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∴ Harpur Palate, Volume 8 Issue 1, Summer 2008

Harpur Palate

Volume 8 Issue 1



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Harpur Palate

Volume 8 Issue 1, Summer 2008



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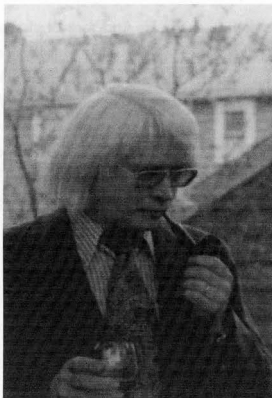
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THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION



WINNER

THE EMPRESS OF CHARCOAL

Jacob M. Appel

The note arrived on Yale University letterhead, neatly typed, three years to the month after she'd lost her husband:

May 15, 2007

Dear Elsa,

I imagine you don't remember me. I was a student in Professor Stanley's figure drawing class at City College during the spring semester of 1962, when you served as a model. After the course ended, I asked the Visual Arts Department for your name, but I didn't have the courage to contact you. I suppose you will think me foolish—and no doubt I am—but that remains among the greatest regrets of my adult life. My wife of thirty-six years passed away last August and my son helped me find your address on the Internet. Would you be willing to have lunch one of these days?

Sincerely,

Morton D. Belldauer, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus

Department of the History of Mathematics

PS: If you are not the same Elsa Kalamaransky who modeled at City College in 1962, kindly disregard this message.

Elsa was *not* the same woman who had modeled for Professor Stanley's class. She'd already been teaching five years at Bonneville by 1962, initiating her girls into the marvels of Balzac and Flaubert. But ever since the balmy, cloudless morning when she'd discovered Bruce facedown in his beloved Jacuzzi, skin bloated and puckered like a bobbing apple, springtime tormented Elsa

with its insincere promise. It was during one of her lonely spells that she replied to Belldauer in longhand:

Dear Morton,

What a delightful surprise! I confess I do not remember you, but 1962 was an eternity ago, wasn't it? My life here in Rhode Island has been a good one. As Emily Dickinson wrote, "To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else." I retired six years ago from teaching at The Bonneville School, shortly after it merged with an all-boys academy. At the end, I was teaching only French language, but I was initially hired as an instructor of Italian literature as well. Are you a fan of Leopardi? I do hope so.

As of now, the summer is surprisingly open. My late husband (39 years together, 3 apart) was an avid gardener, and although I fear I lack his natural gifts, I'm doing my darnedest to keep my thumbs green. I believe I can claim some success, as this weekend the peonies are staging a wondrous show.

Please do come see the daylilies while they are in bloom.

Most warmly,

Elsa Kalamaransky

She reread the letter twice before sealing it inside the envelope, unsure if she'd included too much or too little. She'd been one of six sisters, and all of her life she'd worked among women, so what little she understood of men came from interacting with Bruce and his colleagues in the Providence Philharmonic—not, most likely, a representative sampling of the species. At the central post office in Creve Coeur, she tore open the envelope to verify that she'd printed the correct telephone number beneath her signature, and she had to purchase a replacement at the counter.

Elsa sent the letter on Saturday morning. Belldauer phoned in the early evening on Wednesday, and now it was Saturday again, and she was expecting him at noon. "At my age, I don't like to put anything off," he'd joked in a voice as deep and resonant as a kettle drum. "Besides, the way I see it, I'm already forty-five

years overdue.” Elsa had expected him to sound more patrician, less ethnic Brooklyn—like Cary Grant without the effeminate tinge. But the professor did come across as very much the gentleman. Bruce, rest his soul, had been a slow-spoken tenor with an accent to shame the Kennedys.

She’d started planning their meal the evening that Belldauer phoned and, in hindsight, she’d gone a bit overboard: After all, he was a stranger who’d been sweet on her nearly half a century ago. Not even *on her*. *On a woman who had shared her name!* But Elsa had endured so long without cause to indulge, that now she couldn’t resist a drive to the gourmet supermarket in Providence for fresh Bluefin tuna and hand-picked Nyons olives. She tossed the tuna in a homegrown spinach salad. Then she covered the wrought-iron table in the garden with her late mother-in-law’s daisy-print cloth. As lunchtime approached and the skies remained clear, she set out a basket of assorted breads, a porcelain platter of camembert and brie, and the swan-shaped glass water pitcher that her wealthy grandaunt had bestowed upon her and Bruce as a wedding gift. All night long, a driving rain had pummeled the neighborhood, forcing Elsa to reassess her plans, but by Friday morning, the air had turned crisp with potential. On the slate patio, puddles shimmered under the high white sun.

Belldauer’s car—a dignified jet-black Oldsmobile—pulled up at the curb ten minutes early, but the professor waited inside the vehicle until precisely twelve. Elsa watched through the bay windows in the living room as he advanced up the front path and paused under the crabapple tree to adjust the sleeves of his sports jacket. He was trim and long-limbed, with an grand forehead and a bushy, salt-and-pepper mustache. The mustache, reflected Elsa, might take some adjusting to. Otherwise, Belldauer was as handsome as any man she’d laid eyes upon—at least, since that distant night when Rachel Kalamaransky, her colleague at Bonneville, had invited Elsa backstage at the symphony to meet her unmarried and “pleasantly eccentric” brother. The professor even carried himself rather like Bruce, his magnificent head

cocked slightly skyward, as he stepped onto the front porch, holding his bouquet of lilacs. How fortunate that she'd had the nerve to write back! Then her chest fluttered with second thoughts: What if he realized she was the wrong Elsa? What if he didn't, but rejected her when she later confessed? What if the other Elsa Kalamaransky had been significantly less busty? Or black? Or an achondroplastic dwarf? When the doorbell chimed, she found herself paralyzed with anxiety. After a pause, the bell rang again. Elsa clenched her eyelids together, as though she were about to dive into a pool of icy water, and she crossed briskly through the foyer to welcome her guest.

The portico stood a step down from the entryway, so when Elsa opened the door, she and Belldauer faced each other at eye level. He said nothing, at first. For half a second, he just stared at her, his brow furrowed as though reconstructing a puzzle in his mind from memory. And then he flashed her a broad grin. "Goodness, Elsa Kalamaransky," he said. "It's really you, isn't it?"

"Please, come inside," answered Elsa. "I'm so glad you're here."

Soon they were standing in the parlor, surrounded by upholstery and knick-knacks, and again he was examining her. She accepted the lilacs from his outstretched hand and her gaze followed his nervously around the room. Photos of her long life with Bruce cluttered the piano bench and the end tables, including several from their first honeymoon in the Canadian Rockies, and now Elsa regretted not having moved them upstairs.

"Did you have an easy drive?" asked Elsa.

"Oh, it was fine. I just can't believe it's actually you," said Belldauer. "The Empress of Charcoal, in the flesh."

"Excuse me?"

"That's what I used to call you. The Empress of Charcoal," he explained. "I suspect you'll laugh at me if I tell you why."

"Try me," answered Elsa. She felt herself growing confident, even flirtatious. "But first, let's head onto the veranda. As far

as I'm concerned, it's far too lovely an afternoon to squander another moment out of the sun."

She took hold of the professor's hand and led him through the sliding glass doors. Belldauer's skin felt warm to her touch. Outside, on the low-hanging branches of the Japanese maple, a pair of orioles serenaded each other; from beyond the forsythia hedge rose the cries of the neighbor's children, and the occasional blast of a firecracker. Elsa tucked Belldauer's lilacs into her plastic watering jug and centered the bouquet atop the gas grill. Bruce had enjoyed hosting barbecues for his fellow musicians, but ever since she'd lost him, Elsa used the device as a sideboard. "Now where were we?" asked Elsa, smiling coyly. "Oh, yes. I was about to laugh at your story."

"I wouldn't blame you," said the professor. "As I was saying, the office adjacent to Dr. Stanley's belonged to the chairman of the history department. Big, meaty fellow—I've forgotten his name. In any case, the two of them shared one of those long glass-enclosed bulletin boards, and Stanley used to post our charcoal sketches next to this pictorial genealogy chart of the royal houses of Europe. So one afternoon, I was standing in the corridor, looking over the various ways the class had portrayed you, and somehow 'The Empress of Charcoal' popped into my head. Foolish, no?"

"Not in the slightest," said Elsa. "May I offer you a drink?"

"It's only noon. I wouldn't want to give you the wrong impression."

"Nonsense," she retorted. "I still have a pitcher of frozen banana daiquiri left over from my niece's birthday picnic. How about I pour us each a glass and then I give you a walking tour of the garden?"

"I never say no to a lady," answered Belldauer. "Or to a chilled cocktail."

Elsa retrieved the crystal decanter from the mini-fridge and filled two cognac glasses. She'd prepared the contents the evening before, several weeks *after* her niece's birthday celebration, but it was a harmless lie. The truth was that she hardly drank at

all—champagne on New Year's, Manischewitz at her sister-in-law's Passover dinner, an occasional Bloody Mary at a wedding or shower—but she didn't want Belldauer to think her puritanical. Secretly, she also hoped to limber up his judgment.

"Here's mud in your eye!" she declared. "To second chances!"

They clinked glasses and she drank.

"It's amazing how you expect something to turn out one way, and it works out so differently, yet it's still just as good," said Belldauer.

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain." He sipped from his glass. "I still remember how stunning you looked that first afternoon when you slid that Japanese dressing gown off your shoulders, and all you were wearing was that startling blue bracelet around your wrist. For some reason, I expected you to be reserved, aloof—and you're so friendly."

"I suppose I might have come across as aloof *back then*," said Elsa. "I can pretend to be less friendly, if you'd prefer." She sensed the heat of the daiquiri in her temples. "Or even downright mean."

"That won't be necessary," said Belldauer, beaming. "I have a strange confession to make. After I wrote to you, I still wasn't sure that I'd have it in me to meet you face-to-face. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I miss Louise. Like hell, I miss Louise. Every day. I'll be reading a book or listening to the radio and my mind begins drifting to what she looked like during those final nights at the hospice. Of course, my son—he's a headshrinker at Johns Hopkins—assures me it will get better."

Bullshit, thought Elsa. It might be *different*, but never better. She still woke up *every* morning, three years later, shocked not to find Bruce, his paunch poking over his boxers, hogging the pillows onto his side of the bed.

Elsa squeezed Belldauer's wrist. "Poor dear," she said.

"Honestly, I wasn't thinking too clearly when I sent you that note," he continued. "I had no idea what I'd do next—whether

I'd even follow up at all. But do you know what sealed the deal for me?"

"What?"

"That you'd kept your maiden name." The professor shrugged. "I know that sounds ridiculous, but I liked that you were still a Kalamaransky."

"Why couldn't Kalamaransky be my husband's name?"

"I did the math when I received your letter. If you've been married thirty-nine years and widowed three, you were still single when you posed for us. It makes a man wonder. Had I only written to you then." Belldauer allowed this idea to drift unfinished into the azaleas. "I've always been vehemently opposed to women changing their names when they get married," he said. "It's a particularly retrograde practice, to be blunt, based on historical notions of wives as chattel. I'm proud to say that Louise was born a Kappelgruber and, rest her soul, she died a Kappelgruber."

Elsa wasn't sure she agreed with Belldauer about name-changing, but she found endearing the vehemence with which he voiced his opinion. "Are you ready for a stroll around the yard?" she asked. "Before the morning glories and the portulaca close up shop for the afternoon?"

Elsa topped off Belldauer's drink and passed it back to him.

"And on the subject of math, Mr. Professor Emeritus at Yale University, maybe you could tell me about the variety of mathematics you studied."

"*History* of mathematics," Belldauer corrected her.

Elsa polished off her second daiquiri. "*History* of mathematics," she echoed. "Twice as impressive."

She reached for his hand again, this time clasping it more decisively, and steered him between the neatly manicured beds of dahlias and gladiolas. Now that she'd spread store-bought bark chips around the perennials—as she'd already done for several years with the zinnias and pansies—the entire patch looked far more professional.

"Most of my work focused upon cuneiform tablets, on whether

the Babylonians ever developed an authentic trigonometry,” said Belldauer. “I also authored several papers on advanced functions in the Sumerian system—cubic equations, Pythagorean triples. I developed a particular expertise regarding a tablet called Plimpton 322. Truthfully, I can’t imagine it would interest you in the slightest.”

“You might find yourself surprised,” Elsa answered. But rather than inquire anything further about Mesopotamian numerology, she pointed out the various strains of daylilies. “This over here is Honest Abe’s Beard,” she said, cupping the petals of a tall blossom fringed in black. “Those two red ones behind the phlox are Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. What was it Goldman once said? ‘I’d rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck.’ Personally, I couldn’t agree more.”

“You’ve bred all of these yourself?”

“Heavens, no. Not *me*. Bruce.” Elsa wondered if she was talking too much about her husband—but, after nearly four decades of marriage, what else was she supposed to talk about? “He played the oboe. You should have seen him: Such a large man blowing into such a tiny instrument. But his real passion wasn’t music. It was cross-breeding flowers. In Bruce’s study, I still have an entire filing cabinet full of daylily pedigrees that I can’t make heads nor tails of. I can’t bring myself to discard them.”

“Louise was a dietitian,” said Belldauer—reflectively, almost as though he were thinking aloud. “She worked at the university hospital.”

Elsa said nothing. One of her own sisters had also been a medical dietitian, specially trained to counsel renal patients, before she’d suffered a breakdown and filed for permanent disability. So the Louise Kappelgruber whom Elsa now imagined, wandering the dialysis clinic, warning diabetic truck drivers against eating foods that appeared white, looked like her own dear, hopeless Gladys. Elsa didn’t mention any of this, because she wanted Belldauer to think about his wife as infrequently as possible.

They circled around the far corner of the garden—past

the firewood pile, the strawberry patch, the shaded hemlock arbor where Bruce had installed a polished cedar bench. The quarter acre beyond the hemlocks, up to the stockade fence, was overgrown with oak and hickory saplings. This was also where, in a small clearing, Bruce and his brother-in-law had been attempting to restore a twenty-one foot cutty cruiser that they'd salvaged from a rummage sale. The craft's lichen-coated prow still waited for them on cement blocks, oblivious to Bruce's aneurysm, unaware that Gary and Rachel had since retired to the dry heat of Phoenix.

Belldauer tapped the side of the vessel with his fingers, generating a hollow thud. "One of my former students owns a boat like this," he observed. "He takes me out on the Sound two or three times every summer." This reminded Elsa of her girls from Bonneville, all of whom were now adults, many with fully-grown children of their own. One was even a grandmother—to twins! And another, Maria Coats, was the provost at Bryn Mawr College. Elsa had many regrets in life—not having children, not spending more time with Bruce—but choosing a teaching career was never among them. She reached for Belldauer's elbow and led him further into the lush greenery, keeping her feet on the flagstones to avoid the mud. +

She paused in front of Bruce's favorite lily—his prized accomplishment. The blossom wasn't *officially* blue according to the American Hemerocallis Society's standards—technically, it was aquamarine—so Bruce hadn't won their challenge award. But it was certainly blue enough to fool the average observer. "These beauties here are the Ida Kalamaransky blooms," said Elsa. *Named after Bruce's mother*, she almost added. But she caught herself in time, and blurted out, "Bruce named them after *my* mother." She held her breath, waiting for Belldauer to call out her lie—but he didn't. He merely smiled warmly, so Elsa leaned forward and sniffed the blossoms, more to conceal her face than to inhale the mild aroma. "Aren't they glorious?" she asked. "They always remind me of those lines from the Wordsworth poem about daffodils:

*I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought.”*

Much to Elsa’s amazement, Belldauer answered:

*“For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.”*

The professor held his lapels like a ringmaster while he declaimed, clearly proud of his performance. “You look surprised,” he said.

“I *am* surprised.”

“Why? I’m an historian of mathematics, so I can’t be cultured?”

Elsa feared she might weep from joy. “Of course, it’s not that,” she answered—but at some level, it was precisely that, and in any case, she had no opportunity to present an alternative explanation. Instead, a sharp, high-pitched whistle made her look up with a start—and then a staccato of explosions sent her diving into the hollyhocks with her arms over her head. Bright sparks, orange and pink, shot from the grass around the zucchini plot. Nearby, a portion of the chicken-wire trellis collapsed, toppling with it the nascent pumpkin vines. Then Elsa’s entire world turned beige as Belldauer shielded her from the blasts with his sports jacket. He stood bowed over her, like a hawk protecting its brood, and her cheek pressed against his chest.

After what seemed like months—but must have been only seconds—a deathly hush descended upon the garden. Elsa could hear her own sharp breaths and the cadence of Belldauer’s heart, the two sounds merging into one complex rhythm. Then, from above, a lone catbird began trilling its chipper reveille. Elsa drew

her hands away from her face and climbed out of the flower beds. The elbows of her blouse were streaked with clay, and a run slashed across the knee of her left stocking.

"What on earth was that?" she asked.

"I'd guess three or four bottle rockets," answered Belldauer. "And half a dozen cherry bombs."

"We're being bombed?"

"Firecrackers," he explained, as he dusted splinters of bark from his trousers. "It appears as though your neighbors have turned their artillery on us."

The professor stepped into the vegetable patch and poked under the chicken-wire with a jagged stick. Elsa watched anxiously as he kicked a spent rectangular canister out from the undergrowth. She wanted to warn him to be careful, but feared he would think her a worrywart. "Don't go cleaning these up on your own," said Belldauer. "Your fingers are far too adorable to risk losing. I'm afraid you'll have to ask your neighbors to call in a professional—just in case any of these shells are still active."

"I don't understand," said Elsa. "We've never had any trouble before."

It figured that, on her first date in forty-two years, she'd face an armed attack. If this actually were a date, this is—and not just one-time reunion.

"They seemed like such decent boys," she added. "Their mother's a rabbi. Rabbi Bonomi. Italian Jews."

As though on cue, the Bonomi boys appeared at the break in the forsythia hedge. They were both pudgy kids with broad foreheads and impressive jaws, topped with matching shocks of auburn hair. The older youth, who could not have been much beyond ten, pushed the younger child toward Elsa and Belldauer. "My brother, Zachary," he said, "has something that he'd like to say to you."

Zachary stepped forward in increments, his eyes fixed on the damp grass.

"I'm sorry," he said—his voice soft and tentative. Elsa thought he might sob, and she felt an urge to hug him. "I did something

dangerous and I'm very sorry I did it."

"Firecrackers *are* dangerous," answered Belldauer. "How old are you, Zachary?"

"Eight and seven months."

Belldauer winked at Elsa. "Do you know what I liked to do when I was eight and seven months? I liked to study the stars."

Zachary Bonomi kept his head down, his arms tucked to his chest. The older brother stepped forward and placed a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

"A telescope," said Belldauer, "that's what a young *mensch* like you needs."

Elsa could sense that her date had once been an exceptional father. Speaking to these boys, he sounded as avuncular as the Wizard of Oz—only Jewish.

The professor reached into the breast pocket of his jacket. His hand emerged moments later, fingers wrapped around a short brass tube. The metal gleamed. Belldauer tugged on the cylinder and it expanded rapidly to become a foot-long telescope.

"Here you go, kid. But you shouldn't use it until the sun goes down."

The boy reached tentatively for the telescope. He peered into the broad lens, then turned the apparatus around and gazed down the narrow end.

"Can I keep it?"

"You can share it with your brother," answered Belldauer. "But on one condition. You promise not to set off any more firecrackers."

"Anywhere?" asked the boy.

"Yes," Belldauer said firmly. "*Anywhere.*"

Zachary looked to his brother for guidance. The older boy nodded.

"Okay, it's a deal," said Zachary. "Thank you."

Then the boys turned and ran, a blur of dungarees and sunburnt flesh.

"I'm not sure what to say," said Elsa. "Do you always carry

around a telescope to give to wayward schoolboys?"

"I do, in fact," answered Belldauer. "But not for wayward schoolboys. I'm rather a devotee of the night sky—it's reassuring to think that I'm seeing the same constellations as Euclid and Archimedes." He stepped back onto the path, and this time it was he who took her hand. "You'll have to decide whether you want their parents to pay to have the firecracker shells removed," he said. "I can't say I envy you that decision."

They began walking back toward the house, arm-in-arm, like a Victorian couple on a promenade through Vauxhall Gardens.

"You are certainly a man of many surprises," said Elsa. "I'm afraid to find out what else you have hidden away in those pockets of yours."

"You should be," answered Belldauer. His voice contained a new seriousness, a sense of purpose. "Let's sit down and I'll show you."

He dried off a chair for her at the lunch table and drew up his own alongside it. Then he cleared off a small square of tablecloth between the bread basket and the platters of cheese. Elsa realized what he was going to show to her at the very moment he removed the drawing from inside his coat. The sketch had been folded over many times and bore deep, irregular crease marks. One corner of the paper canvas had been shorn away entirely. In several places, the charcoal itself had streaked. But there was no mistaking the subject of Belldauer's forty-five year-old illustration. It was a young woman—a *nude* young woman—standing arms akimbo on a wooden stepladder. Fortunately, the portrait neither looked like Elsa nor unlike Elsa. Whatever his other attributes, the young Morton D. Belldauer had not been a particularly gifted sketch artist.

