

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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## Harpur Palate, Volume 8 Issue 2, Spring 2009

Harpur Palate .  
*Binghamton University--SUNY*

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.. Harpur Palate, Volume 8 Issue 2, Spring 2009

# Harpur Palate

Volume 8 Issue 2



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# Harpur Palate

Volume 8 Issue 2, Spring 2009



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# CONTENTS

## THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY

Steven Ostrowski, <i>Winner</i>	Being Boys	7
Kerry Ruef	The Fence	8
Katharyn Howd Machan	Salvation Army	10
Kerry James Evans	Soldier's Apology	12
Claire McQuerry	Cassiopeia	15

## FICTION

Mathew Goldberg	Cousin	18
Paul R. Lilly, Jr.	Want Ad	34
Lucas Southworth	Under the World	60
Kymerly Keaton	Why I Can't Buy Drugs in Alchua County	93
Erin Lynn Cook	Summer Night Breeze, 1976	118
Kathleen Donohoe	Dance With Her	134

## POETRY

Charlie Malone	Dead Letters	27
Brynne Saito	Trembling on the Brink of a Mesquite Tree	28
Jane Langley	Rondo	29
Susan Dworski Nusbaum	Learning the Language	30
Gabriel Welsh	On Freaking Out	32
Nik De Dominic	Forgiveness, Arkansas 1895	33
Chris Haven	Clingstone Peaches	52
	Love Left Over	53
Rodney Gomez	What Happened to Fire	55
Jenny Hanning	Fragile	58
Alen Hamza	Letter to a Vacuum	59
Centa Theresa	Wingless	73
	Without Praise	64
Jessica Cuello	The Mushroom	76
Heather Kirn	Shunryn's Bells	78

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 8, Iss. 2 [2009], Art. 1

Jack Ridl	It's Hard to Know Where to Begin	82
Laura McCullough	Circle, Line	83
C.E. Perry	Supplicant	112
Jackie Bartley	Red Delicious	113
Sarah Seybold	Snow Water	114
Jack Miller	National Nothing Day	115
Alex Dimitrov	The Crucifix	116
Melanie McCabe	Sidebar	117
Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé		
	At First Sight (A Cardinal Number)	134
Christopher Citro	I Never Intend To, How 'Bout You?	138
Greg Nicholl	At Night with the Dead	139
Sarah J. Den Boer	They Said It Was Inevitable	140
Christian Knoeller	Wisconsin Gothic	141
Jared Harel	After the War	163
Biman Roy	Pulse	164
Marcene Gandolfo	A Tide	164
	The Flames	165
Matthew Hothman	Poem to the Communication Satellites	170

## ART

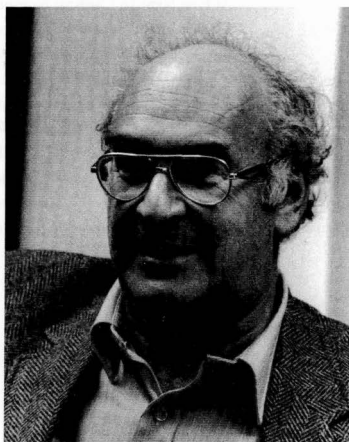
Photography by John Baird	85
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## MISCELLANEOUS

Contributors	171
Friends of Harpur Palate	180
Subscription Order Form	181
Submission Guidelines	182
John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction	183
Creative Writing at Binghamton University	184
Writing By Degrees	185

..: Harpur Palate, Volume 8 Issue 2, Spring 2009

THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY



WINNER

BEING BOYS

Steven Ostrowski

The day was blue and warm.  
We were stoning pigeons.  
They'd built nests under the trestle  
and when we fired our sharp stones  
they were trapped.  
The terror of their coos  
drummed against rusted steel.

Tommy Mydosh brought three cigarettes  
swiped from his mother's purse.  
Mine trembled in my hand.  
John Casey swore to God  
someday he'd kill his sister.  
I wrote fuck you in the dirt  
with a shaky finger.

Beads of blood on gray feathers,  
I saw them flutter, settle in the gravel.  
A gray dust covered my hands.  
I tried and tried to blink  
a fleck of ash out of my eye.  
We were only boys being boys.  
I knew that. Everybody knows that.

MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE

FINALIST

THE FENCE

Kerry Ruef

Yesterday,  
at first light,  
I turned off the highway,  
hands buried in pockets,  
fingers stiff from cold,  
feet scrunching ice.

Between oak woods  
and stubble field  
I followed a dirt road,  
tracing the curve of a hill.  
Up and up  
it led, lined  
by a splintery fence,  
with posts like old soldiers  
leaning this way and that,  
rails shagged with age and,  
because of the morning ice,

bejeweled,  
glittering,

as if stars had tumbled from the night  
and reassembled there  
above cheat grass and mud.

What do the astronomers know  
of this—their eyes lost in the sky?

The light shifted.  
The sun crested the hill  
and spilled at my feet.  
One by one, the galaxies disappeared,  
which seemed just as marvelous  
as finding them in the first place.



MILTON KESSLER POETRY CONTEST  
FINALIST

SALVATION ARMY

Katharyn Howd Machan

So they become others' stories, my chairs.  
What I tipped over and draped with lace

as I turned into a dragon lover, fearing nothing  
but my grandmother's voice as she coldly called me

to soup. What someone's cautious hands had cut  
and curved and screwed and polished deep

oceans away in a land called Denmark  
years before I cracked the world with my

smile of fire and ice. What my father and mother  
chose to offer Connecticut guests, first in their

home of Colonial splendor, then in their broken  
house of dark dust. What my brother inherited

and used to play cards with the dim-eyed men  
who swore they saw nothing wrong with his days

of shuttered windows, broken toilet, unwashed hair  
over ears without song. What I carried away

when he killed himself, silent, short winter dawn  
time's sharp laugh against love. Impossible smoke

forced them into my cellar, cigar reek his touch  
until quince blossoms bloomed. Even then my front porch

could not bear his harsh ashes: what once guarded  
treasure turned into stained bones.

MILTON KESSLER POETRY CONTEST  
FINALIST

SOLDIER'S APOLOGY

Kerry James Evans

I.

What apology would my mother give—my father,  
a room of doubt, where excuse evolves to reason?

\*

My mother turned forty this year. My father  
forty-two. I am currently eight years older  
than my mother, when she had me.

When my father was the age I am now,  
I was six—old enough to fire a gun.

\*

When I was born, my father joined the Air Force,  
then the Army, moved his family from the South  
across the world. He swore I would never see  
Jasper, Alabama, again.

\*

*You cannot escape your family. You cannot escape  
the South, Alabama, Golden Eagle Syrup,  
the quarter horses in your Uncle's barn  
or that goddamn clay red as your wife's hair.*

This is what I tell myself, living in Illinois.

II.

Why don't we take it outside, walk it to the lake  
—drown it?

Tie a cinder block to its ankles—  
no, that hardly makes sense.

Planning has never been my strength.  
I get it from my father, the Colonel marching  
troops into Baghdad.

I am one of them.

You are one of them.

We are all marching into Baghdad.

Jody is fucking your wife.

Your sixteen year-old wife, my sister, pregnant,  
belly out to here.

She is carrying a baby boy  
who is also marching

into Baghdad, *Persia, the last beast to fall*,  
the pastor yells from the pulpit.

\*

I would rather kill you than apologize to you.

When I say kill, I mean wrap det-cord around your face,  
stuff your ass with a bangalore torpedo, stab a crown  
of barbed-wire into your head—make you wish  
you could be reborn.

III.

We are the dying multitude.

\*

If you see my mother, my father—tell them  
I followed my orders.

I carried the guide-on.

*Engineers lead the way!*

\*

But you will not see my parents, and you will not know  
them. I will not know them. We will not see one another  
beneath the flares, rockets, tracers, mortars, grenades  
tossed in our foxholes—we will not stop killing to say

*I love you.*

\*

To our wives—to our mothers, our brothers, our sisters,  
our fathers:

We are not sorry for killing you.

\*

We know not what we do.

MILTON KESSLER POETRY CONTEST  
FINALIST

CASSIOPEIA

Claire McQuerry

Once I carried the light  
where I went        descending—  
                                 emeralds netting my hair—  
                                 the staircase:  
chandelier.

\* \* \*

I balanced each gaze  
as weight        the way the acrobat  
lifts buckets at the ends of his pole  
walks—        his line        suspended—  
sky that bridges the river.

If I glittered brighter for eyes  
below me,  
who could lay blame?

\* \* \*

They thought I'd be lonely here,  
exiled, arranged  
this empty ocean  
from rib to wrist  
bone to bone.

I tell you  
queen or constellation,  
there is no difference.

\* \* \*

Once my act was adding  
gold by ounces—  
circlets, pendants,  
hammered thin and threaded for capes  
and gowns—until my shoulders  
ached with the gaudy weight of it.

\* \* \*

All stories devise a villain.  
Try as I might—  
the sky dull and seething  
                    the sea  
            tentacled  
                    thing  
            green as rot  
the rock  
            Andromeda.  
Unescapable arc.

\* \* \*

Love a daughter or love yourself—  
            say what you will—  
the same act:

My eyes, the white claws  
of my teeth,  
repeat in her.

Kingdoms after all  
depend  
on queens.  
Better that I survive.

\*\*\*

Easy to believe a story—  
menace  
ash heart  
ice mother or  
the wing-heeled boy  
son of a god  
my counter.

\*\*\*

They thought I'd be lonely  
here.  
But I dazzle  
sized to sky, cast  
not of marble  
but star, turn  
above Earth perpetual  
each  
bright rivet fastens  
me.



COUSIN

Matthew Goldberg

When I first opened the door to my aunt and uncle's bathroom, I thought it was Bobby there in the tub. I even called his name before I realized it was Anne, her head in a pool of blood. After bandaging her wrists, the paramedics asked me if she was my sister. *No*. Girlfriend? *No*. Then what? I was confused. I felt like a rapist or an abuser, because what I couldn't tell them was that, for a second or two, the sight of her opened veins had thrilled me.

Nine months earlier I had moved to Boston, primarily for the temperature. D.C. had its bitter days, including five or six school closures a year, but Boston suffered seven dark, glorious months from October through April. The early-afternoon sunsets and single-digit wind chills offered strange comfort—the entire city knew depression. Not to mention local sports teams tragic enough to drive a whole city to alcoholism. Huddled in pubs, nursing warm lagers, lonely men watched weather forecasts with raised collars and dull hearts.

At first I crashed on a friend's futon. We had grown up next door to each other in Maryland, and since we'd kept in touch through college, he knew about my breakdown. Some nights, out at local sub shops, he would wipe mustard from his chin, lean in and ask, "Was it like *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Was there a Nurse Ratchet?" No, I told him. "What about," and here he paused to look for electrode marks on my forehead. "You know," he said, miming a small seizure, "bzz, bzz?" I shook my head and pushed a straw through the ice in my drink.

The hospital had not been altogether different than my first year at college. We had workshops where strangers called us by our first names. We bunked in adjoining rooms with long twin beds, ate regular meals in a standard cafeteria, and counted our paces along the manicured grounds. The legs were constantly breaking off the foosball players in the game room, but someone always had a deck of cards. I never felt anxious about being there.

It was hard to feel much of anything; the whitewashed walls and baggy taupe smocks made myself and the other patients indistinguishable. Watching the sun travel across the day room's freshly buffed tile, I enjoyed the solace of anonymity.

The last day of college I had jumped from my dorm's third-story window. I don't know exactly why I did it, maybe because the structure of my engineering coursework had come to an end, maybe because neither graduate school nor programming jobs interested me, or maybe I was just a coward. What I *was* sure about was that I could not feel things deeply and didn't know what to do next. The television broadcasted plane crashes and men with bombs attached to their chests, and I looked on with imperfect grief. I had survived the fall with only a few broken bones, and though everyone said I was lucky, it felt like they were lying to me.



After three months of recuperation and psychological evaluation, I left the hospital and moved to Boston. Not long after my move, my uncle called and insisted I come to their house in Needham for dinner. "I promised your father I'd check in on you," he said. I ended up passing the house twice before recognizing the tree in the front yard. It still clutched Bobby's frisbee in its topmost branches. Instead of yelling at me for tossing it up there, he had patted my shoulder and said, "Death be not proud, kiddo."

Anne answered the door. She looked the same as I remembered: thin, short hair, and sad eyes. Her face was angular, her nose sloped and scalene. I had forgotten how pretty she was.

"You look shorter," I said.

"Because you're taller," she replied.

She led me into the family room where my uncle gave me a bear hug and my aunt imprinted lipstick on both my cheeks.

"So what kind of work are you looking for?" my uncle asked me once we were positioned on the sofa, sipping Italian wine.

I shrugged.

"We could use a paralegal at the practice. Your dad said you might be interested in law."

"I remember you being so good with math," my aunt offered.

"Law is kind of like math," my uncle said.

I downed my wine. Anne sat with her glass in her lap, looking at the family portrait above the fireplace. Bobby had died almost eleven years ago in a car accident. Anne would have been fifteen, me ten. I remembered sleeping in Anne's room after the funeral. A big REM poster stood over her bed promoting one of the band's earlier albums. Michael Stipe had long hair. He leaned down over the headboard as if to say something profound. Anne sat below the poster, listening. She wore a large, navy t-shirt and a pair of men's boxers. Short black hair hung over quiet brown eyes. She didn't cry. Her face soaked up the long bars of moonlight and she looked like a black-eyed angel. I lay at the foot of her bed in my sleeping bag, staring up to the ceiling, holding my breath as if any move could set off an explosion. Then Anne leaned down. The sleeping bag unzipped and I held still, listening as each pair of teeth split apart. Anne eased inside and clung to me, her slight breasts against my back. And she squeezed, hard. At the time, I could not understand that kind of desperation.



Anne helped me discover an attic apartment in Somerville. It was a functional studio with its own bathroom and kitchen. I liked the small, closed-in feel of the place. A circular window allowed in the only light. The rafters hung low in some places; I had to be careful not to bump my head. The owner lived downstairs where the walls were decorated with black-and-white photographs of foreign churches and bridges.

I liked the attic and the sleepy neighborhood. I took walks through the early evening, listening to the *cush* of boots on snow. Soft, promising light seeped out from family room windows

onto the ice-patched streets. The simple act of exhalation was pleasurable. Seeing your breath proved you were still alive.

On one of these walks I found a small Davis Square bookstore that needed someone for bookkeeping. The owner didn't really care if he made money or not. He owned some fancy restaurants downtown and kept the bookstore as a write-off. "I need good records come doomsday," he explained during our first and only meeting. He wore dress shoes with blue jeans. We shook hands on a modest wage, and he handed me a set of keys to the store.

The other employees had pierced eyebrows and chains hanging from their pants. An English student at Tufts liked to stretch out his arms, crack his back and say, "I can't wait 'til Salinger dies."

Anne started coming by after work. She and I stopped at the market, then made dinner in the attic. She didn't get along with her roommate, her roommate's boyfriend, or her roommate's cat. Neither Anne nor I were good cooks, but we tried our best. I brought cookbooks home from work, and we proceeded to fill the attic with the smell of fried vegetables. Most nights we drank cheap red wine and ate on the floor.

"The eggplant is kind of stringy," Anne would say.

"How's the sauce?"

"Kind of bad."

"I'm sure there's some rich lawyer dying to take you out to the North End."

"I don't do dates," she said, stabbing at her plate.

Anne worked as a paralegal at her father's office. She attracted attention in pool halls because she was thin and had her own stick. Men with thick New England accents would compliment her after a shot and maybe place a hand on her shoulder. Anne would cringe and back away. I didn't ask her about this, and she didn't ask me about the hospital. We ate brunch on Sunday mornings and played pool on Wednesday nights. I felt relaxed with her; I didn't have to smile. Anne and I didn't talk about feelings. She communicated with the way she jolted the balls

apart and the tender way she touched them into pockets.

Her friends teased us about spending so much time together. We sat with them at a Chinese restaurant off the Red Line. There were four of us: Anne, me, and a lesbian couple she knew from college.

"Are you two cousins like West Virginia cousins?" The girl with the crew cut joked. Her partner slapped her arm.

"I can see the resemblance," the partner said. "It's around the eyes."

They stared, and I felt like a patient again. "Yes, yes," Crew-Cut agreed. "And a little in the nose."

"You could be brother and sister," the partner offered.

Anne turned her head down to the table. Her hair covered her face so only her nose stuck out. The walls closed in. Outside the restaurant, a black man played "The Halls of Montezuma" on a tuba. No one else thought this was odd. The lesbian couple examined the splotch of soy sauce on Crew-Cut's shirt. I wanted to hoist Anne up by the waist and swing across the room on a chandelier. Instead, I cracked the spine of my fortune cookie, only to find nothing inside.



At 3 a.m. the phone shook me awake on its first ring. "You need to come over," Anne said. "Fast."

I drove the landlord's Volvo. She kept the keys on the table by the door. I unlocked the bar from the steering wheel and set it on my lap. I ground gears. Windshield wipers flailed. Snow tumbled from a dark sky.

With The Club in hand, I banged twice on the door to Anne's apartment. Because I lacked the muscle of a homerun hitter, Bobby had taught me how to choke up on the bat to strike an infield scorcher. I readied my stance, expecting a large man with the shoulders of a rugby player, alcohol blasting from his throat, red marks trailing down his neck.

Instead, a lanky boy not much older than myself opened

the door. "Whoa," he said, seeing the bar in my hand. "Take it easy."

"You better let me in," I said.

"He's killing her!" Anne shouted from her room.

I pushed my way past the boyfriend and found Anne on the floor. Her face was pale, the cat squirming in her arms. She let go of the cat, stood up, and hugged me. "It was horrible," she said.

"Nothing happened," her roommate said. She stood in the doorway, and though her cheeks were red, I saw no signs of injury.

"I heard it," Anne insisted. "It's happened before."

"I don't know what she means," the roommate said. She took her boyfriend's hand. "It's nothing. We're fine."

Anne lifted her head. "You have to believe me," she said.

"I do," I told her. "I do."

Anne was still shaking when I opened the car door. She pressed her forehead against the window, her arms clinging to her stomach as if to hold back her insides. We treaded carefully up the stairs to the attic, not wanting to rouse the landlord. I stripped off my shirt and hung it over the window. Anne slid on a pair of my flannel pajamas. I made the bed for her and then collapsed to the floor. Everything was very still. I must have drifted off, because at some point I felt a touch on my shoulder and found Anne leaning down from the foot of the bed. I could not see her face in the darkness, but I felt the need in her eyes. I climbed into bed with her, our bodies forming a 'V' as we touched cold feet. I wiped the hair from her face and kissed the nape of her neck.

"He was my friend," she said.

"The guy from the apartment?"

"No, one from years ago. In college. At first I thought he was playing."

They were in her freshman dorm drinking vodka and cranberry juice, listening to music. Then he was peeling off her pants. She tried to push him away, but he held her arms

over her head. And then he was inside her. *It's O.K. It's O.K.*, he insisted. *It's me.* When he finished, he zipped up and said, *That was nice.*

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"It's okay," Anne said.

She clung to me, and then we pressed into each other. She was very tight. It hurt both of us. We stared at each other's shoulders and bucked our hips like creaking oars, the two of us urging a weathered boat out to sea.



Her parents had asked her to housesit for the weekend. The REM poster was gone from her wall, leaving a bare white space. A treadmill now occupied much of the room. I wandered into Bobby's old room. Baseball trophies lined the bookshelves and science awards decorated the walls. The bed was dressed in *Star Wars* sheets, old action figures positioned along the desk. On the nightstand lay a glossy picture of Bobby and Anne. They both held wide smiles, like Han Solo and Princess Leia blasting into space.

I never received a description of Bobby's accident. He went off the road for some reason and hit a tree. Maybe he swerved to avoid a deer. Were there tire marks? I'd been too young to ask these questions. Now I wanted to see his body excavated from glass and metal, to see some physical proof of hurt.

When Anne sat down next to me, her hands gathered on my back. "He was better than me," she said. As she untucked my shirt, I looked down to bars of sunlight escaping across the floor.

Afterwards, we drove to the grocery store. Anne supported herself on the shopping cart and squinted against the harsh light. She ran her free hand along the shelves and dropped items into the cart. The width of the aisles and the height of the ceiling made me feel small. I tried to touch Anne, but she shook me off. I looked the other shoppers straight in the eye, trying to gauge

what they saw. They gripped their carts and glared back. In the checkout line, the woman in front of us slapped down a rubber divider. She held her back to us imperiously and punched in the combination for her debit card. I fought the impulse to push her aside and make her look me in the face. Perhaps the day I jumped from my dorm room window I didn't really jump, but stepped forward. I wasn't trying to kill myself, only feel something. There were no reasons. Maybe the lack of reasons was the reason. Anne tossed our groceries onto the conveyor, and I saw her there on the ledge with me, the wind wringing tears from her eyes, and I wanted to fill myself with her grief.

On the drive home we sat at a red light a few blocks from the house, staring out the front windshield of her car. In a flash, the driver in front of us whipped his hand across the passenger seat and struck the woman beside him. Had I imagined it? I blinked very deliberately. "Wow," I said. "Wow." Anne squeezed her eyes shut, her knuckles white against the steering wheel. I was considering what to do when the light changed and the car sped off.

There was nothing left to do but prepare dinner. Anne wanted a bath first. She asked me to take care of things, so I unloaded the groceries and folded the paper bags. After setting some water to boil, I cut apart the chicken breasts, dropping the fatty parts down the disposal, leaving the breasts pink and shiny. I tore the spinach leaves along their veins, and they yielded without protest. As the water boiled over, I broke apart the linguine, ignoring the small pieces that scattered to the floor, and, emptying the sauce into a pot on the other burner, I watched the coils turn red.



My aunt and uncle stood with me in the lobby waiting for visitor badges. Anne had needed thirty-eight stitches and a liter of blood. I was afraid to see her again; unlike her parents, I'd never been on this end of things.

"It's my fault," I said, the words echoing off the lobby's high



ceiling.

My aunt and uncle shook their heads.

"She never got over Bobby," my uncle said.

"It's hard letting go," said my aunt.

My uncle planted a strong hand on my shoulder. "Life is attention," he said. "The end of attention is the end of life."

I nodded. For my penance, I had agreed to take over Anne's job at my uncle's practice. I also promised to apply to law school. Three years of structure and attention didn't seem so bad, though I dreaded what came next.

Anne wore a teal smock, unwashed hair hanging over her face. In the day room's lemony light, the four of us played Scrabble. Then her parents excused themselves to the cafeteria, leaving Anne and me alone.

"Did you see it?" she asked. Both forearms were bandaged from wrist to elbow. "Wasn't it something?" She smiled at me, not the pharmaceutical smile I'd seen on the patients in D.C., but a bright, childlike grin.

"It was something," I said. "I saw it. I was there."

DEAD LETTERS

Charlie Malone

They've found human remains  
14-Carat Gold dentures, a bearskin  
a live python, some tarantulas  
all this life—a record of life

the flight of unboxed birds

life itself weighed, postage paid,  
contained, shipped, lost to death  
& redeemed by the cutting of a knife  
to flutter around the concrete  
& cinderblock room populated  
by dead mail men

TREMBLING ON THE BRINK OF A MESQUITE TREE

Brynn Saito

And the Lord said *Surprise me*, so I moved to LA.  
After packing my posters and scrubbing the bathroom and bidding goodbye  
to the permanent circus, I drove through The South  
with its womb-like weather, and I drove through the center  
with its cross-hatched streams, and the century unspooled  
like a wide, white road with lines for new writing  
and the century unspooled like a spider's insides  
and the country was a cipher, so I voted my conscience.  
And the country was a carton of twelve rotten eggs.  
And the country was a savior—come deliver us from evil!—  
and my car burned a scar across the back of an angel  
and yes, I was afraid. No I've never gone hungry, but I've woken alone  
with a ghost in my throat and I've been like the child  
who's sure she perceives some creature in the dark—  
some night-breathing thing—and I know there is something I can almost see . . .  
But the future's a bright coin spinning in sunlight  
so fast that it's sparking a flame in the grass, and who knows  
where they'll find me—on which sunken highway?—so I'm writing this poem  
to remember my name. And I'm writing this poem  
to let something go, in the mode of surrender, since God  
needs a ritual, like kissing needs another, or a knife needs the softness  
of a melon in summer, and leaving New York is like leaving  
the circus, and entering America is like entering a fortress,  
flooded by soda and we float to the bars in our giggling terror  
and driving from one shore across to another?  
That's one sign for freedom, one small stab at change,  
so when the Lord said *Surprise me*, I moved to LA.

RONDO

Jane Langley

They lived in a dirty city that was thick with love—heat rose  
from grimy grates, from grinning incinerators—the tedious  
ugliness turned everybody toward one another—passion seeped through  
church belfries and altar boys' white tunics, through  
technicolor wrappers of take-out tacos, through the mud slapped  
up on bicycle wheels and rolled-up trouser legs,  
through the dust motes shielding the sun on even the longest day  
of the year, music-making everywhere—

They laughed, sang, drank, smashed together in below-ground  
taverns—looking at ankles and workboots  
through streaky panes at eye level—they turned to each other and  
others and others, and later, away, to places  
with light and space and too much time, and he grew older and forgot  
pretty much everything  
except how she looked in torn underwear on his overstuffed  
horsehair armchair—the squeak of a broken spring  
when she shifted her hips his way—

He forgot the bare branches, elm, poplar—  
shrank into himself, folded up like  
origami in the hands of a magician who would  
make him disappear. They say the city is cleaner now—fewer acoustic  
guitars in drifters' hands on corners—now you can see  
veined marble on the front of the public library and a pocket park  
with a bench and lovers ignoring pigeons in the grass—

He kept a postcard of the old docks  
stuck on the mirror over his dresser—his daughter found it after  
the funeral, put it in her pocket, where it stayed when she gave  
that coat away.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Susan Dworski Nusbaum

Ruta, the Russian hairdresser  
at the Jewish Home and Infirmary,  
watches Adele loosen her white hair,  
pin by pin, strands rippling  
from her temples  
to her thin shoulders,  
resting along the backs  
of her pale arms like wings.

