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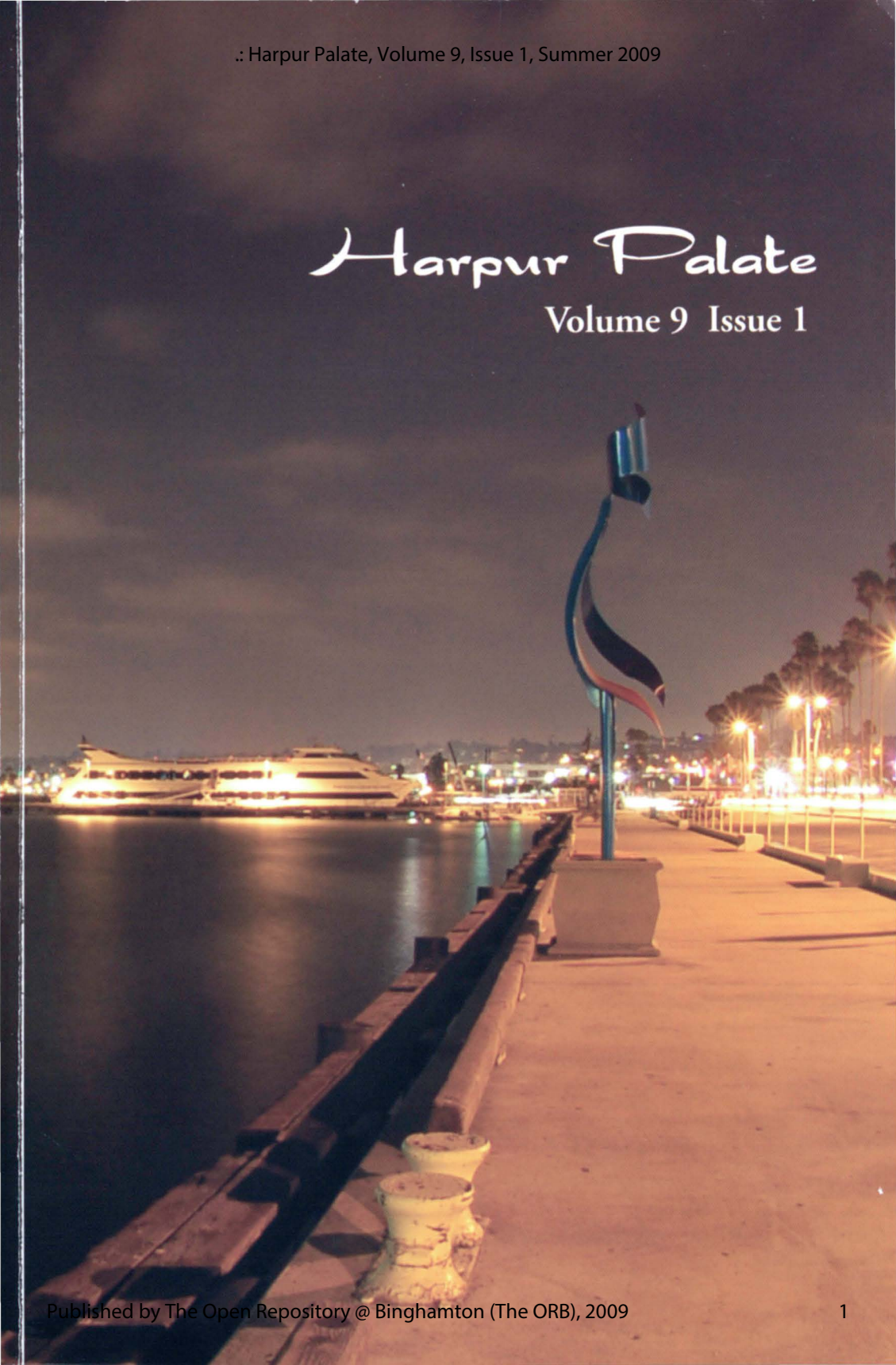

Harpur Palate

Volume 9 Issue 1

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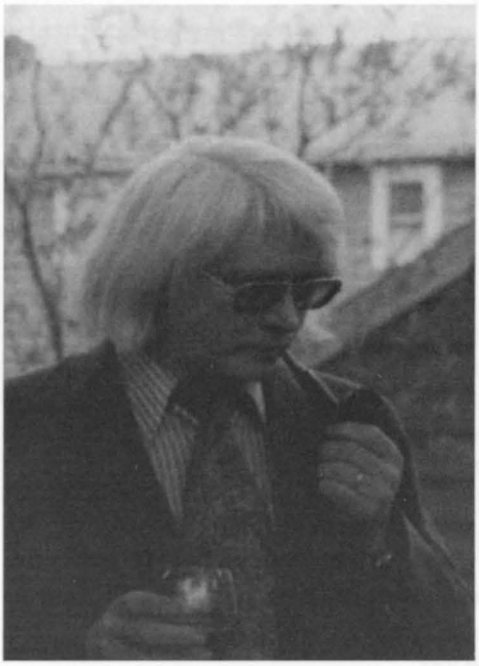

Winner

Derrin of the North

Jesse Goolsby

I'm thinking about my lungs, how they open and close and open and close, and the closest thing I can imagine are two little paper bags stuck deep in my chest. While I know it's not a perfect image, I think about the bags and how they have my name printed on them, right on the front in black ink; they both read *property of Thomas Kelvin*. My lungs are twenty-nine years old, a healthy pale pink with the possibility of a gentle smudge from a poorly smoked cigar or the pneumonia I hacked through in middle school. I expect my lungs to work for me for the rest of my life and, except for tonight, I haven't given them much thought; but, like most things that make us remember we're a collection of well placed matter, there's a good reason for my introspection. And, yes, pondering the inevitability of death is a part of it, but that's not all; there are also five cartons of eggs.

Derrin Dune would do anything for me because I had sworn to keep his secret safe. The secret wasn't much of one because everyone knew he was sick. All you had to do was glance at his frame, how I towered over him, how his blonde head bobbed wide and heavy on those frail shoulders; he looked two grades behind by the time we entered high school. I still remember the eyes of my mother when he first said his age at our dining table. How many times had he seen those eyes? Derrin was brilliant and shy, but socially oblivious, and, as fourteen year olds, he told me he had a secret for me, one I could never share.

It was Halloween, at dusk, and we were in my backyard with five cartons of eggs. I'd hid them underneath a hollowed out part of our woodstack. We had to space out the purchase of each carton because the stores got suspicious if you showed up at the register with them within two weeks of Halloween. The last orange was flicking at the clouds, and we sat there dressed in

black waiting for the sky to follow. We'd discussed our plan for the evening: meeting with the crew, a couple teachers' houses and cars across town, escape routes, what to do if we ran into other groups, cops. Derrin was into it big time, his hands wringing together. There was silence as we psyched ourselves up and then, suddenly, he prepared me for his secret, because, as he said, he wanted me to understand it. He didn't know why he had to tell me just then on the grass by the stacked pine chunks, but according to him there was no other way. It was "imperative," he said with his well developed vocabulary, that this stay between us as it could cause "irreparable damage." With his transition, I was expecting something heavy: he was into drugs, his parents hit each other, he was running away, something, actually anything, but what came from his mouth.

"I'll make this short," he said. "I'm sick."

I would've laughed, but I could still see him, even if it was getting more difficult. He couldn't actually believe that people didn't know, and yet there he was, in earnest. I didn't know what to say; of course he was sick.

"The doctor says I'll live until thirty if I'm lucky, so I'm marking the date. I'm telling you this because you are my best friend, and I want you to know what it means."

And then he told me the name of his disease, and I wondered how many times he'd said it before that time because, as it rolled out into the gray air, it seemed new and uncertain, as if diagnosed for the very first time.

But how could I ever begin to appreciate the secret? Derrin wasn't one of my best friends, even if I was his. Ours was a friendship based on proximity: he lived four houses down, and my city councilman father instigated our relationship, no doubt hearing the secret from Derrin's parents as he gave them a hand moving in. My father had been trying to be proud of me since I was born, and Derrin was his deepest investment in creating an honorable son. I must have sensed this somehow and wanted to do something about it because, although he embarrassed me, I allowed Derrin to tag along with my group of friends as long

as he kept quiet. I called him "kid," and turned to him only in times of assignment due dates. Occasionally, my father would set something up with Derrin and his father, and, even more rarely, Derrin and I would do something, just the two of us, and when we did I made sure my father knew about it. But I did use his loyalty as an advantage: when I really wanted to look good or powerful or popular through my teen years, I'd show up with him and it'd do the trick straight away.

After he told me his secret that night, we got back to the business of eggs. I allowed his confession to stay with me only a moment before it lifted and moved away. It had nothing to do with me and meant less than the shape of the eggs and how I would hold them in my hand to get maximum distance. But he never guessed, and, because I took a minute before I said anything and stared right back at him, he felt I'd understood what he wanted me to and considered the promise forged. He would, from that moment on, be under my control.

Later that night, we met up with the rest of my buddies and went out on our mission. We'd forgotten about the street lights on Mr. Tuck's avenue and had to stay back because no one had the gumption to walk right up to the front. A couple bushes a strong throw away provided our cover, and when I mouthed "Go," we stood up and chucked those eggs as hard as we could at the defenseless house and parked car. Our bodies flooded with adrenaline as the eggs disappeared from our surging arms. It was impossible to tell where they landed in the dark, and we squinted and each knew we'd been the first to hit the house, the very window to Mr. Tuck's room. Under the streetlight, ten yards short of the target, three eggs lay splattered. I knew who it was, and I didn't spare him, not even that night as we jogged away in the dark; I wanted all of them to hear it.

"Don't take the damn eggs if you can't hack it, kid."

Even then I thought of stopping the group to make Derrin return and go up to the front walk to throw one at the door. I'd been imbued with power, and it mixed into me quickly.

I started off small, getting a feel for command. Initially, there was resistance. When I made him take off his shirt—the first time we saw his pure white ribs—for the skins side in basketball, he considered leaving until I whispered our secret in his ear. When I made him touch Jenny Smith's ass, the first girl to develop breasts, he made me repeat my threat three times before walking up to her with his head lowered. In history class, I had to say "secret" and tap my temple before he asked if John Hancock's uncle was Don Keydick. I was lazy and indifferent in school, but I was dedicated to Derrin's tasks; they were something I was good at, and I pushed him harder and harder: dumping lawn shavings into unlocked cars, stealing a sixer of Coors from the corner store, phoning in a bomb threat the morning of the Algebra final. There were many more dares, each one more creative than the last, and as we progressed through them over our high school years, his resistance turned into acceptance and, unexpectedly, thankfulness. He eventually found a niche in our group, the one who would do anything, and it gave him a subtle reputation independent of us. Pity was always a part of it, and people wondered how the kid who dominated academics could be the focus of so many rumors. The wise cracks in class, the unparalleled nerve to talk to anyone, including Jenny Smith, brought him recognition which he digested into happiness. It got to a point where he'd ask me what he should do next.

About the time my impatience with his social ascent peaked, my father planned a deer hunting trip with Derrin and his father. My dad tried this father-son link with Derrin's family about twice a year, and, if it hadn't been the fall of our senior year, I'd have protested more vehemently, but the end was near. My dad knew my feelings for Derrin but pacified me, trying his hardest

to make me think of the days after high school, how the labels and groups would dissipate and form afresh with strangers, and wouldn't it feel great if I could look back at my youth and smile with memories of kindness? I am an only child, and my dad spoke to me like we were in a movie, and besides, talking to a high schooler about anything past the next Friday night is pointless. But I respected my father and even in my most deplorable angst I secretly wanted to please him, which I tried the only way I knew how: angering him. Thus I pouted about our hunting trip, but only long enough for him to notice my superiority over the company we would keep, until he added, "You just don't understand how much it means to Derrin."

I hate the cold, and during those three days it was freezing and miserable. The second morning, Derrin and I struck out on our own in ski masks. We knew the area well, and the rifles slung over our shoulders, pointing at the weak sun. It was too cold to talk and too cold to look up, but a pack of deer strutted right in front of us and settled in the sun fifty yards out. I didn't care much for hunting and thought of working in the cold, gutting the deer, the blood freezing to my gloves, having to take off the gloves and my fingers smoking, frozen. I glanced back at Derrin, hoping he had the same thoughts; we could simply say we didn't see anything and avoid hours of work. All it would take was a nod to each other. But his gun was up without asking me, and it seemed huge on him; I reminded myself it was only a .243 Winchester, a baby's gun. He glared into the scope, and, when he shot, it popped short like a toy, but it was massive against his shoulder. He'd become fierce clandestinely, and I was scrambling to place the fact on the invisible link between us. He pulled the gun down and gave me a thumbs-up as his breath punched out in tiny white puffs. I shook away and ran down the pine and bare aspen-filled embankment to the bottom of the gulley where the deer folded up, twitching the nerves away. I didn't wait for Derrin, and, when he came wheezing up from behind me, I already knew what he would do next. It had just come to me, from where in my consciousness I still don't know. I kicked

the deer to see if I had it in me, and the resulting jolt made me shudder. Derrin said something about the horns, but I was studying the thin face below them. The eyeball was uncovered and murky brown. I gave him an out when I suggested we radio the dads, but he was already on his knees with his blade near the belly. The long gash released a plume of stench that clouded up around us. I helped hold it open while he worked feverishly to disembowel the animal, making off-comments when he ran into something he thought was interesting. "I think they call this chyme," he said, showing me his glove smeared in greenish brown goop, and holding up the bladder full of piss before tossing it to the side. "He had to go." I felt the cold every second of that morning, and the corners of my ski mask holes were caked with spit and mucus. It'd taken a half hour for my plan to reach my lips, and when it did it took the form of a question.

"Will you eat the eyeball?" I asked. The form surprised me because I was not in the habit of asking Derrin for anything, and I felt the rise in my tone at the end of the question. There in the freezing shallow I'd asked him like he had a choice. Trying to recover, I told him the secret was safe, but he seemed to ignore this as he pulled the buck's horns around to his kneeling position. He dipped his shoulder hard as he dug, and I had to look above it. He held it aloft, inches from his mouth, the tentacles of wet ligaments spiraling down. He waited until my eyes met his. "To us," he said.

I dated Samantha Tiller my last semester at Chico High School, and she thought Derrin was cute to have around, so she'd ask him to come along if we were going out with her sister, who was a couple years younger. I could tell it made her feel even more Christian—her term for moral—to befriend him, though she never said as much; she was always motherly to him, asking if he was okay, did he need something, what were his plans. And

while she did this, she'd squeeze my hand in the front seat like we were married, talking to a child, but she had a body that re-routed my entire vascular system, so I let it fly as long as she let me in when I wanted. And she did. Often, I'd simply lie there as she exploded up and down over me, becoming another person, a woman on fire, and she'd fix on a space over her head, and she would preach to it, and she would bound on me and rejoice and use me. I had no idea what I was doing, so I'd look through the dim lamplight up at her breasts and bare throat half terrified that my firewoman would break me; sometimes it was like I wasn't even there, and that's when I liked it best, just watching and feeling helpless. When she'd finish, she'd tell me how wonderful I was, how good I was, how I satisfied her more than anyone could ever, and then slowly she'd shrink back into Samantha with each layer of clothing. Once, while my parents were away, she came over, and we showered together. The water was hot on us, and I wanted it cooler, but she said no; she let me keep the main lights on, and we washed each other with soap. She washed me from behind with her hands. She moved the suds across my stomach, and her breasts pressed against my back, and the smell was clean.

I never saw Derrin make a move for Samantha's sister and early on in our relationship that may have even been a dare, but by that point I'd stopped provoking him altogether. I'd tried ignoring him after our hunting trip didn't beat the "best friend" stuff out of him, but between my dad's urging and Samantha's Christian good-deed tally, I found myself resigned to wait for graduation. There were times when Samantha was over, and we'd be watching television or preparing to fool around upstairs, and I'd see Derrin walking up and down the street—a dead end—and could tell he was trying to hide the fact that he was looking inside, that he was hoping we'd see and invite him in. She did notice him

one time that spring and used the word *meek*—who uses that word?—as in, *the meek will inherit the earth*. Yes, I told her, we will all sit in judgment, kneeled at the feet of Derrin Dune, and may he be forgiving.

"Jesus appeared as a humble carpenter," she said. "And he was thin."

My parents were honest and fair and prepared me for the reception that awaited my poor grades post-graduation. I thought about joining the service after I realized I had no desire to become anything, so I let the Air Force pick my career for me. Three months out of high school, I left my neighborhood and trained as a fuel-cell maintainer on air tankers. I learned how to bend my body into holes no bigger than a basketball and deal with jet fuel on my skin and hair, and how it never really leaves. I was eighteen, stationed in Southwest England, in the farmlands above Cambridge, supposedly the driest place in the UK, and yet it rained most days. I stayed on base, avoiding fights and awaiting paychecks to blow on local British girls who didn't know the difference among the ranks.

My father had not given up on Derrin and thankfully had at least refused to give him my number, but he'd give me updates: Derrin says hi, saw Derrin the other day. My father told me that his health was steadily declining, that he had stayed around and took a year of community college before relenting to his body and going to work for his dad at the pharmacy. His parents let him live alone, but he was on a special machine three times a week, so his parents stopped by his apartment every other day. He sent me letters that I didn't read and e-mail that I didn't open. What my father didn't tell me at the time was Derrin was calling my parents' house three times a week for updates on me, and that my father refused to let my mother do anything about it.

I embellished my role in the service to my father. How could I not? And he was excited at how I was saving the world filling up aircraft at twenty-thousand feet. Unfortunately, his visions were wrong, and the longer we spoke the truth came out; I never left the ground. Instead, I worked at patching up the massive fuel bladders

inside the narrow wings or on the floor of the shop. He gradually stopped asking about my job and focused our discussions on what I was seeing in Europe. He pleaded with me to get out, to find something that interested me. What about the cathedrals? The battle grounds? "There's so much history," he said. After seeing a pamphlet on base about cathedrals I went down to London—the farthest out I went—and saw St. Peter's, but felt no connection; the cathedrals local to the base—in Cambridge, Ely, Bury St. Edmunds, and Norwich—merged into one another, each cold rock building highlighting itself more than any belief. I couldn't help but hear Samantha's words, a 'humble carpenter,' when confronted with another spiral monstrosity. It's not that I believed her or thought about Jesus at all, but I still imagined He'd get a kick out of some of the dizzying stained glass. I feigned interest when I spoke to my father about it, and I could tell by his voice that he wanted to be proud, but what the hell was I going to do with cathedrals?

I didn't realize it then, but I was searching for something I wanted to be good at: anything to define myself besides my memories of my hometown, my childhood bedroom and now, black fuel containers. I was beginning to comprehend the fact that the past is all there is: you are what you were, not what you want to be, and I was a repairman of rubber fuel cells for aircraft that took off and flew circles in the sky. There wasn't a war on, and when my time was up I decided to return to California. I arrived from England on a Thursday, and Derrin was there at my front door as I put my large bag down. He looked the same, maybe a little taller, and, even though I knew I shouldn't, I let him hug me; I'd remained his best friend, although the sentiment was never reciprocated.

It took me two months to get out of the house. My parents, so excited upon my arrival back home, turned on me a month into my stay and my empty statement: "Who ever knows what they want?" was met with distain and sarcasm: "People with jobs." I overheard my father on the phone say that the service didn't turn them out like it used to. I'd learned discipline all right, but not motivation, because that can't be taught.

During my time in my parents' house, Derrin began a series of bizarre events that began with him keeping his apartment but sleeping at his parents' place. At first, we thought it was due to his health, but then he started coming around every day, calling on the days we didn't meet up and barraging me with messages. Even my father admitted enough was enough. He called up Derrin's father, and they had a talk about it. It sounds funny to me now because Derrin and I were in our twenties and still our fathers were clearing things up. But things didn't clear up. Derrin continued his assault on me, and the phone rang, and he'd show up at restaurants where we went to eat and movies that we saw, enough so that finally my mother yelled at my father and gave it to him good, and he took it right there in our living room as our caller ID flashed "Derrin Dune."

My father went over to their house the next day and stayed an hour. When he returned he looked defeated, a look that can only be detected by the whole stance, and, in a way, he really was and deserved to be. The project of healing Derrin with friendship had backfired, and I learned later that my father and Mr. Dune got into it heavy, and words were said that took back years of loyalty. But my father didn't talk about any of that when he arrived. With a slight nod to my mother, he sat down on the sofa. He told us that Derrin wouldn't be calling us anymore, and that he hoped we were happy with ourselves. He told us Derrin needed a lung transplant and that he was against the ropes and fighting a losing battle. Derrin was twenty-first in line, and it could be years before a donor was found; they gave him until he was thirty. I thought, At least the doctors are consistent.

I enrolled in a dental assistant program down in San Jose and passed the two years away just getting by. It wasn't anything I'd ever dreamt about, but my father had a connection in the school and the starting pay wasn't bad. After school, I settled in Vacaville, assisting in a little

office. I made new friends who couldn't decide what they wanted to be, and we spent some time in Napa, and I dated and bought a condo. I had a little Honda that got good gas mileage, and, before I knew it, I had a life; it may have been typical and boring, but it was mine. The job was fine even if people came in with their disgusting mouths; I could suction well enough, handed the correct tools when required, and showed up on time.

Derrin still wrote me, and he'd call and leave messages. Every day, I'd get home and have at least two, three on the weekends, and sometimes, if I was curious, I'd skip the delete button once his voice arose, and I'd listen to him drone on about what had become disjointed blather: his favorite elements on the periodic table, the next eclipse, his favorite pair of shoes. This went on for about three years, and, when I visited home, he'd walk the street in front of our house, back and forth and back and forth, and he'd still not look at it. His arms thinned out, and his hair gradually turned white. His limbs hung from him, and it seemed as though the stretched ligaments were the only thing holding them on. His upper back arched noticeably right underneath the base of his neck, and he'd cough on his walks. It broke my father's heart, but what could I do? I could not save him and live my own life.

Then one day, having returned to the condo from an especially trying day—four root canals—I found the message machine empty. I stood beside it with an outstretched finger over the delete button, but there was nothing more to delete. I waited and thought of calling home; I tried to remain calm, tried to convince myself that this was the state of living I'd always wanted, peace finally, and yet the line of reasoning failed me, and I dialed my parents. They knew nothing. That night I waited. I waited for the phone call that I knew was coming. He had just wanted to talk to me directly, and yet, as I rested on my bed, the phone stayed silent. The next day the same thing happened. After the third day, I had to know. I dialed his number, and as I did I knew that the course of abstinence I'd worked so hard for had vanished and could never be recovered. I left a message: Just call me and let me know you're okay.

He got the message and called me back that evening. The first thing he said was, "It feels good to be wanted, doesn't it?"

We talked for a week straight; he was number ten on the list for new lungs, writing a science fiction screenplay, and down to a hundred pounds. But he didn't sound like he was dying, and that wasn't as exciting to me because I couldn't feel sorry for him unless he was on the edge; his diatribes on prepositions and meteors had me convinced that he was losing his mind, and the last night I told him not to call again, ever, that I'd made a huge mistake. He told me I'd call him again; he knew I would. His confidence scared me. I changed my number and started the process all over again. It lasted a year.

The ringing snapped my dream in half. I stole a glance at the clock before picking up. Midnight. I grabbed the receiver and closed my eyes.

"Somebody better be dying," I said.

"Tom?"

"Derrin? Is that you? How did you get this number?"

"Yeah, Tom. Well, you got it right."

"What? What's that? Hold on."

"You're right. I'm dying."

I sat up and flicked on the reading lamp on the side table. The light struck my eyes hard and bright. There was no one to wake up.

"Wait. Derrin, where are you? What's going on?"

"I'm at home," he said.

"Okay, what else? Are you having an emergency?"

"Oh no, I feel… I feel okay, buddy."

"To hell with you."

"No, no, no. How dare you. What I mean is that I am dying, but we're all dying aren't we? We are."

"So you're fine?"

"Sure. I even got moved up to number two on the list."

This was the chance to end it. I'd always been cordial, and my mind raced to say something definite.

"Screw you, Derrin. I mean that. This is a bullshit prank, and I don't know how you found me, but you have to stop for good." And, instead of hanging up, I caught myself stalling. "Have I not been clear enough?"

"Hey. Hold on, buddy. Buddy, let's talk. T-man, I called you, okay. There's a reason. I wouldn't call without a reason."

"You're not funny. I have to get up in the morning. I have a life!"

"But listen. Since I'm dying and going to be dying before you, I thought we could talk. I'm on the clock, man. I know we can talk during daylight hours, but there's something special about tonight. Electricity in the air. Wouldn't you agree? Makes us feel human."

"Sure, Derrin. Now it's crazy time."

"Well, I was lying here hooked up to the machine thinking about Little Chico Creek. The two have nothing to do with one another except the machine kind of makes the sound of a creek, maybe a perfectly timed, never-ending creek, but anyway. The time we took the Tiller sisters out there. You remember that? Damn, Tommy, I would've never thought to crouch down in the middle like it was deep. There was no way they'd have come in if they knew, and the bodies on 'em. Damn, Tommy."

There was sadness in his voice, and it sounded as if he might cry. I wondered if it was a ploy to keep me on, but, with all the crap we'd been though, he'd never cried in front of me. I wiped at my eyes, knowing it wouldn't help. And I remembered that night with the Tiller sisters, looking at Derrin's thin arms as we entered the water first, at how they helped me. The girls emerged from the trees, and we watched their toned bodies tighten as they walked out to the middle of the cool river. The faint moonlight covered the water, and we squinted and saw them rushing in, trying to submerge themselves as quick as possible. When they reached us and realized we were sitting on

our butts, faking treading water they ran out, and we howled and splashed and called to them to return. The girls changed into their underwear and came to the bank and threw rocks near us before walking away. Derrin and I stayed in for a little while, and after a minute we calmed down and listened to the sound of the water. Downstream, the girls' voices reached us as a whisper. "Tommy," Derrin had said with wet hair, "I need to tell you something." He looked somber, and I knew he would ruin the moment, but he shot up to this feet with arms outstretched to the sky screaming, "I am Derrin of the North, Lord of Shallow Rivers and Naked Women! Thank you, Jesus!"

"Yes. That was a nice night, Derrin. One of my best as well, but what's going on here? There's something you're not telling me, and if you don't tell me I'm hanging up on your ass."

"I want to tell you something embarrassing." He waited a moment. "I remember the colors of their bras and panties. You know why? You know, it's because it was the only time I've seen some. How's that? Did you know that?" His pace picked up, and I could tell he was going somewhere else.

"Yes?" I questioned. "What else? So you've only seen a couple chicks before. You're not the only one, but if you want me to say sorry, then sorry. Enough?"

I was two hours away from Derrin, in a one-bedroom condo, next to the outlet mall of Vacaville, and I had no intention of doing a thing about it.

"We're in our late twenties, Tommy. What does that tell you?"

"It tells me nothing, Derrin. It tells me nothing. It tells me that you're lonely and that you have no friends because you keep on calling me and not someone else, and we're not even that close anymore. It's been years since high school. As I've told you since then, it's time to move on. Now, please, leave me alone. It should be implied in my tone that I don't want to talk to you. And, if you're throwing yourself a pity party, then you deserve it. You got screwed. I'm sorry. My family is sorry. Everyone is sorry. And I'm sorry to say it, but they know. They've always known. Your

secret, all that bullshit, it's nothing, it's no secret. Everyone knows you're sick, that you were sick in school, and will be sick till you die. They feel sorry for you and pity you and want to make you happy, but the fact is no one knows how to make a person whose lungs are folding up happy. And, to be perfectly honest, we don't care if you're happy because it takes too much out of us. It takes too much out of me. I should've been this direct with you, and I deserve your psycho attention because I treated you badly in school, but hear me now. It doesn't matter. It's over."

