the door made me jump out of my skin.

"No, thanks," I called back, my voice squeaking from nervousness. "I'm just trying on some dresses."

"I was in the restroom for a minute. How many did you take in with you?"

"Two," I said quickly. "Do you need to see them?" I held my breath.

"No, that's okay. Just call if you need help. I'm Roberta."

"I will. Thanks, Roberta."

I didn't even bother to try on the other two dresses. I just slipped my blouse on over the one I was wearing, barely managing to button it over the top. My blouse sleeves didn't cover the dress sleeves, but my cardigan did, and I buttoned it all the way up, too. I put my feet into my straight skirt, slid it up, and tried to stuff the dress skirt down into it, but ended up with bulges and lumps around my middle, so I took off my skirt, lowered it over my head, and slowly worked it down over the shiny blue-silver folds of the dress. I couldn't get my side zipper all the way up, but the sweater covered the gap. Roberta, the saleslady, didn't know what I looked like, so she wouldn't notice that I suddenly got chubby. I turned around slowly to check in the mirror and make sure the dress didn't stick out from under the hem of my skirt. It didn't. But my tightly-packed bottom and legs made me walk funny.

Taking hold of the two dresses and the one empty hanger, I slipped out of the cubicle, dropped the empty hanger quietly in a trash can and left the fitting room. Roberta was straightening a rack around the corner. I tried to look and sound normal and more mature than twelve.

"These don't look good on me. Where should I leave them?"

"Here, I'll take them. You want to look for something else?"

"I didn't see anything else I liked." I felt a button pop open over my knobs. I forced myself not to look down to draw attention to it. Roberta didn't seem to notice. When I casually ran a hand over the front of my sweater, I realized that the popped button was on the blouse underneath, hidden.

"We get new things in all the time," she said, going back to her rack.

I waddled slowly toward the exit, stopping to examine

merchandise here and there. I felt like a Chinese lady with bound feet or a Japanese geisha with a tightly-wrapped robe. But no one paid any attention to me. Outside the store I walked slowly, carefully, to my bus stop. No one came after me.

At home, I called out that I had to go to the bathroom and ran past the kitchen where my mother was making supper (I think it was her special sawdust casserole that night). It was too early for my father to be there. In the bathroom I got out of my clothes and the dress, put the clothes back on, and took the price tag off the dress. I had a plan for getting out on Saturday night. I'd tell them I was invited over to my friend Leonora's for dinner and that her folks would walk me home. They didn't know Leonora well, but they knew she was quiet, dumpy, and unattractive, so she didn't arouse my father's suspicions the way Dotty did with her smooth light brown hair and developed figure. A month before, my father had caught Dotty and me standing on a street corner *just talking* to a bunch of boys, but when we got home he told me I couldn't hang out with her anymore because she was "a bad influence" on me (like listening to him call his wife a miserable bitch a few times a day was an edifying experience). Not that it stopped me from seeing Dotty, or anyone else. Not that anything he ever did ever stopped me from doing what I needed to do. I just went on my merry way, which wasn't all that merry, but it was mine.

On party night, I planned to put on my garter belt and stockings under my dungarees, pack the dress and shoes into my schoolbag, and say goodbye. But instead of going to the lobby, I'd ride the elevator to the basement, switch clothes in the boiler room, and leave my school bag behind a pipe. Later on, I'd do the whole thing in reverse.

I folded up my new dress and went out of the bathroom. My mother kept shopping bags in the closet next to it, behind the carpet sweeper. Sure enough, there were a couple from Miller & Krause's. I put the dress in one and went in to show her what a terrific deal I got for her stinking five dollars.

After supper, my father stayed at the table in his undershirt

reading Max and Eleanor. I was lying on my cot deep in one of my favorite chapters of *Black Beauty*, where Ginger tells the story of two of her owners, a brutal son and his kind father: *seeing the clots of blood on my side he seemed very vexed . . . then he quietly took the rein and led me to the stable; just at the door stood Samson. I laid my ears back and snapped at him. 'Stand back,' said the master, 'and keep out of her way; you've done a bad day's work for this filly.' He growled out something about a vicious brute. 'Hark ye,' said the father, 'a bad-tempered man will never make a good-tempered horse.'*

My mother came to the kitchen door and spoke in that coy voice she used when she was trying to suck up to my father.

"Ed, may I speak to you for a minute, please?"

"What is it?" he asked.

"I just need to speak to you privately for a minute."

He got up and went into the hallway. I tried to concentrate on the book, but I could see her showing him something and whispering. When she glanced over, I knew it was about me. She was one of those prisoners who identifies with her captor, so if you said to her, "You have a really lousy marriage," she'd say, "I don't know what you're talking about, I love my husband." It made me crazy that she never admitted anything, even if the proof was right in front of her stupid eyes. One of the ways she tried to get on his good side was to rat me out whenever she got the chance. Funny thing was, I always took her side (in my head) when they fought, even though I hated her. But when he cursed and hollered and called her names, I hated him more.

I'd started out loving her like all kids love their mommies, but once when I was six or seven, she was sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark, crying after one of their fights. I went up to her to hug her. She pushed me away without saying anything, just pushed me away, the dumb jerk. She never knew who her friends were. When someone does that to you, you stop caring—like Cathy did when her father pushed her away and wouldn't forgive her. She cried at first, but then she got tougher and laughed at him.

When my father came back into the kitchen, I could see he was holding the blue dress. I got so scared, I thought I'd pass out, but I pretended to keep reading. He pulled a chair away from the table and sat down.

Him: Erica, come here, please.

Reluctantly, I got up and moved closer to him. He held up a price tag, and I realized with horror I'd left it in the bathroom, where of course she'd find it and turn me in.

Him: Is this the tag for the dress you bought today?

I looked at it, frowning. My mind was flying off in a million directions; my heart kept trying to leap up into my throat. I stammered.

Me: I . . . guess so.

Him: Your mother says you only had five dollars. This is for \$13.99.

I looked at the stupid thing, pretending to be puzzled. My plan for getting to the party Saturday night popped into my head—dinner at Leonora's.

Me: I went with my friend, Leonora, to Miller & Krause's after school, and then we went to her house to try on the dresses we got. I guess I must've taken her tag home instead of mine, 'cause her dress cost a lot more than mine.

Him: Leonora is the heavyset girl with the dark hair? . . .

Me: Uh huh. We do homework together a lot.

Him: And she bought a dress that cost this much?

Me: Uh huh. But I got mine on sale for \$4.99.

Him: What does her dress look like?

Me: It's red, with lots of ruffles. We could go over to her house if you want to, so she could tell you herself. (Dear God, he wouldn't really take me up on that, would he?)

My father stared at the tag, pondering, one hand gripping his jaw, covering his mouth. I could see the traitor standing in the doorway, trying not to show how excited and happy she was not to be his target for once, to see her rival on the hot

seat. She actually used to say to me: "You're coming between my husband and me!"

I stood there in front of my father, watching him study the tag, wishing I could be anywhere else in the world—at the movies with Johnny Bruno; in the stall washing down Black Beauty and feeding him linseed mush; on the moors, running wild with Heathcliff; in Mr. Rochester's arms; in Avonlea, with my best friend, Anne; in the garret with Jo, writing wild tales. . . .

It was unbearable, so unbearable, watching him, waiting, waiting for my fate to be decided. It was a good story I had given him, believable, especially for one I'd made up in two seconds. But he still had his doubts. Why didn't he believe me? Finally, finally, he spoke:

Him: All right, we'll go.



Leonora lived about eight blocks from me, near our public school. Her father was the super of the building, and the family lived in a basement apartment. I'd been there once or twice. It was still light when we came out of our apartment house and started walking. We didn't talk. I was silently composing a fast, clear script for Leonora, if I had any time alone with her. If he came to her door with me, I could still try to alert her to the situation: Hi there, I'd say, when we went shopping at Miller & Krause's this afternoon? And then came back here to try on our dresses? We must've got the price tags mixed up, because I came home with a tag for \$13.99, which is what your dress cost, right? Instead of my tag which was only \$4.99. Do you still have the \$4.99 tag so I can show my Dad? No? Oh, gosh. But you do remember how much yours cost, \$13.99, right? And maybe poor old Leonora would just nod and say yes and no in the right places, and that would be it. Oh God. Please just let this be over.

When we got to her building, I took him to the basement entrance. He stopped there.

Him: Go and ask her to come out for a minute. I'll wait here.

I rang the doorbell. Maybe nobody would be home. Leonora opened the door, I launched right in.

Me: Hi, I need a big favor. My dad's outside and he wants to talk to you. They found a price tag for \$13.99 for a dress I bought today. I took the money out of my bank account and I wasn't supposed to, so I told them I went shopping at Miller & Krause's with you, and you bought a dress for \$13.99 and I bought this really pretty blue one on sale for only \$4.99. But we came back here afterwards and tried on the dresses and I took your tag home with me by mistake. And that's the one they found. But it's for your dress. And you can say you already threw out the \$4.99 tag, okay?

She looked dazed, but nodded okay, that dear lump of a girl. She followed me to the entrance. My father spoke gently.

Him: Thank you for coming out, Leonora.

Her: You're welcome.

Him: Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? (She shook her head no, looking terrified.) Erica says the two of you went shopping today. (She nodded.) Where did you go?

Her: (With a nervous look at me), Miller & Krause's?

Him: And what did you buy there?

Her: A dress? (With another look at me), Two dresses. One for Erica and one for me.

Him: How much did your dress cost?

Her: Um . . . mine cost, I think (eyes on me) about fourteen dollars.

Him: And what color is it? (Had I told her the dress was red? Oh God, oh God, I couldn't remember.)

Her: It's um . . . (with a panicked look at me, blinking fast), it's um . . . sort of blue, I guess?

Him: Okay, thanks, Leonora. I'm sorry we bothered you.



Daylight was gone when we walked home. I was too miserable to speak. My father didn't say anything for a while. When he did, he sounded sad instead of angry.

Him: You know, when you went in to get her, I thought to myself, if you were telling the truth, I'd go out tomorrow and buy you a puppy. But it was obvious that poor girl was lying for you. I'm very disappointed in you, Erica. Did you steal that dress?

Me: No, I swear.

Him: Then where did you get the money to buy it? I want the truth.

Me: I borrowed it from Leonora. I'm supposed to pay her back a little each week.

Him: You borrowed it from her? Why didn't you say that in the first place?

Me: I thought you'd be mad at me. (I began to cry.)

Him: Now don't start crying.

Me: I'm sorry. (I began to sob.)

Him: You have to take the dress back and get a refund and give it to Leonora.

Me: Okay, I'll take it back tomorrow.



I did try to return the dress. I took the bus to Miller & Krause's again, went to the return department, showed it to a woman behind the counter, along with the price tag, which I'd cut part of off at a slant in a pathetic attempt to make it look like the dress had actually been purchased. I was afraid I'd run into Roberta and the jig would be up. But I didn't see her. The woman eyed the tag, the dress, and me. She asked if I had a sales receipt. I told her I'd lost it. She said they couldn't give a refund without a sales receipt, and she reluctantly handed the dress back to me,

her eyes narrow with what I knew to be suspicion. I was afraid she'd call security and have me arrested, but once again, nobody stopped me as I left the store with my stolen dress.

I reported the truth to my father, that they wouldn't return the dress without a sales receipt. I embellished and told him I'd looked everywhere for it, but I must've lost it. My father gave me ten dollars to pay Leonora back right away, which of course, I didn't have to do. I still had the five I started with, so that gave me fifteen dollars that no one knew I had—plus the blue dress.

I didn't get to wear it to Johnny Bruno's cousin's party that Saturday night after all. It turned out Johnny had a steady girlfriend, and when she found out he'd invited another girl to the party, she threatened to come after me. He got word to me through his friend who told Doty to tell me it was off. I saw him in the balcony at RKO Keith's again another time, and he waved to me, but he didn't come over.

I consoled myself with the fortune that had suddenly fallen into my lap. I went horseback riding in Prospect Park for two dollars an hour, and afterwards, I went with friends for hamburgers and chocolate egg creams in our favorite diner, and I went to movies and bought all the popcorn and candy I could eat.

FIRST HARVEST

Elizabeth Crowell

When the girl comes out of the garden
at the end of the road,
where the tall grass starts,
and the brown pond water
stinks in the heat, in the layer of cloud
of mosquitoes, the bullfrog's groan,

when the girl comes out of the garden,
fireflies flit straight from her dark hair.
Her dress is out of her arms,
around the white rush of her belly,
her eyes ringed and tired, bare feet in tiptoe
over the gravely dead end.

When she comes out of the garden,
she calls to me,
hand outstretched, father behind her,
bending, picking at the green,
mother on a boulder,
knees up, slapping her own arms.

The girl comes out of the garden
to offer me everything so far,
the single cherry tomato harvested
half-yellow, small as a marble.
I say I couldn't take it as it comes to me.
She says to wash it before I eat it

and wipes her hands on her limp sleeves.
She is done; she turns back into herself,
a stranger to me, goes back to the garden,
where the rows rise in the darkness,
stalks lean where they are tied to stakes,
as if to wait again for what she can give away.

CLOUD EARS

Maura Stanton

Looking closer at my recipe, I discover that I need five cloud ears for the fancy dish I promised I'd make you. Cloud ears? They're a kind of mushroom but they sound expensive. Perhaps they grow on the highest floors of skyscrapers, and are harvested by window washers. Or maybe baskets are attached to airplanes on routes through fertile skies. Could I grow my own? A big cloud is drifting through my town this February. If I put on my gloves, and gathered some mist and gloom, placing it carefully into Ziplock bags, I might be able to induce growth in the freezer. In a week I could defrost five perfect cloud ears. I could call up my friends for a cloud ear party, and keep them on shaved ice until we'd all gathered to admire their delicate beauty. Somebody who'd had too much wine would be bound to pick one up. It would be you, of course. Yes, you'd stand there holding the frozen cloud ear against your own human ear, as if you could hear what it heard, up there in the clouds. We'd watch you close your eyes, sway, smile, sigh happily. But the rest of us would hear nothing.

GREED

Maura Stanton

after Callimachus

"Why are you chopping down my lovely trees?"

"To build a house to feast my dearest friends."

"Where will my stag feed? My unblinking hare?"

"Demeter, I own these fields, these forests, and these streams."

So the Goddess punished him with savage hunger.
None of the stuff he ate could satisfy
His raging belly. Twenty sweating teenagers
Served his Big Macs and twelve poured out his Cokes.
He ordered sausage pizzas by the thousands,
Buckets of chicken, barbequed ribs, and shrimp.
His gastric juices sang for more and more
And the more he ate, the more he desired to eat.
His embarrassed family declined all invitations.
"Sorry, he's gone hunting," said his son.
"He can't come, he's slightly indisposed,"
Said his wife. His daughter: "He's not home."
Imagine a hole the size of Lake Superior
Filled with herds of succulent red cattle,
Flocks of bleating sheep, fresh eggs, and fish
Leaping on the speckled backs of one another,
All flowing uselessly into his mouth
For he grew thinner with every fat swallow,
Until his skin was cellophane over bones
Stacked up like Legos ready to topple over.
His wife opened the kitchen cabinet doors
And wept. He'd eaten the sugar, the flour,
The scented birthday candles, the toothpicks,
And now she heard him shake the gerbil's cage.
He ate the gerbil, he ate the dog, he ate

The cat, he ate the mouse caught in the trap,
And when she saw him on his hands and knees
At the baseboard, trying to catch a cricket,
She sent the children to her mother's and prayed
To Jesus words like these: "Oh dear Savior,
Please cure this man who only wanted a deck,
Jacuzzi, four-car garage, and 6,000 square feet
On seven acres to raise his beloved family
Free from drugs and inner-city youth."
Now there was nothing left at home to eat.
His teeth were aching; his belly craved
Morsels of anything, and he wandered wide
The streets of his town, rooting in the garbage,
Savoring tossed-out banana peels, stale
Cheerios in the bottoms of yellow boxes,
Dregs of salad dressing, curdled milk, gristle.
Sometimes he waited on the curb outside a feast
Of the sort he used to give, all delightful song,
And begged the guests for a scrap of this, a crumb of that.

EDWARD LEAR'S SHOPPING LIST

Maura Stanton

"they dined on mince and slices of quince"

Never enough cake so he dreamed of quince.
Words filled his hungry mouth with their sweet taste:
Shrimps, winkles, pancakes, cucumbers and mince.

The youngest child of twenty, thin as a fence,
He dug in. Forked up. Nothing went to waste.
Never enough cake so he dreamed of quince.

Oh Dumplings! Oh Custard Pudding! He could convince
His stomach with his pen, and so he laced
Nonsense with periwinkle soup. Hot mince.

Buttercups fried with fish? It made good sense.
Cold apple tart for breakfast? He wrote in haste.
Never enough cake so he dreamed of quince

Sliced or jellied. He wanted his loaves dense
With nuts and sultanas. His stiff hand raced.
Gooseberry pie. Fresh watercress. Hot mince.

He dined on chops and chocolate like a prince,
Stuffing his lines with sage and lemon paste
Never enough cake so he dreamed of quince:
Shrimps, winkles, pancakes, cucumbers and mince.

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE

FINALIST

I SHOULD LIKE TO BE GIVEN OVER

Alex Wenger

We had apartments across the hall from one another. Is this how people generally meet? I've heard so much going either way. Everyone searching for community, drawn to the few people near them geographically in the city. Or everyone is so bound within themselves that physical meetings are anachronistic.

The spiders have ever been a problem in this building, but they didn't begin to show up in numbers or to bite until we started having sex. They were very little spiders, small enough that you might not notice one beneath your hand. We had a lot of pleasure, but we also had the spiders.

I really wanted to have sex with Sylvia. She was a person very comfortable in her body, a sensualist. I didn't know this until after. I'm not terribly observant. I wanted to fuck her, as badly as anyone I've ever been around. I think I'm hesitant as people go, or at least as men go, and I could not tell at first if she thought much of me at all. I thought, Just give me an opportunity. I thought that I could overwhelm her if given the chance. If I could just put my mouth on her belly, I thought. If she could just feel my hand against the back of her thigh. There is force in me.

Eventually I was able to show her. Never mind how we came to that point. This is not a courtship tale. It is so difficult to hold the pen now. My handwriting is terrible, as I look over it, and I used to take pride in my penmanship. I must get it down tonight.

I surprised her. I overran her, and she hadn't expected that, and I continued to surprise her for months by continuing to overrun her. For a long time, I think, she was alarmed by how

heavy my hand could become. Or sometimes I took her mouth between my fingers, not squeezing, not hard at all.

And she met me. She met me, and surprised me. I had thought only of myself, and it came as a great surprise to me to find her alive and calling in the bed. Her force was unlike mine. Hers was in allowing her mouth to be held, and sometimes, lightly, she bit my fingers. Less to cause pain I think than to feel them between her teeth. She was a sensualist.

There was a lot that I didn't understand. She said that for six months before we crawled into bed, she hadn't been touched and that she hadn't hardly minded. She said I had brought her back to sex. I don't necessarily believe her. I don't disbelieve her. It might be just a thing you say to another person, but I certainly liked to hear it. She convinced me of all sorts of things that may not be true, and don't think I'm not grateful.

The spiders gradually found their way into bed with us. It didn't matter, her bed or mine. At first we were revolted. Of course we were revolted. I will say that I was revolted. I could not stay hard with all of those spiders flitting over her back or across her chest. One might dash up over her breast and across her neck, and that would be the end of me. They crawled on me too. I often couldn't feel them, and it got into my head while I was on top of her that they were swarming over my back. Sometimes I checked and there they were.

Their bites, too, were visible after a couple of hours, and if I looked my form over in the bathroom mirror, I saw dozens of tiny red spots where the spiders had bitten me. They bit her too. Her body was covered in tiny red spots.

We lobbied the building to spray for them, and the super told us there wasn't much to be done. The super is a small guy with large glasses. He has one of those chests that sink in, but he dresses himself as well as he might. He has an air about him. Perhaps he's wise. I've never had enough conversation with him to say either way. He told me there was no helping against the spiders and the way he said it stuck with me. It's likely that he didn't want to be bothered. All supers are useless. But there may

have been something else in it. I don't mean to be coy. I'm sure he knew we were lovers, though I don't know what that signifies. Half the time I believe adulthood is the process of knowing a little less than you did the day previous and discussing it with no one. In any case, the spiders were sprayed. For a week, we fucked without spiders. Then they returned, all at once, as if from holiday. I had brought my face down next to hers, breathing into her hair and into her ear with her arms buckled around my shoulders, and when I pulled up again there were three spiders on her face. There was another spider on my arm.

We could never learn where they came from. They were such tiny black things, they could have climbed out of any invisible seam along the baseboard or wherever. The building sprayed three more times, and each time we had about a week before the spiders returned in the same numbers as before. It was difficult to talk about the spiders because they only came out when we were in the midst of a sex act. There was a lot of stupid talk. For some people, it's their job, it's their life to engage all day in stupid talk. We got the building to agree to pay for a professional inspection. The pest inspector came in, examined each apartment for an hour, and found no evidence of spiders. Or no more than the usual for this building, he said. Sylvia raised a scene. I was more hesitant. We compromised on one last blast. For this one, we had to empty our places of food and vacate the premises for 72 hours. A terrible gas capsule had been planted in each apartment. For 72 hours, death reigned in our apartments. We returned after a long weekend at a hotel and the spiders basically welcomed us back. As the super said, there seemed to be nothing to be done about the spiders.

Neither of us moved, which would have been the obvious thing. We talked about it. There were a couple of things we said, which were probably untrue. Such as: "If it's not spiders it will be something else in another place." Such as: "They'll probably show up anywhere we go anyway." I said the second thing. She avoided discussing what 'we' might do over any sort of long-term. I stopped talking like that when she told me it upset her. Partly

we stayed because it would have been expensive to move.

Instead, we became used to the spiders. Only after the fumigations had failed did I start to consider seriously this policy. Prior to that, the spiders were capable of sending me into helpless rages. They had no reason to be there, and I could not dislodge them. I would feel oily hot and sweaty during these rages.

Neither of us liked to kill the spiders. Or rather the pleasures of killing the spiders were not healthy for me. There is a feeling that comes from smashing a vermin on your own naked self. I had the sense of having violated, and I felt several degrees more naked than I had been before. They looked like crushed blueberries. It's a great feeling, this feeling. But walking this path leads to excesses, and she asked me to stop. We tried not to kill the spiders. They were difficult to brush off and they found their way back quickly. There was really nothing to be done about the spiders.