Ruta shampoos and rinses  
the silvery stream, towels it dry.  
She has never seen  
a person's face so luminous,  
so transparent, although she hasn't  
learned the English words—  
how to describe the cool white light  
glowing through her skin,

the color of—  
what is it?  
something like moonstones,  
something like rain?  
She studies her own  
ruddy complexion, black curls,  
peasant shoulders looming  
in the mirror behind Adele's head,

gently brushes the cascade  
into three skeins, winds the silky ropes  
between her fingers,  
pulling them back and up,  
weaving them deftly  
into a French braid at the crown,

pinning them tight,  
until Adele's cheekbones shine,

then bends to touch her lips  
to the coiled softness.  
Adele smiles at the gesture  
reflected in the mirror,  
reaches for Ruta's chapped hand,  
presses it to her mouth,  
releasing her breath  
into the open palm.

ON FREAKING OUT

Gabriel Welsch

Because I wanted to fully embody  
the possible, I split into two. As if  
that were enough. For an evening,  
I became the person who invented  
the knock-knock joke. I stepped out  
as the woman who first said *oh my*  
to something other than a prominent  
forehead. Then, I rehearsed soliloquies  
of a fire alarm, learned the dance steps  
of crash landings, pretended either one  
mattered. I chain-smoked courtesy  
and thought only of my other selves.  
I sought the options, the power of might,  
the satin lure of what-might-have-been,  
the purchased decency of if-only-I-hadn't.

I once knew how to walk into a room  
wearing only my face or a jacket tailored  
for fat and angry. I used to understand  
answering a phone meant variations  
on *what-if*. I used to walk as a fist  
until the ache of constant clench burned.  
I saw a town as a warren of traps,  
building tops as launch pads for a liberation  
dive into forgiving earth.

Where is my other half? On what sugar  
does he step, what trodden contradictions  
reblossom to die once more, wilt  
and wither, crisp for a lack of water's  
clean infusion?

FORGIVENESS, ARKANSAS 1895

Nik De Dominic

A dusty fort, gallows.

The rain kicks up  
the worms to surface,  
rolling in on themselves, the hot  
smell of horse urine, dust.

Maledon takes a thumbnail  
to remove the clay from his boot's  
eyelet. If only it hadn't rained.  
The man next to me asks,

why them worms come up  
with rains? They would  
drown in their holes, shitbird.  
Sometimes, things are this simple –

there are six of us. The worms do  
not want to drown. This is undeniable.  
A single lever. Death. *Now Maledon's  
boys are in the woods, stringing*

*up Delilah's girl. When they come to  
trial, he'll say, this is what boys do,  
string up gourds from the garden  
on the laundry line. The little woman hates*

*that—bruised fruit is only good for stews.*



WANT AD

Paul R. Lilly Jr.

Ari's thinking of Angie again, the way she weaves her hair. Twin spirals black as a raven's wing. Those braids are bouncing against her spinal column right now. And she's not far away, either. Queens or Manhattan.

Ari's also thinking of how he got here, scanning an empty Hempstead street through windows that need a double shot of Windex. The answer keeps coming up like a slot machine: rugs in all three spaces. In Ari's mind the rugs unroll themselves, as if alive. Sarabend Sarouks with rows of pears in lavender and ivory, thick Kashans dotted with eight-point medallions in blue and crimson. Nains from Iran, 600 knots to the square inch. Finally that Kashmiri rug in silk. The one Ari thought would turn the tide, make Angie look at him in a new way. Her father, too.

Him especially. Arjun Singh. Scrolling his blue screen and calculating the worth of his only heir, Angie.

Will a rug man do? Because a rug man Ari is.

Sometimes it's just threads, the way they are knotted into the warp, that alert Ari for a pattern, like following a vase design in a certain Turkish prayer rug his father once owned. Which you do line by line, until your eyes halt before the four pillars inscribed in Turkish, "Allah is perfect, praise be Allah."

But now Ari is looking at a different pattern. India is in it, because Angie is from there. Ari's father is in the pattern, for sure. Terikian Carpets was his store.

A rug's a map, Ari's father once told him right in this same showroom, but with different dead flies on the window sill. What he didn't say is that if you get good at it, the temptation is to think rug-reading can rub off into other areas. Like love, which some picture as a cord. Marriage a tying of the knot. Others, perhaps, see a relationship as frayed. Thread-worn. But few think of real threads the way Ari does.

About the time of his father's rug-talk, Ari's mother became sick, her blood cells forming still another pattern for someone

to read. Doctors were looking at charts, x-rays, passing on their findings to Ari's father. Ari started showing a feeling for rugs his father had never seen in his son before. Ari began to visit museums, scribbling notes about antique Persian rugs, Afghanistan tribals, giant Moghul court carpets from India. In the store his father looked to Ari for solace, but Ari would work the conversation back to Sarouks and Kashans and the quality of wool in the Hamadan area. The best rugs have their own claim to death anyway, Ari reasoned. The sheep that made the wool are always dead; the thin brown fingers that wove the patterns and tied the knots are likely dead as well. Better off dead, if you ask Angie. But this was before Angie.

With his wife in Mercy Hospital, Ari's father started to spend more time in his Ford Galaxy, repairing rugs in the suburbs. Ari had to cover the store. Ari brushed dead flies into an ash tray, using a Pakistani whisk made from camel hair. He worked through a stack of Hamadans, flipping four by sixes into the air, aiming for a landing at the customer's feet. Few of these feet showed up, so Ari had time to perfect his toss. Ari guessed that hawking rugs on the road gave his father a small space in which his wife's tumor did not exist. So it became an unspoken agreement between father and son that rug talk would express their common fear for a woman whose own pattern was already fading beneath a uniquely fierce sun.

Ari's mother died. Not long after, so did his father. Then Angie entered the picture. A work of art herself, Ari thinks, but woven with stranger threads. She's completing an MBA at NYU, which is where Ari met her. In a night class, sitting in front of him. He saw her braids first. Their tight weave dropped past her shoulder blades not a foot from his writing hand. After the lecture, her face: skin the patina of weak tea, shadowy eyes, facial bones delicate as a bird's, but masking, he would later see, an outsider's simmering lust for success.

Angie's father, a widower, left Mumbai to work in Queens about ten years before. He picked up work fast as a computer programmer, taking the subway in from Kew Gardens to a fourth

floor office in Soho, once a dress factory built around the time of the invention of the telephone. Over his desk a rat's nest of computer wires dangles from an eight-foot ceiling. The clutter does not bother him. He owns one third of the company. At noon he walks to the East River and eats his lunch, which is packed in a round metal canister with separate compartments for rice, dahl. Angie prepares the canister for him each day. When he sees an occasional ship it reminds him of Mumbai harbor.

This Arjun Singh is a Hindu but has a few Muslim friends back in Mumbai. One even attended his wedding, Angie says, and his name is Abdul Fir. He deals mostly in rugs, currency exchanges, and other things Ari didn't ask about when Ari met him in Mumbai in September. The day after Ari returned from Mumbai he called Angie. This was a week ago.

"Hey. It's me. The Rug Man." Silence. Ari can picture her moving a braid over her shoulder.

"I've got your wedding present."

"Who is getting married?"

"A pretty one. A real pretty one. She likes her toes kissed. She likes rugs of a certain color."

"Am I knowing this person?"

"You know her toes. Look, I've got a package for you. From India. From Kashmir, to be exact. I practically walked there. Invite me over."

"You said Mumbai. Just a week."

"I didn't like the selection. I got a lead on some Kashmiri silk rugs. From your father's friend. Abdul Fir."

"He is having a scar."

"On his mouth, yes. Don't know what from. He helped me. We took busses to Srinagar. He speaks Urdu."

"All that time I am thinking Mumbai you are visiting. Now Srinagar. So much unhappiness in Kashmir."

"Right. Hindus and Muslims. Between bombs going off they weave rugs of silk. Muslims, that is."

"Children, you mean."

"They're definitely young. There isn't anything else for

them.”

“You are condoning it.”

Ari accepts that it is an uphill effort to impress this person with the braided hair. Also, he has some blanks in his work record that don’t sit well with Arjun Singh, who started work when he was two, if you can believe him. Arjun Singh thinks Americans are lazy.

“I need the rugs. And hope the dealers do the best for the weavers. Some are children, as you say. I’m not arguing. You’re right. They’re too young.”

“Many are not making it to fifteen.”

“Angie, I can’t help that. Someone’s going to buy the rugs. That’s what I do, remember.”

“You have a choice. They do not.”

Bide your time, Ari tells himself. She’ll come around. When she sees these rugs. But even now he wonders if he has too much riding on them. Maybe on rugs in general.

As Ari sees it, he is not lazy, just made some wrong career decisions. He tried the college scene part-time for a few years. Did some trucking with Alco Muffler in Oceanside. Sold auto parts, brake drums. He needed to earn *something* in order to keep his father from kicking him out. They lived in North Hempstead.

When his father, the real rug man, died, Ari got the house, although the neighborhood isn’t what it was when his parents bought it in the seventies. Still, it’s a place to stay, and not far from the store, which is one of the last holdouts on downtown Franklin Avenue. A growing concern, Ari likes to say, because it’s now his base. Where he is going to grow. Get a hold on life. Arjun Singh would say it’s about time. Ari is twenty-six, after all. But rugs are going to do it for Ari. He travels for them, sells them. Buys more.

It takes Ari two days to recover from the September Kashmir trip and the flight from Mumbai, but on the fourth day back he invites Angie to see the rugs. A private showing. She is in a better mood. No references to child weavers. She says she will

cut one class and come out from Queens by bus.

The Hempstead bus station is not a great place to be, especially at night, Ari knows, so she arrives in the afternoon and they walk directly to the store. The Terikian Carpets sign is the same as when his father was alive, but the street looks like an evacuation before a hurricane. Plywood on barred windows, graffiti all over the plywood. Nothing inside of value anyway, even the drunks assume that. Except for Terikian Carpets, of course. But no one but Ari knows what is in there.

After his father died, it took Ari nearly a month to lay the rugs out and size them up. He wrote notes for each one, the kind of thing his father hated to do, and even took photographs. It was a stash. Ari had two Shirvans over six feet, a Sine Kilim, a Kayseri Zaronim prayer rug with a hanging lamp woven in gold thread and the mihrab arches in blue. Museum stuff, really. There were a half dozen Teheran prayer mats two by two, one in a vase design that upset the brain following the lines.

He had big ones too. A Kirman Dozar, seven by four, with a royal-blue medallion floating like a lotus in a pool of cream. A Koum Zaronim with four Muslim princes on horses hacking away with curved swords at stylized antelopes and tigers like there's no tomorrow. He had three Ispahan Dozars in birds-in-nest, the birds opening their beaks to each other across branches of burnt sienna. Bokaras from Russia, Hamadans in all kinds of designs. Sine, Tafrish, Sharibaff. Ari is still sorting them out.

Ari leads Angie in by her hand because she is a bit spooked, no one in the store but them, and she's seen they're not in the best of neighborhoods. Then Ari opens the door to the storeroom, which he renamed the Inventory Room. The rugs cascade from high in the rear of the room, Isphans overlapping Kashans, Saff prayer rugs riding the final surge until a Sarabend Sarouk comes to rest at the tips of her black boots. Angie is on a beach facing a tidal wave of rugs.

"Oodles of carpets I am seeing!" She claps her hands. Ari takes a bow.

"The Prince of Carpets, you are. What are their names?" She

points to the Saff prayer rug from Turkey. "You must be telling me their names."

"Names I can do," Ari says. And he does.

They sit down on the Sarabend Sarouk, this one from India, not Iran, and take their shoes off. Then their socks. Ari peels back the Sarouk, and lets her see what is underneath: a Kashmiri rug, straight from Srinagar, all silk except for the cotton backing, a tree-of-life design growing upward from an urn into the air, branches that split into smaller twigs holding fourteen birds in shades of pink, yellow, and the blue of a rooster's shin. Their beaks aim at the sky over their heads, which is divided into four mihrab arches. "Think of a tree growing inside a mosque," Ari says, watching Angie's naked feet.

Ari stretches Angie out on the rug and lies down beside her. He holds her hand and pushes her fingers back and forth across the nap, making shadows where the cut threads reverse themselves. He tells her what her rug is saying: Fourteen birds mean they will have fourteen sons. That starts her laughing. Still, Ari can see something hit home because there is enough of India in this American beauty from Queens by way of Mumbai to dream of sons over daughters no matter what.

"Then what does the urn mean, Mr. Rug Man?"

"The urn." Ari traces the outline with her finger. "It stands for the rich soil of our fourteen sons' roots. The mixture of my father's Armenian cunning, my mother's Irish faith in my eventual success, your father's Mumbai street smarts. Your own NYU panache in full-dress leather." Ari learned the word panache from his mother. When she told him he didn't have it.

"You forgot my mother." Ari is thinking of his own, who had little faith, in fact, in his success. Call her a realist, Ari concedes to himself.

Angie is watching the urn, but one braid falls past her eyes so Ari can't see her face. Before Ari's Mumbai trip Angie had shown him a photo of her mother. A woman wearing a green sari, gold earrings, a nose ring of gold. Her hair was as dark as

Angie's, her hands folded inside her sari.

"No. I didn't forget. The leaves of the branches. She's in there. Green's her color. The leaves protect the fourteen birds."

"In here there is need of daughters."

"Two, but we may have to cut back on sons."

"Which birds are the daughters?" The power of a rug, thinks Ari. He folds it into a square lump, ties it up with burlap sacking.

Ari's idea is to make Arjun Singh walk on his daughter's Kashmiri silk rug. Then he'll have to think of Ari.

Here's the problem. Arjun Singh wants an Indian husband for Angie. They have these newspapers, printed right in Queens, just like the Hindu Times Ari saw in Mumbai. Page after page of marriage ads. Sometimes Arjun Singh makes up his own ads, and sends them in. But Angie's supposed to earn the MBA first, and while she's doing this, Ari is making progress with her, he likes to think.

If Angie's rug from Kashmir doesn't get Arjun Singh to give Angie a little space, Ari has a bribe for him. A second rug, even bigger than Angie's, silk also, but seven by four. The rugs came stacked in a gray jeep, the only new thing Ari ever saw in Srinagar. The fabled valley of Kashmir. All the houseboats on Lake Dal were rotting on the shore. No tourists anywhere. Indian troops manning sandbagged checkpoints in the streets, and the frowning Kashmiris sizing up the two of them from behind half-closed doors. Abdul Fir did the translation for Ari. Two of the dealers unrolled the rugs on the jeep's hood. They took turns eyeing puffs of smoke erupting far up on the mountain ridges. Mortar shells. The Indian army again. Or Pakistani infiltrators. Or Kashmiri separatists. You could never find out. A kind of permanent backdrop for business in what's left of Srinagar. Reminded Ari of Hempstead.

Two days later Ari and Abdul Fir slept on the bus from Srinagar to Jumma. The bus climbed through mountain passes dotted with the burned-out hulks of buses that didn't quite make the curves. They drank water from plastic bottles, bought

bananas through the open window from children without shoes. From New Delhi they flew to Mumbai, and by the time Ari and his rugs were stashed on an Air Canada flight to Frankfurt he was near collapse. But he had the rugs.

Ari and Angie fool around on her rug for a while, a little heavy breathing but nothing serious. She wears a blouse that looks like the top of a scuba suit. She lets Ari pull the zipper down a few notches. Her hair smells good, and Ari asks her if she uses a Jufti or a Persian knot for this kind of weaving. Angie shows Ari how she braids it. She asks Ari about Abdul Fir, what he is like now. Ari tells her how he met him as planned in the Tea Room of the Taj Majal Hotel. The place was full of Arabs, swishing around in white robes and holding cell phones. The women wore black tents, with eyeholes. They were in purdah. There certainly was a woman under there somewhere, Ari says, but that's all you could tell.

"That is all you are permitted to know, silly. An infidel, you are. Worse, a Westerner."

"Perhaps there's a woman inside here?" Ari reaches again for the zipper of her diving suit. She gives Ari a fake horrified look and pushes him off her rug. Ari turns down the lights. Angie looks fine sitting there, the darkness of her hair and eyes against all the reds and blues of the rugs. This is the second time Ari kisses her toes, and Ari continues up the ankle and shin of her left leg, rides the top of her patella with his lips. But about here is when she says she is hungry, and does Ari have anything to eat in the store?

Ari locks up the place and they head for his car, parked out front. His father's Ford Galaxy. It looks like a junk heap but Ari had the engine and power train rebuilt. A Hempstead car. On the outside it says zilch value even for parts. So leave it there, my friend, and keep walking, is Ari's hope. It drives solid, his own magic carpet for taking Angie to the Red Lobster. She's not a vegetarian like Arjun Singh, and Ari likes to watch her eat. Ari keeps pushing more shrimp towards her.

"Eat up, you'll need strength for your fourteen sons."



"Twelve. Two daughters. This you have said."

"What will your father say?"

"About what?"

"My intentions. The rug, then. What will he make of it?"

"The rug will make you a serious candidate for my hand, you are thinking?"

"Tell him to ease up on the marriage ads. Look what he's got right under his eyes."

"Ah, and what does he?" Angie is looking down at her plate, pushing shrimp shells into a pile. Ari is watching the way her braids began in little tepees on her skull. What does he, indeed? Ari almost says.

She looks up at him. "He is not telling me what to do. If he arranges me to meet a possible husband I can say no to this man."

"Naturally. This is America, right? Just say no."

"If I say no forever, I will be on the shelf."

"No one will want you."

"No one nice."

"Nice like me?" Her smile tells Ari what he is up against.

"Look, I'll drive you home. Do the radiator good to suck on some Kew Gardens air. Unless you want to stay the night with me. I can show you the house, the inside." Ari has driven her by his house once.

"What will I tell my father?" Ari can't tell if she is actually considering it.

"Do you ever stay away for the night? What's he used to?" There are sides to Angie that Ari doesn't know. He does know of her ambition. She has some of the highest grades in the class. Ari has some of the lowest.

"He usually wants me home. But I have friends."

"Friends?"

"Girlfriends."

"It's good to spell things out."

"You are approving."

"So what would you do? Say you're with one of them for

the night?"

"He will be asking questions."

"I've got a better idea. I'll drive you home now. Let's show him your rug." We're looking at a long-term investment here, Ari tells himself, a rug dealer to the marrow.

Ari drives her by his house again to let her think about where they might have ended up that night. Some branches from an oak tree on the front lawn scratch against his window, but Ari never cuts them back because he likes that sound, as if someone's asking to come in. Not a burglar, which is what everyone in the neighborhood talks about. Angie asks which window is his bedroom. Ari points, but the oak tree hides it. Ari turns toward Northern State, coasting along in the slow lane. The cars passing them seem no older than last year.

"My father wants me to meet someone."

"When's this?" Ari tries to make it sound like there is no problem, fine, let's have half of Kew Gardens line up, hand out photos. On Queens Boulevard Ari sees some rust buckets like his, but near her apartment every other car is spanking new and sporting a club lock. The thought occurs to Ari that his Galaxy is a club, guaranteed the last to be stolen.

"It is a ritual. We talk. Nothing will come of it, my father knows that."

"Testing the market."

"You are being silly."

"Where do you meet?"

"In a restaurant. Probably Tandori."

"Where we ate last month? How about sitting in the same booth?"

"Is it so I can see how this person is falling short?"

They are parked in front of her apartment, but Ari doesn't want to go up.

Ari is picturing Tandori with its bronze Ganesh set up in the window, about two feet high, old elephant-head waving his six fat arms about, handing out pineapples and stuff. Ari liked it in there, with the red booths, looking at Ganesh's shoulders from

the back. Now he doesn't as much.

"Maybe you shouldn't sit in the same booth."

"Now you are being upset. Trust me. I did not have to tell you."

"Why did you?"

"Not to be making you jealous. Perhaps to let you know something. What it is like to be me. I do not have a mother to advise me."

"When is this meeting? I'll book the other booth. You can join me for dessert." Angie smiles, but Ari feels something is off, hanging in the air, with the cars prowling by looking for a space, and the traffic light over the street turning green, yellow. Red. Then green again.

"Well, let's deliver a rug. A special customer." Ari gets out and carries the rug through the lobby. At the desk is an Indian who gives Ari's ponytail the once-over but Angie flashes him one of her smiles and they are in the elevator.

Arjun Singh opens the door, sees it is a rug Ari has in his arms. He steps aside, and Ari starts to get his spirits back. Arjun Singh knows rugs. They can agree on that if not on the destiny of Angie. Ari opens the burlap. The urn launches its branches towards the kitchen. Arjun Singh crouches over the rug, fingering the border. No expression. But Ari can tell he is hooked.

"From Kashmir. Very nice."

"Guess how many birds, Papa?"

Arjun Singh's fingers trace the dogtooth border, move upward into the mihrab.

"Your friend helped me. Abdul Fir."

"Ah." His first smile since Ari walked in. "And is he in health?"

"Knows his rugs. He translated for me. I think. He may have been giving his own spin. Hard to tell."

"Urdu he is speaking there."

"Urdu. Could have fooled me." Arjun Singh glances up at Ari from the rug.

"He is speaking five languages. Since a boy."

"He also knows the Indian police." Three of the Border Security Force searched the bus at the Srinagar station. One was a Sikh. He twirled his lathi stick slowly. The other two had machine guns. They made Ari untie the rugs. Abdul Fir talked to them, pointing to Ari. Ari couldn't follow it, but he took out his money purse. The price of the rugs was still going up, and Ari was a long way from New Delhi.

"You are taking tea with us?" Angie steps past the rug into the kitchen and starts boiling water. The obedient daughter. Ari puts his hands together, aims them at Arjun Singh. "Namaste. Tea it is. Chai, right?"

"You are learning. Tell us of Mumbai. Not clean, I am thinking. That will be your impression, is it not? There is much energy there."

"Energy all over. I had tea at the Taj, saw the ships out the window."

"The Taj. The Britishers are fine builders. If you stay at the Taj you are not seeing Mumbai." Angie serves the tea.

Ari sips half a cup then hints he has rugs to deliver in the morning, customers waiting, a line in front of his store backing up to Sal's Fuel Oil. People waving greenbacks. Arjun Singh bows, gives Ari a namaste, and turns to his blue screen. Ari knows that Arjun Singh has eyes in the back of his dark head, something like Shiva's third eye. Which opens when the world is about to be destroyed again. At least, Ari muses, Shiva gives you a warning. Angie walks Ari to the door. He is feeling more confident. So he asks her what night her meeting is.

"How much of my life are you wishing to know?"

"How about ninety percent?"

"You should not learn so fast. You will be growing bored, perhaps."

She smiles as she closes the door. This door, with its tiny eye of a peephole, its number 15 scored in burnished bronze, seems to Ari a blank page awaiting messages that will tell him what he should do next.

Ari drives home spinning out scenarios: Tandori is closed

on Monday. She has a night class on Tuesday and Thursday. The weekends are too crowded. It has to be Wednesday. Ari can show up early, nurse some tea and dahl and rice, wait for them to come in. Ari wants a look at him. The one who answered the ad. Maybe he will be fat. Ari doesn't like the thought of this man sitting near her. Touching her braids. But of course that would never happen. It will be formal, restrained. He will sit across from her. She will talk about her courses at NYU. Arjun Singh will mention her grades. The fat man will describe his business success. He owns an apartment building in Queens. He invented the car club. It will be something impressive. Arjun Singh will take notes.

Ari passes the old Creedmoor mental hospital, now less populated. They're out in the streets, picking through the dumpsters. But some lights are on all the way to the twentieth floor, sad cases up there looking down through wire mesh. Then Ari thinks of Angie walking into Tandori and sitting in their booth. For a second he wonders who has the better deal, the face in the window up there or the one in a fifteen-year old Ford trying to move oriental rugs.

Ari knows he has the better deal. But he can see he will need a lot of rugs to fill out the span of time left between passing this exit to the Throgs Neck Bridge and his removal from the earth some point in the future, the whole thing observed from on high by Abdul Fir's Allah or maybe Lord Ganesh still passing out pineapples with his fat hands. Or Jesus himself, whom Ari learned about first. But who fades somewhat after breathing in all that Kashmiri fervor in a crowded place Jesus never knew about.

The Ford rolls into Ari's driveway and stops. He stares at the gray door, then thumbs the garage opener. The door rumbles, a giant metal eye opening. Ari coasts in. When the door clanks down behind him the light goes out. He wonders what it would be like if Angie had agreed to spend the night with him. The two of them listening to the twigs from the old oak skimming the glass, her hair unbraided and fanned out on his pillow. And

Arjun Singh and his newspaper ads far away.

Ari locks up the house, double checks the dead bolts fore and aft, and goes to bed. There is no wind so the twigs don't tap at the glass. Ari can sift through the patterns undisturbed. In the dark he sees threads for a while, then Angie's hair, her fingers braiding it, unbraiding. But not on the pillow beside him. Ari recalls her note-taking during lectures, her lilting banter with professors after class, her frown at scoring second out of sixty-five, the tightness of her smile as she sizes up her NYU competitors. She wants to go higher than Arjun Singh. She's smarter. And she knows it.