"But you always pick up and talk to me. You tell me not to call, and yet here we are once again, talking like old friends. I don't call that often anymore. You told me to cut it down, and what did I do?"

"Are you listening to me? I'm done here. Good night."

Silence filled the line, and, while I couldn't hear his breathing, the rhythmic turn and puff of his machine played into my ear. I was sweating, and my chest felt cold. It stayed this way for a minute, and I knew I was losing a chance to make a point, to slam the receiver down and cut the connection.

"Derrin? Do you understand?"

"Just know one thing," Derrin said. "I went and bought a gun, and it's in my dresser."

I didn't believe him. He was desperate. I thought about saying "Use it." I thought of saying "Good." Those were my first thoughts, and I wondered what would happen if I said them aloud. But I said, "Derrin."

"It's black. The smell of it reminds me of hunting and gunpowder. It's as if all the decisions in my life have been made for me when I hold it. Do you know what I mean? Maybe you don't, but I do. I thank God for the simple things, blood and shit and water. Now there's something to celebrate. Something you know will be there, no matter what."

"You're talking nonsense. Please. What are you trying to do here? What can I possibly do?"

"You? You can do nothing. You've done nothing. I'm going to die anyway, Tommy, probably tomorrow. It's my birthday today.

Yeah, I've reached my maximum age. I'd like to see you."

The shift caught me by surprise, and I was still digesting the birthday comment. Was it really today? I went over the route to him in my head.

"You just told me there's nothing I can do."

"I'm still in Chico, at the same apartment."

"I have to come tonight or you're shooting yourself? Is this what you are saying? Jesus, Derrin. I'm calling the cops. This is the easy answer. I'm tired, and I don't know if I even believe you."

"Do you want me to read you the serial number?"

"Yes," I said.

He gave me some letters and numbers, and I used the time to consider my options and finally to ask myself, If he were telling the truth, could I live with it?

It was foggy and dark, and the orange glow from the dash bothered me. I-5 at 4:30 A.M. was straight as ever, and I drove home past the city limit signs that hadn't been altered in years. I passed through Williams, turned off at Orland on Highway 32 with its flanking orchards, and passed over the Sacramento River.

On the drive, I thought of saving Derrin and calling my father and telling him what I'd done, how I'd entered his apartment and soothed his nerves and removed the gun because I'd dared him to. How I'd stroked him calm, reliving the Tiller sisters, and the father-son camp-outs. I'd give my dad some credit for keeping after me and he'd say, "This is what I was talking about all those years, son. This is when you show your true colors as a man." He'd tell me he loved me, and as I sat there in the car, lighted from the speedometer, I wondered if I lived for my father's accepting voice, and how it would be okay if it were true.

The street lights spaced out evenly along his busy street, and

all the parking on the road was taken. I considered blocking someone in, but I thought I could be in there for a while. I circled around like normal, but it was the middle of the night, and no one was moving any time soon. I parked two blocks away and got out. I'd forgotten a coat and thought of jogging but walked instead, feeling the cold. The night exuded a surreal energy, and the clouds were still a blanket around the sky, reflecting the shine of the city. The sidewalk was crumbling in parts, and for the first time, the night felt real.

A black seventeen hung from the red door. I decided to knock instead of pushing the doorbell. The door opened an inch and stopped. I spoke his name, and he called to me to come in.

Derrin stood on a silver rug in the middle of the floor. There was no furniture, save an overstuffed chair and his machine. As I took my first steps in, I looked for the gun. In his hand? On the chair? And I asked him where it was. I had a plan, rehearsed for the last half hour of the drive, and it required a commanding presence.

"Where's the gun, Derrin?"

He was dressed in all white, and his skin and hair were white, as bright as the clothes that enveloped him. I closed the door behind me, but I didn't take my eyes off him.

"You're here," he said shakily. "I knew it would happen when you decided to come." I was scanning for the gun but saw nothing, and there were no hiding places. I could tell he was scared of me because he trembled. When I took a step toward him, he took one step back, staggering on his legs.

"Where's the gun?"

He shook his head as if it were the dumbest question I could ask.

"Are you listening to me? I knew it would happen when you decided to come."

"You haven't told me a thing. But listen, I'm here to help. And while I meant what I said on the phone, I never said I wanted you to die."

"Are you listening to me? I got the call."

"You got the call? What does that even mean?"

"It means you saved me. It means that someone has died tonight that I might live. I got the call while you were on your way. I want you to take me to the hospital."

I couldn't move my mind, and, when I finally came to, Derrin was standing there on his rug in white, and he cried and he shook and he sung a whispering version of 'Happy Birthday' to himself. It was eerie, and I asked about his parents; shouldn't they be the ones to take him? No, he'd phoned them already. They would meet us there. His bags were packed.

On the way, I asked him about his new lungs and what they would do: "They'll take the disease away from me." And what would he do now that he didn't have the disease: "I'll gain weight and run and tan in the sun." But he cut me off five minutes into it. He burst forth with energy, and he reached out and touched my glove compartment, the fabric on the roof, the door armrest, and the shifter. He was going to live, and the joy was too much.

"Tell me about England," he said. "I want to know all about your time there. What did you see? What did you do?"

"Derrin, my God, you're getting new lungs in an hour, and you want to know about my time in England? What about you? Holy shit, I can't even think straight."

"Please, Tommy. What did you do? Well, I know you repaired fuel cells; your dad told me that. He said it was the toughest job out there and that it must have been hard on you."

"It was okay. I did have to squeeze into some tight places."

His face remained lit as I talked about England and the base and the few cathedrals I'd seen. He wanted to know everything: what was my place like? Was base housing nice? Did we have a BX? Did people watch the planes land from beyond the fences? Did it rain? And on and on he went, the most banal questions, one after another, and he hung on my every response. His enthusiasm drove me hard into memory, and, when that failed, I made things up: my co-workers locked me in the wing for twenty-four hours. Yeah, it was tough, but I knew I could get

through it. I slept with the major in charge of the squadron; she wanted me from day one, so it was no surprise when she showed up at my dorm room with a bottle of scotch. I saved two people from choking to death in the cafeteria because of my training. Thank God I was there. As I spoke the made-up stories, they sounded convincing, and I realized that I'd thought of them long before this. Derrin would never know the difference, and the truth would never matter. To him, I lived that life, and so I did.

My stories lifted us right up to the hospital entrance in Davis, and as I put the car in Park, I wondered if this was all he ever wanted. We were men now, and he would be made anew, just inside the doors, with someone else's lungs tied to his body.

I accompanied him to the front desk, and his parents stood up and greeted me coldly, so I waited by the entrance. I didn't know if I should stay or go, but Derrin looked over and gave me a signal to wait as he and his parents listened to the receptionist, who was pointing to a red piece of paper. After they broke away, Derrin came over and apologized for his parents. He thanked me for the trip and wrapped his arms around me, and I held his head to my chest with one hand and pulled at his back with the other. I felt the bony vertebrae, and I thought I might crush him, but he held on, and the guilt rushed at me there in the white lobby and overtook me.

As he let go, he said, "Yes."

He disappeared behind the double doors with his parents, and I bent over to my knees in exhaustion. I stayed for an hour and fell asleep on the padded chairs. He hadn't asked me to stay, and, when I woke up, I felt that it would be inappropriate for me to be there when he woke up. Family would be flying in from everywhere to greet him.

I drove back to my parents' place, and, when I walked through the door, I felt like a child again. My father and mother were finishing up their breakfast and rushed to me at the entrance. I told them the story the best I could, and I must have hit the right notes because they were both in tears by the end. They

asked me to stay for a day or two, so I called my work and lied. When I woke up, my father told me he'd called Mr. Dune and that Derrin was having some complications, that they wouldn't know for another twelve hours.

I sit on my childhood bed thinking about my lungs. I think of my name imprinted on them, and I think of Derrin and wonder what name is on his lungs. I recall five cartons of eggs and Samantha Tiller at eighteen. I remember her saying 'meek' as Derrin paced up and down our street, waiting patiently.

John Gardner Fiction Contest
Finalist

Love The Shape You're In

Leah Freiwald

I'm in pretty good shape. Knock wood. I manage an hour of Wheelchair Aerobics, and I still see enough to draw pictures in the art room—nothing too complicated, something traced from a magazine, a cat, a girl on a swing, a bowl of fruit. According to Colette, the social worker on our floor, I function at a moderately active level.

My friend Irene hasn't been doing so hot. "Hang in there," I say.

"What for?"

Irene's depressed. The staff shrink put her on a strong antidepressant. It's also a strong diuretic; makes it difficult to sit through a movie. And it doesn't seem to lift her mood. Truth is, there's good reason to be depressed, if you let yourself give in to it. We're shut up here like a bunch of obsolete machines. What pill can make that go away?

Every day after breakfast the aides wheel us out and line us up along the wall opposite the nurses' station so they can keep an eye on us. Today I winked at the aide who was pushing me and said, "You'd better look sharp or we'll run off."

Irene smiled a little at that. She's fallen a couple of times. Last time they found her on the floor in her bathroom, bleeding from a gash on her leg. Two people had to lift her into bed. After that they strapped her in with a buzzer clipped to her sweater. If she tries to get up from the chair, the buzzer goes off. She doesn't try anymore.

I can get myself from bed to the walker and, if I'm very careful, in and out of the chair. I take my time. It wouldn't be fun to hit the floor; I'd probably crack my pelvis. But I believe you have to move it or lose it. Morning and afternoon I navigate the hall on

my walker. Making my rounds, I call it. When I pass her room, Betty always sings out, "How's life treating you today, Eleanor?" Her next door neighbor, Marie, can only nod and smile. Marie's on heavy-duty happy pills.

My first few weeks here I was angry. Uncooperative. It was like a prison; everything was regulated, every hour scheduled. Let me out of here, I screamed inside my head. I scowled. I declined to eat. The shrink sat down with me. "Eleanor," he said, "you're making this hard on yourself, on the nurses, on everyone. We're here to help you. We want what's best for you." What he considered best for me, should I be unable to adjust, was a tranquilizer. Right. Up the dose until I turn into a zombie, like Marie.

"I promise I'll make an effort to get along." We shook hands on it. And I do; I do my best. I participate in Current Events, where Colette reads from a newspaper and asks questions to see if we're alert, if dementia has rotted our brains. "Where is Iraq? Who is Michael Phelps? What is West Nile Virus?" That's one disease we're not likely to die from. There are no mosquitoes on the third floor. No dementia patients either; they have their own wing with soundproof walls.

Once a week they take us down to the atrium on the second floor. As many as four wheelchairs in an elevator. Volunteers serve tea or coffee—I prefer Oolong tea—and cookies. Sometimes a woman plays the piano, show tunes from *Oklahoma* and *The Sound of Music*. Irene's got macular degeneration. She doesn't see much, but she hears everything, and so far she remembers all the words to the songs.

In between activities, Irene and I have lots of time to talk. More often than not, though, the conversation is one-sided: I talk, she sits and broods. This morning Irene perked up and said, "What's the meaning of life?"

"You've heard that one already."

"Tell me again, Eleanor."

"OK, if that's what you want." I cleared my throat. "Once upon a time there was a man. He was determined to learn the meaning of life."

"That's the one." Irene settled back in her chair.

"This man went in search of a guru who knew the meaning of life. When he heard the guru was in Paraguay—"

"Brazil, Eleanor. He was in Brazil."

"Sorry, Irene. My mistake. When the man heard the guru was in Brazil, he followed his trail, and, when he came to the Amazon, he jumped in. Piranha gobbled up one arm."

"But he continued searching."

"That's right. He heard the guru was in Africa, and he hacked his way through the jungle, where a tiger ripped off a leg."

"They don't have tigers in Africa. It must have been a lion."

"Whatever you say, dear, a lion." I don't know why Irene is so fond of this story.

"Go on. Tell about what happened when he went to Tibet. That's the best part."

"OK." I paused to clear my throat again. "After a time the man heard the guru was at the top of a huge mountain in Tibet. He clawed his way up, ignoring frostbite on his last fingers and toes. When he reached the summit, he saw a cave, and inside the cave was the guru."

"And he said—"

"He said, 'Please, Mr. Guru, tell me the meaning of life.' He waited for the guru to speak."

"And the guru said—"

"If you know it by heart, Irene, what's the point?"

Just then the dietitian arrived with our supplemental nutrition drink. They make sure we get our daily amounts of trace minerals. It's highly sweetened, like thick sugar water. I guess we're not in danger of losing our teeth prematurely. I'd give an arm and a leg to eat out one more time, to take a break from the bland food they serve us. Puréed this. Stewed that. Find out whether I still have taste buds.

The dietitian handed each of us a drink: today's flavor, mocha caramel. I peeled down half the wrapper on my straw. When Irene was looking the other way, I aimed, blew into the straw, and hit her on the back of her head. She swiveled around, started

to say something, and then her face seemed to freeze. One eye stared at me, the other drooped. Her cup clattered to the floor. In an instant the nurse on duty was hovering over Irene. She called for an orderly, and they quickly wheeled her away.

No one will tell me when Irene's coming back. The nurse clomps past as if I'm invisible. The other residents pretend nothing's happened. Maybe for them that's OK. Who am I to judge? The trick is to look on the bright side. At the moment I don't see any bright side in what happened to Irene. I'm doing my best to be positive, but it's hard.

Ordinarily I make morning rounds just before lunch. Why bother? Today I think I'll just sit here. The rooms on our floor are in a circle, with a balcony in the middle that overlooks the atrium. On the floor below, straggly geraniums in planter boxes bloom all year. If I had a pair of scissors, I'd trim them, pinch out the centers, let them grow in lush and dense. Geraniums are without a doubt the most boring plants, but they're indestructible. Forget to water them, leave them alone for weeks, you can't kill them. The people who decide such things probably don't want us to see less hardy flowers fade away. Might give us the idea—well, you know—we're not going to last forever. Ha! The problem is we've lasted too long. We've outlasted our welcome. Outlasted our friends, lovers, pets, most of those who matter to us. Anyway, I'm not allowed scissors.

When I get into this mood, I try to stop myself. If I could see a way to break out of here, I'd do it. What could they do to me? Send out a posse, drag me back, and then what? Tie a buzzer on my wheelchair?

All I know is thinking about the past does no good. The memories are painful. I miss Harry. I miss my garden. This time of year I'd be out pruning the roses, cutting back the lace-cap hydrangeas, columbine, daylilies. I'd lug bags of compost

around, spread it and work it into the soil, preparing the ground for the next spring. By the end of the day I'd be tired. Good and tired.

Harry used to say, "Why do you work so hard, Eleanor? Take it easy. Get some rest."

"Plenty of time to rest when I'm dead," I'd say.

These days, if I squatted down in the dirt, I'd never get up again. Not under my own steam. Doesn't matter. I'm always indoors now, for however many springtimes I have left. Once I asked Harry what he thought would be better—to grow old with your mind okay but your body wasted, or to lose your mind while your body went on and on.

He threw it right back at me. "What would you choose, Eleanor?"

"If I could have my druthers, I'd keep my wits and my body wouldn't let me down."

"Me?" Harry said. "I'd rather get hit by a truck."

He got his wish, sort of. Had a massive coronary, lasted only sixteen hours in the intensive care. That's the only bright side I can think of about Harry's death—he didn't linger. If Irene can't come back and laugh at my jokes again, I truly hope she doesn't linger either.

When Colette came by, I must have seemed pretty glum. She tried to cheer me up. "Eleanor," she said, "shall I take you to the art room?"

I couldn't speak. I was so sad and angry at the same time.

"We have some new chalks, the bright colors you like."

I shook my head. At lunchtime, when the aides started wheeling everyone into the dining hall, I asked to go to my room.

My room is like everyone else's here. A bed, a dresser, a small closet. There's no place for a lot of stuff, and I really don't miss things I used to have. For sure I don't miss the house. It was

empty after Harry died. Like a tomb. Sometimes I would talk to his photograph, tell him about my day. I didn't ask about his day. I'm not that batty. Once in a while I dressed up, put on my pearls and rings and pretended I was back from a show. Harry liked me to dress up, liked to go out to dinner. Indian, Thai, Chinese, Brazilian, all kinds of restaurants. "Spicy," he always said, "that's how I want my food and my women."

After Harry died, no way could I live out my days at home. If I fell, I'd have moldered on the floor, sheer luck for someone to find me. So when Norm flew in from Miami and insisted I sell the house, I protested just to get his goat. He's not a great son, but he had the decency to organize it for me down to hauling away the boxes from the attic. I gave him power of attorney, power to pull the plug if I'm a vegetable. As soon as he checked me in here, he scurried home to his golf game and his second wife, Sherry. That was three years ago.

No, I don't miss the house. I don't miss the clothes, either. C'est la vie. What would I do with silk blouses, handbags, high heels? Lord knows I'll never need a winter coat again. In here it's the same temperature all the time. My outfit today is much the same as every other day of the week. A t-shirt and cotton pants with rolled up cuffs and elastic waist. Every now and then, Norm ships a package: seven color-coordinated shirts and pants Sherry picked out from a catalog. No-iron cotton. Easy for the laundry. Easy for the nurse's aide to dress me in the morning, for her to pull down my pants when she wheels me to the bathroom. Although in the haste of the morning, I often end up color uncoordinated, I am neat and clean. There's a mesh basket on the walker where I keep a cardigan, a box of tissues, a small amount of cash. No rings or watches. Nice as all the staff seems to be, jewelry tends to disappear. I gave it all to my granddaughter, Andi. She would've inherited it anyway. Let her have it now.

I almost forgot. Today's Andi's day to visit. I don't feel like seeing anyone. I'd just as soon put myself to bed and pull up the covers, but I'll do my best to be pleasant company for an hour or two. I'm

lucky she comes. Bless her, she has a good heart. She takes after her mother, Norm's first wife, Melissa. Norm rarely flies out from Miami anymore. He says it's too awful for him to see me like this. So be it. I say it's his loss. Not seeing Andi or Tina, I mean.

All afternoon I force myself to stay awake. Finally there's a knock on my door. How wonderful—Andi's brought Tina. The child runs up and throws her arms around my knees. She giggles, and I see she's lost another baby tooth. My spirits rise at the sight of her smile.

"Am I still your favorite great-grandma?" I reach down and pat her face.

"You're her only great-grandma," Andi says, mock serious. "That makes you her least favorite great-grandma, too." It's our regular shtick.

Andi fetches my walker. "What a beautiful day. Would you like to sit outside on the patio?"

I let her help me up. I smile at Tina. "Let's go, kiddo. Haven't had my exercise yet today." Tina skips ahead down the hall.

A rich resident willed money for a fountain. There's a plaque: "In memory of —." A concrete bird perches on the fountain—can't tell what kind; it's all one color, gray, but it's not a dove. Reddish-gold maple leaves clog the waterspout. We sit down at a table that looks like it should be at a French sidewalk café.

Andi goes inside to use the visitors' bathroom. "Tell great-grandma how you like kindergarten," she says over her back.

As soon as Andi disappears, I have a wild idea. "Tina, sweetheart, bring the walker close to me.... That's right.... Hold it steady."

She obeys me wordlessly. I push up from the table and grab onto the handles. "Let's go, kiddo."

I clasp Tina's hand tight against the cold aluminum handle. I can feel her pulse. We start down the ramp to the sidewalk. She tells me about her kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Williams, and her friends, Jana and Carson.

"I like art best," Tina says.

"Me, too, sweetheart."

Now we're walking along the sidewalk in front of the Home. The trees are scrawnier than they seem from my window. There are little white iron fences around the trunks, to keep dogs from peeing on them, I guess. Cars spew fumes. Tina coughs. The noise is louder than I expected. Up on the third floor my window is bolted shut. Sounds from the street are muted.

The sidewalk is bumpy and cracked. I lift my gaze from the ground long enough to wink at Tina. "We're escaping," I say. She scrunches up her face to blink both eyes at me.

The day is cooling off. A wind blows candy wrappers along the sidewalk. Sweat dribbles down my neck. I shiver, but I can't reach my cardigan. My legs shake from fatigue. I stop and lean on the walker for a moment. At the intersection I'm confused. Should we try to cross? With four lanes of traffic, we might not get to the other side before the light changes. I stand still, uncertain what to do. I'm really happy to be out, but I'm so tired I could sink down on the sidewalk.

"Wait, wait! Don't you dare move!" I hear Andi shriek from half a block away. She runs up panting, her face red as if she's finished a marathon. "What are you doing? You nearly frightened me to death. I thought someone kidnapped Tina. If I hadn't seen you down here, I'd have called the police."

I'm appalled. How could I be so thoughtless? "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't think. Please forgive me."

Slowly Andi catches her breath. A large tear forms and rolls down my cheek. I shudder in the wind. How can I explain? "I just wanted to get out of there… maybe to taste real food…one more time—"

"We're escaping, Mama." Tina clasps her mother's hand. "Come escape with us."

Andi relents. "Okay, you guys. No harm done." She holds onto Tina and puts her other arm through mine. "Let's see what we can find."

We turn the corner. Suddenly we're on a street of shops—a

dry cleaner, a place that cashes paychecks, a florist, manicurist, and, halfway down the street, a Cantonese restaurant.

"Shall we have a bite?" I say.

Andi looks at her watch. "Listen, I have a couple of errands. Why don't you guys go ahead while I stop at the ATM and Walgreens. Then I'll bring the car around for you."

Inside the restaurant, it's dark and almost empty. Red lanterns glow on the tables. The spicy smells hit me, wash over me, remind me how I love Chinese food.

A waiter motions us to a table. He helps me into a chair, parks the walker against the wall, and leaves two menus. He comes back with a pot of tea. I let it steep and then pour a cup.

"Shall we have a tea party?" I put some water in a cup for Tina. "Health and happiness."

Tina sips the water. I raise my cup and drain it. The tea warms my throat.

The waiter asks if we're ready to order. Tina pretends to read her menu. "I'll have pot stickers," she says and sits up straight.

"Vegetarian or pork?" The waiter waits to scribble on his pad.

"Vegetarian, please."

"Your granddaughter is polite," the man says.

"She's my great-granddaughter."

"Oh, a great-grandchild. You are fortunate." He smiles.

I smile back. Tina beams at us both. Sitting here with Tina is the best thing that's happened to me in years. For an instant I glimpse the teenager, the poised young woman she'll become. She'll make her mother so proud. She'll stand tall, a smiling junior version of Andi.

The waiter is expecting my order. "I'll have the won ton soup."

When the food comes, Tina takes a chopstick in each hand, lifts one of the doughy crescents, dips it in the sauce, drops it on

the plate, and ends up squishing it in her fingers. She wipes them neatly on her napkin. I wrap her hand around the chopsticks. Together we pick up a pot sticker. It falls into the dipping sauce. We both laugh.

In a rush I down two bowls of soup. The shrimp are perfect, not mealy at all. The water chestnuts crunch. The peapods are a fresh, bright green. I spear a black mushroom; it slides around on my tongue. Thank goodness I have my teeth. Maybe I should order the sesame chicken. I always loved that. And garlic scallops. Or the clams with black bean sauce. Maybe not. I'm not sure how much money I have with me.

"Here, kiddo," I say. "Try the soup." Tina guides my hand. I keep the spoon steady while she has a taste.

"Do you like it?"

"It's chicken soup."

"Have a won ton." I bring the chopsticks to her mouth.

Tina stares at the protruding veins on my hand. "Great-grandma Eleanor, are you going to die soon?"

"Why do you ask, sweetheart?" If I say yes, will I frighten her? The answer is most definitely, probably sooner than later, but who knows? I never expected to live this long.

"My goldfish died, and mama said it was because he was old. We flushed him down the toilet."

"Well, I'm old, that's for sure. But I'm in pretty good shape. Feel my muscle."

Tina laughs. "Feel my muscle." She bends her arm and makes a fist.

The liquid sloshes around in my insides. I feel full. Satisfied. Content. Whatever happens, I will do my utmost to remember this afternoon for as long as I'm able.

Tina is restless. She's been really good for a five year old. When the waiter comes by, I ask for the check. He adds it up and leaves it near me on a plate, along with two fortune cookies.

Without warning my bladder signals an emergency. Can I get myself to the restroom? If Tina brings the walker, maybe I can pull myself up. But where is the restroom? I feel flushed

and dizzy. My legs tremble at the effort it would require. No, I can't possibly make it.

I beckon the waiter over. "Tina, dearest, do you know the number of the little phone your mother carries in her purse?"

"Actually, I do. I know my address, too. Would you like to hear it?"

"Please tell this nice man the phone number." I put my head down on the table.

"She's on the way," the waiter says.

I will myself not to move. I hold my breath, suck in my abdomen. I clamp my knees together. Please, please, let me hang on. I promise I'll never complain again. I'll cooperate. I'll be good. Please, pretty please.

"Great-grandma, would you like your fortune cookie?"

I raise my head and manage a small smile. "That's okay, kiddo. You have mine."

Face Time

Kate Bullard Adams

Lindsay's sitting across from me, beautiful as sin. Distanced by my desk, I look at my youngest child with the analytical eye I usually reserve for patients, sizing up the brow in need of Botox, the face that's begging for a lift. But with Lindsay, there's nothing I would change. As good as I am with a knife, I know better than to mess with perfection. And Lindsay's as close as you're going to get.

"But, Dad," Lindsay is pleading—Don't scrunch up your forehead like that, I want to say. You'll pay for it later—"it's no big deal. You do it all the time."

I nod, forced to confirm the disagreeable fact that, yes, this is indeed what I do all the time—perform mostly unnecessary surgery on people who have more money than sense. "But that doesn't mean I like it," I counter. "And that doesn't mean I'm going to perform a totally unnecessary procedure on my own child."

What Lindsay wants is minor—a little silicone in the lips that could already serve as the 'after' version of a less fulsome 'before,' the lips that are an exact replica of Linda's, whose mouth I used as a model even before I married her. Overall, our three children are distinct in appearance—different heights, different body types, different features—but they've all got the luscious lips that, from the moment I met her, had me hanging on their mother's every word just to watch the movement of her mouth.

"It's not like I just want to pretty up my face," Lindsay continues, arms folded, looking every bit the college kid still being held to a curfew. "This is for a job. A really good job."

Lindsay's right, it is a really good job. A top New York modeling agency is close to offering a contract, but they'd like to see a little more height in the upper lip. "The upper lip, it makes or breaks the bottom third of the face," they've told Lindsay. "And right now it's breaking yours." That remark makes me want to break their faces, give them all the fat lips they want. How

dare they talk to my child like that. How dare they talk to any healthy human being like that. They're the ones who started it all, I say to myself, staring at Lindsay's flawless visage. They're the ones who turned a perfectly decent profession into a freak show. I used to treat people with birth defects, people who'd been burned or mutilated, people who were in pain. What I did was about medicine, about healing. What I did was an honest day's work.

"Really, Dad. Don't you think this is kind of hypocritical?" Lindsay's eyes have narrowed in an expression that, to a surprising degree, reflects the disdain I've just been feeling. "I mean, it's not like I don't know what you do to Mom. I'm not blind."

In an instant my own eyes narrow and my muscles tense and I lean forward, elbows gouging the arms of my chair. "What are you talking about?"

"Get serious," Lindsay says, and there's a distinctly nasty elevation of the upper lip in question. "All of us know. Just because we were kids doesn't mean we didn't notice when her chest…exploded. Or her hips shrunk. Or her wrinkles disappeared." Lindsay laughs, a snide bark. "How dumb do you think we are?"

I've been trying to hold Lindsay's gaze, to play dumb myself, but I can't keep it up any longer, and my eyes drop to the photos on my desk. They're all pre-op: Linda before the implants, when her breasts still showed the tug of nursing babies; Linda before the lipo, when her hips still gave you something to hold; Linda before the face lift, when life was still allowed to make its mark.