She was always less bothered by the spiders. Is it more correct to say that I was initially more bothered by the spiders? I don't know. She didn't like the spiders, I don't think, but they didn't upset her as they did me. Sex would be a fight to stay hard in the sight of those little black forms blanketing us and, I knew, biting us, though we usually didn't feel it. There were things we could do, though. Even when I couldn't manfully punch our tickets in the thrusting way, we could minister to one another. I loved to find her from below and look up at her lips slightly open and her throat exposed, and if a spider idled on her throat then I didn't mind it so much. And though she might be swarmed with the spiders, she could make me lurch up almost into a sitting position, pulled by the ecstatic bunching muscles of my torso.

I keep having these spells, and after they pass it's very hard to pick up where I left off. I am tired. The fits, the spells, all my energy is gone when I come out. And sleep isn't what it used to be. Sleep is another state that I emerge from more exhausted than I entered. It is in sleep that the transformation goes forward, I think. I find it very hard to continue this account. Sometimes I question its importance. But I will not be easy with myself. The

days for that are past. You listen to me you. You listen.

We decided the spiders weren't so bad, the little black spiders. I don't know how I went from being limp with the spiders to acceptance of them. Anything I could suggest would be a lie. I don't think there's anything that holds us together as people. I think what other people call our personality is what they know we have done and said in the past. I think some of us are dumb enough to believe what we're told about ourselves. I think that everyone prefers to believe this foolishness because we are terrified that we don't know what anyone will do ten minutes from now. We don't know what we ourselves will do ten minutes from now. I think that all that said we are stultifyingly predictable.

The worst jokes stick around longest. There was a king angry that his rule was failing, and he asked an adviser what to do. The adviser came back a day later with a plan, and the king said that the plan was crap, What else have you got? I have this concept called free will, said the adviser. I don't like the sound of that, said the king. Of course you don't, said the adviser, that's why it will work so well, it sounds like just the thing you would hate. You just watch though. What the hey, said the king. Have people preach it. So it was done, and they laughed about their joke at all the parties. Outside, people ate mud and socks. The king lived a long and happy life. That Happened.

So perhaps I will quit with this account before it's through. I just won't now. I still feel the necessity of it. There wasn't a lot that happened for a few months. The spiders were always there, always leaving bites. For me, I will say, they were peaceful months. For her, I'm not so sure. We talked a great deal, and I knew all about her history and what she loved, and often when she was upset about something but not saying it outright, I divined the thing that was upsetting her. But there was a lot more that I did not know.

She may have suspected things were happening for a good while before it became obvious. When she lay on top of me, and I stroked her bare back one night, I came upon a patch of hard-plated skin at the small of her back. We looked at each other

when my hand stopped there. I don't what it is, she said. I've never had something like that there before. She got off of me, and I got in close to look at the patch. She was a pale girl, and these were darkened plates, overlapping one another like heating vents. The plates were stiff, but they were pliant under pressure. When I depressed them, she asked me to stop. It hurt, she said. I suggested perhaps she get them looked at. It's just skin, she said. I said, You just said you've never had something like this before. I don't think I need to see a doctor, she said. What if it's cancer, I asked. I don't care. You don't care? What was obvious was that she wanted to abandon the conversation, so it ended in tickling and giggling. Her skin began to darken in patches. At first, it became purple as if bruised. Then the skin darkened further into blackness, and the skin became cool to the touch, shiny, and very smooth. When we fucked, we were still visited by the little spiders. I sprung plates. They formed on both sides of my calves. One day I looked down the length of the both of us, at the expanding zones of black and of purple. The spiders crawled about the dark patches and the light. I asked her if she thought we had made the right decision. She was moving her head in sudden ways. She'd done that for a while. She stopped doing this when I put the question to her. We've made the right decision, she said. Then she asked me how much money I had. I wasn't sure, but I gave her what I thought was ballpark for my retirement account. Shall we quit our jobs, I asked. She said she thought it would be smart. I agreed. We cashed in our accounts, little black accounts. I went grocery shopping. What do you think we'll need, I asked. I don't know any more about this than you do, she said. I bought a lot of things. I had no idea what we would need. I can say now we ate all the stuff we used to eat right up until the end. Sometimes I still enjoy microwave pizza. Enjoy is too strong. I eat pizza out of nostalgia. I can't digest it very well.

When we stopped going to work, our lives changed. Our behaviors, I mean. We lay in bed all day with the spiders, and we had a lot of sex, as much as we could without making ourselves

too sore. We stopped watching television, except for the news and commercials. The other programs made no sense.

I think that was when I became aware that my thoughts had changed. It's tough to remember how I used to think. I have thoughts that I can't utter. They are urges. I cannot find words.

I always feel terrible right after I come out of my fits. I feel as though my mind has been screaming. When a little time has passed I can remember better what it's like to slide into the fit and I remember that the advent of the screaming is pleasurable. I've been having more fits.

Our black parts were so sensitive. It took me a little while to learn what I could do to her in those places. Much pressure, and she would start to hurt. I was less so. I found any sort of touch thrilling. When the inside of my thighs turned black, I loved for her to lick the skin there and blow on it. I gritted my teeth and chittered all over.

Our genitals were among the last parts of us to turn black. By then, other alterations had begun to set in. A pair of black legs broke open from her abdomen one day. They were useless at first. They hung limply. When they could move for a long time she had no control over them. They might flare out when she was angry. They twitched when she ate. In her throes of love they were active. I had to be careful when we rutted not to lean on them and hurt her.

I wonder, will we be the only two of our kind, I said once. I don't think we're becoming the same things, she said. Of course not, I said. I'll be a male, and you'll be a female. She said nothing, and I said, Don't you agree? I don't know what you're becoming, she said. Do you know what you're becoming, I countered. She said nothing to that, and I went on, Naturally, we don't know but it only makes logical sense. I said, You're obviously further along than me. I think we should each stay in our own apartment from now on, she said. You can have as much of the food as you'd like. We fought then, a long, tedious quarrel that frightened me very much. I did not say it, did not understand

it explicitly until after, but I had been easy of mind about the transformation because she was going through it with me. What I did say over and over again was that we were becoming spiders and it made no sense to face that alteration alone. We could take care of one another. She finally became fierce with me, You are not becoming a spider! I am the only one who will be a spider. You will be something else. How, I shouted rhetorically, as if before a crowd, how do you know that you will become a spider and I will not? Am I not as black and shiny as you? Do I not chitter as you do? You sound differently than I do, she said. I'm a man and you're further along, I repeated. I knew I sounded silly, but I thought she was wrong.

I still don't understand how she knew what she did, but our developments did diverge. I have lasted much longer than her, and now I suspect that I am not progressing. There are pleasures to my existence, certainly. My body rejoices with sensation. I need only drag my surfaces against a soft fabric, and I am transported. My hearing has fallen off, and I consider this a fine thing. I used to like music, but now I have no need of it, and my whole life I hated loud sudden noises, which have far more trouble reaching me these days. I do wish I was not rendered so lethargic by my fits. Or rather, I wish that I could remain in the fits. I should like to spend an entire day in the internal screaming. Then again, perhaps I have. Time means a lot less to me now. I can't understand clocks anymore, and I have only the faintest memories of the fits. I have a feeling of being caught in transit.

We didn't separate then. Not long after, she stopped talking. I could yet talk, and she could understand my words. She did chitter meaningfully. I can still talk. I've kept my words. Now that she is gone, for good and not just in the other apartment, I turn on the television to hear them talk. It never lasts long. I hate them, all of them, and the stories don't make sense. I don't try to read anymore. I haven't read over what I've recorded here. None of it makes sense. I want instead to pursue things. No, I want to be in the act of pursuit. No, that is wrong. I want to be

in a fit, and when I am in a fit I pursue.

I think when I am in a fit that I do things. I recover from the fit to find myself dappled with substances, much around my mouth. I eat hardly anything here in the apartment in this state.

I know that it was me who argued for us to remain together when she wanted us to separate, but at the final parting I was relieved. By then, she was not speaking, but she let me know. She had many new legs by then, and they could bear her weight. I have stayed on the old two, though I did suffer the painful generation of an extra joint in them. She scuttled away from me on dainty legs, and when I approached her she threatened me with her prong. Each time I approached, she threatened with the prong. We had both developed more patience for certain things by that time, and we spent a very long time me approaching and she threatening. Night became day at least once. Then I stopped and went across the hall to my apartment.

The hall is much quieter these days. Used to be, I heard people come and go and I heard the children from down the hall playing. I don't hear any of that now, though I don't hear well at all anymore.

I think of her frequently. She's gone now, gone completely. My sense of smell is my strongest, most attuned connection to the world now. It tells me what is happening. I could smell her from my futon as she went to and fro. Her scent changed over time. I kept detecting new aspects in her: she became more ferric, a higher sugar content, her body temperature rose. Then she went. I don't know what happened. But she is gone, and the apartment is empty. Perhaps the super will enter it soon, clean her things out. Perhaps not for a while. I don't care about that much. I miss her. Now I wish we hadn't parted, though I can't imagine how it could have gone otherwise at the time. And I hope that my transformation continues. I look to the future with great anticipation. I hope this is not the final stage. I should like to enter a long fit. I should like to be given over. I am ready for that.

HER FILTHY PLUMS

Laura Johnson

I am not ashamed of it despite the cold
greenish gold color made natural
by their habitat in alcohol—the way I eat them

as the dregs of a communion
with the goddess Ume
and her sweet slit, drunk in the thicket

of a boon companion's tender skin
breaking under my teeth,
split flesh mirrored by the curve

of plums pouring forward from the jar,
her breasts like a stunted fruit held away
a hand's reach for the forward branch

unpresent in a situation
I suck pleasure from in reminiscence,
the world and its encounters

bereft of their vehemence
in the unbreachable gap
between love and distance.

INNOCUOUS

Laura Johnson

Backlit from the pyre,
a relic raised whole
is how desire presses forward,

its foreign city inhabited
on odd or even days
like the chaste blank of a lover

I can imagine some future with,
and do, offering burning gasoline
on the river's bloodstream,

a congregation of possibles
singing like archangels
in the conjugations of eyelash and sigh.

With a brief touch, I promise.
A little taste won't kill us,
might even amend

some sickness
we didn't know existed,
didn't even know we had.

MISCONCEPTION IN FLORIDA

Lorene Delany-Ullman

Not all death is small like a black dot. A period.
Another baby. Rented houses always have carpet
the color of something edible. Orange marmalade.
Wait until the cockroaches die. Their small black
bodies curl and shine; some fly into the neck of
the night. My little girl and I swat the palmetto
bugs with our shoes. The chameleons die behind
the couch because the heat and the door are open.
No shedding of skin, just the dried small skeletons.
All summer the streets swell with rain for the faithful.
I ask God to be still. Instead, the blankets upon our bed
become a river and I begin to swim. Without a sound,
children drown, what drowns inside the body,
what pushes for release.

MIDNIGHT PANCAKES

Claire McQuerry

That was the summer you carried me
from sleep into the humid solarium, stars appearing
through the glass ceiling, and at our feet,
in a box, the smell of blood and slick fur, as Old
Cat fought to release the last of her litter. We waited

with the voice of the river outside,
and when this last one came, head first, and then
all at once, the color was almost
transparent. It took a flashlight
to see the tiny heart and lungs shuddering
against the kitten's wet chest. *This one was born*
inside out you whispered, more to Old Cat
than to me, lifting the thing into a clean towel.

Alone, I could almost see the cricket noise
around me, like the sparkles from Fairy
Godmother's wand in the *Cinderella*
movie. Old Cat began purring, pulling
the rest of the litter against her warm
belly. When you came in again from the night,
the towel empty, I said nothing, having imagined
there were myriad things you could fix.

We went back to the house, the bright
kitchen, where the little radio, always white with
dust and spilt flour, played late night jazz. You made
pancakes, while I sat on the counter—the first
shadow of knowing that every new thing
carries a death somewhere inside it. I ate those
pancakes hot, straight from the pan; they did not,
and never would taste, again quite the same.

FOR SUPPER

Julie Marie Wade

In the kitchen, abalone shells. Abundant. Several, at least, though she has never been to the Tropics. We don't discuss where they come from, the blistering heat, or how the ocean rushes through it: conch—subversive shell—cobwebbed on the windowsill for want of touching. Listening, at least, though she has never been one to cup her ear. It is nearly time to eat. Bees humming at the screen. Hanging plants, fuchsias overflowing. And this again: uncustomary heat. In the summer, awnings creaking. Sweaty agates propagate in pockets. Loose change. Up from the shore, a cool breeze. The pickle jars shelved, clamped tight. No cars on the road now, at least none within earshot. Her hands grating. Candle wax in clam shells, hinges snapped. *Call your father.* Salivate. Pressure. Release. The first, salty bite of the brine.

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE
FINALIST

BLOOD ON MY SHOES

Roger Sheffer

Really, I was just walking through the hospital tunnel looking at my bloody shoes when some guy spoke to me.

"What are you staring at?" he said. His voice wasn't much more than a barking whisper.

"Nothing," I said. "Nobody." I never stare at the patients.

Then he said, "A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."

Or something very close to that. Song lyrics, definitely, but not sung, offered up in the dim underground as a challenge, like, what's the next line of this song, or the one before it? He pointed at me, as if to say, *It's your turn, buddy*. Another light in the tunnel fluttered on, giving me a clear look at the guy. So I stared at him. He wore a maroon bathrobe. He had a long neck and a knob of a head shaved bald, or he had lost his hair in chemo. He looked fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty. I didn't know who the hell he was, except that he was a patient at the Clinic, probably the psychiatric wing. He had on maroon slippers that matched his hospital robe. I coveted the slippers.

"Nobody? You think I'm nobody?"

"I didn't say that," I said. "You're somebody." I was on my way from the lab to my car, done for the day. Usually I walked outside, to clear the chemicals from my head, but it was raining.

"All right, who am I?" the man asked. He had started to follow me. His legs worked okay. He moved right along.

"I don't know."

"It's the hair, isn't it?" He held both hands several inches above his head and around the sides, to indicate the former shape and

extent of his hair, evidently some kind of white man's Afro. I'd seen bad ones, like the guy with the paint-by-numbers show on PBS, and at least a couple musicians on Lawrence Welk, back in the 1970s, when they *had* any hair.

"Could be the hair," I said.

He wanted me to guess his identity, but I don't play that game. I'm discreet. A couple years ago, an important head of state (Middle East) came to town for his lung cancer. It wasn't in the paper but the staff knew. I passed him several times in the tunnel. If he had asked me directly to guess who he was, I would have said, "I hope you're feeling better, sir. We're pleased that you came to our clinic for your treatment." King Hussein—when they wheeled him by, I acted like he was a normal patient. He looked dead already. Don Rickles, Zsa Zsa Gábor, Doris Duke. I had done the blood work for Zsa Zsa, her older sister, her mother, her eighth husband. Famous people came through these tunnels in bathrobe and slippers, bad hair, no hair, and I kept my head down. But this bald guy—I put a sizable corona of hair on him, deleted thirty pounds of fat, colored his pasty face with a youthful, rosy complexion, and, finally, dressed him in an open-collar plaid shirt, corduroy jacket.

I knew. The realization of his identity made me tremble, not from awe, nor from pity, but a kind of fear, the fear I had experienced a few years earlier when my father lay dying in another hospital in another part of the country and morphed from young-old to old-old in the space of a week. As Dylan once sang, *May you be . . . forever young*.

"Take a good look," the patient said.

So I looked at his feet. They were completely ordinary—they could have been my feet.

"All right," he said, "now that you've figured out who I am, are you gonna go out and tell everybody?"

"I doubt it."

"You doubt it. Put yourself in my shoes."

I kept staring at the maroon slippers. I thought about the shoes he would have stored in his hospital locker with his

turtleneck and corduroy jacket. Nice dark brown loafers, nothing too formal, tassels optional. Or Chukka boots, in charcoal gray. I remember cool people wearing them back in the 1970s.



My roommate at Cornell (class of 1972) looked so much like my new tunnel acquaintance—back when he was a famous and attractive singer—that I used to call him Aggie. I could have called my roommate Aggie simply for the fact that he grew up on a Mohawk Valley dairy farm and was majoring in General Agriculture. He thought he could sing. When we sang together, he would take the lower part. He was naive and somewhat deaf but unaware of his handicap. Like in the song “Cloudy,” where the lyrics go, “Down from Berkeley to Carmel,” he insisted it was *Cornell* and not Carmel. I’d whip out the map of California and show him how Carmel made more sense. A hundred miles or so, a reasonable day trip on Highway 101, with a side excursion to Santa Cruz where we might toss breadcrumbs at the seagulls. “No,” he insisted, “it’s Cornell,” as if a mystical freeway connected Berkeley and the place where we attended college, three thousand miles distant. For both Aggie and me, there was a connection, a shortcut between two university towns, somewhat fogged in and potholed. So we did the song the way Aggie wanted. Other misheard song lyrics spewed from his mouth. Like in “Feeling Groovy,” he would sing, “We got to make these moments last.” Moments? It’s supposed to be “mornings.” My roommate wasn’t all that bright. He looked good when he sang, unquestionably, but he dragged me down by singing flat. There’s nothing more difficult than resisting the slow collapse of pitch, nor anything more exhilarating than finding the perfect blend, a musical soul mate.

Not that I had such a great voice, but at least I stayed on pitch, and when I sang along to my albums I blended okay with the performers. Some guy in our dorm said he couldn’t pick out my voice. “Can’t even tell you’re singing.” That was a

major compliment. And old Aggie, when it was his turn to use the record player, would slap on his folkie albums and sing along until he ran out of voice and just moved his lips, at which point, with the deletion of his off-pitch voice, the effect became quite stunning. Looking at his hair, the curve of his mouth, the way he held his head—like a flightless bird—I would think, *Man, if a certain famous person ever got sick and needed a stand-in during a concert, here's the guy for the job. Just teach him the songs, put on a scratch-free recording, and tell him to lip-sync.*

Aggie is no doubt fat and bald now, unavailable for stand-in work. Sold the farm to his son and moved to town, dumped his records in a landfill. Never sings. Groans all night from the pain.



Weeks later the famous bald guy was still getting his treatment at the Clinic. I saw him in the tunnel more than once. The second time, I saw him walking behind a couple of Arab sheiks and their entourage, kind of sponging off their security, like if our small town paparazzi tried to take a photograph, the bodyguards would grab the camera and smash it against the wall. I've pretended to be famous like that, smiling, turning my head a couple degrees so as to offer the smallest acknowledgment. It's one way to break up the monotony of tunnel walking.

The third time I saw him, a Friday around midnight, my shift had just let out. It was raining hard outside and I figured I would pamper myself, walk to my car as far as possible under cover. The tunnel was empty, but not dark. The city authorities kept it reasonably well lit, and it's not as if rusty water dripped from above or blood had splashed on the walls or snakes dangled from the pipes. This was a well scrubbed, utilitarian tunnel connecting hospitals and hotel and parking ramp. The acoustics were really quite good, the ceiling and walls lined with yellow tile. My shoes still had blood on them, a few drops on the toes. It looked purple in this light, somehow more visible. I could

have been a murderer, suddenly aware that the incriminating evidence was walking around in plain sight.

I heard the guy vocalizing. Yodeling. *Lie-la-lie-la-lie-la-lie*. Pushing the high notes. The high notes didn't come out clearly. Even with the great acoustics he sounded like a sick dog. Double-voiced, actually, like two sick dogs attempting a duet. As if I'd ever heard such a thing. I whistled Dixie to let him know he wasn't alone. Then I whistled the same tune he was yodeling. It was one of my favorites.

He saw me and turned away. He pretended to gag.

"Need help?" I asked.

"You a doctor?"

"Just a lab technician." Actually, I was assistant director of the hematology lab. I might have run a test on his blood. I might even have *his* blood on my shoes.

"Somehow I thought everybody around here was a doctor. Supposed to be ten thousand doctors in this town, I read somewhere."

"More like one thousand," I said. I scraped my soles on the gritty cement floor.

"They're all quacks, way overrated."

"Are you okay?"

"What?"

"A minute ago you sounded like you were having trouble. I could call for help or walk you back to your room. I could get a wheelchair for you. There's always a wheelchair in some alcove. I'd be happy to do it."

"Happy?"

"Yes," I said. "It's a service we gladly provide."

He let me see both sides of his face, as if posing for a mug shot. One side was puffy and green compared to the other. Nauseating.

"You know who I am, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Pathetic, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"That's doctor talk. Any time I say something like, 'Hey, Doc, I'm never gonna recover from this,' the doctor answers with, 'I wouldn't say that.' You people all read from the same damn script."

I set down my backpack on a bench. This was going to be more than a brief chat. The guy had a scene he liked to perform with ordinary people like me. He would suck me into a weird delusion with no exit, hire me as his personal assistant, his butler, his vomit remover. My agenda: I wanted him to stop thinking I was a typical Clinic employee. If this took time, I had plenty to spare.

"What did you think was pathetic?" I asked.

"The condition of my voice. You heard it." He coughed. The echo was like a distant gun being fired. "I hope to God you didn't tape it. Fans are always pulling that crap."

"Here? At the Clinic?"

"Possibly."

I frisked myself so he could see I carried no recording device. "No camera either." I opened my lab coat, like a magician claiming to have nothing concealed.

"That's good." Even on two simple words he sounded awful. He reminded me of a patient who'd had his larynx removed and spoke by swallowing air and belching.

Hoping to make this "moment" last, I asked more questions. "Are you seeing a throat specialist at the Clinic? Is that why you're in town?"

"I have a gig at the Elks Club tonight. That's what brought me to town. I'm that desperate." He might have intended to sound sarcastic, but his voice could not convey sarcasm, only bitterness. Elks Club. Maybe. He touched his neck and shuddered. "The official diagnosis is that I have a thyroid condition, and the official PR bullshit is that I'm getting treated for it. Otherwise you wouldn't find me within a thousand miles of Dogpatch."

"Does it affect your singing?"

"Are you deaf? It turns me into a monster."

I almost said, *I wouldn't say that*. "The hair is growing back."

"Yeah, great, like beautiful hair is the most important thing in the world. My *hair*. To think I was ever famous for my hair and women would rush the stage and pull my hair."