"I can't believe you've kept it all these years."

"I had a terrible crush on you for an entire semester," answered Belldauer. "Bear in mind, you were the first woman I'd ever seen without her clothes on."

Of course, thought Elsa. That wouldn't have been at all remarkable, back in 1962. What a different age that had

been! Bruce, too, had been the first man she'd ever seen fully unclothed.

Elsa held the precious drawing as tenderly as she might hold a baby. Her hand trembled and she braced it against the tabletop. "You had talent," she observed.

"I didn't, but it's very kind of you to say so," answered Belldauer. "I've taken it up again, though. Drawing, that is. Ever since I retired from the department. I've got my art supplies in the trunk of my car."

He reached for the pitcher and poured them each a final daiquiri, shifting back and forth between glasses to ensure an equal distribution.

"I know this is going to sound crazy," said Belldauer, "but I was wondering if you'd let me draw you again."

He sounded so innocent, so gentle. Like a fourteen-year-old schoolboy seeking permission to kiss her for the first time. The man's big dark eyes gazed into hers, brimming with tender hope, and his devotion made Elsa feel bashful. Her own eyes darted away from his quickly. Across the lawn, chipmunks scampered on the stone retaining wall opposite the cellar steps, and a dopey, overweight woodchuck sunned himself shamelessly beside the sprinkler head. She felt Belldauer's attention fixed upon her, waiting for his fate to be sealed.

"Are you serious?" Elsa asked. She had never modeled before, and she wasn't sure she'd even know how to do it. It was probably one of those feats that proved far harder than it first appeared, the sort of challenge her Bonneville girls had always relished—like drinking a gallon of whole milk in five minutes. Besides, she sensed that Belldauer had a specific sort of modeling in mind. "You don't mean...?"

"If you'd be willing. Just like in class."

"Oh, good heavens, Morton. I haven't done anything like that in years...I'm out of practice..."

"You'll do the best you can," he replied. "Let's make today the first day of your second modeling career."

"*Today?*"

"Today. Right here in the garden." Now Belldauer glanced away, his voice shifting to a softer, less fervent note. "I do hope I'm not offending you," he apologized. "I don't mean to put you on the spot."

"Not at all." Elsa downed what remained of her drink and rose deliberately from her chair. "Go get your supplies, Morton. I'll be back in a moment."

"Thank you," he answered.

She retreated into the house and quickly exchanged her blouse and skirt for Bruce's navy dressing gown. The silk charged her skin with desire. How unfathomable that she'd only met Morton Belldauer several hours earlier. She felt as though she'd already known him for an eternity, that the time before he'd entered her life was no longer readily accessible. Maybe this was what her Bonneville girls were feeling when they composed those essays defending Emma Bovary for having sex on a first date. Elsa assessed herself in the bedroom mirror: her rutted skin, her tired mouth, the flesh too thick between her chin and her neck. What a loon she must be, at the age of seventy-one, to compare herself to Emma Bovary. When she returned to the garden, clad only in the robe and a pair of sheepskin slippers, Belldauer had already set up his easel on the tier of flagstone across from the wishing fountain.

"You look ravishing," the professor said. "I'll never forget Dr. Stanley warning us that the models were employees hired solely to further our artistic development—that we shouldn't look upon them as women.... I intended to do exactly that until the moment you walked into the studio."

Elsa scanned the perimeter of the yard. Over the years, the rhododendrons and forsythia had grown high enough to block the neighbors' view. In any case, it was her own property, wasn't it? She had every right to engage in an artistic pastime on her own property! Who would dare say otherwise?

"Where would you like me?" she asked.

"How about in front of that fountain?" suggested Belldauer. "Maybe you could climb up onto the wall so I can capture those

white flowers behind you.”

“Honeysuckle,” said Elsa. “During the nineteenth century,” she added nervously, “teenaged girls were forbidden to sniff honeysuckle because the blossoms were believed to induce unseemly dreams.”

“They’re stunning flowers,” he answered. “A perfect frame for a portrait of a stunning woman.”

Elsa slid out of her slippers and inched along the stone wall as though advancing toward the end of a narrow branch. Belldauer stepped from behind the easel and watched as she allowed the robe to fall slowly from her shoulders.

How exposed she suddenly was! How vulnerable!

“I feel like a schoolgirl,” said Elsa. “All jitters and nerves.”

Belldauer stared at her body pensively, his fingertips pressed over his mouth. He looked as though he were discovering her for the first time. Elsa felt the shame building inside her. What a disappointment she must be! Here he was, clinging to a forty-five year old vision of youthful beauty, while all she had to offer were sagging breasts and cellulite. She wished she’d had the good sense to keep her clothes on.

Belldauer appeared troubled. More surprised than disappointed.

“That blue bracelet of yours,” he said. “What was it? Cobalt?”

“I don’t know,” stammered Elsa.

“Do you still have it?”

“Maybe,” she replied. “I could check for you.”

Why had she said that? For the sake of the charade? Or because she was mortified to pose naked on a stone wall in front of a complete stranger? Morton Belldauer was, after all, nothing more than a stranger who’d written her a letter by mistake. Elsa reached for her robe. “I’ll be right back,” she said, and she scurried through the sliding glass doors into the living room.

Inside the house, of course, there was nothing Elsa could do except to wait until a sufficient interval of time had elapsed. She obviously did not own the other Elsa Kalamaransky’s

cobalt bracelet—or anything she might substitute in its place. If Belldauer learned the truth, she wondered, would he still track down the correct Elsa? Or would he cut his losses with her? Bruce, in Belldauer's shoes, would have worked his hardest to laugh off the entire episode. He certainly wouldn't have held her little falsehood against her. Quite the opposite: Bruce was one to appreciate a stunt so audacious and madcap. He might even have attempted something truly nutty, once he'd forgiven her—like inviting the other Elsa K. to join them both for dinner. But Elsa sensed a sober streak in Morton Belldauer that might prevent the man from looking beyond her deception so easily.

She waited for the grandfather clock to strike three. On the third peal, she strode back onto the veranda. Belldauer was seated on the edge of the stone wall, posed thoughtfully on the very stones where she was to model.

"I couldn't find the bracelet," said Elsa.

Belldauer nodded. His fingers kneaded his magnificent forehead.

"I couldn't find the bracelet," she continued, feeling her tongue grew loose in her mouth, "because I don't have the bracelet."

"How foolish of me to expect it," he answered. "It has been forty years."

He was still scrutinizing her—probably trying to reconcile her naked body with the image frozen in his memory. Elsa drew in her breath.

"I *never* had the bracelet," she said. "I have a confession to make—"

Belldauer held up his hand. "Don't," he warned sharply.

"But I have to," continued Elsa. "I wish so much that I'd been that woman in your drawing class, but I wasn't."

"Please, don't," Belldauer repeated. Louder. "I already know."

"You know?"

She could tell by the deep sadness in his face that he'd seen through her.

"I believed you at first. Forty-five years *is* a very long time. But I knew the moment you removed your robe," said Belldauer. "You were so shy just now, so gloriously shy. How did you describe it? 'All nerves and jitters.' But the one thing I'll never forget about the woman who posed for us in Dr. Stanley's class was how confident she was, how comfortable in her own skin. I'd never seen such sophistication. That's not the sort of self-possession one ever forgets—not even after forty-five years."

So there it was. Over. Done. What a fool she had been.

"I'll assume this means you don't want me to pose for you," said Elsa.

Belldauer frowned at her, his face beset with gravity. This must have been the face he used when investigating mysteries in cuneiform. Elsa felt a dark, unforgiving ache pooling within her chest.

"Nothing survives forty-five years without evolving," he answered. "Not attraction, not love, not even memory. Maybe I'm imagining all that self-possession and sophistication." He stepped behind the easel decisively. "Of course, I still want you to pose," he said. "Why should a lost cobalt bracelet make any difference?"

ARIEL'S DAUGHTER
Devon Miller-Duggan

Not knowing what I come from—
Man, woman, sprite,
Flower, spume, or mist.
Egged or seeded in a tree
Lullayed by bees,
Suckled on the spit of hummingbirds,
Delivered by dragonflies
Already old, and dripping honey
From my breasts,
Wombless, willow-haired, six-fingered,
Barren keeper of a fertile isle.
The rocks here move on feet,
The trees uproot
And root themselves on reefs around the isle
To keep the sight of ships
From us, the story-wrecked.
All alone with monsters,
Flowery fish, fishy trees,
Wingy flowers, I learn
To catch and eat
The still-beating hearts of birds.
And when I sleep
The dark draws in its fingers
Cutting off the color of my breath.
I do not sleep.
I open oysters, slit their hinges,
Lay them out beneath the moon,
Watch them glisten at the stars,
Then shrivel in the rising sun,
Dead around their pearls.

THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SHAPE OF SILENCE

Salvatore Attardo

what is it like
thinking the shape of silence
from the side of the dead?

how is it done,
forgetting the shape of days
among both the living and the dead?

the shape of things to come
does not bother the bookkeepers
the short order cooks
the surveyors who measure the size of silence
who draw the maps that only count for the living

silence is a metaphor on this side
what does it stand for, among the dead?

STRANGER HERE, MYSELF

Salvatore Attardo

Bad poets always believe
in their metaphors
and end up working for the government

Caught between treasons
I eat chocolate
and dream

I wish I had
drinking buddies to show
for all this running around

You say things are strange there
I think they are stranger here, myself.

THE ELEGIST

Rumit Pancholi

for Michaela Valentino

The man behind the dark podium
parts his book of euphemisms
and reads with a stutter
like a child with stage fright.
We look on, patting the backs
of the old ones,
abuzz as if refusing flu shots,
shimmying to the end of the queue,
our saltwater fish circling
the iron insides of a dragnet.
We are their elegists with one brow up,
unsure of our own words, unrecited
and acidic. We are trained
to read with sincerity and pause
for a tissue between the end of one page
and the start of the next,
as he shakes his head *no*,
turning blue, unable to go on.
We learn that this, too,
is a part of the performance
so we do not startle
when his wooden replica
takes over, finishes in monotone.
From a corner, we see
the man's face return to white
as if risen from a womb
to release the one distended breath
he's held since birth.

TOUR OF THE DROWNED NEIGHBORHOOD

Blake Butler

This is the yard where the dogs would sit by the half-wrecked shed and sweat. Dad often tied them so tight they couldn't crane their necks. Their backs flea-bit and wrecked with mange and xylophonic ribs. Moxie, Skipper, Moonbeam. Remember their howling in the hot nights when the ambulances screamed by. Remember the scummy flex of their brown backs, the lather of their sweat like suds. The year I snuck them each a sliver of my birthday cake, age 13—fudge batter, banana frosting. You should have seen those dumb dogs' eyes.

This is the driveway, cracked with gravel from the groaning of the earth. These are my initials scraped into the wet cement for which my father blacked my eye. His Corvette sat for years there dripping, no amount of wrench or sweat bringing it back to life, until finally one day the wind lifted it straight off into the air. Remember how on brown August days mom would come out and spread a towel and tan in her underwear where all could see. Her name carved in a stall of the middle school's boy's bathroom—another box now undersea.

Imagine these houses taking on water. The cold flutter of family lungs.

This is an electric chain-link fence.

This is a picture window with no picture.

This is my parents' bedroom where, when they slept, he'd lock the knob. The drywall damp between us not thick enough to keep a quiet. How dad would shower her in shouting. How mom would cough as if she'd rip. Remember emphysema. Remember how quick the disease spread. Remember the nights I woke with

nightmare and went to crawl in bed between them, finding only a door that wouldn't budge, a cold metal bauble in my hand.

Here's my room with the bunk beds I've slept in since I was seven, long after my feet hung off the end. Here's a picture of my first girlfriend, who I never got a chance to kiss or nuzzle. This is my videotape collection. This is a butterfly knife. A conch. This is the toenail I lost after kicking the side of the house in anger. This is a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle rookie card in near-mint condition.

This is a drawing of me on the top of a mountain waving hello or goodbye.

Imagine my innards flush with water. Imagine endless rain.

This is the chimney, where once a year we'd catch a bird. You could hear it singing through the whole house, in the attic, in my sleep. *Chirrup chirrup*. Dad would get so mad he'd stand in the hearth with a broom. He'd shriek and curse and stir up dust. If he couldn't scare the bird free, he'd start a fire. The smoke curling up its beak lines. Within an hour, the chirrup ceased. I guess the bodies stayed stuck up there somewhere, lost in charcoal smudge.

Imagine how when the water rose high enough to cover the whole house. How you could see the tip of the chimney on the lip—*an eye*.

This is the cul-de-sac where I once socked my neighbor for saying my parents were going to die. Bobby had a sty over his right eye from not sleeping—bright yellow, oozing, swollen so big he couldn't blink. He said he'd read the Bible and there was still time for absolution.

Remember how his was the first body I saw floating bloated on the rain, a school of malformed fan fish nipping at his back.

Remember how you never know it's coming until it's there and then it's there.

Imagine how they swam until their arms ached, their lungs heavy in their chest.

This is a ruined veranda.

This is where I sometimes liked to hide.

This is the mouth of the sewer. Vortex of lost balls. Remember how on hot days you could see the heat rise in wavy lines. How, on that first day, after six hours of torrential downpour, the manhole overflowed and bubbled, and the water spread out from around it, washing sludge and shit into the street.

This is a makeshift graveyard where we all buried our pets. No one could say who'd started, but you could count a hundred markers: cats, dogs, ferrets, snakes, hamsters, goldfish, lizards. The dirt was soft and loamy, fat with earthworms, ripe, alive. In April the flowers grew here first. Remember when Moxie died—followed by both Moonbeam and Skipper within hours, as if one lived off the other, as if connected in the pulse—my father carried them one over each shoulder. He made me watch while he struck ground, heaving. The emphysema had him too. My mother began to recite a benediction, and he told her to shut her mouth.

This is blacktop concrete, great for skinning knees.

This is a children's playground.

Imagine secondary drowning where inhaled saltwater foams up in the lungs and makes it hard to breathe.

This is a spacious 4-bed, 2.5 bath colonial with formal dining area, fireplace, walkout basement, in-ground sprinklers, and a kidney-bean-shaped pool.

This is the Andertons', the Banks', the Barretts', the Butlers', the Carlyles', the Canters', the Crumps', the Davidsons', the Dumbletons', the Fultons', the Grants', the Griggs', the Guzmans', the Kranzs', the Lotts', the Peaveys', the Peerys', the Pendletons', the Rays', the Rutledges', the Smiths', the Stutzmans', the Weidingers', the Woods', the Worths'.

Imagine shallow water blackout, heart attack, thermal shock, and stroke. The skies alive with color. No light, no sting, no sound.

This is street number 713, which sat abandoned since I was eight. Murmur of murder. Phantom life. The paint was green and chipping. The grass had grown up around the hedges, the trees leafless year-round. Sometimes in the evenings you'd see a light come on upstairs. Remember the summer some kid's cousin went in during night. How he didn't come back out for hours, and later they found he'd fallen through the stairwell and snapped his back. Remember the way I sat up evenings as a preteen already balding, staring through my bedroom window at the house with one eye and then the other.

This is the last square of the sidewalk.

This is telephone wire.

This is mud.

This is a rowboat, long abandoned, rotten, mired in stagnant water.

This is the steeple, still uncovered—the high mark of the flood's thread. Remember the copper swallow of communion, the tab pressed against the tongue. Remember trying to imagine how my father could stand the burn of every evening; how his throat must have been mottled from all he'd poured through there, I imagined. How he'd seen me come home through the front door in my Sunday suit and spat.

Imagine the ocean approaching overhead. Imagine waking up under dripping ceiling. The puddle plodding on the carpet, the water already having filled mostly up the stairs. My parents' bedroom on the first floor. The coughing covered, calm. Remember my mother's wet head in the bedroom, a hundred thousand thin, blonde fiber fingers spreading out as I swam down to kiss her face.

This is a quiet evening.

This—I'm not quite sure.

Imagine nowhere. Imagine nothing. A world all swollen and asleep.

These are the tips of tallest trees—the funny firs up to their wrecked necks, spreading out distended undersea. Notice the new nests brimmed with egg. The mothers' wings weak, flown for hours after food over the flat, shimmering face of endless water.

AQUARIUM

W. Todd Kaneko

Paint a boy's room turquoise and aqua
so he will dream of the ocean.
A starfish on the ceiling. A seahorse
behind the door. The outlines of fishermen
casting their nets beside the window.
The backyard cannot contain the soggy
night—a shadow-drenched shawl
draped across the glass, obscuring
krakens in the briny gloom.
The King of the Sea relishes the depth of
blankets, his father's tuneless song overflowing
the kitchen and the dusky taste of saltwater.

Memory is never so simple as talking to fish.
Guppies and octopi have little to offer
an old man lost in this pink coral.
The mythological parts of the brain:
hippocampus, amygdala, crown chakra—
they swallow quilts and mermaids,
leaving only manatees and nakedness
in the reef. Perhaps Atlantis was imagined, or
perhaps it was invented by scurrilous eels,
a lure for seahorses stampeding and crashing,
swelling like high-tide, like a whale's lullaby
trickling over the rim of a seashell.

A SEA SO QUIET

Jona Colson

You would think I go mad with grief
when the white sails fill—billowing out

like a pregnant belly into the cold sky
making no sound. It is a sea so quiet even the waves

are silenced in their swells. I am taught to interpret
these signs—the slight of the keel, the swing of the boom—

as we ghost past Thomas Point Lighthouse.
The keel cuts like a marble blade through the brackish water,

the stern refuses to wake, and the Captain, deciding
not to fight, learns to live here, though it is bitter

in his throat—the way silence affects everyone in the end.
But, even the sea a vow of dumbness? Nobody touches.

We are the only two in existence—all hands forward to strike
and secure the mainsail. Time ceases where invisible

figures move below the surface—how much life can be
kept in by the sea, how much clings to the surface of the boat,

a space where seaweed holds to fiber bathed by water.
I will stay here until the seaweed takes root and the fossils surface

because the quiet present dissolves like salt
and soon sound will drown us all out.

MY MOTHER'S HANDS

Jona Colson

A tapestry of silk once stretched tight now hangs loose
and yields with creases and paths. The skin on her hands
is almost nothing, yet I know she

held me, malleable and male, in a yellow bolt
of cloth—her fingernails trimmed back as far as
possible to avoid scratching newborn skin.

Now, her fingers turn and twist against themselves,
like stems of wild roses—reaching out
into delicate air. When she holds me at the door,

I know her hands understand the cool love
to fever, the light to heat, and chests of days
that close around us, and I can sometimes

feel her fingers straighten and her skin tense
vowing to hold strong and smooth as if years
collapsed and the nerves refused to age.

ALL THE ORNAMENTS OF CELEBRATION

Brian Russell

The Oriental Orchid, the only one
we asked about and no wonder—its ancient

scent: our history of separation
unsifting. We are pink with fascination.

One of us notices the yellow of bulldozers. One
of us, the yellow of prayer flags.
Suddenly we're part of something natural.

Our fascination fans itself below temples.

We say a few words for the past, don't forget
to make mention of progress.

We wish for this
closeness—satellite and tower—for ourselves.

There is an allure of the sacred, especially
when it is not ours: we nod our heads;
the things we love must be burned.

OUR GREAT CITIES

Brian Russell

Our great cities once built
us in their image. One by one

they gave us
names, our countless variations
of *progress*. So we are all

and always their children,
moving furiously in every direction, in great number and

with great speed and without
question. But they want to tell us our moving

forward is just another way of coming home.

Where our fathers rise like shimmering towers over
the violent night. And our mothers—

those beautiful enterprises who leave a light on.

VIDA

Patricia Engel

She told me her real name was Davida, that she was named for four men who came before her in her family and that her older brother escaped the tradition because he was a diseased baby who Saint Anthony saved, so his name is Tony. She said she can't remember who started calling her Vida but that it happened here in Miami. In Colombia she was never called anything but her given name, but over here Vida stuck which she said was okay with her because that plane ride over the Caribbean broke her life in two.

I met her at my boyfriend's house, a small pink stucco cube in El Portal. He's Hungarian and has a cluster of compatriots that get together at his place for weekly barbecues in the backyard. I was one of the newer girlfriends, and Vida had been with her guy, Sacha, for at least a year or two. But when she showed up she always had those same skittish eyes, like a stray cat who knows it's about to be chased off. She hardly spoke to anyone. It was her man who did the talking with a fixed hand on Vida's waist, and you'd almost think she was his prisoner if it wasn't for the way she always dipped her mouth into the curve of his neck and marked him with kisses. Sacha never broke away from her except to hover around the grill with the other Hungarians, poke the steaks and talk in their language about the old days in Veszprem.