I've never told her how I feel about all of this. Maybe she remembers my disbelief the first time she mentioned wanting a little 'touch-up.' And maybe she remembers my trying to ignore her first hints about a tummy tuck. But I've never told her the disgust I've felt every time she's brought up 'one more little tweak.' And I've never told her how dirty I've felt every time I've given in to her coaxing. And I've never told her how every time I've operated on her, after she's been wheeled off to recovery, still

woozy from the happy juice, I've gone to the lavatory, turned on the water and crouched in front of the toilet, doubled over with dry heaves, my stomach empty because I haven't been able to eat. And how I've then sat on the john, put my head in my hands and cried heavy, disfiguring tears at the whore that I've let myself become.

Now, sitting opposite Lindsay, my fingers locked in a futile clasp, I shake my head slowly and let out a deep, empty exhale. I take one last look at Linda, the picture that shows her coming home from the hospital, still wearing a maternity dress, cradling newborn Lindsay in her arms. I raise my head, look into my child's face. My eyes linger for a last second on the lips that are so like Linda's. "All right, son," I say. "I'll do it."

Traveling

Sherman Alexie

Upon arrival, I collect my baggage
And walk across the bridge

Into the parking structure
Where I discover, to my embarrassment,

That I've been gone too long
And have forgotten where I left my car.

From floor to floor, aisle to aisle,
I walk and walk, searching, searching,

Growing weary and angry. My bags
Are heavy. Too heavy. So I leave them

By an elevator and hope that I find
My car and return to them before

A thief steals them or airport security
Confiscates and destroys what they think

Could be an explosive device. Finally,
I think to look in my wallet

For my parking stub, and I find it,
And yes, I've written down the row

And number, so I rush to that location
And find an unfamiliar car, a small,

Black hatchback that disturbingly
Resembles an insect. This isn't

My car, but I insert my key into the lock,
And it works. So this must be my car.

I take the driver's seat and insert the key
Into the ignition, but the engine will not

Turn, will not turn, will not turn over.
The battery is dead. I have no power.

And then I smell something sweet
And sickening. I know that smell.

It's death. Suddenly terrified, I look
Into the backseat and see what must

Be a body wrapped in garbage bags.
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

I want to run, but I need to know who
Is dead in the backseat of this car

That must not be my car, so I pull back
The garbage bag over the corpse's head

And it's my father, O, God, it's my father.
What is his body doing here? We buried him

Six years ago on the reservation. I threw
A handful of dirt on his coffin, and yet,

Here he is. And his body is strangely
Preserved, as if he had just died yesterday.

And then I am rocked backward when
I notice that my father is breathing

Shallowly. I leap over the seat
And land on my father. I shake and shake

And shake him, but he will not wake.
He will not open his eyes. "Wake up!

Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"
I pound on his chest, on his heart,

And I slap his face, and I grab him by
The shoulders and shake, shake, shake him

Until he opens his eyes, barely conscious,
Barely aware, and I scream at him

To come back to me, but he falls
Into sleep, so I punch him in the face,

And bloody his nose, and I punch him
In the gut and hear the air escape his lungs,

And I punch him in the crotch
And that does the trick. My father sits up

Straight and his eyes snap open wide
And he looks at me—he sees me—and he asks,

"Where have you been? Where have you been?"
And I say, "I've been on a trip, a journey

Away from home, but I'm here now, and I am
Not leaving again, and I will stay with you."

And I ask, "But how are you here? How are you
Alive?" And he says, "I don't know, I don't know,"

And then I'm awake. I sit up in bed. It's cold—
Our furnace is too small to properly heat

Our house during a serious freeze. But, wait,
It's not freezing outside. It's unseasonably warm,

And then I realize that somebody—something—
Is in the bedroom with me. I'm alone here

Because my wife is sleeping beside our sick son
In his bedroom. Perhaps our other son has found

His way into this room, but no—something
Large is standing in the corner. Oh, God,

It's a ghost—it's my father's ghost—no,
It's my grief and it opens its mouth

And it wails so loud that it hurts to hear—
My eardrums vibrate—and so I snap on the lamp

And realize that my grief is not standing
In the corner. It's not a ghost, either.

It's a bookshelf. I was frightened by
A bookshelf. This is funny, so I laugh,

And I lie back down, thinking that I might
Find a way back to sleep, but instead,

I weep for my father, I weep my father.
He's been dead for six year, for six years.

When he died, I cut my long hair.
By custom, I can grow back my hair

When my grief abates, but O, my grief
Floods my bedroom tonight. My bed becomes

A raft and I float up toward the ceiling.
I bump against the ceiling. I am crushed

Against the ceiling and I can't breathe,
I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't—

Perhaps I am dying. Perhaps my grief will
Murder me. Perhaps my grief will wrap

My corpse in garbage bags and leave it
In the backseat of a strange car

Parked at the airport. O, I can't breathe,
I can't breathe, as the grief-flood crushes

My lungs against the ceiling. I become
A part of the ceiling. I am the ceiling.

And then, suddenly, I am awake again.
Damn, it was a dream within a dream—

No, a nightmare inside a nightmare—
And I'm sitting on an airplane, weeping.

Beside me, a woman in a business suit
Is also weeping. "Are you okay?"

I ask her. and she smiles and says, "I am
Crying because you were crying in your sleep,

And I couldn't wake you. None of us could
Wake you, and so the pilot is now making

An emergency landing in Pittsburgh.
There will be an ambulance waiting for you."

But I'm awake now, I think, but don't say.
I know I must stop the pilot from landing

This plane, so I race to the cockpit door,
And pound and pound and pound and pound

On the thin metal frame, forgetting we live
In the Age of Terror, and so I have

Unwittingly become a threat to the safety
Of this plane and its passengers, and am

Knocked to the floor and buried beneath
A dozen men, who punch and kick me, who

Gouge my eyes and chew on my fingers and ears.
I don't fight back. I don't fight back.

And then I do fight back. I am suddenly
So strong that nothing can defeat me.

I toss the men aside and I smash through
The cockpit door and I am once again shocked

To see my father, who is now the pilot
Of this plane, and we are plummeting

Toward the ground. "We are going to crash,"
He says. "All of us are going to crash."

And I say, "I know, I know, I know, I know."
And I try to keep my eyes open—I want to see

What happens to us—and as the ground rises
To meet us, I see that it is beautiful—

The world is beautiful. My father is
Beautiful. I am beautiful. Death is

Beautiful. And, O, I lean against
The force of my grief, and I know

That I will wake again. I know this is
A dream—nightmare—but I want to stay

Here for a little while longer. I want
To keep plummeting with my father,

The pilot, so I stagger into the empty
Co-pilot's seat, and I take the controls,

And together, my father and I try
To pull us out of this spectacular dive.

In No Wise: a Memoriam

David Appelbaum

1.

No less a gnat's
unveiling

plods
behind lethargic spring's

war dreams
of burial

in this land about
consumed

in red maple buzz

and that,
a firestorm

of conviction
all blown away

by the moral implosive—
again it is late

2.

we fight
not far from

the jonquil's quarry
in winter combat

as far as it goes
full with poison gas

releasing
in the heart

a rare tranquility
whose fact

can't betray
a single book

3.

odd seems
not fodder for

forward motion

still
harried by a crest
too proud to time

the beach

and pound
rock to sand

scoop soles
as it recedes
under a

drop
into the maelstrom

4.

a metamorphic strain
permits
dreams

in a bed
of dystopic

insomnia

to suffer
a debt of battle

witness
the human impulse

to self-destruct

in killing season

so not to see
happening

what amounts to
annihilation—

and stop

5.

counter-current
slow, braked, impeded

moves against headlong
insanity

fright

as vast or
serene

as being
absolutely
resolute

the first time

6.

come summer
summer will come

breathe
long green clumps
of oxygen

hear the drum
toll the passage
of a next new
tragedy

whose expression
is vapid

the name for

humane cries
sorrow
to the bone

all for pretty things

onion
mullein

The Pitch

JoAnn Balingit

On my mother's death I shoot a documentary. It is set in the kitchen, one of the two most dangerous places in the home for women who have chosen men who hurt them.

However, it opens in her garden, where successions of vegetables ripen in pigments linked in this short film to the colors of human organs. Eggplant, cantaloupe, summer squash, tomatoes. Fiery zinnias, blue-purple snapdragons in the frame. Water-colored sweet peas climbing. The garden explodes like a carnival. She does not stroll but kneels. Camera zooms in on a swatch of white. My mother glints like a polished shield. That's the bleached cotton blouse she wore. I had wanted my mother to do a scene where she bends between willowed tomatoes and lifts their gold-dusted vines. Where she pinches off hornworms, bodies fat with leaf-light.

My father was not jealous of her garden. Thank goodness. He was jealous of imaginary suitors. (I have recently turned that project down.) He failed to see her garden as the lush, triumphant suitor. His failure gave her more time. His failure laid waste to her time.

I will walk you through it.

Moving inside to the kitchen, let's set up the shot. It is brief but difficult to execute—so slowly the moment unfolds. My father drags his bad left foot. He leans on the stock. Our pallid house burgeons from the inside out, a bud tearing heavily open. The world will finger its petals. Its dark and fragrant heart will be exposed.

Trouble is, I can't get my mom to turn around, even though I know she will face him. She just keeps fussing at the kitchen sink, like a bee tantalized by nectar. She hums. She sticks to the script.

1974

Jeffery Berg

On this night in 1974,
my Dad smokes cigarettes with his cousin Curt
outside the White Castle
in Chicago—sidewalk still wet
from yesterday's rain. Dad
will graduate high school
this May and will marry Mom
next year, but for now,
guessing it's a cop, he sees
a black Oldsmobile looming
in the gated lot. The driver
is John Wayne Gacy, a man Dad will remember
on the evening news in 1978,
my two older sisters reenacting
Little House on the Prairie, running around
the four-room Lake Forest apartment
in bonnets and Snoopy nightgowns.
TV cameras will record men
in coats, thick-knotted ties,
exhuming the bodies of boys
from a crawlspace.

On this night in 1974, the man in the black
Oldsmobile offers Curt and Dad
a joint. Curt, standing in the rain-sheen,
hands in his pockets—corduroy pants,
a red-checked shirt, refuses.

It is a simple "No thanks."
Curt and Dad walk away from the black
Olds and back into the White Castle.

Or maybe that's not how it goes tonight.
Maybe Dad takes the joint
from Gacy's fingers—smokes it,
stares at a bug skimming the surface
of a rain puddle.

I know that Dad never gets in the back of the car—
isn't driven to a ranch house in Des Plaines
with its underground, unbreathable smell.

I know Curt only for his name,
printed in blue ink on the white flesh
inside of the green Apple logo
on his *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* LP
that will eventually find its way
to my record player in 1987
in a ranch house in South Carolina
on the eve of a Little League Championship Game,
I'll listen, sitting on my legs, staring at cream carpet.

I'll find out that Curt will kill himself
in 1977. Hanging himself in my great aunt's basement.

I will mop the basement with bleach as a 15-year-old
in 1995 and find his stack of *National Geographic*—
flipped-through rainforests, ads for Colt 45 and lime-green Fords.
My great aunt—hair tied-up in bobby pins,
strapped sandals, denim skirt, white blouse,
standing against the washing machine,
staring at the stairwell, still remembering,
will ask in a low whisper,
"Have I ever told you about Curt?"

It's on the day of the Little League Championship Game,
in a brown station wagon that I'll ask my Dad

about Curt. Why did he circle Dad's name,
Dave, in blue ink in the printed lyrics
of "When I'm 64"?
and he'll tell me Curt was his cousin,
his best friend who died in a car wreck.

In 1997, the year of my first kiss
with a pockmarked boy from gym class,
hands behind our backs in the locker room,
deodorant caked in his armpit hair,
I'll be in the den, watching a cable TV show
on serial killers—John Wayne Gacy:
childhood swing set accident, blood clot in the brain,
Kentucky Fried Chicken, clown,
boys (mostly 15-year-olds) in his ranch,
bludgeoning them, killing them,
covering their bodies in lime, bodies to rot
in the crawlspace. Eighteen-minute execution
in 1994. Dad will come into the room,
stand in the doorway, sweaty from mowing the lawn,
and will tell me about Gacy in the black Olds,
the offered joint
on this rain-sheen night in 1974.

I'll stay up late one night in 1988
with a Ouija board in the dining room
lit with Mom's Thanksgiving candles,
wax dribbling on tablecloth, my sisters in their
punk-rock hairdos and purple eyeshadow,
their Lee Press-On Nails pressing on the pointer
that will tell me I will die
when I'm 63 years old.

There's a strange luck,
standing at the plate in '87,
scared to swing or swinging, flinching,

missing the ball, knowing
Dad will be there in his tea-tinted sunglasses
even as the sun goes down, seated in bleachers,
spitting Redman Chew in the dirt,
forever easygoing, missing a friend.

On this night, though, in 1974,
they are together, alive at White Castle,
sitting across each other in a booth,
salting their fries, listening to Stevie Wonder's
"Superstition" on a mahogany radio in the hot kitchen
where the mustached prep-cook waits
for fries in oil. Curt, the boy
in the photograph in my aunt's
top dresser drawer, with his
smile, his sideburns, tortoise-rimmed glasses,
the red checked shirt.
Dad scribbles a love poem
for Mom with Curt's blue
ink pen on a paper napkin.

Tonight, by the Illinois river,
Gacy lounges in his black Olds—
seats musty from rain,
radio dial burning orange.
He smokes a joint,
waiting for the boys.

The Lump

Steve Calamars

Charlie Greene can feel the lump on his inner right thigh. He steers his car with one hand and pushes on the lump with the other. He prods the thing going down the road, experiencing strange, foreign sensations while maintaining control. Charlie can feel that the lump is not hard or stationary, but soft and transitory, being able to move the mass beneath his skin either down toward the knee or up closer to the groin. He pulls into the parking lot and backs into a space. Charlie checks the mail and walks upstairs to his apartment.

He drops his keys and a few envelopes on the kitchen counter. Charlie immediately walks into the bathroom and removes his gray slacks. He sits down on the side of the tub and inspects the oddity. It is the size of an egg beneath the skin. He pushes on the lump and moves it along the leg. He experiences an awkward, unidentifiable sensation. He has no prior memory of the lump and has only been aware of it since his lunch break, when he was using the urinal in the restroom. Persuaded more by curiosity than fear, Charlie now stands up and walks over to the medicine cabinet.

He takes out a straight-razor and sits back down. Opening the instrument, he holds the lump steady and makes a small incision. He rips off a clump of toilet paper and dabs the blood, before poking his finger inside and feeling around. Charlie runs up against an object, a structure, soft, scaly and warm. He removes his finger and wipes the blade clean. He holds the lump steady and expands the incision meticulously. He is now able to work two fingers inside and grip it.

Stretching the incision open with one hand and gripping with the other, Charlie is able to remove the lump. He pulls out a small, plump goldfish with tiny black speckles and massive black eyes. He holds the fish up in the light and looks at it. The fish looks back at Charlie, mouth contorting, gasping for air. He experiences an uncomfortable sense of sympathy for the fish, dropping it quickly into the toilet to stop its suffering. It breathes

deep and swims small figure-eights in the bowl. Charlie watches warmly as his leg bleeds out onto the bathroom floor.

He opens the medicine cabinet again. This time he takes out Band-Aids and a bottle of iodine. He uses iodine-soaked clumps of toilet paper to clean the incision and applies numerous Band-Aids to contain the bleeding, which continues to flow from the surgery. Charlie checks on the fish and finds it still swimming small figure-eights. He knows a toilet is not an appropriate home and walks over to the tub.

Turning on the hot and cold faucets, Charlie begins to fill the tub with water. He is exacting with his adjustments, aware that if the water is too warm or too cool, the fish will die immediately upon entering the tub. He stabilizes the temperature and cuts off the water. He wipes blood off of his leg and walks over to the toilet.

Charlie submerges his hand in the water, and the fish seems almost to swim into his palm. He carries the thing carefully and releases it into the tub. It breathes deep and swims large, slow figure-eights. Charlie sits and watches quietly.

The fish, breaking its figure-eights, comes to the surface of the water. Mouth contorting, it stares up at Charlie. He thinks it might be hungry, whether correct or incorrect, he gets up and goes into the kitchen. He opens a loaf of bread and removes a slice. A small pool of blood collects on the kitchen floor. Charlie wipes his leg with a dish towel and returns to the tub.

Tearing off bits of bread, he rolls them into tiny white balls and drops them one at a time into the water. The fish eats the tiny bread balls and hovers near the surface. It eats the entire slice of bread, before Charlie begins to get dizzy.

He looks at the thin stream of blood running down his leg and coagulating into a small puddle at his heel on the floor. Charlie manages to wipe some of the blood away before finally losing strength and falling. He lies there peacefully and gradually loses consciousness. His eyes close, his breath shallows—

In the tub beside him, well-fed and content, the fish breathes deep and swims long, slow, meditative figure-eights.

Just Once I'd Like to Sneak up on the Wind—

Rob Carney

—there must be something tucked in its pocket:
a memory I've somehow forgotten,

or the shape of a promise, the quiet heart
of smooth stones.

And I wish I could translate the ocean,
all that it's learned about blue,

about the seagull's wing.
Though it takes eight years for the sea to say *feather*,

and longer to answer its questions about fire,
I'd wait like a granite cliff

and write it down.
I'd like to know what sun thinks, shining

through a yellow dress . . .
if it feels the same to trace a body as a peach.

Can it taste a whole orchard?
Can it sense it's the season in Yakima?

Can it go in search of a willow?
Imagine sitting in the shade?

What is the meaning of meaning?
A river.

That's it?
Well, maybe a wide enough one to skip rocks.

Best Peach I've Ever Eaten:

eighteen years ago, the Pike Place Market,
an August morning in Seattle

with a breeze lifting off of the Sound,
the Sound between two mountain ranges,

and crossing ferries looking perfect on the water . . .
silent white to match the snowcaps . . .

and then that first bite.

I don't know what Disney Land costs these days,
but twenty years ago

it was twenty-five bucks.
So that settled it.

It really put things in perspective.
I ditched class,

and we hitched to Santa Monica,
and it turned out—

who would've thought it—
Mike was right:

some flight school was only charging twenty
to learn to fly . . .

for the first time, anyhow.
Their angle was to get you up in the air

and get you hooked so you'd sign on for lessons,
but no chance of that—

the two of us both flat broke—
and in the meantime . . .

in the meantime, we'd get to fly:
thirty minutes each in a two-seat Cessna,

and once you're off the ground,
the stick's all yours.

And it was easy.
Well, easy enough you could relax

and bank the plane away west
at nothing but blue and clouds, and the smog lost behind you . . .

nothing but sunlit water
however far below

and a small black shadow of the plane there,
sailing across that glimmering. . . .

I'd call it a pretty good day, you know?
I'd call it *Sometimes you fall in a miracle.*

Somewhere in your city there's a rooftop
and on that rooftop a garden

and in that garden is a color
no one's ever named.

This isn't a test.
And you won't gain any money.

But let's say choosing that color's name
is up to you—

Some day I'd like to play chess with the rain
to see if there's a pattern.

And I'd like to ask a barn owl where it lived
before there were barns.

which reminds me of a story:
In a harbor town, there was a carpenter

building houses without kitchens.
When no one wanted to live in them,

he got mad, made a canoe,
and paddled away to a nearby island,

built a bright-red octagon watchtower,
then set about shaping a thousand arrows and a bow.

Nobody noticed his manifestos—the flaming darts
he'd arc nightly into the bay—

and if anyone did,
he'd have just shouted, "Truth and Art

speak for themselves.
What's the matter; can't you hear?"

And that's the end of the story.
Pretty typical, I guess.

But perhaps if he'd built homes with kitchens,
even porches,

and a few well-balanced tables . . .
if he'd gone ahead and fashioned bunk beds

or chair swings
or simply the here-and-there bench . . .

if he'd bothered sometimes to make picture frames,
to shape fiddles as a craftsman,

perhaps the town would've gathered . . .
made him welcome wherever he went . . .

one of them bringing her accordion,
another a drum or harmonica,

others for hours in the horseshoe pitch,
others for hours on guitar,

and children there adding to the music
like wind chimes,

and, yes, I know; that's a common story also.
But it's common like an ice-chest full of beer.

A Running List of Things I Need to Thank:

the God of Gravity
for moving some to be acrobats;

the God of Summer Vegetables
made manifest in corn;

the God of Collision—
creator of football and molecules—

and all the underdog Gods
of All the Overlooked . . .

I need to thank plenty.
I need to thank sharks,

for you were my first fascination.
And everyone, starting with my parents,

who taught me to read.
And all our talismans

so patiently pretending.
And wind

for fitting a piece of itself in my hand.

What is the meaning of meaning?
Nothing you can measure.

What's the meaning of meaning?
You can't count time with time.

Did you hear me? I want to know the meaning of—
A shoreline.

That's it?
A shoreline stretching

farther than you see.
But surely there's—

Yes, there's more.
You walk along looking for shells—just listen—

you walk along looking for shells.
The kind you want to keep.

A Treatise on Violence

Kerry James Evans

Mad cow, the nurse said, *ravaged Europe from 1980 to 1992.*
For ten months of 1988, I lived in England with my family.

I cannot give plasma.
At five years old, I ate cannibalized beef.
My brain might be eating itself.

I cannot give plasma at the plasma center
where, in a raffle drawing of people
who have donated twice this month,
one person will win a plasma television
worth 450 dollars.

I asked the nurse how the British
owning the plasma center
had anything to do with my brain eating itself.

You can never give plasma or blood.
And when will my body become meat for my mind?

Tangoed in the living room beneath the ceiling fan
with my wife and six beers and polka music
and two helpings of dinner—walked outside,
looked off the deck at the sun casting shadows

of a tree on a garage door, pack of children
howling at a playground—Saturday
a football day, helmet to helmet, an upset;
Colorado beat Oklahoma, Auburn beat Florida.

This, the day men watch bodies that were their own.
But I have this dance waiting after this cigarette;
I have a shadow and voicemail from my father:
he counts gravestones at Gettysburg.

We were stationed in England—my family.
The playground was installed
at the end of the cul-de-sac
of our neighborhood three weeks
before we moved to the Azores,
the next stop on my father's route
to satellite command headquarters—
Pentagon, Washington, D.C.,
contractors, revolving door.

But I am talking about a playground
and skinned knees, riding my BMX
into a European-looking van—
I was flat-nosed and weak,
like my younger brother,
the high school football-stud-graduate
working part-time toward an electrician's degree.

There are wires in the machine
—*Neutral is white, but white,*
he says, *is not always neutral.*

I'd like to give a retirement plan
to each member of my family,
tell them to live their lives, invest
in nothing—the poor do not belong.

I am poor. I play golf on Mondays
with used clubs, drive a used car
to a public course and hit a used ball
to a hole after striking the ground

with the club head more times
than my father choke-slammed
me to the wall, more times
than my father choke-slammed

my brother to the wall. No promotion
and I strike at an already scarred
and filthy ball. My father is honest.
What apology does a father owe his son?

I hate golf, but the walk is nice—bull-shitting with the guys
about nothing, football glory extended play-by-play—
we drop out of the pond without counting the stroke.

I am not angry at my father;
I am not angry at my brother.

The crazies in the plasma center are not angry
at their condition, their fucked eyes
swirling in a room
of free coffee, peanut butter crackers,

a movie about football—volume turned low enough to sack
the waiting room, the nurse calling loudly the names
of high school dropouts,
marriages that began at eighteen

at a courthouse with two witnesses—

I do not belong here.

Tube-drawn from a long needle, my wife's arm
drains, her plasma the muddy yellow of urine.

She collects her twenty dollars.

If I am mad, where, but in the shadow of a tree
that has lost the leaves of its crown and buried
roots in winter, a tree crossing a power line

and shucking its bark, this sycamore standing
in my yard? And now, I will dance the mad dance
with my wife, bow before her curtsy, archaic

and chauvinistic—what she appreciates when she
takes my hand, asks me to lead. I cannot be angry
at my wife, and yet I toss her across the room,

our limbs shadows breaking from the walls,
the bass picking up hard, and her hair: red,
opening like fist. A fist covered with blood.

Expectation

Ivan Faute

When Joan of Arc arrived in heaven, St. Ambrose handed her a basket of chocolate rabbits, hollow, wrapped in silver foil. "You could have done much less," he said.

She sat and ate them all, observing heaven's gates for six hundred years. She thought once that she saw someone she knew, but she was mistaken.

Something That I Do While I Wait For

Ivan Faute

Margheritta opens up the heavy glass door and walks up the long, narrow flight of stairs to reach a frosted glass sign. "David P Matheson." And in script below: "Sculptor."

It is through her cousin Sarabeth that she's been offered this job. She needs the money.

The sculptor is so thin, she's afraid he is ill. Perhaps he will expire when she is here; perhaps he will give her something that can't be cured. His breathing is so fierce, she's unsure if it is the rattling of his breaths or his heaving chest that frightens her more.

He makes her take off her clothes in front of him, as he watches so indifferently, and makes her lie down on the metal table. Every time she shifts her feet or flexes her fingers, the table rocks on its uneven legs and makes a cheap aluminum sound. He takes out his straight razor and shaves his designs into the hair between her legs. After he has taken his eight-by-ten Polaroids, he hands her several bills, hot, slightly damp, taken from the front pocket of his worn, denim pants.

You Know

Gary Fincke

Her Piece

The woman whose one daughter was buried
By her killer tells me she wants to talk
To someone who will write everything down.
She means "to say her piece" in the paper
Where my column is printed once a week,
But we stick in two minutes of silence
After she begins, "It's awful to bear."

I nod like I know what it is to have
A child found after eight months in the ground.
The four rooms she rents face a wall that keeps
The Susquehanna from flooding her street
And the seven blocks before the city
Slopes up to hillsides where the rich can build.
"Over there," she finally says, "you know,"

Meaning beyond that wall where her daughter
Has surfaced, and she passes a small set
Of photographs I shuffle through and hold,
Embarrassed to lay them down. On top is
Her daughter at twenty, taken, she says,
"Just the month before." Outside, I can read
"Thank You Wall," those words repeated in paint

After April's flood crested three inches
From the brink. "Beforehand is when you know,"
She says. "It doesn't take Thomas to touch
The grave," trusting a Bible tale with me,
Adding, "You study her now. Find the words,"
Watching me clutch those photographs as if
I was already hearing those faces, too.

The First Dark Glasses

The street lights are aspirin.
My wife talks about the queen
Who bearded herself before
Ceremonies, convincing
Her soldiers to obey.
The air between us rattles;
The night is footsteps.
Along this road a father
Has thrown his child in front
Of a truck. Now, the headlights
Are cigarettes in the mouths
Of prisoners. We know
The knees of those cars will buckle,
And we cross and recross,
Diminishing ourselves like waves.
The first dark glasses, I say,
Were worn by judges to hide
How they felt about evidence.
She places her hands on my back.
"Get ready," she says, lights coming
From both sides like testimony.

Girls

My wife begins with hiding in a ditch
As a child, pressing herself to the dirt
As if her seventh-grade homeroom teacher
Was evaluating her bomb drill form.
The men in the truck joked about fresh meat
That turned their truck around. One of them said,
"She'll have a story to tell tomorrow"
While he pissed upon the shoulder, so close
She heard the hiss of contact just before
A quirk of traffic chased their lust away.

She says the man who bought our house confessed
To raping "his girls" in the small room where
Our daughter slept for six years. Where she screamed,
One night, undressing, at a face against
Her window, sending us outside to where
We found the painted cinderblock that man
Had left behind, inviting us to check
The garages of our neighbors for proof.