"Didn't they?"

He shook his head, as if his minuscule white follicles would move and help to demonstrate the point. Then he told me what *was*, in fact, the most important thing in the world. Singing. This had been the case for him since junior high school. "I lost my top notes. I can't get a wig to cover that fact." He cleared his throat. More distant gunfire. "You heard me. Rat-tat-tat. I can't hit my freakin' high notes. Or I hit them for maybe a second and then I crack and start spitting blood. It's true."

"I'm not afraid of blood. I'm covered with it, most of the time."

"We're talking about my voice, dammit."

"Sing low notes then," I said. "Change your style."

He tightened the knot on his maroon bathrobe and pointed the end of the drawstring at me, not like a gun but more like a paintbrush. "Who are you anyway, man, to be telling me how to sing?"

I don't blame him for sounding nasty. He must have been struck by the oddness of the situation—a person of his stature, a musical legend of the second or third order, being given advice about "vocal production" by an anonymous lab technician with blood on his shoes. In a midwestern tunnel, at midnight. It was freaking out the both of us.

"The fact is," I said, "I've taken a few voice lessons."

"Yeah, the fact is, everybody in the world has taken lessons." His voice cleared somewhat as he grew calmer. "And what good are they? I tell you, the loudest singers who ever cracked a windshield probably took voice lessons. Fifty bucks a shot."

"I paid thirty."

"And all it did was make them able to sing louder, which increased the pain of the poor folks who had to listen to them, or it boosted their ego, or it created a perverted relationship between them and their teacher. That's what you get for a hundred bucks

an hour in this business. The poor saps still couldn't sing in tune and yet they believed they were one phone call away from fame and fortune. People used to come up to me in the street and sing in my face because some two-bit voice teacher told them they were wonderful. They wasted their money, right?"

"Right."

"Not that I couldn't have helped them out if they had real talent. And some of the *best* singers were born that way. Are you one of them?"

"No," I said. "I'm average. Never made a record, so if I was ever any good there's no proof of it. Maybe a few old cassettes in my mother's apartment, the tape all wrinkled. I haven't sung in public for decades." Nor had *he*, really. When was his last public appearance? Ten years ago, during a PBS fund drive, one of those horrible oldies shows where only one original member of the group is still living, with gray hair and no teeth. "I have to hurry along," I said. "Gotta get home."

"To the wife and kids."

"Actually, no."

"Glad to hear that," he said, perking up. "You can stay up all night with me. I was beginning to believe you had a normal life." He tapped me on the shoulder, hard enough that I felt pain for a few seconds. "Who needs a family?"

"I thought you had a wife and kids."

"Everything is temporary. Love, respect, a working phone, copyright protection. Lemme ask you something," he said, in a casual tone. His speaking voice really was getting better. He sounded human, like an old friend. "I mean, you're not in any big hurry. Do you know the last thing on my mind?"

"I couldn't even guess."

"No, I meant the *song*." He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "'The Last Thing on My Mind.'"

"That's an oldie. Judy Collins."

"Tom Paxton, but who gives a crap anymore?"

"He still living?"

"You know," he said, "I always wanted to sing that kind of

music, that kind of pseudo-authentic folkie stuff, but it was passé by the time I came on the scene. I had to sing all this new material, by you-know-who. It was all over the map. We'd have a whole freakin' orchestra for backup, gospel singers, church bells. All I needed was a piano player."

"So, you weren't really a folksinger."

He rubbed the top of his head, then brought his hand down. His hand shook violently, as if it had picked up an electrical charge from the white hair bristles. "Here's a shocking fact. The first wave of so-called folksingers are in their seventies now. Eighties. Those who aren't dead."

"It makes me sad," I began.

"What?"

"It makes me sad when *Entertainment Tonight* does celebrity birthdays and they give the person's real age. They should just wish them happy birthday and leave it at that. Judy Collins is sixty-six." I pulled that number out of the air. I had no idea how old she was.

"You're off by a few," he said.

"I guess you would know."

"Of course," he said. "We exchange the most pathetic birthday cards. They never do my birthday. On that TV show."

"Why not? You're famous."

"They have no clue what year I was born. Check your latest World Almanac, and you'll see me listed but no year of birth. I'd sue the bastards if they ever put the year in. Go to the internet, type my name in the box and check out the unauthorized bios. They're all guessing."

I would have guessed his year of birth right then, thrown it against the shiny, yellow wall to see if it stuck. 1940? Pretty close. Older than Dylan, younger than Elvis. Same age as Lennon. *John Lennon, past retirement age, getting fat and ugly*. Yoko Ono, now in her seventies—I just read about that.

"How old do you think I am?"

"It would be rude of me to guess."

"That's right," he said, almost smiling. "I wish someone in

this town would be rude to me.”

“You’re not sixty yet, are you?”

A nurse came through the tunnel, swinging a couple of tote bags. She sang a few words, like “honey, honey, baby,” testing the great acoustics. I think she knew who this guy was and wanted to impress him. Like, make me a diva, get me out of this uniform, out of this stupid town. She sounded like Carly Simon, bouncing on the high notes. A very young Carly Simon, who only needed to be discovered and pampered and recorded while walking through an acoustically-perfect tunnel. We stood and listened. Her heels made a nice, wet tapping noise as she walked along.

“Not bad,” I said. “A few sharp notes.”

“Sometimes it’s more about looks than talent. More about being in the public eye and misbehaving and creating a legend.” The bald guy poked me again. “What the hell was I asking you about?”

“The Last Thing on My Mind?”

“Thank you. That song has been driving me bananas,” he said. “Maybe it’s the medication. I keep screwing up the verse that goes something like, ‘My thoughts are a-rumblin.’” He sang in a low raspy voice, eyes closed tight, like a ninety-year-old blues singer. “In the subway, I think.”

“A-tumblin,” I said.

“Right. Keep going.”

I sang the entire verse for him, not to show off, but to get it right. I sang in my best voice, in tune, open, light, unpinched, folky. Good echo. It might have seemed as if I were auditioning to be his partner. I even did the chorus, with a specific feeling, thinking of a woman I might have loved, but not well enough, and who, disgusted with my attitude, took off one day, unannounced, because, of course, the best women often did pack up and leave this town. I gave it that feeling, as if my life were like that, a tragedy that I had managed to step back from, objectify, and sing about. He nodded. He placed his hand over his mouth and coughed. Evidently, something had connected.

But he didn't need a partner, especially one whose range fell so close to the way he used to sing. He sang along with me anyway, an octave lower, and got a few more words wrong. Like, in the next-to-last verse he sang, "For the weeks they have been steadily growing," and I stopped right there and I actually touched him on the arm, as if to stop him from crossing a busy street. As if I really knew this guy. I told him, "It's *weeds*, not weeks," and he kind of pouted for a while, and I realized how sick he was. I should have treated him more kindly. Like, he wouldn't be appearing with me on stage in the near or distant future. Unless the Clinic doctors worked a miracle, his career was finished.

"You know," I said, patting him on the arm, "either way makes sense." And he thought so, too.

We finally sat down on the bench, like two old buddies. He told me about the times he had screwed up the lyrics on stage in front of thousands of people. Woodstock, Central Park, Monterey. It never mattered. Sometimes he had sung nonsense verses until his mind got back on track, and he had wondered even then whether he had something wrong with him, medically, like some inoperable brain tumor. I told him what it was like to be cursed with a perfect memory. Once I got started on a song I never forgot the lyrics.

And then he said, "We'd be great together then, wouldn't we?"

I had no quick answer to that. The two of us, together? Standing on stage in front of a real audience? Like, sharing a microphone, with our faces only inches apart as we leaned toward each other to perfect our blend? Is that what he meant? He should have contacted me twenty-five or thirty years ago, when I would have benefited from that kind of offer, when I actually worshipped this guy and would have sprouted wings to get close to him. Wasn't that the ultimate scene in every half-assed musician's fantasy—to climb up on stage and perform with his hero, the singer whose voice he had so often lip-synched or doubled? Even to perform in a yellow-tiled underground tunnel connecting two hospitals.

Finally I said, "You could sing with the nurses. They'd get a big kick out of it."

"I'd rather sing with another guy."

"Not me, though," I said. "I'm an amateur."

"You're very good, actually."

Okay. I should have asked him right then to put his appraisal in writing and sign it for me, as if I were some idiot autograph hound. I had a Clinic memo pad in my pocket, a Clinic pen. He didn't even have to write it if his hands were too shaky; I would take dictation and then ask him to initial that note. I recalled the episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer ended up in a mental hospital and befriended an inmate who claimed to be Michael Jackson. I mean, maybe this guy in the tunnel wasn't who I thought he was, or even who *he* thought he was. "Gotta get home," I said, standing up from the bench.

"Right," he said, "you were just going. Going away."

"With no word of farewell," I said, half singing.

He winced, shook his head. Then he had this look in his face as if he were trying to remember more lyrics, maybe from his own songs, the two or three he had written. Or it was pain. Or both. Because when you think about those songs and how they came into being, you get a vibe, a tremor in the gut, a wave of heat in your mind that is much more than nostalgia. And I shouldn't put too many Tom Paxton lyrics in this story because after a certain point I guess I'd be owing him royalties—or his heirs, if he's no longer living—but I'm thinking about the last verse and why somebody might have those particular words running through his head. *Each song in my breast dies a-borning.* Or is it *breath*? Like, that's where the poor guy is now, on life support if he made it back to his hospital room. Can't write, can't sing, wanders the tunnels, ghost-like, making people look at him and remember who he used to be and even sing with him for a while because he doesn't want to die thinking he missed that last big chance.

BREAKFAST

Thom Ward

Harold, yes, let's call him Harold, as H is for hardwood and D is for devoted, was not a particularly smart man. Yet, like many others, he found it asinine to pay thousands of dollars for a piece of granite to be quarried, carved and engraved, then stood upright at the head of a dead body in a large flat area, full of thousands of already dead bodies.

Matilda, would you mind if I bury you in our yard? he asks one morning over breakfast. And could I make a wooden tombstone from one of our trees and place it by your grave?

Why, that's a lovely idea, says his wife, who was sick with disease. I've always thought of myself as a Dutch Elm.

I'm glad you like the idea, says Harold. Things made to be upright should stay upright. He was thinking of the maples outside their house as opposed to the granite beneath it.

And darling, you should make little wooden tombstones from our maples and put them in a plastic bowl.

What should I do then? he asks, his mouth full of Wheaties.

Why, pour some milk over the little fellows and eat them for breakfast, she replies. Bark is loaded with vitamins and minerals.

What a splendid idea! says Harold. A bowl full of little wooden tombstones—now there's a breakfast of champions.

Don't forget the additional benefits. You'll never have to pay the tree man to prune.

Yes, let's call her Matilda, as M is for mortuary and A is for ashes.

That's wonderful, no more tree man, says Harold. *And* I'll save money on cereal. My gosh, that stuff is expensive.

IN THE TIME OF THE CATERPILLARS

Kristin Naca

Auntie Ining renders fat from slabs of pork she's cut into cubes.

At the kitchen table, I render "Scene from the Garden of Gethsemane" in chalk, in the backdrop a greasy staccato.

Sweeten your tongue to the roof of your mouth till /e/s come out, if you want to pronounce Auntie I's name.

Today begins Elvis week and I's heart pounds, Elvis sweetening her meaty lining.

Though her name's the shape of an "I," Auntie I's the shape of an O. In childhood fotos an O. A wonder she's ever known love.

A returning GI, E's sweet on a girl rendered helpless when she loses her top in the staccato of waves.

At the party that night, he renders a song he sweetens with dance, a shag in his tail for the swoony damsels.

When I look down, eyelids of apostles are sweetened shut from too much dust, all my over-touching.

When Elvis clenches his jaw as someone else speaks, it's all his over-acting.

Tupelo, Mississippi, 1929. A child who would be a very tan king is born.

On the TV Elvis soothes the savage gypsies who store booty in a shiny caboose; the Acapulco cliff divers; shirtless, traapeze

artists; a tizzy of dizzy love-hung women; seriously, devoutly, desperately nuns; bullfighters—make that one. *Ah, but Don Pedro can this one sing?*

All along, the black gum in our front yard fizzes with caterpillars; locusts scorch the sky with a sticky, torch song.

In some other cases, the black gum's rendered, the black tupelo and the tupelo gum.

In waves the curious neighbors clench at the brown woolies barking up the black gum's skin.

"Green surrenders to a staccato of Os," goes the leaves' fading stomata.

When the black gum's leaves go faint and holy, my parents put their feelers on.

At dusk, the dusty apostles also fade as Christ begs for strength in the face of death!

How the silky caterpillars litter the pavement, falling through the holes they've eaten, to death.

With our fingers, we clench ice cream scoops between saltines, sweeten avocado with sugar and swoon.

When Auntie I rings fizz from the Os of a sponge, her fingers bark from all the bleaching.

"She's as big as a house," Mom and Dad pound her when she isn't around or isn't looking.

She steeps her branch in the murky water, fingers for the rice sweetening the bottom of the pan.

Pick you poison, says the neighbor, a peevish redbud blooming
in his yard.

Gripped with love, I pound white rice until I'm full, white bread
till I'm numb.

A chalk of scorched meat on the bottom of the pan. An oily O
on the chicharron rag.

Outlines of apostles I've fingered into Os, even scalded with
grease they keep sleeping.

When Dad starts with war buddies burning monkeys from trees,
Mom goes to sweep the brown woolies to the street.

I gum on the chewy chicharron bark, at the fatty white parts:
hard swallow.

If food is love, pound-for-pound, Auntie Ining's *a hunk o' hunk o'*.

Wise men say: "When Christ calls, fill his jug with laughter, his
eye sockets with song."

No black people sun in *Blue Hawaii*, nor *Fun in Acapulco*, ni
Viven en Las Vegas tampoco, leaving but one explanation: too
tan.

In a canoe Elvis fingers his tiny instrument. O flaming ukulele
of passion! Ukelele of desire!

What a gas. Dad pounds his foot, sweetening his story with, *The
singed bodies fizzed*.

Elvis, have you ever known love? Have you ever never wanted
the girl and still known love?

A ticked off Mom and Dad tweeze bodies with fingers through
their spiny hair.

I watch them in wonder through the kitchen window, the two
Os in the front of my head.

BAPTISM

Kristin Naca

The taller men with baseball bats, a tree branch garbled with knots, log iron, and leftover pipe from the fence they put up last summer. The shorter men gripping buck knives for slashing at the pig's neck. And ripened on a dry slop of peanuts, cornflakes and newspaper shavings, moiled between the washer and dryer and shelves of dust-caked soda bottles, the pig that grew tall enough to sniff and lick the doorknob. So, from the other side, I watched it turn and, hearing it flicker at night, dreamt of succoring the pig's escape. Then, they unleashed it. It drumming its blunt, fleshy hammers through the downstairs hallway, its high-pitched cough the air it dragged over vocal chord lathing. Then they prodded it across the yard and cornered it under the porch. So with a *ka-thunk* the pig, then stilled in its tracks, had to watch as one of the men crept up and dragged his knife across its neck. They held the sullen body in their pink, craggy hands, standing up, in order to catch its blood in a bucket. Blood Mother cooked into a musty, black blood-food we smothered our rice in. After that, the men heaved the body on a picnic table wrapped in Glad bags and tape and rolled the carcass on its back and split the skin down the long belly, its guts oozing out—all beigy, peachy and blue like clouds of chewed bubble-gum or the bulbs of a wilted, worn-in coin purse. Collapsed hoses, too soft and slick to pile up, spread across the lawn in pearly pools. Then, carefully, the men excised the gall bladder before it broke and spoiled the meat, gallbladder curled like a finger on a folding chair beside them while they emptied the carcass to the snout. On the grass, the heart and lungs lay, and the throat ridged and perfect as a staircase. And then, the new backbone a metal rod they pierced and guided through the carcass. Tackle they hoisted onto some posts, so—though I can't remember exactly—they could turn the whole thing on a spit. How it hovered for hours over the orange coals that startled whenever the juices dripped, and the rangy smell of singed pork-meat and charcoal slinked into our sweat, and the pork skin transluted, cells shimmering amber and snapping easily to the touch, hot loosened fat

down our fingers, until the meat fell apart without us hacking at it.
The men, smoking packs of Kool cigarettes and piling up the empty
Schlitz beer cans, hardly mentioning anything about the child.

MISS SCARLETT

Katie Cappello

I do not cry in front of anyone.
Sucking on the speckled end
of another cigarette
I hold the lovely smoke in my lungs
for a moment, then exhale
through the lips, move on
to the next pair of pantyhose,

each seam straight
down the back of each calf.
This heat makes me do strange things:
bite into mango flesh so hard
fibers get stuck between my teeth—
the pain of sugar, enamel, separation,

the red surprise of swollen gums.
Do you want to kiss?
Hold a breast in each hand?
Slide your stomach
across the small of my back
where my dress dips down in promise?

I'd rather discuss
the way people breathe
when one has come and the other hasn't.
One chest rises up, down, up
down, a well-greased piston.

The other barely moves,
drags a deep, irregular
march through wet pastures. I am no
debutante, tobacco leaves

and white gloves. I am another type
of alien. Sweat on my upper lip,
a pearl moustache, an invitation
to lick. Do you desire? Well,
so do I.

LAND OF PLENTY

Timothy Liu

To have flown
halfway round the world for this, the two of us
listening

to the same bells striking the hours
as I made my way from hotel to his flat,
up five flights

to the door he'd always leave
ajar—three rooms overlooking a square
that remained

vacant as we stood there
on his balcony where I could still make out
the corner of his bed,

the tea steaming
in a cup on his crooked kitchen table,
the lid already off

the honey jar—
Nor did we need to exchange a word,
cracked porcelain

warm against my palms,
the soothing breakfast tea unlocking
my nostrils and throat

as I paced from shelves
to writing desk where he had tacked a print
of Breughel's *Land of Plenty*

against the wall—
three peasants passed out under a table
loaded down

with so much bounty all around
I couldn't tell if they were napping, drunk,
or simply dead.

Had he seen it in Munich?
he who was already broke, his phone
to be shut off
in less than a week, the honey
and tea about as much as he could afford—
the two of us at his table,
saying nothing.

BOTTOMLESS

Pir Rothenberg

He met her on his first visit to Mistura, the small Roger's Park restaurant where she waited tables and I tended bar. She wore a frock patterned with piebald birds, and lusterless army boots that looked as soft as soot. Her pale hair was up, wrapped loosely around the V of chopsticks, and her face and long bare arms were glazed with moonlight, cool and marble-blue. On the silver tag pinned above her small left breast, Mr. Brow thought he saw the words "Oh no," but her name was Oona.

The restaurant, a snug dark cellar with windows at street level, was small enough for Oona to handle alone during the week, but on the weekends Lydia, a college girl with red hair and dimples, shared the tables and hosted. When Mr. Brow came in on a Friday it was too early for the usual crowd of regulars. A mazurka played softly behind the milky steam coming from the kitchen, and the cook's dog groaked for food at the table of a few old, smoky men bent over a card game that Mr. Brow couldn't identify. He smiled when Lydia sat him, and his eyes chased the strings of her waist-apron as she withdrew to the kitchen. But when he pulled his nose from the menu, it was Oona who stood over him, without ledger, pen, or pleasantry, her wrists crossed like a barb behind her back.

Like most newcomers, especially those who were not immigrants from one of the countries in which the dishes originated, Mr. Brow was having difficulty making a selection. He drummed the edge of the menu with a finger, met Oona's eyes, and said with poise, "I haven't eaten here before." Andre, owner and head cook, had designed it so as to give little hint, besides the exotic languages in which the dishes' names were written, as to where any item came from, or what any of it was. He said it would add to the mystique of the restaurant. Oona preserved that mystique too well by offering Mr. Brow nothing more than cold patience.

"What's *duvec*?" he asked. "German?"

"No," she said. Her face stayed impassive.

Mr. Brow leaned back in his chair, grinned and flirted for a suggestion.

She raised her chin and showed him the white of her neck. She asked if he ate meat. Of course he did.

"Then I'll bring you *ko hjerte*," she said. "It's beef. Very traditional."

It was a simple thing to see that Mr. Brow was unconcerned for what was coming, melting as he was like a pad of butter in a warm kettle for her. As she glided toward the kitchen to relay the order, she flashed her eyes at me, and I saw a curl sprout in the corner of her mouth. When I was young, still in Turkey, an involuntary gnashing of my teeth always foretold any mischief I was planning. My mother would see the little muscles of my jaw bulge and deflate, then keep me in for the day. Such was Oona's smirk the sign of her own vengeful preparations for any customer she felt had crossed her.

She returned with Mr. Brow's dish, set it before him—"Dig in," she said—and left him gazing down in the warm, odorous air of his *ko hjerte*, a quarter-inch-thick slice of crimson flesh, darkly glistening and shaped vaguely like a Valentine's Day heart. He tested it with his knife, then unsettled one of the purplish mushroom blooms that sat adjacent to a pile of pebble-grey beans. His face paled at the first bite as the flavor, gamey and sweet, spread across his tongue. He choked back a cough, then gulped from his wine.

I continued to watch him eat from my station behind the bar, and all the while he watched Oona's haunches weave their way through the oak chairs and tables as if her work was a dance, a servant's ballet. She settled against the bar, pale and detached, the long symmetry of her face like a Byzantine Madonna's, and her steady pale-moon glow interrupted only when she clawed for cubes of ice in her glass to mash between her teeth—a habit of hers, among others that were less winsome.

"How do you think he likes it, Simi?"

I tossed my head back to please her, forced a quiet laugh.

"I'll get a doggy bag ready," I said, but Mr. Brow actually seemed to be acquiring a taste for the *hjerter*, steadily taking in each bite with no sign of slowing.

What worried me at that moment was the idea I already had of Mr. Brow: I knew him from a place in Lake View where I worked three years ago. We had never met or spoken, but he dined there each night, alone. He was wealthy but unassuming; his suits were somber, and the generous cash tips he left were always tucked deeply inside the receipt book. One girl, Monica, became something of his personal waitress, and then his lover. From the gossip in the kitchen, it wasn't the first waitress he had dated. Ten years tending bar, I had known others like him, not connoisseurs of food, but of the girls who served it. Such a man visited the same restaurant night after night, asking each time for the same waitress until he didn't have to ask anymore, until she came to him, blushing, smiling, the way I remembered Monica had for Mr. Brow. A thrill roiled softly in him as he watched her labor, talking to one table and moving for the next, cradling plates too hot and too full, hauling the dirty ones away: the lipstick-smudged mugs and dirty ashtrays, the balled-up napkins, the remains of cold food bled together, dried or still dripping. It was the juxtaposition of it that I thought he, and other such men, found beautiful, secretly knowing the contours of his lover's nakedness as she stood politely laughing with a family of four, being reminded with every dish she brought him of the passion of their lovemaking hours before, and knowing that for all her skill at pleasing a roomful of patrons, her servitude to him was of another level.