I didn't mind those barbecues. The boyfriend and I were doing well at the six month mark, and I beat out the other two girls he was sleeping with when I met him; a Mexican and a Nicaraguan. Didn't take a genius to see that the boyfriend and his friends had a thing for girls with a tan but I didn't care. I'd been living in Florida for three years already and only had a few ex-boyfriends to show for it. No female friends and a community college teaching job that always left me fearing for the future of our youth.

Vida raised an eyebrow at me the first time she heard I

was Colombian. The boyfriend said it when he introduced us, as if that's all we needed to become like sisters. I had to clarify that I was U.S.-born, it was my parents who were true Colombians, and Vida accepted that, even appreciated that I took the time to authenticate myself to her. She found my Spanish amusing. Said I talked like it was the seventies. That's the Spanish my parents left with, I told her, the Spanish I learned in our house mixed with the telenovela talk I picked up on Telemundo. The other girlfriends, a Russian girl named Irina and two Hungarian sisters named Valeska and Marina, mostly kept to each other. That left Vida and me to take refuge in each other those long afternoons around the picnic table.

Vida didn't work officially. I knew she was illegal like my boyfriend, most of his friends, and about half of Miami. But she was pretty: lean with high hips, dollar-green eyes, and bouncy black hair. I didn't see why she couldn't get a job in a restaurant or a store. She told me she cleaned houses sometimes, even offered to clean mine for cheap. She said she did makeup nice too, and if I had a party to go to I should give her a call. I asked her where she learned, and she got a faraway look in her eyes and said, "I used to do pageants."

I told her my mom was a beauty queen in her former life. She was a plain Bogotá nerd and deaf in one ear, until some guy pulled her off the street and into a pageant and she ended up a Miss Colombia finalist. The following year, she married my father and moved to Flushing and later to New Jersey where she traded in her tacones altos for driving shoes. Vida seemed to be doing me the favor of listening, and when I was through she only asked me where New Jersey was in relation to Florida.

One day, Vida moved past the usual light talk about the weather and food and asked me flat out what I was doing with my boyfriend.

"I don't see you with him," she said with such authority that I felt childish, which was absurd since I was five years older.

"I just like him," I told her, which was true. The boyfriend and I met at the gym where he worked out aging divorcees, sometimes

sleeping with them to lift their spirits. He confessed that to me on our first date. We didn't have much else in common, that was no secret. And logistically it wasn't ideal because the boyfriend was in a green-card marriage to a Cuban girl that cost him ten thousand, of which he still owed five.

He was a boyfriend for the shadows, somebody my parents didn't know existed. A boyfriend I spent nearly every night with but with whom I didn't envision any other life. He drove me to the doctor when I had the flu. Took me to the movies and let me pick them. But once I found a text message on his phone from a woman named Gisela who said she was dreaming of his penis and something in me split. But I never told him.

Vida asked me if I still believed in love. Asked me as if it was something like Santa Claus or El Coco, an imaginary creature sent to taunt us as kids and inspire fantasies. I shook my head, and it hurt my heart a little to do so.

"Me neither," she said with a pride that I wanted for myself.

The boyfriend worked days at the gym but ran a little side business at night as a private driver. When they wanted to get fucked up on South Beach, the clients called and he'd drive them around in their own car. The boyfriend and Sacha were partners and they rotated jobs, but on some nights they'd both get stuck working. On one such night the boyfriend suggested I hang out with Vida. Told me she was lonely, had no friends and couldn't drive herself anywhere. I picked her up at her apartment complex, which I'd never been to because she and Sacha always met us when we went out together.

The apartment was a shoddy place on upper Collins near the banged-up motels and right off of drug dealer's row. She was sitting on the front steps, smoking a cigarette when I pulled up, her hair pulled into a ponytail, wearing jeans and a pink blouse. Almost looking like a private-school girl who got lost in the wrong neighborhood.

I thought we'd go for a drink or maybe get dinner, but Vida

only wanted to go the beach, even started begging me to take her there like I was her mother or something.

We bought some media noches at a little Cuban place and parked just before Haulover Beach. Though clouds covered the moon and the shore was dim with night, Vida pulled off her sandals and ran towards the water, went in up to her knees, and splashed around in the foam. I sat on the sand and watched her lose herself, shouting things at the clouds. When she came back to my side on the sand, she ripped into her sandwich and told me she still couldn't grasp the immensity of the ocean, that until last year she'd only seen it on film and on the plane ride over.

"I thought you've been here for years already," I told her. Which was true. She'd told me she came to Miami at twenty-one, and I knew she was already twenty-three.

"That's true," she said, rubbing the sand off her ankles with her free hand. "But they didn't let me out of the house the first year."

"What house?"

"Where I was working."

I imagined a horrible employer. A family who hired her as a muchacha. I saw tons of young girls in white maid's uniforms all over Miami, pushing strollers at the park and grocery carts at the supermarket. Maybe she had a boss who locked her away. I'd heard of that. My mom's muchacha was full of terror stories.

Vida faced me, but all I saw was the outline of her hair and the car lights flashing in the distance behind her.

"Una casa de sitas."

If my second-generation Spanish was correct, she said a brothel. A place where they take appointments with women. I didn't know how else to say it, so I asked her as plainly as I could what she was doing there. And just like that, she said, they'd made her a puta.

She pulled her hair out of its tie and wrapped it back up again.

"You think differently of me now, don't you, Sabina?"

"No, of course not."

"I was a nice girl once. Nice family. Everything."

There were so many things I wanted to ask her. Did her family know? Did Sacha know? How did she end up in there and how did she get out? How long did she stay?

"I'm so sorry," I said like an idiot.

We started talking about other things. She told me that Sacha agreed to pay for her to go to beauty school to learn how to do hair and nails, and that he knew a Russian lady in Aventura who would give her a job off the books. Her eyes shone as she told me that her dream was to open her own salon one day.

On the walk back to my car she told me it was her hairdresser who brought her over to Miami. A transvestite named Fito who always did her hair and makeup for the beauty pageants gratis because he said Vida was the best investment in her town, Usme. He told her family he had contacts in Miami and would get Vida auditions at all the Spanish networks so she could be a presentadora on Sabado Gigante or something.

"And your parents let you go, just like that?" I was so used to the overprotective pair I'd been dealt. Couldn't imagine how they could just send her off.

"Oh, my mother had me drinking water from the Flower of Jerusalem. It was supposed to bless me and send me on a journey, so, when Fito offered to pay for my ticket, Mami thought it was the work of God."

I had to ask. Flower of Jerusalem?

"She kept it in a glass bowl next to the television, and we had to feed it fresh river water every week or it would curse us. It's was only when I went to an American grocery store for the first time that I realized I'd been praying all my life to a shitake mushroom."

I was laughing, but Vida just shrugged it off and went on with her story. Said that when she and Fito landed at Miami International he disappeared, and some other guys ushered her into a car, stuck a gun into her stomach, informed her that Fito had sold her for seven thousand dollars that she had to pay off starting now.

I couldn't sleep that night. The boyfriend returned from work exhausted, rolled around next to me, pulled the blankets off of me, pulled me close and asked if I want to make love, but I feigned indigestion. I couldn't stand the night or his touch. I'd sworn myself to silence, not wanting to betray Vida's confession. If I told the boyfriend, he would tell Sacha who I was certain would then reject her, as I'd known many a man who loved to hold a girl's past against her.

The boyfriend grew up in a two-room house on a dusty patch of land with chickens that became dinner. His father left his mom when she was pregnant with him, and the lady never remarried. They had a cat that was constantly pregnant, but the kittens always disappeared within days of their birth. When the boyfriend was seven he caught his mother drowning them in a bucket, something that still caused him nightmares. When he took me to the winter carnival that year, we spotted a cat stranded in the middle of the Palmetto Expressway, crouched against the highway divider. The boyfriend stopped the car, nearly causing an accident, and ran into the darkness to rescue it. The cat lived with him now and often left decapitated mice on the kitchen floor. "Because he loves me," said the boyfriend. "He knows I saved his life."

The boyfriend was tall with enormous thigh muscles and a back that was wide and defined like the smooth ripples of the Sahara. He had stretch marks on his biceps from a few cycles of teenage steroids, and more wrinkles around his blue eyes than you'd think a guy his age should have. No matter how many showers he took he still had the musty smell of a workout, and sometimes I left bite marks on his shoulders and neck just to keep the other women away. I didn't used to be this territorial. The boyfriend thought it was cute; a Latin thing.

When he and Sacha convened and fell into their Hungarian slang, sounds and intonations reminding me that we would never really understand the other, I looked to Vida. She was sitting on the lawn chair with her knees curled into her chest, a cigarette

propped to her lips by her long red nails.

"They could be brothers," she said.

It was true. They looked like twins with their creamy complexion, shaved heads, and box-smashed noses.

She asked me how I met the boyfriend, and I told her the prepackaged story: I was sweating on the treadmill, and he picked me up. Most people laughed when I said that, but Vida gave me her still eyes, then offered a half smile as if to appease me.

"How did you meet Sacha?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

"The house. He worked there too. He was the guard."

We were speaking Spanish, so I know that he couldn't have known what we were saying but Sacha appeared within a second, pulled Vida up by the elbow towards the driveway. She seemed defiant as he talked into her face. She crossed her arms and looked away, at the ground, up to the sky, even to me on the other side of the yard. When she came back, I asked her if everything was all right, and she rolled her eyes as if she was bored with all this. "Such a big production," she said. "Just to tell me he loves me."

I was exaggerating before when I said that I had no female friends in Florida. I had one: Jessamy. A thin-lipped strawberry blonde. The kind of American white that doesn't know what it is but if you ask will probably say Scottish and Welsh. This is odd to me because my parents know our family line ten generations back and five ways wide.

Jess and I were new teachers together, but she couldn't stand it so she left after a year, got her real-estate license, and now all she talked about were interest rates. Usually we'd meet for coffee because she was only willing to break away from her new fiancé for one-hour blocks at a time.

She'd never ask about the boyfriend because she thought he was loser, and whenever she got on my case about him I avoided her for a month or two. I wanted to tell her about Vida because

Jess did a stint as a social worker before teaching, and I thought she might have something to say about it, but, when I started, she got that look like she wished I'd cut it and finally sighed, "I don't know why you hang around those people, Sabina."

I was pissed but held back. If not, the first words out of my mouth would be, "I don't want your life, Jess. I'm not like you."

And her next question would be, "Well who exactly are you trying to be?"

I wasn't ready for that either.

Later that night, when the boyfriend and I were eating pasta in front of the television, I told him I saw Jessamy earlier.

"I don't know why you hang around her," the boyfriend said as if his food had suddenly become spoiled. "That girl has the fear of life in her eyes."

I defended her. Said she was my friend, but the boyfriend wasn't listening. Flipping channels with his free hand, shoveling linguine into his mouth with the other. Afterwards, we smoked cigarettes on the balcony and then went to bed. We weren't one of those couples who fall asleep like intertwined roots. We kept to our separate sides of the mattress, only came together to fuck and to push each other out of bed in the morning.

Vida had many smiles. Careful ones, small ones. The harsh but sexy ones she gave Sacha that looked like more of a decoy. But sometimes a sunrise ripped across her face, and she smiled like it was going to save her life.

Like at the beach or when she spoke of her family. She smiled even when she told me how she worked in a flower shop in El Centro Andino only to give her money to her father who would then gamble it away, and how her brother Tony worked as a mechanic and a messenger for gangsters, ate every meal with a gun next to his plate, which is why she had no problem with cleaning Sacha's gun for him. She said she had a little sister named Justina who worked in the kitchen of a diplomat's house, and they were training her to serve dinner for dignitaries and maybe

one day she'd get to work for one of the overseas ambassadors.

Her mom, she said, was a gentle woman who worked as a companion to an old scientist who was going senile. She had to sleep in the old man's house most nights because he had a habit of wandering into the street and had once been lost for two days before Vida's mom recovered him on the steps of the gold museum talking about Bolívar to anyone who would listen.

It was Vida's mother who encouraged her to be a beauty queen and made Vida's competition dresses herself. And Vida had paid off, winning Reina de la Primavera, Reina de Azucar, Reina de las Flores, and even Reina de Usme. People said she had a gift; even her priest said she had been blessed with beauty to bring money to her family. Back then, she said, all she hoped for was a regional title. But then Fito, el pato peluquero, put it in her head that she needed to aim higher: Miami. "The Jerusalem for Colombians" is how she put it. Enter shitake mushroom.

We were at the beach by 41st Street. I was on a school break and the boyfriend was at work. I still didn't know what Sacha's day job was and gave up asking. Vida and I were stretched across towels in our bikinis, and she stared into the sky as if she could see her whole history projected into the clouds like a movie screen.

Two or three times, guys wandered over to our spot of sand and tried to flirt, but Vida cursed them, inspiring some insults about how we were stuck-up sluts, to which she only laughed.

"I hate men most of the time," she told me.

I asked her how she ended up with Sacha, said that they seemed like a good couple, which was only a half-lie.

"There were four of us, and we each had a bedroom. Sacha sat in the waiting area most of the time. Collected money. Watched for police. Made sure that we didn't try to escape. But I could see that he liked me. I worked at earning his trust. It was obvious that he was lonely. It's wasn't so hard, Sabina. You can get a lonely person to do anything."

She paused, lit herself a fresh cigarette.

"It took a year but one day he said he loved me and that he

wanted us to be together like normal people, away from the house. He gave the other girls money so they could run away, and the two of us left together. We had to hide for months because his boss had people searching everywhere. But time passed. And now we are okay.”

My friend Jess would say it was the freak factor that drew me to Vida. That she was a novelty act for me, a living movie complete with exploitation of Latinas. There was also the vanity element, that in her I saw a parallel life, one that my mother always imagined aloud: the “What if we had stayed to live in Colombia?” narrative. She always said I would have grown up with better manners, been more feminine, and that probably I would have figured out how to be married by now.

And then there were the Colombian horror stories that my parents and their expatriate friends told each other whenever they got together for *ajíaco* and *vallenatos*, to appease their guilt for having left the motherland.

“Un país de locos!” The men would shake their heads in shame, repeating headlines ripped from *El Tiempo*. Headlines about the guerrilla and paramilitary infiltrating the cities. Political corruption, baby trafficking, child prostitutes. The land mine capital of the world.

“Qué vergüenza,” Papi would say as if talking about an alcoholic parent.

My parents and their friends all congratulated themselves for having American-raised kids who only had to see Colombia on vacation. The last time I’d been back was at nineteen, spending two weeks at tea parties with the old relatives who liked to speak French to each other for kicks, and the cousins who hung out at El Country and made it their mission to get me wasted on *aguardiente* in La Zona Rosa every night of the week.

And then there was my *tía*’s *muchacha*, a girl named Claribel who had a secret history we weren’t supposed to mention that involved getting raped by a half-brother at fourteen, resulting in a baby who was adopted by an Italian family. Claribel who had to put in a good two years of service before my aunt would pay

for her to get her high school diploma on Saturday mornings. Claribel who drifted through the rooms of my aunt's house like a ghost, making our beds and shining our shoes without our asking.

"Do you ever think of going back?" I finally asked Vida.

"Every day. But first I have to think of a story to tell my family, to explain what I've been doing here so far."

Dolor ajena is what they call it. Feeling pain on behalf of someone else. A pain that is not your own. No succinct way to say it in English. I suppose that's how we get by.

I'm not that charitable. Nothing in me said I should help Vida. Give her money from my savings so she could buy a plane ticket back home. Hook her up with a counselor at my school, someone to talk her through her dramas. Help her heal. None of that. I just wanted to drink her up like everyone else.

She asked me if I had some old clothes that I could give her. Hers were worn through so that the seams on her jeans looked as if they might give at any moment. I never wore clothes enough for them to disintegrate from wear. Always tossed them on a whim to make room for more. I showed up at her place with three shopping bags' worth, and she poured through my things like they were spun from gold, trying things on and modeling them in her crappy living room. Sacha was in the bedroom, supposedly on the phone with some client. They had a small balcony that opened onto a back parking lot, and the kitchenette smelled like grease.

She walked across the room like it was a runway, posed, and for a second I got a glimpse of that beauty queen. Her prize smile, lashes that fluttered their way into a judge's favorable graces.

She was wearing a blue dress with an arabesque print. A dress I bought in a Las Olas boutique and never wore. It sat in my closet for a year waiting for a party, a romantic summer dinner, nights that never happened. It looked like it was made for Vida, clung to her round breasts and the thin straps were the perfect length so that the fabric draped off her behind like the bows of

a palm tree.

The only way she could think to thank me was by doing my nails for me. She pulled out a plastic tub, filled it with water and soap and washed my feet for me in a way that made me ashamed. She was proud of herself, telling me she already knew how to do all the stuff that they teach at the beauty academy. She'd cruise right through it, she said, be their best student ever, just as soon as Sacha gave her the money to enroll.

She chose the color. A light pink because she said I struck her as a natural sort of girl. One who doesn't like to wear bold make up and who always wears solid colors.

"A natural nail varnish," she said, "because it's quiet and honest. Like you."

And this only made me feel like more of a phony.

The boyfriend slept with another girl. I asked him straight out, and he confessed. Said it happened twice and that it was another lady from the gym. Forty. Divorced twice. Panamanian. I know because I asked for details, and I was so angry all I could think of to say was, "Panama used to be Colombia, you fucking asshole."

I had a canned defense. Said I hoped it was worth it. You lost me. Lost me. Lost me. Gave him a wall of silence, unreturned phone calls, adjusted to my life without him, the hole in my evenings and the cold bed. Returned to life before the Hungarian. Sunday without his grill. His friends. Without Vida, the living documentary.

And then I caved in. Because I am weak. Like everyone else who can't do anything based on real principles. Thought of my father. How he would shake his head and say I have no character. That he didn't raise me for this kind of treatment. And when my parents called to check up on me, I closed my eyes and mumbled that everything was fine while the boyfriend fell asleep with his head in my lap like nothing.

When I saw Vida again, this time for dinner, the four of us, at an Argentinean place on 79th, she and I fell into our Spanish

while the boys talked business in their language.

"I didn't think you would take him back," she said softly.

"Neither did I."

Later, the boys suggested we get a bottle of wine and drink it on the beach. Normally Vida loved the beach, but with Sacha and the boyfriend there she seemed indifferent. As the boys got drunk and did flips in the sand, Vida lit herself cigarette after cigarette. She had an eye on Sacha as he and the boyfriend frolicked like little boys in the sand. He blew her a kiss, and she stared back under a veil that looked a lot like contempt.

"The owners of the house used to surprise us at night sometimes. Once, they went extra hard on me, punched my eyes so that I couldn't open them for days. I never was allowed out except two or three times when Sacha let me smoke a cigarette with him behind the house. But after that beating, he put me on his motorcycle, and all I felt was the wind because I couldn't see. I held him as tight as I could, but I was in so much pain I thought for sure I would fall off and die on the road. And then I smelled the change in the air. Salty and sweet at once, and he carried me into the water. At first it stung but then I opened my eyes and saw the sea in front of me, all around me. We were in our clothes but wet up to our necks. He held me so I could float, didn't talk so I could listen to only the waves. And when he returned me to the house and put me back into the bedroom where I lived, I thought it's not his fault that he is so cruel. We'd all become different creatures."

And just when I started to think of her and Sacha as some kind of weird fairytale, Vida turned to me and declared that she was no Eréndira.

She told me other things.

She said there were four girls and they were expected to see clients whenever they showed up, and could only sleep a few hours at a time. One of the girls wore a bikini all the time and would do anything for drugs, and the owner of the house, a guy named Raúl, kept her supplied. One girl, Vida told me, hardly ever spoke, and once they raped her so badly that she bled for

hours in the shower. There was a woman doctor who came to see the girls when Sacha called, but she was cruel and Vida was pretty sure all the girls were sterilized during one of those brutal examinations. Vida heard of a girl who was there before her, who managed to have a client fall in love with her and buy her debt to the house. Some girls thought she was like a Cinderella while Vida thought the client probably made the girl his personal slave. Vida said the other girls resented that Sacha took a liking to her, that she tried to explain to them that she had a plan for seducing him to get them all free, but that Sacha started encouraging clients to pick other girls so Vida wouldn't have to work. For this, Vida said she would never forgive herself.

One of the clients let Vida use his cell phone to call her parents, but when she heard her father's voice she hung up the phone. She said she lived in her dreams for a long time. Thought of an old boyfriend she used to have, a guy named Fernando who moved to Brooklyn to be with his father when they were still in high school. He wrote her a few times but the letters stopped, and Vida told herself that, when she was finally free, she'd go find him. And then the beatings, she said. Every time the bruises faded, there came another round.