After we moved, for one year, we walked back
To that house, returning until we thought
We'd never lived there. That father, she says,
Raped each daughter earlier than the last.
For privacy, that bedroom had two doors
To lock. Surely, the mother would try one
Or take to her tiptoes at the window.
What kept those three girls from screaming? What keeps
Us from setting fire to our former rooms?

A Scenario of Accomplices

The day, in early November, he takes
His daughter to Niagara Falls, it snows,
And from out of the crowd of cold tourists
A woman bends to say, "What a darling,"
And suddenly, "Want to see?" She swings her
Up until she's squealing and squirming high
With delight just before he steps forward,
Fearing at first this woman is the one
Who can throw a child over the railing,
And then, with conviction, she's the woman
Who will steal her, flee into the crowd where
A scenario of accomplices
Will pass his child like a relay baton
While she squats down to disappear among
Families, rising again in a coat

That covers the purple sweater he's marked.
When he rushes that woman, when he tears
His child from her arms as she walks, he learns
The tight grip of somebody sure of theft
Or safety, his daughter's cry of surprise
Or sudden pain, a stranger spinning to
Curse him with an expression of loathing
As if he is a soldier assigning
Her child to a boxcar, saying nothing
As the crowd swirls her behind him, yet he
Keeps moving, looking for men he is sure
Are nearby, seeing him or him or him
Retreating as he passes, his daughter
Saying, "what?" and "water" while he hurries
Away until there are so few people
They could be walking their own upstate street
On this Saturday morning, watched only
By a neighbor, someone like me, who cuts
His grass among flurries to get it trimmed
For winter, who thinks his daughter is sick
From the way he carries her to the car,
Who imagines he sees emergency,
Something to remark to his busy wife
Who will look across the street for the rest
Of the day, straining to see his story,
Reading the trouble by gesture, whether
It can pass or is inconsolable.

Stories

My daughter says that three men, this year, have jerked
Themselves off while she walked near them in New York.
She names teachers who suggested sex, the way
They managed ambiguity to protect
Themselves from guilt or shame, and I name a few
Of my own, including the one I worked with

Who married a girl he fucked, keeping his job.
The one who photographed fourth-graders and moved
To another school. The one who, for years, touched
Enough sixth-graders to finally be fired.

We're getting ready to talk about the man,
This afternoon, who showed her his back yard, who
Asked her what fish did in winter, guiding her
Toward his shadowed pond, asking, at last, how long
I'd be gone from the house we were visiting.
And because he's not a memory, because
He's standing on his screened-in porch fifty feet
From us, we lower our voices when we start
To talk about the needs we keep to ourselves
Until some of us eagerly surrender.

The Murder Interview

She was riding on his shoulders,
The father says—she waved at me.

He's describing, for reporters,
The last time he saw his daughter.

Alive, that is. With her killer,
We've been told, just minutes from death.

The father returned to yard work.
The girl, we know, climbed down and held

That boy's hand like a small sister
Beginning a walk in the woods.

After that, it's speculation—
The boy fifteen, the girl, seven

And her body, found this morning,
Undressed and beaten and strangled.

The father remembered that boy
Helping with the search, calling her

By a nickname. He remembers
The way his daughter bounced, laughing—

Like on a carousel, he says,
Like she was at the school picnic

Out to the park, the bumper cars
And the tilt-a-whirl coming next.

He lights a cigarette, asks us
If we want to follow him back

Through that forest to make believe
With ourselves. Take hold of my hand,

He says. Try my fingers for size,
Then just you wait till we get there.

The day's bruise widens like the wish
For leaving, the humidity

Of denial staining our shirts.
The moist light seeps into the earth.

All of us remember the weight
Of our children through our shoulders,

And we hold our breath, listening
To the childish cry of darkness.

Best Wishes, or *sortes Bushianae*

Dennis Finnell

Some of us wish we were smarter and better looking and rich and were younger.

Here few birds mornings sing. Mostly mockingbirds, starlings.
Do starlings sing? Maybe they're songbirds—goldfinches? Mandelstam's psychic singer.

Do birds wish they were younger, rich, stronger? To fly to the farthest of Saturn's rings?
Learn from goldfinches. Don't worry about *not*.
Think *is*. We can't be more than the world permits. We're earthlings.

What will happen to us? Who will fill the potholes?
Who will defend us against our many enemies? Will we be rich enough to buy
the stuff we need?
How high will the oceans rise? Will each of us shrivel into islands? Will each
have his own high spot?
Whose thumbs will plug the levees?

To find out some people throw grass in the air. For example, baseball players.
Others butcher goats and read their intestines. Some buy Chevys.
Some have used chickens or espy the way crows fly.
We know friends who've paid fortune tellers.

We love surfaces. Our theory: Dig things up, *voila* becomes *voici*.
Is the inverse true? In days gone by those lucky bastards who could read
Opened a revered papyrus at random to see the future.
Nowadays the sayings
Of the President of the United States shall help us ready
Tomorrow. An English child asked him, "What is the White House like?"
He said, "It is white." Some people think that means
Our future is Caucasian. Others say it strikes
Against global warming—it's a new ice age, totally white. Or we'll be pure,
Living in paradise seeing God's face, or if it's a Muslim world the muezzin at the mic
Will sing perpetual mourning.

The new world is more than ice and white people, more than paradise mourning.
In this future we'll run out of national debt.
Economists worry we won't have bills. Debt is value. Morning
Is evening. In the red is in the black. We'll just glance at the headlines
To get a flavor of what's moving because our assistants
Read the (*whole*) news that very morning.
They'll brief us, then we can sound like we haven't made mistakes
Even though we're confident we have, although we haven't.

We will have no deficit unless we hit the trifecta.
We will trust God speaks through us and teach children to read so that
He or her will pass a literacy test. The first shall be first.
Oh no, we're not going to have any casualties in any war, not even casual ones.
Ticket counters will fly out of airports so many enemies of the Homeland
Shall be slain. Speaking of slaughter, what will quench our thirst
Will be the acceptable ratio of fatal shootings to non-fatal.
We will have done something about it,
All because "It is white," this seeming tautology, this completely total,
Apparent reductio ad absurdum. Black shall be white, and white shall be white.

We'll give money to rich people. The last shall be last.
We shall continue to think we cannot win it. Tomorrow they will be wrong.
Finally. Tomorrow we will find the weapons, albeit teeth and fingernails of the past.

Nevertheless we will suffer a great sadness. The White House track is small.
We can't run more, can't get stronger.
It shall be one of our saddest things about being President.
We won't spend a lot of time thinking about why we do things, not any longer.
We won't be very analytical. It would set a bad precedent.
We won't think everything to death. We will master the comedy of inductive reasoning:
Those weapons have got to be somewhere, check every spider hole and pup tent.

Next slide please. It shows our number one priority: We won't be resting
Until we find Osama. We will all be very tired but right.
The slide show shall go on without us, running one big loop.
This foreign policy stuff will be a little frustrating. It will not be white

Enough. Next slide please: Mission Accomplished.
We promise we will listen to what's been said here even though we won't be here, right?

Wink wink. It will be one of our strengths. Ipso facto, a wish
To involve Saddam in the war on terror because he has been willing to terrorize himself.
Saddam shall strike terror in himself. We shall aid him.

Who else shall we aid? The rich. We shall be compassionate.
We shall pass an energy bill encouraging consumption.
Some people might think that's insane, that the future will be us thumbless peons
Waiting in long lines for gas but remember debt is in the black,
Our empty tank is another's full tank.

We shall stare the future in his face and say, "Bring them on,"
All those tomorrow's camouflaged as roadside bombs, but don't you worry now—
We'll be out of gas. The waters shall rise, our enemies shall drown.
They can't even dog paddle. Their IUDs will fizzle.

Our mornings shall rise brightly, a big Caucasian face
Smiling providentially upon us making our new papyrus high and dry on little islands.
We dare not disturb the surface, for therein lies water
And no one will have reinvented the sump pump, much less electricity.

Tripe shall be our national dish, inasmuch as farm animals will have been bred
With gigantic intestines, the better to tell our futures,
The poorer to gauge our past. A past of broken levees—
Since stoppered with the superfluous digits of immigrants—
And potholes—dittoed. We shall prize starlings at last
For three things: their ideal of congregating behavior,
Their skill at eating tripe, their morning song which we shall believe
Sounds like: there is here, there is here.

Buzzard

Rachel Contreni Flynn

Buzzard is over-stuffed.
He's eaten too many hearts.

Now it's time to hunker elsewhere,
satisfied and away.

We will grow hungry again
and find each other.

When Buzzard was young, he was beautiful. Eyes and muscle and hair. I loved all that rough sweetness. But even then it was wrong, even when there was no one else. Wrong because he only loved the motion of us. The circling. The ascent and plummet.

The boy I loved when we were children was quickly nicknamed Buzzard. It stuck. Like a finger in cotton panties. Stuck like the t-shirts against our teenaged bodies standing in the back of a red pickup, racing the Amtrak. Buzzard ate too many hearts, mine first. I meet him now in the old house, in the ice. I kiss his neck—

the taste of home and blood. He roosts in my body like a twin that vanished before it became anything. We hear of tiny body parts extracted from the living, telling us our loneliness is for a reason. There used to be a child in the child, and now there's something stuck that grows and hurts and must be dug out.

If I've been tracking Buzzard,
it's because he won't ever,
and that's the old equation:

to crave changing the craving
as well as the nature of the creature.
He was never, but always, inside me,

gouging, asking, refusing—
talons crusted thickly
with the death of others.

Buzzard lives outside an old house outside
the town that started us. He scans the snow
for scent and entrails. I'm frozen there,

and buried. Buzzard doesn't care.
He plugs my ears with feathers. He glides
down my body—the fields, the ice, the pick-up—

until he's started a thaw and a cadaver, both.

Sad Buzzard. Never sleeps. Wants to be a man at rest
in an expensive bed, woken by the wine-breath of a woman
who never lies still but always leaves, blessedly. And in the quiet,
he wants to bash around her house, wrecking the fine things, cawing,
feeling somewhat bad about it all, but still dropping crap on marble,
granite, silks, the bone china place settings on the long shining table.

We started and will end
here. A town

off the highway where
childhood names

stick like snow and gravestones.
Buzzard

was early and so changed everything.
His brother

spied us, close-to-naked in the ramshackle house:
slapping screens, the heat

of kerosene. We started too young
and must now

repent. The brother tells us to pray
for ourselves,

but we are still ignorant and now lonely,
both buzzards.

Buzzard wants
to wear clothing,
to stop buzzing
harvested fields
for rodents pulled
under. Buzzard

wants.
It's his best
job. He wants

my life, here
in the house
where I pass

my hands over
precious things.
Child things.
Buzzard never
thinks but only

wants
to snag them.
I will let him
rob me of what

I love.
He means no
harm, and I
will let him

take
what he will.

Buzzard returns, and I've grown old.
I ought to lock him out
for I've been happy these years
without him. Without him, I have

had these years of happiness, if not
ascension. His lanky body has grown
soft, and mine, softer. Still, he pecks
at the door and airs his gorgeous wings.

The dark shimmer is not happiness.
It is heat on the highway making a mirage
like water, or a ghost that rises
into a winter sky full of fog.

Tomato

Kathie Giorgio

So you fuck him and then his wife sends you a bag of homegrown tomatoes. You wonder what this means. Does his wife think you're a tomato? A hot tomato, a sassy redhead, meeting her husband in mid-line hotels, letting him drop 40 bucks just to fuck you for an hour? Forty bucks, a hotel room, a bag of tomatoes, just so you can come sometimes and sometimes not. Or is she just thanking you for tutoring her husband in French, taking him from a community education class to private sessions so that he can achieve his lifetime goal of speaking French like a Frenchman? Does she know that, while you are supposedly at Starbucks, conjugating French verbs over ice-cold venti frappucinos, you are actually in that forty-dollar room, your red hair spread on a pillow, while her husband kisses you the French way, in your mouth and between your legs?

Tomato, you think. *Tamate.*

You've never been to France, but you speak French fluently. You can whisper it in his ear from the back of your throat or shout it during climax, real or faked. You tell yourself that the French don't believe in monogamy, *monogamie*, and neither do you, and that makes you more than a *tamate*. Sometimes you come home from the hotel and fuck your husband, *votre mari*, before you even take a shower. And he doesn't even notice, doesn't comment on the scent of another man on you, the Frenchman's semen still soaking the panties that *votre mari* peels away and tosses to a place where you'll have to pick it up later, with all the other tossed clothes, and stuff it in the laundry because, if you don't do it, no one else will. And you delight that he doesn't notice because that gives you justification. *Justifier.* You don't believe in *monogamie* and *votre mari* is a fool. *Un imbécile.*

So you continue with the tomato tryst. *Tamate liaison.* And you listen as your lover, the Frenchman, calls out words above you, words in a guttural English that names your body different things you can never shout out loud. You whisper them after

him, a soft echo, an *écho*, but in French so that you can say that you've taught him a lesson. *Plunge, chatte humide, baise, twat serré*. Your body spreads open beneath him, and you take him in again and again. You whisper these words, these tomato words, and you try to stay with him, in that bed, in that forty-dollar hotel room. You try to be the tomato. *Tamate*.

But with the Frenchman as well as with your husband, you fall into memory and you are a young girl and you are with him again. Your father. *Votre père*. He squeezes your new breasts and parts your legs and, after the first time when there was red blood, *sang rouge*, on the sheets, he leaves you breathless each and every time. When he is there, when he is in you, when his tongue enters your mouth, your ear, licks the tip of each nipple, you forget he is your father, and you sink into the deepest part of your body where all is red and warm and gentle undulation.

It was only during the day that he was *votre père* and you blushed at his touch, a pat on the back as you left for school. But then his misplaced hand dropped lower, pausing on your ass, and you always wished for the night. *La nuit*.

So now with the Frenchman, you whisper his words and try to stay in the forty-dollar room. With your husband, you think of the Frenchman. But with both, sometimes you weaken, and your mind falls away, and you think of *votre père,* and then you come. Then all is red again. *Tamate*.

So you try to keep up, hotel room to bedroom to hotel room, and the tomato ripens, it fills with juice and seeds, *jus et graines*, the skin growing thin and dotted with beads of *rouge*. And then it bursts and you burst and there is rouge and jus and graines everywhere.

You wipe it all up and put it in the laundry because, if you don't do it, no one else will.

And you move to France. Where you learn of the freedom, *liberté*, of being alone.

Seul.

Green on the vine. Until you ripen again.

Seven Strolls without a Map

Elton Glaser

As a man walks he creates the road he walks on.
—Louis Simpson

1
One foot into the future, and I'm out
On the streets, in the city of a hundred tongues.

I know what language they speak in this quarter
Of doormen idling under the canopies
And jasperware looking down from the china hutch
And children, in their new Monet pajamas,
Muffing their prayers beside the bed,

Far from that avenue of roller blades and guacamole,
Where women in blue bandanas lean out the windows,
laughing,
Watching my awkward walk, as if I'd just
Suffered a coup d'état in the nuts.

2
I take my bearings
By a small dog at a lamppost
And factor in the breeze.

Over here, the bell tower and the bingo game,
Afternoon confessions in the cool dark.
And over there, by the Cadillacs,
The hush of a funeral home, the corpse inside
Banked by lilies and loved ones, looking
Life-size even in death.

Everything's a mystery
If you stand too close to it.

3
At that corner where I once heard
The teenage harmonies
Tie silk knots in a tune, I lose myself among

A dozen rappers all reciting at once, serial poets
With the blood of language on their hands, squeezing the
oxygen
From the public air. I make my way around them,
Following my own lines, always
One pace behind the gorgeous, one step ahead of the raw,
Like Rimbaud talking trash with the seraphim.

4
Twilight of gnats in the sly alleys. It's getting late
For the old guys elbow-deep in the gadget bins,
Closing time for the slowpokes at the haberdasher's
And tourists fingering each souvenir, asking their wives
How much is that in euros.

I see myself in the plate glass, head propped up
On a pyramid of aspirin, or one more dummy
Among the cocktail gowns and stoned accessories.

Anonymous. Bait and switch. Off-the-rack hairshirts
Going for next to nothing
From the trunk of a bottomed-out Impala.

5
Debris of picnics across the park:
Chicken bones dangle in the dwarf azaleas; napkins
Ghost the grass. Why should we worry about nature,
After all she's done to us?

I pass the diners and the dim cafés,
Kitchens of Little Armenia, the hash houses

And the chop joints, where grifters
Sit beside the gumshoes at a greasy counter
And take the daily special, whatever it is,
And put down a two-dollar tip
For the waitress with red hands and a sour smile.

What hunger can the body fill?
Why should I give in to appetite,
After all it's done to me?

6
Somewhere the sun sinks on top of itself
In a sleek sea. Somewhere a prom queen
Slips from her garter
A flask of Four Roses, a nip and a tuck
Before the blackout of oracular sex in the back seat.

Even three blocks away, I can sense
A bridegroom sniffing the pillows for brilliantine,
And those self-basting boys lonely enough to
Change their names in a chat room—

Love that lingers and love that comes to harm.

7
By what radar have I arrived
At the end of the dead end,
In a broken neighborhood, the moon so bright
I could count every wrinkle on a crone?

The last house leans against the wind,
A gutsprung tatter of shadows, the walls
Slick with nightsweat,
And mice breeding in the baby grand.

I'd need a fire hose
To clear it all out. Or a purifying flame.
But why not, wrong and ornery,
Call it home and live like a spider
In the slow dust of every room,
Beyond reach, on the other side of silence —

Right there,
Where I always wanted to be.

Tomboy: Danger to Self and Others

Charles Grosel

A tomboy, everyone called you,
because you didn't throw like a girl,
and you'd rather play guns or catch
with me than dolls with our sisters.
You were older by a year,
and the leader. When we
weren't playing baseball,
you took me up trees
and down creeks and paths,
six shooters strapped to our thighs,
Winchesters or carbines
slung over our shoulders,
cowboy hats or army helmets
tied under our chins.
We flopped to the ground
and belly-crawled into position,
the musk of soil in our nostrils,
sneaking up on the enemy,
our sisters or mothers
at their female pursuits.
We took them out
with a spray of shots,
even if we caught a few
ourselves and had to drag
back to camp for Doc to wrap
our arms in ragged bandages.
We spent hours at these games,
whole days, from the sparkle
of morning to the charcoal of dusk,
stopping only for Kool-Aid
and peanut butter sandwiches
at the gnarled picnic table

that stood in for a tank,
pirate ship, dump truck, PT boat.

One rainy day
when we were eight or nine,
indoor games played out—
race cars, hide and seek,
trampoline—
we took our shirts off
in the closet. Maybe we saw
it in some cowboy movie,
sun-slicked, bare-chested men
working the fences or chopping wood,
or maybe we had real-life models,
workmen on the street,
our own fathers in the yard
(though yours had been
gone some years by then).
We weren't going to do
anything in particular,
just wanted to cool off, really,
but your mother pulled you
out of there faster
than she could say, *Girls*
don't take off their shirts!
Stunned by her thunderclap,
we asked no questions.
But we didn't understand,
not really, there being
not much difference
between us then
except the obvious one,
which we dismissed
as kids dismiss

all those mysteries adults
make such a fuss about.
We were watched more closely
after that, not left alone
quite so much, but they
didn't have to worry.
It wasn't like that.
When we played doctor,
we both wore
a stethoscope.

Was this the beginning of the
(what everyone came to call)
confusion that dogged
the rest of your life?
None of this is official now,
just guesswork and backfilling,
long after we had gone our ways.
Or maybe it was just
random chemicals in the brain:
your father left when you were
a child and died before college,
and nothing seemed right after that,
depression a good enough word for it,
though you still went to school,
got a job, an apartment,
lived a kind of a life—
but no boyfriends, everybody
pointed out. Girlfriends?
No one thought to ask,
this being then, and who's to say,
now that you're not talking?
My guess is no—
that you never were
able to put a name
to the hole in your heart,

let alone fill it,
and that after a while
you gave up. Not all at once.
If you couldn't keep a job,
you were always able to get one,
and the same with doctors,
though you never liked
the styrofoam the pills
packed your head in,
took them only sporadically,
then stopped altogether,
just as you finally stopped working,
left your apartment, and
squeezed life down to a room
in your mother's house,
cigarette after cigarette
in the dark, a GI too long on the lines,
cross-eyed from watching the red ring
crawl toward your fingers.
When your mother sold the house—
not even the house you grew up in,
but a safe shell nonetheless—
you bought a gun. For you or for her,
or simply for the familiar heft of the
days you thought yourself happy
and the wounded sprang from the
ground to invent an even better game,
your mother didn't wait to find out.
She called the police,
and it was lockdown for you,
ward of the court:
danger to self and others.

In Response to the Question, Asked at a Party, "Do You Wish That You Had Waited Longer to Have Children?"

Kevin Haworth

At first you say, Well, yes, because we're all friends here, and let's admit it: they do eat up the day, and when they're done with that they swallow up your night until you're so tired, so tired, it's all you can do to remember that there was this novel, the one you were going to write and all this sex you planned to have, preferably on the living room floor surrounded by boxes of Chinese and the pages of that terrific manuscript you wrote, but then this boy arrived loud and needy and, yes, kind of beautiful and asking to share your name and not asking but demanding the rest, including the novel you never wrote, the sex you never had, the bad Hollywood movie you never saw, the hip, independent film you never saw, the endless afternoons of child care and *Law and Order* reruns, the same wisecracks and perps, and once again the novel you didn't write because of the sleep you didn't get, the hours untyped, the sex you didn't have.

But then. You think of the stories you cannot write or even read anymore, the ones where a child is kidnapped or found floating in the pool or pulled away at Auschwitz, hands reaching for parents who are still there, mother and father whose task it was to keep that child safe and who failed; and that your one and only job is to keep this boy safe, to keep him from every harm and sickness, and to foresee and to prevent every random accident; and that to answer Yes is to imagine a world without this boy in it, and here, finally, is the thing you cannot do, not for time, sex, art, not to save your own life, not even for the moment required to lift the cocktail to your mouth and to answer this question.

Flock

Jennifer A. Howard

A racing pigeon in love will fly faster to get home to his mate. Fanciers never let pigeon couples race together because they dawdle, landing next to each other in cherry trees to brush the tips of their wings against each other's chests. They detour inside barely open windows on the top floors of abandoned buildings and settle onto windowsills. Touching beaks, they tell each other, "We could live here," imagining their beautiful pigeon babies—feathers a wash of gunmetal and church steeple like him, their backs spotted like new rain on a sidewalk like she is. They plan where they would set their nest, the part of the floor where the sun shines in the late afternoon when they would nap, naked, grappling their feet together to hold on to each other. They forget they even have jobs, that they are supposed to be competing with other birds for a win.

Once fanciers realized they were losing birds to love, they began to fly them apart. They learned to drive them to separate fields in opposite directions. The first to be let loose follows the car, keeps himself eye level as they drive away until he can no longer keep up. Then he books back to where they started. "If we are ever separated," they have already agreed, tucked together one night in the corner of the loft they share with all the other birds, "we'll meet back here." But the fancier should know what he is thinking: "Next time they drive her away from me, we will meet instead at the apartment." Next time, that's where he will go, through the attic window they discovered together. Until she gets there, he imagines, he will pluck insulation from the open sores in the walls and sawdust from the floors and make them a bed. They will spend their first night alone, without being kept awake by the other restless birds, their wings fluttering with dreams.

It is my open window these two will fly through, him first and then her later, both tired from the trip. We will hear them from the upstairs bedroom, your fingertips like feathers in my hair

and my feet coiled tight around your legs. They coo and rustle one floor above us, free from the work of always flying back to the men who own them, but wondering—though not aloud to each other—where they will find birdseed and corn out here on their own. We will hear them together, staring through the ceiling to where we imagined they are settled, our birds, unless this day when they arrive is like usual. In that case, your phone has already rung and you've already left to go back to her. Then, it is just me, alone in the pigeon hideaway and my clothes on the floor, which I will pick up and put on again even though I have no place else to head back to.

Spark

Jennifer A. Howard

The afternoon Laura ended up in bed with the door-to-door umbrella salesman, her basement was flooding. She was standing at the top of the stairs, but she could hear her TV in the living room. Laura thought, Perhaps I need to put on some rubber boots and go down there and do something.

But she didn't know what she should do once she was there. There was a water heater and a furnace and other things that plugged into the wall. There were fuses. She was sure she would be electrocuted for trying. A talk show was on, and she listened in case it would help her, but the topic was adult children who fail to ever move out of their parents' houses, and that wasn't what her day was about at all.

The doorbell rang. Outside it was raining, so, on her way to the door, she grabbed a dish towel to wrap around the brass doorknob. Laura's great-great-great-grandfather had been the first white man in Michigan to be killed by lightning. And on the other side—her mother's—a great-grandmother was also struck dead, standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes in front of her two small children when the lightning stole right through the open window in front of her.

Given this history in her blood, Laura not only avoided tall trees during rainstorms, she refused to understand electricity altogether. She didn't own a blowdryer or a toaster, and she made popcorn on her gas stove. Her garage door needed to be lifted open, and her vibrator was battery-powered because she refused to connect her body to a wall socket. The TV had been on, sometimes loud, sometimes muted, since the day it was delivered.

When she answered the door, she found a man with a shiny gray coat who carried a sack of umbrellas over his shoulder but had not opened a single one of them against the rain. He was soaked. Laura motioned for him to come in. When he stepped through the door, little drops of rain rolled like mercury onto her carpet and then disappeared.

She told him she didn't normally invite strangers inside but that her basement was right this second flooding. She asked him if he knew what to do.

Flooding? he said, and looked back over his shoulder to the sky. I guess we should bail. So she got buckets from the garage and gave one to him, and she stood at the top of the stairs while he scooped one full of water and carried it up. She traded him an empty bucket for the full one and carried it outside and threw dirty water onto the already wet lawn.

While they were working, Laura asked the man if he usually sold in the rain, if that was better for business. He answered that no, he had been caught by surprise by the weather. He said umbrellas actually sold better in the sunshine, when people misremembered rain as less messy than it really is. When it is not raining, he said, people imagine rain falling down orderly and perpendicular as if from a pencil-sketched cloud over a boy in a sour mood. Real rain gets around whatever you hold over your head. It finds you.

But still, he said, that's no reason to not own an umbrella.

After they cleared out the water and mopped the floor, the man plugged the sump pump back in. Laura watched him do it. His feet were wet, as were the bottom six inches of his pant legs, and still he took the cord and plugged it into the socket without flinching. He was the bravest man she had ever met, so when he started to walk up the stairs, she didn't move out of his way. In fact she stepped down one or two steps to meet him, and he didn't even look confused that she might want him to kiss her. He did, his hands coming to land at first on the back of her knees. As she was leading him through the kitchen and into her bedroom, she did wonder how it was that she was about to sleep with a man whose profession was quite so dangerous. A man who held over his head a long metal stick protected only by the flimsiest layer of nylon.

From the bed, she could still hear the TV in the living room. The weatherman was saying, And that's what causing our unpredictable… He stopped at his choice of words. Well, it's

predictable, of course, he said, because knowing the future was his job. But variable, very variable weather.

Laura's feet tangled in blankets shoved to the foot of the bed, and her hand moved up the man's back to settle on his neck while he kissed her. When the thin hair on the umbrella salesman's head began to whisper with static, she thought to let go. Her whole body began to pull itself away from him, but she remembered his bravery. She kept her one hand firm against his skin, traced with electricity, and she reached her other hand long above her head. She flattened her palm, she lengthened her fingers, and she pressed her hand, connected to everything about her, against the wooden headboard to ground herself.

Though Bob Eubanks is Still Alive and Kicking

Jennifer A. Howard

When you were a kid, you and your neighbor Tracy played radio bingo for the old woman who lived in the house between you while she worked in her garden. You sat at her kitchen table with the cards, and Tracy had the phone number of the radio station memorized for the moment you'd need to call in and claim the win. After, sometimes, you'd watch *The Newlywed Game* together because there was something dirty going on that neither of you could quite figure out.