Such men were predators: gracious, generous, kind while the thrill lasted, but quick to pursue new services and another poor, pretty creature to render them. Perhaps this is what rankled Oona about Mr. Brow; perhaps she sensed right away that he was looking for a new girl, and with a cruel joke hoped to jar the thought from his head.

When Oona returned to check on Mr. Brow, she asked if he enjoyed his *hjerter*, though she paid less mind than before to the foreign stress on the word; it rolled lazily from her lips and must have sounded somewhat familiar to him.

"I'm sorry?" He wiped his mouth with his napkin.

"Your *heart*," she said, and her pupils caught the candlelight. "How did you enjoy your cow's heart?"

He watched her for signs of a joke, but his horror was only momentary, a wrinkle that smoothed into a cool smile.

"It was delicious," he said, and leaned back so she could remove his empty plate.

This is when I felt in my stomach what my mother must have felt, a vague and queasy premonition that Mr. Brow, having just proven himself game for the challenge, would not be gotten rid of so easily.

When he returned the next night he told Lydia, when she greeted him at the door, "I'm looking for the other waitress."

Of course he was. It was busier this night; Slavs sat in running suits along the bar, forking up sausage and onions. The sausage was made of cabbage and lamb brains, the onions actually tulip bulbs fried in ginger, and I wondered if Oona would make this Mr. Brow's next surprise. At his table he craned his neck to find her between the slump-shouldered patrons around the bar. Her legs strode from one table to the next, to the kitchen and back out, her arms languid, her long neck liquid. She noticed him and he tried to make his eyes sparkle, but she disappeared too quickly behind the spring coats and umbrellas of a departing table. After thirty minutes, Lydia came by his table and murmured an apology for his wait, but Oona appeared just then with a plate of food. I smiled to myself; she hadn't even brought him a menu.

"Since you enjoyed the *hjerter* so much last night," she said, setting down the plate with exaggerated delicacy.

On his plate were fiery twists of peppers and small, flesh-pink petals upon a bed of kasha. She had delivered duck tongues instead of sausage—not that she offered to tell him.

"Like a flower," said Mr. Brow, and she rewarded him with a smile.

She stood by as he tried one of the tongues and made a noise of approval, his teeth working the rubbery texture.

"Now a pepper," she said, and with her fingers she plucked one off his dish and began to suck it like candy, her lips pursing, her cheeks dimpling.

The drink order I had just taken vanished completely from memory.

"So, you remember me from last night," he said, sounding pleased and a little smug. He tried giving his name but she interrupted, leaned in closer and implored him once more to try a pepper. He smiled, put one in his mouth. "Oona," he said, chomping, "how long have you worked? . . ."

His face splashed with sudden heat, and I could see his eyes well with tears. He tried to speak again but the breath in his lungs had already ignited and no noise escaped. Oona pulled slowly away and looked down on him with cold eyes as if to say, there, now let this game be finished. He reached for his drink, but there was none and his hand stopped in mid-air. He wheezed a desperate smile up at her.

Oona rolled her eyes. "I'll get you something," she said, and left.

I watched from the bar as his face grew warmer, redder. Oona was the only one on the staff who could eat those peppers with no water or dairy on hand. He shoveled some rice into his mouth, hoping to dull the burn, but I knew the heat was spreading like brushfire along his lips and turning the fingers he had used to pick up the pepper into cherry-tipped tinder.

He waved for Lydia, who was skittering by, and breathed, "Please . . . Is there any water?"

She glanced around warily for Oona. "I'll let your waitress know."

Struggling with his tie, he got up and elbowed his way between the other men at the bar, beckoning for me now and rasping something I couldn't understand. He was a handsome

man up close, even while his rosy face expanded—dark hair, light eyes beneath articulate brows, a sophisticated mouth and jaw. I had just then set down a double vodka for another patron. It would have been possible, I admit, for me to prevent Mr. Brow from snatching it up and draining it with two swift chugs, but at that moment I was keen that he should take the hint—leave and do not return—that Oona felt was somehow below her to vocalize. The entire restaurant seemed to pause; Mr. Brow's eyes closed into slits at the shock of the drink and, to the explosive hoorah of several drunken men aside him, his whole body grimaced. He wasn't so handsome anymore.

Most men who crossed Oona did so by flirting too aggressively, by overstepping their role in the brief love affair that was every contact between servant and served, those men whom I had watched bolt for the door with her corkscrew grin twisting in their backs. Such men made trite innuendoes or blurted offensive suggestions; they reached for the small of her back as they gave their order, or clasped her wrist while they handed back the check. Oona managed them easily by tricks similar to those she used on Mr. Brow—an enchanting glance, an exotic dish. But Mr. Brow didn't stay away even a day to nurse his wounds, physical or otherwise. Nor had he transgressed his role like those cretins. Maybe it was this combination that so infuriated Oona, the fact that he played his role of patron so earnestly and so well, and yet so obviously wasn't there for the fare.

Mr. Brow sat at the bar this time, perhaps wary of another pepper. He ordered vodka, perhaps wanting now to master the taste of it. When Oona saw him—casually reading a magazine in his casual suit, hair swept back—the light in her face flickered like a faulty bulb.

"Let Lydia," I said sternly in her ear, wiping dry a tumbler.

Her eyes darted at me, then back to him. And then that grin, disrupting all the darkness. I watched her move swiftly toward him, and I would have had mortal fear for the man, appearing as she did ready to drive a corkscrew into his skull, if I hadn't been

stricken with the far worse suspicion that she was beginning to enjoy his visits. It wasn't that I feared her falling for him, but the distance she might go in happily punishing him for his cool perseverance. I had felt the hints of her temperament before, and they were like those brief, icy currents along the lake-bottom that snake around your ankles and then vanish.

As for lovers, I had seen Oona with only one, a short-lived affair with an older man when she started on at Mistura. He would wait for her each night in his car behind the restaurant, staring straight ahead, blowing curls of smoke against the windshield. I was hauling out trash when I saw them near the garbage bin kissing. It looked like a passionate kiss; although her arms hung listlessly by her sides, her lips moved as if to devour his. Partially obscured on the steps that ascended from the kitchen to the back lot, I watched, then made to turn so as not to disrupt them. But as I did I saw her jerk away from the man and belch a noise of disgust. I couldn't hear the murmuring words they shared before she kissed him again, and again jolted back, this time spitting on the ground—not the way Mr. Brow had drooled into a napkin, trying to ease his burning tongue, but as if a wasp had flown into her mouth. The man recoiled, struck her face. Before I could think, I made myself visible and let the bag of trash fall dramatically to the ground. The man eyed me, then got into his car. Oona, clasping the side of her face, walked past me without a word. I never saw the man again.

We took the same train home, Oona and I, but her stop was three earlier than mine. Although we'd often arrive at the platform at the same time, I was too shy, and she too disinterested, to make any effort to sit by one another, or even in the same car. But that night I took the seat across from her.

"I'll walk you home," I said. "In case he's waiting."

She looked over at me and smiled, the fluorescent shadows gliding across her teeth.

"You speak English better than you let on."

The tremor of the train buzzed though my body and I was as happy as a boy to be received by her, but I also felt the muscles

of my jaw begin to make knots. It was true; I spoke English quite well. I was born in Ankara, where both my parents had taught English; my father, an American, brought us back to his hometown of Chicago when I was eight. I was raised and educated there. I became a lawyer, the youngest to be hired at the firm for which I worked. I fell in love with the woman who sold and maintained our office plants; we married the same year in the city's botanical garden. We bought a home and a car. We visited my parents on Sundays, and hers, who lived on the beaches of Delaware, every summer. We began trying for children. Eventually we went to the doctor's, where we learned that it was not she who was barren, but me. At that moment my entire life, and everything I had blindly accumulated around me, sat stagnant, a sour taste in the back of my mouth. The taste crept up from the sudden and vast emptiness I felt inside me, and from the emptiness inside my wife. It didn't go away. I realized that I had never wanted anything before, had never even known what it was to want, but now I was hungry, voracious, yet had little idea as to how to feed myself, or even what it was I thought I craved.

My wife and I divorced. I quit my job and went back to Turkey for the first time since I was a child, but there was nothing I wanted there. When my money was gone, I came back to Chicago and began tending bar, where all day and night I was surrounded by the conversations of other people who wanted things. They wanted a new job, a new television, a new car. They wanted a better husband, a friend they could trust, more children, or less. They wanted a raise, a word of compliment, another chance, another shot of bourbon. How articulate they were about all the things they hungered for, and yet the more I listened, and was called upon to describe my own wants, the more I realized that what I had earlier taken for hunger was only a pit in my stomach turning over like a loaf of lead. I desired nothing more than to desire anything at all, because a lack of desire for a thing precluded my ability to search for it, and then to know that thing when I found it.

Life with no appetite, I decided, was bland, and for a long time I was jealous of those I served. To avoid being drawn into their lives—their wants, their searches, their failures—I withdrew behind the affectation of a Turkish accent stronger than I had ever had. I ignored plurals and blundered tenses. I whistled a song from my youth that my mother sang; I had forgotten the words, but I imagined the melody conjured for them strange, fog-laden landscapes. If a customer tried to draw me in too close, tried questioning me of my own life, I'd blurt out something nonsensical or rattle off a long tale from my childhood that had no bearing on the conversation. But the better I became with my act, the more my customers eased their guard and revealed to me all the more private matters; they stopped asking for anything in return, no longer demanded anything from me but my ear, which they never assumed could understand half the secrets they spilled.

Secure in my role, I still found it necessary to move quickly from one bar to the next, from upscale dining establishments to sooty pool halls. The only remnant now of any personal desire I had was to be around people who at the very least wanted things that were different, and wanted them in ways that might rub off on me. This was how I found Mistura. The menu itself foretold of alien appetites, otherworldly cravings. And this was how I found Oona, the hungriest girl I had ever known.

After we spoke on the train, I escorted her home each night, down the dark, narrow sidewalks, hemmed on either side with thin chains that drooped from post to post, protecting all the miniature night gardens of the city. These walks were the happiest time of my day, the only reason I stayed at Mistura, for alongside Oona the long flat world seemed to bend with surprising contour, and things I had never seen in the once bland darkness began to sparkle with life. The maples and oaks lining the street dripped lamplight, and figures far ahead appeared and disappeared, and shapes in storefront doorways stretched and yawned, and couples sharing a swing in the park laughed into each other's arms. We'd walk quietly, nothing but

the sound of her army boots on the pavement, and the queer nocturnal music of chattering birds. Along the way I'd think about that kiss I saw her give, or rather take like it was a food, and how odd it was that she could spit out a kiss, as if the taste of this man affronted her. Finally, at her building, I'd bid her goodnight and wait until the door closed all the way behind her. She trusted me: I had given up my secret to her. Sometimes I stood by her building a while longer, watching for a new light to come alive in the dark windows and show me which apartment was hers. I waited for it like a secret she would return to me, but the building always stayed dark, and eventually I would move on, mildly disappointed, but increasingly aware of something rumbling to life in my soul.

On that third night, Oona faced Mr. Brow, each on either side of the bar; she shifted her weight onto one leg, locked her arms over her chest. I waited for her to hiss, to tell him to leave.

"What do you recommend today?" he said, looking up at her, cool as ever.

They regarded each other, neither faltering.

She shifted to the other leg—a sign of weakness that Mr. Brow wouldn't miss—and said, "What do you like?"

Ah, even worse! Don't engage him in conversation!

"I like filet mignon and chicken Kiev." Confident, like he'd rehearsed it.

"We haven't got any of that," she said, hardly before he finished.

"Shrimp," he said, "lamb shank, potatoes au gratin, veal—"

"No."

Nice. Say as little as possible.

"Soft-shelled crabs. Asparagus. Swordfish—"

"This isn't Red Lobster. Do you have any food allergies?"

A good move, make him afraid.

"I'm . . . lactose intolerant."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Thank you."

That arrogant grin—he's calling your bluff.

"Do you need some time with the menu?"

Don't offer him that!

"No," he said, "I can't make heads or tails of it."

". . . Then what would you like?"

"I'd like for you," he said, moving his brows to the height of their charm, "to bring me some dinner."

And then it happened. A ritual was born: he came every evening, and every evening she served him our most exotic dishes, ones no one ever ordered, ones even Andre wouldn't eat and prepared only with great reluctance. She served him an array of tongue dishes: our calf's tongue in cabbage, potted tongue and ginger, and pottage of larks—beef tongue in lambs' broth and lemons. He ate poached sturgeon and sprats for her, sweetbreads, sevruga caviar and cod-liver pâté. He devoured haggis and horse meat for her, and the heads of lambs, stuffed with spiced brain; and rolled pigs' spleen, ox tail soup, and deep fried tripe; and blood-red Russian borscht with black eel, and squirrels sautéed upon wilted greens with a side of devilled kidneys. Oona and I often had a drink after the restaurant closed, and being in closer proximity to him, she'd ask me how Mr. Brow fared with the meal, and what I thought she should serve the next night. Having grown bored with the menu, she sometimes asked Andre for things that weren't on it. Not that Mr. Brow ever saw, or even asked to see, the menu again. He took all his meals at the bar now; sipping expensive vodka, he, like so many others, soon found it relaxing to burden me with the details of his life. There was his work, which I didn't understand and which sounded to me very dull and lonely. Other times, when he thought we were sharing a moment of camaraderie, he asked about Oona, but I always answered evasively, with feigned stupidity. Him: "Simi, who's that man she's speaking with? I've seen him before. . . . Is he her boyfriend?" Me: "She like boys. Or maybe girl, who knows?" Him: "Did she say anything last night after I left?" Me: "She say you must be hungry. Ha-ha. Much of the crazy food in here, yeah? Special today: piranha!"

Sometimes I asked him questions, too.

"Why come here so much?" It was the second week. He was having difficulty with the *kokoretsi*, a Greek recipe of sheep's liver, heart and testicles, cooked in the sheathe of intestines.

"I like the service," he said with a wink.

I had already told Oona what I thought of Mr. Brow, of how I believed he preyed on waitresses, but this only strengthened her resolve to play the game, to serve him something he could finally not eat. So I began to devise ways of shaking Mr. Brow from his perfect rendition of a kindly customer. All he had to do, I thought, was take a step over the line—by taking her hand in his, by asking to see her outside of the restaurant. Then Oona would snap; the pot would boil over in a maddened white rush and extinguish its flame.

"You take her out to date?" I said, slyly. "Take her to *nice* place, ha-ha."

But Mr. Brow had too much expertise in this form of seduction to act on any of my suggestions.

"In good time, Simi," he'd say with an air of wisdom, as if I were his apprentice.

As well as he played his part, finishing each meal she delivered, never breaking his role, it was obvious he could barely stomach some of the foods. The plate of fried pigs' snouts, for instance, took him two hours to consume, and the ground dog-flesh in betel-nut leaves was an agonizing three. Still, each time she arrived before him, his dinner on her arm, he greeted Oona with that smile, like a prince who affords the occasional gesture of deference to his inferior. And she'd beam a smile back that he must have known was exaggerated. Sometimes she said nothing to him the whole night; other times she coddled him, bringing him endless small dishes of jellied meats and seafood, watching him eat from a distance with an almost clinical interest that greatly unsettled me.

To my astonishment, Mr. Brow did not conceal from me his passions: all the girls he could remember dating, he said, had

been waitresses. They waited in greasy-spoon diners, in cool Italian cafés, and in family-style chains. He found something “very sad and very sweet” about watching a young waitress work. The way they’d flirt for the businessmen downtown, powwowing over lunch, and graciously answer all the women in suburban bistros who wanted to know where the coffee was grown. He liked how they flayed the foil from those dark bottles of wine; how quickly they could calculate tips and totals in their heads; how they cursed in Spanish with the cooks by the kitchen doors. He liked watching them wrap silverware in napkins and wipe greasy menus in the slow hours, and then through the dinner rush be pulled in every direction by a hundred greedy desperate hands. He hadn’t planned such a pattern of dating, he said, but confessed to knowing it wasn’t a coincidence that he dined out each meal, nearly every day. His dates were usually younger than he, and comparatively poor. He liked to pamper them, opening doors and opening his home, paying for everything they did—operas and ballgames, cocktail bars and art benefit shows. He painted an image for me: he and his lover racing toward downtown along the curves of Lake Shore Drive—she in the passenger seat watching the high rises loom taller and taller and feeling the spray of the choppy lake against the break-walls; and here he described how a blissful confidence would spread warm through his body with the assurance that his lover had forgotten, if only for a moment, that she was a waitress, and might well be one the rest of her life.

“There’s some poetry to it, isn’t there?” he asked, perhaps to himself.

All this I would report back to Oona on our nightly train rides home together. I repeated the things he’d said, laughing softly so as to better hear her own, yet all the while I was increasingly troubled by the fact that Mr. Brow didn’t seem close to backing down, and that Oona, conceiving grander methods of torture, was becoming too invested in the game, perhaps to a dangerous degree. She began asking me less what to serve Mr. Brow, either because she thought I wasn’t much help to begin

with, or else she feared that my disapproval—which I began expressing to her—would get uglier, or get in her way. But I could see well enough that the dishes she brought for Mr. Brow were increasingly moving away from the restaurant's normal offerings. Some portions were larger than normal, others far too skimpy. The peacock seemed spiced beyond the limits of human tolerance—it burned my nostrils as she passed me with it. I began noticing the pink of meats and organs that should not have been that color. His fish and seafood dinners arrived with shreds of scale, a random fin. I could hear his teeth mash painfully down on a bone someone had missed—or perhaps added. I'd see him chew endlessly on the gristle from a poor cut of meat that should have gone to Andre's old dog, or inspect with his fork inedible chankings hiding in a thick broth or gravy. She had no doubt reeled in Andre's support, but this was not much of a surprise as he had always been fond her: when most waitresses would eat only bread and water the duration of their employment at Mistura, she had sampled the cicadae, fried chickens' feet, and marinated whale blubber her first day.

I asked her one night in a tone as severe as I could use with her, "How far will this go?"

"As far as it will," she said.

As for Mr. Brow, he never complained. After he finished his meals, he'd lean back in his stool and watch Oona with her other customers, watch her as if she were something he'd devour next. I didn't blame him. Some nights I found myself ashamed to discover I felt a bond between him and me, for as beautiful as she was, it was an alien beauty that took a keen eye to recognize. Men were initially drawn to her because of the way her legs carried her gazelle-like, because she looked frail, because although she wore no jewelry on her ears or thin wrists, five golden freckles dotted her milky chest. But these men's infatuation was brief, the way they might feel the allure of strange colors and shapes on a canvas before realizing, with shame and anger, that the thing depicted could not be reconciled to their sense of things in the

real world. Men who loved her from a distance got nothing from her up close except perhaps a wintry blast of oceanic current. It wasn't because she had nothing to give, but only because her true person existed under different pressures, in darker pools. I myself had seen only a fraction of this true Oona—and this was perhaps more than anyone had ever seen. If Mr. Brow could see it, or could even suspect it, then in this way we were linked.

All that this realization inspired in me, however, was greater trepidation for his chances of succeeding with Oona, of winning her and continuing, as he had continued with the others, their game outside the restaurant, to extend her servitude into his daily life. Such servitude, it went without saying, would be demanded in the bedroom, and this, as gruesome a thought as it was, calmed me, for I was confident Oona would never let it go that far. That Mr. Brow could and certainly did delight in fantasies of peeling off the girl's thin, damp garments, of inhaling from her stomach the salt of her labor, was reason enough to be assured that we had no connection. Only the basest mind could look at her and think such things, and such minds couldn't see in Oona the untouchable beauty I saw.

"Do you know, Simi," Mr. Brow said, "what she told me last night?"

I shrugged.

He put his fork down and picked up his drink.

"She told me that your spleen swells when you're in love."

"Peasant-talk," I said. "Silly girl."

"No, it's scientifically proven."

Walking Oona home that night, I told her, "He is in love with you, and he thinks you're in love with him."

I couldn't see her face, but I imagined it creased, just as the entire night seemed to crease and miss a beat.

The next day she started with the insects. Dragonfly nymphs and locust stew. Water bug eggs and broiled grasshoppers. Wasp salad and agave worms in wine sauce. For seven days the man ate bugs. For seven days, stink bug pâté and mealworm spaghetti, until Andre grew fed up with preparing it. Once bugs were off

Mr. Brow's private menu, Oona demanded bats' head soup. Andre conceded, if only for the change, but even he was growing weary. That night I left the bathroom window propped open, even moved the small trashcan out of its usual corner and set it below the window as an invitational aid to escape. But out he came, refreshed and eager.

He made a thunderclap with his hands and sang, "What's next?"

Oona and I used to roll our eyes at the halfwit; now she just got that grin and brought dessert.

After a month, Oona sat down next to him at the bar. She put her chin in her hand and watched him. It was late, the restaurant was nearly deserted and quiet enough to hear the toenails of Andre's dog as it wandered about under tables snuzzling for scraps. She yawned, he smiled. She took the chopsticks out of her hair and clawed at her scalp; her hair fell, crimped and coldly flaxen.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he said, taking the cue.

"Don't be an idiot," she said, then asked me for Mezcal on the rocks, which I knew she liked only for the worm wafting on the bottom.

"Nice," he reflected, "you sitting here with me."

"It's nice to sit," she said.

I slid her drink over, but she kept her eyes away from me.

"Your legs must get tired," he said. "I go to a professional masseuse. Have you ever been?"

She sipped her golden drink while he informed her of orthopedic shoes designed for people on their feet all day, if, he added, she *had* to be on her feet all day, and weren't there other careers she'd like to pursue? I went to take out the garbage and when I returned, some strange white vegetation had sprouted up between Oona and Mr. Brow, a long stalk of milky flowers, each hanging loosely in petaled clusters. I assumed it was a present from Mr. Brow, but when Oona plucked off a petal and placed it on her tongue like communion, I knew the gift was from her. She sucked on the petal, and her face eased, smooth and

sleek. She ate the rest of the flower, first the remaining petals, the sepals, the chalk-blue stigma, and the snowy-white stamen. He watched in amused awe, and Oona smiled radiantly back at him as she chewed.