On Wednesday afternoon Ari ties up the Kashmiri rug he has in reserve for Arjun Singh. The big one, the one the Sikh officer pointed to with his lathi stick. Ari puts it into the back seat of the Galaxy and takes aim for Kew Gardens. As he carries the rug into Tandori, Ari gives a bow to Ganesh in the window. It is early, only two customers there, both Indians. Mr. Shastri comes toward Ari, eyes on the rug. He raises his eyebrows. Ari tells him he doesn't want to leave it in the car. Too valuable.

"You can't be too careful," Mr. Shastri says, but he is uneasy with the size. Ari asks for a booth in the rear. Then Ari decides to show the rug to him.

Ari unties the string, lets it roll to the floor. It lights up the room. Mr. Shastri squats, runs his fingers through the nap. He rocks on his hams. The two Indians in the first booth come over, wagging their heads, which looks like a no, but Ari knows means yes. Yes. And yes again. Mrs. Shastri comes out of the kitchen, wiping her hands.

"From Kashmir," her husband says to her. Then it is quiet. Their eyes follow the scroll work within the borders, pick out florettes, follow tendrils to their source. They look up at Ari.

"A gift for someone," he says. They nod, back away.

Ari rolls it up, leans it against the wall in his booth. He takes a seat behind it. The rug hides him from the front door view. Ari orders dahl, gobi aloo, basmati rice, things Angie showed him, then something that turns out to be carrots and almonds

in lemon sauce. Ari can't stop eating. More customers come in, heads are bobbing above the booths. Ari orders palak paneer and gets creamed spinach with cheese. He orders chai. Only two booths are empty. Voices rise, blending with the clatter of dishes. He orders a dessert made of balls of almond paste floating in liquid sugar.

Ari looks up behind his shield of rug and sees Arjun Singh, holding the door for Angie. Behind her comes the reader of advertisements. He is young. Twenty-three, maybe less. And not fat. Behind him is his father, the man looking for the match worthy of his first-born son. Possibly only.

Ari ducks his head behind the rug. They sit down three booths away, too far to hear anything. Arjun Singh and Angie have their backs to him. The son barely looks at Angie. He lets his father do the talking.

Ari drinks his chai, orders another. The rug chafes against his ear. He gets out of his booth, hefts the rug over his shoulder and strolls two booths down. A waiter eases past Ari with a tray of glasses of water. Pani, the waiter whispers. Pani. Ari unfolds the rug, letting it roll out, a rectangle of blooming flowers, curled leaves, a soundless explosion of birds raising their beaks to an unseen sky. The four stare at Ari. It is clear to Ari that he has their complete attention. Ari sinks his right knee into the center of the rug and gives Arjun Singh a namaste, his fingertips forming a pulsing tent below his nose.

A spike of amusement races through the son. He raises an eyebrow. Some spectacle here about to unfold, a play perhaps. He leans forward so as not to miss a single line.

His father glances at Ari, then his eyes scan the rug's mille-fleur pattern, take in the pink rosettes sprouting from a restaurant floor. Angie is getting smaller, shrinking, her eyes numbering the tines of her fork.

"Arjun Singh. I would like to marry your daughter. The one to your left. Angie."

"You are a man without restraint. Is it that you are a drinker of spirits?"

The son is openly grinning. "This is like a film I saw."  
"I give you this rug as a sign of my devotion to your daughter.  
Still on your left."

The waiter weaves around the border of the rug to a table in the front, bowls of rice on his tray. Mr. Shastri watches from behind his cash register. Apparently as long as Ari stays on one knee no one will call the police.

"What is the name of that film?" The son presses his fist against his forehead, miming memory loss. He is into it, sees a role for himself here somewhere.

"Arjun Singh," Ari says, "May I ask the wish of your daughter?"

Angie flinches. Her eyes, Ari would have to say, are smoldering. "I do not wish to speak of this now." Then she looks down, begins studying her plate.

"My daughter is not wishing to speak."

The son's love of spectacle is a rising flame. His smile tells Ari that he is not eager to be following his father from one interview to the next, sizing up potential wives over Formica tables with stainless steel trim screwed into the edges. Maybe he has lived in Queens too long, his native roots withering away. Or this son wants to check the ladies out himself. Ari starts thinking he has won something here, and then pushes it too far. Because if it isn't this one, this candidate to Ari's right grinning from ear to ear, it will be another tracker of ads. Angie keeps shrinking.

Voices in the restaurant are quieting, but Mr. Shastri, arms crossed, is a man who deals with the public, knows how to wait out an event. Ari is making up lines in his head. His knee hurts. He stands up.

"What is this rug to me?" Arjun Singh asks Ari.

"I carried this rug. Through the Khyber Pass." For a second, Ari is Errol Flynn in an old black-and-white, muskets going off, men in turbans running around, bagpipe music. Brits in kilts defending the color line.

"The Khyber Pass is in Afghanistan," Angie chimes in.

"Well, whatever pass. I carried it through a tunnel, I know



that.”

Ari is losing track.

“I thought you were on a bus,” Angie says. “With Abdul Fir.”

“It broke down. We all walked out of the tunnel together. We ate diesel fumes. All to bring you this.”

She looks up, composed. “This is not wise, your coming here.”

The son is getting carried away. “The Khyber Pass? This is better than the film!” He looks to his father, who ignores him, keeps scanning the rug.

Ari nods to Arjun Singh, offers his final namaste, and walks out. The waiter steps around the rug again, impassive. The water glasses on his tray are empty.

The son comes out after Ari, trotting. Also chewing. A rice grain perches on his lower lip. His teeth are white, his merriment unbounded. Ari can see he isn’t interested in Angie as a wife, so he hates him.

“My father would like to make an offer.” The rice grain on his lip looks like a termite egg. He smiles. “For the Kashmiri carpet.”

“Ah, but now it is Arjun Singh’s. A down payment.”

The son shakes his head, brushes off the rice grain and walks back to Tandori. He turns to Ari, raises his arm in salute. “The Khyber Pass! I love it!”

Ari drives to Hempstead, occasionally rubbing his ear where the rug had pressed against it, thinking of Angie taking in his own unravelling right next to Ganesh’s fatty shoulders of bronze. Ari senses that Angie needs no Brahmin sadhu to read his horoscope. Inauspiciousness is written all over the face that looks back at him in the rear view mirror.

When Ari sees the Hempstead exit he turns toward Terikian Carpets. No one is on the sidewalk on either side of the street. As Ari pushes the key into the front door lock he notes fresh graffiti on the wall of Sal’s Fuel Oil. More than ever Ari needs to move rugs. But he has them in spades. A real stash. They are waiting

for Ari in the dark, inside. He just has to turn the key.

CLINGSTONE PEACHES

Chris Haven

I am eleven in early December  
on the twisty road to Crescent OK  
past the gated Kerr-McGee plant that killed  
Karen Silkwood I wondered if our car  
ever passed hers on the way to grandma's.

My father and his eight sisters divide  
the estate he has strange authority  
the youngest, the only male, and the eye  
of a grocer he unstocks the freezer  
at dusk he spots the unpicked peach tree.

He tells me to come on and I feel strong  
hands me a basket asks catch or climb  
catch I say as my father in black tie  
black wingtips disappears into the arms  
of the tree a peach falls to my hands.

I place them in the basket the skin stings  
my palms when I catch it leaves no bruise but  
the ones that hit my face do I can't tell  
my father it's enough I can't see his face  
I can't know this is a kind of crying.

That night in the hard light of the bathroom  
I still feel the peaches on my skin my  
mother takes a tweezers plucks the needles  
from my cheeks like splinters hundreds of cling-  
stone peaches lie in baskets they will rot.

LOVE LEFT OVER

Chris Haven

I worked grounds crew one summer  
with a boy named Evin Piggett  
he could barely form a sentence  
it was hard to look at Evin

and think acne came from within.  
His loomed like craters an assault  
from without. When a storm blew in  
delaying the games the flag's change

of direction stymied Evin.  
Who moved the flag? He thought someone  
shinnied the pole switched it by hand  
he did not know about the wind.

His father I hate to tell you  
lived in a trailer by the field  
klan-standard black specs and hair  
lord how he used to cuss that boy.

I felt sorry for the father  
Gerald worked hard had a good job  
drove the city truck home at night  
this boy's stupidity hurt us all.

The boy had been damaged no doubt  
drink drugs who knows what but we found  
he could be damaged more  
we beat him down.

My friend called him a death rocker  
but I heard death walker I thought

maybe he'll commit suicide  
and then I thought maybe he should.

You wonder about kindness how  
anyone ever has any  
love left over for himself.

WHAT HAPPENED TO FIRE

Rodney Gomez

1.

In the alley, a boy  
would fly  
a fish-shaped kite

its nylon mouth  
and feathery anus open  
to air.

What held him there—  
a single red fin

along a row of withering  
gray spine, like a flame  
still flickering  
in ash.

In those days  
you expected fires

wind that could calm  
every thrumming nerve

even among ruins  
even in the sky.

2.

By the berm  
where someone was stabbed  
in Garden Park

every Sunday  
a pair of black-bellied ducks

would beg for crumbs

and though a mile north  
they could have fattened

themselves on throwaways  
they remained.

They would waddle  
in the shade  
of a lime tree

shape rinds into scythes  
in their brown beaks  
for the sparring.

3.

What everyone remembered:  
monkey bars, whirligig  
and steel pigs stuck

with coils a super  
clairvoyantly thought  
to paint yellow

since what happened  
only exists now  
in newsprint.

We were offered a wisp  
of devil there  
and when we said no  
we were beaten until

all that remained  
of our wormhole vision

was the blue cupola

of the movie  
theater, smoldering  
in its own shadow.

The last thing I said  
before going under  
was a treatise on fire  
so near my tongue.



FRAGILE

Jenny Hanning

At the Children's Museum they collect pennies in a penny pit. It started as a fountain, but was overwhelmed by wishes. Someone thought it pretty, so the fountain was emptied and disposed of. In its place, a trench installed. There's a little plaque: *A million and counting!* My heartbeat changes to an uphill pace. And counting. When I was a child I used to say everything twice, first to myself then aloud. Words are such fragile things. To speak them is always to risk them. The fountain was downgraded to a memory, the world is quickly overrun. In Florida, where the sea turtles hatch on a beach that stretches alongside the highway, they've changed the bulbs in all the streetlamps. The color of the light drew the new turtles out onto the blacktop and they were flattened like acorns on a playground. The light is more yellow now, or was more yellow, and is now more white. It's so easy to say the wrong thing. To say something that's incorrect. We should all be careful. *A million and counting!* At the Children's Museum the mothers go through their pocketbooks. They come up with linty fistfuls. Fistfuls, and the children throw.

LETTER TO A VACUUM

Alen Hamza

Four limbs puncture the earth.  
Turn me on my back, turn me innocuous.  
Show me celestial barricades;  
tell me I can walk only in circles.  
Tell me you are a biting  
to which I must return.

Turn me into cyan.  
No, turn me into a word.  
Utter me black—say black  
and point to me. Then think: he is a word.

Play me much.  
Touch.  
Assume my hands.  
Glue my tongue on top of yours and say:  
My words are your dusk.  
Be rough, make me knit you hats.

Plant bugs  
in my fingers;  
watch me ride  
vacuum cities.

Manifest me. Molest me. Mother me.  
Atrociously father me.  
Ask me:  
Do you want falling forever?

## UNDER THE WORLD

Lucas Southworth

Down here, the walls are traps. Long escalator and elevator rides are the only way up. The smell of electricity thins the air. Musk settles in the corners.

Here, the constant wail of metal grating against metal. The flipping and flipping of schedule boards. The stuttering cement. Sometimes winds burst free from the mouths of tunnels, whipping over the crowd before shivering and dying across the platform.

Here, a cold smoke slithers along the ceiling. Aromas from makeshift food-stands mud and then separate. A traveler waves before stepping aboard a lurching train. An outcast sleeps on a bench, his head drooped back, his mouth gaping in the shape of a zero.



This place has always been fascinating. Its reach, its depth. A worldwide subway system that has begun to function like its own city. A web of satellites, an underground metropolis that connects all others. The system accommodates millions of travelers per day and is home to those who crouch in its shadows, those who hawk food and wares, those who populate the dingy cathouses and hotels. It seems the desperate are doomed to forever migrate downward, and they've descended to this place. Here, they've found ways to subsist. Here, they've adapted to the concrete and bad air.

For travelers, the subway is convenient and affordable. But it can also swallow a person. There are tales of muggings and violence. There will always be someone willing to tell you about the dirty economy, the inevitability of collapse. People on the surface speak of this place as a series of incidents, and together they build those incidents into horrors. Once, a man was tortured so hard he began to grow butterfly wings. Once, a

woman tumbled over an underground palisade and was sucked to the bottom of a bottomless river. Once, a man stumbled upon generations and generations of his relatives, all living together as though they were still alive.



Once, not long ago, I stood in line with enough money to buy a yearly pass. I was thinking of those stories. The ones my mother told me, the ones I'd heard from friends. Stories repeated and repeated. Stories that have become myths, fairy tales. Stories with morals and lessons and explanations. Some people believe the subway has the power to return to you what you've lost. Some believe it has the power to lose you.

And as I waited to purchase my ticket, that's what I wanted. To be swallowed. Ever since, I've been trying to lose myself under the world. I've kept my gaze low to avoid schedules and clocks. I've kept moving. The system has begun to blur. It rotates, it expands, it retracts. Sometimes I feel as though I no longer trudge forward. That I'm turning in all directions. Often, I think that I'm living outside of time. That I'm stepping from a train and into a memory. That I'm touching the dead.



Down here, sparks dance in the throat of a tunnel. On the platform the crowd of bodies is thick. Children brush flyers across knuckles and tug customers in the direction of what they're selling. Odors of food and sweat mingle. A man in a turban scoops stir-fry with his right hand and collects money with his left. Another man crawls moaning from the shadows, clutching his broken face.

Sometimes the stations are grand and beautiful. Sometimes the ceilings are low and suffocating. This one is cavernous and resembles an ancient city. All its surfaces are lacquered in a shiny, white overlay. Stone arches spread out and run down the walls

like liquid. On either side of the platform, two giant mirrors echo each other, reflecting an eternity of vaulted passageways, an eternity of tracks, and an eternity tunnels. In the center, two large stairways adorned with marble leaves curve to meet a story above. Passengers recline upon the steps.



Here, another train forges though another seemingly endless tunnel. A man sidles up and sits in the seat to my left. With a strange expression that resembles something like a smile, he accuses me of following him.

No, I tell him. I'm not. I'm wandering.

When he doesn't believe me, I describe my attempt to disorient myself, my avoidance of schedules and maps and clocks.

It must be a coincidence, I say.

The man adjusts the collar of his shirt and leans back. He sighs. He brushes his elbow against mine.

Sorry, he says. It's strange. I've seen you at four stations now. If your path is random and mine has been meticulously predetermined.

He begins to mutter.

Then he speaks up: There's something scary about it. Something impossible. Something inevitable.

I'm John Markus, he says to me.

I shake his hand.



Here, as I crouch over a Styrofoam container on my lap, the stranger beside me begins to talk. I can smell him, and I can smell my food, just purchased and steaming hot. But he will not let me eat.

From his rambling I start to understand that behind the concrete in the tunnels there are pockets. With his finger the man draws slashes across the air.

I can find them, he tells me. There are marks on the walls. I see them. I read them. Then he smiles, showing teeth too large for his mouth. I will sell to you, he says. You want a home? You want to come see mine?

For a moment I imagine the two of us stumbling through the pitch dark. I remember a story from childhood about people who once lived in the tunnels. Those who slaughtered sheep as a kind of sacrifice, and then began doing the same to humans. The sheep and human bodies had been bled from the neck and deposited on the tracks. At various times, trains would emerge to the lighted stations, pushing a ripped and ragged carcass.

The man next to me is still smiling, hopeful.

I stare down at the food on my lap.



Here, a sign announces the name, Selene. And underneath it is a price. Behind a small table draped in colorful cloths sits a woman, scrutinizing the skin on the backs of her hands.

I place some money in front of her, and she rakes it in with crooked fingers. I extend my palm, but she doesn't take it.

It will be too painful, she warns. I will be searching for hidden doors.

I nod. I've been here for what feels like a long time, I tell her. That's what I need.

Selene is silent. She shuffles close, dragging her chair. Then, when her face is inches from mine, she stares into my eyes.

Don't tell me where I am or where I've been, I say. Only where I'm going.

But it's true, Selene says, there might not be any difference between those things.

And then I can feel her strolling through the corridors of my brain, picking at the walls with her fingernails.



And sometimes I step off a train, and I am not in a station at all, but in the hospital with my mother. The air is so stiff it could have been manufactured by giant machines, and a nurse is shaking her head at us. When she looks away, my mother drags me into a labyrinth of whitewashed hallways. We turn corners at random and take elevators to different levels. I have a slight feeling that I've been here before, that I know where to go. But my mother will not let me lead. We wander for what seems like hours before she stops and slumps in the middle of a hallway. She pushes at her eyes with the heels of her hands and begins to cry. I lean against her, weave my arms around her neck. Doctors and patients continue to flow past. They rush by as though they do not see us, as though we are boulders in the center of a river.



Once, long ago, the critics claimed a worldwide subway system would never be possible. They questioned the science, saying it would be too deep in the ground, it would cost too much, trains could never travel under the ocean. They argued this place was a product of an overblown inferiority complex. It was a way of strangling the world. It was an attempt to prove we could be gods.

Thousands of feet below, contractors and architects couldn't hear these concerns. Drills marched forward. Machines slammed against bedrock. Inventors created the necessary technologies. As construction continued, they assured us the system would be safe. It would not disturb anything above. Trains did not need to travel under oceans if they could tunnel through them. The world would not be strangled, it would be brought closer together.

Then the first train carried passengers from New York to London at 600 miles per hour. Then one from Japan to Los Angeles. Then Russia to Argentina. Each new journey did its part to shrink our idea of distance. These trains were incredibly

fast. They were always on time; they would forever be on time. That might mean we'd brought the world together. That might mean we'd finally controlled it.

Soon after these maiden voyages, people stopped seeing the subway in terms of innovation. The system lost its wonder, its feeling of ingenuity. Its size and technology did not impress. It no longer made us shiver. Stations once studied as architectural marvels received absent glances. The history, the significance, the initial symbolism faded. Now, it is about simplicity, convenience, and comfort. Travelers want to go to places they want to go. They want to believe this system is separate from their world. They want to tell stories about what happens to those who've spent time under a mile of dirt.



Down here, sound overlaps sound. A woman grabs her luggage and disembarks. She crosses the platform and enters the sprawl of people and clutter. Soon she will ascend toward the surface.

Here, trains lurch and then glide. The light from a station recedes to black in the windows. Arteries of silver wires coil outward from an electric, sizzling heart.

Here, a station of headless statues. Hundreds of marble figures frozen in time. The figures commemorate those who were burned when flames shot from one of the tunnels. Skin was seared, muscles eaten, bones turned to ash. Now rats scavenge for food. The place smells of ammonia and burnt cold. The walls are empty, gray, and covered with deep cracks. Different versions of the story about this place put this station under different cities. Each version attributes the flame's origin to something different. As I walk, I hear little else but the echoes of my footsteps. And in the distance, the whirring of machines. The statues are here and stand as tall as people. It is said outcasts wear white and crouch still with their heads burrowed deep between their shoulders. They are like sea anemones, waiting to sting whatever comes close.





On the train, John Markus tells me he's working on a second book. He's a professor of architecture at a college in New York. He's always checking his watch. He's always shaking his head. I was hoping you were either going to kill me or you were a fan of my book, he says.

No, I say. I haven't read it. What's it about?

Simply? Periods in history when architects were failing to produce anything new. We're mired in one right now. Ever since we finished this place.

And the new book?

Kind of the same thing. This one's on a theory I have about the evolution of architecture over time.

Markus then goes on to explain that he has arranged an itinerary that will take him from station to station, following a tour of what he calls the beginning of architecture to the end.

When these stations were built, Markus says, each city hired local architects. They took pride in what they were going to create.

He pulls a piece of paper from his briefcase. This, he says, is my timeline. This is where I've mapped it. Here, he says pointing, is the first. A station inspired by buildings in Greece, around 600 B.C.

I make sure not to glance at Markus' paper. In many ways, his plan is simple. He will charge through the history of architecture so quickly that when he reaches the end, his momentum will carry him forward into the future. Then, he might glimpse what comes next.



I decide to go with the strange man to see his home behind the tunnel. If he hurts me, if he bleeds me over the tracks, I will slide into the mythology of this place. I will have gotten what I wanted.

Together, we crouch in the dim corner at the end of the platform. The man continues to smile, showing his large teeth. I'm so glad you came, he says. He grabs the sleeve of my coat. He lays his fingers on the concrete in front of him.

After five minutes a train shoots by, and after five more, a second. My legs are burning. My knees are sore from the hard ground. The man still holds my coat as if he thinks I might stand or run away. A third train rushes by, and then we lower ourselves onto the tracks, hurrying into one of the tunnels.

We will move fast, the man says, breathing hard. He leads me through the dark with nothing more than a lighter. Step where I step, he says. Not on the tracks. Don't step on the tracks. If you do...

The man turns, stretches out his arms, grits his teeth. He fakes a seizure. He laughs. The sound of his voice bounces off the walls and clamors down the tunnel in both directions.

After a while, he hands me the lighter. Stretching his arms over his head like a diver, he slides into a tiny hole in the wall. Rocking his torso back and forth, he scoots forward inch by inch. Once I no longer see his feet, I follow.



Selene tramps through my brain for a long time. Each one of her steps is like a needle prick.

Do not think, Selene says. Do not squirm. It will take longer.

When she has sucked herself out through my eyes, she sits back in her chair.

She looks at me. You're going to die, she says.

That's not a fortune, I say. When?

She laughs. Every hall in your mind had an ending, she says. I was almost lost.

She points to my head. Everything is all inside out, she says.

I close my eyes as Selene tells a story. Long ago she had

conceived a baby, carried it, and given birth to it all in one night. She'd always wanted a child and she cried with happiness. As the head crowned, followed by the beautiful feeling of the shoulders sliding through, Selene realized she hadn't experienced even a stab of pain. And after, when she reached between her legs, she touched nothing except cold concrete. There was no baby. Not even a warm drop of blood.

My mother used to tell this same story. And I want to believe Selene has always been the woman in the tale. I also consider asking for my money back.

Selene is staring over my shoulder at the station behind. This is not the world, she says. Some things could only happen down here.



After a long ride, I disembark to the sound of my father's whispered curses. He is trying to build the electric train set he bought me for Christmas. And he sighs with relief as the toy lurches forward. For over three hours, I watch the engine haul its single boxcar around the track. I pull the lever until it slows. I push the lever and it quickens. Then I realize my father has not assembled the station. There is no place for me to stop the train. Stop it anywhere, my father says gruffly. But there is only the suffocating turn of cold metal on the family-room carpet and the plastic locomotive upon it, circling and circling, without end.



I often have a strong urge to abandon what I'm doing, to reorient myself. It sneaks up on me like nervousness or guilt. My heart begins to hammer. I can feel my breath fluttering just inside my chest. It is tempting to glance up, to read a schedule or a clock, to know just where and when I've wandered to. It would be a relief to end this floating.

But if I gave in, I do not know what would happen. It's

possible I could go back to who I was my first few weeks down here. When I frequented the filthy cathouses. When I slumped in the corners for days with drugs I'd bought from men hovering at the edges of the markets. This, I told myself then, was where I belonged. Like the other outcasts, I refused to speak about who I was, where I had come from, what I had left behind. We spoke only of what had been taken from us, and what else could still be taken. We rooted ourselves in our bodies, in the places we sat and slept. But we were not lost. We were fighting against it. We were at the lip, we were in the throat, but we had not been swallowed.



There will always be more trains, more stations. People shouting in an effort to be heard over the howling breaks, the whine of electricity. Here, everything either moves too fast or does not move. Engines power forward, others slow. Doors spread to exchange passengers, doors slide shut. Trains sit. Air pulses and stagnates. People pull in oxygen, stale from the pipes. Lungs inflate, lungs deflate. And used air rises to the ceiling where it rests a while before it is sucked away.

Here, a station where beggars have no fear of hassling the crowd. Men, women, and children grab and nick at pockets and sleeves. I untangle myself from bony fingers. Above the tracks, high in the air, floats a giant sphere. It hovers and glows, pouring off warmth. Its light glints off the metal. Rays quiver through the dust, crisscross, dot the walls. A row of columns casts elongated shadows. At the end of the platform, away from the heat of the globe, I almost stumble over a man. He is crouching over a helpless body. Stop, I say without thinking, and he turns his eyes on me. He has something metal in his hand, and he rubs it against the concrete. The body below him twitches, makes a tiny sound. There is no one to stop this. There are no police.



John Markus wants to know if I'll be getting off at the next stop. I tell him no. He looks disappointed.

You're the only person I've met down here, he says. I'm not ready for this trip to be over. I don't have much confidence in my theory. I've got nothing to go back to.

I nod. I know how he feels, but I don't tell him that.

We shake hands just as the train begins to slow.

I have another theory, Markus says, turning in his seat. He is cleaning up his area, stuffing half-filled bottles of water into a plastic bag.