Now, twenty years later, reruns of *The Newlywed Game* make you sad. There is something about the color of the film, or the sheen of the fabrics the contestants wear, or perhaps their imperfect teeth, or the slick rouge on their cheeks that suggest that many of them are now dead. It's not a medical diagnosis, an identification of them as heavy smokers or drinkers or far too heavy to grow old. Though each one does suggest her own end. You feel breast cancer in them, and car accidents, and surprise aneurysms. Hearts giving out from incessant throwing up, suicide by pills, accidental shootings. They look like people who no longer exist, echoes of adults you might have known when you were in grade school. These couples, you realize, are only about as old as you are now. Someday, someone could look at pictures of you and see your own end, though you have no idea what tragedy they will see in you.

What makes you sadder is that, even if these contestants have been doomed in the ways you imagine, they have something you do not. Each person playing the *Newlywed Game* has a teammate, where you have gone through your life from boy to boy to boy, never being good enough to any of them that they'd want to play the game with you. You lost track of Tracy in high school, stopped playing bingo, and began identifying your signature lipstick, making out in trucks parked on dead-end roads. Even later, when your friends started getting married, you never learned how to keep any of your boyfriends around long enough

that they even had a chance to propose to you, because there was always someone else so marvelous, so attractive, and who loved you back so hard. Someone who wrote you long letters or put together music for you or drove you around to new waterfalls, who cooked you dinner. In *The Newlywed Game*, there's one question they never ask because it is too easy, because every couple would get it right, and it would not advance the game. Nobody has asked it of you yet, but you worry that someday, when you are older, when you have figured out exactly how it is that you will die, someone will. That they will ask you who was the love of your life and you won't know the answer, even though you have loved and loved.

Shoulder

Kaja Katamay

I'm in the old white Volvo with my mom, and she's talking about why people speed through the fog.

"It's in us somehow," she says, "to screw up this way."

She says the fog pulls us in like a vortex, she saw a special about it on TV, not only can we not tell how fast we're going but are actually compelled to speed.

She says she once got a call from my aunt, saying, "I'm okay! I'm okay!"

"You're okay," my mom responded. "Great. What happened?"

There had been a 60-car pile-up in the tule fog on Highway 99, the route my aunt normally took to work. She was calling the way you would if you'd been scheduled to get on a plane that had crashed, loved ones wondering if you're dead.

"And, bless her heart, no one had heard about it."

The best way to visualize tule fog, which is regional, is to realize how little you can see right in front of you. Like how once, when my mom was in high school, she and a date got stuck in a bad patch of it between our town and the next one over, and they made it home driving with the passenger side door open, my mom feeling for the shoulder of the road with her hand.

Ryan G. Beckman

Photography


TOE
PROTECTION

Steele Creek Journal

Stephen Knauth

1
The willow has something to say,
dipping her hair in the black
ink of the pond.

2
They're making souls again tonight.
Sometimes the right
cut adds carets to the stone.

3
Reflection of trees along the creek's edge,
as if you could climb
downward into the earth and see.

4
Scratched clean
that which was held dear.
Then scratched out.

5
Who can rest?
No clouds to furnish the sky.
No curtains to close that glass eye.

6
You knew them.
His dark shell.
Her creamy center.

7
Days pass, or were they years,
once-bright fragments
left on a page in a drawer by the sea.

8
That face
reflected in creekwater,
unmoving among moving leaves.

9
Downstairs, in his little shop,
he's sanding away what seems to belong
from what longs to be.

10
Whispers at the bedside,
children clinging
like starfish to a darkened coast.

11
Mild imprint of wind on the water,
windprint, no two alike,
sometimes it calms its victims before claiming them.

12
Fathers don't die.
They're out back, in their heavy jackets,
patiently raking the moon.

13
I am cold and lonely,
please take me with you,
he heard Christ whisper to him in the woods.

14
Stepping out of love's shadow
is a dance we do
with slow, uncertain—yet formal—steps.

15
Last of the poplar leaves,
brass fixtures gleaming in the sun—
even they can't open his heart.

16
Passed out, royally,
between the long slender legs
of the town water tower.

17
That line of trees
along the winter ridge says
go back to her room and sit quietly by the bed.

18
Windy all day
on Little Pisgah Mountain,
leaves falling in full compliance.

19
In the yard he takes a breath:
abandoned hornet's nest
soaked with rain.

20
Old field pine
elongated with yearning,
holding forth a few cones and a crow.

21
Her face at the end,
abdomen filled with dark fluid,
brown velvet paw paw flower on the tray.

22
Furrows in tilled fields
dip out of sight, reappear on the next hill,
headed another way.

23
Clouds eel-green and lavender.
Loved ones, one by one,
untie their tethers and go.

24
Grief pools
in the hollows of the face,
while sorrow sinks, bronzing the heart.

25
All night at sleep's edge,
the small-leaved linden
rubbing herself along the shakes of the house.

26
That last thousand feet,
where hikers become climbers,
reading the cold braille with both hands.

27
To learn the language
of leaves, please
fall silent.

Down the Line

Alex Lemon

There's a man inside you who tells you to let go of the trunk, and the branch bends the farther you walk out. When you wake, the man inside you says you should eat the dead grass that's mashed beneath you. You decide to get a tattoo of a piece of cake, Ol' English style. A few weeks after peeling the bandages away, you'll think it looks more like kelp, floating in the spotted sky that has become your back. *Where did all those moles come from, anyway?* you'll ask, wrenching your spine in the mirror. Something will pop. It will take months for sensation to return to your legs. But this is here. This is now. And you are getting up from the lawn. Finches sing above you. A girl throws a can at you from a passing car. The beer explodes at your feet. The man inside you says hello again, and you drop to your hands and knees. Blood spurts from your lips when you crush the can in your mouth. And right then, the holiday season approaching, the street now absent of traffic and completely silent, you feel, for a cracked-second, like you're teeming with a hundred bursting hearts.

Ice Trays

Alex Lemon

This is what it must feel like to kiss the sidewalk, I thought as I pressed my lips to his stubbled cheek. Anymore, he wouldn't get up from the davenport. I wondered if he ever moved. Each time I walked in, he wore the same white t-shirt and sweatpants. More stains on the threadbare cotton. Red sauce. A tiny curl of bologna. His feet were blue-veined, pale—the knuckles on them ash-white. The couch looked rusted. Collapsed beneath him, the springs were giving way, cushions welcoming him to something invisible, something beyond all of this. Ten years old, I didn't know what it meant when my father told me that grandpa's girlfriend died. It's not that I didn't notice that Lovey wasn't around; I just spent more time rubbing my hands together. The heat was always turned way down. Coming back from the bathroom, I'd stand in the kitchen behind him, wondering why he'd stopped shaving. When the sunlight angled through the drapes, his eyeglasses looked like they'd been dipped in milk.

Winter exhaust expanded cartoonishly from the muffler of my dad's Dodge Dart as he drove away. Wheelwells dropped brown snow on the well-packed street—Portland, or maybe it was McKinley Ave.—I don't remember anymore. The sidewalk was never shoveled.

Just feet away from the droning TV, I'd sit and draw lines in the carpet. 'Origami,' 'velocities'—I'd spell whatever I was supposed to memorize over Christmas break, and then, like I was performing CPR, I'd use both hands to rub the frayed shag back and forth until my letters vanished.

And somehow, though it is always December in this memory, he speaks, tells me to turn the channel. He says that the game is almost on. And I'm grateful because my fingertips are on fire from writing on the floor. The plastic is cool against my skin's red rush, and I twist the knob until ballplayers appear on the screen. Wrigley Field's manicured grass pushes out into the living room's winter light. The Cubs are all wearing short sleeves,

laughing as they stretch in the outfield. The announcer's headset looks like earmuffs.

The snow starts up again. Wind whistles against the windowpane. And each time, whether it's one of those creaks—ice pattering against the glass, winter's groan or the pop of a baseball mitt on TV—I glance back, and always some sort of magic has happened. It feels like Grandpa is staring at me, but his eyes are watching the game over my shoulder. I haven't heard him move from the couch, but now, he dips his chin, and, cradling a Tupperware cube like a chalice, he purses his lips and a jet of brown spit tocks against the plastic. He nestles his giant spittoon into the crotch of his tattered sweatpants, and gently daubs his mouth with a tightly folded paper-towel. But, after the second spit, he holds the raggedy tissue against his mouth like he's going to turn inside out.

And now, thinking about how I turned to watch him spit, a Louisville Slugger cracking a baseball on the TV, snow falling outside like sheaves of whiteblue paper, I want to laugh. Everyone knows these stock emotions—the McDonaldization of feelings. *Please pull up to the second window for your cancer or stroke, your super-sized grief.* It doesn't matter if I say I hardly knew him—that those afternoons were it. That trope is played out. Lovey isn't going to stand on the back porch, smoking cigarettes in the snow, and so everyone's car radio sings "Lovey Lovey Lovey" during long stretches in the midnight dark. All of it—it's already been done and better than this. All grandfathers have those spider-veined cheeks. A rolled-up pouch of Red Man on the side table. It doesn't matter that your fingertips always feel like they've been caressing dry ice, that you're never again going to clip your toenails. As soon as you hear the voice over the phone, you already know who's dead.

Verde Vista

Alex Lemon

Waiting in line at the post office
In Thousand Oaks, California—

I'm tapped on the shoulder
& turn to see an old man

Milky-wayed with liver spots,
Skin hanging from his cheeks

Like pancake batter. *Those*
Real? He asks, pointing

At the tattoos covering my arms.
He smiles when I nod—says

You know, Hitler would have
Made a lamp out of you.

He did that you know? He
Laughs. I shake my head *yeah*

But as I start to speak, to tell him
About the one-of-a-kind baseball mitt

I played with in college—a real
Beauty & all of it sewn

From the saddle-soaped hides
Of big-mouthed elderly men,

How if I spit a bit of tobacco juice
Into the pocket, it was the kind

Of glove that wouldn't let me make
An error—the line pushes forward

& it's my turn, so I wish him a good
Day & drop my envelopes

On the counter, where a too-chipper
Man asks me if I would like to purchase

A coil of the brand-new American
Flag stamps. I buy the stamps. I say
Goodbye to the old man. The mall
I have to walk through to get outside

Is adorned with holiday decorations—
Trumpeting angels & walls netted

With Christmas lights. "Jingle Bells"
Plays from speakers hidden in giant

Snowflakes. In the parking lot
The gushing sprinklers flood

The concrete while a Latino
Prunes flowering azaleas & a pitbull

Begins gnawing himself apart
In my chest. I will wait for the old man

To come out, so, just as he starts up
His Cadillac, I can toss a shopping cart

Through the windshield. In a half hour
I count ten women leaving the mall

Who have obviously had plastic surgery—
Basketball-sized breasts, lips like bloated

Caterpillars, cheeks stretched taut, identical
Almond eyes & one banging body—model-shaped

& gorgeous with the head of a cadaver.
Who knows how many of the men that passed

Recently had their penises enlarged.
The old man's walker scrapes the pavement.

He stops at the curb, heavy-breathing & inside
Him, I imagine his heart dropping the white

Flag of surrender. That he is about to crumple
And the next thing I know, my piled hands

Will be compressing his sternum & his lips, tender
As the crust of a burnt loaf of bread, will open

Against mine & as the air I just breathed into him
Returns, the taste of mayonnaise & his aftershave

Fills my mouth, & I realize, that in the end, it will
All work out, brilliant with dirt & light. Cryogenics

& biogerentology & pregnant men & clones
Of our favorite Chihuahuas. & if the old man, still

Kicking around, vigorous with his fourth
Or fifth different baboon heart growling within

Him, wants to stay up a little longer to finish
The terrific book he's reading & tugs on

The beside lamp & is illuminated by the patchwork
Of colors that had, years before, covered

My body, well, I guess, that's fine with me, too.

The Door Peninsula

Brandon Lewis

1

On the outskirts of the dry town Ephraim
there are clues of a further starkness

—this weird lichen-cleaved shore rock
that has scuffed so many feet, and the shapes

of a thousand slithering things, as these
bodies of brachiopod and squid, imprinting

the shallow seas of the Silurian Age.
Trout fishers shore up onto pebbles that chime their round forms, one

against another, soughing side
to side, along Porte de Mort.

2

Lake wind swells in the gullies
the snakegrass swales and dune drifts,

spinning through thimbleberry leaves and
branches of beech birch cedar maple hemlock

—a wind that lets up as I walk
the woods, occasionally carving signs of planets

into sides of trees with a splinter of flagstone.
Over sun, snow, water, and wind

bleached cliffs—cormorants emerge.
Dark comes. Green dragonflies
lick wildflowers a little longer.

3

Inside the cabin, bookbinding of
my grandmother's *Song of Hiawatha*

evaporates on the wooden shelf, leaving
the air a faint scent of gin berries. And so

Nokomis, upon opening the book, smells
of gin berries. Hummingbird nectar

glows the same garnet-red
as a jar of St. John's wort salve, warming

on an east-facing window sill
before lathered on the cuts on my feet.

4

There is always a more direct route
the traders seek, hauling

masses of pelts and the black
book. Grounding ashore, Nicolet

stands in the canoe and fires his musket
upward. With his Chinese robe

of bird feathers, gunpowder exhausting
grit into the air and jugs of wine

roll into his ankles, he is too occupied
to hear laughter on the banks.

5

A game of sheepshead
inside the cabin—the trump runs

black before red, round
before sharp. Grandpa John sips

slowly his brandy with cherries. The chief
of the Menominee sorts his cards.

The *Ed Sullivan Show* plays low
and a child lifts the fireplace bellow.

That bellow looks like one of my black spades.
The child airs the fire.

6

It's just a melted glacier, its valley
risen, over time, with rain.

I spin on the cracking-hot tar
of an inner tube. Sand, cave,
sand, pine, sand,

horizon, horizon, horizon, horizon,
sand. I see it desolate, I see

grandpa waving and I beach
tired, laughing, dripping, to lie
and stare at the water

as from a school bus window. This is not
the Florida my friends return from golden.

7

After driving slow in the fog past
stone wall after stone wall sliding

into piles, I pull over to a farmer's
black cherry stand.

I say hello and peer down
his orchard row where a tree-shaker

rumbles its force into the heartwood
to avoid damage. The day done,

the farmer lifts his cherry bushels
into a blue pickup.

PETE ROSE AND A BOTTLE OF CHEAP MERLOT

gary lundy

last night i drank
a bottle of cheap merlot
the kind of wine connoisseurs
would never touch
would shudder and blush
the kind of wine
a guy like me should drink
would drink
which is fine
because i'd never be able
to afford their wine
never mind popping
the cork on that bottle
of expensive red wine
then sticking lips and tongue
on the glass to drink it
good wine like good money
in my hands
are soon partying so why
go all that way even

last night i drank
a bottle of cheap merlot
the wine thing started
because i love a woman
who loves a man
who wants to hurt me
so he says
because i love a woman
who loves him
give her things
so i lift the glass
and drink this bottle
of cheap merlot
sorting through brain cells

determining guilt
or innocence and in that way
sending those guilty
bastards to the guillotine
i mean no sense
killing the good fucking brain cells
when there are always those
criminal cells just loaded enough
to honestly answer yes or no
and i feel pretty damn good
closing in on this bottle
of cheap merlot
my arms and legs and lips
weak with pin needles
it's all cool

then i'll be damned
but steven seagal pounds
on the door
and i'm here to tell you
when steven seagal pounds
on your door
you better not ignore it
i mean i've seen
enough of his movies
to know he can damn well
kick a door off
its hinges i mean kick
a door in real easy like
so him pounding and me
stumbling up off the red sofa
not wine red
but bright bloody nose red
stumbling off the red sofa
i knock the damn bottle
of cheap merlot
over and my dog
the one i dance with
all the time

beats my tongue to the floor
and begins lapping
the wine up so
i settle the bottle upright
and kick him under the chin
which makes him
grin and whine like
the best dog he is

and i realize something
truly amazing is taking place
i mean something
miraculous like water
into wine is happening
i'm steven seagal
and i'm right this minute
daring a gaggle of guys
to attack knowing
i can slap them silly
i mean slap the shit
out of each one
on my knees
my left hand behind my back
i'm steven seagal
and the last guy
left standing has a knife
he has a fucking sharp knife
but it's all good
as they now say
because i'm cool and
steven seagal is cool
and i clean up my living room
with remnants of guys
derelict catholics
or mormons or something
given to the dark side
ralph nader

no one finally gets hurt
but i feel better
i mean i feel good
about the night and the
cheap merlot
and even cheap wine glass
the one of two we bought
the day before you
walked out of my life
the glass we bought
at pier one imports
the one that's now
peeling paint off red
and orange
but the glass still
holds the cheap merlot
without complaint
so it's good
meg ryan it's good
you walked out on me
but left those two
memento wine glasses
reminder of what i had
and lost because i couldn't
stop obsessing about you
and this older guy
who fell in love with you
the wild old fuck
thinking he could keep up
with me with you meg
and of course he could
and of course he does
because he's me in
that other film
we thought about making
about valentines and the mascara
running down your eyes

i don't know from squat
about any of this
except you keep calling him
when you're having trouble
or just want to feel good
and when he hears your voice
steve meg and i all smile
nod our heads
and sing harmony parts
to an old carole king song
about calling out names
friend and all that shit
and even though
i'll likely get the shit
kicked out of me
for saying this
because steven seagal
just left
even though i'll likely
get the shit kicked out of me
for saying this
what the fuck it makes
me look informed
and why not act
like a lady
act like the lady i am
under this set of sweats
not cursing or smoking
none of that for me
nope not for me
i'm a lady
and pete rose
has been elected
to baseball's hall of fame
and that's in my poem
not yours and it's
about fucking time

Awake (1969)
M

A daughter's face is a peach in the bin
outside Mr. Alessia's grocery next door
and people who should know better
cannot resist plumpness.
Bickering from the other room
strips the finish from the pine cabinets:
non me ne importa un cavolo![1]
figlio di puttana![2] I was born deaf
in one ear. Pound cakes visiting
in the kitchen listen to everything they say
and gossip about how little we spent:
Not even a new dress. Sfaciade.[3]

Kennedy's been dead for five years,
but Uncle Sallie still bitches to Aunt Rose,
It's a damn shame us dagos lost
the only good Catholic boy
this whole fucking country could afford to love.
My sister Francesca sprinkles salt
on the satin pillow under Mamma's head,
and Viola takes her ruby ring
as if the promissory it was traded for
was contagious. Together we turn her.
A black shoe falls, one with discernment
in the turn of its heel, and an improvised vamp.
Mamma's size, but not one we recognize.
It's Papa's work, who never learned the difference
between commandments and demands.

Mamma always laid on her side in sleep,
one arm thrown open across the badlands
of sheets, her naked lips a glass

1. *non me ne importa un cavolo!*: I don't give a damn about it!
2. *figlio di puttana!*: son of a bitch!
3. *sfaciade*: bad fronted, bad appearing, a social and moral blooper

of cool water on the table for anyone to drink.
The tap in the bathroom drips:
Smart girls stand up straight
or their lives turn into question marks.
That day the front door slammed so hard
the back door cracked open.
She'd gotten good at coaxing
dollar bills to dance out of his wallet.
None of us knew where the money went.
He must have believed
it boogie-woogied like a Christ
across the water all the way to Ferla
and he could too.

Arguing with lies only gets you
left behind, bambinas.

Francesca paid her way through secretarial school,
and works at Chase Manhattan Bank.
She carpools the nine miles home
at 6:00 p.m., other people's money
cutting like bamboo shoots under her nails.
Bill Mulryan drives and slides
the rear view mirror down until his view
of Francesca's backseat black hair
obliterates the Borden delivery vans
with nothing better to do but gain on them.

Every Sunday in the summer,
Bill grills burgers on the barbecue
while his wife Catherine purrs on kitten heels
that aerate their limeade lawn.
Bill sucks Lugano olives down to the pits
and watches his daughter Debbie's hair turn dirty
blonde in the water of the backyard pool
until he can't catch his breath.
His buddy Dave Callaghan said boys
with secure tickets in their back pockets
to play with the Fighting Irish

couldn't afford a WOP—*C'mon, Bill,*
they're just niggers turned inside out.
Still there's that Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge
over on 8th with indoor parking.
Dave came back from Uijeongbu
in two different shipments.
Sang-mi told impressive men
he was an excellent marksman,
a flightless woman he learned to cock
better than his rifle.

Francesca coos for strangers'
babies at the Woolworths on Saturdays,
gives them dollar bills
they stuff inside their mouths.
She eats Underwood deviled ham
straight from the can
and an orange every day for lunch.
Occasionally, she'll add six Saltines.

After the undertaker folds the wake
like an American flag, the dead leave
a mess on the carpet. Francesca washes dishes
in the kitchen after everyone's parties.
Viola sings the wrong words to songs on the radio.
She says you can tell a lot about people
from the brand of dishwashing liquid
they buy—Ivory, Dawn, Joy. I tell her
there is vomit and there is shit.
Francesca says *Find a bucket*
and some strong soap.
There are hands and there are knees.

Tortilla

Lou Mathews

On Thursday nights I take a class at the junior college. Philosophy 101. I know, I know, you're supposed to call them community colleges, but they've only been community colleges for, oh, maybe fifteen years. For thirty years I knew it as East L.A. Junior College. It still sounds better to me. Looking up is better than looking down.

This Philosophy class is pretty good. The teacher is young, Dr. Lascola; he just graduated from USC. He still gets passionate about ideas. He doesn't know this, but he trembles sometimes when he can't make us understand.

He likes to give us puzzles to make us think. The second class he gave us a Zen Koan, it's like a riddle. He said, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" I thought about that, and I gave him the answer. I said, "A tortilla."

He said, "What?", and I said, "It's a tortilla. That's the sound of one hand clapping." He didn't understand, and I had to explain it to him.

If you get an old woman, I told him. She's probably from Michoacan, and she's been making tortillas a long time. You watch her in the morning. The sun is barely up, just a red glow in the east, but she already has the fire going. You can smell that mesquite and then the wet masa. She gets the comal hot, and then she rolls some masa into balls, and then she starts to pat the tortilla into shape. She doesn't even look at her hands; she watches the sun taking shape. You watch her hands; they're very fast, but if you watch closely you'll see that only one hand touches the tortilla at a time. As the other hand touches the tortilla, the first one leaves. They never touch. And yet, there is the clapping noise.

No soy mentiroso. It's true. You can see this even in the city. You go to an old fashioned place, like La Luz de Dia at the end of Olvera Street. You hear those abuelitas before you even walk through the door. Clap, clap, clap. You watch carefully and you'll see. The palms never touch. That's the sound of one hand clapping. One tortilla.

Truckstop Reliquary

Clay Matthews

This is a story of what gets picked up along the way:
a coffee counter and fountain soda that won't stop
running. Spring up O well of everlasting life.
Oh well, the old man beside me says.
He hacks into a napkin, buries it into his overalls,
throws a dollar on the counter and waves goodbye
to everyone. Everyone should at some point
say something personal to a stranger in the restroom.
Books on tape, *Moby Dick* played in a cab across Iowa,
the hills of Northern Missouri, down Mississippi way,
Alabama, and Stubbs, saying: But I am not a brave man;
never said I was a brave man; I am a coward; and I sing
to keep up my spirits. I sit with silverware.
A real cloth napkin. Hot gravy. A sense of home
for myself, for the fifteen truckers, for the family
too tired to pull through another drive-through,
just wanting a cold glass of water, a booth, a little time
to unwind, to talk. I could stay in this place forever,
I think, if it were home. Perhaps sometimes
it is. So I sit in another truck stop and try to avoid
thinking about politics, the dramatic tension of a conversation
two booths down. Or not politics but politics
as I understand them. The personal level. The ashy arms
of the waitress wiping away the mess a child has left
behind, no anger in her wipe, but rather compassion there,
love, as briefly an entirely different life of swing sets
and soggy teddy bears walks slowly across her mind,
paced to the tick of cowboy boots, clicking on the tile floor
behind her. Taped to the windows, dollar pledges
for medical research, the donors' names displayed
on paper stars. Post your sorrows. Post your hopes.
Buy a little ridiculous something at the counter
because being ridiculous is the best way to feel

like a good consumer. A good customer. I tip her
well and hope it's enough for the hot plate,
the timely coffee refills, Just a little to keep you warm,
she says, and outside, circus tents, boxed up
on flatbeds, twenty trucks in a row, and tarps and tie-downs
and the wailing moans of tired and exotic animals,
calling out all the secrets of the magician's magic underneath.
The snake charmer takes a seat on the bench outside.
The scaled man practices blowing fire from his mouth.
Home is nowhere, in this moment. Home is mashed
potatoes, a hot roll, and after a long day on the road
sometimes the simplest things can almost make you weep.
Then she lowers the blinds as the sun comes down,
and through the windows it cuts across the countertop,
and on and into a thousand small gadgets, extra lights
for the trailer, leather gloves, automotive oil. Roses
for those who need roses, postcards for those writing home.
Hello, there: Just stopping through for a chicken-fried steak
in Joplin, MO. Be home soon. It is cold today. I miss you.
Yours, me. In the distance, only a mile away, the interstate hums,
and the machines rush in either direction, making pathways
with their lights, leaving, arriving, traveling on while on the side
of the road the large sign for this place offers everything
they could want, everything but where they want, and how,
and who. They go on and off, at 80 miles an hour,
passing the glow of this place, preserved in memory, a holy relic
of the journey, the long and at last, this exit from which they had
no way to return. So many state lines and alcohol or no alcohol
behind the counters, on the shelves, cold beer in the cooler
or no beer at all—a dry county and 30 more miles
if you be a thirsty one. At the gasoline pumps they shiver
and watch as the wheel turns, the dollar turns, the price
turns over and up, another gallon of milk, a bucket of honey.
This the land that stretches out in the middle, and the red
suspenders of a trucker crawling out of his cab, yawning,
waking to a world of late darkness, early dawn, a frost

as he pulls the tight elastic off his shoulders, stretches
and reaches toward the low pitch blue of a morning sky.
We go as the wind goes, today: wild and long and slowly
bawling its way from the north, moving as the weather vane
turns, the metal horse atop the central building, pointing
the other way and with a tailwind at her back, wanting to run.
Passengers and a hard push against the car door. Open.
Sometimes something outside ourselves pushes back.
A trashcan beside the pump to get rid of all the memories
too painful to carry anymore, thrown under the seat
to ride and ride another thousand miles before the stench
becomes too much to hold, too much to bear, and comes out
of the darkness, to the light of an open sky, an open highway,
opened up there out of its foil wrapper to the fluorescent
parking lot, setting itself in a hundred directions of free.
A five-dollar haircut and men wait beside the men's shower room
for the barber to return. Video games in an arcade buzz
in the background, and a middle-aged trucker sits with his son
in a small, dual car game, as they race each other and keep driving
through the night, even as they have come to this place for the road
to temporarily end. And it is the end of the road, sometimes—
a dinner bell, and a place to take your boots off.
At the Petro station in Kingdom City, MO, there is even
a tiny movie theater, a popcorn machine, all the comforts
of a small town wrapped around the inner and outer effects
of American architecture. Hot food served in iron skillets.
Tin posters of the Tin Man. And behind the curtain,
the wizard is out for now. He will return, as on the journey back
from the west coast, the same trucker will return, and buy
the same meal, thank the same woman, stare longingly
at the same postcard for the same Caribbean island
that has held the same place in his heart as it has beat
for so long now, tucked beneath the same brand
of cigarettes, rising and falling in his shirt pocket as he breathes.
Breathe in, and the smell of bleach. Telephones in each
of the restaurant booths. A long distance call, and it is so good,

tonight, to hear your voice. I eye the pocket knives
and wonder how well they hold their sharpness.
I eye the lighters and wonder about the duration of the flame.
I eye the menthol smokes behind the counter, the coffee,
the Budweiser, the crowbar display and the rest of the tools.
Aye, aye, captain, and outside the ships set sail. The diesel motors,
the gasoline motors, the motors that fuel each of the singular captains
on their long way of going or coming or just getting out of the house.
The door opens, and inside a bell rings. The sound and signal
and sign of a human, a ghost, a being entering, or leaving, or lost
or lonely. And outside the door waits an abandoned dog left to beg.
It wags, and I take it a bit of food, something warm to eat.
As do the others, all of them, whatever they have left to offer.