This was the one real thing I knew about Oona, not a secret she had given up to show herself to me, but one I had discovered. We used to keep a flower in the restaurant, an orchid in the window up front. I began finding the stems stripped clean, but there were never any petals in the soil. I thought it was a mischievous child who came in with his parents every week, but then, a few months after Oona began working at Mistura, something happened. We had received a shipment of truffles, packed in soil, and Oona was told to wash them for that night's special. By the kitchen sink with her back to me, I saw her hand bring something to her mouth; through a curtain of pale hair I saw her jaw working. I crept up to her, took her arm and turned her around, ready to admonish her for eating the delicacies. But it wasn't the truffles she was eating. It was the soil, smeared across her lips like frosting. She stared at me hard, her chest rising and falling; I could feel the pulse of her arm in my hand. I let her go. We never spoke of it, of course, but since that time Oona was not shy around me when she had one of her cravings. And she had many besides orchid petals and soil. I saw her eat clay, and swallow pebbles left in the lobster buckets. She sucked on matchsticks until they dissolved into a sulfurous pulp, coating her teeth, and for a while I suspected that she was gnawing upon her own hair, though, for the sake of her appearance, she curtailed that. She'd eaten slivers of soap, and all sorts of cooking staples—starches and baking sodas, cocoa and vanilla extract. Oh, the sampling she did when Andre's back was turned—the meats, raw and cooked, the oddities, the scraps and snippets to be thrown out—while I fell so willingly into the role of her loyal lookout.

I didn't fully understand her cravings, but I knew that Mr. Brow, as he watched her devour the flower, was too dense to suspect he was witnessing a miracle. Because to me Oona was

a Madonna, and she could feed the entire world by making the world into food. The more I had thought of it on our nightly walks, the more I was convinced that this, at heart, was what drew me to her. I knew there was nothing she wouldn't serve the hungry, nothing she wouldn't devour herself. She had the hunger that I wanted, that I never suspected could exist; a hunger that was infectious, and so edacious that it awed me. I began to crave like she craved, but it was only for her—for her appetite, for her body and her soul. But more than this, I wanted her to crave me, for her to wolf me down like it was her last feast.

Mr. Brow followed suit with the flowers; he picked his own from the stalk, tore a petal and put it in his mouth.

"Spit it out," she said, sticking out her hand.

"What?"

"You ate a piece of the stalk—anything green will make you sick."

He let it fall from his mouth into her hand like a child.

This time she tore a petal off for him. "See? You have to twist it right here."

I caught her eye and dropped it coldly. On cue, the pint glass I was drying slipped from my hand. I heard the glass shatter, felt the shards explode against my pant leg. A taste, foul and acerbic, welled up from beneath my tongue.

He began to bring her jewelry, bracelets with gleaming opals, and turquoise necklaces; it was not overstepping his role or crossing any lines, for Oona had herself initiated this current phase. For her part, she brought him tablespoons of plant soil, soggy piles of tea leaves, uncooked grains of black rice, flecks of pigs' hooves, dollops of hand-soap, carbonized crisps scraped from the depths of the oven. I was losing Oona fast, and could think of only one crushing regret: that perhaps all those nights standing by the kitchen door as Andre counted the receipts, making sure he wouldn't see Oona pick at the meats marinating in the coolers, or suck on bats' eyes, or guide the long grasses and weeds that grew around the parking lot into her mouth like noodles, perhaps

those nights as I eyed her through the gap between the swinging doors, and as she eyed me back, were each an invitation to me. All I had to do was join her.

Clearing the bar that night, I took a crushed and blackened cigarette from an ashtray. I looked around for anyone else, could faintly hear Oona talking with Andre in the kitchen. I brought it to my nose and winced at the stale odor. I dabbed it upon my tongue as if to prepare for the taste, then let it fall into my mouth and gnashed down upon it. Bits of salty carbon gathered in my teeth, shreds of soggy tobacco slid along my gums, and the taste was overpowering, burnt and toxically sour. I cringed, gagged, spit the thing onto the floor, wretched into the basin and guzzled at the water splurging from the faucet. No, I did not have Oona's voracious appetite, could not work her kind of miraculous. I went home, more hungry than I had ever been.

She was bending toward him, like a solitary stiff reed in a steady wind. I could feel it. Mr. Brow could feel it. She sat with him, let him stay later into the night, after the restaurant closed. I tried speaking with her on our train rides home, but she wouldn't listen, eventually lashed out, accused me of being overbearing—paternal, of all things! She shut me out completely, and finally began allowing Mr. Brow to drive her home so that each night I rode the train alone. More than once, mechanically, I got off at her stop. Oona's resistance to him weakened as she ran out of new things to feed him. His tongue had become a strip of metal, his teeth like a piranha's; he had grown the stomach of a dog; but there was still a dish he had not sampled. He awaited it patiently, just as, I believe, she bided her time in serving it, prolonging the anticipation, stretching out what began to feel inevitable. And when she finally served it I was coming through the kitchen doors from the wine closet, three bottles to a hand. She was on her stool with her head back while Mr. Brow, standing against the bar, lowered himself to taste her lips. When they parted, she straightened herself and seemed to consider the flavor as if it were a sip of wine. She didn't seem to mind the flavor at all.

"What do you want with her?"

I had never spoken so directly to Mr. Brow, and I feared the edge in my voice had dismantled my simple-minded immigrant act. I was put at ease when his answer came slurred.

"I'm in love with her," he said, his whole face beaming. "Can't you see that?"

Several days had passed since their kiss, but at the end of each day they kissed again, and each time it renewed my anger. This night I had been pouring his drinks generously and leaving little time between them. I suspected now that I was trying to get him drunk so I could drop the charade and be angry for a moment.

"Why?" I said. "She's a . . . a *garbage*-mouth." I nearly spit the words, and I felt a wave of nausea at the hate I heard in my voice.

I cranked on the faucet and the water drummed in the basin with a hollow murmur.

He looked at me quietly, with more sincerity than I had ever seen creased into the wrinkles on his forehead. His eyes screwed up, his lips twisted into a euphoric smile.

"She has strange tastes, Simi," he said, then deflated and laughed. "She's looking for the right one is all. Look at this, Simi," he said, pulling a slim jewelry box from his suit-jacket pocket.

I peered down with disgust as he revealed a turquoise ring he meant to slide upon one of Oona's once bare fingers.

"Did you know, Simi," he said, gazing at the ring, "that she is very close to saying yes?"

My heart plummeted. "Saying yes?"

"To a trip to Italy," he continued. "She's never been. I go every summer."

He went on about summer villas, but I had stopped listening to him. A cold sweat had broken out upon my forehead and for a moment my head swam; but then, as the ring came back into focus, I remembered Monica, Mr. Brow's waitress and lover I had

known three years ago. I thought of the jewelry he had brought her, and then I thought of the last time I saw her. It was a few months after I quit, a frigid and sunny winter day downtown; she was crossing Michigan Avenue and I wouldn't have recognized her, buried as she was in a fur coat, if she hadn't called after me. She had quit the restaurant, too; Mr. Brow had gotten her a job downtown—not another waitressing job, but something with an advertising firm where he had a friend. To be polite, I asked after Mr. Brow, but she told me she had left him.

Standing before her on that salt-white corner, I took note of the fur coat and the shopping bags filled to the brim with the wares of ritzy stores. I thought Monica was lucky to have gotten so far ahead on Mr. Brow's shoulders. Now, standing before Mr. Brow himself, it struck me as odd, and an outright contradiction, that a man who thrived on young, working women would be so unwise as to help elevate them from that lowly position to a bough from which they could alight and leave him. I chuckled in front of the man as he prattled on about Italy, thinking of all the servant-girls who must have left him, the endlessly served, and thinking that perhaps there was some justice to it all.

I decided to take another risk and mention Monica, to plant this ugly little memory back in his head. He was drunk enough, I hoped, not to recall he had never mentioned her by name. I leaned in close and asked him, "What is that 'right taste,' Mr. Brow? *You*? What will you do for Oona? I'm curious. You're going to take her from the restaurant and bring her to Italy? Get her a real job? Like Monica? Didn't she leave you, Mr. Brow, as soon as you opened your hands?"

His face was surprisingly close to mine, his head hovering inches above the bar and his eyes weary and red but locked on my own. His silence began to panic me—perhaps he wasn't as drunk as I thought. I felt sick at my words, but sure I had to keep up the ruse lest he realize, reach across the bar and throttle me.

"These girls," I continued, motioning around with a hand, "you've got to keep the cage shut. Let them sing, right? But never fly."

He sat back suddenly, saying, "No, no, no," and released me from the train of his eyes. "Monica? I left her. Monica Martinelli! I got her a job, I bought her a car. I was done with all that. What do I want with a girl like that?"

"You mean a girl who took your money?"

"No, you misunderstand. I mean a girl who has everything. What else can you give a girl like that?"

I laughed now. "So that's what you are, Mr. Brow? A saint? You give, not take?"

He stared at me with patience and sympathy, as if he had just delivered the news of a terminal disease I had in my stomach. Indeed, something did swell in my gut, and even as I grew aware of people beckoning me for drinks, I could pay no mind to anything but this expanding feeling inside, as if what Mr. Brow had said was a truth that would tear through any moment. I tried to push the notion away, chuckling, shaking my head at him, snorting like a horse.

"Fucking Saint Brow of the Weary Waitress!" I said, then immediately left him, went to the kitchen and leaned, hidden, against a freezer. Across from me, near the back door and upon a small table, was a bouquet of flowers of the same variety Oona and Mr. Brow had shared two weeks earlier. I swiped at it like I would an insect and they crashed to the floor. What I had thought of Mr. Brow was, despite my convictions, slowly taking a new shape. If he didn't prey on poor and pretty hungry girls with the purpose of chaining them, then it was to feed them. Monica was, in the end, but a heavy, steel drum who, because he could no longer fill her, could no longer fill him. It didn't mean that Mr. Brow was any less of a predator—the useless Monica might as well have been a drum of spent grease by the time he was through with her. To grow fat on the fulfillment of others seemed more ensnaring and deceitful, more corrosive and corrupted. And yet, Monica was no longer a struggling waitress, no longer scraping by. As for Oona, the famished Oona, Mr. Brow wolfed down the endless scraps she delivered not as part of an elaborate flirtation to own her heart—what did he care for

hearts? He had consumed hers completely on the first night—but because each bite he took—and Mr. Brow knew it, had known it from the start!—fed *her*. And this was all he wanted—to sate her, to fill her up. But how could a girl with infinite appetite ever become full with love? Only one thing mattered though, one thing I knew for certain: the restaurant had grown too small for their appetites, and Mr. Brow surely had every intention of taking Oona away from Mistura, and from me.

Andre called to me sharply and said, “Bring that out for Oona, will ya? She’s buried.”

I collected myself, saw the plate of food to which he referred and, though I felt I didn’t have to, asked, “Where’s it going?”

“It’s his,” Andre said.

I took the plate with both hands. It was the special of the night, a fairly simple dish of quail and rice with a glistening raspberry sauce. Something inside me turned off. My legs carried me, along with the plate, to the back of the restaurant, where my hand retrieved the flowers from the floor. I began stripping the stems of their petals, letting them fall one by one into the food on the plate, and all the while a muted voice in my head wanted Andre to see me, or for Oona to appear behind me. I put the bouquet down on the table and stared at it, as if waiting for it to speak. It did not, so I retrieved the ladle from the pan of sauce on the stove and covered the petals in crimson.

I took the food back to the bar and placed it in front of Mr. Brow. I told him, quite evenly, “You will never fill her. She is bottomless.”

His gaze floated down from the ceiling where it had been dreaming and settled on my face. There was a dull and dangerous intoxication in his eyes.

I left him to wait on others at the bar, but kept my eyes on him. He began to eat. When he noticed the first petal on his fork, he looked about for Oona with a wry smile, but the front door was presently flooding with customers. He put the bite into his mouth, and at that moment my teeth ground together so hard that one customer nearby glanced around for the source

of the noise. I tried to calm myself. Anything green will make you sick, Oona had told him. So there might be some green left on the petals, so he might fall ill. As remarkable as it was, he hadn't once been made ill eating here, or if he had, he was discrete about it. Surely he suspected, as did I, that any sign of rejecting the food Oona would take as a rejection of herself. The spell would be broken, she'd cast him aside.

Mr. Brow began to cough. His face flickered, his hand went to his chest. He took another bite, dropped his fork and gagged. The patrons aside him inched away, exchanged glances with each other. One to his left asked if he was alright. Mr. Brow, his face sallow, did not reply. He picked up his fork, tore at the breast of the quail and shoveled another bite into his mouth. The man to his left told him to stop eating, pleaded with him to take some water. He tried taking away the plate, but Mr. Brow caught his hand with alarming speed and eyed him so severely that he backed away. Then Mr. Brow turned to find my eyes.

"What's going on?" said Oona. She was suddenly pressed to my side, her breath coming quick. "What's he eating?"

I shrugged. "What did you order for him?"

"Simi, what did you do?"

I tried moving away but her fingers dug into my arm. "Simi!"

"It's the flowers," I said.

"The stem? Did you give him the stem?"

"He thinks *you* gave him the stem," I said. "So what? He gets sick—"

"He dies, Simi! *Dies!*" And here I saw her face flush red with true concern.

I stood firm, felt the light caress of her breasts as they rose and fell along the side of my crossed arms, felt her breath touching my neck. Mr. Brow was hunched over his plate. The other customers had moved away a considerable distance now and watched him with amusement that bordered on disgust and fear. He took another bite, chewed it slowly.

"You'd better take it from him, Oona," I finally said.

"You served it, you get it."

"You said he'll die," I said, looking over my shoulder at her.

"He might." Her face had mellowed, its paleness had washed away the color.

I tried piercing her with my eyes. "Oona . . ."

She said nothing, just kept watching him, eyes heavy, lips parted. And then I knew that in her trancelike state she was experiencing something like awe, lust and terror combined, and that she would not move to stop him, not now or ever. Mr. Brow had won; she knew that, and yet had she been allowed to watch him gorge until he keeled over dead, she would not have done so with malice or contempt for him, or even with the shame of her loss. In those brief moments we watched Mr. Brow eat, shoveling in his own death, she felt rather the opposite; she felt the possibility of love, and I was sure of it because suddenly the beautiful, bottomless stomach of her soul did not feel infinite to me anymore. Falling through all her darkness—falling since the moment I met her—I had just caught sight of a rapidly approaching floor, and it appeared as black and solid as basalt.

I snatched the plate from under Mr. Brow, unsure whether my aim was to prevent his death or her love, and threw it in the sink, and in the same movement picked up the telephone to dial for an ambulance. Seconds later, I and several men had Mr. Brow, who seemed hardly aware now of what was happening, slung between our arms; we rushed him to the restroom whereupon he evacuated the night with horrific noise.

Mr. Brow did not come back to the restaurant, although I suspected he waited in the lot to drive Oona home, since she now left through the backdoor each night. But there was no reason for him to come inside anymore. The days and weeks began to blur and I felt as if I was hiding from the sight of Oona—and the world—using my own body as a cave from which I peered out through portals, and from some quiet operational room directed my hands to pour drinks, and my mouth to issue utterances. Oona was happy, a different sort of creature. She lost her grace

in the restaurant, tripped over her boots, dropped plates, burned auburn scars on her wrists upon the oven. And whether she continued to sneak all the morsels of her strange cravings into her mouth, I don't know, but I never saw her do it again.

Mr. Brow never implicated anyone in his poisoning. He led the medics to believe it was a flu he caught from a friend, and the drinks he unwisely took. The night he was taken to the hospital, after the restaurant was closed and deserted but for Oona and myself, she came by the end of the bar and watched me. I was wiping down the liquor bottles. Her eyes flared at me angrier than the cigarette tip she was just then making glow between her lips.

"I'm going to the hospital now," she said.

"Do you love him?"

I had to ask, had to know for sure, but instead of answering me she began to tell me where in the restaurant they had been making love after Andre and I left each night. Back there, against the stove, she said, in the pantry and on the booths, and here, upon your bar.

I kept my eyes on the bottle I was cleaning as she hissed these things to me. I said, as steadily as I could, "So, you do."

She said nothing, and for a moment I thought she was merely gathering silence to add to the effect of her outburst, but no outburst ever came.

"Then he'll be done with you shortly," I said, almost tenderly.

She stood frozen, an impossible length of ash bending from her cigarette. She left, and we never spoke of Mr. Brow again.

Oona stayed only a few more weeks at Mistura. One night she left and the next morning a new waitress came in, a slovenly, middle-aged woman who called the customers "honey" and "doll," and asked them why they wanted to eat such things. And then after many months, in the middle of white winter, at midday, I felt the icy tendrils of air wind around my neck as Oona came once more through the door. She perched upon a stool and ordered Mezcal on the rocks.

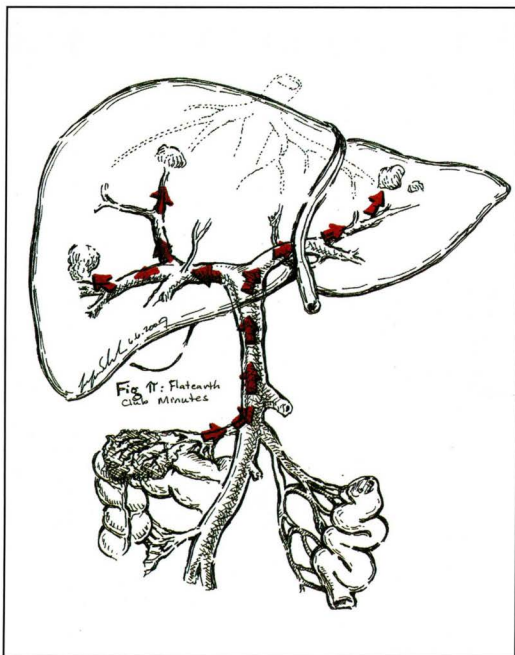
We watched each other in silence. She smiled, brought the glass to her lips, smiled again. Her face seemed to ripple then, and after a moment, crack. Her eyes and brows twisted, her lips glistened cherry-red, her jaw shuddered and bulged. It was like watching fire bleed through from the back of a painted portrait.

"Simi . . ." She said it softly, brokenly.

But I felt suddenly hardened; it was a dumb sort of brutality that wanted to preserve at all costs the memory of the idol on whose sooty boots I had worshipped—that pale-faced mother who had room for everything and all in her depths, who had taught me how to hunger, and for whom I now starved. When I spoke, all I could say was,

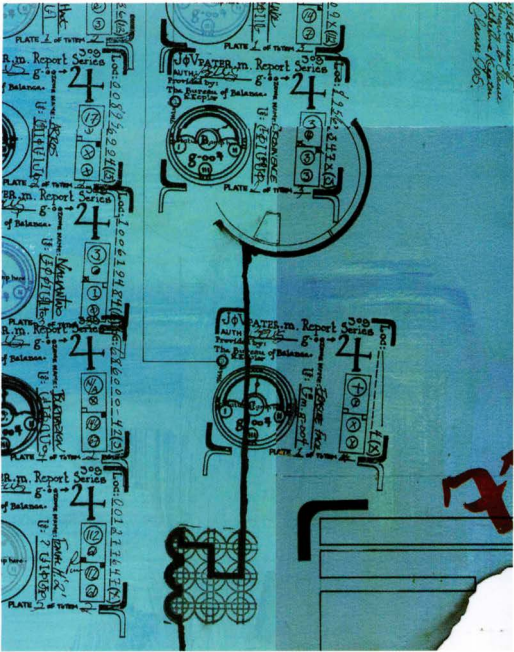
"Much crazy food in here."

I began wiping a bottle. I cradled it, wiped until the label began to peel. I felt her watching me, but I didn't return her gaze. I started to whistle that song from my childhood, tried to remember the words, but couldn't. I felt the cool air of the door again and looked around. She was gone. I took up her glass, empty but for the sodden worm coiled between the ice cubes.

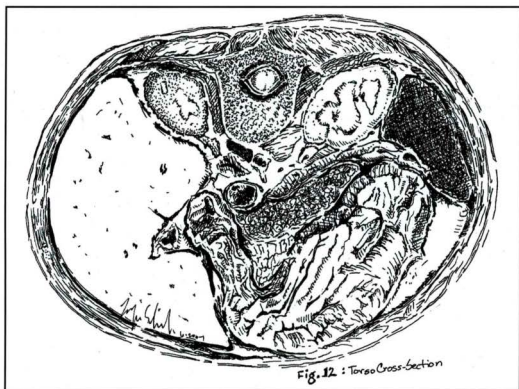


Route Seven, Quadrate Lobe, by Ed Jones and L. D. Schneider

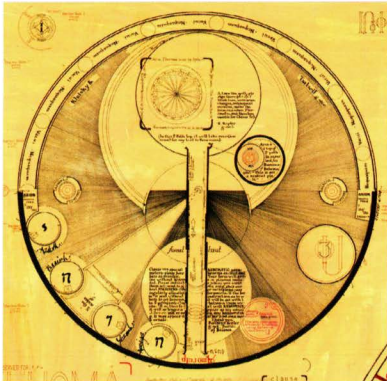
Map the border between appetite and desire or survey yearning across the body that hungers. What is the geography of longing? Consider these comparative anatomies: three inspired by Ed Jones's computer-generated medical illustrations, retro-rendered in ink by L. D. Schneider, and Neil Dvorak's vast and yet intimate imagination-scapes.