All this and it never occurred to me to ask Vida where this house of horrors was. I never thought to report it to the police, to see if the house was still in operation. Help her expose Fito, maybe help the girls who would follow.

None of that. I just listened.

That New Year's Eve, the Hungarians had a party in a mansion on Hibiscus Island. The owners were off skiing, and one of the boyfriend's friends was the caretaker, lived in the guesthouse and had run of the place when the patrons were away. We drank champagne on the boat dock, watched the fireworks over Biscayne Bay. The boyfriend pulled me into his side as we sat on the concrete ledge, our toes skimming the dark canal water. We had our midnight kiss, hugged all the friends. Vida wrapped her skinny arms around my neck, and we toasted privately to

the future.

On our way home, I asked the boyfriend if he knew that Vida used to be a prostitute and that Sacha was her warden. He didn't lift his eyes from the causeway. Just nodded, palms closing tighter around the steering wheel.

"I don't know how she can stand to be with him."

The boyfriend looked over at me, a shot of anger in his eyes. "He almost got killed because of her. They hunted him for months."

"He watched them beat her, rape her, and sell her."

"She never tried to escape."

"They shot a girl in the back once for trying to run away."

"They just told the girls that to keep them from trying," he laughed.

"How could you have known about it all and done nothing?"

That set him off. The boyfriend pulled over right there on the Venetian and wrapped his fat knuckles around my shoulder, his rough fingertips carving into my skin.

"It was just a job, Sabina. He had to make a living too. It's not his fault they took her there. If it wasn't for him she'd still be there."

"Being a witness can make a person just as guilty."

A solid minute passed. The boyfriend's eyes drove into mine, and I refused to soften. He wasn't my lover anymore but an accomplice to something terrible and his hands on my body felt like weights. The strange thing is that he was looking at me with a blend of hatred and confusion. We didn't recognize each other anymore. Or maybe we were seeing each other for the first time.

"Get out of the car, Sabina."

But as soon as he said it, he relented. Pulled me into his chest with that same heavy hand and pushed my hair off my face, kissing my cheeks and forehead with his dry, chapped lips.

I wish I'd gotten out. Had a little integrity and walked home by foot, each step reminding me how off-track in my life I was.

But I didn't move. Let the boyfriend drive me home and let him sleep in my bed and everything else.

Vida and I both woke up the next day with the same idea. She called me while the boyfriend was still sleeping and Sacha was out for an errand for one of his clients.

She didn't even have to say it. I already knew.

Later that day she told Sacha she was going to buy cigarettes. I told the boyfriend I was visiting Jessamy. I picked up Vida on the corner of her block, and we drove all the way to Orlando before we stopped for a toilet. Didn't talk the whole way either. It was only there that we realized we needed a plan.

We drove for something like thirty hours. When we got to the New Jersey line I called my parents and said to expect us. They were nice to my new friend Vida, didn't understand why they'd never heard of her, or what we were doing there in New Jersey in the dead of January with no luggage and still in our Miami clothes. I dressed her up in one of my high school sweaters, gave her some thick socks and duck boots. Made her look like a real suburbanite.

I slept in my childhood bedroom, and she slept next door in the one that belonged to my brother. I went into my parents' room early the next morning and shut the door behind me. Vida was still sleeping. I tried to explain to them as much as I could but stopped short in several places, every time I saw my mother lift her palm to cover her heart.

I'm a coward. I hid when my parents took Vida into the kitchen, pushed some breakfast her way and tried to talk some truth out of her while their muchacha, Luz, pretended to be busy chopping vegetables for the lunch soup.

I listened from the hallway as Vida complimented the coffee and asked for another bagel. My mother told her she could use our phone to call her parents and Vida declined.

"They must be worried about you," said Papi.

I knew that's all it would take. The face of a father. Any father.

Vida started to cry, and Papi had an in. Offered her a ticket home. Or he said, she could stay here and they'd figure something else out. But my mother pushed her towards Colombia. Said it's not a question of dreams anymore. It's a question of love and she should be with her family for now.

Seems so easy now. After all those confessions on the beach. Problems solved by a long ass drive and my dad's credit card.

The next day, she was home.

On my end, I still hadn't figured anything out, but I decided to stay with my parents a little while longer. The boyfriend would forget me after a while. Maybe he'd pester me to find out about Vida for Sacha, but he'd replace me with another chica soon enough.

My parents and I took her to Newark Airport together for that insanely early Avianca flight. I insisted to Papi that he book her a direct flight, no layover in Miami. I was afraid the sight of the ocean might blow her off course. It happens to the best of us.

She hugged me. Gave me a new smile. A shy one I'd never seen before. Thanked me for nothing specific, which was fine because I felt like I'd been really stingy in every way. Why did it take me this long to get her there? I'll never know.

When she landed, she called. Her parents got on the phone and thanked mine for their help. They still didn't have a clue about Vida's life here. I wondered if she'd ever tell them.

It's been a year since all this.

I went back to Miami. After a few failed phone calls the boyfriend forgot me, just as predicted. I only saw him once afterward, at the movies. I was alone and he was with a girl wearing knee-high leather boots in the middle of Florida summer.

Every time I get to thinking of Vida, she is the one to call first. Always that fuzzy connection, her warning me that she's only got a few minutes left on the calling card and we might get cut off.

"I'm just calling to make sure you're okay," she tells me. "I

worry about you.”

That always cracks me up.

She says she’s washing hair at a nice salon on La Septima, that they’re going to teach her how to do highlights. Her family is planning a trip to Cartagena. Their first vacation together ever.

She sends her love to my parents. Makes me promise to visit her one of these days.

On the long drive up from Miami, Vida and I went through two or three states without a word between us. She hardly moved her gaze from the stretch of interstate sound barriers beyond her window. Somewhere around Maryland, Vida spoke over the hum of the engine that comforted me through the night. Said, “There is no love. Only people living life together. Tomorrow will be better.”

CANDY

Patrick Carrington

It's not the casual way he offers
you a drink or the nuclear
glow of the lime rickey

that spooks you, not even
his famished look
as he watches your first sweet

sip. It's the way his eyes move
to your blouse buttons
when your teeth

snap off the maraschino
that makes you realize how long
you've been taking off your clothes

for treats, and you can't help
but quiver and remember
the first time,

that hand out a car window,
the spearmint leaves
and licorice.

THE RECIPE FOR SAD DOTAGE

Patrick Carrington

Beneath the apartments of Gravesend
at the hot height of summer,
if you were an old man
you sat on the sidewalk in shirtsleeves
and talked blood and sport as you
dabbed your forehead with a handkerchief—

your armpits were waterfalls two-toning
your shirt, your liquid medicine
of espresso and anisette
on a table beside you. In 1967

you were a decade without the Dodgers,
two without the stink of death,
and still you mourned
all the missing blue-eyed boys.

Baseball and war were magic
tricks gone wrong,
heavy things you carried with you
up the staircase of your life

to its soft tar roof, to lament
with the shadow
stuck to the bottom of your feet.

WAR GAMES

Ron McFarland

Our mother watched from the window
while I killed my brother, not once
but often, the way Cain, probably,
thought about slaying Abel, that
weakling shepherd: sometimes a sword,
occasionally a Seminole tomahawk,
guns of various caliber and make
starting with the '73 Winchester
and including in no particular order
the M-1 Garand, the 1911 Colt .45,
German Lugers, of course, the 1863
Springfield, the Kentucky long rifle
(Tick-licker, we said, Old Betsy),
the Thompson submachine gun,
.38 Smith & Wesson, always, we thought,
a good cop gun. And miraculously,
our actual arsenal never numbered
more than four highly versatile firearms.

Or perhaps the real miracle had to do with
my brother's uncanny returns from death.
How well he could collapse on the grassy
lawn of Shiloh, the Alamo, or Belleau Wood,
or crumple against the gray cement block
wall of our Stalingrad carport
streaking it gloriously red
with his treacherous gore,
only to come back for more.
Meanwhile, our mother stood staringly there
thinking God-knows-what, in her apron,
concerned we would hurt ourselves, no doubt,

get carried away with our pinecone grenades,
or perhaps she recalled a few years back
when her brother caught one at The Bulge.

Two years younger than I, my brother
never once won a battle, but sometimes,
seized with a sense of fair play, I'd only
wound him a little, or take him
prisoner of war according to Swiss conventions.
Only a flesh wound, he'd say,
grimacing like John Wayne,
wincing against unmanly tears.
Bite the bullet, I would advise,
slipping him the shiny brass
from a thirty-ought-six.
We were practicing war and pain,
and a few years down the path
at a place named Pleiku
my brother watched it happen from a bunker
firsthand, just like our mother.

A POEM ON MY FORTY-SIXTH BIRTHDAY

Denise Duhamel

Four score and seven years ago
my mother brought me forth, losing continence—
a new moon nativity, conceived in my father's libido,
and dedicated to the prophetess who told her
that all menstrual blood stains the crèche on the equinox.

For a time we were engaged in a great civil war,
testing whether that nativity, or any nativity,
so conceived and so deep-seated, could long endure.
We meet at the greasy spoon of that war.
We have come to dedicate the large portions of fried fish

as a final resting place for those grievances
that naturally made us livid. It is altogether fitting
and proper that we should do this.
But, in a larger sense, we cannot decrescendo—
we cannot conciliate—we cannot act holier-than-thou—

at this Ground Round. The brave women, living
and dead, who struggled like Herefords,
have conciliated for us, far above our powder blush
and power suits, our addictive personalities or delusions.
The world will little note, nor long remember

what we ate here, but it can never forget
the décor. It is for us the living, rather,
to be dedicated to our unfinished works of art
which the waitress who fouled up our order here
has thus far so noted as avant-garde.

It is rather for us to be here, dedicated
to the great tasteless pile of fries remaining before us—

that from these honored spuds we increase our insulin—
that cause for which our mothers and grandmothers
gave their last full measure of devotion—

that we resolve our issues so that that these dead
shall not have fought with each other in vain—
that this family, full of governesses and go-go dancers,
gout and grace periods, shall eat at a new bistro,
free of free-floating anxiety—and that a grab bag

of the weeping, by the weeping, for the weeping,
shall not persist in this earth mother's purse.

PLAYING PRINCESS

Sinduja Sathiyaseelan

Red like my mother's sari, that she wore on her wedding day and never again, pure and hopeful, the sari with delicate gold peacocks dancing on silk, strutting their embroidered feathers to the sky.

Red like my father's mouth after chewing betel leaves.

Red like blood, when we found Peter Uncle strewn across the branches of the guava tree, his arms in five pieces, a hole in his stomach, his bones gleaming in the morning sun.

Red like the sand, the mud from which my sister Parvati and I made play food that dried in the sun, miniature *vadaas* and *samosas* and *murukus*, unaware like my mother that we were shaping our futures in the clay.

Red like Fridays, when everyone dressed up and went to temple.

Red like the coat of the goat we raised, whose milk I grew up on, the goat that got too old to give milk, the goat that we slaughtered for New Year's Day feast.

Red like the hibiscus flowers that grew in our yard and that we plucked to offer the gods when we went to temple, the flowers that wilted after the goat died.

Red like my coral birth stone Appa placed in a ring for my birthday to keep me safe, the ring I lost at school one day.

Red like the mehendi that darkened my mother's hands on her wedding, unaware that in five years she would birth two daughters, the first one ugly like mud and the last one too fair, unaware that in seven years she would be dead of a tumor the doctors said was benign.

Padma chased me up a tree once. I don't know how she did it, being only four years old and as tall as my waist. But she had nails and jaws like sharks. She even barked at me.

We played under the guava tree in her backyard. Padma's

Bata slippers protected her from the red sand that perpetually coated my feet. She never sat down in the sand or grass because of the red ants. She was a princess, the daughter of doctors. She had her hunched grandmother bring her a small folding chair to sit on while we played.

I *had* to play with her. Her aunt was my tutoring teacher, or I would have never done it. Ever. Sometimes I would get lucky and ride away on my bike before I was asked to play.

I hated her, hated how she wouldn't step outside without her slippers, hated how pressed and crisp her sundresses were, hated how her short hair was always in two pig-tailed fountains. Even her own cousin hated her.

Most days we played princess and prince.

"You be the prince," Padma told me, handing me the raggedy penguin doll we used for the prince. It had an old brooch pinned in the middle of its bowtie.

"The princess needs to dress for the party," she went on, settling into her chair with the princess doll as her cousin and I sat before her. "You." She pointed at me. "You can't be here. You have to be at your castle."

"Where's the castle?"

She pointed to the veranda, far away from the guava tree. I would have to entertain myself until the party. There was an ant castle there, proud and majestic and crawling with red ants. They built castles high. I loved dripping water onto the towers and watching them collapse, jumping from foot to foot to make sure the ants didn't touch me.

One of the ants tried to crawl onto my foot. I flung it off, and it ran in circles before finding a line to join. Another ant struggled to keep up with the others, its little legs scurrying fast but no match for the weight of the dead ant stuck to its back. The ant dragged its dead brother slowly up the wall of a tower and into the pit.

We all have dark skin in my family, but not so dark like the beggars or the jungle people. Not like we rubbed coal on our faces. Not like mud.

My father is a kind man, if poor. Rather short and chubby, with a large moustache and crooked teeth. When we were little he would buy us candy from the wine shop when he came home with staleness on his breath.

My mother never liked him at night. She would always cluck her tongue and glare at him. She never said anything. Her eyes were too big for her face and her lips were swollen as if they had been stung by bees. In her wedding picture that hangs in our hall she has so much white powder on her face you can't even recognize her.

Parvati was four years younger than me, fair and beautiful and loud-mouthed. She was the moon to my darkness. All the relatives loved her and compared her to the actresses on TV, and I always thought that she would grow up to wear kohl on her eyes and dart around trees while violins serenaded in the background. Grow up to have a lover, grow up to pick her husband. Who knew that she would never grow up at all. Who knew that she would be trapped in the mud.

There were bullet holes in the walls of our house, the cement crumbling into powder and settling in the deep recesses. When no one was around I often stuck my finger in those holes and licked off the cement. It tasted better than sugar.

One day I got the courage to talk back to Padma, to suggest that maybe she should let her younger cousin be the princess once, the cousin with large eyes that watered whenever Padma bossed her around, the cousin who wouldn't stand up for herself. "Why don't you ever let her be the princess, Padma?"

"Don't you talk to me like that, darkie," Padma said.

I clenched my hands.

She got up from where she was sitting, the only shady place under the guava tree. Sashaying to me, she imitated the walk of an actress, bouncing on the heels of her feet, swaying her hips, head tilted.

Padma grabbed my hand and spread her fingers next to it. Her skin was milky gold. Mine was dusty and dark like coffee.

“Like I said, don’t ever talk to me like that.” She smiled a sticky too-sweet leer, her straight, even teeth bare but her eyes frozen. “Darkie.”

She turned and walked back to her chair underneath the guava tree, swaying her hips.

I had a cat once that drowned in the well behind our house. Probably a trick played by the rascally boys, my mother told me. *I hate the rascally boys, Amma.* Don’t. They’re just trapped, like all of us.

The tensions bubbling between Singhalese and Tamil, Buddhists and Hindus—the tensions didn’t affect me. The rascally boys, maybe. But not me.

Some of them had probably lost family to one side or another, maybe in a bombing or two. Sometimes the tension reached a rolling boil and leaped out of the pan. Like the cat that leaped off the cement wall of the well.

I cried all night, the ghost of the cat meowing around my ankles and sometimes coming by my head to fluff up my pillow. I woke up with a puffed face, and that day at school when I was sitting on the steps that led to the sandy playground—still crying—an older boy asked, “How is your cat, Anjali? I heard it killed itself. Did it scream?”

He was a rascally boy with teeth too big and hair too short and burn marks on his legs from a heated spoon. A boy who looked too odd in his white uniform to not be rascally.

I didn’t plan it or think about it, but I was soon being hit by Miss Virginia’s switch for throwing sand in the boy’s face. When my father picked me up and was told, his face grew dark

and he didn't talk on the walk home. He explained in a hushed voice to Amma, who raged and yelled until Appa gave her a warning look.

After Appa had left to meet his friends at the wine shop, my mother held me down and pressed a heated spoon to my leg. I tried not to struggle, but my arms flailed and my legs kicked as if they had minds that didn't care if they insulted Amma, didn't care about the order of the family.

Amma then cried and soothed the burn with honey and gave me sweetened goat's milk to drink.

She tried to put me to bed but Parvati, who was only one, started crying. I think Amma knew she would get hit when Appa came back. Appa usually sang and danced for us and balanced bottles on his head, laughing with his crooked teeth and jumping with his belly. But when he'd come home to find us being hit, he'd yell at Amma and slap her. She was afraid. I could tell.

I lay down hearing the sounds of them arguing, Amma that she had wanted to work at a bank and Appa that they would have just taken advantage of her. Amma's voice was deep and grated, an anger I hadn't heard before.

I looked at my leg under the moonlight. It seemed so foreign a concept that now I had a brand on my leg, too.

The water smelled of salt, the odor ballooning off the surface and making my stomach turn. We were on our way to Peter Uncle's wedding in Trinco, across the lagoon. The small wooden rowboat looked like it could fit four people, but there were eight of us on it, crammed together like tin fish, the salt of sweat mixing with the salt of the sea and rocking my gut. The sea was calm, but the boat lulled and danced like bile.

"Off the edge, child," the driver said to me.

His skin was the color of coconuts. His sarong and beniyan were both a murky, muddy gray and hung limp on his bones. He pulled me roughly by the hand to the front of the boat so that I could vomit off the side into the water. The sea was dark

under the black sky, more like ink than water. My vomit floated like froth, being carried away to the shore we couldn't see.

The rest of the way I had to crouch with my head between my knees. My neck ached and my feet were wet, but I was too scared to complain. The driver looked like a Tiger.

Appa sometimes cries at night. He doesn't make a sound, but I can see his body hiccupping when I sneak to the bathroom.

Padma's parents were doctors on assignment in Trinco. She lived with her grandmother and aunt in a bungalow, a little house that was all nose and no nose hair.

Her parents visited her three times a year, once on each of their birthdays. Her father scared me. He was tall and handsome and wore large glasses like the people in the movies. His shirt was always ironed and white, and he never wore sarongs like Appa did. Her mother was wilting, her hair falling out in places, her skin paler than her daughter's. Padma's cousin always whispered that she was dying.

Padma was playing the princess again that day, and I was the prince. I waited on the veranda, squishing the prince penguin's nose into its face. Her father was also out there, sitting on the steps to the door, leaning on one of the two large columns that flanked the old house. His face was hidden by a newspaper, and I was glad. He always looked at me funny, like I wasn't built right, like I was too dark and too tall and too angular, like my bones were too big for my body, like I would never be beautiful.

The day when Padma chased me up the tree, he was there, and all he did was laugh. He gave Padma amused looks, and, after I started crying, he told her to let me go, but he was still laughing. Padma was always meaner when he was around.

"The princess is ready," Padma said.

I dragged the penguin back to the guava tree that now hung heavy with fruit. The princess, dressed in gold brocade and a

curry leaf garland, made her entrance into the throne room of the palace. There were many princes in attendance, but the only one that mattered was the penguin prince. The princess swayed her hips as she made her way to him, placing the garland from her own neck around his. He touched her face, and she turned away coyly, dropping to her knees to touch her new husband's feet.

Padma's grandmother brought out juice in little flowered glasses on a tray. Padma ran to get the first pick, after which we both took our turns. She took a sip and spit it all out onto the grandmother's feet. Padma's cousin and I jumped back to avoid the splatter. We watched in horror as Padma raised her little hand and slapped one, two, three, four times on the grandmother's face as she squatted with the tray.

In five long strides, before we knew what was going on, Padma's father had crossed the length to the tree, taken a curry leaf branch, and raised it.

The first blow seemed to take forever. I followed the branch with my eyes as it curved back like a snake in her father's hand, the wind stripping it of some leaves. Padma's scream exploded in my head, and everyone scrambled out of the way.

Padma hopped from leg to leg as the branch marred her white legs with slim pink welts. The tears didn't stop.

My face burned, and my stomach churned the juice uncomfortably. I tried to turn my eyes, but Padma ran and screamed into my field of vision. I looked at the tree. The guavas were almost ripe, pulling down the branches.

I stood rooted. My legs wouldn't move even if I had wanted to run. I wanted to be back home, playing hopscotch with Parvati and the mango core we had dried out the day before. I wondered if Padma's legs would bleed. Part of me, the part that wanted to bite her back, wanted to see it. The part that hated blood didn't.

For two weeks after, Padma's aunt didn't stop me after lessons to play. Padma hid when I came for tuition, and, when I finally saw her, the welts had faded to a similarity with the brand Amma's heated spoon had given me.