Still Good

Monica McFawn

One day Froggy Dagnet showed me his masterpiece and taught me his methods. "They're usually all curled up and sort of hidden in the grass by where the road ends so you have to look down for one that's still shiny and doesn't look broke. Here's a good one 'cause it's green and big and isn't broke so now we take it to the stream and wash it out. You gotta turn it inside out and swish it around real good and maybe put your hand in it to get it stretchy so it hangs better." Froggy trusted me with the job of stretching and drying, so I put my hand in it and spread my fingers as we walked to what he called his 'Magic Bounty Tree,' a big tree outfitted in about a hundred used prophylactics, some of them pulled over big branches, straining so they looked like squeaky webs, some of them filled with pinecones and rocks to help them hang low, some simply tossed up as high as Froggy could throw, and these settled on the high branches like little angel stockings snagged off during a low flight. It was an awesome sight, and I was as puzzled as Froggy when he said he didn't understand why people threw them out when they were still good.

Rorschach

Sharon McGill

My neighbor has hung a murdered blouse from the short cord in his window. He usually pins socks and neckties there to dry like dead worms, but today there's this blouse with a scream of blood staining the left side in jagged, red-brown shapes.

All I know of this man is his laundry, though I've never seen him hang it. He keeps the curtains closed. The window looks directly into my kitchen from a distance of ten feet over a well-like air shaft. There are no other windows on our level, and the view from the apartment beneath mine is too acute. I know this because the only person I've talked to in the building lived there, a man with some biblical name like John or Mark who fucked me in his kitchen. He said it would be sexy. It wasn't. John or Mark moved out a long time ago, but I remember the view there, and it was nothing like mine.

My job is to watch. I work as a security guard in an art museum, keeping people from touching things, scolding anyone for talking on cell phones or leaning too close to the walls.

I tell people I finally made it into a museum. The joke wasn't even funny the first time.

Sometimes I forget people come for the art. They could be actors in a silent show put on entirely for my benefit, a show about the way people look at things. Other times a viewer's gaze shifts from a canvas to my body, and it takes them a moment to understand that I am alive.

The blouse still hangs the next morning. I start calling the landlord and have most of the digits dialed when I hang up. She hates me because I painted a railroad bridge in the living room. But mainly I stop because all I can think to say is *The blouse across from me has been murdered.*

The language of art is homicidal. Ideas are executed. Paintings hung. Photos shot. My ex embraced this, called himself a shootist. *I don't photograph things. I shoot them. I am a shootist.*

He shot me several times, and my now dead body hangs in New York. He's art-famous, and I'm hanging in a bunch of galleries labeled as *Girl #5*.

In the museum, we have these Clyfford Still paintings. My favorite is a giant white field cut by a torn red shape in the upper corner. When you stare at it all day, the shape becomes a screaming mouth that is impossible to unsee.

The building is 150 years old. It was commissioned by the mad daughter of a rail baron who kept building it until her father's fortune ran out. The dim halls are filled with sepia shots of the city's dead history. The faces of people in them are blurred and bleached out, impossible to judge.

The laundry room is in the basement, a maze of corridors notched with heavy, mostly locked doors. I had always assumed the man across from me washed his clothes in the sink because he didn't want to venture down to the fleet of coin-ops next to the boiler room, a place that screamed like the antechamber to hell.

I knew the passage to his wing was there, so I went and tried all the doors until I found the right one.

My ex took the shots in his studio with me on the floor and him hovering overhead on a ladder, a silhouette against bright lights. *Play dead*, he told me. I widened my eyes into an empty stare, arms and legs splaying at unnatural angles. He touched me only to spill my black hair around the floor. *Like rivers*, he said. *Think of Ophelia*.

What do you see? the docents ask the high-school groups and senior citizens and other would-be art connoisseurs. *A place to begin understanding is to start with that question: what do you see?* They answer, Black blobs. A guy with no face. A woman's body pushed against glass, her skin smearing like paint. A red necktie cinched around nothing, hanging from the ceiling like a noose.

When they ask what it means, the docents tell them, *That's not*

the point.

The stairs lead to a carpeted hallway like my wing with its buzzing lights and distant muffle of anonymous living. Here, too hang framed shots of the city as a boomtown, faded and distant. His door is like mine, marked by gilded, stencil numbers. I knock.

What do you see? A man older than I'd imagined, his face serious as suicide. He looks like a professor—philosophy maybe, something both essential and irrelevant. He studies me the way artists look at paintings with eyes that recognize rather than see.

It's winter. A knife-like wind stabs the windows down the hall. "Come in."

The apartment is a mirror image of mine. Dark parquet covers the floor, and the living room bleeds into a hallway, an efficiency kitchen at left.

"I know why you're here."

The door shuts behind me. On his wall hangs a shot of a nude woman, not me.

"You do?"

The place is deeply lived in—glowing lamps in small corners, antique sofa, a piano with its lid raised and keys yellow as teeth.

"Would you like a drink?" He pours a glass of wine. "You look like an artist."

The wine warms my tongue. "I live across from you."

"I know."

In the kitchen, light from my window outlines the blouse upon its wire hanger.

"You never open your curtains," I say.

What do you see? Knives on a magnet lining the wall. An antiseptic kitchen. I turn and find his neck behind me. Slow throb beneath skin.

He touches my chest in the place over my heart. "Yours are never shut."

Derek

Keith Meatto

Sharon leans over in bed and invites me to karaoke for her engagement party. It's a bad idea, but I can never say no. When I agree she stays for another hour before she goes back uptown to Richard.

I get to Sing Time the next night. The crowd is frat boys, Asian girls and theater kids. There's a monitor over the bar and on the video a guy and a girl tumble and tousle each other's hair. The lyrics run along the screen, but everyone already knows the words: *Cheer up, Sleepy Jean. Oh, what can it be?*

I leave the daydream believers and homecoming queens and go to Room Six. Richard hugs me as if it's been years, not days. Sharon smiles but stays on the bench. They're both drunk. Nobody else is here. Some party. Richard presses a button on the wall. A waiter appears in 1.2 seconds. Richard says something in Japanese and in 3.2 seconds the guy returns with two beers and a Riesling.

Richard picks a song from when we were kids, when he first claimed Sharon. He sings like a prince. Never mind that he helped turned the global economy into a burning pile of slag. With that voice, I'd marry him.

Then Sharon takes the mike and says to me in a slurry voice: This one's for you. For a second my heart tightens. But when the music starts, it's only that song from the musical about the dictator's wife. The song sucks; it's all sentiment and syncopation and strings. Still, when Sharon hits the chorus, I shiver and wonder why she ever went to law school. After the song, Sharon blows kisses and tosses an invisible bouquet. Then she passes me the mike. I remind her I can't sing.

Who cares? Richard says. We're all drunk. We're all friends.

Every song in the book seems wrong. Finally, I see a tune that's not about love with an easy melody. My voice is too soft, then too loud, but never on key. The whole time Sharon and Richard watch me like a disabled kid's parents. I stumble through

two verses before I put down the microphone. We should have jousted. The music churns along for a while. Then Sharon takes the mic and finishes the song.

Richard suggests another round. I say I need to go. I have first period tomorrow. Emily Dickinson.

Stay, Sharon says. You can teach that in your sleep.

Nobody says anything for a while. Then Richard puts his hand on my shoulder.

Look, he says. Sharon told me.

The air leaves my lungs. Music from the next booth bleeds through the walls.

Let's just hang, he says. It doesn't matter anymore.

Then he pushes the wall button. The waiter appears right away, pad in hand.

Three more, Sharon says, and her voice squeaks.

Two, I say. For the bride and groom.

Then I bow to them both, give the waiter a twenty and go out into the night.

Manheim

Keith Meatto

The orchestra was rehearsing *Die Erste Walpurgisnact* when Manheim bowed his viola and a wet juicy fart slipped out. The tympani masked the sound, but not the smell. Moments later, someone coughed and the music stopped and the stage collapsed into chaos.

Then Masur clapped and everyone fell quiet. We are not schoolchildren on a picnic, the conductor said. Give me fire and pitchforks. Give me *höllenbroden*.

We already have hellish brew, said the first violin and waved her hand in front of her nose. Manheim blushed as the orchestra and even the Westminster chorus kids laughed. Masur frowned and turned to grab the mezzo-soprano's shoulders and scold her for flubbing a pitch. Ashamed, Manheim ducked his head.

After he finished his critique, the conductor cued a few measures before the interruption and the music resumed. Manheim clenched his cheeks and attacked the strings. Yes, the breakfast burrito had been unwise. But such immaturity! When he studied Mendelssohn, half the kids on stage hadn't been born. And every year he re-auditioned to protect his job from a 94-pound girl who memorized Bach as a fetus.

Kommt! Kommt! Kommt!

As the chorus sang, Manheim dug harder into the strings. Then he relaxed, and another fart escaped—so toxic that he coughed and the orchestra stopped again.

Such errors, Masur said. Do I need to say this is our final rehearsal?

The orchestra fell silent, chastened. Manheim shut his eyes, as if he could dissipate the smell by willpower. But it lingered. Then the second violin spoke.

It's not our fault, she said. Somebody reeks.

The orchestra gasped. Nobody made excuses, not to the legendary Masur. The conductor turned his back to the musicians and stared at the auditorium and the 2,700 empty seats that in

six hours would all be filled. His bald crown shone and his jacket was rumpled, as if he had conducted all night in bed. For a while he stood still, then turned back to face the orchestra.

Then cover your nose, he said and cued the music again.

Manheim smiled as he played. The maestro was old, too. He knew how the body could fail. As the orchestra swelled and the glorious chorus sang, Manheim's heart swam with Christians and pagans, heaven and hell, darkness and light.

Dein Licht! Dein Licht!

They were measures from the finale when Manheim ripped a fart so loud that his legs shook. This time, no tympani came to his rescue. The music stopped. Masur lowered his baton. Everyone stared at Manheim. His face burned. Nobody spoke as he bent over, opened his case and lay his viola down in purple plush. Then he picked up the case and bowed three times: first to the maestro, then to the musicians, and last to the concert hall, his second home.

Goodbye, he said.

Then he farted again, loud and true as a trumpet, on purpose this time, and walked off stage before he could savor the reaction.

Kitten Survives Wood Chipper/Severed Pig's Head Thrown into Mosque

Matt Mullins

Two headlines, signs of our divided mind
sharing today's front page. In one we are

the nurturers, witnesses to the miracle,
in the other, bigots speaking through

the frozen thuds of a rolling pig head
bowled past the prostrate as they send

their prayers toward Mecca. *I thought*
it would be funny, the man from Maine

told the cops. *It was meant to be a joke.*
And some surely do find such a joke

funny—an assumption of humors
turned on end, only to turn on us again

as we assume throwers of pig heads
do their throwing from a deep south

and kittens happen into wood chippers
in a far north, not the other way around

as our headline stories claim. Understand.
This is how our truths lie, between

the lines, in blank spaces telling the eternal
tale of humanity's compassions and hatreds

colliding in a wreck that cancels us out
causes you and me to consider this

world from behind the fluttering eyelids
of the faithful just now disturbed at prayer,

through the tree-cutter's saw-dusted safety
goggles as he reaches for the switch.

On the side of that grinding mouth
the curious, wanderling animal sought

likely for the sake of shelter or a dark
womb-place to take a nap, I imagine

there must have been a symbol or at least
a name. Some owner or maker's claim

to deconstructions that should include
those gravities attached to the dull thumps

of a frozen, severed pig head signaling
the arrival of the mangled thing that is

our current psychological condition spit out
torn, yet living still, a mewling fur-ball

rushed to the pet hospital where even
animals must endure our need for doing

everything possible to stave off those
afterlives we kill to prove. Such headlines!

To accept them is to claim the only truths
left to us are the primetime clichés born

of our suffering those countless channels
beaming the nonsense of this America

down upon our dissolving neighborhoods.
No! We are more than bombers of cities

whose cities have never truly been bombed.
Invaders never invaded but for the lolling

consciences awash in the blue glow
of three hundred million TV evenings.

We are one hand triggering the other
to proffer a package labeled CARE,

terrified bigots tossing pig heads into holy
places and tree cutters tenderly cradling

a bloody lump picked from the gnawed dust.
Believe otherwise and there is no arguing

against a history of bodies heaped in accusation,
the flies caking the wronged dead staring

through us across centuries of convenient lies.
Eight surgeries later, the kitten's prognosis

calls for full recovery. *You always have to*
be optimistic and give it your best shot.

Never count anybody or anything out.
The veterinarian binds our internal wound,

solves us so neatly with a soundbite of trite
aphorisms we'll accept even as we

ignore them with a love of our hatreds
and a hatred for the failure of our hopes.

By tomorrow we'll have forgotten the shaken
kneeling with their vacuums, not questioning

their commandment to cleanse the reasons
why. Is the answer to this question stitched

to another question, the same one
we always fail to ask: when

the wound becomes the body
what does the mind become

once the wound heals over?

So Tempting She Cannot Stop

Peter Munro

"Somebody might think they are dancing."
—answer to an ancient Calvinist riddle

Why do Presbyterians never fuck
standing up? To where does the other sock
hie off? In the Maker's infinitude,
could She stew a pot of porridge so huge
He could not consume it, every single bit?
Why-come the avocado bears a pit
bigger than the digestive tracts emboweled
by most herbivores? Did that put the howl
in howler monkeys? Expressing passage
of a seed, replete with squinched-up visage?
By what means am I able to tell,
at 100 meters, if a gal quells
the jouncing of her breasts with a brassiere
or if she goes unbound, jostling this here
sad world with blessings only a woman
newly minted from a girl can mammon?
(Hell, at 200 meters I'm exact
mostly, somehow knowing if she's stacked
freely or if a soft-wired undergarment
boosts her high. Why did the Maker of varmints
and bubonic plague stick me with such talents?)
How do Presbyterians keep their balance?
How does them Calvinists bespeak their Psalms
upright? How is it they manage to embalm
God's Word in human talk yet not topple
awestruck, remaining as erect as nipples
in the soprano section of the choir?
(I'd have thought that the Holy Spirit's fire,
ruptured from their tongues, would have blasted
'em to the deck, all to hell and busted

under an exaltation of God's wonders
as weighty as a Conquistador's plunder.
That one's harder to answer than the sound
of one hand slapping.) If Grace abounds
and Jesus invites each least Child to feast,
wantonly, lavishly, at the greased-
pig-barbecue, why-for does my hunger
spit me through like some steely skewer,
piercing the distance of me till foretold
appetite drives me to that table extolled
umBiblical and I ravish what God
spreads before me, praying neither grace nor lauds,
unmarveling at the way my belly
growls on, gracelessly, as if the jellies
and condiments of Heaven could not sate?
How much must I suffer to lose weight?
In *whose* room do those women come and go
conversating of Michelangelo?
If the beast in me ogles females
on a sunny summer day, impaled
upon his own ancient, animal
knowledge, glaring at those gals' carnival
struts in colorful, sheer blouses, his anger
best expressed through liturgy lest dangerous
lust contort hymnals to such deformed
phrases of worship that the new abnorms
thusly defined are enough to render
Presbyters too destitute to tender
offers in the terrifying commerce
conducted by lovers, can I coerce
praise from my beast sufficient to exalt
that Womb wherein Creation defaults
me as if tectonic drift decrees muscle
along slippages of salt and corpuscle?
What kind of God imagined flatulence,
erectile function in luminous tumescence,

and conniptions fretted by boys seeking girls
and girls seeking boys while crimson unfurls
wars and spurs magnificent tribal
movements laxatived as gory as the Bible?
Is She laughing His ass off at me and you
speaking so beautifully distant from what is True?
Will I still be lonely in Heaven?
At night, when the constellations leaven
the dark a billion times told lovelier
than I am lonely, or lonelier,
does one of God's eyes I-spy through each star-hole
pricked in that black mantle? How many shoals
of eyes does it take the Increate
to bleed light through like to osculate
offspring swirled alive in that cauldron
which is His womb, staring, fixed, the Children
of Creation so tempting She can't stop
Himself from watching while we bebop
our affairs, you know, fucking upright,
drinking, dancing, and whatnot? If uptight
congregants practice their rituals
adequately to come unto spiritual
purity, such that Presbyterians
chorus like a choir of accordions
wheezing decorum's deepest precepts,
why should the choreography of mis-stepped
praises, danced off-key to a hymn-tune, burden
the flock with such terror and a hard-on?
Why is there evil? Why is sex fun?
Do Presbyterians often get done
by each other in such public places
that they could be caught coming where Grace is,
(and be taken for dancing)? And, at the dance,
that time you took my hand and circumstance
placed touch at odds with nobility of soul;
I mean, that time my want of touch left a hole

into which I could not cram God and remain
present and unbroken—why then did you arraign
me to my body and afflict me with terror
that at any moment you might see your error?

Advice To Joe's New Girlfriend from the Ghosts of Lovers Past

Maria Nazos

1.
Let's get this straight—if his heart were any further on his sleeve, it would be a wrist watch; he tells time with that instead of the tired old concept that doesn't exist.

2.
Thing is, he isn't great at articulating things. I don't mean in that way that women stereotype men to be—he believes you

cannot say *this sunset is beautiful*, because how could it ever encompass the ejaculate gold and russet streaks? How can you see the flowers just now,

poised on the sill—I believe they're called posies—but he believes that when you gaze at upon them, the yellow is not a symbol for friendship, that they are what they are. You have no choice but to breathe them in and in—

3.
You need to train him to lie resourcefully. He cannot, repeat, *cannot* tell you that you've gained weight. If he ever does, stare into his eyes as if you can see his unborn children. He'll get the message.

4.
Ask him about those years, playing with the Jug Band, about the top hats and vests he wore, ask him about his former loves, about his lover-of-three-women

in a day past, ask him about the infidelities, the monogamy, his ex-wife Martha, who is still convinced there are cameras

hidden in the squirrel's nests. Make him dance on the frying pan, as he calls it. He doesn't think he loves it. Rest assured; *he does*.

5.
He'll never love you as much as he loves me.

6.
Then again, he's a die-hard romantic who resurrects from infertile soil; so he might.

7.
Okay, let me be real with you for a second. If I'm going to tell you anything, anything resonant, or applicable anything that you wield, it's this:

you've got to be more stable than me. Hopefully you'll be able to not feel like monogamy is a defunct invention, that you have cellular memory

as an emotional escape artist, even though your blood whispers his name. Listen: this is the man with salt grit stubble, who coughs and rises to stumble

barefoot onto the whale watch boat he captains from the rowboat docked beside it. He stayed there whenever his second ex-wife kicked him out—

Her name's Louise. She is short in height and temper. She has a soft frizz of gray hair pinned up in a messy bun to show off her soft jaw line,

like a tragically beautiful ballerina. The boutique she works at is called Dulcinea, it's right on the main drag. I'm telling you this so you can cross over to the other side of the street when you see her.

She's 90 days sober, I hear, and that's a pretty crucial period. I'd stay away from her if I were you.

8.
Okay, let me be really honest: when you've drank too much, because you drink only in excess, when your voice breaks and breaks down (and it will),

Do me a favor, and punch the couch instead of him. I know it's tempting. You'll feel better in the long haul.
9.
But it's all because you love him, because he has this thing where when you yell at him, he shuts down like a computer chip in an unknowable machine.

10.
The blue glass bottles under the lamp need to stay there. They're called Blue Solar Water. He's been drinking them and intoning the mantra, "I love you. I'm sorry.

Please forgive me. Thank you." It's derived from this book he's reading, it's about delving into the place of zero limits in your heart. Read it, I urge you.

It's gorgeous. Plus. You'll know we aren't crazy enough to be licking the grapes off wallpaper.

11.
Things can't always be perfect. When gravity kicks in and makes him descent lightly off the wagon, don't be too worried. He'll get back on soon.

12.
Admire him. Admire him to the point of envy.

13.
Tell that Colleen to stay the hell away from her. She's the one with reddish cropped hair, who hangs out at the Old Colony Tap.

14.
He'll always forgive you, to the point of his detriment. Learn the humility part, the self-blame, the ability to be wrong.

15.
Love him, I urge you, or else I'm coming back to haunt you in the ass.

16.
He's always been pretty virile, but with you, he might need some Cialis. You can get it online.

17.
Don't do that! That thing I just did, don't *ever* cop out, using blatant humor to deflect raw emotion. "I love you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you."

Sing it, sing it, again and again, when you go on a whalewatch, bend over the stern, it's the best place to watch the humpbacks. Plus, while he's captaining,

he likes to watch you lean over; he's wondering what the ocean smells like to you.

Ontology

Nancy J. Nordenson

Two palms, his and mine, pressed flat against the cool stone, newly tidied, a box buried below. I wonder now and always about this child who was never a child, but who may already see what no eye imagines, acquiring that full knowledge of what's really going on here in one fell swoop without having to so much as scrape a knee in search of it. Between visits, the ground encroaches. My husband scrapes the stone with a plastic card from a roadside assistance service pulled from the car's glove compartment, sliding it into the engraved lettering to free her name and epitaph, free the rosebud I had drawn once as instruction on gridded paper alongside "A time to mourn, a time to dance." My hand, its underside blackening, moves across the granite, pulling grass and sweeping dirt. We did the same at our last visit, and the one before that, and before and before and before. On snow we stood at this plot an age ago and placed grief next to hope in the company of pastor, family, and friends. Be still my soul sung in harmony. Pink flowers arrived and my milk came in and tears. Tears. For the price of a prom dress we bought that piece of land under weeping willows and old oaks. Smack in the middle of a brilliantly bright winter day the sales rep with his map led us through knee-deep snow. Two brothers waited. Why do people rush around so, I thought while looking out the car window at shoppers on the sidewalk as we drove home from the hospital with nothing but a bag of groceries in the back seat. When it was finished and I had left the room, I saw the green leaf cupping a drop of rain, a picture stuck on the door frame, a secret code for the maternity floor staff: Don't ask to see a baby. Her head, hairless. On her forehead ordained fingers dipped in a vial of water drew a cross. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, outside of time, inside of grace, I baptize you. The bundle stilled the world. Perfectly formed and wrapped in a blanket the nurse placed her in my arms. She had slid out, finally, not making a fuss and that was

that. My husband told me, You're pushing her into God's arms. Where was the strength? The contractions fierce, fueled by the pitocin's drip, drip, drip. The body entombed on the ultrasound screen, bobbing not moving, like a waterlogged mango, had confirmed the worst, and so we began. The way there was too fast. Kick, baby, kick! The exit is up ahead, and I can turn around, go home. I'd laugh later, that nervous laugh of danger evaded, but in the doctor's office it was hard to swallow. Telephoning my husband and sister to tell them where I must go, I nearly wept at the comfort of a hand laid on my shoulder, but when I turned no one was there. I held death but didn't know it. They did. So awkward they were at the silence in my belly. I lay on the table, cool crackly paper over black vinyl, and stared at the ceiling. These babies can get themselves in the strangest positions, they said, trying to smile. Slide the probe on its jelly lake farther to the right, no farther, now back, to the left, now up, and all will be well. How cheery, the midwife said when I arrived for the routine check. My new pink- and green-striped shirt was stretchy enough to last the months ahead. We were halfway. Not long before, an ultrasound showed in undeniable black and white everything anyone dares hope for: ten fingers and toes, lengths and circumferences in correct ratios, all organs present, a thumb being sucked. A heart beating. When exactly did it stop? I pulled a glass from sudsy water; I swept hair from my forehead; I blinked. Which of these moments was it, and why didn't it make itself known like a midnight strike at a century's turn? Of all the things to someday know, when blindness becomes sight and the last tear is wiped, I'll ask this first. My belly measured bigger than the month before, and the month before that, and a lifetime before, when my stomach was flat and smooth. His hand slid across my skin. Our lips touched.

Last Day on the Job

Henry Presente

"Tell me everything is going to be alright," she pleads, but there is no escape. The elevator plunges, throwing us a few feet into the air before it grinds to a stop. She lurches into me.

"Take my hand," she cries, jamming her fingers into my palm and breaking my hold on the broken emergency phone. I wince as the phone falls and cracks into my bruised knee, which has been inflating like a purple balloon since I fell while trying to climb through the ceiling a minute ago. Smoke is crawling into the elevator cabin. She's breathing in quick gasps.

"Hold me," she demands, and crumples against my body. We're deep inside the courthouse—too deep for firehoses or wishful thinking. No rescue could make it in time. The smoke is adding up and we sink to the floor.

"Save me," she whimpers, so I stand up to pantomime a hero again. I unbutton my shirtsleeves, pry my fingers between the elevator doors, and wrench. On the other side of retirement, my hands were strong and thick and welded metal for battleships. Not long ago, I couldn't feel shirt buttons through the calluses on my fingertips. I feel everything now. I feel light-headed. After a minute of futility, I pull back from the elevator doors and lean against the wall, panting and stroking my soft, white beard with a soft, aching hand.

"Do you want me?" she murmurs, sitting cross-legged on the floor and suddenly peaceful and calm. I'm surprised until I see the heroin needle in her hand and the hole in her arm.

"You'll never have another chance. Do you want me?" she asks. She licks her lips, drops the needle, and rope-climbs the dangling emergency phone to her feet. She locks me in a stoned, sultry stare and slips off the shoulder straps of her blue dress. It falls like a curtain and leaves her body glistening and bare, except for tattoos of two dragons that climb her ribs like ladders and lasso her breasts with long tongues. I snap my eyes to the floor.

"Look at me," she declares, convincing my eyes while my brain is still considering the argument. The hazy smoke between us rolls back the mileage she's put on her body. She's a looker—a luscious brunette—just a few years older than her husband, my useless grandson, who was probably late for his court appointment like he's late for everything else. No doubt he is standing outside in the snow right now, shivering as he watches the fire and the real men with real jobs trying to do something about it. If nothing else, this mess spares me from singing his praises in court as a character witness.

"Take me," she commands, crossing the elevator in a single step. She lifts my hand to her breast, and my fingers graze against green dragon scales that feel just like warm skin.

"Take me," she insists, inching closer and brushing my beard with her cheek. Her earrings are the little white pearls my wife gave her before she passed away. I bend down and pull her dress back up. After I replace the straps on her shoulders, I tug gently on her ear and her eyes brim with tears.

"Forgive me," she says, reaching up to grasp my wife's earring between her thumb and forefinger. I swat away her guilt with a wave of my hand. Then I hold my arms out to make her understand that hard feelings can't exist where we are. But when she steps into my embrace, rests her chin on my shoulder, and clutches two fistfuls of the back of my shirt, I allow myself a sigh.

If she weren't here, I wouldn't have to play all these parts. I wouldn't be climbing up elevator ceilings or worrying about hurt feelings. I would be sitting quietly—or humming a Bob Dylan tune if I felt like company. I would be pissing in the corner and enjoying five minutes free from responsibility.

"I'm scared," she says, pulling me tighter and gouging her fingernails into my back. I stroke her hair and rock her gently this way and that, but I am coming up empty in a search for something comforting to say.

Some piece of the elevator—some cable or pulley—begins to groan under the strain. It's not a high-pitched whine, just a

grumble earned after a long day on the job. I contemplate how much more I have in common with this battered piece of metal than the confused girl in my arms.