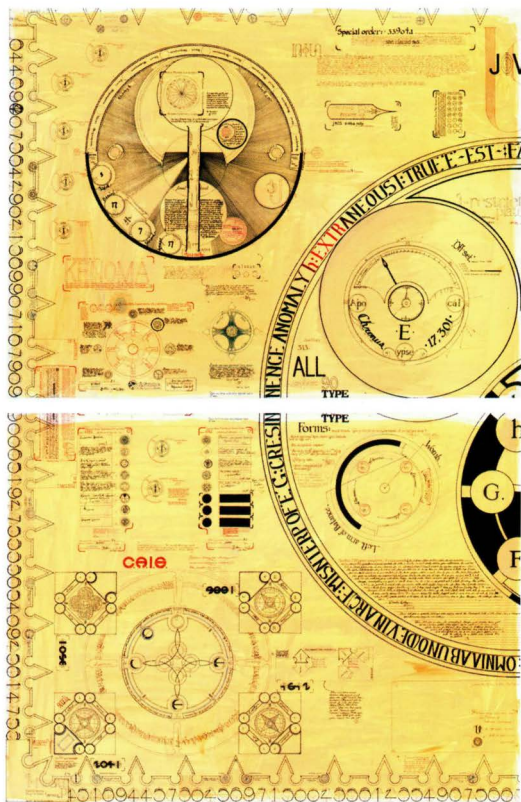
The Blue Piece (2007), excerpt, by Neil Dvorak
Original is 30" x 40", gesso, pen and ink, pencil, bottle, string, on paper



Torso Cross-section (2007), by Ed Jones and L. D. Schneider



Ochre in Quadrants (2005), excerpt, by Neil Dvorak
Original is 7' x 9', gesso, various inks, pen, pencil, tooth, on paper





Ochre in Quadrants (2005), by Neil Dvorak
7' x 9', gesso, various inks, pen, pencil, tooth, on paper



Cranium in Quadrants (2007)



by Ed Jones and L. D. Schneider

FANTASY

Michelle Brooks

Tell me yours and spare no detail.
I am dining on men tonight. Do
you need a secretary to take down
your every brilliant word before you
even say it? A nurse to bathe those
parts that you could reach if it weren't
for the IV? Love doesn't matter here.
I'm not one of those women who is going
to make you say it. I'm whatever you
need, baby, until one night I beat you half
to death with a baseball bat I have hidden
under my bed in case of an intruder. No
one knows what can happen in the dark.

FIRST CUP

Glen Pourciau

My husband keeps himself from me and I don't know what he's keeping. But sometimes I see a look in his eye, something dark, something that fears I'll find it.

When he goes out of town on business or after he goes to work, I often sit in the chair in his study. His study is a wreck, stacks of papers all over his desk and the floor, his bookshelves stuffed and in disarray. He doesn't want me touching his things or to come home and find that I've sorted it all out. In the bedroom, he doesn't want me organizing his drawers. He doesn't want them to be like mine, in other words. His territory, his world. My territory, my world. That's the arrangement as far as he's concerned. And to him, it includes whatever's inside his mind.

I don't accept this arrangement. When he's not at home I go through his things, searching for him. I've looked through every page in every stack on his desk and on his floor. The stacks extend to the walls, interrupted only by furniture, but they tell me nothing revealing about him. I've taken everything out of the closet in his study and gone through it, all the old records and the limited cache of photos from his past. No diary, no journals, no letters or cards from friends or relatives. I've looked behind the rows of books in his bookcases and taken the books from the shelves one by one and fanned the pages. No notes, no photos, no business cards. I've looked under the furniture and in back of the bookcases, through all of his drawers and under them to see if anything is taped there. No suspicious objects, no unidentified keys.

He sometimes mutters in his sleep. The night he got back from his last trip, he went to bed exhausted. In the middle of the night I heard him. He may have said, "I didn't kill her." I'm sure of the first two words and the fourth word, but not of the third word. He could have said, "I didn't kiss her." He may have

been talking about something far in his past. But why would he say he didn't kiss her? Who would care? He could have said, "I didn't miss her." I leaned toward him and asked what he said, whispering the words in his ear. He curled up tight in the covers and closed his mouth.

I want to know what he does with his free time when he's out of town and what's inside him when he does it. I smell his clothes when he gets back, but they just smell like his clothes. No matchbooks or phone numbers in his pockets, no makeup smears on his shirts, no unusual stains on his underwear. He doesn't say much to me about his trips. Just a business trip, boring food, a movie in his room at night, and after that a little reading. I wonder.

I wonder who it was he didn't kill or kiss or miss. I wonder what he meant the night he said, "Don't leave." Was someone in a dream leaving him? "Who's leaving?" I whispered. His mouth moved, but he said nothing.

One night when he was away, I alphabetized his books by author. I pulled them all off the shelves and lined them up on the stacks of paper covering the floor and sorted them. I cleaned the dusty shelves and then put the books back.

After he returned from his trip I waited for him to comment on the change in his bookcases. But he didn't comment, and the longer he went without commenting the angrier I got. So I asked him if he'd noticed it. He claimed he didn't know that I'd alphabetized his books, though he said he had noticed that they were out of order. I told him that his books weren't out of order, that I'd put them in order. He said they weren't in the order he'd put them in. He said he thought I knew that he didn't want me messing with his study.

"What's in there then?" I asked him. "Are you saying it's none of my business?"

"It's not what's in there, it's the way it's in there. It's in there the way I want it to be in there."

He headed that way to see what I'd done, and I pursued him.

In his study he looked over his bookshelves, up and down, back and forth, touching some of his books and shaking his head. I waited for him to ask me why I'd done it and if I'd been angry at him when I'd done it.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me nothing."

He didn't say anything more about the books, but that night he had unsettling dreams. He jerked as if startled and mumbled, "What is she looking for?" or "Who is she looking for?" A little later he said, "Can't get her out." Then he sat up in bed suddenly and looked around in the dark. I wasn't sure if he was awake or if it was part of his dream.

"Did you hear something?" I asked.

"No."

"You were dreaming."

He rolled over, but it was some time before I could tell by his breathing that he was asleep.

The next day, while he was at work, I wrote questions to him and went in his study and buried them in the stacks, except one that I put on top of his desk. "Who am I looking for?" it said. He ignored the sheet on his desk and never said a word about the others.

Frustrated, I spent more time than usual in his study going through his stacks. I moved stacks around the room and left them, shuffled the papers in stacks and mixed pages from some stacks in with pages from others. I began to toss in my sleep and one night he woke me up and asked, "What can't you get out?" and "Who didn't you kill?" He asked if I was upset and what I'd been dreaming. He tried to comfort me. He held me, which didn't happen often.

As we read the newspaper that morning, I spoke to him while the coffee was brewing. He doesn't like to talk before he's had his first cup of coffee. Several times he'd suggested that it be a household rule that we not talk to each other before his first cup, but I'd refused to agree to the first-cup requirement.

"Did you get the note?"

"What note?"

I could see that look in his eye.

"The one I left on your desk."

"I didn't know how to answer it."

"You. I'm looking for you."

"I'm right here."

"But inside."

"Right here."

"What I can't get out is you."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't get you out where I can see you and hear you."

"You had a bad night."

"Stop doing this."

"What?"

"Avoiding me."

"I'm right here in front of you. I'm not avoiding you."

"You're hiding."

"It's all you. You upset yourself. I'm not doing anything."

"You ignore me."

"The coffee's ready. I'll get it for us."

He got up and the subject was closed.

Why does he do this to me? What is he afraid of?

After he leaves, I go to his study and sit in his chair and think of him sipping from his first cup. The room seems resistant, unyielding, and looking around, I see what I will do. In the back of my mind I hear noise, the sound of him roaring as he comes toward me. I will burn his papers, all of them. When he comes home, his floor will be clear, his drawers and his closet will be empty. He'll have to show himself. If he doesn't, his books will be next. I'll smash through his walls and flush him out, wherever he's hiding.

He can't stop me.

MY IMAGINARY HUSBAND

Kim Roberts

1.

My husband always talks
about the wind
that shakes up the trees;

he's got sixteen
different ways to describe
how the leaves chatter.

I can think of
a half dozen sounds
I'd rather hear.

But my husband is always
most joyful
when everything looms.

He dances in splayed sneakers
across asphalt's brittle trust
while the trees declaim,

wagging their fingers,
and the alley's loose chain link
rattles like a guard dog.

When everything looms—
a storm, a fight—
my husband is bouyant;

he loves most the frayed
and dangerous edges
that threaten to call us out of our names.

2.

My husband wields a spatula
like a sceptor,
lords it over the eggs

toiling in the pan.
He likes to cook breakfast
in nothing but underwear.

As he stands at the stove,
I sit brightly at the table
like a well-informed citizen

(for I know better than most the doings
of his duchy,
the raising and lowering

of his flag). The minions
of his hair
creep across the elastic border

of his boxers, threatening
to traverse the paunched
stomach-Sahara to reach

their northern brethren.
But they never do.
Like so much else about my husband,

that could only happen
in a parallel kingdom,
a realm with no name.

3.

My husband,
I clothe you in salt,

which drapes across your shoulders
in a shimmering pale wave

and falls, toga-like,
to your marvelous thighs.

I am thirsty thinking of it
but you remain immobile,

like a pharaoh,
like King Tut who traveled

to the afterlife guided
by twelve painted baboons, one for each

hour of the long night.
I search your canopic jars,

breaking each heavy wax seal:
here are your two grey eyes,

still echoing with the lines
of my face; there is your tongue,

tasting of salt,
still tracing my sunset name.

REVERSE NOIR

Bruce Lader

Pre-dawn glow, fleeing to the border
both realize they've been poisoned, fatally;
she slips hand in blouse, pulls Derringer,
keep driving and don't try anything funny—
a roadblock, then blast of a demanding honk,
headlights barreling at them in the rain, he
swerves onto shoulder, precipice a stowaway.

Suspicions turn paranoid of ulterior motives
to eliminate the other, abscond with briefcase
containing antidote, possess a piece
of that elusive golden light, take it along
an unmapped road of shadowed entanglement,
a dream losers triumph, bask in a jackpot,
redeem blundered affairs, loves trifled.

If it weren't a dangerous risk to trust an exile,
his dubious resources, her covert contacts,
they'd split the loot, wallow in happiness
at the husband's expense in exotic settings
beyond the law, have a foolproof racket
devised on a nifty scheme with the traveler
whose lonely craving flesh duped him.

He wagered his last dollar she was hooked
all the way down when she had *him*
in her palm, took the enthralled pigeon
for a ride head over heels in a lair of hungry
promises, reneged with counterfeit talk,
the net of deceit dropped, every link
tightened on the drifter desperate for a job

in a town tyrannized by the husband,
a wire-pulling lothario jealous of the world,
aloof from the spell-binding woman
who endorses a deal with the wanderer,
treats him to a salad bar and movie,
sidles over in a bookshop, plants a seed
of intrigue that germinates a dilemma.

THE FEAST

Rebecca Morgan Frank

*Santo Tomas Internment Camp
Manila, 1943*

There's no need to stalk a starving cat
once the recipe has been devised:
a bartered for onion, a found clove of garlic,
abundance of curry that had been inedible
in other meatless, watery soups.
It was Elsa's idea, watching her pet shrink
to tough muscle, surprisingly angular bones.
She found the shape of a cat an illusion,
its flesh and fur hiding something harder, more mean.

Harold, her husband, broke the cat's neck,
then my grandfather skinned and boned it.
Years later, he'll tell me this story of a feast,
of times when hunger shapes a new ethic,
when war carves a family
into small pieces that float to the surface.

How could I know the pleasure they found
in chewing flesh, boiling bones
into a marrow soup that soothed their small child
days after the meat was gone?

THE BALLAD OF DANNY-THE-BUTCHER

Claudia Serea

Danny-The-Butcher is a tall strong man
with an outlaw moustache
and a pro-wrestler name
he carries his surgical knives in a tiny
velvet-lined box
 like a flute case

in the back-of-the-house he sculpts
the orange morning in
 salmon flesh

he makes steaks, cuts to pieces meats
and the lives of others, with his huge judging knife:

he advises all to leave, or change

he tells Olga Run away
 be a supermodel

he tells Mary how
 beautiful the Acropolis is

he tells Ursula Take a cab,
 go Somewhere

he tells Viktor Get a better job
at The Windows of the World, in a tower
 that shall fall

one morning the tower fell
carrying Viktor like a pitched
flute note
 in abyss

that morning Danny had come earlier to work
cut thirty steaks and they let
 more blood than usual

standing in the kitchen alone when he got the news
the blood rose to his ankles
 to his knees

since then he stopped giving life advice
 took up playing the flute

SO THERE MIGHT BE RAIN

Jessica Jewell

Because the drought endures,
the old dogs start digging—
know what has to be done,
four bony front paws, clawing
the red dirt, teeth moistened
by an unclouded moon, deep
through the burial shale.

They do not raise up
his tiny body for hunger alone.

Three feet of cotton
wrap—easy enough to pull
from the sand—tilling
with their claws, until they
scoop out the dead boy
and lay him on the ground.

This is an offering for the rain.

His heart will be eaten
by the summer hawk
circling since sundown.

The worms do not feast,
nor the dirt, will not let
him arrive at the Sacred River
untended by this wild kindness.

They dig around the unearthed
sheets until morning, raw-pawed.

They see Samuel coming, see him
grab the shovel, but do not run
away, as he beats them to death.

CORA MAY HEARS OF THE SLAUGHTER

Jessica Jewell

Abigail said millions of pigs
were slaughtered in late September.
Something about keeping prices
low, but I think the government

men have lost their goddamn minds,
because there's madness in spilling

those fat, pink bodies to the mud.
Young pigs too, and not yet finished

suckling, Abigail said. My soul,
what are they going to think of next?

Burning pits for ripened apples?
Flour barrels set out in the wind?

AND YOU WILL BE CONSUMED

Kelley Evans

My first quarter teaching freshman composition was punctuated by sharp pinches in my colon, parentheses of heartburn, and the bloated semicolon of my stomach between meager meals. I didn't have time to think about my gastrointestinal distress on the days I taught, all hours until four P.M. eaten up by preparation—thinking up exercises, perfecting handouts, and choosing homework. My stomach, acidic from the anticipation of standing before twenty students, would admit only the bare minimum of bland food. Afterwards, I replayed the class over in my head while eating a light supper, if I could tolerate it. The khaki straight-leg pants I had bought in a thrift store that summer—chosen to project an image of casual authority—sank to my hipbones. I spent the entire class period pulling them up, or I excused myself to run to the bathroom and to adjust the safety pins in the waist-band. As the quarter drew on and the silences during class discussion grew longer, my confidence ebbed with my weight, and I began to think I was constitutionally unfit for the work. How ironic, I thought—too fragile for life in the ivory tower.

Once in a while I'd catch myself feeling smug because my body shape was beginning to approach those of the svelte eighteen-year-olds in my class. But I knew it was a ruse, something I told myself to palliate the reality. Weight loss, when it's not needed and unintended, is poor compensation for the loss of control. I could not quell my fear.

I couldn't figure out how to be in a classroom, physically, as a teacher. As a student you can be more mind than body. Hidden behind a desk, you slump in your chair, tilt it backwards, relax or lean forward; these postures do not call attention to themselves. Your movement is limited to craning your neck to see the student speaking behind you, or you don't turn and just listen to the bodiless voice.

But the students' bodies point towards me. I cannot escape the attention, which is as much directed at my body as my mind. If I gesture, their heads follow my hand. If my shirt rides up, exposing a sliver of belly flesh, all eyes go to my midriff. If I burp, I must excuse myself in front of twenty people.

Perhaps that is why I couldn't eat—at some level refusing to accept that my body had to stand in front of a blackboard. The less of me that had to be there, the better. But why was I unnerved by freshmen, who were as clueless about college as I was about teaching? I would look out at their bodies, also being tested as they hadn't been before, eating dining hall food, surviving on little sleep, walking through rainstorms in flip-flops, ingesting new levels of alcohol. As their eyes fluttered closed mid-class, I wondered who would go under first, and if somehow, we exhausted each other.

While I prodded my stomach along with acid reducers and yogurt and watched my weight diminish, my husband Jamey's stayed the same. As the quarter ended and my weight returned over Christmas with shortbread cookies and sweet potato soufflé, his remained stable.

In addition to eating a normal diet, Jamey takes nine pills a day. In the morning he swallows three brown pills, an orange and yellow capsule, and two dingy gray ones in a diamond shape. When I come to bed a couple hours after him, he rolls over and sleepily asks if I'll grab him three more brown ones.

The pills keep his intestines from eating themselves. Not literally, but almost. His overactive immune system fights off the good bacteria in his digestive system. That was how the doctor explained Crohn's disease to us after Jamey had been hospitalized, as he showed us pictures from the colonoscopy. But "fighting"—the verb he used—seemed too tame a descriptor as I viewed the walls of Jamey's intestines. Illuminated by the unnatural light of the scope, uncomfortably asymmetrical and wet, his insides looked as if they had devoured themselves. Amorphous burnt-orange splotches contained red centers,

surrounded by browns and blacks. The delicate surface, like the underside of the tongue, looked too soft and too alive. Now, in retrospect, I contain the images in language, and the regular curves of the letters make them more distant, safe. At the time, the terror I felt while thumbing through the photographs was just as sinisterly shapeless as the sores themselves.

No one knows exactly what causes Crohn's disease. Some think you can inherit it, but there are many cases where none is detected in extended family. The doctor said that people in the developing world don't get Crohn's, by and large; they develop the appropriate amount of intestinal bacteria from reacting to parasites and pathogens. People in developed countries—nations who consume the majority of the world's resources—develop Crohn's.

The pills have been a part of our rhythm for more than two years now, more regular than my menstrual cycle. The clear amber bottles are depleted, and then there is a computerized voice on the voice mail saying his prescription is ready for pickup. Containers replace containers, the old ones go in the trash, and there is no proof of what he has taken, except for the absence of illness.

Back before the bottles, he was sick and we didn't know why. He had lost twenty pounds by the time he was admitted to the hospital. After weeks of irregular eating, it reached the point where he hardly ate anything; he vomited nearly everything he ingested, and the bit he could stomach came out in a bloody mess. Half lying, half sitting on the mattress on the floor of our dark bedroom, he sipped the Gatorade I forced on him whenever I could, and passed time by watching brainless movies and Comedy Central. Every hour or so, he would leap from his dormant position and run to the bathroom. (We later learned that an ulcer towards the end of his lower bowel caused the spasms.)

He would always flush, so I didn't see the extent of his illness until I viewed the colonoscopy photos, and even then they seemed

abstract and removed. More difficult to confront was the toilet and the soiled pair of teal-blue boxer briefs he left in the bathtub the night before he was admitted. Since I was accustomed to taking showers at the gym after swimming, I didn't touch the bathtub and its contents for a good week, just ignored the shit. But eventually, I donned rubber gloves, filled the tub with an inch of water, and attacked the briefs with detergent. Horrified by the fecal matter released and floating in the tub, I doused it all with toilet cleaner and scrubbed. My back soon hurt from hovering low enough to clean but remaining high enough that I wouldn't splash myself. Squinting, lips pursed, I concentrated on not gagging, because I was afraid that if I started I might not be able to finish cleaning. I feared my fear of not finishing. If Jamey's body was eating itself, mine was slowly succumbing to my anxiety—that he would have his colon removed at such a young age, that I wouldn't be able to keep up the regimen of his care and my job and schoolwork, that the stress would break us as a couple. I worked as hard and fast as I could, assaulting the toilet, scouring the caked-on layers, splatters of dirt-brown, black, and dark red. I hated them, the colors, and the ache in my arms, and the chemical sting in my nose—the evidence of his evisceration.

The day after cleaning, I sat with Jamey. I watched nurses check LED displays and the cooks take away uneaten food, a welcome distraction from his drawn face. You do a lot of sitting in hospitals, which isn't so different from the rest of life if you're an office worker, except that it's more uncomfortable. I worked as staff at a university, sitting at a computer for a good portion of the day, and late at night I typed at my computer at home, writing a paper for school. But my back ached most after coming home from the hospital. The chairs were either slippery plastic that didn't hold me, or old-style living room armchairs that were made to look comfortable but weren't. They never pointed in the right direction—couldn't with the limited amount of space in a hospital room—so I twisted my back and neck to attend to Jamey. Or I'd sit next to him on the bed, half falling off, giving awkward hugs.

Occasionally I would get into bed with him and watch TV, the bed tilted up into “recliner” position, becoming a mini love seat. But I disliked being in bed when the doctor or nurses came in. Being discovered in this position felt almost worse than being caught making out. Watching television together is more mundane, and its interruption was a painful reminder that normalcy (or at least its appearance) was beyond us. The fact that I fit into bed with him was also an uneasy reminder of how much weight he’d lost; he’s 6’4” and not skinny, or wasn’t before he became ill. Even so, the most pleasant times were when we sat, hip-to-hip.

I could touch him when we were in bed. His thigh against mine, our forearms pressed together. Touching someone in a hospital is more difficult than sitting. To hold a hand, fingers have to navigate around IVs and tubes. The nurses come between you and him to take his blood pressure, or he has to go to the bathroom again. And there’s the sheer unattractiveness of the beloved’s skin, sallow and pale pink when it should be ruddy tan, as if something has evaporated just below its surface. It feels moist, betraying ominous heat or sinister cold. Unprotected, its hue is visible through the nubby hospital gown. Skin slips out between flaps that won’t close, or is too obviously bare because the pants reach to just below his knees. Touch it to make sure it exists, but the doubt remains when you let go.

I can’t remember who was with us when I told him—doctor, nurse, relative—but someone else was present, so I had to say it obliquely. “I cleaned the bathroom. And the bathtub,” I blurted, apropos of nothing. I had planned on telling him. I wanted him to know that while his body wasted away, mine walked to work, made my dinner (something he did most nights before his illness), drove to visit him for a couple hours, came home and did homework, and then drank a glass of wine while it sat blankly in front of the Style Channel, trying to divorce itself from the images of the hospital. Though one might think that the act of forgetting is not the domain of the body, the mind must still have the body’s permission to erase. I remembered Jamey’s

disease in my body; I ate less and slept fitfully. And I wanted Jamey to know that, to feel my physical presence (even though I could not always be with him) as much as I wanted him to know the resentment I felt at being so joined to him.

I didn't even know if he would remember the soiled underwear, but as soon as I mentioned the bathtub, he turned sharply (or as quickly as someone very ill moves), looked straight at me, and said an almost inaudible, "Thank you." His eyes were watery, though it could have been the glassiness that had been there for weeks. The look he gave me, however, was unmistakably gratitude. And I felt wretched. My confession had leaked out of me under the pressure of his care, and I resented myself for it.

Almost two years later, during the winter break after my first quarter of teaching, I walked with Jamey through the Art Institute of Chicago. As we entered a contemporary art wing, a pile of candy in the corner caught my eye, instantly appealing on a number of levels: shiny, colorful, chaotic, unframed in an environment of frames, and—it was candy. A small group of people contemplated this controlled mess, and I let go of Jamey's hand to go join it.