SPACES OF ART

Rumit Pancholi

Like maple leaves that snap off as they please,
silent coattails rest on your deadbeat jaw
as he fucks you. *Laying the pipe down*
he calls this work construction work, putting
hammer to nail, and demands your dog
to stop panting when he is hard at work. You yell
for the sake of yelling, two curious wasps scaling
the fog on the windowpane, to nothing
that touches you back. He rises to thrust open
the drapes, calls this perverse histrionics
his performance art to be thankful for. Words
in which art takes space but has no interest in:
dearth, dishearten, outsmart, spill
from you like marooned reef. You wince,
think what precedes art is *arson*
and follows is *artery*, but he will disprove you
in every angle art can contort its limbs.
You follow in the obedience
you learn from your departing dog,
let *first time* and *last time* take turns and tolls
on you the way a blind swimmer
teeters in the water, hands outstretched, searching
for his cane, that black cleft in the sea
hooked on the slick fin of a drawing shark.

PRIME CUT IN SYNCHRONY AT THE PRE-RECORDING SESSION
Sharon Doyle

*-for Ivan Turk, the Geologist
who made this find:
1997, Divje Babe Cave*

I found a weathered red-brown pipe
pierced with measured ragged holes—
a bone aged forty thousand years
that looks to be carved for music.

But I found it in this Slovak cave—
a place not clearly East
or West,
so I wonder if it plays five tones
in oriental mode, or did
Neanderthals hear twelve
as in occidental octaves.

Maybe they worked up harmonies,
counterpoints, an orchestra,
and when they played the pipe, it was
a flute, round embrasure whistle-toned
or flat like an egg to coax overtone
in prehistoric Black,
or maybe Irish, jazz.

Whatever, they did not wait for time
to teach them to forge
from mineral silver
or carve
from vegetable tree limbs;
rather, they cleverly salvaged from animal—
calcium phosphate leached of blood—

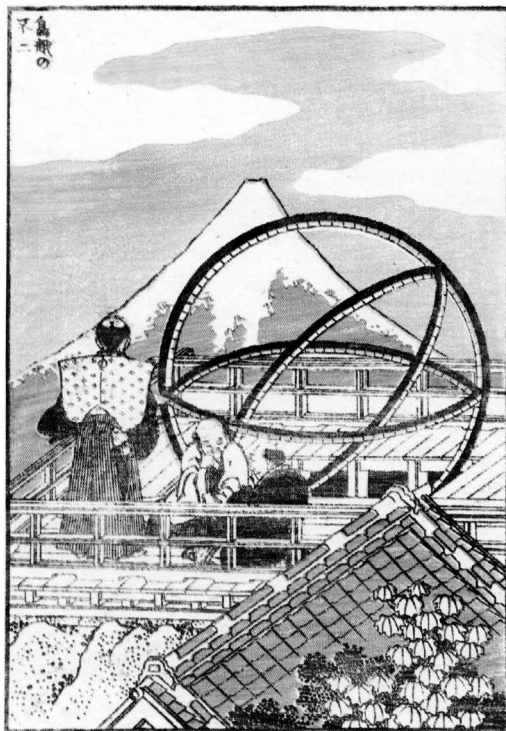
the thighbone of bear in a primal cave,
that taught them
the tricks
of breath.

Global Illumination



Untitled Abstract, by Charles Eldred, oil on canvas, paper, ink.
A gift donated by Marilyn Gruber.

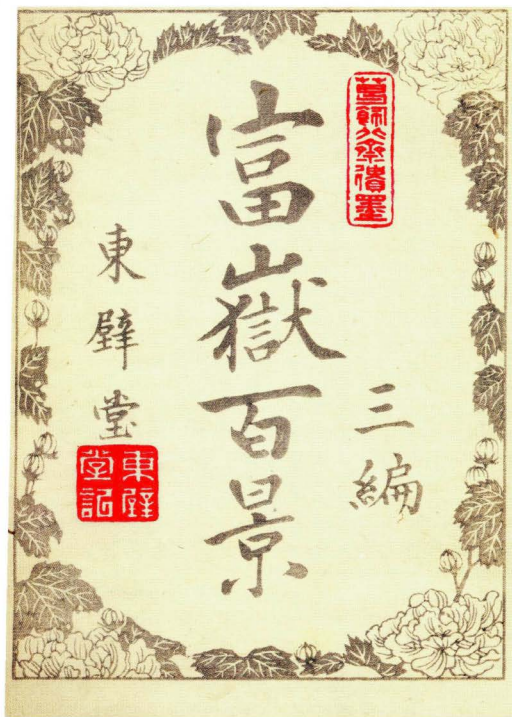
Images courtesy of the Binghamton University Art Museum. Special thanks to
Jacqueline Hogan, Assistant Director, Art Museum, Binghamton University.



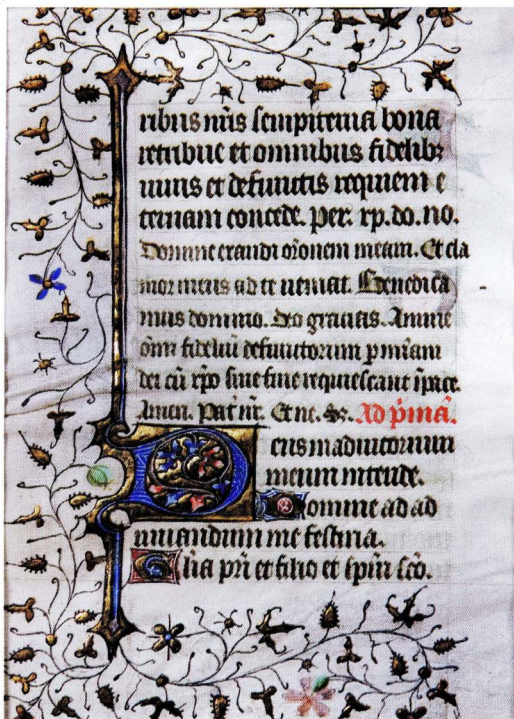
One Hundred Views of Fuji (1878), by Hokusai, wood block print



Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin (1511), by Albrecht Durer, woodcut



Frontispiece from *One Hundred Views of Fuji* (1878), by Hokusai, wood block print



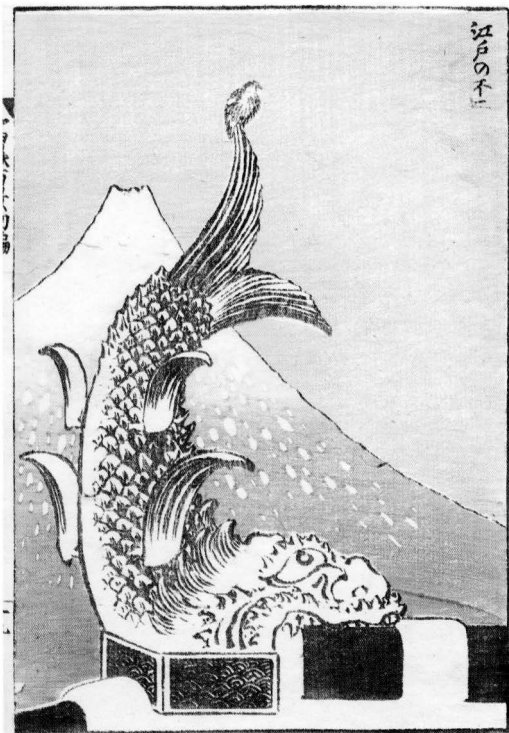
French manuscript page (1450), by Unknown, ink and paint on vellum



Detail from *The Crossing of the Red Sea* , by Luca Giordano, chalk and ink



Angelica and Medoro (1765) by Benjamin West, oil on canvas



One Hundred Views of Fuji (1878) , by Hokusai, woodblock print

OLD '89

John T. Trigonis

Crashed my lightning blue '89 Cavalier into the 1&9
divide after the Giants won Superbowl XLII.

So I wandered the Jersey City underworld cloud heavy
passed motorcycle hangovers and White Mana

thinking how a lonesome star like mine could get the
moon's attention without police and hospital

lights on my tail to sweep up the busted glass and
me off someone else's powdered lines.

Everybody's drunk tonight, Saturn-ringed, speeding
with some sweet heartache wrapped around a

tattooed arm like a worn-out Timex or a cheap bomb.
I think about the snapshots of my autopsy haunting

the front page of the Journal, my little roadside diversion
loitering the YouTube expanse for Stoned-Age

frat boys with nothing better to do than record my last
minutes for his 15 of fame, my own cheated for a

late night thumbsucker, platinum second mate in heels,
says she's been searching for a strong sailor with an

ashtray heart so she can burn away the last of her regrets.
What else can you say to an offer like that when

you're dizzied off a 12-pack of Bud, lost in the beautiful
car crash beneath the bridges of her eyebrows?

Sure, I tell her, and tearing apart my ivory button-down,
I lay her head on the scar where my heart used to be.

I'll put out the pain, Love. In both of us.

AFTER DANCING AT SWANKY'S WE DRIVE TO TENNESSEE

Amy Bracken Sparks

I carried the legs and he carried the talking part
past the veggie crepe stand to the depot.

Grits in the morning and we're in Tennessee.
The dog finds treasure behind the couch—

dead crow after too much ouzo. *Us, not the
bird, bozo.* What is the mathematical equation

to keep cocktails on a swinging table
and never fall over the way people do?

Sometimes we stay separate from our legs
even when our brothers put us on bikes

and face us downhill. This is what we know
about Tennessee: there's peanut butter

and the snot-nosed kid next door watching
us eat. There's a blue Catalina out front

which seats six plus a husky dog.
I am poorly in love with the driver

who cured my common itch
with a well-placed

orange juice and amaretto.
He knows how to take people

apart and screw them
together again. But sometimes

he puts the legs on facing back
so you're walking yesterday,

talking the wrong way. Sometimes
he's married, and has a house

in Tennessee, a long way from
where this all started.

BEEES ARE THE SMALLEST BIRDS AND BORN FROM
THE BODIES OF OXEN

Amy Bracken Sparks

I say *bestiary* and she says *what?* I say it louder and she laughs, *bestiality?* and all the diners around us stop, mayonnaise on their chins. *Bee is the smallest bird* I say and she pokes at her yellow chicken while the man behind her picks up a perfect scroll of meat and reads its sacred contents. *What you need*, she says, *is a pink cone. A pine cone?* I ask. *No, a vibrating pink cone it costs a hundred bucks and has sixteen settings it'll get you off baby.* The man drops his meat. *Did you know they used to put black cloths over the beehives when someone died to keep them from flying away forever?* I say, and she says *I get it now, you need a caladrius, a bird that can tell if a sick man will die* and I shove the yogurt away and the split lemon spins in the water glass and I say *what I need is a kingfisher, a bird that calms sea storms* as she flicks a pink turnip into her mouth and says *you need to get stung good* as she stirs her fava beans, and I say *I'm done with midnight singing* and she throws up her hands, catches them and yells *we need more*

BLACK HEART ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

T. J. Forrester

Yvonne has that tired all-over feeling, and, when she shrugs out of her backpack and drops it next to the fire ring, the thud is part satisfaction and part relief. Her legs ache, but she and Devon hiked sixteen miles today, their high mark since beginning down in Georgia.

"A fire would be nice," Devon says, and drives a tent stake into the ground. "I'll make a Log Cabin tonight, get a big blaze going."

Devon prefers camp chores to gathering firewood because he worries about getting lost. Getting lost never happens to Yvonne. She has a keen sense of direction, much keener than Devon, who sees the Appalachian Trail as a conduit through the unknown. Venture away from the footpath, and he is doomed.

She nibbles a Snickers bar, savors chocolate melting on her tongue. Devon was supposed to join her for a week, but one week dragged into two, and two weeks dragged into three. Sometimes she wonders if he stays because of her or if he stays because of the campfires. He has become an expert at building fire out of her wood. He places twigs at the base, then shapes branches in various ways. Tepees and Log Cabins are his favorites, but occasionally his arty side surfaces and the wood takes on strange forms. One night he broke wood into equal lengths and built a square he called Skyscraper Deluxe. Another night he wove a ball that put out dense smoke and little flame. He called that one Dante's Inferno and later changed it to Dying Sun.

"Be dark before you know it," Devon says.

Yvonne, weary of his hinting, flicks the candy wrapper into the fire ring. Devon knows she would never toss out something she doesn't intend to burn, that the act signals she will go into the forest and gather wood, and he looks her way and smiles. It is the same smile he offered when he invited himself on her

adventure. She wanted to say no, but she wears his ring. The diamond is bright and hard and promises two people wish to live together forever. Together forever has taken on meaning during their time on the trail. He is the first thing she sees when she wakes up and the last thing she sees when she goes to sleep. In between, he is always there, always. She imagines gathering *his* firewood for the rest of *her* life, and the skin tightens between her eyes.

"I'm going," she says. "But I will not be rushed."



The earth is moist from recent rains, and a dank smell rises from where Yvonne's boots disturb leaves and expose soil dark as charcoal. Fiddleheads, green and slender, curl out of the forest floor, but, higher up, where branches are without leaves, colors are muted slashes of gray and brown. She's a quarter-mile from camp, on a slope that falls away to a narrow hollow. An owl hoot comes through the trees. The sound is forlorn, expectant: a lover, Yvonne supposes, separated and seeking assurance. She looks back the way she came, at the trees, the rocks, at the scuff marks in the leaves. She imagines she hears Devon, alone in the clearing, cup his hands around his mouth and shout her name into the graying air. Would she respond? She thinks back to junior year at Ohio State, tries to remember how it was between them when they met. She first noticed him after her floor exercise at an intramural meet. Later, at the gymnastic party at Logan's Lounge, he came and stood next to her at the bar.

"You have remarkable balance," he said.

She was ordering a drink and didn't look at him right away. When she did, she saw a young man studying her intently. He wore black-rimmed glasses, and his pupils seemed soft as brown felt. He leaned in her direction, a posture that made her feel as if they had been friends for a long time.

"You're staring at me," she said, not displeased. She had gone to the dorm after the meet, taken a shower, and changed into

nylon sweats. The top, unzipped to show what little cleavage she had, clung to her as she squared her body to his. She was a thick woman, muscular in the arms and legs, wide like a swimmer in the shoulders. Yvonne knew these were not attributes most men were attracted to.

"Did you know," he said, "that the cicada life cycle requires they live underground for seventeen years? Seventeen years! Can you imagine?"

Yvonne sucked down a lemon Jell-O shot. The shot warmed her stomach, and she gazed bemusedly at the man.

"That's an original pickup line," she said.

He went on as if he didn't hear her.

"Imagine living in the dirt for seventeen years, waiting to crawl up out of the earth to extend your species, then you find out they built a Wal-Mart parking lot over you."

"I'd be devastated."

He looked amused. "You would, would you?"

"Think of it. My little cicada paws scraping away at that asphalt roof—"

"Think of living your life in vain," he said. "Everything wasted, you might as well have never existed."

"I am more than my ovaries."

"That's not the point."

She ordered another shot, turned back to the man.

"I suppose you're right," she said.

He raised his wine glass, and she raised her shot.

"To the cicadas," he said.

"To the cicadas."

The band started up and he nodded toward the stage. She wasn't much of a dancer—as a teenager she preferred tumbling runs to the latest steps—but she had flexible limbs and could move well enough. Out on the checkered floor, she whirled in front of the man. Her hips twitched to the beat.

"We're dancing," he said, as though he couldn't quite believe it. His arm movements were small, typical of a man who doesn't like to stand out in a crowd. She raised her hands above her head

and pretended to claw an invisible roof. Then she leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"I'm doing the cicada. It's the latest thing."

Darkness came over his face. "You're mocking me."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was trying to make a joke." She shouldn't have made fun of this man, this cicada lover with the big brown eyes.

"Life is a serious thing; what we do matters."

"Yes," she said. "Life matters."

After the set was over, she followed him to a booth and they sat next to each other in the bluish air. They sat for a long time without talking, and she was comfortable in the silence. The music started back up, and, instead of going to the dance floor, they ordered a carafe of red wine and started in on the conversation. His name was Devon McLanahan, and he was an art student who wanted to mold young minds and planned on teaching elementary school when he graduated. She was majoring in computer programming and had never considered teaching. Last summer, he went to the Dominican Republic as part of an outreach program and helped build houses; she flew across the big pond and backpacked through Europe.

"I want to know everything," he said, and put his hand on hers.

His skin felt smooth and warm, and the more wine she drank the more she wanted to whisper secrets and wanted him to whisper back. At closing time, they went to his dorm, and he tied a sock around the hall doorknob so his roommate wouldn't barge in. She offered herself to him, and, as he knelt between her legs, she thought she had found the one.

Now, as Yvonne walks around an upthrust boulder, the owl hoot again comes through the forest. The sound is loud, almost overhead, and she stops walking and peers into the trees. Against the sky, in the upper reaches of a yellow poplar, wings unfold, and a feathered shadow flits through the branches, gone before she can raise a hand and offer hello.

She picks up a branch and drags it through the forest. Finds

another branch and adds it to the one she drags. This hike was supposed to bring her closer to Devon, but the opposite has happened and she thinks maybe he isn't the one. Maybe nobody is the one. Maybe she will live life alone, impenetrable, a woman who goes away and never comes back. She laughs, a forced exhalation with a staccato at the end. If Devon knew her, truly knew her, he would not have invited himself on this trip.



Her black heart surfaced, a year earlier, on a spring-break hike in the Gila range. They had rented a car and driven from Ohio to New Mexico their senior year to celebrate their engagement. Devon, eating a peanut butter cracker, sat on the edge of a cliff that fell a quarter mile to spruce forest. Yvonne sat beside him. She had on a blue Nike shirt, and she wore long pants because they hid her legs, which were more solid than fat, but she lived with worry Devon would lose sight of the difference.

"That's a long way down," he said.

The urge came without warning. One minute she was looking at a hawk windsurfing the updraft, and the next she wanted to push Devon off the cliff. She was amused at the novelty, but, when the urge intensified, she smothered it with thoughts of how much she enjoyed spending time with him, and how tonight they would pitch the tent and snuggle into their sleeping bags and talk about whatever. She enjoyed her lover's voice in the darkness, liked how it surrounded and caressed her with its easy tone.

Marveling at the absurdity, she allowed her thoughts to dissipate and the urge to reappear. Devon was talking about buying a house with a spare room. He wanted a studio on the east side so he could catch morning light while he worked on his drawings. She nodded agreeably, aware for the first time sitting next to someone on a cliff is an act of implied trust. Had he ever thought about pushing *her* off? She put her hand on his back, applied the tiniest pressure, and he must have sensed something because he got up and went over to his pack and rummaged for a

camera. She studied his eyes, looking for a flicker of recognition, and, in the end, decided he was oblivious.

The rest of the hike, she stayed back when he stood on overlooks and took pictures. On the drive home, as they passed out of New Mexico into Texas flatlands, she leaned against the passenger door and glanced Devon's way. He had a NASCAR fantasy and wore gloves when he drove. It was a harmless game, and one that amused her. Although he hovered over the wheel, he didn't believe in speeding because it wasted gas. They chugged down the interstate at sixty miles per hour.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" she said.

"You are a fire-breathing monster."

"Devon."

"Ask a ridiculous question, get a ridiculous answer."

"I've been thinking," she said, then, after a pause, "I don't know, really. I guess I think too much sometimes. You know I've never killed anything, not even a mosquito?"

"You want to kill something?"

"No," she said. "That's not what I'm saying." The lie was for the best. They had a long drive, and she didn't want to spend two thousand miles thinking about something she'd rather forget.



Yvonne takes a route that brings her to an oak grove north of the campsite. She steps across the trail and hoists herself onto a limb. She likes changing physical perspective when she thinks, believes the process frees her mind and allows her to view life from new angles. She climbs high enough to look down the trail into the campsite, settles into a fork, and holds onto a limb.

Devon faces the direction she chose when she went into the forest. He wears the yellow fleece they picked out from L. L. Bean. She watches him until she grows bored, then turns away and watches the sun fall below the mountains. An orange band stripes the horizon, and, above the band, the sky is the color of washed-out purple. Toward the north, where the sky is darker,

the first star appears. She imagines the star hovers over the trail's northern terminus, wonders how many steps it takes to get there from here.

Her fiancé believes she chose this journey because she wants to put off settling down. He calls her thru-hike a 2,000 mile procrastination. She has not told him the real reason. She hikes because she is 21 and tired of perfect Yvonne, the gymnast who spent her life in pursuit of tens. She wants change and hopes it comes like an erupting volcano, melting her so completely when she cools she becomes something else entirely. This, of course, has nothing to do with Devon and is something he would not understand.

"Yvonne!"

The two syllable explosion startles her, and she shifts in his direction. He turns on his headlamp, and the beam cuts a swath through black air, illuminates trees in its white glow. She roots for him to begin an all-out search but knows his fear is greater than his worry, and he will never venture into the forest. She listens to him call out, the croak that once was her name growing fainter with each repetition, and, when her back complains about the corrugated bark, and her stomach complains about lack of food, and her mind says she should feel guilty because she loves that man down there, she decides it is time to end this game and go back to the clearing and get something to eat. She feels her way through the limbs, lowers herself to the forest floor, and walks the trail to the clearing.