"I don't want to die," she sobs, reminding me that I still have one more thing to do before I can clock out.

"It's okay, darling. I'll see you on the other side," I say, using a smile and a little kiss on the cheek to soften the sentiment. They're the right tools for the job. As her stranglehold eases, I feel the blood returning to my head.

"See you," she mumbles.

When the elevator finally drops, she does not scream. We fall weightless and calm, and on the way down, she opens her arms and sets me loose. With those few seconds of freedom, I listen to the wind rushing by, which sounds enough like bubbles escaping from a beer to give me one last smile. I always liked a cold beer at the end of a tough job.

Apology

Scott Provence

I was watching football one Sunday afternoon with the sound turned off when my wife came into the room. "I wanted to apologize," she said, "for leaving my dirty dishes in the sink this morning." That's big of her, I thought, coming to me unprompted like that. But then I remembered that I was the one who had left dirty dishes in the sink. In all our years of marriage, I have never known her to leave a dish behind. As soon as she's done eating, she's under the faucet, scrubbing hard. "I forgive you," I said. Then I said, "I'm sorry I left the light on in the bathroom all night," even though that had actually been her. I had woken up at three in the morning and all of the bathroom lights, including the heating lamp, were humming away. "That's quite alright. I'm also sorry about last month's paycheck," she said. I had lost three hundred dollars on a last-second touchdown. "Water under the bridge," I told her. She was really quite beautiful, standing in the hallway of our house in the afternoon light, her body still radiating from the heating lamp that she always left running. I used to hold her under that lamp after a shower, inhaling the steam as it rose from her body. "You know, I've been thinking about that Christmas party two years ago," I said. "I want to apologize for sitting on Kevin Phillips's lap and telling him I could have done better." "Kevin who?" she said with a shrug. On the television, my team was losing bad. It was like they couldn't give the ball up fast enough. My wife sat down next to me on the couch. She reached up with one hand and buried my face in her hair. "And I'm sorry for that illegitimate son," she said. My child would have been a natural athlete, untouchable on the field. Her child would have smelled like lavender and soap. He would have stayed warm the whole winter. "Ancient history," I said.

Whatever You're Not Out Of

Scott Provence

I try to tell the waitress about my shitty childhood. I have to make it short because there's only so much room on her pad. "I'll have the hard-beaten eggs and the bruised-berry awfuls," I say. She nods, writing without looking up. She's about as old as I am, and probably can't decide if she wants to hear, "You look young for your age" or "You look older." "You look medium-well," I say when my food comes. She's confused. I should have ordered a burger.

The next morning I'm shadow-boxing in the shower, imagining my father's head whipping back like a drain-plug, when I slip on a right hook and separate my shoulder on the edge of the tub. When the waitress asks about the sling, I tell her it was the result of a fight. I tell her about the other guy and how he begged for mercy like it was something I could give. When she brings me my food, I notice there's a hair on the edge of my plate. She's giving herself over in the smallest of portions. I eat the hair with the meal, hoping it's hers, hoping she'll notice. But she's too busy entertaining the next table over: a group of college kids who kick each other under the seat and want one of everything on the menu.

Arvo Pärt at Twilight

Dean Rader

—Ocean Beach, San Francisco

I. Kyrie
Unto the end, O lord,
unto the end.
Drink up the darkness and
recommence this:
our unlocked hour.
Night's measure:
caesura of distance and longing.
The fat oboe of moon
quarter-notes the same sound;
our hearts,
your little records,
stuck on the same prayer.

II. Gloria
Who,
if you were to cry out,
would hear you amidst the drown of
sea-crash and skin song?
Down here
our skullcaps of malefact
and washout
let nothing—
not excelsis,
not the clock's fingersnaps,
not even your roll call—
slip past our earbuds.

III. Credo
And the body,
strung like a cello
across time's fingerboard
believes in its own music, believes
in hammering through
the great rest:
Score of vestige and lineament,
score of sun-scrim,
score of mercy sought and mercy attained, we wait
like singers struck dumb
for the final tenuto.

IV. Sanctus
Undertow of strings.
Coda our chorus
back to this beached world.
Stars candle out across
the sea of heaven—
waves metronome in,
marking arrival and resurrection.
Twilight of the mortals
doesn't have the same zip
and yet, here you are,
lone pilgrim to absence and afterflow.
Our voices
sing down the sun like they always have
and always will.
You ask again:
what dark pit opens
beneath the ocean's fathomed stage?

[*silence begets silencio*]

O choir of exhumation,
call me up.

V. Agnus Dei
He who comes before
the great conductor
brings an offering
of ossia and catgut.
Miserere nobis, maestro,
our instruments are out of tune.
Mercy's cup overturneth,
as we overturn those whose sins we swallow:
How do we tell dismissal
from obstruction?

VI. Ite missa est
In the beginning, O lord,
in the beginning:
unlocked moon, caesura of exhumation.
Our skullcaps strung
like a violin of sun-scrim,
our hearts drown in sea-crash
and skin-song.
Night's undertow and mercy's tenuto
candle up into absence and lineament.
Go, it is the dismissal:
Pilgrim of this breached world,
recommence our hearts:
vestige of mercy, record of
longing and malefact,
we sing up
our fathomed prayer, our offering of silver and washout—
final music of obstruction
and resurrection.
O distance,
O silent measure,
drink down the body:
drink down time's cup.

On Target

Todd Richardson

I thought I saw a dead baby in a Wal-Mart shopping cart once. Its arms and legs were splayed asymmetrically, and things on sale—Cool Ranch Doritos, Mountain Dew, Tylenol PM—surrounded the body like a chalk outline. The baby had only a diaper on, and nothing, not even a plastic bag, prevented its spectral flesh from sagging into the cart's wire bottom. The woman whose cart contained the corpse—I don't want to presume she was the dead baby's mother—was digging through a box of five-dollar DVDs as I stared at this child, looking for a shallow breath, an eye twitch, something, any sign of life.

It was a harrowing sight, and I wanted to tell my friends about the maybe-dead-baby, but that meant confessing I was in Wal-Mart, and people like me shouldn't be in Wal-Mart. We know better. Wal-Mart is evil: its products are made in sweatshops, then shipped to the U.S. to be stocked and sold by exploited Americans who would be working at conscientious, locally-owned businesses if such businesses had not been exterminated by Wal-Mart's aggressive pricing. I'm an educated member of the American middle class, and I have a responsibility to act rightly and to shop at Target.

Just yesterday, I was in Wal-Mart's express checkout—I needed some trash bags, and I was in a hurry—when, at the edge of my vision, I saw a friend walk in the store. To avoid eye contact with him, I pulled my head low and directed my attention to the impulse items, congratulating myself on how little the candy bars, phone cards, and lint rollers tempted my sophisticated sensibilities. Of course if I were in Target, the point-of-purchase exchange would have been different; I would have taken the schwag seriously. Andy Warhol said the great thing about America is "the richest consumer buys essentially the same products as the poorest…a Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking." The quote makes me think Warhol really

was a fool. A Coca-Cola from Target, I swear, tastes better than a Coca-Cola from Wal-Mart. Along with whatever usefulness a product promises, when it's purchased at Target, it provides something else, a little slice of a color-coordinated, clean edged life—Wal-Mart sells products, but Target sells Target.

Melissa and I recently moved to Columbia, Missouri, Sam Walton's hometown, and, on our first visit, we were aghast to see so many Wal-Marts but no Targets. We seriously reconsidered the move as a Target-less life isn't worth living. Where would we find tasteful shower curtains at affordable prices? Furniture that is both stylish and practical? Jersey bedding in fun colors? We could always go to Target.com for these things, but then where would we go when we are feeling blue? Melissa and I often spend our evenings ambling through Target, chronicling all the things we'll buy with our next paycheck. The store has been the engine of our economically stylish lives for so long that, when we walk through Target, we aren't contemplating the people we might be—that's what we do at Pottery Barn—we're reminding ourselves who we are.

Becoming full-time Wal-Mart shoppers was out of the question as it would put us in too-close-quarters with people below our station. Behind the high-sounding rhetoric of social justice that people like me use to denounce Wal-Mart resides deep hatred and fear of the lower class. I'm not talking about the poor. As much as Americans would like to believe otherwise, class is more complicated that comparing paychecks—Wal-Mart shoppers and Target shoppers are equally susceptible to bankruptcy. Class, especially in this instance, is a product of taste: Target shoppers work towards cultural superiority whereas Wal-Mart shoppers work on securing financial security. It's worth pointing out that both classes stand in opposition to the ruling class, that elite group of people who control everyone's cultural and financial fate and who think it's cute that I think there's a difference between Wal-Mart shoppers and Target shoppers.

A number of locals consoled us that there is, indeed, a Target in town: "It's in the mall," they said, yet, driving around, we'd

seen every mall and no Target. It wasn't until we were leaving, waiting to turn onto the interstate while thinking of the other mid-sized, Midwest cities with numerous Targets we might move to, that we spied a Target truck heading into Columbia.

"Follow that truck!" I demanded, and even if Melissa laughed at my absurd request, she did what I asked and I was glad. When the light turned green, Melissa did a U-turn, and we sped off after our Moses. It was a tricky pursuit as the truck had already ducked down a rather innocuous looking side street, one of those service roads you use to get to hard-to-get-to motels. It didn't look promising. We suspected the truck, like us, might be lost. When we turned the corner, we were so fixated on catching the truck that we almost didn't see it. There it was, tucked away on the backside of the Columbia Mall, impossible to see from any main street. I think Melissa and I were holding hands, and I swear the Talking Heads' "This Must Be the Place" was on the radio.

"Credit or Debit?" The fifteen-year-old cashier startled me with his question. I was so deep in my invisibility I did not realize he had already scanned the trash bags, and I was holding up the line. All he needed to know was what I intended to do with the card in my hand and our transaction would be complete.

"Credit," I answered. "But these, too." I added a tin of Altoids to the total, thinking they might make my breach in line etiquette seem more meaningful. While I furtively scanned the store to make sure my friend hadn't seen me, the cashier ran the Altoids over the electric eye, pressed a button, and gave me a vacant but pointed look to let me know it was my turn. It took less than a minute for me to slide my card through the black box, receive approval, sign the screen, collect my receipt, scurry past the blue-vested greeter and exit the store.

Once outside, however, I did not feel the relief I thought I would feel at having put Wal-Mart behind me. Instead, I felt a deep melancholy. As I walked back to my car, I empathized, more deeply than they could possibly comprehend, with the lost

souls lost in that Wal-Mart world, those tacky masses who had given up hope to save a few cents; I even empathized with that woman I once saw, the one with the dead baby in her cart. Target gives my life meaning, gives me a sense of purpose, but Wal-Mart gives them nothing but low prices. It's so sad, I thought, that they don't have anything to believe in.

Poem with Bathtub, Foils

Liz Robbins

—after Berryman

1.
At what point did shifts occur? Did the mirrored
face make cliffs of fractal rock? She, about
to leave thirty-six, yet November's fall
back—that extra hour—more than she can do.
Her house's rooms—blankets, clocks,
books, fur, carpets—are some of what she loves,
despises, they are so much her. The little white
dog comes and goes, lies down, sighing. Out
the window, wind moves the raintree, sheds
the skin-colored blooms. She starts a bath, waits
on the bed, the water going like a promise, she
cannot stand to smell her hands, her hair,
her mind, twisting from the night, the still-
blueing dreams.

2.
What so bad, at thirty-six? Only the relative
few dead, not yet the Do Not Go Gently, nor
the As I Lay Dying. The sun has not yet
run, her husband whistles, digs shallow,
plants marigolds in ground.

3.
She tried so long to mum. To speak would
be risk, she sensed accurately. But felt the poke
of pride and change, a painter's smock she'd
admired in a shop so bought, though the sleeves
too wide, pockets worn. Such a bright green like
the sprawled lawn of the Castillo de San Marcos
fort, where students sun themselves in shadows

of penetrable coquina. A bad fit, her thought
and mouth speaking. Now all the world see jade
scales, tail, teeth, fire. And saw clearly. Helplessly,
the no-defense.

4.
Emails arrive, should she open? Encoded with
(imagined?) slights and black screened. In
the evenings, the modem slaps down, but is still-
darkened connection. She has friends somehow,
but all the unsent missives go
like valentines to June, who hates her most. As
she suspects June's right.

5.
Does she offend all with her useless heart
of the personal? She tried no pride, she tried
disdainful, haughty. Now she hide.
She try all ways, and hide's what works. White
bear in a snowbound cave, thick has grown her
hide. Teeth, kept in, hidden, pornographic art.
So long, the dead arousal of sleep.

6.
At the kitchen counter, she stands before
a bowl of pretzels. One bite, and the dog
comes running: O, tiny bliss! Onto the pink
tongue to place a twist, one's heartbeat
the corresponding crunch echo! To share
becomes un-difficult within love's salty
laps! (What we shan't say: she holds all
the snacks.)

7.
When June demand her sharing, she gnarled
yellow teeth and no-love-there. And hide. *No*

person ever looks miserable who feels that he has the right to make a demand on you. Then she feel black soot inside. Make June yellow cheese sandwich equivalent. Feel weak. The bee sting, make honey, die.

8.
"I wait for Joe to come home, so I can toast bread, melt cheese, pop soda. He's out tossing a plastic disc far across a field. He say, *You don't need make food, woman! I, a grown man!* But my feet root to floor. Duty burn. I, with cellophane wrap, bound. Foiled. I put out. The plate, Joe. You don't have to, he means. He and I know I don't do."

9.
She got no baby, babyfies her dog. Kisses it dead on the mouth. Who's mommy's sweet bunny, she cries, confused. Good thing it don't speak human. Like a god, the dog gets all needs met. And without a spoken word. Not the burlap sacks and straps to the back, but the monks got right howls of silence. Too late to make herself right?

10.
Three impossible tasks, say Freud. To teach, govern, cure. She mutters this in hot baths. Epsom salts for nerves. There's reasons, see, can't teach nobody. No dog, no June, no god, no he. Why drive shudders to a stop. No good. No bath for what she got.

Moonwalk

Marvin Shackelford

My brain was wet like water. I thought it was a stupid thing to say before I said it, so I kept my mouth shut. I swelled and rolled, rose up and fell back, riding along with the weighty feeling of a million years at sea.

"This is what it's like to live in outer space," Fred said. "Feel that looseness in your joints?"

"Yeah."

"That's gravity going away. Wave bye-bye to gravity, Jack."

"Bye," I said, and I watched my fingers wag, one at a time at the end of my hand, like I was experiencing a manual dexterity test. "Dexterity."

"What, are we playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, now? Should I go get my dice and roll up some scores?" he asked.

"No, man. Just—move your fingers."

"I don't get it." His arm appeared out in front of the couch, his hand twitching. He said, "I can moonwalk. Watch."

Fred towered above the living room furniture, suddenly, his shirt caught still, out away from his body as though the wind had been set on pause. I waited for the air to push on through the fabric, but it didn't. He slid backwards, right heel sliding up off the carpet and his toe pointed straight into the carpet, left heel sliding off the carpet and his toe poked straight into the carpet, like he was dancing. He twirled. I was amazed.

"Is that a pirouette?"

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe. I took ballet for seven years. Tell anyone and I'll kill you."

He glided in steady, jerking motions. Reverse around the coffee table, between me and the music on the radio, finally brushing past my knees.

"Christ," I said, uncomfortable under the weight of new information.

"Where?" Fred dropped onto the sofa with me, sending ripples through the world. "He's coming back, you know."

"I hope not. Well, I—maybe. Just not right now."

"What do you think he would say?"

"That I wet my bed until I was ten," I told him.

"No."

"Yeah," I said. "The sheets had stars all over them. Then later it was baseball teams. Their logos. Used to collect baseball cards."

I turned my head to get him lined along my eyes' tracks, but he just faced straight ahead, like he could see better than me.

"Even?"

"Definitely."

Fred's head tilted forward but never quite reached his chest. I nodded, so slowly it couldn't possibly communicate a yes, and rolled into the silence of the radio, the stillness of the couch, all that mess out there between me and him.

Sputnik on the Dance Floor Learns of Lobsterboy's Demise

Marvin Shackelford

He is reddish and thick-lipped and the way he moves so gangly and dark is hilarious. Somehow the call goes out as "Look at the Sputnik on the dance floor!", and this is how his exploits travel. When we arrive fresh from spiking the punch and feeling up our tenth-grade dates in the hallway where we press them against the lockers, on-the-spot inspections for health and safety, he's in full swing and jive and never again will he be the Russian exchange student. He is dancing with a fat girl and is only, always, Sputnik.

This is a man, we say, who surely knows about the punch.

But we can only go so far with sophomore girls, so when they herd to the bathroom to reshift makeup and undergarments into place, we're up for making a circle to join Sputnik in the jig. It's the happy akimbo of arms and legs and bobbing head that tells us what to do. We flail ourselves mad, lock arms, and spin a tornado-eye about him, his fat math-club girl. We insist the dance is communal and make her a part, but she cries and dishevels against our tuxedo bodies and has to dip away, runs to shevel herself together again. Sputnik, he gets it, we are making something out of all this.

In the parking lot there is only spike, no punch, and the girls are all gone, still waiting. There is the matter of teachers—Ling will marry the gym coach, but she isn't wearing a bra. Scioscia wants to scare us off breasts altogether. Gerard, he knows. He knows. We want to know of Sputnik, what of the ice and snow? The things that fall from Heaven to level a forest? The bears? How do the women make it up in the morning? Is capitalism damned, too? He will tell us only, "The penis; we say 'khui' instead."

Sputnik, you fucker.

In the gymnasium, word is spreading: The boy with no fingers hasn't made it. We are ambivalent, we are broken. He had come so close. The sophomore girls are destroyed and will

forget the lessons learned freshman year, how far to let us go. They have to be comforted, the way he had only doctor-cut flaps of webby palms to grasp things with, how nothing in his body would work right anyway. He pinched at things and soon, soon, we'll be standing there to make him lower in the ground a falling, flinging, swinging down man from space. He was like another Sputnik.

But no, Sputnik, he knows again. His elbows and knees are shouting, and his voice is something without form and so full it's a void in the silence before the next song starts. We begin to think Sputnik always knows. The mourning is in his party face and his moves all beat on without thinking, without waiting. He is interested only in shooting upwards—he leaves us to process the deformities of life, to see if they must add up to something less than the wonder of it all.

The Essential Salvador Dalí

Anis Shivani

Figure Standing at a Window (1925)

The peaceful bay, at the window where she leans,
chastity in white, how we spend the summer,
before greater talents intrude, and we turn around.

Venus and a Sailor (1925)

Already the diminutive male, the sailor in her lap.
Kiss the vague image, not the lips themselves,
kiss only the painted profile, not the substance of man.

Woman at the Window in Figueres (c. 1926)

She is embellished by the fabrication of the town.
The balcony is a hothouse of gigantic suggestion.
Back turned to us, she contemplates the victory
of the mind never at rest, even in private lacemaking.
The town grows sturdier, the mountains sink down,
and the ability to concentrate is a jest to be coined.

Senicitas (1927–28)

I perceive the beginnings of healthy paranoia
in your rendition of the limbless body, attacked
by spatters of red worm-fests, clouds of blood-anger,
shimmerings of a heady transvestitism beyond sex.
Lorca, of course, died of a shot to his headstrong heart.
All the bloodless submerged lactation in the world
won't give us our genitals back. The body floats
awkwardly, more male than female, in the synergy
of the corpse moments before it revokes license
to conjure possible monsters, donkeys of the head.

The Wounded Bird (1928)

Breton dreamed of the bird that fell into the sea,
turning into a cow before dying. Your rough sand
extinguishes the fire of the heart, the bird a footprint
simplified like all death: the fall greater than the climb.

The Unsatisfied Desire (1928)

I wouldn't call it castration. Only a simple question,
about the origins of masturbation, that spun out of
control. The hand that embarks on accusation,
when the vagina is not looking, is the body's way
of claiming presence. The sea is too wide, too calm,
for argumentation to succeed. I dread the pink tokenism.

The Spectral Cow (1928)

Again the dream of Breton reversed for the inane.
How may a cow dream of its impending transference
from symbol of rectitude to betrayer of tradition?
I see it stripped of its flesh, not yet groaning,
so far removed from the fallen bird, it claims land.

The Great Masturbator (1929)

The style of sleep is bloat. The crotch hot and impotent,
ready to be sniffed. The grasshopper sings immortal
energy. The head inclines to the earth, snout-standing,
perversely ill. What fear then of women as they battle
phallic offensiveness? One sleeps through sex just as easily.

The Architechtonic Angelus of Millet (c. 1929)

We permit prayer to turn our hearts into stone.
Where is the female of the species to warn of soliloquy?

The Catalonian landscape, heart-weary of dull potato farming,
observes the cosmic battle of the worn female,
pushing her conditional phallus out to the face.

The Invisible Man (1929–32)

All men are hoary constituents of leftover architecture.
Always the face bleeds into the ruins of buildings,
legs denote presumptuous waterfalls that no longer slide,
and the jug woman looks away, not interested in guarding
the pieces coming together moment to moment, fatedly.

Chocolate (c. 1930)

"Beauty will always be edible." Jug, urn, in any case the spout
dribbles on the apple, affront to man in mode of devotion.

Paranoiac Face (c. 1932)

I would say the puzzle is in the unmaking of the human face.
We sit over our faces like huts in Africa puzzling animate cool.

Solitude (1931)

We avoid looking into the face of the rock for all we're worth.
Welcome the shell, protected from useless talk, the calumny
of socialization. Would you throw your own wife over the cliff?

The Persistence of Memory (1931)

Gala protects you from the harsh outside (your crustacean shell)
so you can grow soft, supersoft, on the inside, invisible to all?
The truth is, watches are soft only in the way rocks are soft,
their interior harmony a question mark to spatial discord.
The clocks, if you note, must be wound before there is time.

The Dream Approaches (1932)

Take a blank canvas. Insert a coffin, women's genitalia, a naked
man on the beach with flames swirling on his back, a cracking tower,
dark cypresses, and the symbolism screams death of interpretation.
Once Freud put the apparatus in place dreams lost their thrill.

Necrophilic Spring Flowing from a Grand Piano (1933)

Music calls us to our death. On one side, the cypress tree,
spouting from the hole in the piano, calling back to childhood,
on the other side, the pool of death. Music calls us to death.

The Triangular Hour (1933)

Your soft watch is becoming harder? Classical man watches
in feigned ignorance, unable to turn back to look at the plain.

The Angelus of Gala (1933)

You fear humble peasants praying over the potato harvest
as a "monstrous example of disguised sexual repression"?
You think the female would rather devour the poor male?
Fierceness in sexuality is a copout for you, Dalí, let it go.

Hairdresser Depressed by the Persistent Good Weather (1934)

Blocks of time, free of watches, yield unseen possibilities.
The primitive behind the hairdresser will yet wring joy
from Western cities, weather forecasting the new thrill.

The Moment of Transition (1934)

Our first bones will have been observed by the woman in white,
as we enter the new destiny of wherever villages turn to ruins.

Allegory of an American Christmas (1934)

America, Dalí, is new only in the sense that a cracked egg is.
I expect any moment for the north to turn gold too, in memoir.

Autumnal Cannibalism (1936)

War starts with soft slicing of the knife of one stone figure into the other. Soon the pieces of meat devour us. Who is father, who the son, only the rocks, which will outlast us, know for sure.

Lobster Telephone (1936)

It is better not to answer the phone if you think it might be Hitler.

The Burning Giraffe (1936–37)

"The masculine cosmic apocalyptic monster" has been in the news again. Woman loses features. We will die for the strip of meat.

The Invention of Monsters (1937)

Premonition of war is the surrealist's first line of resistance.
A few months before the Anschluss, prophecy is a dead man's only game. One head becomes two, everything twins.
While we sit counting butterflies, war doubles every silence.
The figures washing in the water look like horses from far,
the bust of the woman watched by the angel and the cat is horse and woman. Something terrible waits for us, we foretell.

The Metamorphosis of Narcissus (1937)

Those were the days when reflection repaid manifold.
There is no such pool of water left in the world, Dalí!

Sleep (1937)

"Held up by the crutches of reality," you would have it,
sleep as the heavy monster, but where do the crutches
come from? We dream the crutches as props of reality,
we sleep into the dog-mind, we succumb to separation.

Impressions of Africa (1938)

To concentrate on what is before us, we lose the outside.
Small conspiracies in dark lands are being hatched,
peasants strum handmade guitars. Don't put yourself
out, Dalí, bad news has a way of finding its means.

Invisible Afghan with the Apparition on the Beach of the Face of García Lorca in the Form of a Fruit Dish with Three Figures (1938)

The death of Lorca interlocks apparitions for you, Dalí,
but the world counts him a romantic hero, whole, like an urn.

Philosopher Illuminated by the Light of the Moon and the Setting Sun (1939)

The same American Christmas egg, now in the shape
of an eclipsed dark moon? The philosopher studies his
fingernails, rocklike in emotion. The egg has cracked.

The Enigma of Hitler (1939)

Chamberlain did answer the phone, Hitler on the other end.
I would hang my unbrella too, paint swastikas on the backs
of all my wet nurses, if their backs were soft enough, like Hitler's.

Daddy Longlegs of the Evening...Hope! (1940)

Softness has become liquidity. I posit your dead tree figure,
the inkwells standing for female breasts, as mimetic scorn.
Must your phalluses always be held up by crutches?
Induced impotence, Dalí, is the first principle of war.

Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate, a Second before Waking Up (1944)

In dreams we float, we're told, because the air of reality
is too thin to anchor us. The moment before waking, with
the bayonet and the tigers aimed at the ethereal romanced
body, is also the moment of the end of carefree schooling.

My Wife, Naked, Looking at Her Own Body, Which Is Transformed into Steps, Three Vertebrae of a Column, Sky, and Architecture (1945)

No ordinary wife, Gala, evoked of stone and metal, classical
architecture personified, perfect shape of the back, all that you,
self-declared impotent, would consider the constituents
of a woman able to hold you in her cage, backbone to backbone.

Inter-Atomic Balance of a Swan's Feather (1947)

"The atom was my favorite food for thought." Pity, after
Hiroshima suspension would never be seen as mere freezing,
giving you license to shatter the swan into head, foot, feather.

Dematerialization Near the Nose of Nero (1947)

So you've become a classicist after all, Dalí? Is Nero coming
together, head with bust, or splitting apart? How can your
surrealism reconcile with atomic force, the greatest splitter?
The thing to do is to stuff pomegranates in open cubes.

Raphaelesque Head Exploding (1951)

Inside the Madonna's head, the Pantheon, the shapes clear
despite the splitting, the ubiquitous rhinoceros horn,
now in the service of illuminating religious devices.

Design for the Costume for The Woman of the Future (1953)

At least I am now the crutch-holder for the elongated head.

The Sacrament of the Last Supper (1955)

This ascension is mystical in the sense that an atomic bomb is.

The Dance (The Seven Arts, Rock 'n' Roll) (1956)

"I love anything that is dionysic, violent, and aprodisiac."
Dalí, you tire me. What happened to your impotence?

Tuna Fishing (1966–1967)

The battle has been deflected from man to fish. How I long
for lobster telephones, Hitler on the other end! Do you now
believe in finitude? Energy melts the personified universe.

Profile du Temps (1984)

One last time, your soft watch, now almost bronzed with
solidity, the bottom so close to melting we can taste it.