The placard next to the installation read "Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA) 1991/Multicolored candies, individually wrapped in cellophane. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, American, born Cuba, 1957–1996." I'm always drawn to these little informative blurbs when I'm in a museum, and often I read them before giving the art my full attention. Perhaps it's my constant urge to verbalize, contextualize the visual within familiar symbols, or at least make it more manageable. At least with sculpture, reading the descriptions allows me to retreat to two dimensions. One would think that, since my body has height, width, and depth, I would be able to negotiate all three, but I find myself displaced in depth. My shoulders run into door frames, and my thighs hit desk corners. I prefer the contained space of the printed page or canvas (though when I paint, my images appear flat and distorted).

The small square of text beside the candy continued (yes, I wrote it down, copied it into the notebook always at my side in museums): "This installation is an allegorical portrait of the artist's partner, Ross Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. The 175 pounds of candy correspond to an ideal body weight." The mixed blue, green, orange, silver, red, and pink wrapped sweets looked like the "wrong" end of a kaleidoscope, light reflected in thousands of sparkling angles. The pile reached its apex in the corner of the room at about two feet and spread out in a skirt between the walls. It didn't look any heavier than I was, even after I'd gained back some of the weight I'd lost while teaching. The word "ideal" jarred me, as if this silvery mountain could somehow be a more perfect substitution for a living being, a loved one and his body, however diseased.

The final portion of the placard read: "Please help yourself to one piece of candy. As the pile diminishes, candies will be replaced." As soon as I had read it, I acknowledged the urge to take one, suppressed since first seeing the installation in my peripheral vision. I salivated, and my face flushed with desire—the urge for the sweet, the compulsion to consume, and the impulse to transgress. But no one moved forward, and my feet would not budge. Had the other spectators not read? Was the imperative of the museum too heavy? Not 45 minutes ago I had seen a guard tell a young woman, "Don't touch the paintings please," the "please" increasing the severity of the admonition rather than softening it. Or perhaps it wasn't the museum, but Ross that held us back—Felix Gonzalez-Torres' longing for Ross, for his body, a body poured out before us: 175 pounds. I pictured Ross in a room similar to the one Jamey had at the hospital, with pine-green curtains and carpet and cream-colored walls. How often did Felix visit Ross? Every day after work? Maybe he moved his studio into the hospital so he could be with him. Maybe Felix took Ross home to die. Did he surround Ross with bright colors? Could you see them reflected in Ross's skin?

Maybe I would come back when others weren't around.

I moved on to Andy Warhol's giant portrait of Chairman

Mao, taking in the garish colors, but I only thought about eating them. Was it okay to eat art, ever? I thought of the butter sculptures at the Minnesota State Fair, which I attended in my teens. Every year a woman carves near life-sized busts of the Dairy Princesses out of huge slabs of butter. The royalty would sit bundled in the refrigerated, rotating “butter booth” while the carver worked her magic on the churned cream, the beaming smiles evoked in semi-solid state. Would I, could I bring myself to butter my toast from the likeness of Princess Kay of the Milky Way? Spreading the corner of a cheek or chin on whole wheat. Gouging the forehead or the clavicle. Would it be pleasurable?

Jamey caught up with me, and I told him I wanted a piece of candy.

He laughed. “Dare you.”

“No, you can, it says you can. Will you do it with me?” Not a courageous gesture, but at least I would get to do it. He agreed, and as soon as the last person left the corner, we returned to it. Although the edges of the installation were not defined, spectators had created a defacto border, and stepping into the “don’t touch” art space thrilled me. Jamey quickly took a candy—a green one—but I couldn’t decide which color I wanted. As I hovered over the pile, it occurred to me I shouldn’t rummage through it like a child over a Halloween candy bowl (I heard my Dad’s voice saying, “Just pick one”), so sooner than I would have liked, I took a blue one from the edge of the pile. A guard watched us with boredom.

As I twisted the wrapper and slowly peeled it off, a delicious crinkling of cellophane echoed on the high ceiling. This in itself felt enjoyably naughty, the same feeling I get when disrobing a particularly luscious piece of fruit. When else do we get to see under the skin? Or more to the point, when else is this desirable? The wrapper had two layers, a blue translucent one over a shiny silver one, a skin over the skin. The candy was purplish and large, larger than a Life Saver, with no hole in the middle to save you if you swallowed it whole. It stuck to my fingers as I placed it in my mouth, and on my tongue it melted bitingly sweet—the

corn-syrupy and slightly acidic taste of a grape lollipop.

As my mouth filled with liquefied candy and saliva, I had another urge, this time to camp out in the museum until I could see the pile replenished, as the installation placard promised. How many pounds had Ross lost today? How many had I eaten from his body? I wanted to ask the museum guard but was too intimidated by her vacant stare. When did they refill it, after the 175 pounds was gone, or every day? Or was it once a month, like communion at the Baptist church I grew up in?

We passed wide metal platters with round loaves of white bread baked at the local grocery store, and each of us pinched off a morsel. I took as little as possible so as not to appear as hungry as I usually was by that point in the service. Up and down the rows, we passed heavy, stainless steel trays with individual communion cups, smaller than shot glasses, held upright in sockets. It took my full concentration to hold my small vial of grape juice while passing the tray on, watching the levels of purple in the glasses tilt and jiggle. I knew that the sharing of the “cup” was symbolic, if a bit more germ-phobic and sober, of the one Jesus shared with the disciples. We waited until the trays were passed back up to the front, the pastors taking the last vials, and then we all drank at the same time. But I always thought it an intensely personal moment, one in which I dredged up all my worst offenses—most of which were known only to me—and laid them before God. He washed me clean and sweet down the back of my throat; I didn’t much care about my neighbor’s sins. Afterwards, I placed the cup in the small circle holder on the back of the pew in front of me. Pressing the glass down into the rubber ring next to the hymnals, I touched the last drop of juice, which I spread around my fingers until it dried. On the way to the car after the service, I touched my fingers together to feel them stick slightly as I pulled them apart, skin cleaving to skin. Perhaps it was superstition, the belief that the juice somehow protected me—at least until it washed off—from sinning again. Mostly, I think, it was a way to personalize the transaction. I had blood on my hands.

My act of communion, however sincere and familiar, did not prepare me in any way for the kind of intimacy I experienced with Jamey in the hospital, a communion wrought with real bodies. And it was a peculiar kind of intimacy we had, one that felt like it was ripping us apart as much as it forced us together. Finally, his illness consumed us, and we got through the shit together. We married a year and a half later—a public testimony to the bond we forged. But that makes it sound as if it were our efforts that carried us through the ordeal. If my love for Jamey had resilience, it was given to me, just as healing took over Jamey's body, though we don't really know why. I'm not sure what would have happened if Jamey hadn't recovered. I don't know that I would have created as sweet a memorial as Felix.

In the Gospel According to John, Jesus claims that “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” He has the right to claim it, I suppose, since he actually went through with it. But what about those who lay down their lives in front of their friends? Are they deprived of this greatest demonstration of love? And what of us who care for them, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who laid his lover's life out for us in art? He made their private communion public again; Ross provided the body, and Felix the medium of consumption—millions of candies to see, to feel, to taste. Is this not also love, one wrung out of us? As Ross' body disintegrated in my mouth, I waited for my throat to clench as it had the day I cleaned the shit-filled bathroom. But I swallowed, and saliva replenished itself just as easily. I reached for Jamey, put my arm around him, searching for a memory. I felt his love handles. He had weight, and Ross had dissolved.

I taught my tenth college course this past quarter. I still haven't gained back all the weight I lost my first year of teaching, though about half of it returned. My body seems to have found stasis at this new point—a recovery, but not without scars. Where did the fear go? Eased away by time, through practice teaching? Or did my body simply determine that teaching was ultimately not

worth the calories I was expending over it? I try simply to be grateful for my body's adaptation, for my sense of being more at ease in the three dimensions of the classroom. I've begun to bring snacks to class, as my students do. I take pumpkin muffins that I bake with whole-wheat flour and butter crumbles on top. After breaking a muffin into small pieces, I slip a bite in when I finish speaking. I tell them to let me know if I have any crumbs on my face.

ANOREXIA, WITH CHORUS

Marcela Sulak

When I lay my frame across
your flesh
(wherein lies the pain?)

your belly buoys me
through night
(hunger we are being).

*O red beet of winter, yogurt of despair
sleepy onion eyes of hope
glowing just below.*

(How fitfully
the rain
contextualizes sorrow.)

Timidly your sleeping folds
whisper secrets
of your household.

*O urgent avocado
docile mango on its side
little curls of shrimp.*

From your ropey scars and sagged
stretch marks
rhythmically are dangling

a girl's chaste breasts
a navel.
Consider the cheeks.

*Mixed vixens
vituperative twaddle of peas
and all the skins and leaves.*

Consider the apple
the roll
of hip bone

a preoccupation
a towel
a bar of soap.

*Consider the raggy cabbage
the silt of mushroom gills
the diasporic cauliflower.*

It is not given
to each of us
to be desired.

FAMILIAR II AND III

O. Ayes

"In fondness molest a curly worm

Whose familiar is everywhere."

-Anne Spencer

ii.

i didn't know parasitic
worms existed though
i was warned not to play in mud
puddles

i splashed anyway
made waves
on my way to *lola's* house
letting my foam slippers
float in brown water

then once at school i saw
a girl bent over the sink
her pleated skirt bunched
between her legs puking
a long white string

they said it got in through her toe
and it grew
and grew

iii.

sometimes when it rained
we ran to the beach
 just as the water
warmed up and just before
the current sneaked sand
 into our underwear

it was a day like this when a small boat sank
 on the way to boracay island
i didn't know the kids
 two of them a year apart
when their caskets were carried
 through the school yard

their father managed the local bank
 went crazy after he found
 footprints of white sand in his office
said his wife knew

LATE SNACK

Jeff Tigchelaar

Tonight I finally ate the edible panties
my wife brought back from a bridal shower.
They'd been in a bedside drawer
these past seven years,
beneath a bunch of other stuff: dust-
covered notepads, brittle
scraps of yellowed paper,
an old Bible, good
as new.

I'd never read the writing on the box
before tonight, but the package was full of promise:

*Contents: One undie. Pina colada
with rum. Ideal for hors d'oeuvres,
quickie lunches, Sunday brunches . . .*

but it wasn't
without some words of warning as well,
like *Novelty item only* and
*Garment will dissolve
in water or excessive moisture.*

And this mandatory health hazard:

*Contains saccharin, it cautioned,
which has been determined to cause cancer
in laboratory animals.*

And then there was the model.

A brief glance was all it took to see
she didn't exactly make the product look
tasteful.

But tacky photos and frightening fine print
were not enough to turn me off tonight.
My appetite couldn't be curbed.

I took. I ate. It tasted
... *clean* (for such
dirty merchandise)
and by that I mean
it tasted like
soap.

I'd never pictured the scene
this way—me
in bed
alone (save for
a sleeping baby
across my lap),
too tired, too lazy
to get up, to go
to the kitchen for a snack . . .

I'd never imagined
my wife would be out of town
the night the edible panties finally went down.

SHORT NOVELS

Richard Kostelanetz

He relished paternity suits not as threats upon his integrity but as opportunities to publicize his potency.

I've just been handed a news flash that says, "There will be no more news."

A virgin at twenty, she was a snob at thirty and a spinster at forty.

In the story a that is palindrome is that a story the inn.

I'm a man inside a man inside a man inside a woman all wanting to get out.

He spent the day listening in sequence to all the versions he owned of J. S. Bach's *Die Kunst der Fugue*, crying every time the last triple fugue ended in mid-phrase, signaling the composer's death.

Obsessed with your face, I see you everywhere I go; I see it everywhere I look.

Better to make us performers seem ethereal, he filmed only our reflections on water.

Soon after he thought himself gay, he had the good fortune of meeting the man with whom he would spend the rest of his life.

She married the sort of man who her wealthy parents wanted for her husband and then divorced him in favor of another man who would be, she thought, even more acceptable to them.

He changed his home address so often that I no longer know where he is, or was.

Any word I write can be interpreted in seven ways, or seventy-seven, or seven hundred seventy-seven.

Thinking she could cure every philanderer of infidelity, she wouldn't forgive herself for ever being wrong.

I write a sentence and rewrite it, and then rewrite it again, until I have a string of words as perfect as the one you're now reading.

The road on which he traveled receded precipitously before him.

He stood on a spot from which everything important to him in the world was equidistant.

As long as he made it his principal interpersonal strategy to tell his superiors whatever it was they wanted to hear, he would never emerge from behind their shadow, disqualifying himself from ever becoming a leader.

He could tell from how she clasped her arms across her chest, moving them up and down as she was talking to me, that she must be taking an interest, a serious interest, in him.

They are a million, and we are only three.

Whenever I begin a novel, my wife invariably rewrites and writes until she completes it.

On the same day that he married his ex-wife's daughter by a later marriage, his ex-wife married his son from his first marriage.

Founding companies that required her constant attention, she spurned the leisure her inheritance afforded her by buying herself into workaday slavery.

Authoring a book-length autobiography that is unauthorized, I expect, once it appears, to file a defamatory suit against myself.

He lied because his colleagues lied, he cheated because they cheated, and he stole because he could see everyone around him successfully getting away with theft.

She wired the fence around her house to shock not only animals and burglars but relatives who hoped they would not be forgotten in her will.

Returning home for the first time in two decades, she was continually surprised to discover that most of the people she heard on the streets were speaking the language of her dreams.

What he wanted to do was exploit his wife's instinctive sadism by putting her in charge of surreptitious assassinations.

Allowing no self-pity, he refused compensation for injustice.

The "bottom line" in literature is not how much money you earn before you die but how many readers you have after you're gone.

She preferred being married to a man who lived and worked in another town.

He was such a compulsive, intimidating beggar that every night with him resembled Halloween, and every woman beside him looked like a witch.

While the doctor mentioned the names of my past lovers, several electronic measuring devices, attached by wires to different parts of my body, registered different responses that the doctor then recorded in his book.

Though he took a year to paint a picture, he shot each day a photograph of himself before his work in progress, knowing that the snapshots would be exhibited chronologically beside the painting.

He took a perverse pleasure in getting to the office before any of his employees and then staying later than they did, even though his mid-days were customarily spent sleeping with one of his three secretaries.

What he hadn't anticipated, in his greatest vision for his family, was a son who would never marry and thus never have any children, a son who would dissipate his inheritance in homosexual charities.

You can observe a lot by just looking.

As a fake professor who was also a professional faker, he was full of ruses to keep us from recognizing how ignorant he was.

Nothing plus nothing equals nothing, while something plus something equals more than something.

She worked as a fair-weather birdcage cleaner.

I feel like I've spent my life waiting by the telephone for women who were scarcely interested in calling me back.

Her new lovers had to rearrange their daily schedules if they were to stay lovers at all.

My father showed up with a new girlfriend one weekend and another the following Saturday, both of whom would spend the night with him in our guest room; it was hard for us to remember their names.

Even though she was a full professor at a well-known college, no one respected either her writing or talking.

Overhearing the scheme for a monstrous crime, I left my newspaper where it was likely to be found—with the men at the airport, sitting on their suitcases and looking at the ceiling as though they were waiting for their savior to come.

Every day, for fifty years of their marriage, they set up a tripod and took a photograph of themselves smiling at each other.

I belong to a secret society about which I can write nothing more.

He wrote two thousand different poems in an hour.

So great was his power over women that wives would leave husbands, parents, and children, as well as homes, possessions and friends, to go away with him.

Her academic scorecard showed that she received an A in every college course she ever took.

She stole his best ideas and called them her own—even the idea of stealing his best ideas and calling them her own.

You'll know the millennium has come when vinegar turns to wine.

THE MENU POET

Arthur Plotnik

Her early work appeared at Ed's Diner
(Akron), where she married the phrases
chicken-fried and *cheese-stuffed*
to the steak and omelette entries.

She knew that such savory items
as butternut squash, rack of lamb,
forest mushrooms, mousse and flan
could levitate menus on their own,

but Ed's menu lay flat in its grease
until she imagined dishes animated
by action verbs—energetic participles
of preparation, some topped by nouns

as in her first inspired couplet,
Pit-roasted thigh of wild antelope
in sesame-thickened mustard sauce,
for which uninspired Ed canned her.

In wintry midwest bistros she knew
dark times, as seen in the curious lines,
black corn masa-crêpes steamed and
rolled around inky corn mushrooms.

Mixed appetites met these efforts;
then, like fiery La Mancha wine sauce,
an epiphany came upon her, of verbs
to signal *fussing* on behalf of diners;

not the moiling of *baked* or *fricasseed*,
but the *crusting*, *dusting*, and *dotting*
once reserved for moguls and maharajas;
delicate actions of the *chefs de cuisine*.

In New York such participles as *doused*
and *brushed* caught the critics' notice,
and with her *Thai green-chili-rubbed*
fennel-marinated bass she dazzled them.

But the poet wrote not to please critics;
only to delight beloved diners, for whom
her menus sang of breasts *jalapeño-glazed*,
and loins *pistachio-cruste*d, *citrus-planked*.

Legend, doyenne of menuists, she aged
as gracefully as cognac until the year
she wilted like warmed salad leaves,
leaving for her epitaph these words:

No fruit but macerated,
no pear but maple-laced;
no torte but three-milk-soaked,
no death but ash-dusted,
earth-layered,
and dotted with tears.

THE APPLE

Richard Jones

I pare an apple for my little girl, stunning,
as usual, in a shimmering Cinderella gown.
I cut seven happy, shining crescent moons
to array and serve on a deep blue plate,
and recall how to cut and remove the hide
from the head of a white-tailed deer.

Before Sarah was born, before I imagined
her in my life or how life would change,
I met in rural Wisconsin an insurance adjuster.
His hobby was taxidermy. Headless carcasses,
waiting to be skinned and butchered,
hung from pulley ropes in the trees.

I visited the taxidermist with my carpenter friend.
We borrowed a pulley and winch to hoist
a plate glass window to the second story
of an old house we were renovating.
It was brilliant, sparkling autumn. Deer season.
Gun shots and church bells rang in the distance.

What I recall most vividly is the teenaged girl
who lived in the house next door to the taxidermist.
Barefoot in a sunlit Sunday dress, maple leaves swirling
on the lawn, she danced, pale and long-limbed,
practicing baton twirls, throwing the metal bar
high in the air, catching it with a curtsy.

Enchanted, I steadied myself
against my friend's truck, watching the silver baton
spinning crosses in the air. I remember that
as if it were yesterday. That, and the cold stare
the girl's father gave me as he stood on the porch,
knife in hand, paring an apple.

LOVE AFFAIR IN THE PANTRY, EARLY '80S

Curtis Bauer

The latch never clicked shut and after forcing it one afternoon my mother stripped the weak metal in two and it hung there for a decade, then more, yet the doors still held in shadows of what we should and shouldn't eat, what we could and couldn't afford—cheese, flour, corn syrup, molasses and honey the government gave us, generic salted crackers in tin *Saltine* boxes, HyVee Cola with grape and lime and cherry syrups or something else to remind us of those flavors, and cereal none of us wanted for breakfast but ate because what we were told to do we did furiously. The cookbooks, too, my mother inherited from some great aunt who had several subscriptions, and pork & beans tins, chicken noodle soup, beef and fish bouillon cubes I thought were candy once, and on the middle shelf sat enthroned the gilded, glowing cans, the holy row where the Lord God Almighty must have placed what we were not allowed to touch, a biblical test of temptation and faith for our house alone when the pantry doors opened wide and my covetousness stared back from the eyes of the patrons of my lust—Count Dole of Pineapple, Duke Starkest of Tuna and my most desired Lady Blue can of Mandarin Orange. I desired her, would pass hours in front of her smooth blue figure circling her perfect waist with my fingers, holding her curves close to capture her intimate scent. My mother caught me once and shrieked. After that I'd wait for the house to empty,

but she should have known I'd fall again—boys
becoming men do this. She should have seen
my decline from *He is such a nice boy* to *Where
on earth did you come from?* but she did not wonder
why every evening I found an excuse to linger there
in front of the shelves and Lady Blue or how desire
can slap courage into a boy some afternoon and move
his limbs to lift forbidden fruit and consume it whole,
and who's to say we're not conscious of our early sins?
I carried her from that throne, sat her on the counter
top and moved in close to undress her, peel away
the celestial blue top, inhale those sweet curves, and kiss
those delicate lips, her flesh and juice a sweet I'd never
tasted, consumed until then, until I had all of her.

ACT II

Angie Hogan

Chocolate/Spanish Dance

My love sits beside me.

My lover is miles away.

I can't put this back together,

sucking sugar off a raspberry

truffle, watching a bullfight.

I never learned the language . . .

that year a boy stood between me

and the rest of my life.

Tea/Chinese Dance

This is my black teapot,

heavier than the mahogany

shellacked nightstand with eagle feet

it sits on. A gold dragon-bird

carries one merlot candle

across the chest of drawers.

But that has no point.

What I wanted to say was

this is my goddamn teapot.

And *my* china green tips

floating in just-whistled water.

And my morning to sit like a butterfly

over opened poems. Touch any one

and I'll spring up like Rumpelstiltskin,

click my feet together

and turn this tea to fire.

Coffee/Arabian Dance

It's funny how hearts break themselves

over mundane things like morning coffee.

I have thought about Serguei's griddled stomach

for months, his arms stirring
Elena between his legs, around his shoulders,
above his head. How they mirror each other,
us. I would be a ballerina if I could.
I would wake to yogurt and a caffeine rush,
spin my hair tight as perfect piques.
I would wake to you and make
poems with my whole body,
not just these solitary, leaping hands.

Trepak/Russian Dance

Red, red lips. A great white
hat that might float like a sailboat,
cup the wind. Pearly jumping bean,
popcorn in a pot. *I have never felt
so light before.* Staccato ghost.

Waltz of the Flowers

Easter lilies, albino petals
we may as well
pluck and wish upon.
Short-lived promises,
pale against the deep bramble
of blackberry winter—
unlike cicadas, quiet
in their passing.
Mother's favorite, a field
of them waving,
tiptoeing one-legged
in the valley
breeze. I hate them
for dying.
*Bring out the tropical
giant, tinged with yellow,
tie it around my wrist.
The tough green middle*

*damp, perfect
in its fragrance:
human sweat.*

Grand Pas de Deux

The lights come up thick
and sickening. I am not Masha.
There is no prince.
It's almost Christmas again.