Tell me what you think, he says. When an architect plans a building, Markus says, he's really designing a kind of museum of himself. Or a home. A replica of his own mind where he could feel comfortable.

What if a building is designed by more than one person? I ask. What if it's designed by many?

I don't know, Markus says. But people who aren't architects must search for a place that suits them. I suppose a collaboration may find more dwellers. But none of them will feel quite right.



The small tunnel is longer than I thought it would be, but finally I pull myself from the darkness and into a lighted cave. There is carpet on the floor, a couple of couches and tables, even a television.

Let me make this for you, the man with big teeth says. He walks about the room touching each piece of furniture. You can have one of these. And this. And this. You can even find a wife, a family. He smiles and ropes an arm around a woman, thin and sallow as a candle.

How did you get electricity? I ask.

Electricity, he says. Electricity is everywhere.

Then he again indicates his hovel: This was not easy, he says. You could not do it. You could not find it or dig it.

How much? I ask.

The man names a price. It will be a new life, he says. You will be anyone you want. You will be a new person with a new home.

He struts around once more. My children, he says, indicating a space that juts off from the main room. I wonder if this man's family has ever seen the sky. Has ever breathed air that isn't lined with dirt.

When I decline his offer, the man threatens to kill me. He demands my money. He has a knife. He will slice through my throat and leave my body to rot in the dark.

I follow his instructions and he counts what I give him. This is not very much, he says. Then he leads me back to the station.



I sit with Selene and she continues to avoid telling my fortune. She tells stories about herself, most of which I've heard before, and many of which can't be true.

Do you tell your own fortune, I ask her.

I do not, she says.

Selene says that telling fortunes is usually easy. Most people already know where they're going and what's going to happen to them. All she has to do is follow a clearly marked path. It's like walking on a road through the woods. And people never try to see what is around the bends. They hide it from themselves.

But you are not like that, she says to me. Everything's scrambled. There are many paths and they all lead inward. Everything goes in to a single point.

What is it? I ask.

In the center, she says. She shrugs. I don't know what it is. Someday you will find you are back there and then you will know it. You will die there. Not here. Somewhere in the world above.



The next time I step from a train, I am in the backyard of my childhood home. I am thirteen and digging holes. I know that my father is dead. I know that my mother is sick and soon to die. I have been digging every day for weeks, moving the dirt from one place to another. Creating something by removing something else. The shovel enters the ground. It tosses the dirt away. Then, one day, I uncover a collection of bones. I pick up a few and take them into the house to show my mother. She is on constant medication and she rarely knows where she is. She says that she used to own chickens. That when they died she buried them one by one in the yard. She tells me she does not know how long ago that was. The past always comes back to the surface, she says, stroking a bone with her fingertip. I don't know if she knows what she's saying.

WINGLESS

Centa Theresa

Anything can harm you. A sliver from a telephone pole. A slat in the fence. The wind if it pierces your face. The sun if you look at it straight, or a door that snips through your bone, the tip of your finger gone flying. It could be water that does it, the lessons of buoyancy forgotten, a rock or stick in the eye, even the color blue from a cornflower could make you rub your eyes blind, if you let it. Things outside your skin can be used against you. A word. A look. A gesture. I lie under the sheets like the dead in their coffin beds so the spiders will be fooled and won't climb up my cold legs. I still my breathing until it forgets what it is and a wave hardens to stone in my chest. I silence my sex before it knows its name, give it another face, as if it were a face, as something wingless only knows by dream what it is to fly.



WITHOUT PRAISE

Centa Theresa

it can seem the sun only partially rises,  
painting the sky with shy light, and it seems  
children too soon forget how to play  
when there's been no praise.

Without praise, couples uncouple,  
trees are leafless in spring, every dream  
goes in search of its dreamer, each breath fears  
for the next. As with no peace

and no dream, without praise, tables stay cluttered  
with yesterday's news, dropped sugar, the single  
crumpled napkin, and the woman never  
finds her keys, the man never dies peacefully.

In a land where newspapers sell for bread  
and hands hang by a thread to the arms  
they belong to, as the instinct for belonging  
has faded from the pages of people's minds,

scarcity reigns. This morning I awoke  
to this dismissal, the lack of wonder  
like beggars at my feet. The featherless birds,  
gaunt cats, and hopelessly newborn appeared,

reminding me they are mine to feed.  
Forsaken infants, all of them—some lack  
strength to get off their backs, while others,  
already walking, speak an unreadable tongue,

leap over the bedposts like acrobats  
vying for my attention, and when I still  
won't heed their call, one will flash

monster eyes and full sets of teeth.

I am waking late in their bed, the sun nearly  
scorching the sky, its constant light  
bleeding along the untended yard.

THE MUSHROOM

Jessica Cuello

Summer nights we played in the dark.  
I hovered in the kitchen's steam and ceiling  
light, waiting, while my mother—tired  
of what asking meant—  
sent me out.

But her friend, whose children  
had no bedtime,  
passed me a mushroom—white  
—its flesh drew back  
from my fingers like a sponge.  
I held it  
going down the stairway,  
where other suppers—over,  
crept into the common hall  
like the pale private  
light seen through  
a stranger's curtains.

Outside, children  
—smell of grass  
and gravel—ignored me.  
I stood opposite  
the cement fenced-in building  
with no doors.  
I never asked,  
*What's there?*

A tall boy, too old  
to be among us—came, drawn  
by my cupped hands.  
He took the mushroom,  
smelled it, broke the stem,

threw it inside the chainlink fence.  
*It's poison. Don't eat it.*

Silent again, months later,  
I lay at four a.m.  
beside my brother  
on the shag carpet of the boy's bedroom  
while our apartment burned.

I stared at the stray  
broken toys beneath his bed.  
I never tried  
to explain the mushroom's spell,  
how it would delay  
the interval alone.

His mother washed  
inside his mouth—  
I watched her hold his head  
on their front porch  
then ran lightly  
through the yards, escaping.

I would have taken my mushroom,  
turned back into the fire  
to avoid my voice.

SHUNRYU'S BELLS

Heather Kirn

1.

Battle-  
fields belonged in  
every inch of Japan.  
The low, wooden beams of Shunryu's  
temple

sighed the  
heart sutra; *tatami*  
mat still held straw and air;  
but the rooms filled with the army  
who beat

minions  
with sticks, and the  
navy who used straps. Where  
Shunryu's students should meditate,  
slaves slept.

2.

The war  
possessed metal  
and men. Women slid rings  
from their fingers and mailed them to  
battle,

glad they  
weren't fingers or  
daughters. Knives that once sliced  
the carp from its skull bubbled with  
bells, rings,

weapons.  
War wrapped Asia  
in blueprints where *hanko*  
bled red on every brush-stroke  
border.

And monks,  
forced out of their  
*zendos*, swept *ensos*—whole  
circles—on the sky with nothing  
but toes.

3.

Shunryu's  
temple had sky  
and now: ten monks breathing,  
the mosquito's buzz, the Buddha  
to kill,

green tea  
in a blue cup,  
thunder to shake bamboo,  
silence waiting like wooden floors  
beneath

a bow  
in *dokusan*.  
Shunryu's temple contained  
what a bell does: nothing, and in  
that air

rings clear.  
But his temple  
also owned three bells. The  
military declared each theirs.

Every

priest has  
his attachment.  
Even the Buddha must  
die. A good priest will ask you to  
kill him.

4.

The monks  
dismantled the  
bells, the last objects in  
Japan without pronouns.  
Not *yours*,

not *theirs*.  
Fill a bell with  
shoes, food, maps: it will not  
ring. Someone took a picture of  
the monks,

the bells,  
the soldiers, and  
Japan's unwavering  
flag. Shunryu posed for the photo,  
then left.

5.

Shunryu  
wondered, would the  
metal remember what  
it had been? Commands to hustle  
young monks'

feet on  
a wooden floor?  
The call to squeeze all time  
into Buddha-mind? The gong to  
forget

the self  
and recall the  
bohdi tree, the morning  
star? Propellers would not ring in  
water,

would not  
ring in the ears  
of monks or soldiers. Their  
propellers would churn the ocean  
and push

a ship  
forward to claim  
lands with thousands of trees  
under which soldiers would never  
just sit.



IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN

Jack Ridl

I could start under a tree outside  
my grandmother's kitchen window  
or I could wait until the dog needs  
a walk or I could start over here  
by the couch and stack of books.  
Maybe not; maybe upstairs under  
the bed or even in the basement,  
back behind that pile of toys we  
keep saying we'll give away.  
The garden is a possibility,  
around the comfrey or the spent  
peonies. Or maybe just here,  
where an old man from when  
I was a kid came up and asked  
if I would look at his hands.

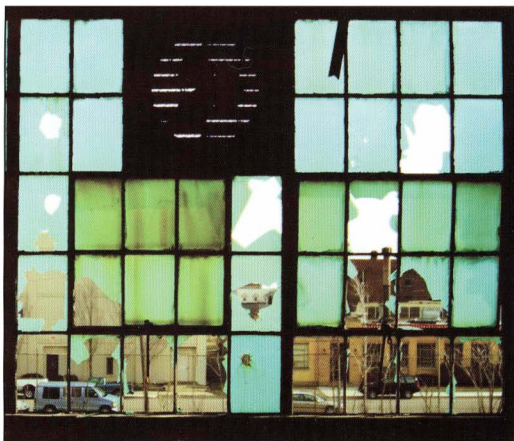
CIRCLE, LINE

Laura McCullough

There that day were six seniors from the assisted living center  
at the community pool. One was on his oxygen, the tank parked  
next to the plastic recliner lined with a blue towel draped across  
it for comfort, and he'd seen the boy dive into the shallow end,  
and there were signs. A circle. He remembered what a circle was.

A tiny man diving in a slim arc. A line cutting across. Like No  
Smoking. He wanted a cigarette hot in his lungs and cold menthol  
in his mouth, the small ripple across his skin from the nicotine, and  
the clarity, so temporary, his mind filling like lungs with smoke,  
even in this air, next to the pool next to the lake with the optimistic  
fountain, even with the twin plastic nodules in his nostrils, his arms  
placed along the chair rails, his hands dangling, twitching the index  
and middle fingers of each against the other, back and forth, the drag  
on his skin reminding him to stay awake if he can, the darned boy  
an annoyance going by again and again with his wet slapping feet  
and scuttling run, then the sound of the sirens coming closer;  
then the fear; surely they would take him away for good this time.





## John Baird

### Photography



*Birds*, Nettare camera



*Light*



*Gloves*



*Garlic*, Pinhole camera





*Horse*



*Taxi, Holga camera*



*Cats*

WHY I CAN'T BUY DRUGS IN ALACHUA COUNTY  
Kymberly Keaton

Three and a half minutes before we get thrown out of Gyration X because my friend Briana kisses the dancer on her lap, Tanzy is on her hands and knees in front of me, wearing a black leather G-string with faux zebra trim, rolling her head with her eyes closed. Her preternaturally blond hair swishes against my lips, and when her head is down I can see that with her back arched this way her tan ass looks round and perfect, all the tiny flaws smoothed by her position. Even though I am fifteen pounds away from perfection and prefer to have sex with the lights off, I want to be her, shed fat and inhibitions and shiver onstage with the attentions of all these hot eyes.

Tanzy's knees flatten the dollars I have laid on the stage as she moves closer. Her lips twist in a nasty smile that manages to be both sexy and cruel, and then she bends down and mouths my left breast so delicately that she could be a ghost, intangible as rumor. At first it's as if she is sipping at my nipple, and then she nips and twists, and I wonder again if the dancers are as bold with men. Someday I'll have to ask Keith. Someday I'll have to come clean.

Tanzy lifts her head and stares at me.

So you're Jess, she says, from three inches away, you're the one.

I have less than a second to wonder what kind of crazy stripper talk this is before Tanzy puts her arms on my shoulders and swings her ten pounds of hair back and then forward; her hair covers both our faces, tents us in a safe, scented, private space. I turn my head sideways to see how Briana reacts to Tanzy practically in my lap, but Bri has her own lap full of Athena, and then I can't see through the heavy blond curtain, and then Tanzy grabs my chin and forces my face forward. Our foreheads touch. Our lips are an inch apart, her long nails pinch my skin, and I am more intimidated than turned on.

Four four eight—two three four nine, she breathes, right into

my face. She smells outrageously of mint and chamomile, like she's been steeping in Sleepy Time tea backstage.

It seems stupid, insulting to tell her that I only come to watch, to be immoral support for my lesbian friends. And to score drugs from the bar manager.

Oh, I'm not—

She releases me and flips her hair back into place, rocks back on her ass, flips an ankle around my neck. Everyone can see us. Everyone is looking. Men have moved closer to watch Tanzy work me; I can feel them stare as if glances had tongues and touch, and suddenly I am tingling, tight nipples and all, for the first time tonight. Please, god, I think, please don't let this end. In the chair beside me Briana laughs out loud and says Baby, I fuckin' love you.

You don't get it, Tanzy says. Still in her stripper voice, something she bought along with those six-inch spike heels at an expensive boutique, something that comes in Husky or Breathless.

Shut up and listen, she says. I'm fucking your husband. Call me tomorrow and I'll prove it.

She repeats her number, asks me if I have that, and before I can change my tune from But I'm not a lesbian to But I'm not married, Tanzy's ankle is gone and she is five feet away arranging herself for another sucker with a fistful of dollars. She knows what poses make her perfect. She knows how to spread and flex and stretch, how to present, how to arrange and exhibit, and I want to learn this, want to look like this, want men to look at me the way they look at Tanzy.

I repeat Tanzy's number to myself and look around to see if anyone is still watching me, but the audience has slipped away. The lack of attention feels draining, depressing, like when I eat too much X and I'm waiting, hoping, but the last pill doesn't get me high.

Before I can reach into my purse for a pen Briana laughs, says I know, I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, ouch, and then we are both marching quickly, bouncer-speed, towards the side door.

Outside, I glare while Bri lights up a cigarette, wipes a hand across her forehead, feigns exhaustion.

What? she asks me. She kissed me first. All I did was kiss her back.

Briana is the kind of person to give in to the power of a moment; her philosophy pretty much allows her to sacrifice an entire evening for a single kiss. Her lipstick is smeared and her tight skirt is still hiked high on one thigh. I reach down and straighten her out. We are in an alley beside the club, facing a closed door with no handle.

You silly dyke, I tell her, you got us thrown out before we found drugs. It'll be a month before they let us back in here.

A couple of weeks, she says, at most. Even we can wait that long, can't we?

I put a hand on the obnoxious pink stucco of the club, close my eyes, try to feel the music beating inside of it like an electric, amplified heart. There is no vibration, nothing to make my heart beat faster. I need bright eyes and a racing pulse, I need rose-colored glasses. I need to feel the dizzy energy that seems to bring chemical clarity. I open my eyes and breathe in the soft early spring of Central Florida. I look at Bri, see that she knows the answer to her own question.

No, I say, no, we cannot.

Especially if Keith is really cheating on me. I'll need K to accept it, roofies to sleep, and X to want to go on. That might get me through the first day without him.



When Keith calls me I want to ask him if his skin aches because it hasn't pressed against mine for thirty hours, if his flight was bearable, if he'd enjoy his trip and play in the snow if I was with him. I want to tell him to pick a sexy verb and let me use it in a sexy sentence. Your turn, I want to say, my turn, your turn, switch back and forth until we are both wet, warm, languid. Satisfied as much as we can be this far apart.

But tonight it is as if three years of paranoid fantasies have come true.

So this girl I met at a club says she's having an affair with my husband, I tell him.

I'm tired of this, Jess, he says. I'll say this one more time. I have never cheated on you. I will never cheat on you. I might leave you, though. There's getting to be a lot of bullshit.

Part of me is relieved that this old issue will keep him from asking questions about the girl, the club, the circumstances I'm not ready to share. Part of me realizes I've blown it. He hates it when I do this. Hates it that I don't trust him. He might even think I've made this up.

No bullshit, I tell him, I'm just telling you about my night. Are you sure you're not fucking someone else? She seemed pretty sure.

I don't know how far I can push him before he hangs up on me, leaves his hotel room, camps out in the bar, and turns off his beeper. I have been known to beep him every ten minutes when we're fighting and he won't answer the phone. Keith doesn't believe me when I explain that all my bad behavior is compulsive and automatic, something I can't seem to change. He thinks I can do anything I want to do, tomorrow, yesterday. I am afraid that if I stay with him long enough he might convince me.

I told her she must have it wrong because I'm not married.

That's right, he says, you wouldn't tell her she must be fucking nuts because your man loves you, wants you, doesn't have any desire to stick his dick in anyone but you.

His tone excites me. He's angry, the feeling heavy enough to travel the distance between us and still have substance when it reaches me. I bury a hand between my thighs and cross my legs.

If I had a dick, I say, that's exactly how I'd feel about you. Why don't you tell me about your dick?

Don't get off on this, he says. I'm serious. I think you're always worried about me cheating on you because you're the one with the guilty conscience.

That ruins the moment, I tell him.  
What moment? Have you ever cheated on me?  
I hesitate before I say no, just long enough for him to notice.

Are you sure? he asks.

If watching strange women dance almost-naked under pulsing pink neon doesn't count, I'm sure. I don't say this. Keith doesn't know about the men's club.

This isn't a difficult question, Jess.

And fantasies don't count, right?

Answer me.

No. I haven't.

But you must think about it. How close have you come?

Why does he say this? What do I think about? What do I want?

Because if you didn't think about it, you wouldn't worry about me. It's yourself you can't trust.

I love it when I have to accept your whack logic, I tell him. I uncross my legs and flip off the phone with my now-free hand.

We are silent for three heart-beats longer than is comfortable. I promise myself that I will make him break the silence. Beat-beat. Beat-beat.

I love you, I say.

I love you.

Can we forget this? Can we—

I want you to marry me.

My eyebrows move upward, my eyes sting, tear from opening so wide.

Or I want to move in. One or the other. I want that level of commitment. I want to be around all the time so that you know your bullshit fantasies are just bullshit.

I make a small noise, a stutter of an exhale, to let him know that he can't possibly expect me to talk, to respond to this. I think about the drugs, all the nights I've had the lesbians, other cooks from the restaurant where I work, miscellaneous servers,



sometimes strangers, tripping, rolling, high on GHB, all K'd out, sleeping on my couch, my floor, in my bed. As long as I never ride my motorcycle fucked up, Keith doesn't disapprove, sometimes he even joins us, but will he want it where he lives?

He reminds me that he's home in three days.

Get laid, he says.

I make the oh-I-can't-speak noise, only louder this time, hard enough to start choking.

Try someone else out. Shave your legs, use condoms, get this out of your system. When you pick me up at the airport I want to be yours and I want you to be mine with no bullshit.

Are you or-elsing me? I ask him.

No, he says. But only because my balls aren't quite big enough to give you an ultimatum.



Tanzy directs me to park around the corner from her apartment and then meets me by the bike, her hands clasped in front of her as if she is going to pretend that she's shy. She stares at my motorcycle, cocks her head and looks at me, then nods, as if suddenly something makes sense.

Does that get you attention from lots of boys? she asks. She looks cute and friendly with not much make-up, baggy jeans, tight half-sweater; her boobs and flat stomach are probably always on display.

It got me the boy I have now, I tell her.

Keith makes a living designing graphics for high-end Web pages, but once a month he teaches a motorcycle safety course for beginners. I took his course about three years ago. Twice. I fell in love with Keith's garage before I fell in love with Keith; he has eight motorcycles from six countries, three continents and five decades. I've been riding ever since, picking from his garage for our weekend rides. Keith is my motorcycle hero. I want to be just like him if I grow up.

You look good on it, Tanzy says, really good. It does amazing

things for your butt.

Tanzy is so astute.

On the motorcycle correct posture puts my ass in the air, tilts it so that it's curved into a plump heart. Anyone behind me can almost but not quite see my crotch. Before I purchased my baby I rated every brand of Japanese sport bike for horsepower, brakes, reliability, comfort, and price. And then I made Keith stand behind me, beside me, in front of me, and tell me which one looked the best. The Ninja won the ass contest. Damn, baby, he'd said, they are going to look at you and think I'd fuck her if I could only catch her.

Please, I think, please please don't let him show up today.

The plan is for me to hide in Tanzy's apartment and wait for Pitt to show up. In her world, that's what this man she thinks I'm married to is calling himself. When I think about how this could go down my stomach feels like it's being dragged behind a ski-boat across a shallow reef.

Listen, I say, all my friends know just where I am today. I'm supposed to call them as soon as I'm done here.

I think about telling her I have mace in my purse but no cash, that I'm not even carrying an ATM card, but that seems over-the-top insulting.

Tanzy laughs and tells me not to worry.

Just come in and hide, she says. I want you to see him. I want you to see his face.

I'm really not married, I tell her, and my boyfriend is out of town.

Oh sure, she says, that's what he's told you.

He's registered at the hotel in New York, I tell her, I've called him there.

And I have. But only on his cell.

I end up perched on top of the dryer, Indian-style, as if I am meditating on the meaning of life or considering the existence of God instead of camping out in some stripper's laundry room, in the pitch black, nose almost touching the dusty slats of the louvered door, waiting to see if I am insane. This is moronic.

This is demeaning. Keith is in Albany, teaching state employees how to design rudimentary Web pages. I am positive that he is faithful. I am wrong and twisted to doubt him.

I can see into the sunny kitchen perfectly. I can see Pitt enter the apartment. He is pale and blond, tall. Intent and serious. More than a little sexy. He could easily play the villain in a James Bond film, minus the bizarre disfigurement.

I can watch them talk; I could probably listen. But it doesn't matter what he says to Tanzy or what she says to him. It doesn't matter that my legs are falling asleep and that I have to pee. It doesn't matter that when I tell Keith about this episode he will freak and Baker-Act my ass.

All that matters is it isn't Keith.

Not him. Not even close, I tell Tanzy after Pitt leaves.

You're kidding me, she says, her pretty face blank. That fucker.

Why exactly did you think I was his wife?

He broke up with me, she says, he just fucking dumped me. And he said that it was because of his wife. Because of you. It must be my mistake. Maybe he pointed to some woman behind you. Maybe there's another Jess.

Right, I say. He identified me by name?

And pointed you out in the club. It must just be my mistake. Now I'll have to find out who his wife really is.

So why did you tell me? I mean, why did you want to confess to this guy's wife?

I wanted him back, she says, or I wanted him in trouble. I'm not sure. I need a fucking drink.

I need to ride away on the Ninja, leave my obsessions and paranoia and distrust, escape this apartment into fast air.

Hey, Tanzy says to me before she closes the door, be careful, okay?

When I frown my confusion at her, her eyes harden and she looks away.

On that motorcycle, I mean.



Sometimes working with your best friends gets to be a bit much.

Keith will hate you forever, Briana says.

She looks up from the big silver bowl where she is turning romaine, croutons, parmesan, and Gin's homemade dressing into Caesar salad. I splash au jus over a small mound of roast beef and use my flat spatula to toy with the meat when I should just leave it alone, let it cook in its juices peacefully. The grill hisses and sizzles and hums loud enough so that I can't hear Briana's tongs scraping against the bowl, can't hear the printer spit out its tickets. The expo screams about an eight ounce filet, black and blue, solo, and I move away from Bri and towards the meat door of the fridge.

Her opinion about fidelity isn't something I trust entirely. All of her lesbian relationships are so much looser and hipper than anything I want. Half a dozen women moving in and out of each other's houses, swapping partners at parties. Orgies, I'm sure, when we have the right kinds of drugs. Probably in my bed while I'm passed out in the other room.

It's gotta be a trick, she says. I don't believe that he's just hoping that this last taste of freedom will make you want to commit.

Keith isn't like that, I tell her. He's not manipulative. And he knows me. He always says he knows me better than himself. Maybe he's right. Maybe this is what I need.

I consider the best case scenario, reach for our steak marinade, juice up the filet and grind fresh pepper blend onto its surface. I use my fingers to work the mess, massage the meat, and as I do this I start to make lists of men who I might fuck this week. The list just isn't that long, only three juicy fingers worth.

Forget it, Bri says. Heterosexuals can't handle this kind of open relationship. If you do this it will come back to bite you in the ass.

Maybe, I say. But I'm not the kind of person to say no, now am I?

I've never seen it, she says. Wanna fuck?

I'll consider it, I tell her. I'll put you on my list.

We get a little busier, but not so much that we need to call Gin in from the prep room. Bri seems to realize that I don't want to talk about Keith anymore. I enjoy moving together, working in concert without conversing, without thinking, moving efficiently, letting my hands and body do my job. I love the kitchen, love almost everything about my job. Unless I'm hung-over I even enjoy the heat.

I've always hated dealing with customers, so when I'm called out to talk to one of them I'm wary and grumpy. I put on a clean apron and my tall, stupid hat and roll down my sleeves.

The host points out the man who wants to praise me. I walk right up to the table, and Pitt is there, all alone, looking even sexier now that I am not looking at him through slats. Slightly more villainous, too.

I knew it had to be you, Jess, he says. On the grill today. Sauté, right? What an amazing steak. Perfect. The outside is seared, hard, peppery. And the inside is cool. Soft and rare.

I'm glad you enjoyed it, I tell him.

His eyes are pale – blue pretending to be gray.

You're an amazing chef, he says. I'd love to watch you cook sometime.

How do you know my name?

We have a lot of the same habits, know some of the same people. I've seen you here and there.

He lifts his coffee cup. He sips and sets it back on the table, never takes those eyes off of me.

Maybe I'll see you tomorrow night, he says. He leans back in his chair, crosses an ankle over a knee. Casual. With a half-smile that manages to look just too sexy to be sinister.