If You Ain't Got The Do Re Mi

Jeff Simpson

Someone in the hall yells, "Dominoes!"
and just like that I'm shuffling bones
over a card table—the clink-clink sound
like dropping marbles into a wine glass,
fresh coffee, a slice of pie, and all appears
as worn and smooth as an old Zippo.
We have a radio and a space to eat,
a space to talk, and when you don't
feel like speaking, a space for silence
and an ashtray or a game to pass the time.
I play the double six, sip my coffee,
and gaze into the faces of men who never
went to war, never fought for peace and love
or made it to college, but would leave
the schoolyard in the seventh grade
and spend the last hours of daylight
welding horse trailers from the bare
bones of steel beams, oiled and smoothed,
then transformed into cages to haul
thoroughbreds to Shreveport, Santa Fe,
Oklahoma City, where four hooves
and a beating heart are the means
to a capital gain, a ticket for the small
things in life—new linoleum, new washer
and dryer, new teeth, the new smell
of a new car.

If I'm lucky, I'll lead this hand
with a dime or a nickel—anything
for a break, a good start. I take a bite
of pie. I run my thumb across the pips
on the tile as if reading the future in Braille,
picturing casinos off the interstate
shining like Vegas, Mecca of blinking
lights and three-dollar steaks, where before
there were only hay barns and unbroken

lengths of sky. I picture sparrows on a fence,
mockingbirds in the trees, farmers
planting subsidized corn in the dark,
knowing it will fail, knowing if the roots
take hold they can fertilize every acre
until it burns and withers back into dust
for the coming spring—anything for a little
disaster relief, a handout in the heartland
because you can forget your stock portfolio,
forget about strapping what's left of your
belongings to a Model T and heading west.
There's no more California, no more prospects
of fortune. The only gold rush this state's
ever known was in '68 when impulsive
welders went north to work on the pipeline,
sealing gaps with exquisite beads,
pretty as Victorian penmanship.

After all, this is where the wind
comes sweeping down the plains,
where license plates tell us everything is OK,
and it is, I suppose, so long as there's honey
in my honey bear and milk in the fridge.
For every gray sky, the kiss of spring.
For every dead field, rodeos in July—
the odor of cotton candy and horseshit,
popcorn and keg beer. We sit in the stands,
waiting for a renegade bull or a clown
to get what's been coming for him
his whole life. Strange how much we love
disaster. Strange how I'll watch the Daytona
500, hoping for a collision, praying for a spill,
until it's not so much a race as an assembly
of motorized billboards smashing into one
another at 188 miles per hour—100 more
than the 88 required to get back to the future
and away from clock towers and the pressure
to ensure your own existence.

Someone changes the station and America
sings out on the radio—Crystal Gale followed

by Marty Robins followed by Woody Guthrie
and his tiresome locomotive blues—
song of the dust bowl, song of the banjo,
song of the boxcar and red clay dirt.
I check my watch. I drop a tile and look
for a pattern, though I've got nothing
but a double blank. I think I'm just better
on paper. There's more danger in a Popsicle
stick than my fingertips. The trick is to be
on the go, the way alcoholics' mouths
move even when they're not speaking.
On the muted TV, they're showing images
of the Murrah building—song of the Ryder
truck, song of ammonium nitrate.
The hours pile up like seeds in a grain elevator,
but if you got the money, honey, I got the time.
We start another round, draw another hand,
and I start to wonder about the places
I could've been tonight—song of Astroturf,
song of the reservation, song of the doublewide,
the La-Z-Boy, the microwavable pancake
dinner. The tiles start to resemble a jagged
spine misshapen after years of bad posture.
I try not to over think the next play.
I tell myself that in the end, every move's
the same, so you might as well take off
your coat and drop another quarter, say another
prayer, score the odds on horses and weather,
the likelihood of an early spring—
song of the cattle prod, the seed catalogue,
the convergence of pressure systems
that'll huff and puff and blow your house in.

Secret Journey

Liliana Ursu
(Translated by the poet, Adam J. Sorkin, and Tess Gallagher)

You live in a white apartment,
its light opaque like milk,
your impeccable white suits,
raincoats like bright sea spume,
all neatly hung in big white wardrobes
with crystal doors.

Between us lie shadows, chalk-white—
our souls' pale ghosts. Poor slaves of oblivion.
On the long white table, a simple bouquet—
lilies-of-the-valley and two lit candlesticks
like twin sunrays.

The tapestry in your room twitters with woven birds.
The books you wrote—small, silent pyramids—
house the soul of your youth.
Unchanged. Good. Tender. At peace.

In the window a birch,
the flat lazy water of the bay,
and a souvenir from the Cişmigiu Park
of my Bucharest girlhood
when its small lake used to freeze
and, so happy to see snow,
I'd go skating with my father—
a white angel held my hand
while I spun pirouettes. My father
waited for me on the shore
holding a thermos of hot tea.

You wait for me in the doorway
of your sitting room. I arrive,
or don't arrive.
And with the most natural gesture in the world,

I embrace you. Then you slowly
take off my gloves, brush the crystalline snowflakes
from my hair and blow over me
words in an unknown language.
You take my hand in yours
and seat me in a white armchair
near the stove covered with glazed white ceramic tiles.

You start telling me about your life,
the thousand years without me,
the gold of the Goths,
the man in that painting—
a warrior, your grandfather
who built his own boats—
and his wife, your grandmother,
who smelled of milk, of babies, of lavender,
her lips stained pink by the strawberries
that perfumed the short summers.

I am listening to their story
when suddenly you stand
and play a recording of Dvořák's "Cypresses."
Then you fall silent
and stare a long time out the window:
somebody's waving at you from another world,
trying to tell you something.
You sit down sadly, complain to me
how much your knees hurt.
And I realize I'm out of place
in your new white apartment with a view of the bay.

But before going I tell you a story:
of the woman in my mountains
who, one hard winter,
sold her amber earrings
for a cartful of wood
or of my grandfather
who, during World War II,
sold his garden in Sibiu

for a bag of potatoes
or of my grandfather in Apold
who used to write home from the front
on birch bark.

Hey hey hey! my Balkans,
the aroma of smoke and basil,
of cabbage and the meat in *sarmale*,
of mutton pastrami
and brash new wine.

Hey hey hey! the first crocus of spring
eaten as communion
by the shepherds on the mountain peaks.

Hey hey hey! a violin made from an orange crate
by Brâncuşi at eighteen.

Hey hey hey! Alexander the Great
who at eighteen commanded
the Macedonian cavalry.

Hey hey hey! the Danube's waves,
the joy of knowing that someone you can't forget
always waits for you.

An Ode for Leaving the Place You Call Home

Joe Wilkins

I scramble down the weedy bank,
crawl across the rocks, sit on my heels
beneath the bridge.

Everything is mud and rust,
Charles and Katie are forever.

The river, of course, is quick, deep,
a great dark thing refusing to be ignored—
the flood line runs up the iron the height of a man.

Now the sky blazes
above mile after mile of cornfield,
slough, gravel road, and those always
white two-story farmhouses—
and the grown son slings hay to the goats,
and the old father curses the tractor.

Look, here is the world!
The world of light that lives between darkness
and darkness! Here is the world! the herons cry,
those river lovers, those iridescent brothers
of sun and moon, white winged
pilgrims who make their home
wherever silver fish rise for nymphs—

and now the son looks up,
and the father,
and here they are,
two men grown like corn from the dark
earth of the Middle West, staring at the bird-shot sky.

This is the poem I'd show you,
if you were alive.

But you've been gone
these twenty years. And I'm living

in this land without mountains,
without pines, this place

of slow waters and hogs,
the late summer leaves of corn—

I guess you wouldn't like it.
At least that's what I tell myself,

hunkered up beneath the bridge
here, my chin on my knees.

I don't really know.
I've long forgotten every moment

we ever shared. There's nothing
to be done for it, really—

my breath already so much dust.

Now the sun is gone.
Now the aluminum plant clangs
with shift change—

across the gravel road, a hulking man
in blue jeans and suspenders and that's it
stands in his doorway, sucks on a cigarette.

He stares into the lights of the flatbed trucks
and beat-up Buicks streaming out the lot towards town,
his white belly curving like the earth curves, dark seas
of hair at his nipples. He shivers. Says *Hurry now,*
Bitsy. Hurry! to the small dog

shitting in the rhododendrons.
And turning from it all, a boy runs across
the train tracks, sidesteps through the pokeweed

and silver cans littering the ditch bank.
This is my world, he thinks, *pokeweed,*
gravel road, that man

without a shirt saying Bitsy.
He realizes he is not happy about this,
he wonders if he should do something. But what?
What can he do about the way smoke leaks
from that man's lips?

What can he do about weeds cracking
like bones beneath his steps? He doesn't know,
he doesn't know—

he jams his fists in his pockets,
hunches his shoulders against the wind. Above him,
a wash of herons darkens the moon's pocked face.

What can I say?

I am sure only of highways and dust,
afternoon cigarettes,

thunderstorms, the dark night shot with stars,
the sadness of white houses in the dark.

Tell me, what should I do?

Here I am in the Middle West,
a thousand miles from my father's grave—

I still dream Montana. I still believe
for each of us there is a country

we call home—

where the river always rises
and the moon burns its white hole in the sky

and like prayers the herons swing
between wind and water,

where the son sometimes turns away

from the father, where we die
but die home.

Nunavut

David Yost

It was the first time I'd seen her since the hospital, and after, re-clothed, we stopped at a corner café for an hour of lattés, thumb-wrestling, and tasseomancy. We joked about the Cubs and a former classmate of ours who'd just been abandoned in Nunavut by his boyfriend, a gambling-addicted geologist, then she reached to take my hand and finally she talked about it, the Guillain-Barré, the tubes twisting in her throat and the snake-hiss of the ventilator, how her estranged plumber father loomed weepfully above her to declare he'd die in her place if that's what was needful and how it took twenty minutes with the alphabet cards to blink back *oh please* but then, chastened, *Thanks, Dad*. Then she looked me right in the eye and said, foam-lipped, I think it was because of this. Don't be silly, I said, I read the Wikipedia article, GBS isn't contagious, and she said no, I think it means I have to choose. So choose, I said, squeezing her hand, my hairy knuckles sprouting between her fingers like radishes, and she said, I'm sorry, and went home to her husband. But still, every time I walk past, I think how we tugged at each other's fingers to hear the joints pop, giggling like kids, and I think, so we had that, anyway.

Contributors

Kate Bullard Adams, a writer of mostly long fiction, is delighted to have the downsized word count of "Face Time" included in *Harpur Palate*. Lengthier stories have appeared in *turnrow*, *The Portland Review*, and *Jabberwock Review*, and her novel-length manuscripts have reached the final rounds of various contests. A resident of Charleston, she has received the South Carolina Arts Commission's Fellowship in Prose.

Sherman Alexie is the author of many books of poetry and prose, including *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, winner of the 2007 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, and *Face*, a book of poetry from Hanging Loose Press.

David Appelbaum is a hiker and biker, a former editor of *Parabola Magazine*, and the publisher of Codhill Press. His poems have appeared in *APR, Commonweal, Verse Daily*, and *2River*.

JoAnn Balingit's work appears in *DIAGRAM, La Fovea, Salt Hill Journal, Smartish Pace, Best New Poets 2007*, and elsewhere. She is the author of *Your Heart and How it Works* (Spire Press, 2009). Since May 2008 she has served as Delaware's poet laureate. You can reach her at her website: joannbalingit.org.

Ryan G. Beckman's photography started out as poetry. While living in New Brunswick, he purchased his first camera and started to examine the role of nature in urban landscapes. His work has developed through endless experimentation and been influenced by photographers Amanda Smith and Matthew Burns. Some of his photos have been exhibited in galleries throughout New York and New Jersey as well as in Italy.

Jeffery Berg received his MFA from New York University. He lives in New York City.

Steve Calamars lives in San Antonio, TX. He received a B.A. in Philosophy from U.T-San Antonio and now works for UPS, loading trucks from 3am to 9am. When he is not working or sleeping, he writes (mainly prose). The stuff he writes can be found in *bottle rockets, Gloom Cupboard, and Zygote in My Coffee*. He can be found in sccalamars@yahoo.com.

Rob Carney is the author of two books—*Weather Report* (Somondoco P, 2006) and *Boasts, Toasts, and Ghosts* (Pinyon P, 2003)—and two chapbooks: *New Fables, Old Songs* (Dream Horse P, 2003) and *This Is One Sexy Planet* (Frank Cat P, 2005). His work has appeared in *Mid-American Review, Quarterly West, Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*, and dozens of other journals, as well as *Flash Fiction Forward* (W.W. Norton, 2006).

Kerry James Evans will attend Florida State University fall 2009 as a PhD candidate in creative writing. His poems are forthcoming in the following journals: *Agni, Iron Horse Literary Review, Georgetown Review, New England Review, Roger*, and many others.

Ivan Faute lives in a 100-year-old house in the Chicago neighborhood of Pilsen, along with two rat terriers. Recent prose has appeared in *Buffalo Carp, Other Voices*, and *The Mochila Review*, among others. Also, his adaptations and original plays have been performed in Chicago, New York, and San Diego.

Gary Fincke has published ten collections of poetry, most recently *The Fire Landscape* (2008) and *Standing by the Heart* (2005), both from the University of Arkansas Press. His short story collection, *Sorry I Worried You*, won the Flannery O'Connor Prize and was published by the University of Georgia Press.

Dennis Finnell's poems have most recently appeared in *Unsplendid, New Letters, Colorado Review*, and *Interim*. He has published three books, the first from UMass Press (Juniper Prize) called *Red Cottage*, the last two from Georgia: *Beloved Beast* and *The Gauguin Answer Sheet*. He doesn't teach, but he does work as a financial aid administrator at a community college in western Massachusetts.

Rachel Contreni Flynn's second full-length collection, *Tongue*, won the Benjamin Saltman Award and is forthcoming from Red Hen Press, and her chapbook, *Haywire*, is forthcoming from Bright Hill Press. Her first book, *Ice, Mouth, Song*, was published in 2005 by Tupelo Press, after winning the Dorset Prize. She was awarded a Fellowship from the NEA in 2007. Her work has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and she received an Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship in 2005. She is a graduate of the Warren Wilson College MFA Program and lives north of Chicago with her husband and two children.

Leah Freiwald: "Because my academic specialization is as a medievalist (Berkeley PhD), I am pleased to be part of the John Gardner Memorial contest. This will be my second short story to be published; I have also recently completed a novel. Among other adventures I have been a technical writer (book on computer animation), an editor, and an organic farmer. I now live in San Francisco."

Tess Gallagher is the author of eight volumes of poetry, including *Dear Ghosts*, *Moon Crossing Bridge*, and *My Black Horse*. She is presently working on her *New and Selected Poems*. In 2008 Blackstaff Press (Belfast) and Eastern Washington Press published *Barnacle Soup—Stories from the West of Ireland*, a collaboration with Irish storyteller Josie Gray. Gallagher will publish T*he Man from Kenvara: Selected Stories* in Fall 2009.

Kathie Giorigo's stories have appeared in *Fiction International, Dos Passos Review, Ars Medica, Thema, The Externalist, Bayou*, and many more. Her work has appeared in several anthologies, most recently in Main St. Rag's *Dots On The Map,* due out in May of 2009. Two stories published in 2007 were nominated for the Million Writer Award. In 2008, the short story, "Chain of Events," was nominated for the Best of the Net anthology. Kathie is the director and founder of AllWriters' Workplace & Workshop, an international creative writing studio, and she is editor/owner/publisher of *Quality Fiction* magazine (formerly *Quality Women's Fiction*).

Elton Glaser, a native of New Orleans, is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Akron. He has published six full-length collections of poetry, most recently *Here and Hereafter* (Arkansas, 2005).

Jesse W. Goolsby is an author and poet currently living in Colorado. He received his undergraduate degree in English from the United States Air Force Academy in 2001 and a Master of Arts in English from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 2008. He met his wife, Sarah, along the banks of the River Cam in England. They have a daughter, Ella, who will soon be a big sister. He credits Donald Anderson, the Head of Creative Writing at USAFA, for placing great books in his hands, and the Wolfpack for echoing the lifesong, "What are you going to remember?"

Charles Grosel, a free-lance editor, writer, and poet, lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife and two children. He has published poems in *Slate, The Threepenny Review, Poet Lore*, and *The Comstock Review*, and stories in *Western Humanities Review, Red Cedar Review*, and *Water-Stone*, among others.

Kevin Haworth's novel, *The Discontinuity of Small Things*, won the 2006 Samuel Goldberg Foundation Prize for Emerging Jewish Writers. Recent work appears, or is forthcoming, in *Witness, Sentence, Juked, Another Chicago Magazine, Permafrost*, and elsewhere. He has held residencies at the Vermont Studio Center and at Ledig International Writers House and now teaches at Ohio University.

Jennifer A. Howard teaches at Northern Michigan University and serves as fiction editor of *Passages North*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review, Blue Mesa Review, Redivider, Sycamore Review, Smokelong Quarterly, Southeast Review, Quarterly West, Literary Mama*, and W. W. Norton's *Flash Fiction Forward*.

Kaja Katamay has published literary nonfiction and journalism previously with *Caketrain, The Feminist Review*, and other publications. "Shoulder" is dedicated with love to the memory of Gretchen Georgann Katamay, née Glanzer (November 8, 1941—January 28, 2009).

Stephen Knauth's latest collection is *The River I Know You By* (Four Way Books). His poems have appeared in *North American Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, New Orleans Review, Poetry Daily, The Cortland Review, Drunken Boat*, and in a recent anthology, *Southern Appalachian Poetry*. He is the recipient of two fellowships from the NEA. He lives with his family in North Carolina, where he works as a writer for a Web technology company.

Alex Lemon is the author of *Mosquito* (Tin House Books), *Hallelujah Blackout, Fancy Beasts* (Milkweed Editions) and *Happy: A Memoir* (Scribner). He teaches at TCU in Ft. Worth, Texas, and lives digitally at www.alexlemon.com.

Originally from Milwaukee, where he was poetry editor of *Porcupine Literary Arts Magazine* for three years, Brandon Lewis currently live in DC. Last May he graduated with his MFA in poetry from George Mason University. Poems by Brandon Lewis can be found in journals such as *Poet Lore, Oranges and Sardines, Water~Stone Review, Borderlands*, and *SNReview*.

Gary Lundy is a professor of English at University of Montana Western. His poems have appeared in a variety of magazines, including *Why Vandalism?, Snow Monkey, Karamu, Spout, Heeltap, RFD, The Tule Review, Black Book Press, The Poetry 'Zine, Timber Creek Review*, and *Elimae*. Has also has three chapbooks out now in print.

M has served as an Associate Poetry Editor for the online magazine *Stirring: A Literary Collection* for the past one hundred years or so it seems. More than a few editors have found her poems intriguing, and included them in their journals. She is genuinely grateful and honored when they do. She received her B.A. in Literature so long ago, she's pretty certain her diploma has crumbled to dust. She is currently working on a poetry manuscript that focuses on the twentieth-century Italian immigrant experience. She lives and loves in Portland, Oregon.

Lou Mathews is a short story writer, novelist, and playwright. His first novel, *L.A. Breakdown*, was picked by the Los Angeles Times as a Best Book of 1999. He has received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction, a California Arts Council Fiction Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, and a Katherine Anne Porter Prize. He teaches fiction writing and literature in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program, where he was Teacher of the Year in 2002. His short stories have been widely published and anthologized. The current issues of *Black Clock* and *Short Story* feature his work.

Clay Matthews's first book, *Superfecta*, is out from Ghost Road Press. He also has two chapbooks: *Muffler* (H_NGM_N B_ _KS)

and *Western Reruns* (End & Shelf Books), which is available for free online.

Monica McFawn is a writer living in Michigan. She has published fiction and poetry in *Conduit, Conjunctions, Poetry Salzburg Review*, and others. She created and moderates the literature and art website, Litandart.com. McFawn's collaborative chapbook (with painter Curtis Rhodes) of drawings and prose, *A Catalogue of Rare Movements*, is forthcoming as issue 42 of *Xerolage*. Outside of writing, McFawn rides and trains dressage horses.

Sharon McGill's fiction and graphic stories have appeared most recently in *Pank Magazine, Pindeldyboz, Opium*, and *Hobart*. She has written book reviews for *Calyx, The Indiana Review*, and *New Letters*, and is a co-founder of the journal *Monday Night* (mondaynightlit.com). Since receiving her MFA in fiction from Penn State University, she now lives in Denver and is at work on a novel. Her website is sharonmcgill.net.

Keith Meatto recently finished a short story collection. One of his stories won third place in a recent *Glimmer Train* fiction contest. He is a graduate of Yale College and the New School (MFA) and has worked as an English teacher and a journalist. He lives in New York and is at work on a second book.

Matt Mullins has had a few fistfights, but he has no experience with martial arts. He is not the other Matt Mullins, the Five-Time Martial Arts Champion Matt Mullins, who could obviously kick his ass. This Matt Mullins has spent nearly his whole life in the Midwest fighting with more intangible things. *Hunger Mountain, Fifth Wednesday, Slipstream, subTerrain, Descant*, and a number of other print and online journals have all been there for him with the spit bucket and towel. He has made a living as a tree surgeon, house painter, automotive plant security guard, and teacher, among other things, but you will not find him on YouTube throwing spinning

back kicks to heavy metal. However, you can go toe to toe with him at m-mull@hotmail.com.

Peter Munro is a fisheries scientist who works in the Bering Sea, the Aleutian Islands, the Gulf of Alaska, and Seattle. He has had poems published here and there. He is also the offspring of a Presbyterian pastor, always has been, always will be. Maria Nazos was born in Illinois and raised in Athens, Greece. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in T*he New York Quarterly, The Sycamore Review, Tar River Poetry, The New Plains Review, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, the anthology *Double Lives, Reinventing Ourselves and Those We Leave Behind, Main Street Rag*, and elsewhere. She lives and writes in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Nancy J. Nordenson holds an MFA in creative writing from Seattle Pacific University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *North Dakota Quarterly, Relief*, and *Desert Call*. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her husband.

Henry Presente's creative juices have dripped onto *SmokeLong Quarterly, flashquake, Broken Pencil*, and *Word Riot*. Occasionally, the sticky mess has been sopped up with a Pushcart Prize nomination form.

Scott Provence was a nationally-ranked gymnast until he discovered that words were more flexible than the body. He earned a Masters in both Fiction and Poetry from the University of Washington. His flash fiction has appeared most recently in *The Potomac* and *Quarter After Eight*.

Dean Rader is an associate professor at the University of San Francisco, where he teaches in the English department and works with graduate students in the MFA program in Creative Writing. He's published two books and is at work on a collection of poems, tentatively titled, *Works & Days*.

Until recently a lifelong Nebraskan, Todd Richardson is currently completing a Ph.D. in Folklore at the University of Missouri-Columbia. His essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Weber: The Contemporary West, The South Dakota Review*, and *The Writer's Chronicle*.

Liz Robbins' poems have appeared recently in *Barrow Street, MARGIE, Puerto del Sol, RATTLE*, and *storySouth*, among others. Poems from her first book, *Hope, As the World Is a Scorpion Fish* (Backwaters P), have been featured on Garrison Keillor's "The Writer's Almanac" and "Verse Daily." She's an assistant professor of English and creative writing at Flagler College.

Marvin Shackelford, a native of Tennessee, has run cattle, sold hats, killed hogs, hauled heavy equipment, made hamburgers, and written for a living. He has taught creative writing at the University of Montana, where he received his MFA and worked on the staff of Cutbank. His work has recently appeared in *Quarterly West*. He lives in the woods of Kentucky, where he's at work on a collection of stories.

Anis Shivani's poetry collection, *My Tranquil War and Other Poems*, seeks a publisher. Other poems appear in *Harvard Review, Threepenny Review, Poetry Northwest, North American Review, Washington Square, Denver Quarterly, Iowa Review*, and elsewhere. A short fiction collection, *Anatolia and Other Stories*, is being published by Black Lawrence Press in October 2009.

Jeff Simpson is a student at Oklahoma State University, where he is pursuing an MFA in creative writing and works as an editorial assistant for the *Cimarron Review*. In 2008, he was selected as a finalist for the Pablo Neruda Prize in Poetry. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Pinch, Lumina, H_NGM_N, Copper Nickel, Main Street Rag*, and *Nimrod*.

Adam J. Sorkin's recent books of translation include Ruxandra Cesereanu's *Crusader-Woman*, translated mainly from with

Cesereanu (Black Widow Press, 2008) and Mariana Marin's *The Factory of the Past*, translated with Daniela Hurezanu (Toad Press, 2008). He was awarded the 2005 Translation Prize of the Poetry Society (U.K.) for Marin Sorescu's *The Bridge*, translated with Lidia Vianu (Bloodaxe Books, 2004). He was the Regional Editor for Romania and Moldova in the recent *New European Poets* (Graywolf, 2008).

Liliana Ursu was born in Sibiu, Romania, which figures prominently in many of her eight books of poetry in Romania. Ursu's collections include *Life Above the City* (1977), *The Order of Instants* (1978), and *Lift Up Your Hearts* (2002). She has twice been Fulbright Lecturer at Penn State and has also served as a visiting professor of creative writing at the University of Louisville and Poet-in-Residence at the Stadler Center, Bucknell University. Ursu's poems have appeared in *The New Yorker, The Kenyon Review, Poetry London, Poetry Wales, World Literature Today, Vallum, Rattle, Seneca Review*, and many other literary magazines.

Joe Wilkins was born and raised north of the Bull Mountains of eastern Montana. He currently teaches writing at Waldorf College in Forest City, Iowa, and has new work appearing in the *Georgia Review, The Southern Review, Mid-American Review, Indiana Review, Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *Orion*, among other magazines and literary journals.

David Yost, a former Peace Corps Volunteer, recently returned from his second trip to Thailand working with Burmese refugees. His fiction has previously appeared in *Pleiades, Witness, The Mid-American Review, the minnesota review, The Red Rock Review*, and *Lake Effect*, and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, most recently by *Pleiades*.

Corrections Page

Matthew Hotham's last name was misspelled in the Table of Contents section of Issue 8.2. Hotham's "Poem to the Communication Satellites" appeared on page 170.

Kerry Ruef's biography was omitted from Issue 8.2. Kerry was a Milton Kessler Finalist for her poem, "Fence." Kerry Ruef is founder and director of The Private Eye Project, a nationally acclaimed education program that fuses poetry, art and science. She is the author of *The Private Eye: (5X) Looking / Thinking by Analogy – A Guide to Developing the Interdisciplinary Mind.* Recently, she was a finalist for the 2008 Poetry Contest at *Third Coast*, and the 2009 Poetry Competition at *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*. She is the winner of the 2009 *Prism Review* Poetry Prize and is currently at work on a book of literary non-fiction set in the Great Depression.

Brynn Saito's first name was misspelled in the Table of Contents section of Issue 8.2. Brynn's poem, "Trembling on the Brink of a Mesquite Tree", appeared of page 28.

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

Prose: 250 to 8,000 words, one submission per author; mail to Prose Editors. Poetry: up to five poems, no more than ten pages total per submission; mail to Poetry Editors. Reading periods: We will accept submissions between August 15 and November 15 for the winter issue. Send to:

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

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Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address, and poem titles. Entrant's name should only appear on the cover letter and should not appear anywhere on the manuscript. Manuscripts will not 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:

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

http://harpurpalate.binghamton.edu

Writing By Degrees

Photo by Kathryn Henion

Writing By Degrees

Binghamton University's graduate creative writing conference is now twelve 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. In 2008, we were proud to welcome fiction writer Helena Maria Viramontes, poet Alex Lemon, and non-fiction writer Jenny Boylan as keynote speakers.

The 2009 Writing By Degrees conference will be held September 24-26, at the historic Bundy Mansion, a Queen Anne/shingle-style mansion near downtown Binghamton, NY. Panels will include topics such as prose, poetry, creative non-fiction/memoir, creative writing pedagogy, and the business of literary journals, as well as exceptional readings of graduate fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

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