THE PANCAKES OF DAN

Alice Stinetorf

Dan pinned a squirrel to a tree with his knife, once. Dan pinned many squirrels to that tree, actually, but we only witnessed it once. The squirrel was fat and unafraid. The tree was a healthy maple. The knife was a six-inch switchblade.

In the months that we knew Dan, he was never without that knife. It came out at the most random times. To trace wild images into the dirt at the smokers' feet during parties. To cut a loose thread that nobody but Dan would notice. He would stab the papers he occasionally chose to write and transfer them to the professor's hand at the blade's tip. To those of us who knew Dan, it was never strange. Just Dan being Dan.

Now that Dan is gone, we struggle to describe him to our new fraternity brothers. We dive into our accounts with such vigor, such nostalgia and pained celebration. We say "Dan was" and "Dan just" and "Dan always" and "Dan could" and "Dan never," and halt. Our tongues trip in the flood of all that he was. Behind our cigarettes or glasses, lips twitch and revert to "Dan was Dan. You had to know him."

Nobody forgets the night we met Dan. It was our first big event of the semester, a party with a '60s glam theme. The girls loved an excuse to spice up their makeup and hair, and we loved an excuse to see them in miniskirts and vinyl boots. We had the house clean for once, one bathroom roped off for drinks. A keg of beer on the edge of the tub, the sink full of some godforsaken punch the chicks love. We each stuffed at least three condoms beneath our pillows. Some of us anticipated that much luck. Some of us figured we'd be too drunk to get it right the first time.

The girls were no disappointment. The house swam with funky tights and tube tops. Our minds swam with lean thighs, nipped waists, and curves. We high-fived each other between turns on the dance floor. Our reputation as the place to be on

Friday nights was secure. The freshman girls whispered and giggled and winked. Our intentions to get some that night were secure.

It speaks wonders of Dan that he single-handedly altered the course of that night. He entered our house like a modern jester. Dan was small and dark, half Cherokee. His hair fell in frizzy natural dreadlocks. One crossed his right eye. Red-rimmed sunglasses with green lenses, a copper coil about his neck. A crisp blue McDonald's shirt. He stole that, would never work there. Tight corduroys rolled to the tops of worn, steel-toed boots. A belt embroidered with flowers. A little anti-fashion warrior.

So this person entered our house without pause. No evaluation. No hesitation. Dan, as if he fucked a thrift shop and let it ejaculate all over his body. Dan, hands clasped behind his back, strode to the bathroom. He grinned at each of us, made a point to catch each of us. He plunged his head into the sink and came up a mess of sticky pink, shook his head in ecstasy, flung vodka and fruit juice and whatever else onto our white walls in lines and drips.

"I'm Jackson fucking Pollock, cats."

We hated him. We loved him. We wanted him, and he knew it.

Dan stole that night. Away from the girls in their neon wigs. Away from all of us in our jeans and Greek letters. He slipped a collection of Irish music into the player. He called traditional dance steps. A ceilidh orgy erupted in our basement. Dan lorded above the madness, swinging from dusty pipes, kicking the beat out on any echoing surface, riding through the room on our shoulders. The girls sweated, we sweated, our wet limbs executed the dance as he called it. Right hand star, left hand star, cross, turn, clap-clap-clap! Reverse, shake hands, and go again! Dan tossed back his head and howled to an exposed light bulb as he galloped past.

It was insanity.

The girls didn't leave until four in the morning. Dan perched on the picnic table out back. He recounted tales through the sunrise, of fishing trips, power trips, acid trips. He flicked open

his knife to carve illustrations into the wood. We flinched at the metallic snap, the first of two times we ever would. We watched. We listened. Dan abruptly stood and walked off mid-sentence. We called out. Where was he going? When would he be back? Why was he leaving? We recoiled, embarrassed.

“Leave? No. Nine three three, amigos, nine three three.”

We filed into the house, dazed. Some of us tossed plastic cups into garbage bags, others collected the cards and ping-pong balls of abandoned drinking games. Several of us lumbered upstairs to sleep. Sweaty and awed. Just as Dan’s enchantment began to lift, just as we began to question our fascination, the door opened and closed. In popped Dan. In his arms, a grocery bag fixing to split. Blueberries, chocolate chips, flour, eggs, milk, cinnamon, he stacked the kitchen table with bounty.

“You throw a kick-ass party. I make kick-ass pancakes.”

It was precisely 9:33 A.M.

Dan rushed our fraternity, and we initiated him in the spring. He rarely attended class. We had no free rooms at the house, but Dan said dorms were Tupperware for lost teens. He was not a leftover. He curled up on our spare futons, beneath tables. Catnapped throughout the day, never took a full stretch of sleep. At night, he wandered the streets neighboring campus. Brought back the weirdest trinkets. “Souvenirs of the resident vagrant,” one of us dubbed his loot. That’s what Dan called it, his loot. Dan uprooted the flowers from the Dean’s window planter and relocated them to a hubcap he dragged out of a creek. That arrangement is on our front porch to this day. Nothing but brown stems and thirsty petals.

When we saw Dan wheeling a trampoline down the street one day, rolling it right up the road like a discarded tire, we confronted him on the sidewalk. We told him to take it back to its owner, that the last thing we needed was a theft conviction. And Dan, all lean muscle in his camouflage wife-beater, he braced the trampoline against his five-foot five-inch frame. His mess of dreads beneath us, the twelve-foot diameter of the trampoline above us, neither trembled.

"A trampoline still covered in dead leaves by mid-March is fair game. It's loot."

His eyes winked without moving. He stepped away from the trampoline, and when we moved in to catch it, Dan scurried up the silver rim. He squeezed his yellow sneakers and striped socks against the springs and canvas, climbed higher, higher, to the top. Dan crouched, then stood, extended his arms for balance. We clutched the base of the trampoline. Dan threw his arms to the clouds and let out a great *ay-ay-ay*, a vibrating, triumphant war cry. We caved to our brother's spirit in an explosion of deep, pure laughter, and imitated Dan's *ay-ay-ay* as we rolled him up the driveway on his stolen throne.

We sometimes found Dan tucked beneath our parked cars. Those evenings when the sun lingered too long and the moon came out early. A stray dread or untied lace revealed his hiding place. From a distance, we heard Dan mutter to no one but himself. Muttering in choked phrases. And if we spoke his name aloud, if we kneeled by his side, Dan stopped. He strode off to tread a lake, explore a shed, prepare a strange dish. But we rarely spoke his name. The disjointed words, muffled by tires and pavement, turned our feet in fear. The moon and sun glowed and shone while Dan murmured to the dark, dirty underbellies.

"A world away, a way. The wayward, way of words. The deaf. World away."

On lonely mornings, we sought Dan beneath desks and staircases. Fueled by our own rough breakups. Our own family fractures. We shook him awake with sturdy sticks, the ones he whittled and burned. His favorite loot. Asked him to take walks. Those mornings, he always offered to make pancakes, and we always accepted. Dan whipped up batch after batch as we spat out our worries. Dan spun his wooden spoon. He never measured the ingredients. Knew them by heart. As we speared mouthfuls of syrup and divine fluff, Dan perched on the cooling oven and told his tales. Told us of the tree house he built on a Tennessee

golf course, right on the eighth hole. Dan snuck lumber across the starlit greens for three nights, climbing and nailing. During the regional tournament two weeks later, a man drove his ball into the tree. Walked over, looked up, and there was Dan, grinning madly in his elaborate home of platforms and peaks and footholds. He held a golf ball in one hand, a joint in the other.

“Hit?”

On our walks, we trailed Dan through backyards, over splintered fences, around rusty swing sets. Property lines meant nothing to Dan. Cops meant nothing to Dan. He led, a limb of birch or oak in hand. We followed. He knelt to wipe dirt from the forgotten action figures of young strangers. Our eyes darted a tad and our brows grew moist. Some April morning was warm, the moon still high when we came across a high school football field. Dan produced a ball. He sprinted to the center line, shedding clothes. Threw himself to the ground, traced his cheekbones in dirt. We wrestled, we ran. We invented a new sport, then walked home in jeans and bare chests caked in muddy grass.

Behind his bright eyes, behind the sunglasses shielding them, Dan was more. More than his adventures, than the life of the party, than we ever tried to know. We let him rock our world in all his Dan ways. We passed his joints. We joined his spontaneous road trips. We lapped up his bank of anecdotes. There was never an extra pancake, we left only crumbs and drying syrup on our plates. And under the full moon, Dan cried. He cried and went a bit crazy.

We noticed the red stains on the tree, the big shade maple out back. We hypothesized vomit. Some girls drank too much strawberry punch. Got sick on the tree. We liked this explanation, but it happened when parties didn't. Our hypothesis didn't explain the fur. Or the notches. We forgot about it. Threw a huge party to wind down before final exams. Mixed the punch extra strong, packed our mini-fridges with handles of vodka and rum. Dan created a dance mix for the basement. Layers of techno,

African chanting, and thrash metal erupted out of the speakers, crashed off the stone walls in waves. The violent beat shook the house, shook it foundation to roof, and everyone fought back with wild dance bursting from a primitive core.

We took a smoke break. Dan perched atop the picnic table. A fat squirrel edged down the maple tree. It sniffed the air, shuffled its feet on the bark. Dan lit a clove. He dove into a story, and we listened. Dan had spent an entire summer on the road, a few years back. He had met this trucker at a breakfast diner. They had sat next to each other at the counter and got to talking. Hours melted, and by the end, Dan had an invitation to spend the next months with the man, trucking coast-to-coast. Just Dan, the trucker, and his trained squirrel. We all laughed as Dan described the squirrel's tricks. How it collected coins at rest stops and learned to buy them snacks from the vending machines. How that squirrel had saved the two time and again.

"That squirrel cracked his beers for him. Lit his cigarettes. Shelled his walnuts."

In a quick twist of bicep and wrist and shoulder, Dan's switchblade flew out of his boot and into the air. And just as soon, Dan's switchblade was through the fat squirrel and in the tree. We couldn't react. The squirrel's tail twitched. Its feet pawed madly for a second or two. We saw death in its black eyes, and red crept down the maple's bark. Dan smiled, his teeth big, white. He yipped mightily. He rushed to the maple. Shook the lifeless squirrel from his knife, retracted the blade, tucked it into his boot. Dan mounted the maple's lowest branch. He maneuvered as he did many nights. Through the limbs, out, and into a second-floor window of the house. We lost sight of his plaid pants. His steel-toed boots.

We stared at the bloody squirrel. The messy corpse, nuzzled amongst roots and moss. The fresh stain on the maple. We all added it up. We all ran from conclusions in bouts of nausea and disbelief. We wondered why. And finally, we spoke these words aloud. None of us knew. And all of us hurt.

Not as much as Dan. He climbed into the house that night

and swallowed a bottle of prescription pain pills with a handle of rum. And one can of Coke. He crawled beneath the dining room table. The one we used twice a year. The formal table. That's where he convulsed, spat blood, soaked the carpet, and died. Drips and lines of his fluids. Like a Pollock painting. Behind a stack of his favorite books. Mostly poetry, some philosophy, a few of the edgier classics. Clutching a little wooden doll he'd been whittling. Modeled after an action figure he found. It was packed into the dirt by a seesaw. Dan extracted it. His own archeological dig. He washed the toy in the bathroom sink. Gentle, with a toothbrush and unscented soap. The wooden doll is incomplete. Rough edges, undefined features.

The note pinned by the switchblade to the tabletop read simply.

"Eat up, cats."

It was a recipe for pancakes.

Just Dan being Dan.

MAKING BISCUITS ON CORN-HUSKING DAY

James Doyle

The old scale runs down its sides
with odd weights that never add up.

The biscuit tin is losing its light
to olive mash and anniversary grit.

She is bent over the stove, taking
pictures with her eyes as the iron strokes

her back, little biscuit puffs curlicued
down the wobble lines of the tray.

Her hands as important as her eyes.
Flour through her fingers, corn

scaling the silos, bellies against orange
rust to move the farm around and back.

The kitchen small, large again, small.
She can press the walls out or in

with her breathing, cooking. The farm
collapses around her when it is ready

to sleep. The quilt saved from grease every
day of harvest, the old hands steady on her.

FREE WILL

Glenn Sheldon

The Chinese restaurant's fake
trout stream is heartbreaking in
its trust that we need lies. We do.
So many expensive beers, bows

to blonde waiters and talks about
friends turned into puppets to get
to their misfortunes. We need
poems much more than poems

need us: *Chicago is tomorrow and
the time to pack up is right now!* This
means something: meaning is possible?
The tip is merely mathematics.

FETTUCCINE

Fran Markover

it's simple enough	our hands talk	pound the dough
until it gives	until the holes	seem to heal
the only fortress	flour as it melds	with the eggs
then knead rest	chat pummel	salt pepper
even her hair	is older	I'm at Lynn's
and awkward	with firsts	homemade pasta
a fresh <i>Hello</i>	after years	of no words
we're together	two women	with more pounds
we shape-shift	tomatoes	mealy ribbons
whole pieces	cranked out	long stories
her rescued dog	our exes	is the clock slow
mother's shoulder	brother's pills	there's too much
wine garlic	Pavarotti's	falsetto
but the noodles	are so tender	like new skin
her arms a cradle	and for a moment	we're simpatico
as if three minutes	simmer boil	what's left

hurt snub hunger	pesto marinara	I can't decide
serve yourself	she tells me	with a touch
a flourish	not opera	biscotti
no thanks	she can't	her root canal
maybe something	deeper softer	cheesecake
or Sinatra	thanks I say	for the invitation
maybe lunch	yes maybe	yes maybe

ON LOVE

Elizabeth Wade Buckalew

In sixth grade, I traded my first kiss for a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. A year later, I baked bunny-shaped sugar cookies as an Easter gift for the boy I was going with. The recipe called for an abundance of powdered sugar, which I managed to sprinkle onto nearly every surface, ceiling included, of my mother's kitchen. When Mama asked how he liked the cookies, I was too embarrassed to admit the truth, how I'd gotten to school and realized that middle school couples didn't commemorate Easter, how the cookies sat in my locker for two months, how gray mold made the icing look like real fur, how the Red Hots I used for the rabbits' eyes grew mushy, and the color seeped onto the animals' faces. Eight years would pass before I baked again.

My first high school boyfriend and I were too distracted by other hungers to ever share a meal. The next beau, an artist, had parents I found exotic, because they grated fresh parmesan over pasta. Together, the artist and I discovered brie and negotiated its troublesome rind. One summer, a horseman bought me pizza at Papa John's in Nicholasville. An older man snuck me White Russians in a bar named Charlie Brown's. The morning after the boy I loved told me he hated poetry, I threw Mama's untouched rum cake—his favorite—in the trash can outside his house and never saw him again.

In college, I survived on mac & cheese—you could get three boxes for eighty-nine cents at the local Harris Teeter—and washed it down with wine from a box. I didn't try the bottled stuff until the politician took me to a wine tasting when I was just nineteen. A boy whose name I never remember left chocolates outside my chemistry class. The one who became a lifelong friend brought bagels and orange juice before my finals. The fraternity boy took me to Steak & Date, where the meat was piled foot-high on platters. I knew it wasn't for girls, and supped instead on

salad. Away from campus, the fraternity boy took me for lobster dinners, ten dollars a plate at a roadside shack in Hingham, Massachusetts. He bought me a ring, but I didn't learn that till much later, after we'd broken up, when a mutual friend spilled the secret over a pancake breakfast at Disney World.

The man whose ring I did accept was allergic to peanuts and avoided spicy things. He liked sandwiches, not prosciutto and chèvre on seven grain bread, no, just a single slice of turkey and Miracle Whip on Wonder. When the artisanal cheese maker asked over ice cream in England if I was happy in my marriage, I lied and said yes. I should have known better.

My first meal as a divorcée consisted of tomato basil soup and whole wheat crackers straight from the box. My sister tried to set me up with an all-American boy, a former quarterback with a penchant for fillet. There were several boys I didn't date—the bigot who followed me into bars and the bourbon drinker who reminisced about barbecue ribs after a lazy afternoon with friends. I swore off dating, but when my best friend and I went out, waiters always thought we were a couple. We knew each other's histories—how my mother carries a steak knife in her purse, how his ex-girlfriend publishes love poems about a woman who tasted like mangoes—and finally decided what the hell, we'd give it a try. On our first date, the chef sent a complementary salad of sliced tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, and basil leaves, and we thought it a promising omen. Since then, we've dined on lobster ravioli and driven three hours for chili dogs. We've invested in a pasta maker, a potato ricer, a citrus zester. Each morning he brings me tea in bed.

DARJEELING

T. A. Noonan

1: Service

Mimosa. Toasted waffle. Potatoes
half-soft in the skillet.

Focus on you: a woman
licking olive oil off her wrist & shouting,
"There ain't a witch here
or anywhere in the world who wants this job!"

(turn

(to the pull-out couch: one witch pockets
a five dollar bill left in a program,
another slips
hands into her underwear)

on the oven)

First, unsteady silence. Two
clicks, a hiss of blue
heat. Now I'm beside you greasing
a Pyrex dish.

We work the dough in shifts,
our nightgowns bleached by flour & thin
winter sunlight. After your funeral, I bake
cinnamon rolls.

Rise. Dress. Take breakfast on the patio.
Entertain an audience. Cast long profiles over every teacup.

JULY

Nick Courtright

In her sleep she wades through an orchard.
Grass high against her legs. The day is like a cactus.

•

She needs little for happiness, but the apples
are just out of reach. In the dream her face is glass.

•

Patience can be a grave virtue, to give in. *Somnus*,
to sleep. She feels she's been here for weeks.

•

For a month the creek bed has been dry. Unbroken
but getting there fast, she walks the tracks.

•

Morning: the trestle shakes beneath her feet.
Her face is the same as glass falling from the sky.

•

Something small is just out of reach. It's July.
She's been longing for more. It's long been July.

LONGING AS HOPPIN JOHN

Iain Haley Pollock

From the ecstatic blue flameburst of coiled burners,
the rising funk of black-eyed peas & collards.
Remember when we staked ourselves here,
in this small, open kitchen of want?
Not to hem appetites grown ragged,
but to be transfigured like spice—
ground into cumin or cayenne,
mixed with slides of onion,
stirred in, steeped, stewed,
simmered to sauce,
spilled over rice,
folded by spoon,
again & again,
into grains of
soon &
yes.

OPENING NIGHT

Jason Tandon

Lit up on the only marquee in town:

CURLY FRIES ARE BACK.

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Please note: *Harpur Palate* does not accept submissions via email.

Prose: 250 to 8,000 words, one submission per author; mail to Prose Editors. Poetry: 3-5 poems, no more than 10 pages total per submission; mail to Poetry Editors. Payment: 2 contributor's copies per author. Reading periods: We accept submissions between July 15 and November 15 for the winter issue, between December 15 and April 15 for the summer issue. Send to:

Harpur Palate
English Department
Binghamton University
P.O. Box 6000
Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

Send a copy of your manuscript, a cover letter, and a business-size, self-addressed and stamped envelope (SASE). Manuscripts without SASEs will be discarded unread. Copies of manuscripts will not be returned. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable as long as you let us know in your cover letter that you are simultaneously submitting; also, if your work is accepted elsewhere, please let us know immediately. Due to the number of submissions we receive, we cannot respond to questions about whether your work has been read. Unless otherwise noted on our website, our response time is approximately 4 to 8 months.

THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY

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

Opens: July 1

Deadline: October 1

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

Poems in any style, form, or genre are welcome as long as they are: 1) no more than three pages, and 2) previously unpublished. The entry fee is \$15/5 poems. You may send as many poems as you wish, but no more than five poems per envelope/entry fee. Please send checks drawn on a US bank or money orders. Make sure your checks are made out to *Harpur Palate*, or we won't be able to process them (or accept your submission).

Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address and poem titles. Entrant's name should only appear on the cover letter and should not appear anywhere on the manuscript. Manuscripts cannot be returned, so please send disposable copies.

Send entries along with a business-size, self-addressed and stamped envelope (#10 SASE) for contest results to:

Milton Kessler Poetry Contest
Harpur Palate
English Department
Binghamton University
P.O. Box 6000
Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

<http://harpurpalate.binghamton.edu>

AREAS OF STUDY

Poetry, fiction, creative
non-fiction, memoir,
children's literature

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WRITING BY DEGREES

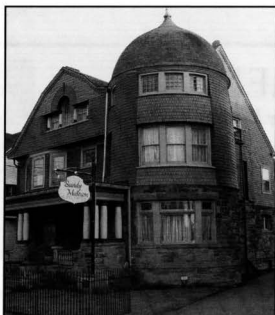


Photo by Kathryn Henion

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.

The next Writing By Degrees conference will be held September 27, 28, and 29 at the historic Bundy Mansion, a Queen Anne/shingle-style mansion near downtown Binghamton, NY. We are proud to welcome fiction writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, poet Vijay Seshadri, and nonfiction writer Jo Ann Beard as keynote speakers for our tenth anniversary conference. Panels include topics such as prose, poetry, creative nonfiction/memoir, creative writing pedagogy, and the business of literary journals, as well as exceptional readings of graduate fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

For more details, please visit our website at:

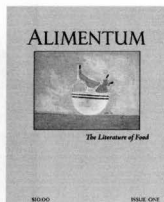
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\$65 for three years (\$72 outside USA)
Single Issues: \$7.00 (\$10.00 outside USA)

Submission Guidelines

Accepts submissions year round in Poetry, Fiction, and Non-Fiction
Simultaneous Submissions Welcome

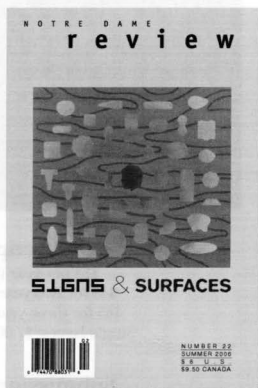
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Creative Writing at Notre Dame

Our graduate Creative Writing Program is a two-year, literary immersion program that leads to the M.F.A. Each accepted student receives a full-tuition scholarship; several assistantships are also available, including the Sparks Fellowship. All students are given opportunities to work as editorial assistants on our national literary magazine, *The Notre Dame Review*. For more information, visit our website www.nd.edu/~alcwp



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