How's that? I ask. Where exactly do you know me from?

You usually go out, right? On Friday? To Gyration X? To Ellipsis?

Have we actually met?

I'm introducing myself now. Derek Pitt.

I can't even think of something semi-intelligent to say.

I know you're busy, he says, it's okay. Go on back to work.

I make a quick move towards his empty plate, to pretend there is a reason I am here. The steak is completely gone; there are only tracks where he dragged it through its sauce. He moves his hand toward mine, fast enough to touch me as I move the plate away, but stops with his fingers just an inch from my wrist. I want him to touch me. I will scream if he does.

I move quickly back into the kitchen. I want to look over my shoulder, but if I do he'll see my face, see what's going on there.

I pull the expo away from the plates she's garnishing with chopped parsley.

The one-top in smoking, I say. I need you to very carefully watch and see what kind of car he drives. Just go clean the brass or something as he's leaving and see what his car looks like.

Jesus, Jess, what the hell is wrong? she asks me.

Briana appears, asks what's going on.

That guy, I tell them, he thinks he knows me from somewhere. He's hitting on me and he creeps me out a little. I just want to see what kind of car he drives in case he's following me around.

Watching me, I think. How long have his eyes been on me?

Do you have a stalker, Jess? Mandy grins at me and wipes her hands on the apron tied around my waist before she leaves the kitchen.

He seems to know an awful lot about me, I tell Briana. He knew I'd be cooking today. He knows my name and where we go out. He says we have mutual friends.

You do have a stalker, she says.

I'm not listening to her. Not really.

He makes me weak in the knees, I say. He makes me buzz. There's some strange anatomy between my stomach and my clit that's boiling right now.

Oh, Christ, Jess. You are such a fucking freak.

It's a full rolling boil, I tell her.

Let's see, Bri says, just as Mandy swings through the door, should you fuck him, or should you call the cops?

You can't call the cops, Mandy says. This guy is a cop.

We both just stare at her.

White Caprice Classic with a couple of antennas and a DARE bumper sticker, she says.

Holy shit, I whisper.

This is exactly what I say four hours later, after my shift, standing in my own kitchen. In my absence, someone has washed all the grimy dishes that were in my sink this morning. And put them away. In the right places, no less. The red number on my digital answering machine is zero. When I left there were two messages from Keith. When he's out of town I never delete them just in case I need to hear his voice.

Above the answering machine, my calendar is flipped over from February to March; it was not that way this morning. The pin that holds it in the wall is still in its single hole. Right there on the calendar is my work schedule for this week. Tuesday prep, 1pm. Wednesday pizza-salad, 4pm. I was late because of my adventure at Tanzy's apartment. Thursday, today, sauté. Friday, sauté, 9:30 am. Gin usually gives Bri and I Saturday off, takes the day off herself. We usually need time to recover from our Friday nights.

The calendar also tells me that Keith flies in Saturday afternoon. In forty-eight hours I am supposed to be all his.



Friday night the pre-going-out phone call to Keith goes like this:

No regrets or recriminations? I ask.

None, he says. I absolutely promise. As long as you are mine when I step off of the plane.

And you're not going to sleep with anyone up there?

Silence.

I'm sorry, I say. I know it's completely unfair. I haven't even decided to do this.

Do it, he says. I am going to say this one more time. I have no desire to sleep with anyone but you. I am not going to sleep with anyone but you. You are the one who has commitment issues.

I love you, I tell him. I love you so fucking much.

I can see him looking at me with those wise eyes, later, if this falls apart, or even if it doesn't. I hate those wise eyes. I hate thinking that he's smarter, more experienced, better than me. I'll give him up in a heartbeat if I ever start to believe that.



Gin, Briana, and I buy our drugs in bulk. We do too many to be able to afford ten rolls at a time, or a couple of Ketamines. For example, if we buy four hits of X we'll probably pay twenty-five dollars a pill. That's pretty harsh for a four-hour high. We eat probably three or four or five a piece once or twice a month. On average. When we buy more than twenty at a time, the price slips down to somewhere around ten. We always try to buy at least twenty rolls.

And that's just Ecstasy, which is all we have left on this Friday night.

We don't have our dealer's home phone number; we always call to see when he's working and then meet him at Gyration X. Even if we could get in, I don't want to go anywhere I might see Pitt, not even for drugs. I do not know what to do about him yet.

Like he doesn't know right where you are, Gin says. He's probably watching us right now. His eyes are all over us.

She doesn't realize how much that turns me on.

We split our last two pills three ways (half for Gin, half for me, and one for Bri) and head out to a club, not Ellipsis, but some new rave club with DJs spinning house, trance, and jungle



in three different rooms. Temporarily, we decide, we will buy a little supply, pay premium club prices, just to get us through. We will buy X only; I won't purchase K or GHB from a stranger.

Bri and I leave Gin at the bar and move off to try and find a dealer. It's easy. You look for the little girls with lollipops and giant pupils and ask them where to buy. About one in four is fucked up enough to tell you the truth, especially if your pupils are giant, too.

Bri is blowing up full-bore and I am laugh-out-loud happy, my pulse mated with the music. I am in love with this music, with the fact that I can't hear myself think. We move through the crowd, Bri cutting a path, me behind her with an arm wrapped around her waist. We can't help but dance a little, but not too much, because we miss Gin. We never take her to buy the drugs. She owns the trendy bistro; she can't afford any trouble with the law. And we'd need her to hire us felons back the instant we got out of jail. Or rehab. Or both.

Until tonight this has always been a joke, a good-luck ritual that was supposed to keep us safe.

If you have to be arrested, I suggest you try it on X.

The money changes hands in a stall of the women's restroom. I make the buy from a girl with dyed black hair in pigtails while Briana hovers outside. The dealer tells me to enjoy and leaves before me. When the stall door closes I slide the lock closed before I place the ten pills into my purse. Everything is absolutely fine. Our evening can really begin.

And then I hear Briana laugh, and I realize that I have heard that laugh before, three days ago when this all started, when we got thrown out of the strip club.

I open the door to the stall and there are three men there, wearing dull-colored sport jackets and boring ties. Briana wears one on each arm. And Pitt, of course, is there for me.

If I close my eyes I can bury this panic, feel the drug still working, know that everything is going to be okay.

The dealer, I say to Pitt. Another woman in this town working for you?

The other cops are cuffing Briana.

Tighter, she says, oh, tighter.

I am not cuffed. Instead, two hands hover a hairs-length above my naked arms, make the distance between us an erotic tool, then descend. My skin wants them, and Pitt's hands are stronger than I expect.

Behind me, he pushes me out of the ladies room, through the crowd. I smile, I do not struggle, I walk with him. And I realize, in one of those Ecstasy-induced epiphanies, that the last three days are not about my commitment phobia, not about Keith.



A woman on a motorcycle is an easy target, Pitt tells me, an easy ticket. You never carry guns. You're never hopped up on something that will make you violent. You're a polite, middle-class professional. You don't challenge our authority. You never even talk back.

We are parked inside some kind of van with hard bench seats and a partition that turns this space into a box. He sits on one side, I am on the other, with five feet between us. I am forward. I am daring. I am going to be just fine. I am still rolling, of course. I stare right back into those pale eyes.

Tell me, I say. I want to hear it. Why are you watching me?

Jess, how can I not watch you? I have to follow you. I've absolutely had to. In my dreams I see your hair hanging out from underneath your helmet. Light brown and streaky. Flying. Flying straight out.

I decide to change the subject.

I lied when I said I've never seen you, I tell him.

I dare to find his eyes. He can see nothing but me. My lips, my trembling hands, my skin-tight pants. I am fucking gorgeous tonight. His eyes touch all of my body and try to slip inside. His mouth seems stuck in that half-smile; I have the urge to lick those lips.

That's the flaw, I think, for the Bond movie. A villain who

can't move his mouth any other way but this. Does the girl in the white bikini ever want to fuck the bad guy?

I saw you at Tanzy's. I know you told her we're married.

Listen, he says. I didn't want it to seem like I was stalking you. I asked her to tell you that. I set that up. I wanted you to know that I was here. That I was watching. I wanted you to think about that before we met. I thought you'd enjoy that. Was I wrong?

You did my fucking dishes, I tell him. You were in my apartment. You saw my calendar. That's how you knew I was on the grill yesterday.

And that's how I know your boyfriend is still out of town.

Jesus, I say.

It's not like that, he says. I saw you in the club with the motorcycle helmet and I stepped outside to see what you rode. The next time I followed you. And then I found out where you live. Work. Play. Who you play with. Finally, what you do that's illegal. Simple steps. Textbook surveillance. It just seemed like part of my job, part of what I do every day.

You could have been there when I was sleeping, I say. You could have seen me in the shower.

I haven't, he says. I haven't touched you until tonight.

Stalker chivalry, I think.

He moves to me, kneels on the floor, looks as if he wants to take my hand. Says:

You're so good. You're so amazing. Fluid, graceful. I never get tired of watching you move. You turn corners like a falcon diving. I can hardly keep up. Do you know what you look like on that bike?

I've suspected, I say.

The motorcycle is my secret weapon. Sometimes I ride without the heavy jacket, in just a tank top, and I love the stares. I love being something strange, exotic, automatically attractive. It's like stripping, except I only show my perfect parts, so I'm stripping in safety, knowing that all those eyes can't help but approve. In the best moments I feel bullet-proof.

I feel bullet-proof now, only two hours since that little half a pill went down my throat. I am going to get myself out of this.

I move my hands down to Pitt's, move them into his grip. It's easy. My body wants to do this. I move my knees apart, pull him very slowly towards me. He closes his eyes when his body touches my thighs. I am rolling just hard enough to really want him there, to want to wrap up the feeling I get when I kiss him, take it out later, chew it like caramel, get it stuck between my teeth.

But his tongue is strange in my mouth. It takes me a second to think about that, to remember not just who he is, but who I am, and why I am here.

One night, I tell him. You get one night. I can't offer you anything beyond that.

I don't know, he says. If I agree to that, it will just be because I need you so badly. I don't know if I'll accept that tomorrow.

I move a finger to his ear, trace tiny X's up and down the lobe.

I am hypnotizing you, I tell him. You are going to let Briana go. You are going to take me to my apartment to get some things. I will follow you back to your place and we will have our night. We'll talk about tomorrow tomorrow.



He is in his big white-whale car, the engine running, the window down, watching me slip into jacket, then helmet, then gloves.

There are three things in my head as I dress for the ride to his place.

One: There is a chance that Briana and I will go to jail. She'll have to understand, I think, the woman who will do just about anything for one kiss.

Two: I'll probably never buy drugs in this town again. I may not ever do them in this county, and no one will want to do them with me.

Three: The Ninja is a 600cc motorcycle, potentially a racing bike, with an after-market pipe, a K&N air filter, and a tooth removed from the rear sprocket. Keith did all this for me when I told him I wanted to be able to outrun the crotch-rocket morons who hang out in the Taco Bell parking lot, the boys who have bragged, on occasion, about outrunning police cars. I've always thought that they were morons to even try this.

When Pitt takes off I know that his eyes are on his rear-view mirror, watching me. I nudge the bike into gear and exhale slightly. I wish I could turn the headlight off. I wish I was in full leathers instead of these silly vanity pants. I wish I'd had race training.

I remember my promise to Keith never to ride the bike under the influence. Especially X, he'd said, because your eyes won't quite focus correctly, and you'll be overconfident about every turn you take.

I let Pitt go a half block, and when I see his brake-lights, I take off in the opposite direction. I crank hard on the throttle and squeal away, throw my weight forward to avoid a wheelie. I will not look behind me. It will take him some time to react, to turn that huge car around. This is my neighborhood and I can only hope I know it better than he does.

Second gear, third gear. I am about a half mile from I-75. I brake hard and downshift, turn left, just fucking shove the bike down to make it corner faster. I can feel him back there, with his wide cop-tires, his flashing lights. A huge engine.

And a radio.

I stay on the new road only a block before I cut left again. This time when I downshift, the engine screams louder than usual. I am at redline, and I have to slow down. I've never taken a corner like this.

I look in the rear-view. Nothing yet. I try to feel his eyes, feel that stare. I have been kidding myself, about a lot of things, but mostly about how people look at me on this motorcycle. I've ignored the fact that there are disapproving glares, that some men hate me for being able to ride this thing. For daring. I think

exotic, they think whore, or maybe they don't think at all, just see me and feel angry, impatient, infringed upon.

The highway is only a block ahead. I look back and see headlights, coming straight down the road. The headlights did not turn the same corner I did. That means that he is not back there, or that he knew I was headed for the highway all along.

I choose south, because the next exit is only two miles away. Since the bike accelerates faster than the car, I might be okay. North is disaster, a fourteen-mile stretch before another exit. Plenty of time for him to make up the distance between us.

I take the entrance ramp so fast, push the bike over so far, that I scrape my fucking knee against the tarmac. It feels like a living creature underneath me, licking and scarring the fake leather of my pants.

I roll on, running through my gears faster, more efficiently, than I ever have. The highway ahead of me is a canvas of darkness streaked with colored lights. I reach a hundred, move into the middle lane to pass some traffic, reach a hundred and ten, now in the left lane.

I look behind me, but the headlights only get farther away. They are blurry anyway, and at a hundred and twenty I realize that it's safer not to look back.

At a hundred and thirty I have to duck behind the fairing, press my breasts against the gas-tank, peek over the instrument cluster. Even with a full-face helmet, my eyes start to tear.

The next exit is half a mile ahead. I skip it. I push up past one hundred and forty. I will push this fucking bike all the way up to redline, maybe beyond. If I go fast enough, maybe the wind will shed my clothing, strip me right down to naked. If I go fast enough, who can stare at me then?

The next exit is two more miles away. I will take it. The airport is there. I will try to hide the bike, I will sit in the terminal, naked if I have to, for twelve or fourteen hours. I am going to meet that plane.

SUPPLICANT

CE Perry

Give the doe that extra  
glance of the road, a safer  
path through the ice.

Give me back your face,  
tearless and illuminated  
as it was that January night

in my car. Give us our lives  
before we learned that sedimentary  
rock is formed from hair

and fur: fragments pulled  
from their homes, then  
deposited elsewhere forever.

RED DELICIOUS

Jackie Bartley

Beside the road in a black encrusted snow bank,  
an apple, dark and whole, its meat after weeks

of freeze and thaw probably mush and tasting  
like water left in a glass for days by a sickbed,

nests in a remnant of snow that fell and fell,  
muting earth beneath its white cowl.

So near the school-bus stop I imagine a child  
must have dropped it while rushing to greet

friends or board the bus, abandoned it there  
in haste or searched without finding it. Later,

the solid heft of it missing from backpack or sack.  
The millisecond replay of its loss, like a drop

of blood vanishing in water. Or else it fell  
unnoticed, seeding that later discovery of absence

with the crystal of doubt. Growing in the time  
it took to look and then look again. How long

before, loss acknowledged, was desire shed,  
the curtain closed on all contingency?

Some of us might try hard not to think of the apple,  
or of the long burden of cause and effect.

While others, like you, perhaps, can shrug and say,  
*There was an apple, and then, it was lost.*



SNOW WATER

Sarah Seybold

For months after the August drought,  
when the pump parts dried up and broke,  
we hauled milk jugs filled with water  
to flush the trailer's toilet and wash the dishes.

Fall of my senior year, I tried to hide  
my grimy hair. Sat in the back of class,  
scratched the build-up on my scalp,  
collected white grease under my nails.

One day in January it finally snowed.  
My sister and I leaped through the yard,  
heaping full the bucket we took inside  
to our mother in her musty nightgown.

She stood at the stove, melting the gritty  
white scoops we gathered without gloves.  
I lowered my head over the plastic basin.  
She poured the warmed gray water.

I learned how little water was in snow,  
but my mother tried to make it enough  
to rinse away the cheap shampoo, the grease.

NATIONAL NOTHING DAY

Jack Miller

Brute resection by grade-school science,  
the cold-punched voice of authority,  
its corners sharp with unfiled edges:

*The human heart in no way resembles  
what you see in valentines.*

(Those bulbous cardioids drawn to a point,  
taut-skinned and tethered, straining  
against some secret and enormous weight.)

*To observe the approximate size and shape  
of your own heart, make a fist.*

So: the ventricular base of the thumb.  
The digits that echo great vessels.  
The whitened atrial knuckles squeezing

—what? Pumping what? Decades dripped  
unnoticed from these imperfect seams

before I recognized the absurdity  
of judging a heart by the size of a fist.  
I never even heard the pop.

They also said *it's what's inside that matters*.  
I prise each finger back to look.

THE CRUCIFIX

Alex Dimitrov

My father's gold crucifix hung  
from his neck in a kind and devastating way.  
It lay hidden under his shirt and apron,  
wait staff uniform then blazer, when he finally  
found a good desk job. Walking through the living  
room after work he'd slowly loosen the knot  
of his tie, teasing it with his fingers and  
unbuttoning that top button every man  
must hate so much. From there it took him  
only seconds until the cotton trailed behind  
his back, shirt fully undone, allowing me to  
notice the tense drops of sweat which ran down  
from his armpits, the stains forming delicate rings  
around his sleeves. And when he sat down  
on the couch to rest his head back, Adam's apple  
sharply gleaming, palms left open on his thighs –  
I'd stare at that gold crucifix which sank so low,  
our Jesus buried deep inside his chest hair,  
closer to my father than I ever got  
and claiming the best part.

SIDEBAR

Melanie McCabe

None of us ever dreamed she could do something like that. After all, a bell is just a hoopskirt of bronze until you peep beneath and find the clapper—or until you make it ring.

She dyed her hair the color of oxygen, painted round her eyes with something drab as twigs. Did she have a mouth, a tongue? We never noticed, but now, knowing

what we know, we're supposing that she did. Just so, a trapdoor spider. Just so, one of those nightmare plants that does unspeakable things inside covert lips.

There were never any words. She had a kind of hum, like white noise. We never heard beneath it that other song, its pitch so shrill even the dogs let it alone.

She smelled like nothing we knew—a scent that neither pricked the nose nor arched the spine. It was dry as hourglass sand, the null of kindling before it pops with flame.

How then this spoor tracked to so much mayhem? We've thumped theories like melons since we heard, but haven't uncovered a clue. Still, we're happy to tell you everything

we can imagine and then some. How she leaned against walls and looked exactly like them. How her name spilled thick ink but wrote nothing in the air. Come back

tomorrow, and we'll tell you more: how under the rocks in her yard, there were things that crawled. How what squirmed needed only a lifted stone, a witness to make it true.

SUMMER NIGHT BREEZE, 1976

Erin Lynn Cook

Claudia was very small and dreamed of being big. Inside her bed at night she would count days, like sheep, imagining each one holding hours of growing.

Dr. Kuljin had told her not to fret. "Don't fret," he'd say to her. "You will aspire to do great things."

"But when will I grow?" she'd ask again and again. Her tight fists wrapped around the white paper covering the examination table.

Dr. Kuljin just turned to her mother and asked if she was sleeping comfortably. Always the adults would turn away.

On a day like today, Claudia went outside to play. She was allowed to wander the back yard as long as she promised not to wedge herself between the bars of the pool fence. There in the unusual stillness of the spring day she turned over stones to find the hibernating toads. They lived along the wooden fence under the heavy rocks that kept the dog from digging out. Each one she turned had a community of insects, arachnids, and beetles. There were black widows huddled in bundles of thick black legs, hiding their visible red splotch for fear of death. There were roly-polys wrapped up inside themselves when the stones were first turned and then splaying their legs out eagerly when they saw the light. Claudia liked roly-polys best. She'd capture them quickly and let them warm on her skin until they crawled like pets up her wrists. She usually had a collection of them in a discarded kitchen cup kept up on the porch. Then there were the water beetles, big and clumsy, looking stupid in their enormity. And finally she found what she was searching for, the eyes of a toad.

It seemed to squint at her from the dirt. Too bright, it seemed to be saying. She poked at it with a stick. Not hard, she knew better than to try to harm them. It hardly stirred, a blink or two were the only indications of life. The weather felt warm enough to her, so Claudia urged the sleepy toad out with her finger. One

hop, two hops, and then it sat like a smaller stone. Too stiff and cold to move any farther. She picked it up and tucked it into her pocket for warmth.

There was a swing set. She had had to argue for months with her mother and father to get it. They saw her small stature as arrested age. A perpetual four year old, barely tall enough for the dragon roller coaster in the kiddies play land. She was nine and knew when adults patronized her. They finally relented.

The play set had monkey bars, a slide, a sand pit, and two swings. She climbed to the top of the slide and out over the edge to sit on top of the monkey bars. Her legs dangled between the bars. She was conscious of the toad—she wasn't a child!—and felt the side of her pocket gingerly to make sure it had ample room.

Up on top she felt the stillness give way to moving air. She could see into the neighboring yard and heard the rowdy loud boys next door. They threw mud against the cement fence and made underground forts with shovels. The oldest was younger than her by several months.

Claudia arched her back and tried to see them. "Hey!" she yelled.

"What!" one of them yelled back.

"Look up, can you see me?"

"No." It was Harry, the eldest. He was tall. He could reach her monkey bars with his whole hand and palm them, pulling himself up with ease, and swing his legs through the bars to sit with her. She liked it when he came over.

"Climb up on the fence. Look over."

Harry obeyed. Claudia could hear his feet scraping against the cinder block fence and then finally saw his head pop up, like toast, over the edge. He leaned awkwardly on his elbows, a look of pain around his eyes. "Oh, yeah. I see you. Hey, can I come over?"

She nodded.

A foot, then a knee appeared next to his elbows, and then the fence became a door and Harry was in her backyard. He

was always nasty-mean at first. Like her toad, he had to warm up to the idea of her. His blood had to thin and flow, loosening his mood like tendons until he could freely be himself in her presence. Claudia knew this and was patient.

"You're nuts," he said.

"Why?"

"Because. You just are." Harry stuck his hands into his back jeans pockets and stepped on a moving snail. His shoe was muddy and the snail shell crunched.

"That wasn't nice."

"Yeah, so?"

Something Harry never did any more was call Claudia small. She appreciated it, but had fought for it. He used to stick his elbows on her shoulders and laugh. Or he'd put his chin on top of her head, and although she kind of liked that, she knew he was insulting her. Finally she'd had enough and kicked him repeatedly in the shins. She had yelled at him, "Harry Hosfield, I might be smaller than you, but I can give you bruises you'll cry about!" She had won his respect and he never made mention of her size again. She felt, next to Harry, equal, as if she could see into his eyes like a compass—east to west—horizontally—with nothing separating them save boy and girl.

He moved his head from side to side, stretching his neck muscles, and then shrugged his shoulders to crack his back and finally his knuckles, one, two, three. He had to physically warm up to her. She saw his nasty mood slip away like snake skin. His face opened up and he looked at her anew. He walked under the monkey bars and did just what she wanted. He put his hands straight up and grasped a bar in each fist, then he pulled. His shirt rose at his stomach and his pants slunk down to reveal the waistband of his underwear. He swung back and forth then dropped back to the ground. Instead of climbing up to her, he sat on a swing and began the lengthy process of swinging higher.



Dr. Kuljin's office smelled of Lysol. There was a sick-child entrance and a well-child entrance. Both doors led to the same waiting room and Claudia thought it ridiculous. The first time she walked boldly into the sick child entrance her mother had tried to hold her back. "You're not sick," she had scolded. Claudia had rolled her eyes and kept walking, her mother double-stepping to keep up with her small daughter.

"Hi, Claudia, new shirt? It's cute." The receptionist, Gloria, knew her and kept her file handy. Claudia liked her because she spoke to her like an adult. She didn't mind that people treated her special; she knew it was just something they had to do. There were two ways adults responded: one was to be very protective of her, watching out for her, making sure others didn't say rude things, and the other was to treat her as if she were older than she was and take the opposite approach and treat her like an adult. That was her favorite way of being treated special, like an adult.

"Oh, thanks, Gloria, I chose it to match this skirt." Claudia put her arms out to her sides to demonstrate the effect. What she didn't tell Gloria was that it had to be purchased in the toddler section. That was too embarrassing. What she also didn't tell Gloria was that she didn't even pick it out, it was all her mother's choice. She didn't go clothes shopping. Something unspoken happened a couple of years before between Gloria and her mom. Her mother began coming home with outfits for Claudia to try on, and Claudia never asked where they came from. It became one of the many little games to play.

"Go on in to room two."

Claudia didn't have to be shown to the examination rooms anymore. She knew the office like her own home. She knew where the gowns were kept inside the top left drawer of the table. She removed all but her underclothes and then lifted her arms up over her head to slip a gown on. She had told Dr. Kuljin that she expected to be treated like a young lady, and that meant gowns. He had gladly shown her the drawer. Her visits had increased since the decision. A specialist was meeting with Dr. Kuljin and



her parents at the office. A determination would be made about her potential for stability after the surgery.

Dr. Kuljin had been opposed to her parents' idea at first. "I'm telling you, you've quite a young lady here. I don't think you truly understand what you're going to put her through. She will do great things no matter her size." He said only once in her hearing his real fear—"It's very experimental"—and that was said so low that she had to work the words around in her mind until she correctly formed what she had heard.

At times they still talked above her head, spelling out certain words, as if she were two. And there were times when she didn't mind Dr. Kuljin's advice—she liked the motivation to aspire to great things despite the odds. But reality was she wanted height and so did her parents. It was a family decision, like conception, Claudia was their child, and if they had it in their power to help her grow, they would do it.