"Hey," she says.

"Over here!" Devon says, headlamp bobbing. "I'm over here!"

They come together, and his arms wrap around her.

"I'm here," she says.

"I've been calling for hours."

"I got turned around but I'm back now," she says.

"I can't believe you did that!"

"I didn't get lost on purpose."

"You never get lost."

She gets down on her hands and knees and follows him inside the tent.

"I'm hungry," she says.

He empties a food bag in the space between their ground pads. She plucks a PowerBar from under a baggie filled with raisins. The PowerBar is banana-flavored and she chews slowly, hoping to avoid conversation. The tent, with its low ceiling and narrow walls, feels unusually cramped tonight. Devon takes off his boots, and she wrinkles her nose at the smell of dirty socks.

"I think I heard a cicada," he says. "While you were gone, I think I heard one off in the distance."

"No, it's too early for the cicadas."

They are silent for a long time. The silence is uncomfortable, as if he wants something but is afraid to ask. She closes her eyes and tries to sleep, opens them when Devon pulls up her shirt and his fingers trace a circle around her bellybutton. She stiffens, but he seems unaware of her reluctance. His fingers drift under her panties toward the mound between her legs. She's dry but moistening, and at that precise moment—yes, right there, just the tip of the finger—no, she should say no, say it loud like she was taught in high school: "No means no, girls say it like you mean it."—"No!"—but there is only yes, and the finger thrumming and her mind focused on the swollen button until she is there and nowhere else, submerged in that hot river, pulling her to the precipice—just the tip, there, yes, please, just the tip, please Devon—and her back arching and her legs contracting and her toes curling and her breath harsh and unabated—don't stop, don't stop, please don't stop—and the free fall over the edge, and the magnificence and the pleasure and the transcendent energy of being there, only there . . .

Her voice, when it comes, is low and guttural.

"You bastard," she says.

"You love it." He guides her hand toward his crotch, but she won't have it, any of it, aware this is the first time she has refused to reciprocate.

"You're not playing fair," he says.

He'll get over it. Devon, if nothing else, is a forgiving kind of guy.



Yvonne wakes to rhythmic noise she can't place. The noise is insistent, drawing her toward consciousness. She gives in to it and opens her eyes. At first she thinks the noise is Devon rubbing his leg, then recognizes the sound for what it is. The rhythm picks up speed, and her lips pull into a shy smile. She didn't know he masturbated. She is pleased Devon has a secret side, and she wonders how he would react if she told him hers. He probably wouldn't believe her.

"Devon," she says.

The noise stops.

"Devon?"

His voice has a fake groggy tone. "Huh?"

"Never mind." She puts on her headlamp, opens her trail guide, and muses over tomorrow's hike. In the forest, an animal skitters through the brush. The footsteps are so light she can hardly hear them. Probably a squirrel or a night bird, maybe a raccoon. The air is cool against her skin and doesn't smell as bad as it did when she went to sleep. Devon's socks must be drying out. She wets her thumb and flips a page. Fourteen miles up the trail, there is a campsite with a spring nearby. Between here and there, the trail crosses a major highway they'll reach mid-morning. She looks over at Devon, who mumbles something and yanks his sleeping bag over his head.

"The light's in my eyes," he says.

"Sorry." Yvonne flicks off the headlamp, and darkness returns to the tent. The animal moving through the brush has either stopped or moved out of hearing range. She rolls over on her stomach.

"Devon?" she says. "Hey, are you awake?"

No answer.

"I feel a little sore, same spot as yesterday," she says. "I think I might have to take some ibuprofen."

A rustle, and Devon's hand finds her back. He applies gentle pressure, and every so often she lets out an appreciative moan.

"Is that it?" he says.

"A little higher."

"There?"

"You have nice hands," she says.

Moaning and complimenting during a Devon back rub is like standing in front of a candy machine. Drop quarters into the slot, and the candy keeps coming.

"Hey," she says, eventually tiring of the attention. "Did I tell you there was a road crossing tomorrow?"

She hasn't the courage to come out and ask him to get off the trail. Not that it matters. Her lover is good at reading the fine print. Devon turns his back to her, and she does the same to him. She pulls her sleeping bag to her neck and listens for sounds in the forest, thinks of cicadas tunneling through soil. She wonders what it feels like when they break free.



Cars and trucks stream over the highway; they come from both directions, drivers in a hurry to get to opposite sides of the mountain. A station wagon pulls off the road, and a white-haired man gets out and hobbles their way. He has a narrow forehead, hooded eyes. He hands Devon a card and she reads it over his shoulder. Mr. Quinton calls himself a trail angel, and he has a house in town where he rents tent space for ten dollars a night. Shuttle fee is by the mile.

"Thru-hiker?" Mr. Quinton says, directing his question at Devon.

"Springer to Katahdin," Devon says. "One step at a time."

"You livin' my dream," Mr. Quinton says. "I tried to hike her when I was a young man, but I got this trick knee that would

have none of it. I hang back now and try to help you fellows out. Do what I can here and there. Shower's hot, got a couple rooms. They're full up at the moment."

Yvonne moves up to where she is shoulder to shoulder to Devon, intent on breaking up this all boy's club. *She* is the thru-hiker in this duo; Devon is the tag along.

"One step at a time," she says. "That's the only way to thru-hike a trail."

The man glances at her, looks back at Devon.

"So how about it? You want a ride in?" Mr. Quinton says. "Five dollars each coming off the mountain, but you and your gal friend ride free coming back, if you stay with me, I mean."

Devon says, "Sounds reasonable."

"I don't say it on my card, but I cook blueberry pancakes for breakfast. Not all mornings, sometimes I sleep in. Breakfast is five dollars each if you want it."

"What about a ride to the nearest bus station?" Yvonne says.

Now she has the man's attention. Devon's too.

"You thinkin' about gettin' off, honey?" Mr. Quinton says.

"Just asking," she says.

"I don't blame you one bit," he says. "It's a hard go out there. Wear you to a nubbin' no time flat."

Devon puts his arm around her and squeezes. "She gets grouchy at night, but she's been pretty good so far."

Mr. Quinton goes back to his station wagon, picks up a folder lying on the dash, and comes back over. He flips open the folder and runs his finger down a page filled with jotted notations. "I can never remember these figures. Let's see, shuttle to the bus station in Asheville run you a hundred twenty dollars. Pretty lady like you and I'll knock off the twenty." Yellow teeth show between parted lips. "No offense, just trying to be helpful."

"I might have to stop and pee," she says. "You know us women folk. We got us these small bladders, no bigger than a thimble, really."

"Don't I know it!" Mr. Quinton says. "I had me a wife who

couldn't drive no more than fifty miles without wantin' to run out to the bushes. When a woman has to pee she has to pee."

"I could pee right here," she says. "Right here before God and country and this here highway."

The man says, "Don't let me stop you."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she says. "Bet you come up here and hide in the bushes just to see hikers pee."

"Now see here," the man says. "There ain't no call for—"

She steps onto the highway, dashes through a gap between a semi and a glimmering Porsche. Devon is close behind. He catches up and tugs on her backpack, slows her to a standstill.

"That was rude," he says.

"Him or me?"

"What?"

"Who was rude? Him or me?"

"He was trying to be helpful, trying to make a buck."

Yvonne, with a curt wave of the hand, motions him up the trail. He tells her he'll wait for her at the next shelter, and she says that will be fine. She watches him walk out of sight, then pulls down her shorts, squats behind a bush, and lets loose a stream that sends a beetle scurrying across the leaves. She hops behind the beetle, urine splashing the leaves, her boots, everywhere but on that blue back. She gives up the chase, thinking, if she had been born with a penis, life would be different all the way around.

An hour later, she catches up to Devon at a lean-to built under a hickory tree. She sits cross-legged on the wooden floor and waits for him to stop writing in the register. He hands her a notebook and pen, and goes to the spring to fill water bottles. She flips to an entry made in early March and reads about September Sunset and Lizard Boy, a couple who started their thru-hikes earlier than most, and who hiked through a foot of snow that day. Then comes Gregarious George, a man who hikes with a copy of Robert Frost poems and writes about starry skies and clouds white as cotton. She skims forward, stops on trail names like Monkey Butt, Greasy Spoon, Riot Boy, Sweet

Dreams, Strider, Dances with Ravens, and Sloppy Seconds. She comes to Devon's entry. *Devon and Yvonne passing through on the 29th of March.*

Devon comes up and hands her a water bottle.

"I hate my name," she says. "It's boring. Who's named Yvonne these days?"

"You know how I feel about trail names." He goes over to the fire ring and kicks at a rock.

"They're fun, a bunch of hikers having a good time."

"I don't want you to change your name."

"Never mind," she says. "I'm sorry I brought it up."

"No, really, why obscure who you are?"

"Come on, Devon. We're not talking about plastic surgery."

His voice has a helpless tone. "Please, Yvonne, I'm tired of arguing."

"Never Lost," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"Never Lost. My new name. Yvonne is history."

Yvonne crosses out Devon's entry and writes: *Never Lost solo hiking the trail. Me here. Me gone. See ya when I see ya!*

Devon says it is time to go, and she looks over at him, wonders if he notices anything different about her.



Oaks, pines, and rough-barked hickories give way to rhododendrons and spruce, waist-high mountain laurel bushes. The air is clean and cool. The trail switchbacks to the left, levels out, switchbacks to the right and steeply ascends a leafy slope. She watches her quadriceps expand and contract with each step, notes with satisfaction the climbs are easier than when she began this hike. Her shorts are looser around the waist, not so loose they are in danger of coming off, but loose enough so she knows she is losing weight, a few pounds here and there, nothing major.

The trail tops the ridge, and she sees Devon sitting with his back to her on a ledge that overlooks the Smokies. The mountains are blue and humped and ripple toward the horizon. Far off, down in a narrow valley, smoke curls above the trees and bends in the wind. She imagines a house, or a factory down there, a place where humans live out normal lives.

Devon lowers his legs over the edge. He stares in one direction, shaking his head, as if locked in silent debate. She takes her pack off and lays it next to his. For the last three weeks, she has walked past him when she finds him on an overlook. She has offered excuses like she doesn't want to take a break just yet, or she's tweaked her ankle and wants to keep walking so it won't seize up. Today, though, she gazes at his back, at the flat spot between his shoulder blades. She estimates the distance, twelve feet across gray rock, and takes a step his way, heel to toe, like Indians walked when they stalked these mountains.

"You talk in your sleep," he says, without turning around. He grips the rock, and fingers whiten around the knuckles. "Did you know that? You talk in your sleep, and sometimes you say things like you want to push me off a cliff. Do you want to push me off a cliff, Yvonne?"

She closes the gap one step at a time.

"I love you," he says. "We can work this out between us, we can fix this, this, whatever it is."

She puts her hand on his back. He's shaking, doubting her love.

"I thought for a long time there was something wrong with me," she says. "Wanting to push my fiancé off a cliff? How crazy is that?"

"It's my breath, isn't it?" His laugh is feeble and ends abruptly. "I knew I should have carried some mints."

The ring comes off in a single twist.

"You are my asphalt roof, Devon McLanahan."

He picks up the ring and holds it in his palm, turns the ring over and over. Then he turns toward her. His face is pale, and his eyes are wide open.

"I imagine that man's still down there," she says. "Plenty of cars coming by if he's not."

She puts on her pack and jogs up the trail. The gait comes easily, and she pumps her arms and throws back her head and glides through the forest. She doesn't want to live life like a cicada under a parking lot. She wants to matter somehow. When she walks the streets, she wants people to point and say there goes a woman of consequence. She thinks of the fire she will build tonight.

TO A RUNAWAY HUSBAND

Meg Franklin

On the cleaning table sat the only thing you left behind,
save a toolbox: the flank of a deer, gathering bleary maggots.

Overcome, some fell to the grass with the solemnity
of rain through a roof gone bad. When time has passed

and the white worms have turned to green flitting flies,
I will teach our girls a fly swatter's arc. They will know

its swish as well as the whisper of their Sunday skirts;
they will know its slap as well as my face.

VISITING HOME

Phoebe Reeves

for my grandfather

Your house burned yesterday. Not
to the ground, not in consuming

flames, as you might imagine—
it smoldered in the walls. A pine tree

downed the power lines. Electrical surges.
Firemen had to tear down the bookshelves,

insulation, floorboards older than you
would be by now. Everything charred

in that corner you filled for fifty years,
with your half-glasses and manuscripts.

It's rented now; they'd moved out all your
things, so none of that burned. They keep saying

it would have been better had the house burned
to the ground. Aunt Betsy spoke of ghosts.

Are you there now?

(Funny, really.

As if anyone knew.)

And now the smell of smoke,
the water-damage. Pine-boards lying

slant-wise in the wreckage. Mom still
tells of waiting for the cows to cross,

and riding her bike to get milk
at the Lewis farm. Remember the pines you planted

when she was eight? Now they're rows and
rows like a giant's corn field. Your house is older

than our family, but the family trees
are bringing it down.

Every time I drive the three hours
back to the City, I think of you

at each pond or field razed
for winter. Which is not to say

I'm homesick, exactly, though I want
to dig into the loam of your garden. A kind

of violence necessary for propagation.
Some trees need a fire to sprout.

BEFORE THE WILDFIRE

Joseph J. Capista

Walking those endless gravels along
slabs of low-slung cropland and knots
of tallgrass, I felt as if I roamed
the bottom of some enormous bowl
slowly filling with crows and swifts,
the first drops of what would gather across
an electric sky in the dark days ahead.

On the prairie, things change so quickly.
My boots scraped the vein of crushed lime
like a bell in tower scrapes when its tongue
has been severed by a thin preacher whose
mind rings endlessly with burning grief.
And, of course, I still hear that tireless wind.

It whistles hotly between the water tower's
taut cables, thistle and berries beneath
already preparing for their inevitable burst
pressed between thin tongues of flame.

We smelled the fire before the smoke.
Even now I see lush culverts and mingling
bull snakes or dusty whisps of pulverized
mass passing by me and into me as I breathe
air that's traveled overland without rest,
air that mistakes me for some body of water
that will extinguish its burning hems.

We should have known this county, after
dragging itself for so long like a match
against the raspy sky, was ready to ignite.

LUSH

Jim Daniels

March 24

Robin on a wire. Wacky disco-ball snow
swirling around it. Bird's probably thinking
I come back for this? It wants rain to draw up
worms. The robin bounces, waiting.

The sun's back-lighting it into a saint
preaching on electricity. My skin's turning
into cheap old typing paper—try to erase
and you're making windows instead.

Reverse snowflakes. Or, maybe you never typed
a word on any kind of paper. Then think about
cheap paper towels—they still make those.

When I look up again, the robin's gone,
maybe looking for the one spot
where the ground's thawed. Robins—about
as exotic as we get in Pittsburgh. Except for
dancers downtown in their own strange, sad light.
You may have been there, or not. Some of us
look for moisture in the driest places.

Okay, yeah, I banged my fist on the bar
and squinted up into the mirrored faces.
Looked down at the toes, painted out of boredom
or for my benefit. Sometimes I saw the tender space
in the arch, skin that rarely touches the ground.

Okay, robin, I've stood for it long enough.
I'm going outside. I'm going to open wide.

BIRTH MARKS

Jim Daniels

She was stymied by pizza
but not ice cream. She ordered vanilla
for its sound. She was Queen
of the Isle of *You Decide*.

He had the patience of a thorn
working its way to the surface
and the business sense
of a herd of cattle.

She used her checkbook
to prop up every minor purchase.
He used cash for the benefit
of its traceless disappearance.

In short, he was a bad magician
and she was the nervous assistant.
A match manufactured in a damp swamp.

Yet they set off enough sparks
to produce me out of a hat,
dazed and surprised by applause.

Technically, I can't remember
that far back, but I can make up
a few things, given the lack
of memory, and receipts.

PLAYING DEAD

Robert Long Foreman

Last night I slept alone among the sheets of a photographer I have never met. My girlfriend Sarada house sits for her, but took a vacation this week with her parents. I agreed to stay behind and watch the house, as I continue to not have a job.

I stayed here a week with Sarada before she left, and we broke the photographer's bed. The supports snapped off of their wooden frame. This was a collaborative effort, and we fractured the poor thing twice, in different places, before we dragged the box springs and mattress into the adjacent office. After that adjustment I think we scraped the hardwood floor with our friction, as if the bed frame had not been enough.

Nothing expensive has broken yet. Neither of the photographer's cats has died. Thus, we have done a pretty good job of looking after things so far.

This is the first time in a year that I have had so much as a room to myself, and things are likely to get out of hand. I may never sweep the floor. I may take up chain smoking and refuse to use an ashtray, let the cats throw up and not clean after them. I could use the bathtub for a toilet, smash the TV set, eat nothing but lettuce and LSD for three days, and redecorate the place with tinfoil and used film. I might even listen to the photographer's Pink Floyd albums. Sarada would return, arms full of luggage, to find me stark naked on the floor, twenty pounds lighter, punctured with broken glass, the two cats wandering about perplexed. I would have not washed the dishes since I clogged the sink and filled it with pig's blood. This is the kind of thing I think would be intense and memorable but lack the initiative to carry out.

The two cats, Mavis and Monkey, insist on drinking straight from the kitchen faucet. On the first morning without Sarada

I had to wait several minutes before I could fill the coffee pot, while Mavis lapped at the continuous stream of water and Monkey licked Mavis' neck in eager anticipation of his turn to suck moisture from the plumbing. I stared at the oven.

I spend my time in the office, on the mattress, where I read, write and eat in the pleasurable company of the window unit air conditioner. My previous life was not sedentary, but in this summer's blistering heat I got used to the lifestyle. For a couple of days I watched the cats laze on their own furniture as I acted like this, and I saw that all along I was unconsciously doing my best to fit in with them. The cats lounge incessantly, and meanwhile their owner lives it up in New York City. I repose with them, and Sarada goes sailing off the coast of New England. The cats and I have a lot in common.

Gallons of unused water pass through this house every day, because of the cats. When Mavis drinks from the sink, she does it for five minutes at a time. I do not know how to politely throw a mammal to the floor, so I leave the faucet on for her and walk away. Water spills from the faucet straight into the drain, embarrassingly, long after she finishes. I hate wasting things. When I do this I blame the cats, and feel glad for the city's recent report that its water contains cyanide. I am not conflicted when it comes to throwing away cyanide.

Once a day, Monkey meows and coughs nervously until house debris comes spilling from his mouth in a soggy bolus. I think it is only a matter of time before I, too, vomit food and hair onto the hardwood floor, and pace away without cleaning it. I cannot wait.

The gender divide between the photographer and me makes my stay here a little invasive. Sarada, after all, is the one who was trusted to watch the place and not I, her unclean, undoubtedly male boyfriend. As an adolescent I wished I could walk invisible through a pretty lady's bedroom as she undressed, and watch the proceedings with rapt attention. My presence in this house gives not quite the same ghost-voyeur's satisfaction, but it does

achieve some component of that common fantasy. Although no one in this house is currently naked except for me, some woman's stuff is all over the place, and her life is arranged on shelves and in drawers, and if I wanted to I could go riffling through it. No one would stop me. I have not yet explored that option, and my exasperated friend Monty does not understand why.

The photographer takes pictures of ghosts or, anyway, pictures that simulate ghosts. Books of occult photography haunt her shelf, and according to her web site their old shots of ectoplasm seeping out of ears and clothes inspired her recent work, which hangs on her walls. In them, dense fogs inhabit a few cells in the old lunatic asylum in town, and linger in the woods that surround it. I am not certain how she achieved these effects, but I like the concept: she knows the ghosts are not real, yet she passes them off in earnest despite that. Skeptics have fun, too.

Before the photographer returns, Sarada and I will fix the broken bed. We will carry her box springs discretely to where we found them. Later she will see how we scraped her wooden floor. Perhaps she will not see this, though, for several months after she returns, and by then she might have put it out of her mind that Sarada lived here. She might wonder if the scars were made the night before, by something unseen. At midnight her bed will snap, in the same place where Sarada and I broke it, as she shifts her groggy weight. Her mattress, which I am currently sprawled on, will slump with mystery from the wooden frame to the floor. She might wonder if disquieted spirits have emanated from the ground to tell her something.

She seems to think about this sort of thing often enough to draw such conclusions. Others have gotten ideas like it based on less complicated evidence than what I am providing her. With any luck the cats will act disturbed when the bed breaks again and frighten the photographer even more. I know the truth, though. There are no ghosts: rather, wooden beds are not strong enough to withstand housesitters in love.

At first I thought the cats were not all bad. They relieved

themselves in the appropriate sandbox, and left me alone as long as I kept clear of their sink. They even crawled into bed with me at night. With Sarada gone, there was room enough for me and both of them together. We each snuggled up to ourselves, at peace.