"Can you hear me down there?" Claudia asked Harry. She watched the top of his brown-haired head as it tipped like a bottle to reveal his face on the backward swing. His nose was small, and his mouth tightened into a hard grin with each pull of his legs. His two front teeth were big, but Claudia saw power. He could get to swinging high faster than any kid on the playground. He had strong legs.

"No!" Harry managed to spit out.

"Well, obviously you can."

He shook his head.

"I'm going to be inside all summer."

"Why?" He made a quick motion of his eyes up to hers. Her legs dangled just inches from where his swing was connected to the beam. If she had wanted to, she could entangle his chain in her shoe, and possibly hurt them both.

"That's just what they said."

At school Claudia was a grade above Harry. They didn't

have the same lunch, but occasionally they passed each other on the playground as she was going in and he was coming out. Sometimes he'd catch himself and wave at her without thought. She'd laugh and wave back, knowing that his hand would soon discover his embarrassment and dart back to his side. He was never too cruel, just not the same as he was at home in their own yards.

Harry's swing went high up over the top of the backyard fence. He had once told her that he wanted to make it go all the way around, like a Ferris wheel car; he could hold on tight, he had assured her. His face grimaced as if in pain. Claudia knew what he'd do next. She'd seen him do it a handful of times. She gripped the monkey bars tight in anticipation. It was a thrill to see, the idea of soaring out over land, only her body between the air and grass. The bars were shaking from his steady pace. Up and down, in and out, there was technique, of course, and Harry seemed to have it mastered. On the downward flow he put his legs straight out before him and arched his back. Then he let go of the chains, and as his body flew forward, he reformed into a crouch, then landed on the lawn in a run. If he was angled just right, he could avoid the fall.

Claudia clapped as if he were a circus performer. He threw his hand up in the air and waved her praise away. She wanted to tell him more about her procedure. That's what her parents were calling it, but Dr. Kuljin kept referring to it as the surgery. The specialist had predicted a seventy-five-percent chance of gaining up to four inches and a fifty-percent chance that the bones would begin to expand on their own, even after they healed. That seemed like a mile high to Claudia. She had read the information packet and knew that the higher the percentage, the greater the chance, and the percentage of patients who reached heights over five feet was in the twenties. But still, there was that chance.

"Why would you want to stay inside all summer? I don't get it." He had been listening, she knew he had.

"The doctors said it will take up to six months to recover from

my surgery," she said, feeling the words of Dr. Kuljin leave her mouth.

"What surgery?" Harry walked back towards the play set.

Claudia thought fast of something that would make him grab hold of the bars and come up to her nesting spot.

"They're going to cut my legs open and then break my bones."

That was it. She had given sufficient drama to the words *cut* and *break*.

"Gross!" Harry put one fist and then another onto bars just three over from where she sat. He pulled, and Claudia could see small striations in his wiry arms where his muscles worked to pull his legs, then his body, up to the top of the set. He was just close enough that Claudia could imagine him trying to save her if she fell. She wouldn't though; that was something only clumsy people did, and Claudia prided herself on her agility.

"Remember? I told you last week."

"Yeah, but I thought you were just trying to impress me."

"Nope. It's true. They're going to make me taller." At the mention of height Claudia noticed Harry give an instinctual flinch. She knew he didn't feel comfortable with it.

He moved his head from side to side as if he were smelling something interesting, or as if he were trying to avoid a conversation. She felt a tickle in her pocket and remembered her toad. She paused. If she pulled the toad out Harry might grab it and be mean. If she left it in her pocket, he wouldn't have something to grab from her. She pulled it out gently and kept her other hand cupped over the top so it wouldn't hop out.

"What's that? A toad?"

"How do you know?"

"Because of how you're holding it, duh. Let me see."

"Are you going to hurt it?"

"Nah."

"You squished that snail, I saw you."

"Yeah, probably heard it, too. Let me see it, I won't hurt it."

She continued to hold both it and Harry's attention. "I want to tell you what I heard my mom say to my dad. Then I'll let

you have it.”

Harry nodded.

“She said it’s going to be horrible. And that I won’t be able to move for at least three months. That I’ll have to be carried everywhere, including you-know-where. I’ll have to have medicine because my legs will hurt.”

Harry looked right into her eyes for the first time that day. He looked deep and she felt him. It was almost as if he were stepping into her brain to take a look around, peek behind the brainy folds for truth or lies. Finally he shook his head.

“What? Why’d you do that?” she asked. Unsure of his attention.

“Nothing. Okay, I listened to you, now let me see the toad.” He held his hand palm-side-up next to hers. His skin was warm. With his other hand he made a ceiling, like she was doing, so he could keep his promise. She carefully unfolded her fingers and exposed the still sleepy toad. It had peed on her palm, but she didn’t mind. Harry Hosfield’s hand was touching hers.



Her bed was too warm. The sheets hadn’t been changed in a couple days, and they felt sultry and filled with her own oils. Her mother did her best to keep her fresh; she sprayed Lysol around her furniture and kept her wash basin clean with bleach. The room still had an odor of disease and decay. Though Claudia didn’t consciously think of being sick, she felt it.

To her left was a table filled with her knick-knacks. Books and writing pads, colorful paper with scrolls of hearts and flowers, were piled in a jumble on the shelf below. Her mother had purchased the paper, certain that Claudia had friends to correspond with during her recovery. I don’t have anyone’s address, Claudia had complained. I don’t know where they live. Her mother had assured her if Claudia would write them, she would find them. “What about your friend next door? What’s his name?”

Claudia didn't answer and busied herself with an encyclopedia. It was L, and she looked up the word Library—too dull. She had learned the Dewey Decimal System at school—Lorrie, short but funny; Luxemburg; and then she wanted B for Belgium, but her assortment of encyclopedias near her bed were only L-M and Q. What kind of encyclopedia had only one volume for Q? Her mother kept chatting, pulling her drapes aside to reveal the summer morning. Her chatting echoed like a bird inside Claudia's mind. Underneath the up-lifting voice of her mother was guilt, and Claudia didn't want to hear it. Her mother had nothing to fear.

"It's okay, Mom. I'll just write them and you address them, alright?"

It seemed a gift of forgiveness, and her mother smiled shyly as she left her daughter to her own thoughts.

She put the encyclopedia aside and perused her assortment of other books. Since the surgery she had wandered through the lives of Charles Wallace and Meg, of Lucy, Edmond, Peter, and Susan. She was at that exciting stage in her reading where she could do a balancing act between the worlds of picture books and chapter books. She could easily embark on interior voyages with both. In her hand was a book by a Russian author writing about the adventures of an imaginative boy searching for little people. The illustrations were so finely detailed, that though she had been on her bed for six weeks, when she stared into the intricate line drawings she settled there. She was inside the ship looking out at the curiously large boy.

But though the readings kept her occupied for much of her day, she spent another portion listening to records. A small portable record player could be placed just next to her on a rolling table. When the pain came on strong, she would ask her mother to play her the story book records of Bartholomew and the Oobleck and Yertle the Turtle and Gertrude McFuzz—who wanted the most beautiful tail that finally hindered her flight—they took the pressure off her imagination and allowed the pain medication to take effect. Dr. Kuljin had told her parents the pain should subside in a couple

of weeks. He had written the prescription for only fourteen days, but had okayed the refills her parents had requested.

Around two o'clock every day Claudia felt the dull pain increase to sharp pin pricks then to piercing foils until she could stand it no longer. She would ring the small hand bell on her night stand until her mother came in with the codeine syrup. The recorded voices of Bartholomew and Yertle and Gertrude, crackly through so many turns under the needle, softened her mind to let the medicine flow.

After sometimes hours of dozing she would wake to see the shadows falling onto her shelf filled with her acrylic life-like horses. They were stagnant in motion. Her favorite was a black stallion in a full run. Wind sweeping his mane and tail, right foreleg raised in anticipation of coming down again some distance beyond to gain more speed. She imagined herself upon that horse, grasping his mane and seeing clods of bright green Kentucky blue grass flying up and behind her as they flew through endless fields. She felt small enough, still, to do it.

The codeine once-a-day increased to two, and she began receiving another dose around bed time.



There was a scratching on her window screen; it faced the backyard and was left open to allow the summer night's breeze into her stuffy room. The curtains were still open and the sky had become nothing but stars. She flicked on her bedside light and shut it off again quickly. It was a silly thing to do, everyone knows you can't see outside in the dark with a light on inside, and she waited for her eyes to adjust again. She wondered if the noise had been real.

"Hey," said a voice. "You awake?"

She pushed hard on the bed with her fists to push her body and the heavy casts up into a sitting position. The pillows didn't follow her and made her back feel as awkward as her front.

"Harry?"

"Yeah. Can I come in?"

"How?" She could hear him snort at her questioning of his abilities. She saw him push the screen forward until the springs popped that held it in place, then he pushed it up and angled it out, and in a moment the window became a door and Harry Hosfield was in her room. Claudia switched her light back on, and he squinted instinctively at the sudden glare.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"I dunno, my folks are watching Johnny Carson."

"How did you get out?"

He snorted again, and this time Claudia could watch him turn his head away from her question. "Easy," he said.

He took in her room. The record player had been rolled to her dresser, and that caught his attention. He flicked on the switch and waited until the turn wheel was moving fast enough, then he expertly placed one finger under the tone arm, lifted it, and moved the needle gently onto the revolving record. He sat at the foot of her bed, and she could feel the depression of his weight. He had grown, she thought, in the last six weeks. The announcer's voice came on too loud, he turned the volume down, and then it moved into Gertrude's whiny voice, dissatisfied with her dreary, ugly, too-short tail.

"How was your birthday? Did you get anything neat?" Claudia wondered if Harry would be scared away by her remembrance of his July birthday. He had been nine now for two weeks.

"Aw, you know. Just stuff." He wandered over to her horse shelf and picked up a rearing mare. "What do you do with these?"

"Play with my Barbies. They like riding on them. I get two every year from my Grandma." Claudia pulled the sheet up a bit around her waist. It didn't bother her that she was in her nightgown, nothing much about Harry bothered her. She knew what he wanted to ask her, but she also knew that he wouldn't. "Do you want to see my casts?"

He turned back to face her. A look of embarrassment on his face.

"What do you want? I mean, do you want me to?" he said.

She shook her head and felt like she floated. Sometimes things swirled. Whatever growth her marrow may be doing, it was causing her legs to feel like rubber bands stretched too thin.

"Can you turn that off? I've already listened to it twice today."

He obliged her.

"I want to know how come you haven't visited me?" Claudia wasn't sure where her boldness was coming from. Maybe it was because she needed to use the toilet.

He scratched his head, and she was afraid he might fly out the window again.

"I don't know, Mom says you're having a hard time. Does it hurt?"

"Yes, a lot." The words that needed speaking were out of her. She felt relief.

"I brought you something." Harry reached into his shorts' pocket and pulled out a wiggling, army-green toad. He didn't hold it securely enough and it hopped out onto Claudia's pink quilted bedspread folded at the foot of her bed. They laughed loudly as Harry scrambled around the bed. He caught the toad as it soared out over the edge of the mattress, bound for freedom in her house. He cupped his hands carefully and brought it over to her.

"Do you want it? I've got loads more. The drainage pond was filled with polliwogs this year. I got a bucketful, and now they're hopping all around the neighborhood." His face was animated, and Claudia was able to look unabashedly at his brown eyes rimmed with thick lashes.

Claudia shook her head. "Leave him outside my window, okay?"

"Guess I'd better get going. Your folks might come in."

Harry hesitated, then reached a hand out to her arm. Claudia could feel his fingers press down, and when they lifted, they remained.

He climbed back out the window and put the screen back



in place, leaving it unhooked from the inside, of course. For everyone knows you can't hook a screen from the outside. Claudia could hear him still outside.

"What are you doing?" she called.

"Digging a hole. I'll put him in here and this stone on top like a roof. He'll like this home."

"I wish I could see."

"You will."



On her tenth birthday, Claudia walked. The leaves had turned and dropped. School had begun, and the new corduroy pants she had looked forward to wearing had indeed become too short. To another girl, the difference in length would go unnoticed. Her parents celebrated her new year with a cake in the shape of a doll and a bottle of champagne. Her gift was a new record, "It's a Small World," with all the songs from the Mickey Mouse Club that she loved. When she opened it, her initial reaction was pleasure, but as she let it sit on her lap and picked off the plastic coating, pain seeped into her shins and thighs. She felt the needles, then the swords, piercing her legs until it was unbearable. She knew what it was. She had heard Dr. Kuljin whisper it to her mother when he came to the house to check up on her. He had said her mother was not being strong, he would not fill the prescription again, Claudia would need to break free of the codeine. He had raised his voice at her mother. She heard the words culpable, kidneys, failure, addicted, all jumbled together.

The record covered her lap like a napkin. The vinyl seemed to heat up and the colors blurred into messes of pinks, blues, turquoise, and purple. She felt nauseous. The faces of the Small World children mashed together like oatmeal, and then Claudia's head fell to her lap.

When she awoke she was in her bed again. The success of walking had disintegrated, leaving her trapped inside the sheeted

cocoon again.

From her father's hi-fi stereo she heard Barbara Streisand singing of second sight—a gift of seeing well beyond the present. The sun was bright. How long had she slept? She heard the school bus honk for the Hosfield boys next door. It stopped in front of their house. Harry was a late sleeper. Since his gift of a toad he had come to her room—the screen still unnoticed and unlatched—several times. Each time he brought something from the yard. Sometimes she was drowsy from a dose. He never stayed more than a few minutes. He always touched her arm as he left.

His bones were strong. Claudia noticed how even his jaw had grown. He had lost another tooth, and there was such a difference between the two baby teeth he had left and his adult teeth. They were so large in his mouth. His hands, too, seemed long, and his feet, mostly bare, had toenails growing past his toe, jagged from where he had snagged one or two. His father was over six feet tall—a former athlete—and Claudia saw in him Harry's potential height.

She heard his mother shout his name, and the bus gears grind in departure, a screen door slammed, and the sound of running shoes down the sidewalk. Harry had missed the bus again. Soon his footfalls would resume to a walk and he'd have to go the distance alone.

She shivered, and sweat formed unexpectedly on her brow. She looked at her arm and saw the familiar pale cast of invalid in her tone. She held her hand out in front of her and saw it shake, this time so much harder than before. She clutched the sheet and screamed for her mother.

Her mother came in with a tray. A glass of milk and a cool washcloth on top. There was no bottle of syrup anymore. Claudia cried at the sight.



When Claudia finally walked outside, the air was still and chilled. There were Christmas light bulbs hanging from eaves, looking clumsy and bright in the dark. A teacher had been assigned to bring her work—keep her studies up! was the goal. Her reading had increased. She was reading of Pip and Jane and Emma, characters from the past, but filled with purpose. Harry snuck her a Judy Blume novel. He hadn't read it, of course, but had heard it had some bad stuff in it.

Christmas vacation was a week away, but she was going to go back to school. Her legs were strong, and she accompanied her mother to the department store in hopes of being able to purchase in her age section. No one stared at her strangely when she pulled a pair of gauchos from the rack. They fell far below her knees, but not to the floor, and she insisted that they fit.



Claudia went out early to wait for the bus. She had on her new clothes and stood with her books by the curb. Now that Harry was in the next grade up, they would share the same lunch recess. She wondered if things would change.

She sat behind the driver. He knew her from the year before. Harry's little brother ran on just before the swinging doors shut. He climbed up the steep steps—the steps that used to seem a mile high to Claudia, and she had just used them with ease—flushed from the cold air. He glanced at her briefly, a tight little smile, and then heard his name and headed to the back.

Claudia saw her mother in the front window, coffee in hand, a smile of accomplishment on her face, and she waved. Claudia, too, felt some pride. After all, it had been a family decision. The experiment was over.

The bus driver shifted down and she smelled the familiar exhaust and heard the gears grind and felt the bus lurch forward. She heard a yell and looked out her window. Harry was running fast to catch up.

"Can't you stop?" Claudia asked the driver. She saw him

glance in the rear view mirror at her and for a reason she believed was pity, he braked, and the doors hissed open.

Harry Hosfield climbed on board. His head held high, his brown hair swept low over his forehead. His lunch bag clutched in his hand.

"Thanks!" he said to the driver.

He stepped forward along the black rubber mat. His shoe was untied and his mis-matched socks slunk down to his ankles.

The toe of his shoe paused near the base of her seat. She felt his brown eyes look down at her head, her hand splayed across the top of a book, fingers wide. His free hand dangled down, his fingers hovered near her shoulder.

If she tilted her head up the moment would be gone, so she kept her face down and watched his calves as he walked away.

It wasn't her job to stunt his growth.

AT FIRST SIGHT (A CARDINAL NUMBER)

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

Helen Keller's *Three Days to See*

(understudying Russell Edson)

The apple is first rolled across the floor, bounced, bruised like her forehead, like her small brown tired eye. The apple tosses, itself a tennis ball, against all four walls – still she thinks it's the parrot out of its cage, out all four walls. When it finally dribbles to land against her shoe, a knob, soft knock, she thinks it the rain and how it moves to a stop, the way she only wished of her every day.

These days, it's all been about apples, and sometimes oranges the rest of the time.

"This is what an apple feels like, Helen."

"This is what an apple smells like, Helen."

"This is what, Helen, an apple tastes like...."

There's saliva all over the apple now, like her tongue, the wallpaper she's wrapped around her waist like a wedding lehnga, its train like a red carpet, the labrador chewing on its tuareg patterns. These pictures too would speak magenta parables for Helen, figural, scrungy hyperbole unloosed.

Repeating a name doesn't make it ring true, a troika sans Russian horses, triune but its menorah flames never meeting.

Repeating a name doesn't dwarf the metaphors that already glut her mind, excessive, cataractal.

In an instant, she'll know knowledge, what it looks like, and the differences that exist within it, room against room, pane watching pane, the air before and after the honeymoon rain.

"But I wanted the apple on the table," she says, dealing her cards, her mannish hands, her three of hearts. "I wanted it as it always was."

Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*  
(understudying Charles Baudelaire)

Writers – seeing, sighted writers, that is – have the bad habit of making their blind protagonists wise.

Every blind bat is a bloody savant!

With mysterious “seeing” powers that look into the souls of the sighted.... we are inevitably myopic and damaged. They are the ones consecrated, sacrosanct, inviolable. They are the ones divinely consigned mysterious hands and mysteriously faultless morals and such discernment, and mastery of all senses except of course, the one cardinal sense they ultimately crave but must never ever have... could there be any other more banal analogue, so amplified and overworked, to shore up humanity's lack of vision?

So every blind man's story becomes a speculative fiction, every magically realist tale asking us, the sighted, questions about insight, about what it means to truly agonisingly bitingly “see”. In the way apostrophes seem to accent specific ironies, give them high diction like a series of invocations, Gordian knots piled into this Persian.

How they stump, how they weigh in heavy, deep.

Hell, if I wanted patronising, I'd rent the movie about that blind massage therapist, going Swedish and Shiatsu, falling in love with Mira Sorvino, our trusty vapid Mighty Aphrodite suddenly stupendously turned Delphic caretaking oracle. And who can resist Val Kilmer as the Man with the Hands, his big, handsome hands? Never to live down the Blind-as-Batman batty jokes that ensued....

Now there's a character with real super-heroic sensibilities, replete with all its wounded sensitivities, obsessive compulsions, no compunctions, what with not really having any bona fide suprapowers but one more cloak-and-daggering Gothamite nonetheless.

A high, unseen gargoyle looking like the devil precisely to scare the devil, away and out from under.

If I wanted to know blindness, I'd sneak right up next to that numinous father decked out in his resplendent chasuble, aquamarine-beryl green, sequinned like catty emerald eyes.

I'd see him praying and listen in, precious and primal.  
Has he reconciled himself with himself, and with God?  
And what of our little venial encounter all those years ago....

"Herein my act of contrition burning, burning, burning!"

Alas, I am Blind! I am but Blind to the world!  
Blind to myself! Blind to every fuckin' penitent moment  
when I thought I could not think for myself!

C. S. Lewis' *Man Born Blind*  
(understudying Walter Benjamin)

It's not nice to lead a blind man to the edge of a cliff, it's just  
not nice. But the painter was far enough away, and only telling the truth:  
He had come to catch the light, trapped at morning like a flammable water,  
sparkles, flares in a baptismal font.

Did the Man Born Blind die in the fall?  
Did he too catch the light?  
And did he fly? Did he fly high, riffs, not knowing why?

The cliff indicts itself: it is the ending of all stories. It leaves all  
our ideas to hang, a more persistent ambit of all we glisten heuristic to  
disclose. It fringes all our loud, bawdy dialects, bandied round and about,  
everything we see plainly corralled, with posts and stakes and knives.

Whither the man on the cliff who institutionalises himself?  
I institutionalise myself, manacle around muscle, forever beholden.  
You institutionalise yourself thus, forever incumbent.

He is mad, a madman made pointless, strangely larger than life  
like all our monuments, all our life-long moments. He too has been  
deprived of his senses, blinded, hopefully but momentarily,  
like the towns beneath him. In the towns, there are smaller plazas  
bigger than towns, the houses more ratty and thereby begrudging,  
the markets seedier, the corners darker, all the children smaller  
but more alarming.

Hungry, hostile. Absent.

"Is this light? These bulbs?" His fingers run across the chandelier.

"What about this? This flame? Is this what light is?"

"And why call this lightning? Why the sound, its continuance?"

Who can blame the Man Born Blind? Who can blame his wife for never knowing, never knowing what to say, or not to say?

At least he knows his way now, around what he calls "home and mother country", the nave of it with its small cottages, where the newspaper man sets up and talks shop, the pawnier behind his iron grills, the park benches with their wrought iron curves. Every town has the peculiar-familiar of birthplaces and the high-wire disequilibrium of the city.

To The Man Born Blind, this town is like every other town: it's Headroom. It apprehends, with its own Doric columns, north aisles, south aisles, the transept that separates, the transept that always separates.

It gets preachy no matter which way you wing this arc.

An institution remains watchful, it knows how to watch like a gatekeeper. Then a harbinger. So you are reminded of the dooms. Of your bitter ends, our never making it beyond our own gullies, our own sad fears. The way we all never take that extra step, to say this is our courage, this is what we do together in this panopticon, this is what it means to be visionary, this is what it means to be a town.

I wish we could look at what surveys us with the gaze of institutions, such a sovereign state, what it's like to be cruciform in it.

But he is a cathedral, caked, as am I.

He is even his wife, his acolyte; he is her cohesion and tenacity.

He has his hands too, and they table him his unanswered questions.

He is rained in, homily in a stoup, but he is what we will remember our likely death by, anima christi a near friend, and at hand.

Next to another unholy puddle.



I NEVER INTEND TO, HOW 'BOUT YOU?

Christopher Citro

It's eight o'clock. Time to plug the ladder in. I love our new ladder, the way it glows bright blue when the juice is flowing. I agree with you: our friends are no use to us anymore. I left a message on the machine saying, "Hello. Thanks for calling the so and so residence. Please don't do it again, though." Hopefully, that'll do the trick. I hate being interrupted when we're watching the ladder. The way it glows there, propped up in the corner... It's like it was made to be here in our house shining all night long just so we can sit and watch and tell each other all the different things we imagine we'd reach if we climbed it.

AT NIGHT WITH THE DEAD

Greg Nicholl

Scent of wildfire and silence  
wakes me:  
the hum of the fridge released; that click,  
then nothing.

Wind has set loose the gables—  
a wind that carries on it the dead.

Soon the power will surge,  
send the clock back  
to its flash of midnight

despite the hour  
pressed against the house,  
its breath against the glass.

In the yard a child crosses the lawn,  
cowers beneath the dogwood.

I open the door—  
ritual smoke mixed with rain,  
incense and burnt cedar.

This is the closest I've come to acceptance.

Tomorrow, I will collect  
the severed buds of the iris  
three days from blooming,  
their sepals folded against the cold.

THEY SAID IT WAS INEVITABLE

Sarah J. Den Boer

Her escape to the ocean usually told the story.

The view from the hallway was similar.

A storm of arms and skin. Sheets ripped

and twisted on the floor. Veins on her legs

spreading like shredded blue yarn, her skin

slowly drooping like the creep of water

across a slanted floor. It wasn't always like this. Riding

her tricycle down the driveway, pulling up

carrots from the garden, greens dangling.

Overalls with patches on the knees. But eventually

it's all lyrics of the thigh, soft and dimpled. Eating

deviled eggs in the bathroom, hiding behind

the shower curtain. The yellow light of early morning

not so giving, even when a waxwing

looks on. On days like this, she feels

her tonsils swell in her throat, sacks of blood vessels

growing plump. She imagines disappearing up

the inside of a chimney. Crawling, using only

her fingernails. Coals at the bottom. Legs pulled up

into herself, offensive as a splash of mustard smeared

on an open book. Tick tock. And the ending

can be like the beginning, if only she could remember.

If everything wasn't tilted like italics. Now, shifting

like a mound of cherry pits in the belly.

WISCONSIN GOTHIC

Christian Knoeller

The couple inherits the oldest house in the valley  
perched above pasture abandoned  
to wild apple and black oak.

Come October, he returns from wetlands  
a paper sack streaked with duck's  
blood in one hand gun

in the other. She gathers wild grapes from  
a gully along the road to boil down  
with cinnamon, lemons, and clove

straining dark juice until morning. Night  
after night he rehearses with bow, target  
marked with a buck's heart and lungs.

She listens for reports of first frost, rescuing  
half-ripe tomatoes to the safety of her  
porch. He no longer notices

trophies beside the dining room table nor paired  
pheasants a taxidermist has captured forever  
in the gesture of escape. She picks

a spray of Indian tobacco to arrange  
in a tall vase just inside the door—  
her corner—the one wall devoid

of death: a resurrection of weeds and dried  
flowers. Year to year he remembers trails  
bucks strut in rut, she the feral trees

laden with sweetest fruit. Under a harvest  
moon they sit together, silent, as if  
the same walls contain them.

DANCE WITH HER

Kathleen Donohoe

Byron needs a rollicking bout with disease, not fatal. Double pneumonia, avian flu, viral meningitis. He will emerge from illness skinny, heroic and interesting, if handsome is not possible and it probably isn't. He is not so fat that his features only look like those of other fat people. Slim Byron is still visible. His nose is centered and his chin is beneath his lips, of which he has the proper two, one on top of the other. But now, after fifteen years, it's become clear that his face will never live up to the hype of the adorable early years.

Recovered Byron will be moody, not placid. His hair will darken from brown to black and be always unkempt. Though a daily shave will now be a necessity, he won't. The shadows circling his eyes will never quite go away. On the small streets of their town, he will be mistaken for a poet. A girl will fall in love.



Byron is hallways. This is why, though he has three steps further to travel, he pauses. The noise of the house is down the stairs. Dinner is being prepared and pots rattle, dishes clatter. Byron can hear his sisters' voices, all three indistinguishable from here, sometimes raised in irritation, but then it's warm for a May afternoon and only the bedrooms are air conditioned. The other rooms are cooled by ceiling fans to keep the 'integrity' of the old farmhouse. Their mother loves the place, which their father named for her: *Carolyn's Haven*. Once he'd gone, Carolyn took down the calligraphed sign he'd had woodworked for her and posted beside the mailbox. Byron watched her wrestle it out of the January ground and stood by as she tucked it in a corner of the garage where it remains, five years later, sticky with cobwebs, because it's bad luck to throw away one's name.

Hallways are how Byron imagines Purgatory, which has always held more appeal than heaven for him. Heaven is probably

carpeted in white and requires graceful feet.

Purgatory, though, has got to be one long corridor with an echo, excellent for all the loitering souls full of sins worse than the one he dreams of.

But that's for later. He's on earth and alive and here, a hallway keeps you in transit. Whether you are going to or going away, you are going. There's the one at Onohedo High School, where he tramps, head down, though sometimes he swerves to tap his shoulder against another's for that day's proof: I am not invisible.

There's the hallway that led from his maternal grandmother's front door to the kitchen. It carried the scent of the sea and had the whole family history laid out in tarnishing silver frames. His eyes come from her and Ireland.

But this hallway, in their own house, is best. Unlit and uncarpeted, the floorboards speak beneath your feet. Byron leans his forehead against one white wall, and it's cool and somehow soft, like the palm of a hand checking for fever.

Yes, Byron is hallways the way Alyce is kitchens, with their delineated purpose and humming appliances. She sets her mixing bowls on the countertop, bows her head above them and lets her brisk hands work. Ginny is living rooms. There she haunts, slipping in and out of novels for hours in the sinking chair which holds her like a lap. Alyce is twenty and Ginny is eighteen. They are tall, spare girls with their mother's high cheekbones and their father's brown eyes. But they resemble each other more than either parent, as though they'd arrived together to join the family with a pair of shoes each and a jumble of clothes in one suitcase.

Byron's youngest sister turned thirteen on April 6th.

Robyn is bedrooms. She perches in the window seat and scribbles atrocious poetry in journals embossed with butterflies or purple flowers. She naps fully dressed, lying on the bed as though laid out for her wake, and she sits on the thick gray carpet, legs outstretched while she babbles on the phone.

Quietly, Byron begins to move again. He passes the bathroom.

His next step brings him beyond the door that hides a stairwell leading to the attic and a very private bedroom for the family's only son. Byron massages his right hand. It is appreciated.

He's at risk now. If he's caught this far down the hall, there will be questions asked.

Robyn is struggling with her math homework. It's her worst subject so their mother makes her sit at the dining room table to see that she doesn't give up in frustration, in spite of the fact that she will be sent to summer school if she fails. Also, if she doesn't at least try, their mother will not let her run track next fall, though it's clear she will not be getting into college on an algebra scholarship. At any rate, Robyn won't be paroled until she's finished. Which means Byron has some time.

He leaves the door ajar for quick escape, but in case he can't, he has an excuse prepared as to why he's in Robyn's room: a CD of his is missing, she must have taken it.

As much as he would like privacy, a shut door is suspicious, as though he's gone in there to steal, though nobody will be able to think of a single thing of Robyn's that Byron could possibly want.

The bedroom is done in pale blue (robin's egg, of course) and there are two colorful throw rugs on the floor discovered at a thrift shop in town. Robyn shrieked with joy for a wholly annoying ten minutes when their mother brought them home for her last year. Byron recalled yelling at her to shut up. She'd ignored him.

Her bed is high; it takes three steps to climb into. It's covered by a white and blue quilt. Byron inhales the scent of Johnson's baby powder and the sharper underlay of athlete's foot spray. While watching television at night, Robyn sometimes props her foot up on the coffee table and picks at the peeling skin between her toes. Byron used to find this revolting.

He closes the closet door to hide the full length mirror so he won't catch an glimpse of his whole self. A smaller mirror is attached to the bureau. In its frame are party invitations, blue and red ribbons won at track meets, photographs of Robyn



and her friends, most of whom she's acquired in the past few months—girls that Byron used to ogle at when they came over, which he can do quite safely because he does not exist for them. His penis doesn't exist for them.

He studied the slim legs and small breasts and the shoulders and necks bared by ponytails and understood that if he were the handsome big brother, they'd be competing for his attention. Robyn's House would mean *him*. His name would not be a Kick Me sign, more permanent than any tattoo, but a synonym for sexy. Byron Arthur. Bear, Bear. Both names mean that, he would tell them with a grin to make them shiver.

But those kids hardly matter anymore because he compares them to Robyn, who has thick brown hair with natural gold highlights, envied so by Alyce and Ginny. Blue eyes, identical to his. Her scrawny legs have gotten taut from running. She shaves them. The oval face is their mother's but with finer lines. Of her friends, Robyn is the prettiest, and he is not just saying that because he's her brother and in love with her.

Stuck in the bottom corner of the mirror is the Mass card for their father from that time he died running with the bulls in Spain.

Their father did not hear that he was dead until he had been so for three days. San Francisco, a long, long way from upstate New York. On the first weekend visit, which did not happen for a month, they went to Burger King. Alyce and Ginny were absent, having refused to see him. But Byron and Robyn were ten and eight and had no choice.

They took a corner booth. Robyn swung her legs nervously until Byron pinched her thigh. She squeaked and then clamped down on the pain. Later, when she'd climbed over him to fetch more ketchup, Byron asked his father if he was mad about being killed. He'd laughed and said hell, a woman with balls like that was rare. It almost made him consider coming back. But you won't, Byron said. His father mashed a French fry with his thumb. Well, no. There's June. Confused, Byron thought he meant the month but of course, he'd meant the woman he'd

run off with and later married in a brief civil ceremony. The party afterwards was quite small, not worth the kids missing school for.

Byron's father and stepmother both taught mathematics at the same college and did not get to New York much. The funny thing is that Byron's mother is also a college professor. She teaches American Literature.

Once when Byron was a little boy, his father said "Mathematics is a waltz, a minuet!"

And his mother answered: "Waltz is from German: high, turn around. Minuet is French: small, dainty."

How strange that the children of a failed marriage should go on existing as though the parents had not admitted in court that they'd been awfully mistaken. All the procreating was like a spill of milk spreading across a table, never to be gotten back. We love you! We'll always love *you*! That hasn't changed. Byron and the girls heard it again and again and again and again.. Oh, but hadn't it changed? Just a little? Didn't the two have days when they wished they'd never met?

Robyn has a bouquet of old roses tacked on the wall beside the mirror. Their mother had presented them to her four months ago on the occasion of Robyn's first period, a family tradition. Byron remembers Alyce and Ginny getting their roses. He's always thought it a gross thing to celebrate and hated that he had to know, but now he's glad he has the information.

Byron doesn't linger at Robyn's mirror. He's perfected the art of averting his eyes to avoid his reflection but can only sustain it for so long before his head begins to ache. Beside the bed, he sees Robyn's jeans on the floor, a pair of white underpants tangled in them. One sock lies nearby. Her bra is next to it.

Byron smiles. She must undress the way she has always opened her Christmas presents. He and Alyce and Ginny are patient, but Robyn tears the paper off as though she suspects each gift is the very thing she's longing for. He swipes her pink bra off the floor. The cups are triangles, not even as big as the palms of his hands. He probably has bigger tits.

He's thought hard about how to get her attention. There has to be some courting and it won't be easy, what with one thing and another, but he's decided the best strategy is to take advantage of the fact that he knows her better than the idiot boys in her class ever can. But after scanning and sorting his memories, he was surprised to find how little he's really paid attention to her. The battles have been between him and Alyce, the competition between him and Ginny because he used to be a reader like her and they both vied to be their mother's favorite. Then Byron grew tired and so by forfeit Ginny won the gift of their mother's unabridged gaze, which might last as long as fifteen minutes. Free Byron discovered that he preferred nonfiction.

Yet it is Robyn beside him at every meal and in every posed family picture: Communion, Confirmations, graduations. He's looked back through the albums recently to see if there's any spark but there isn't, of course. He is never even glancing at the child, Robyn Leigh. (*Robynly*, their father used to call her.)

She was beside him as well on the pew at Our Lady of Sorrows Church, which they'd attended until their grandmother passed away. For a month of Sunday's after her funeral they'd trooped faithfully to the eleven o'clock service. Then one week, Carolyn stayed in her office, answering her mail. The four of them grouped outside her door and listened to her fingers tap the keys as though they were listening to a pianist play. At five to eleven, Alyce shrugged, and they dispersed.

But in the day, he'd smuggled Hershey's Kisses in the pockets of his winter coat because they could be unwrapped quietly, palmed and popped into the mouth with a fake yawn. He worked them with small movements of his tongue, pressing them to the roof of his mouth, tip first until there was nothing left. No chewing required.

Robyn knew. She'd nudge him with her elbow, begging him to share, but he'd ignored her, wondering why she didn't just steal some for herself. Later, he decided that to take from him was less of a crime than to bring them in herself. He believed she thought him daring, and he'd liked that. Not enough to share his candy, though.

Today, Byron lays four Hershey's Kisses on her pillow in a straight line. They are plain chocolate, no almonds, no peanut butter, no caramel. None of that foolishness.

He kneels beside Robyn's jeans to touch her underpants. He runs two fingers over the seam of the crotch. There's no scheme to steal or sniff them. That's perverted and he's not, though nothing hurts like this. He hunches over. He will have to teach her how to take off her clothes. *Slowly, Binna* (he doesn't call her that in life, but he plans to). He's wondered, if a girl ever let him, how would he figure out what to do? How many chances would she give him before shoving him off her body in disgust? He's studied *Playboy* and Tampax instructions. Though it *appears* uncomplicated, he's sure the whole construct is really a trapdoor with an unknown mechanism ready to trip him up.

But he's not worried anymore. His girl grew where he did. Robyn has always been near. Just the way he knows her face by heart, so will he know the rest of her. He will find his way inside with ease and, there, be home.

But first, he'll take her hand, he'll hold it hard, and tell her about ancient Egypt and how the pharaohs' sons and daughters married each other to keep royal bloodlines pure, to keep kingdoms together.



Two weeks ago at dinner, he reached for a buttermilk biscuit. Alyce made them from scratch. She does almost all of the cooking now, even though she works two jobs, at the Coffee Palace and at the Macy's in the mall. She needs the money because next September, she is going to the CIA: The Culinary Institute of America. She will pay her dues in restaurants, but someday she will become a personal chef to someone rich and famous. She will write cookbooks and have her own television show.

Their mother hardly minds being usurped in the kitchen, consumed as she is with her course load and notoriety. The latter came quickly from the first two articles in *The Onohedo*

*Bee*: the obituary she wrote for her husband and the article that followed two days later, headlined: “Angry Wife ‘Kills’ Cheating Hubby.”

There were follow-ups and interviews. She became known throughout Onohedo and towns beyond when she went on a local morning talk show, billed as the woman who held a funeral for her marriage. In the years since, she’s written articles about adultery and divorce and children and is in demand as a speaker at support groups. *What to Tell Your Daughter About her Cheating Father: Parenting a Son After Divorce*.

She talks about how she and her then-husband left Brooklyn to buy a home in what for them was the country—the quaint town two hours outside of Manhattan. They meant to write books, raise children and flowers and vegetables and be very quite happy.

But Carolyn does not inform her fans that the house has become a memorial for the dream. They don’t know that without the husband and father, the great plans for restoration never came to be. The front porch boards are rotting like teeth in a sour mouth. The pipes rattle and the roof leaks in the dining room so that a bucket is permanently kept in the corner. The banister to the second floor is half-sanded and the roses on the kitchen wallpaper have faded to gray. It’s as though she and her children were not exchanged for a twenty-four-year-old graduate student but instead had become the widow and half-orphans of a flood or hurricane or some small war. Later, when he finished disappearing, she added *When Dad Doesn’t Visit* to her repertoire.

“Byron,” Alyce said.

“That makes three,” Ginny said in the exact tone of a toddler who’s just learned to count.

Alyce had grilled steak, and to go with it, sweet corn and potatoes au gratin, which were getting to be her specialty. Though Byron will never compliment her, he’s had two servings of them even though he’d stopped at McDonalds for Chicken McNuggets and French fries on his way home from school, as he’d been

doing since he quit his job at Key Food, which he'd had to do since he asked out Anna, a shy girl a year behind him who was herself not so thin. She went to Our Lady of Sorrows.

She came to his line at least every other day with a bag of Kettle One potato chips and green apples or nectarines. She paid with her head down. Byron stared at the judicious part in her blond hair, hoping to make her look up so that he might give her a smile of camaraderie and tell her that he was not Bryon, as his nametag said. The fruit was beard-buying. He knew. He knew. Selecting a sympathetic cashier was the whole key to avoiding the worst of the shame.

Then, one Wednesday, an old lady on the next line raised her voice when Jimmy refused an expired coupon. Startled, Anna looked up, caught Byron's smile and returned it. They began mumbling hello and exchanging bits of gossip about teachers the way they might have shared the rectangles of a Hershey Bar. If Byron still ate them, that is. But he won't anymore now that they are packaged like every other candy bar. Slipping it out of the sleeve, sliding a finger up the seam of its silver underwrap to open it wide, that's what made the Hershey Bar special. Now, you might as well have Twix or a Three Musketeers. Byron grieves for the silver foil.

He and Jimmy, and Dozy too, sat on the hood of a car in Key Food's parking lot after their shift, sharing a bag of Doritos and trying to work it out in the fifteen minutes they had before a manager yelled at them to stop loitering. Jimmy and Dozy said go all the way. Ask her to the spring dance.

"She likes you," Jimmy said.

"You don't know that," Byron answered.

"She's got to like you," said Dozy.

"Why?" Byron asked.

Jimmy, short and skinny with bad hay fever, and Dozy, taller, just as thin, with a zit forever blooming above his right eyebrow, exchanged a look.

*Because she's fat too.* They didn't say it out loud, of course.

"She always gets in your line," Dozy added, downcast. He'd

proved too slow on the register and so was moved back to stockboy.

"She'll probably let you fuck her," Jimmy said.

"She's no Clem, but she has big tits," Dozy offered.

"By—don't be a pussy," Jimmy said gruffly.

Don't be shy, he meant. Was Byron shy because he was fat or fat because he was shy? It was the great mystery of his life, besides why his father forgot he had four children and how his mother had gotten addicted to the pity and admiration cocktail so quickly and why his grandmother had to die when he was only nine, long before he got tired of being loved best by her.

So he listened to Jimmy and Dozy, both of whom had made the online list of Mostly Likely to Go Columbine while Byron had not. The posting was pulled before Byron had a chance to see it, but Jimmy told him about it.

"It's a good thing, man. No one thinks you're psycho," Jimmy had said.

"I'm gonna sue," Dozy added, but neither could hide their pride at being thought dangerous.

Anna is not Clem, true. But he'd never have Clementine Hart, who glided through the hallways at school, not seeing him the way a doe running through the forest doesn't notice the ants she tramples. Byron never touched Clem's shoulder. When she passed, he stepped aside and turned to watch her go.

One Thursday, Anna was alone on his line, a gift. He scanned her chips, Sea Salt, which he took to mean she was feeling adventurous. Usually, she got Plain, but sometimes Mesquite Barbecue.

"The thing at school? The Spring Fling thing?" he began, blushing at the rhyme. He sucked in gallons of stomach and tried to stand up straighter.

"What about it?" Anna asked, fishing in her wallet.

"Want to go?" Byron said. The words nearly choked him.

Anna turned to stone, holding out the \$10 she'd just dug up. "With you?"

Byron quit at the end of that shift. He hasn't told his family

yet. They will probably say it's a good thing and that he should get a job like dog-walking for the forced exercise.

"Three rolls, b-f-d," Robyn said, gulping her milk. Lately, she has been preoccupied with the strength of her bones.

Carolyn's fingers drummed the table without making a sound.

"You should go on a diet," Ginny said.

"Diets don't work. It's been proven," Alyce waved her hand. "It's a lifestyle thing. You have to commit to eating right. I would cook only health food meals if I thought you would eat them."

"I'd eat them," Byron lied. "If that was all there was."

"Or maybe you'd just go out for junk later?" Alyce asked. She actually put her fork down.

Byron hated it when she pretended to be overwhelmed by his problems.

"Fuck you," he said.

"Get your stomach stapled already," Alyce said.

Ginny snickered, then put a hand to her mouth as though she hadn't meant to laugh.

"That's for grossly obese people. Byron's not grossly obese," Robyn said, poking her congealing potatoes with her fork. Since she had not taken one bite, Byron had been considering asking her to fork them over but he couldn't now.

Their mother focused on him hopefully. "You just need to eat less and exercise more, that's all."

Byron knew how badly she wanted him to look well-adjusted. A son thirty pounds overweight made it hard to present yourself as a successful single parent.

He looked around the table. None of them seemed to care that the dad was missing. They kept the carton of milk and Ginny's vegetarian dish in the spot where his plate used to be. His chair was in the corner with a potted fern on it. All the females, they didn't get that Byron was the man of the house. He had to eat for two. He nearly said so, but instead he picked up the roll and shoved it in his mouth. Robyn laughed. Milk spurted out



her right nostril.

Alyce shook her head and Ginny exclaimed in disgust and their mother said, "Byron!"

Robyn took a fresh napkin and wiped her chin, still grinning. Her seat was by the window and she was backlit by the late afternoon sun. Beneath the table, she nicked his shin with her bare foot, a show of solidarity. She turned to stick her tongue out at Alyce, and Byron saw that her face was no longer a child's.



It's Friday evening, close to seven-thirty, and Byron is lying on his bed like a friendless boy in an orphanage as he listens to the water shushing through the pipes. Robyn takes twenty-minute showers. Then, hair turbaned, she emerges, wearing the white bathrobe with Eyore on the pocket that she got for her last birthday. Eyore has always been her favorite, which, Byron thinks, bodes well for *him*. She knots the belt for the walk down the hall.

He can be patient because it seems she has come to him a hundred times already on her little naked feet, hollow-boned the way birds are hollow-boned, allowing them to fly, and so waking no one with her footfall on the stairs.

But, really, she hasn't bothered with the attic after the initial fuss three years ago when it first became his bedroom so Alyce and Ginny didn't have to share anymore. For weeks after, she'd played a game with her friend Emma, whom she doesn't talk to anymore, where they were captured princesses waiting for rescue. He'd come home from school and chased them downstairs more than a few times.

The attic is divided in half: his room on one side and extras of their family life on the other. Boxes of Christmas ornaments are stacked in the corner beside a set of turquoise rocking chairs, bought to be refurbished and put on the front porch. A listing wardrobe is crowded with out-of-season and outgrown clothes.

He has a mirrorless bureau with a television on it and a desk that holds his computer. His mother believed a household should have only one of each for communal use. She speaks about the fragmentation of the modern family in her lectures.

"Oh, *Byron!*" she'd said mournfully. "We'll never see you again."

When the water stops, Byron scrambles to his feet but he can't move as quickly as he thinks he can. This continues to surprise him, his bulk. Rushing now, he moves down the stairs too quickly and practically tumbles into the hall just as Robyn is about to disappear into her bedroom.

She gasps. "Byron! You scared me."

He smells her shampoo—Pantene for Fine Hair—and for a moment, he's dizzy. "Listen, come upstairs to my room for a minute?"

"What? Why?" She tugs at the towel, freeing her hair, which has grown nearly to her waist. Alyce and Ginny keep urging her to get some kind of stylish cut, angling, layers, a fringy bang. There is not much chance she will listen to them, and Byron is grateful. He wants to comb her hair and braid it as he has watched their mother do so often, but without interest. Not then.

"I want to show you something," he said, his voice low to intrigue her.

She frowns. "What is it, some website about Ireland or something?"

"I thought you wanted to go to Ireland," he said, stung

She shrugs, finger-combing her hair. "Someday."

"I'm going," he says. "I might live there."

Her hand stills. "For real?"

He's got her interest. "Why not?" he says boldly but leaves off there. It's too soon to invite her. When he does, it will be to point out that they can move to County Clare, where their grandmother was born but no one knows them. There, they will be at home and strangers all at once.

"That'd be pretty cool," Robyn says with grudging respect.

"Did you get the Hershey's kisses?" he asks.

"Huh?"

"The Kisses. I bought a pack and I know you like them too, so—"

"Oh yeah," she says. "Was that you?"

"Who else would it be?"

"I don't know. I thought Lisa for some reason. What is it?"

"What's what?" Byron asks. His heart begins to pound because he's sure she's noticed the way he's looking at her. He can't help it. But maybe it's good she sees.

Robyn rolls her eyes. "Upstairs? What you have to show me? Because I have to get ready. We're going to the eight o'clock movie."

"We?"

"Me and my friends." She is fidgeting.

Eight o'clock. So soon, the doorbell will ring for her, or the mother chauffeuring tonight will honk the horn. He feels stupid because he should have known she was going out. It will have to be a weeknight or a Sunday then.

"It can wait." He pinches the rolls around his waist. She averts her eyes.

"Okay, then." On the threshold of her bedroom, she turns. "It's not an email from Dad, is it?"

Though Byron wants to lie and say yes, because for that she'll dash and might not even bother throwing her clothes on first, he can't because he isn't cruel. He shakes his head and she nods back and goes into her room, shutting the door.



The night is both moonless and overcast. Byron is sitting on one of the two sagging wicker chairs on the front porch, sipping from a bottle of Heineken and eating Tostitos. There's no salsa so they taste flat. He keeps eating anyway.

He's lost count of the number of women who have arrived on the porch, some crying, some stone-eyed. In

weather too hot or too cold, Carolyn leads them inside to her office, but in fine weather she brings them to the two wicker chairs and listens as they say, "He left me for his secretary nurse then a nanny sister my best friend in the world." Many are pretty, a couple have been beautiful, but most have been average. Byron has peered out the window at them and wished only for the other side of the story, the man's. When they sobbed or whispered or shouted, "How could he do this to me?" Byron asked himself, "Yes! How? Why?" The reason cannot be the same for all.

Carolyn doesn't drink beer but her boyfriend likes a few when he comes over for dinner and a movie. Then he has to stay over because even two is too many these days. Byron wishes he could just be honest and tell them, *Look, your mother and I want to fuck*. Byron basically likes him though he doesn't seem particularly interested in family life. He's an X-Ray technician. He and Carolyn met on New Year's Day when Robyn fell ice-skating and had to have her ankle checked. Thankfully, it was just a bad sprain. Byron has regrets. For two whole weeks, she did little but sit on the couch with her foot propped up on the coffee table. He might have spent time with her. They might have talked.

Tonight is Saturday and Carolyn and Michael are out to dinner with another couple. Byron used to hang out with Jimmy and Dozy, on weekends but their friendship has crumbled without the bond of Key Food. Ginny is out with her boyfriend of a year. She swears he will follow her to the Peace Corps though Byron has doubts.

They'd been born out of time, her and him. Ginny and Quint should have been a priest and nun, secretly in love, but not obliged to act on it. Ginny, who preferred reading to talking and swatted hands off shoulders and flinched if a stranger passed by her too closely. And Quint, who blushed when he ran out of conversation, which he often did suddenly.

Fickle Alyce is on a date with a guy she met at a bar she'd gotten into with a fake ID. Robyn is at a slumber party at

Genevive's house. Byron is not even sure which one. Genevive is. He remembers when Robyn used to have two best friends, not an entourage.

Byron is on his second beer when a car pulls into the driveway. Since he has not turned on the porch light, he doesn't see that it's Alyce until she's up the steps and approaching the door, keys out and jangling.

"Hey," he calls.

But he doesn't scare her. She isn't even slightly startled. Instead, she clicks across the porch to peer at him. "Is that beer?"

She's pulled her hair back in a barrette and it isn't flattering.

"It's light beer, don't worry."

She actually laughs, so he knows that she's had a couple herself. He's suddenly glad he didn't make fun of her ears.

"How was your date?" he asks, because, though it's Alyce, he is lonely.

"My date!" She sighs and sits down in the other chair. "Asshole."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Yeah, this one had me a little bit fooled. The night we met, he asks me what's the one thing a guy can do to really charm a woman? My answer: dance with her. So tonight, he takes me to The Haze --"

"Haze's? Fuck," Byron says. "They didn't card you?"