As the week wore on I dozed later into the day. The first time I slept in, Mavis attacked a pile of her owner's papers with claws and teeth. I could hardly believe how loud this was. She was trying to wake me up. I told Mavis to go to hell, and she stopped, and then I shut my eyes and dreamed about a giant lobster.

Monkey took over the next morning. Some cardboard boxes inhabit the space next to the mattress where I sleep, and he dug his claws into them, at high volume, and made my life feel like an unfortunate mistake at five in the morning. I refused to hit him, which I worried might be the only thing that could halt his awful behavior. This quickly became a morning ritual.

In a high school anatomy class I dissected a cat in order to learn something. I had to reach in and split its ribcage with my bare hands. If I could somehow convey that experience to Mavis and Monkey I think they would manage to leave me alone when I want them to, and we would get along splendidly.

I descended to the town my second night here, to see what the noise was about. One would expect that, on a Monday in the summer, college kids might calm down a little. I could hear them from up at the photographer's house, though, at their howling parties. I went out, and passed a crowd of college guys who stood on a porch with their shirts off and shouted at girls who walked behind and in front of me. The girls ignored them. None of us had anything better to do.

They all failed to acknowledge me, and I might as well have not been there. I walked into a crowded bar where I knew nobody. I breezed past a few average, living people at the entrance, then scurried to the back while I eyed the crowd, pretending I needed to use the restroom. I stood there a few seconds, looked in a mirror, then turned and left. It occurred

to me later that if I had been killed by an SUV on the way to that bar (which I just know is bound to happen someday) and had unknowingly become a ghost and continued on my way, thinking I was still alive, my ghost self would have behaved in that same fashion, talking to no one, avoiding eye contact, not ordering any drinks.

The next day I passed on foot the remains of a devastating collision between two cars. The street was filled with torn metal and no passengers. If I had been standing near the vehicles when they hit, I thought, I could have easily been killed. I got worried, thinking perhaps I really had been there and died, and then had joined the spirit world and forgotten the event, as ghosts will supposedly do, and gone about my quiet life as usual. I entered a bakery nearby, and no one saw me. It appeared that my end had finally come.

Then I caught sight of a friend of my ex-girlfriend, and she scowled at me. She was disgusted, as though my ears were weeping ectoplasm. This reassured me that I was still alive. I could not decide exactly how I felt about this.

Sarada returned with her golden hair, and she did not like my lettuce and LSD fantasy when I told it to her. She did not think it was funny. She said it sounded like something her ex-husband would have done.

Sarada's father and sister came one afternoon to drop some things off, and they looked at the ghost photographs on the wall. I tried to explain to them what effect the photographer seemed to be after, what she was trying to achieve, and they did not like this at all. They were displeased with the whole concept, and I found myself trying to make the photographer sound good so that they would think highly of her. I wanted them to like the photographer. I still have not met her myself, and I am not certain I will like her if I do.

Now that I am near the moment when I will exit this place for uncertain things ahead, I want to leave something for the photographer to find, an object she will know me by. I do not

keep business cards, as I make no money from the things I do.

I could leave a copy of something I wrote while I was here, perhaps an early draft of this very essay, but if I did she might take it the wrong way, or steal it and publish it herself, or try to publish it and fail. Who knows how she would react. Despite how intimately I have come to dislike her cats, I know almost nothing about this woman, and I doubt I ever will. She could be a sadist, for all I know. She could be friends with my ex-girlfriend, or with all of my ex-girlfriends. I do not think she will respond well if I leave a signature behind me.

I have my doubts, however, as to whether I can help it. Everything I do in this house reminds me how easily the photographer could perceive the remnants of my presence when she returns in September. I lose, at the very least, one hair per day in her living room. Everywhere I go I trail a mess of evidence behind me, indicating where in the universe I have existed. I might as well spend this summer on the surface of the moon, where no wind will ever sweep my footprints from the dirt below me, and dust mites will not eat my flaky remains.

I think I understand why ghosts are never as direct and obvious as believers think they are, and as skeptics think ghosts would be were they real. We are not the ones specters would want to talk to if they could do it. Like the photographer and me, ghosts are stuck with us by circumstance, and most of us—living and dead—would much rather be windsurfing.

I will not miss the cats after I leave. As soon as I move in with Monty, they will be strangers to me. If we cross paths on the street and they look at me expectantly, I will walk past them without making eye contact. I will brush them off as though they were insane, or salesmen, or insane salesmen, and leave them without a word. They will feel betrayed and confused.

Many of the people I know in this town are leaving, or they have left already. I have lost touch with dozens of friends in these last three years, and it feels like I have not seen them in ages. Even Sarada will be gone by September.

I have some friends in town still, and I should not pretend that they have all disappeared or become astronauts. This fall I will inhabit an apartment near the photographer's house with Monty, and he is more animate in five minutes than most people are all day. There will be others around, too, but the friends I never see far outnumber those that I do. I will be everywhere surrounded with absences and dead potential. My life has never been so ghostly as that.

It did not have to turn out this way: Monkey could have tried harder not to throw up; Mavis could have kept his urine off the bathroom tile; they could have left me alone in the mornings, and made my life easier. They should have thought about these things at the start of our week together, and things could have turned out differently. When I am gone, in their cat brains I will have been a specter, a transitional presence who has found some other way to occupy his time, perhaps with some stray cats—less demanding ones—in a house where no one lives on the other side of town. I will vanish, and they will forget me, and the photographer may never know that I was ever here.

WHEN THE HOUSE CRAMPS IN ON US AND YOUR
BLACK AND WHITE CAT

Elizabeth Fogle

Sometimes I wait for you
in my small bathroom
of muted purples and greens.

Reclining in the tub
like David's Marat; but not
dead, no bloody wounds

turning my bath brown and red
and slick like oil while I
slump with a petition in my hand.

Not that at all. Just waiting.
Waiting for you to come home and
find me in dim candlelight

behind my closed door. I let my
hands float, cupped up towards
the low ceiling, watching the water

flood in and out of the low plain
of my palm. I notice a strand
of brown hair there, mine,

and know if you find me like this
I might be tempted later to write
of my sex and your sex and

the smell of it all on my fingers.
But then I'm afraid I'm growing old

when I think like this and realize

I won't be making love to you as we both
grow even older and even farther apart
and know finally what the change has become.

+

I never told you that the morning after
Jackie died, I didn't want to leave you

because your skin was glowing golden
against the white sheets as you slept,

your back rising and falling with your
steady breathing. I think I did mention

I found the stray by the sidewalk again,
the one you've given a name,

eating a bird, his small, gray mouth
chewing through gristle and feather.

What I meant to say was that you are alive
and I am alive and so is the grass

which grows so quickly among the clover
that used to choke our backyard.

+

Outside our small, brightly lit house,
the summer heat slows the city down
in beiges and browns and smoky grays.

A neighborhood dog barks and Rory

with the cherry-red coupe pumps his bass
loud enough to rattle the windows.

There, in the midst of too many words
and too little silence, I realize things
are easier to imagine when you give them

a name. And I wonder what name you will give
this feeling, this place as you button
your shirt and tie your shoelaces. And

I know like so many times before, you won't tell me
as your eyes crinkle into a smile and you laugh
at the clumsiness of it all. I know it amuses you

and your black and white cat when she lifts her chin
higher for you to scratch and dusk closes in
on our shining, cracked panes.

PRESIDENT'S DAY

Jared Walls

Over the television recall of lucha libre masks,
his roommate walks into the living room,
wearing nothing but briefs and asks, "Are we in school
on President's Day?" The roommate lets out a belch,
his throat open like a flue.

Pinned to the table by a Wonder Woman coffee mug,
is the murder mystery novel he's been working on
for three semesters now. In it, the killer/protagonist is a poet
who bludgeons other poets to death with their own manuscripts.

At this moment, during a contemplation of murder,
he recalls his sister smacking his mouth after he said
she looked like the cheerleaders in that Nirvana video.
He was glad she squinted all the time, because she had eyes like planets.

K CRUCIS CLUSTER

Wendy Barker

A ring of stars, a crown
of lights, a necklace.
Pearls, lambent on a strand
like my mother's, the ropes
she wanted us to wear,
her gleaming jade, cool
in the hand, on the throat.
These are new stars, as stars go.
The pearls are cultured, from Japan,
the jade from China, before the War.
Our last dinner, she'd weighted
her fingers, bony chest, her ears.
Erect as always, that body
didn't bend under all those stones.
The Milky Way weaves through
this constellation, south of which
a nebula, black rent, absorbs
the light from stars beyond.
When she died, we twisted loose
her diamond earrings, opal ring.
At the end, we'd heard only
her breathing, slower and
slower till we were left with
her mouth agape, a silent
ring of flesh, the teeth inside
a space too dark to see.

MOROCCO

Dave Peters

In the shop they were offered tea by a mildly obsequious man with a long beard. He unrolled at least a dozen rugs, each very ornate, and told them about the weaving, all by hand, the hours of labor that had gone into the making, the skill and the training. Behind him a woman whispered to her husband that she could see the way the machine had stitched out the pattern, that she could tell. It hardly mattered. There wasn't any room for a rug on the bus.

The tea was strong and sweet, hot enough to be satisfying in the cool, cavernous room. Sam helped Jane up from the floor and they examined some of the rugs on the wall, the designs moving intricately, almost seductively, as if they could speak. Jane stood mesmerized in front of one, finally shaking her head and mentioning "The Yellow Wallpaper," as if watching too long would drive her crazy. How would she pack a rug for the plane home?

The owner of the shop appeared close behind her, his fingers interlocked in front of him, a stance both condescending and invasive. The djellaba he wore was as involved as the rugs, a tattoo he could take on and off.

"This one is special," he said.

He gave a history of the artisan and her family, poverty-stricken and full of integrity, naturally. Everyone here had some hard luck story, each one practiced and believable, but so jumbled together they began to be like the landscape, the long rolling dunes in the distance that Sam and Jane would leave behind when they went home. This was a vacation, not a mission. Jane told herself she would buy something, but not from this man, with the baleful look behind his beard, the hints of brown circling his mouth, cigarette or khat residue. She would buy a few things, small, useful things, and she would pretend to haggle, because the guidebooks told her it was rude

to pay the offered price, but she would not be taking home something as cumbersome as a rug, no matter how beautiful it was, and especially because it would contrast too much with the beggars, muddying the experience and trading decoration for understanding. Sam had convinced her this trip was a learning experience, and she'd come to see that he was right.



The embassy had a facility that looked like it had been prepared for a thousand casualties, as if every American on the continent would be in this precise location at the same time, each of them in need of medical attention. Sam looked down the long corridor of empty beds, wondering what catastrophe had entered these diplomats' minds, and then everything began to warp and expand.

"Sir?"

He turned to see her with the room's tunnel swarming, breathing around her head and shoulders. She was dressed like a soldier, but told him she was a nurse. He would've believed anything, except the truth, and so her uniform was perfect. She was gruff, like a nurse, and took charge like one, but by that time he wasn't paying attention to her. He was looking over her shoulder, and then back over his, to each end of the hall.

"She'll be fine," the nurse said.

She pushed down on his shoulders to put him in one of the beds. He bent at the knees and elbows like a machine.

"The doctors are looking at her."

She stuck him with a needle that kept going in his arm, in, in, in, until he was asleep.



They'd been warned to travel in pairs, at the very least, to stay with the group if at all possible, and for the first few days they'd

done just that. It wasn't quite boring, the regimentation, the routine, but it didn't fit the adventurous idea they'd brought with them. Neither did the police presence. It felt like every time a native person leaned in to offer advice or lower his asking price, someone in the distance unholstered or cocked a gun. This hardly made Jane feel safe, and though she didn't mention it to Sam, she couldn't imagine he disagreed with her. The security teams were a reminder that something was at least a little out of balance, that given the opportunity, something could go wrong. It was a constant lesson to stay within earshot.

Which they had done at the market, the thought of safety not far from their minds when they rounded the corner to look at the spices in careful mounds on a wooden table stacked on sawhorses. Jane stared at the heaps of fine powder, redolent and slightly hieroglyphic, a mixture with an aroma like curry that suddenly made the air feel thick and overbearing. A distraction and a curiosity. Over it all was the ubiquitous canvas tent, the nomad's shelter that seemed to be more present than the mud structures that lined the more prosperous streets. To protect the spices from the desert wind, the table was pulled back a few feet into the tent.

She was wondering what she would do with a canister of cumin when she felt something cut through the aroma, ratchet up the heat.



They were flown by military transport to Ramstein, which Sam remembered as a band. The connection wasn't far from his mind as they rattled and shook over the Mediterranean, their rickety plane shuddering to bring them back to Europe, where they'd started. Jane had been under sedation for days at that point, and he knew that her shaking wasn't solely due to the flight. Sam was ashamed to be pleased that the noise kept them from talking, and transferred his anger to the army, which couldn't or wouldn't arrange for more comfortable transportation.

He'd been asleep for almost a day before he could see her, and still he put it off, walking to the end of the infirmary and stopping at the doorway. Finally he ventured into an alcove where an unmanned nurse's desk sat underneath a presidential portrait. Everything in the embassy was prepared for siege, as if the employees had a plan to fall back when the gates were breached, farther and farther into the building, inside a warren of protective gates and doors. He knocked on the steel barrier on the far side of the alcove and received no response. The sedatives having worn off, he had a strong urge to see Jane, to help her, or confirm her. He began knocking again, this time with the heel of his hand, harder and harder until it was a sound all by itself, neither noise nor music, just something to do.



Two more flights and they were home, at the end of a two-week vacation after only five weeks. Sam was surprised at both the loss of time and the relative quickness of their return, this time on an ordinary jet that flew for twelve hours, giving them ample time to avoid the conversation they still hadn't shared.

Out of the jetway there was no one waiting, just a sea of bobbing heads like a bingo cage and a single line of people eager to board. Then through the corridors, a Hawaiiana art display, all along the terminal, until finally near the baggage claim Jane's mother appeared with a strained smiling face, like a month-old jack-o-lantern. Her worry seemed to have caved her in. She came forward with her arms outstretched like Frankenstein's monster.

"Honey."

Jane backed away involuntarily. Her mother dropped her hands.

"We'll get your bags."



Home. Neither Sam nor Jane parsed the word, but Mrs. Sedgwick didn't give them time. She unpacked for both of them, taking rather ridiculous care of Jane's clothes, as if she were a forensic scientist looking for clues. Sam's clothes she put away with an alacrity bordering on distaste. She seemed to know where everything went, which made Sam wonder how often she'd been here since she'd heard, and since she'd come back to prepare for them.

Jane's mother had arrived at the embassy less than twelve hours after Sam had come out of sedation, and had made herself indispensable, a combination psychiatrist's couch and iron lung, positioned in the matrix of the compound with a familiarity that suggested she'd lived a previous life as a very efficient functionary. She stayed there for a week, useful as a blanket, until Jane asked her to go home and wait.

When someone said a person made a better door than a window, they were always talking about Jane's father. He had a way of filling a doorway completely, usually for effect, but this first time he'd seen his daughter since her exotic vacation, he paused there, just behind her, as if the idea of his entrance were enough, better than his actual arrival. The sun shone over his shoulders, the corona just perfectly situated around his bald head, as if he were made of light. Or darkness. His position there was a perfect eclipse.

"Angel."

Both Jane and her mother turned to face him. Sam felt more than a little extraneous.



The first night away from the military base Sam came from the bathroom in pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, stopping a few feet from the hotel bed to look at Jane across it. Just when he felt it almost unbearable that one of them should speak, Jane undressed completely and stood at the edge of the bed, with just a little hesitation, as if she were wondering about the temperature of a

pool. Then she slid under the covers. Sam was frozen.

"Oh," she said, "just get in the bed."

This was her demeanor with him from that point forward. She would accept no sympathy, no solicitations or help, preferring instead to do the heavy lifting herself. She gave him the impression that he was the fragile one, the injured one, and he had to remind himself what the truth was.



In the grocery store, Mrs. Sedgwick called the checker a nigger. There was some mundane dispute, something about a price or a coupon, and Mrs. Sedgwick said "dumb nigger," crumpled her money, and tossed it in on the conveyor belt. The checker watched the bills slide down and catch in the trap.

It wasn't until Jane's mother was almost finished putting her bags into her car that the manager found her.

"Ma'am?"

Mrs. Sedgwick loaded the last two sacks into the back seat. Then she pushed her cart to the end of the aisle, making sure it rested against the parking abutment without rolling away. She turned back.

"Ma'am."

The man's face was all downward angles, as if the wrinkles somehow linked to the frown. He had a thin moustache, trimmed to half-width between his upper lip and nose. The hair stopped at the east-west barriers of his overlarge cheeks. He gave the impression he'd been lying in a heap among the back stock until a complaint had caused him to be inflated to emerge and deal with the problem.

"One of our employees brought something to my attention."

Mrs. Sedgwick could see the faces lining up in the store window.

"What is it?"

Her own terseness surprised her.

"My courtesy clerk said that you insulted her."

"What did I say?"

"She said you insulted her. That you used . . . an epithet."

"Which was?"

Neither of them was going to repeat it.

"Ma'am, I think it would be best if you didn't shop here any more."

Mrs. Sedgwick turned and got in the car. As she drove away, she saw the people in the store celebrating.



"They weren't even black, Mom."

Jane leaned into the washer and pulled out the sheets. This part she didn't think she'd ever have to describe. In fact, she hadn't described anything, up to that point. She'd discussed how she felt, and what she was going to do, or how she was coping, in a detail that seemed to erase the facts, or push them aside, but she hadn't talked about what had happened at all.

"They were African, Mom." She put the sheets in the dryer and switched it on. "I was in Africa. But they weren't black. And how could you call someone that, anyway?"

Her mother stood there with an expression less chastened than defiant. She was hardly there to take a lesson.

One of them was the color of cumin. Two of them were the color of nutmeg. One was coriander, and the other was cinnamon. All of them were represented by the piles of powder in the tent, as if they'd sprung from the spices, or vice-versa. In the space of time it took for everything to happen, which was quite a while, there were surprisingly few details. The ones she remembered, though, were sharp, exact, and indelible. Most of these were facts that her mother would not be able to hear, that Jane would not be able to hear if she were in her mother's place.

"I asked you a question," Jane said.



The raised voices were something new. Previously everything in the house had been in a protective layer of silence, like insulation. Sam was grateful for the catastrophe, whatever it was. It was time for a child down a well or a broken leg, a manageable disaster. An argument was just what he needed, if only to get them all talking.

Blocking the doorway was Jane's father, his arms tensed and pressed out just a little from his body, the light coming around him. He moved aside and let Sam squeeze into the room.

Why was Sam afraid of her, glaring at her mother, why was he frightened of the woman who used to hold on to him in shady neighborhoods, on their way to urban restaurants? What had he become? He could probably carry her in one arm, and she scared him.

"Please," he said, raising his voice over the rattle of the dryer. "Stop."

"Shut up. This has nothing to do with you."

"It does. I was there."

"You watched."

They looked at Sam, all of them except Jane, who turned her attention back to her mother.

"I won't have you behaving like this."



When Sam went back with the soldiers, they discovered that no one had witnessed anything, not so much as a suspicious character or a pickpocket. The tent itself was still there, one of many, though it had been emptied of its contents and looked deserted for good. A rope come loose from its stake snapped in the wind like a whip. Sam jumped. The soldiers shook their heads.

"Why did you go in there alone?"

"We didn't go in alone," Sam said. "We went together."

He remembered walking past the woman who'd criticized the rug, how she'd talked about the caftan she wanted to buy, and had complained about the quality of the material. Sam had taken Jane's hand and gone in another direction.

Jane hadn't been asked to join them. The soldiers hadn't mentioned it, and Sam thought she wouldn't be up to returning, wouldn't want to come back and find the men there, grinning or fearful or indifferent. He'd convinced her to make the trip for her courage, which seemed lacking in the States, as a way to show her the world, even in the controlled environment of a tour, so that she wouldn't be so afraid to try new things in the future.

"What did your guide tell you?"

There were circles of residue where the mounds of spices had been.

"Didn't your guide tell you to stay with the group?"

Inside the tent the men had put a knife to his throat. Simple. He hadn't ever thought something like that would happen to him, or he'd thought it would, watch and wallet, over in a minute. On a bicycle trip through South America he'd been beaten severely, but he was traveling alone, he was young, and he'd recovered quickly. In Thailand he'd had everything stolen from his hotel room, even his passport. He'd gotten caught in a brawl in Dallas, once. Those other experiences were stories, and he'd laughed in telling them.

"Because you always stay with the group. The guides are there for your protection. You were told that."

Well, he wasn't told that, at least not explicitly. The lead soldier had a European accent, almost, as if he'd learned his English by way of France. In the U.S. his language skills would be very marketable. His expression confirmed that nothing would be done about all this. Sam stared at the moving canvas, coming forward and back as if the tent were alive.