"Nope. Jake ordered wine and the waiter didn't blink. The music starts but he doesn't get up. I figured maybe he needed a couple of glasses to warm up, but no! Not one dance."

Byron laughs and she joins him.

"What a loser," Byron says, though this man's existence comforts him. In the world, there is awkwardness as great or greater than his own.

"Indeed." She is wearing a light white sweater over her t-shirt so, dark as it is, he can see her shoulders move in a shrug. "I'm out of here in a few months anyway."

Alyce promised their mother she would attend college for

at least two years. She is a student at Gilbride, though she never took a class with their mother. But now, in the fall, her obligations filled, she is going to the CIA.

"Must be weird, huh?" He drinks from his beer.

"But good. Great, in fact. You know me. I wish we'd never left the city."

"Yeah," he says.

"You need to study harder, By," she says.

"Yeah, yeah."

Alyce leans forward, making the rocker protest with a loud creak. "No, I mean it. I'm not just nagging this time. You need to go away to school. Okay, I'm not saying you can get into Harvard, but somewhere. Do the work now, or it'll be too late."

A lump rises in his throat. He tries to wash it down with Heineken.

"Think about it." She squeezes his arm and when she lets go, he nearly reaches for her.

But she sighs again and stands up. "And now I'm going to bed. I've had it. 'Night, By. Don't stay out here too long."

The screen door slams and when she's gone, Byron realizes that his sister did not ask why he was alone in the dark on a Saturday night drinking beer, light or not. This makes him sad.



Though he would prefer his own bedroom because it's farther away from everyone else's and the door locks, Robyn's room will have to do because he hasn't come up with a foolproof way to get her up the stairs.

Byron waits until after dinner on Wednesday, Robyn's day to do the dishes and a school night. She won't be going anywhere.

As soon as they finish eating, he leaves the table and rushes upstairs to the bathroom where he washed his face, his armpits and his penis. He considers tucking his t-shirt into his jeans but that makes his fat fall over his jeans like something just barely

corralled.

When Robyn comes in, he is sitting on her bed, his hands clasped between his knees. Her mouth opens in surprise. It's unseasonably warm for May and her face is pink with heat. Her hair is in a ponytail, and she is wearing green shorts and a white t-shirt, damp from the chore she has just finished.

"What are you doing in here?" she asks, and he hears uncertainty in her voice. She's not sure if she should get mad.

"I need a favor," he says.

"A favor? From me?" Her eyes widen in surprise.

Byron smiles. She's the baby of the family, after all, not used to being asked for things.

"What?" she asks, a frown coming and going.

"Close the door."

She does.

Byron stands up. Robyn stands still.

"There's a dance at school."

Robyn laughs impatiently. "I know. Spring Fling—Enchanted Forest."

He forgets that she's in the same school as him now. He never sees her. Their schedules are too different.

"I asked this girl to go and she said yes."

Her mouth falls open. "Oh!" she says and then again. "Oh!"

He can see her cataloging the school's piteous girls: acne, weight issues, the girl with pretty much no chin, the one with scoliosis (can that one even dance?), the girl with thirteen fingers.

It's going like he planned, but Byron's mouth is suddenly dry as a bone and his hands begin to tremble. "I need to—I wanted—"

She never sighs like Alyce, snaps "*What?*" like Ginny, or says his name encouragingly as their mother does. No, Robyn waits. She roots for him. She does so because she is his girl, though she does not know it.

"To practice," he finally says. "I've never danced before, not

for real.”

Robyn shoves her hands into her back pockets and shifts from one bare foot to the other. “Maybe Alyce. Or Ginny—”

“They’ll make fun of me.”

Robyn nods and chews her lip. “It’s not like I’m some kind of expert dancer.”

“But you’re an athlete. Athletes are naturally graceful and all that.”

She smiles, pleased. “I guess.”

“I brought music.”

He stole a Michael Buble CD from Ginny and after previewing each song, he chose “The Way You Look Tonight ” to be their own. He presses the button on her CD player until he reaches track eleven.

When the song starts, he turns to her. “This might be a little weird.”

She giggles and smooths her hair. “No kidding. Whatever.”

Byron goes to her and slides one heavy arm around her small waist. They begin to move, their bodies not touching, not quite.

“I think you need to, uh, pick up your feet a little more or something,” she says.

“Okay.”

“And don’t stand so close.”

“Sure.”

“It’ll be air conditioned, right? You’re kind of sweaty.”

Byron had not thought she would really try to give him advice. “Just let me get a feel for it, okay? Tell me how I did after.”

“Oh! Sure.” She giggles again, snorting a little at the end.

But after that, he feels her breathing deeply, as though she’s falling asleep. He wants to inch his hand up to her bra strap.

“By?”

“Yes?”

“Am I graceful?”

“You are.”



She falls silent. He pulls her a little closer. Her hair tickles his chin. He drops head and buries his face in her neck.

Like lightening, she shoves him. "What are you *doing*?"

Byron stumbled back.

"Dancing."

"Dancing? Freak!" Her blue eyes, eyes to drown in, say even more.

"Robyn—"

"Fucking fat freak. Get a *life*." She spins on one heel, stalks across the room and yanks the door open. "I'm going. You better get out of my room."

She does not run, and her footsteps on the stairs are measured. Byron goes as far as the hallway right outside her door. Rooted there, alone for the next song, he understands that she was never going to be too afraid of him to say no, nor too curious to say yes, let's see what happens. Neither did she love him, too. She never would. She never would have, a girl like her.

AFTER THE WAR

Jared Harel

My grandpa got a job at a munitions factory  
with a female/male ratio of ten-to-one.  
So many men had been killed in action  
and my grandpa, a POW, just happened to survive.

He escaped with a friend and fellow soldier  
Nazis shot in the head while crossing the creek.  
For some reason the Nazis took only  
one shot, and when at last he stopped running,

my grandpa was alone. He mentions this last bit  
with little emotion, as if recalling a lotto ticket  
two digits off. But that old factory  
had so many women. So many widows

still filling ammo, blending gunpowder  
just to be safe. Each week, he insists,  
he was with another woman who'd hold him  
like a ghost before going back to work.

PULSE

Biman Roy

Facing the library, the red oak  
in purplish light of November  
casts a shadow on the stubbled  
face of concrete apartments.

Memories of hanged men  
high up in branches of beech,  
myrtle and locusts and underneath  
mandrakes growing from their semen  
still haunt the night.

Not too far from here O'Henry  
wrestled with his characters,  
even Dickens—  
now residents bring their spaniels  
and beagles to run round and round  
for biscuits as they measure the pulse  
of the city through each other's eyes.

A TIDE

Marcene Gandolfo

It begins after the crash, after  
the smell of grease, the pop  
of glass, after her car caroms  
embankment to levee, one  
wheel still spinning. When her life  
is an eyelash flutter away  
from the river, that's when she breaks  
from the half-opened  
door, screams to the black  
morning and crawls  
to the ground, worms her way  
through mud and climbs the bank.  
Each fall breeds  
a shadow. Each shadow breeds  
rage, until she scales the riverbank, grabs  
the stalks of weeds  
with bloodied hands, and stands  
again for the first time, learns  
again to balance on two legs.  
Now she blots the blood  
from her hands on her torn skirt  
and steps up to the road, moving  
toward town, where later you will see her,  
clean, bandaged, waving hello.  
And you will notice something,  
a wilderness in her eyes, an animal  
in her gait. But now she is limping,  
not waiting for the sirens, the wheel  
still spinning inside her.  
And now her walk steadies as day  
takes shape. A vein  
of light scales the riverbank,  
through the crook in the road, and now

her eyes open to a wave  
of blue air, transparent.

THE FLAMES  
Marcene Gandolfo

*for my father*

*How many nights must it take  
one such as me to learn  
that we aren't, after all, made  
from that bird that flies out of its ashes,  
that for a man  
as he goes up in flames, his one work  
is  
to open himself, to be  
the flames?*

-Galway Kinnell

I

You lift your oxygen mask to ask if I see a dead pigeon  
on the burnt sienna

and when I shake my head, you stare cold into hospital  
light and say

that once your eleven-year-old hands caught a pigeon, held  
its body down and sliced

wings from thorax then left the bird to wrench on red ground.  
When you held the trophy wings

to the boys who dared you, the crowd cheered, another boy  
lit a match to the pigeon's

body and you stood still holding those wings in the smolder.  
How everyone wanted

to be your friend. You tell the story in small breaths,  
how no one knew

you cried yourself to sleep for three weeks and you were glad  
when the rains came,

took to your room and glued model airplanes.

## II

As you sunk back into the gurney's buckle, I listened to your staggered breath,  
pictured each lung

a vessel of black snowflakes, an envelope containing a sentence from the hell  
you could not excavate

but I asked to you to breathe the black ash out and as we breathed into that  
antiseptic night

you said you could see your breath smolder, began to cough the rattle  
from your chest

until morning when your fever broke, when the nurse brought me coffee and said  
happy new year,

took you for your morning walk, and I was a child again running down the  
empty street,

a filament of blue confetti at my feet.

## III

In April we don't speak about the last article of December, and you say  
you have no memory of that night.

I don't mention your story, don't ask if it's true, don't beg for proof today

in the garden where a pigeon sweeps

down to eat a crumb and as April makes me forget the scars of December, I  
throw a piece of bread and see you

stare as I stoop to peer into the nervous fidget of the pigeon's eye.



## POEM TO THE COMMUNICATION SATELLITES

Matthew Hotham

What a burden to carry the voices  
of millions of humans—specks to you—  
shouting, somehow, their weak  
and varied screeches across atmospheres  
with thick vocal chords to penetrate the low-hung clouds.

How you shuffle through the dozen tongues trained  
to reach your earth-sloped ears—and still, whole continents  
are silence, like they never devised a speech to break  
their planet's bounds. And what games they must play:  
as cities flicker quiet—neighbors strewing nets across the sky  
to suture their voices to the decaying ground.  
Imagine their words reflected back to them—

whole cities of echoes you can't see inside,  
whole cities of darkness and no words get out.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Jackie Bartley's work has appeared most recently in *Nimrod*, *Spillway*, and *Calyx*. Her latest collection, "Ordinary Time," won the Spire Press Poetry Prize and was published in 2007.

Christopher Citro's poetry is forthcoming in *Poet Lore* and has been published recently in *Permafrost*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *Burnside Review* and online at *Juked*, *Ghoti*, and *Stone Table Review*. He won the 2006 Langston Hughes Creative Writing Award for Poetry, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Erin Lynn Cook received her MFA in Creative Writing from California State University, Fresno. Her stories have been published in *Slice Magazine*, *The Louisiana Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, and forthcoming in *Cottonwood Review*. She is working on two novels. Erin resides in Fresno, California and teaches English, reading, and writing at a community college and a high school.

Jessica Cuello is a graduate of Barnard College and teaches French in Central New York. Her first manuscript, "My Father's Bargain," was a recent semi-finalist in the Crab Orchard Open Book Poetry Series, and I have a poem forthcoming in the anthology, *Zeus Seduces the Wicked Stepmother in the Saloon of the Gingerbread House*.

Sarah J. Den Boer, originally from Canada, received her M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Illinois-Chicago. Currently, she is working to complete her Ph.D. through the University of South Dakota. Her poetry has appeared in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Siren*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and *blossombones*, among others. Her chapbook *Sawdust. Sugarcube.* is forthcoming in 2009, published by dancing girl press. She lives in Bozeman, Montana.

Alex Dimitrov is the recipient of a Roy W. Cowden Memorial Fellowship from the Hopwood Awards at the University of Michigan. He is currently an MFA student in poetry at Sarah Lawrence College. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Gargoyle*, *Poet Lore*, *Pearl*, and *DMQ Review* among others. Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, he currently lives in New York City.

Nik De Dominic, an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama, divides his time between Tuscaloosa, AL and New Orleans, LA. Lately, he has overwhelming urges for citrus and his work has appeared in *42Opus*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *A Capella Zoo* and elsewhere.

Kathleen Donohoe lives in Brooklyn, New York where she was born and raised. In 2003, she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for a short story that appeared in Hampton Shorts. Her fiction has also appeared in *Inkwell Magazine*, *Emrys Journal*, NYU's *Washington Square*, *New York Stories*, *The Recorder: Journal of the American Irish Historical Society and Web Conjunctions*. She writes a blog on [irishabroad.com](http://irishabroad.com) and is currently at work on a novel.

Kerry James Evans is currently an MFA candidate at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in the following literary journals: *Court Green*, *Eclipse*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

Marcene Gandolfo's work has appeared recently in several literary journals including *Bayou*, *Poet Lore*, *Van Gogh's Ear*, *The Café Review*, *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, and *River Oak Review*. She has taught writing at Sacramento City College and currently lives in Elk Grove, CA.

Mathew Goldberg holds a BSE from Duke University and an MFA from the University of Arkansas, where he was the Walton Foundation Fellow in Creative Writing. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Shenandoah*, *Mississippi Review*, *Passages North*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Southeast Review*, *The Yalobusha Review*, and *Alligator Juniper*.

Rodney Gomez lives in Brownsville, Texas and is a student in the new MFA in Creative Writing program at the University of Texas – Pan American. Recently, he was a resident at the Atlantic Center for the Arts. His poems appear in *Denver Quarterly*, *Barrow Street*, *The Literary Review*, *The Pinch*, and *Hawai'i Review*.

Alen Hamza was born and grew up in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He immigrated to the United States in 1995, when he was fifteen years old. He received a B.A. degree from Wesleyan University and also completed two years of graduate coursework at the University of Tübingen in Germany. He is currently working as an ESL teacher at a refugee-resettling agency in Louisville, KY. This is his first publication.

Jenny Hanning is from Maine, but lives in Austin, Texas. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in *Caketrain*, *Shenandoah*, *Third Coast* and others.

Jared Harel is a lecturer at Cornell University. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in over twenty literary journals such as the *New York Quarterly*, *California Quarterly*, *RATTLE*, *Rhino*, *Notre Dame Review* and *Apalachee Review*. He also plays drums for the NYC-based rock-band, Heywood.

Chris Haven's fiction and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in journals including *Threepenny Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Confrontation*, *Washington Square*, *Ruminate*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. He teaches creative writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

Matthew Hotham received his MFA from Syracuse University and currently attends Harvard Divinity School, where he works at the Harvard Review and co-edits the HDS Wick. His work has appeared in *Third Coast*, *32 Poems*, and *The Chautauqua Literary Journal* among others, and has been reprinted on *Verse Daily*. A chapbook, *Early Art*, was published by Turtle Ink Press in 2006.

Kymberly Keaton has been a ballerina, a bartender, and a BMW motor-cycle rider. She lives in the woods of northern Florida with her husband and two dogs. She has just completed her first novel.

Heather Kirn's poems have appeared most recently in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and on *Verse Daily*. Her essays have been noted in *Best American Essays 2008*, lauded by *The Atlantic Monthly*, and published in *Florida Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Barrelhouse*, and elsewhere. She teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley.

Christian Knoeller has published in literary journals nationally for the last 30 years with new work appearing recently in the *Evansville Review*, *Nebraska Review*, *Permafrost*, *Poetry International*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Westview*. He was awarded the Jill Barnum Midwestern Heritage Prize for 2007 from the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. His first collection, *Completing the Circle*, was awarded the Millennium Prize by *Buttonwood Press* and a second, *Indian Summer*, is in the works. He serves as Associate Professor of English at Purdue University.

Jane Langley lives in Pacific Palisades, California with a screenwriter and a rescued terrier mix. She has worked as a reporter for *Newsweek* and *LIFE* magazines, and as an actor, educator, curator and designer. Her poems have appeared in *Cimarron*, *Soundings East*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, among others, and the anthology *Ghost of A Chance*. She is currently at work on a novel.

Paul R. Lilly, Jr. lives in Oneonta, New York, is married, and has two daughters. He has published fiction in *West Branch*, *Short Story*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The New England Review*, *Potpourri*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Cornfield Review*, and others.

Charlie Malone travels mostly by bicycle in Fort Collins, CO. He tries to tell stories of people's ecstatic lives. He is an editor for Wolverine Farm Publishing's *GER*, and currently edits *Matter Journal*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Laurel Review*, *Boneshaker: A Bicycling Almanac*, *Luna Negra*, *Permafrost*, *Phoebe* and *Matter Journal*.

Katharyn Howd Machan was born in Woodbury, Connecticut, in 1952. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, and textbooks, and in 28 collections, most recently *The Professor Poems* (Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2008), *Flags* (Pudding House Publications, 2007) and *Redwing: Voices from 1888* (FootHills Publishing, 2005). She makes a home in Ithaca, New York, where she is a professor in the Department of Writing at Ithaca College. In 2002 she was named Tompkins County's first Poet Laureate.

Melanie McCabe is a high school English and creative writing teacher in Arlington, Virginia. She received an MFA in Poetry from George Mason University in 2005. Her work has appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Lake Effect*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Quarterly West* and *Nimrod*. She has been both a finalist and a third-place winner in Bright Hill Press's 2007 and 2008 Poetry Book Competitions.

Laura McCullough's third collection of poems, *SPEECH ACTS*, is forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press (2010). Her second collection of poems, *WHAT MEN WANT*, is forthcoming from XOXOX Press (Jan. 09). Her first, *THE DANCING BEAR*, debuted in 06 and in 07, Mudlark published her chapbook of prose poems, *ELEPHANT ANGER*. She's been awarded two NJ State Arts Council Fellowships and has an MFA in fiction from Goddard College. Her work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Guernica*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and others. Her book reviews have appeared in such places at Webdelsol Review of Books, The Potomac, and Small Spiral Notebook. Laura is a doctoral candidate in poetry at the University of Essex.

Claire McQuerry teaches writing at Arizona State University. Her poems, essays, and translations have recently appeared in *The Superstition Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and *Double Change*.

Jack Miller lives and writes in Arlington, Massachusetts. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *RHINO*, *Vallum*, *Packingtowntown Review*, *Tundra*, and *Hawai'i Pacific Review*.

Greg Nicholl's poetry has appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Arts & Letters*, *Natural Bridge*, *Smartish Pace*, *Crab Creek Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Baltimore and works at the Johns Hopkins University Press. He is also the web manager for *The Cortland Review*.

Susan Dworski Nusbaum received her BA from Smith College, and her law degree from the University of Buffalo Law School. She is a retired criminal prosecutor living in Buffalo. She has been a frequent participant in the Chautauqua Institution Writers' Festival and poetry workshops. Her poems have won First Prizes in the Chautauqua Poetry Competition, The Buffalo Boomdays Poetry Competition, and the Hauser Poetry Competition of the Chautauqua Writers' Center. Her work has appeared most recently in *The Connecticut Review*, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Artvoice*, and the *Buffalo News*.

Steven Ostrowski's chapbook, *In Late Fields*, was published by Bright Hill Press in 2006. He teaches in the English Department at Central Connecticut State University and lives with his wife and three children in Niantic, CT. He is currently completing a manuscript of poems called *Birds, Boys, Girls, God*.

C. E. Perry graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1992 and Dartmouth Medical School in 1999. Her work has been published in *Southeast Review*, *GSU Review*, *Margie* and *Pool*. Her first book of poetry, *Night Work*, is forthcoming from Sarabande Press. She lives in San Francisco with her family.

Jack Ridl's collection *Broken Symmetry* (Wayne State University Press) was named co-recipient of the best book of poetry award from The Society of Midland Authors. In 2009, CavanKerry Press will publish his collection, *Losing Season*. After teaching poetry at Hope College for 38 years, Jack is happily retired and living with his wife along Lake Michigan



Biman Roy is a Research Psychiatrist at The Nathan Kline Research Institute in Orangeburg, New York and a clinical faculty at NYU. His work has appeared in various literary magazines in UK, Canada and India and all across US including *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Hubbub*, *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, *Mobius: The Poetry Magazine*, *The Owen Wister Review*, *Porcupine*, *Permafrost*, *The South Carolina Review*, and many others. This particular poem is from his new manuscript, *A Door To The Wind*, poems on New York City.

Brynn Saito was a 2008 Kundiman Asian American Poetry Fellow at the University of Virginia. Her work is forthcoming in Helen Vendler's *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (2009). Currently, she lives in Ventura, California, where she is at work on her first book.

Sarah Seybold earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Oregon. Her poetry and fiction are published or forthcoming in *ZYZZYVA*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Gulf Stream*, *South Dakota Review*, and other journals.

Lucas Southworth has recently published stories at *Willow Springs*, *Web Conjunctions*, *Iron Horse Literary Review* and *The Fourth River*. He is an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama.

Centa Theresa, poet and artist, has exhibited her mixed media pieces in galleries in the San Francisco Bay area. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Drum Voices Revue*, *Sonoma Mandala*, *Tiny Lights*, *Women's Voices*, and *Writing For Our Lives*, and will be forthcoming in *Eclipse*. She has authored a letterset edition of poetry, *Blameless Recognition of Natural Light*.

Gabriel Welsch is the author of the poetry collection, *Dirt and All Its Dense Labor*. His other poetry, fiction, essays and reviews appear widely, in journals including *Tar River Poetry*, *Georgia Review*, *New Letters*, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Ascent*, *Mid-American Review*, *Isotope*, *Harvard Review*, and *Missouri Review*. He is assistant vice president for marketing at Juniata College, and lives in Huntingdon, PA, with his wife and daughters.

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé, a former journalist in Singapore, has edited ten books and co-produced three audio books, several pro bono for non-profit organizations. His poetry and prose have appeared in *Agni*, *Confrontation*, *Faultline*, *Gulf Coast*, *Harvard Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Seneca Review* and *Sonora Review*. Trained in book publishing at Stanford, Desmond holds a theology masters from Harvard.

John Baird studied sculpture at the University of Michigan and now works as a furniture designer. He first started photography in high school but became totally obsessed with it as a creative medium only in the last few years. His equipment bag includes homemade pinhole cameras, toy and vintage cameras, some modern medium format gear and even a fancy digital camera. For more of his work, check out <http://www.flickr.com/photos/johnbaird/>

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## HARPUR PALATE SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

*Harpur Palate* is now accepting submissions of long poetry and short fiction for the themed issue: The Long and the Short of It, scheduled for publication in the summer of 2009. Beginning in January, we are looking for fiction of 1000 words or less, and poems 3 pages or longer. Harpur Palate is hoping to accept pieces other journals might not.

Read through our guidelines before sending your work. Almost every literary magazine already says this, but it bears repeating: look at a copy of our publication to get an idea for what kind of writing we publish.

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

Prose: 1-3 submissions per author, each less than 1,000 words; mail to Prose Editors. Poetry: One poem per submission, no less than 3 pages; mail to Poetry Editors. Reading periods: We will accept submissions between December 15 and April 15. Please mark your submissions "themed issue" and send to:

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

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

THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

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

Opens: January 1

Deadline: March 1

John Gardner—fiction writer, dramatist, and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the creative writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce the Annual John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction.

Short story submissions should be: 1) 8,000 words or less, and 2) previously unpublished. You may enter as many stories as you wish. The fee is \$15 per story and includes a 1-year subscription to *Harpur Palate*. You may send as many stories as you wish, but no more than one story per envelope/entry fee. Please send checks drawn on a bank or money orders. Make sure your checks are made out to *Harpur Palate*, or we won't be able to process them (or accept your submission).

Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address and story title. Entrant's name should only appear on the cover letter and should not appear anywhere on the manuscript. Manuscripts cannot be returned, so please send disposable copies.

Send entries along with a business-size, self-addressed and stamped envelope (#10 SASE) for contest results to:

John Gardner Fiction Contest  
*Harpur Palate*  
English Department  
Binghamton University  
P.O. Box 6000  
Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

<http://harpurpalate.binghamton.edu>

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## WRITING BY DEGREES



Photo by Kathryn Henion

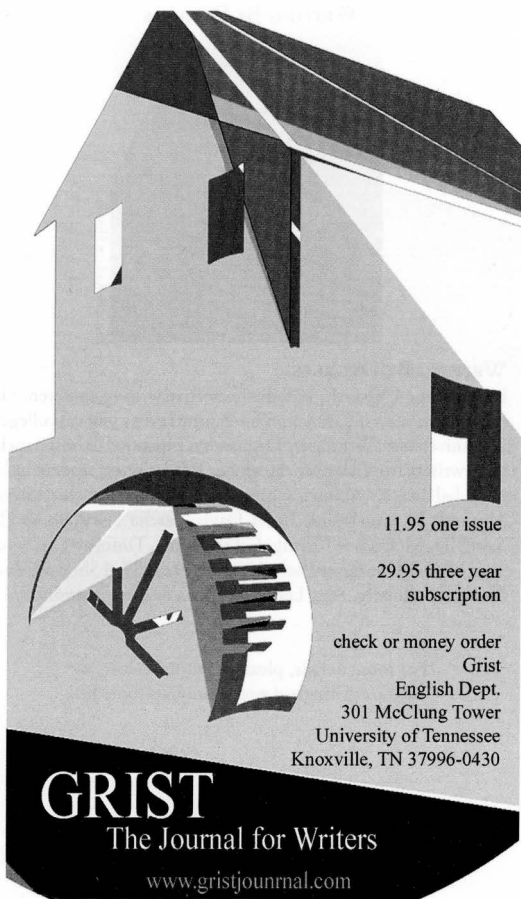
### WRITING BY DEGREES

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, Alex Lemon, Helena Maria Viramontes.

For more details, please visit our website at:  
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Jackie Bartley  
October 1, 2009

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