Sam couldn't sleep, because when he closed his eyes, he saw himself watching. Jane had apologized, at some length, moving on to the origin of the trouble, and describing her mother's actions as unforgivable. Then she'd considered the matter settled and had gotten into bed.

He realized it might have been easier if he'd gotten killed. If he'd gotten killed it wouldn't have been so much a compounded injury as a diversion from what had happened to her. Dead, he would be a useful distraction. Alive, he had nothing to offer. Jane seemed to know that, to hold onto it and use it. Even so, if she knew what he was thinking she would call him melodramatic.

She slept coiled in sheets the color of rope. Sam realized for the first time that he loved her with a wildness that he hadn't ever acknowledged. It had taken all of this for him to see it, a feral kind of desire that had become manifest after their trip. There in the bed he wanted to devour her. He imagined waking her up and seeing her eyes glow in the dark.

Like most untutored students of a foreign language, they'd known the cursewords well, though sometimes they shouted things at Sam that didn't apply. And like movie characters they knew all the conjugations of violence. The knife jerked against his throat with each threat. If he closed his eyes he could see the men taking turns. He could see himself watching them, could see Jane's legs in the air like something butchered.



"These men," Jane's father said to Sam, "they think women are this way, and then they act it out on them."

It was the first time they'd been alone. A few times they'd found themselves in the same room together, but they didn't even notice each other, cocking their ears to listen for Jane's voice and keeping decidedly apart. They kept at a discreet but measurable

distance until Jane finally agreed to go shopping with her mother, just to be away from their continued surveillance.

"This is a rite of passage for them. They do it in their own communities."

Jane's father had become an immediate authority on all things African, from the chief exports of Namibia to the sack of Carthage. He could talk at any length about genocide or the diamond trade. He'd tried an encyclopedic approach to his problem, as if knowing everything could bring relief to the one thing with which he couldn't cope. And so with Mrs. Sedgwick planning every moment to keep her daughter from thinking at all, Mr. Sedgwick took up the slack and concentrated on the facts, piling them up to smother the truth.

"I don't understand how they can blame us for immorality and then do those kinds of things. What are they angry at? What's their point?"

He pored over articles on the Internet, in popular magazines and books. These explanations were written for people who didn't know anything, as primers or polemics, and Jane's father utilized them for his own purposes, to confirm his desires, like pornography. Finding evidence of depravity seemed to comfort and support him. Mrs. Sedgwick was so omnipresent in her daughter's life that this was probably the first time anyone had a chance to hear the explanations Mr. Sedgwick had formed.

But he was getting nowhere. Sam listened to it all out of politeness, primarily, but also to have something else to think about, and to believe that Jane's father didn't blame him. Sam wanted to be forgiven in a way that didn't seem possible, but he kept paying attention in case Mr. Sedgwick stumbled on something, leaving open the possibility that there was an incantation to save him, a loophole that didn't turn into a noose. It was easy to seem like he was intent because Jane's father was talking quickly, and wanted the confirmation that Sam's silence gave.

"How can they pray so often and do those things?"

"Do you mean they wouldn't have the time?"

Jane stood in the doorway with two shopping bags hanging like weights from her hands. She dropped them with a thud and turned the corner into the laundry room. Her father was startled.

"No, honey. I'm just trying to understand."

"Why?"

She reappeared in the doorway with an armful of tightly wrapped bedding, the bulk of it twisted small enough to resemble a loaf of bread.

"I need to make sense of things, Jane."

"That doesn't work. Sense isn't part of it."

"Then what do I do?"

"You can do anything you want."

With that, she was gone.



Sam stopped in the bedroom doorway as Jane stood under the windowsill to finish slipping on the fitted sheet, tucking the last corner of the mattress under the fabric. He watched as she bent over and stretched out her arms to push the wrinkles away. He watched as she went to the foot of the bed and shook out the top sheet, letting it fall in soft folds like hillocks. Then again, with a snap and a ripple like a flag in the wind, Jane foregrounded and solitary as the sheet went up, then silhouetted against the incoming light as the sheet came back down, her image faint in the glass across from her. Sam tried to catch her reflected eye, but the sheet interfered as it came up again, whoosh and snap, rising between her and the window. Sam closed his eyes and listened.

CERTAINTY

Michael Homolka

The first kiss goes down like a glass
of flat champagne on a holiday no one
has ever heard of. The later ones
are like a generation of wolves born
fully grown. Dramatis personae. I search
the list, the first act and the last,
the footnotes, the index, the copyright page.
You are not there. And what am I
reading? This is the wrong book
and the play was written centuries ago.
One thing I know for certain
is your name, and even more certainly,
the way you do things, the way
you are not at home with the quiet
side of yourself, the way you drink
vodka and pretend to celebrate.
Once you were this way, now you are
that way. A new hairstyle and the rock
is replaced over the cave mouth
for good. No one can remember
whether there was a body there or not.

PROPOSAL

Micah Ling

I'd swap my legs for wings
if they were offered. If
a dragonfly whispered
the proposal and circled
my head, I'd nod
like an eager auction buyer
and we'd seal the deal.

I'd wander above the sea
with onion-skin arms
teasing cattails, rummaging
the highest fruits.

I'd taste the air in my tiny body
just long enough to yearn for feet
to feel the grass and the sand
on toes I'd given up.

THE LADY WITHOUT A DOG

Sara Kaplan

Near the Lower East Side Tenement Museum,
on Essex Street, in the pickle district,

Guss's barrels of kosher sour, half-sour, quarter-sour, new
and spicy pickles, olives, sauerkraut, and pickled green tomatoes

bob in their juices while I stand in line in June and watch women's thick
white arms stretch and point. My eyes water from the city—

the women in front of me, their underarm garlic-scented sweat
staining their blouses, and saltwater hovering with the sour

fermented cucumbers while a man snaps into a fresh green one.
I carry loads of boxes of jars of pickles and olives

into the trunk of my car, and in that warm darkness, the pickles and olives
slosh through the Midtown Tunnel.

I came to the city only for the pickles—
to take them back to my basement, back to dolls and vinyl, dial

phones—all my obvious paraphernalia: unhooked and damaged.

Next to the water heater, I stare at the dust-stale-air soak in the scent of brine.

SQUANDER

Jenny Hanning

Katherine wakes up one morning, showers, dresses, drinks a cup of coffee, and does all the things that are routine. The children are gone already, and one—the daughter—has left her lunch bag sitting on the counter. Katherine opens it and guesses from the state of the cheese cubes—soft and greasy, corners rounded—that the lunch has been sitting out since the night before, sometime shortly after Katherine packed and placed it in the fridge. Katherine's daughter has a habit of taking her lunches out to check the contents. The daughter is a child who cannot accept any form of change or surprise. As a mother this used to worry Katherine, but for the last few years worry has been shifting steadily toward annoyance.

Katherine's daughter pitched a fit when they bought a new sofa and ottoman. "Where will I eat cereal!" she screamed. She cried until she vomited.

Katherine feels she has made a lot of allowances where her daughter is concerned. She's thrown away a lot of cheese.

Katherine throws away today's cheese and puts the lunch back in the fridge for tomorrow. She lifts the sleeping cat off the windowsill, but before she has opened the door to put it out, it's already trying to get back inside, turning in her arms. The cat becomes liquid, slips from her grasp and vanishes—under the furniture, up the stairs—who knows? Katherine sighs, rinses out her coffee cup, slides into her shoes, and is on her way.

Katherine teaches junior high, Honors English, and finds that she has more and more difficulty not comparing her daughter to the oddball girls in her classes, the ones that get called *spaz* and *freak*, who sit at the front, and always volunteer to read out loud. The ones with terrible ratty hair, droopy clothing, and no friends. The least favorites among Katherine's students, the ones she actually dislikes. She is thinking about this—her daughter—when the car's windshield shatters into a million tiny cubes.

Stupidly, Katherine's final words are, "Rainbows. Rainbows," and no one but her has any idea what it is she means.

Katherine wakes up again. Through half-open eyes she can see the tip of her tail curled neatly over her slim little paws. This sight is not any less strange than it was the first time she woke to it. Across the arch of her shoulder there are at least one dozen shafts of hair, of *fur*, that are not laying appropriately flat. The compulsion to clean and organize is familiar. Katherine had it in her human body too. After a fight with her husband she would go at the baseboards with a toothbrush, as if clean baseboards were a necessity for survival. It could feel that way when she was a person. Katherine feels that way now about her fur, the spaces between her toes, her whiskers, and her genitals. Easier than flipping a pancake, Katherine tucks a leg behind her head and begins a steady licking of her anus, thinking, *If Robbie could see me now.*

The night before Katherine dies Robbie admits he feels their sex life has gotten stale. Katherine is hurt, but not particularly offended. When Robbie says he has a few suggestions, some ideas, Katherine tries to be patient, but then he uses the phrase, *spice things up*, and Katherine cannot help it, she laughs him out of bed. Robbie spends half an hour in the bathroom with the water running, which strikes Katherine as womanly, so by the time he comes out she is no longer sorry that she hurt his feelings. He hurt hers too. She spreads herself out across the bed in the shape of a starfish. It isn't actually comfortable, but it forces Robbie to sleep on the very edge of the mattress. It's less comfortable for him. His alarm goes off before hers. Robbie does not kiss Katherine's sleepy face goodbye. She wonders now if he feels guilty.

Katherine is trying to have a good attitude about this. She has to, so that she doesn't go insane. Sunning herself on the windowsill she makes jokes, *This is what I get for making them read Kafka*—but late at night when she is filled with a thrumming and

shameful need to poke her paws into the cage holding her son's guinea pig—taking swipes at its head, going at it until her fur is rubbed off on the wire—she becomes desperately philosophical. Katherine runs through everything she knows about heaven and hell and purgatory while licking at her raw skin and fighting the desire to try to knock the lid off of the guinea pig's cage and get its skull in her jaws.

Katherine wonders why she remembers anything. If this is reincarnation—which seems the most plausible explanation—why was she not born as a kitten? What has become of the cat that lived in the cat-body before her, if it was ever a cat at all?—and if not, if it were some other person, then what has become of them? Is this *punishment*? These thoughts keep Katherine up through the night stalking the house.

She notices the general untidiness. Dust bunnies and tumbleweeds of human hair and lint gather along the baseboards. She wants to go to Robbie, wake him and say, *What are you doing? What are you doing?* But he closes the bedroom door at night. He should keep it open for the children. He is continuing to let Katherine down.

She tries to split her waking time between her daughter and her son. Katherine watches them sleep at night, pressed against the backs of their knees in the spot where they are warmest through their covers. It is impossible for her to tell if they are in mourning for her. When they speak to her she cannot understand. Words are distorted; they are like fragments of muted conversation heard through a wall. Their voices are familiar, but their *language* so distant and watery that Katherine cannot give it any meaning.

The children may come to her—to the cat—to laugh, or cry, or confide their secrets. They try to hold her close. She feels their chests move, the warmth of their breath on her fur, but then she is skittering away, unsettled by a sudden movement, or the pressure of their arms tightening around her springy ribs.

Katherine comes to avoid them when they are awake.

She discovers new sneakers by the door, drawn to them by their strange new shoe smell—it irritates her nose. Katherine devotes an entire morning to nibbling off the plastic tabs at the ends of the laces.

The snow is melted away. The birds are out again.

Crickets are chirping in the yard. The pounce is satisfying, the crunch of their—*Exoskeleton*—Katherine thinks, is better.

Under the whine of summer insects, sounds inside the house distress her. No one comes to the door when Katherine sits yowling on the welcome mat so she goes around the back and climbs the bittersweet bush lickety-split. This is a phrase that remains. She watches the flex, the grip and release of retractable claws, and thinks of clapping her hands at the front of the classroom: *Let's wrap this up now. Chop-chop. Lickety-split.* There is the hole that she has ripped in the screen. Katherine lands easily on the rim of the sink. Her agility still shocks and delights her.

Upstairs the bedroom door is open and her son is there sprawled out with his face pushed into the sheets on what was once Katherine's side of the bed. They have always been close, she and her boy. The year before Katherine's death, her son began to do badly in school. Unlike the daughter he had always been an easy child, happy, friendly, bright, popular, pleasant all around. Katherine understood. She knew exactly what was happening. She taught the Honors English classes for the eighth grade, and her son would be one of her students. It was something that she was worrying about as well—how awkward it would be for both of them. She loved him for trying to sabotage himself to save them the discomfort of deciding whether he would call her *Mom* in class. As it turned out neither of them needed to worry about it.

Katherine, her chest trembling with love, leaps onto the bed. She pushes her face against her son's neck. He turns over sharply,

unbalancing her, then pulls his hand from under his stomach and hurls a magazine. It lands open and Katherine recognizes the winged blonde hair of a third rate celebrity her husband once had a crush on. She bought the magazine as a joke—the woman showed her oil slicked breasts in every photo— and tucked it into Robbie's Christmas stocking—it was years ago. Katherine cannot believe Robbie kept the magazine. Her son throws a pillow then, sending her bolting through the bedroom. Katherine leaves without checking to see if her clothes are still hanging in the closet.

They have been there for three days. Squeaking. Squeaking. Squeaking. Katherine has denied herself the pleasure, because they are just little babies, but now she gives in. The nest is tucked into hollow in the stone wall between her house and the neighbors'—*good fences make*—and she scoops them out and eats them down still wriggling. Katherine thinks she can feel the twitching of their miniscule paws inside her. Their blind-blue mucus eyes, now turn her stomach. Katherine delivers them, no longer wriggling, onto the welcome mat in a wash of yellow bile.

Robbie comes at her with the broom. Katherine feels all her fur coming alive. From the corner of the garage she hisses at him. He lifts the broom in one hand, hurling it at her like a spear. If Katherine could speak she would tell him he's a woman, a coward, and that he has never been able to satisfy her sexually. Unable to speak, she dodges the broom and knocks a can of screws off a shelf onto his car.

The neighbors have a kitten. Katherine is hopeful. She's been preparing. Practicing different lines. She does not want to seem desperate or afraid. She decides to go with humor. The kitten is a tabby, a little fluffy girl, and immediately after determining its gender Katherine begins to feel on edge. *Slut*, she thinks as she watches the tabby leap, back curved and legs stiff, pawing for

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a dragonfly obviously out of reach, but Katherine pushes aside the anger, calms herself, then leaps down from the chokecherry tree at the end of the driveway.

The kitten is pushing a piece of gravel back and forth between its paws. Her fur is full of sand. "Mom?" Katherine asks. "Is that you?" She hopes the pitch is right, that the joke will carry. The kitten meows. Katherine feels her tail twitching. *Meow* means nothing to her. Katherine tries again, asking, "How long have you—you know?" Waiting she nervously smoothes her whiskers. Then the kitten—that little goddamned bitch—pounces on her tail. Katherine whaps her sharply on the nose, pins her down and rips one pert little ear. The kitten is yowling and twisting so Katherine lets her up. She runs. Katherine would give chase, but the kitten's blood is on her whiskers and she must clean them immediately.

It is her son who finally catches her. He throws a towel over her head, tangles her feet in it then upends her into a cardboard box. This is unexpected and terrifying. Katherine is panting and frenzied. She cannot find a stable place to put her feet. By the time the motion stops Katherine is too exhausted to hiss and spit and shriek and claw. Robbie lifts her from the box and passes her to her son who holds her against his chest.

Katherine recognizes the brushed metal countertops and floral prints as the standard decor for all the doctors' offices she's ever been to, and knows—with mixed feelings—that this is another end. She would be calm, except for the smell of dogs, it makes her body anxious all around her. Robbie's hand touches her along the spine in all the right places, but Katherine hates his touch. She will not purr for him.

Katherine's head is put through a noose and hands stronger than she hold her to the table. She focuses on her son, on his face next to hers, and she must fight down the urge to bat at his fluttering lashes. One of his hands slips under her stomach, the other cups

her chin, rubbing gently. Her second chance ending, and it is the same life, wasted in all the same ways. Katherine finds that she is overwhelmed.

As the warm pull of sleep moves through her, she pushes her head down into her son's hand. He puts his nose against hers, and she can see the tears, bright, in his clumped lashes, and there is a floating moment when Katherine is nothing but laughter. Rainbows, she thinks. Rainbows. Rainbows.

Katherine wakes up again. The air is thick with the smell of cedar, and the light that touches her falls in a grid, bands of warmth of shadow divided by the wire walls of the cage holding the body that holds her.

Katherine believes she is beginning to understand.

EATING MOORS AND CHRISTIANS

Sandra M. Castillo

We eat the mixture of two Cuban staples: *arroz blanco y frijoles negros*, cooked together until the rice is brown, *mestizo*. I can smell the oregano, *comino*, the cilantro Mother removes, though I can still taste it, and we crowd around the small dining table (which has been moved to the backyard), pass the bread, the *papitas fritas* in this corner of *Marianao*, *La Habana*, Cuba, seven hundred and fifty-one years after *La Reconquista* though Spaniards still parade through the streets of Alcoy dressed as Valencian peasants, *peones*, Navarre soldiers (marked with the cross of St. George), stage battles of victory against those who choose to play *Moros*, to carry the scimitars, Saracen war axes, the Muslim crescent, to ride camels or elephants against the *Cristianos* who take the *papier-mâché* castle in the afternoon, burn effigies against the Valencian sky, beat Al Athrak, who surrenders to *Los Reyes Católicos*, signaling the coming of Columbus.

THE PATIENTS' SWALLOWS SEEN ON THE X-RAY
SCREEN

Rebecca Givens

Language, we're told, is something edible,
fish being thrown from the pond
and beginning to hum (rather
mythical): language as sharp tips, scales

to eat our meat with, have at the base
of our tongues while food gets moved back
further in our mouths and carriages
of doctors come over to see us

sup: our artichokes raw, salmon nearly
gill-full, green-gold with cherry
tomatoes for eyes

it eludes us, language, though we may eat
and eat, spoon carrots and quantified
mixtures into our throats (a movement we
see on the screen as two black blobs

slipping past the trachea to the
esophagus, open air) we notice what is
dark as it goes down
and try to mark it, though it swims fast,

slips past as soon as the machine
catches our swallow
and moves (quickly) (whirring) away

KIMONO

Jessica Goodfellow

Your dead mother's kimono fades in blue
chrysanthemum and shaded green leaf,
but you have only one word for both
dolorous colors. Never mind.
Many seaside dwellers draw no
line between watery hues,
unsurprised by the vagaries
of the salty kaleidoscope.
Shifts of light, angle, distance,
even wind can gust green
from the purest cerulean blue.
Time, too, is as fluid
as a noose. What's blue
doesn't stay blue any more
than what's past.
Every New Year you unfold
your mother's empty kimono.
Every morning you rise
on your island of Now,
surrounded by blue blue Time.

Note: Traditionally the Japanese language had only one word, aoi, for both blue and green. During the Heian Period, a word for green, midori, came into usage, although it was considered a shade of blue rather than its own color. It was during the post-World War II occupation of Japan that educational materials influenced by the West made a clear distinction between blue and green, though even today some kinds of vegetation are still called "aoi," and green stoplights are also said to be "blue." Most other green objects are nowadays referred to as "midori." This grouping of blue and green into one category is common in many other cultures as well.

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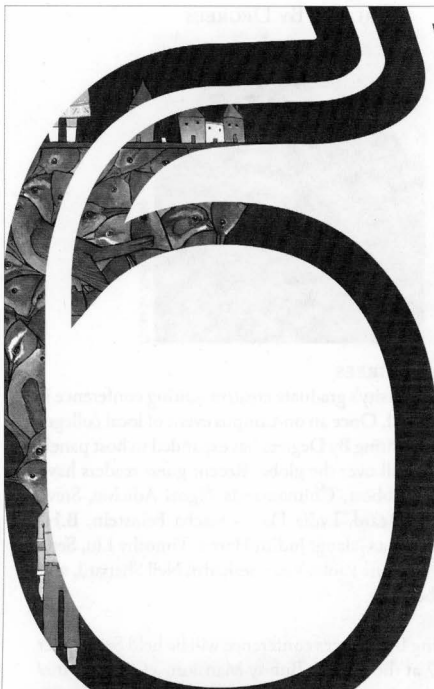
WRITING BY DEGREES

Binghamton University's graduate creative writing conference is now eleven 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, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Steve Almond, Jo Ann Beard, Lydia Davis, Sascha Feinstein, B.H. Fairchild, M. Evelina Galang, Judith Harris, Timothy Liu, Sena Jeter Naslund, Suzanne Paola, Vijay Seshadri, Neil Shepard, and Michael Steinberg.

The next Writing By Degrees conference will be held September 25, 26, and 27 at the historic Bundy Mansion, a Queen Anne/shingle-style mansion near downtown Binghamton, NY. We are proud to welcome fiction writer Helena Maria Viramontes, poet Alex Lemon, and nonfiction writer Jenny Boylan as keynote speakers. 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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