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Harpur Palate

Volume 9 Issue 2

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Harpur Palate

Volume 9 Issue 2, Winter 2010

Binghamton University
New York

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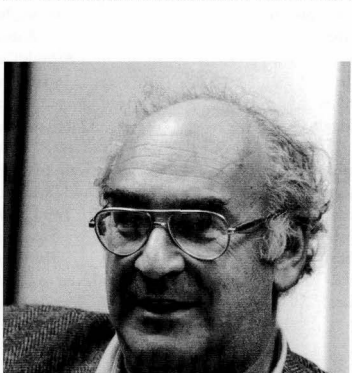

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Winner

The Owl
Ruth Thompson

The owl
flying from dark woods
on wide eyes of wings

carries out from shadow
the lank beast of our secret
in her moon-
curved beak

beats behind us
as we run panting

takes us
our small bones

takes the nape
delicately
in her black hands

always
the owl comes sailing
out of the place we cannot look at

on easy wings on currents of ice

On Cold, On Green

Kimberly Quiogue Andrews

Mid-November, and the steel pail of my mind
tips—

(at this point I should be able to say what *spills*,
as if the bucket of one's consciousness could contain berries,
or perhaps a type of liquid)

—and galvanizes everything. All
that is not gray becomes unfathomable.

The stray cats, collectively the color of weather coming,
inch closer to the house during those solid evenings,

and I sympathize: as the light emaciates, barely
able to lift itself over the unconcerned trees, I find myself

looking more often at travel photographs, specifically those
in which the sun seems most relentless, and the colors
announce their presence,

the frames that weigh and shimmer with air so saturated
that it falls like cold, pulling

branches, birds' tails, and fabrics' unresisting drapery downwards.

Here the impossible blue of water. Here the ropy greens,
alive beyond any comprehension, though we live ourselves.
As if something alive were capable of ever truly

being stilled. Pyramids of fruit shout from their pages
like a rare thing seen. Even the dust is specific, a particular

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wet brown, carrying some smell that hangs
so naturally in the aforementioned air. I no longer know
what I'm saying.

It is still. Something creaks.
The sky the color of the sky in winter.

Why We Will Not Have Children

Amy Ash

He shakes a match
as if it were a thermometer
just pulled from under a child's tongue,
a fever contained in the singed end.

We are still awkward
in our marriedness, though nothing has changed,
really, except that our spices
now have a place to arrange themselves
in the brushed steel file-o-dex that spins
by the stove:
cinnamon, coriander, cumin

and the plates we will someday smash
now match—
we could feed eight with etiquette and grace.

A fragile snow-globe
of Palmolive pops to reveal a glazed turkey,
bald and slick like a newborn
unstuffing itself, wielding the shining knife,

the in-laws ducking under the tablecloth
in fear, like children pretending safety
in a homemade fort.

I send out Christmas cards two months late
with a false return address and a picture
of our neighbor's fat toddler.

My husband smokes a pack a day, and I have begun
to lick the lead paint off the walls, the skin
of our living room metallic on my tongue. And still,

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if ten years from now he were to drop
to his middle-aged knee, clutching his heart
as if in pain, if he were to ask me again

I would say yes. Maybe this time
the waiter would not drop the ring
in the soup, would take our picture.

We would frame the moment
in silver, beautiful proof
of our perfection. Whenever I try

to recreate the look
of the smoky-eyed women in *Cosmo*,
I look like I lost

a horrible fight. I cannot sew.
I do not know how to fold
the curved, elastic corners of these sheets.

When will you have children? my mother asks.
I tell her that when we die, some say,
our souls escape our bodies
in an exhausted sigh.

I go outside, kiss my husband,
because I cannot bear
to watch the ghost of us
escaping from his mouth.

Family Therapy (IV)

Cynthia Atkins

It is the thing we always fail
to mention on all the forms—

the despotic voices dancing off
the charts, and on the trail

of our acrid ancestors, haphazard
and lorn, sniffing us out like cadaver dogs.

Our chromosomes flirting
on the cordless phone—deceases of the heart

and kidney are just the body's bric-a-brac.
Incorporeal or obscene? We are the doctor's worst

unexplained nightmare. And we never speak
of the endocrine glands—unsavory

secretions passed down like the heirloom
nobody even wants. We are a Rogue nation.

No country or comfort zone. Inhospitable bedrooms,
where our parents detonated bombs, blamed

the groping in-laws. Our family trait is to remember
only the good times, like a last blown kiss

at the door—but more like a breath
blown over a bottle, forever haunting

the offspring. Hush, we'll never tell,
yet deep down we know, the mind's pain

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is the last inconsolable and extra gene.
Rabid dog in the school yard—

mean and mad and frothing.

Etymology of Questions

Kaveh Bassiri

Why is it called a tongue
this boneless palm doctors read
Is it the ladle for memories
the sail for thoughts

How is it that this heart with one artery
half stuck in your throat
is also a flag locked in an attic
of the house you'll never leave

How does a metonym work
that I'm to represent
that *you* is an understudy for *I*
and if I say yes to sand
nigger towel-head terrorist
if my body is an address
with a number an appointment a country
as if a proper noun tells you something
as if the DNA

As if I knew the first name of a blade
and I could address the pale tree in the yard
holding up its shaking hands
not as plane or sycamore
as if I have something for him

How is it that I stand for a stop sign
but ignore the homeless raising
the signs on the curb
How is it that a tongue grows out of its nest
that with the same mouth you can praise a falcon
and eat the fowl's flesh
that pomegranates the pomes of desire
are the grenades of war

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What do you speak if you aren't speaking in tongues
if you evacuate the past
in the last boat of a name
rinse your mouth with questions
with the chill of the pen licking snow off a page

Why do I still have a tongue after losing one
can serve without having a home
as if by arriving at Mars we become Martians
as if he stopped talking once the prophets were gone
as if by holding the dictionary I grasp
the pulpy flesh of history

A boy with Time under his arm
is eating a hot lamb tongue sandwich
in the Alborz schoolyard imagining how
to take off the muddy coat in his mouth

Is it true that we're made of flesh not words
that bitter sweet sour salty are our custodians
that I can go on and I go on
iterating the same prophesies

What if we're the impulses
of some inner ear in a bony labyrinth
and it isn't us that's dying
but the words

Vague Concept

F.J. Bergmann

At the moment of our darling child's conception,
the lush scent of peonies hung in the steamy air
that slithered breathless through the window,
barely stirring the pink gingham curtains,
limp with the sultry heat. Four houses away
a Labrador-poodle cross named Wookie
was crying for the uncooperative moon.

Actually, I haven't the foggiest notion,
except that it was apparently sometime
in June. The Ob/Gyn said he wished
we kept better records because it was
important for tracking the gestation
of the fetus, and I said people who can
remember the date aren't having sex
often enough and people who notice
the details aren't having sex exciting
enough and at least I have a pretty
good idea of who is the daddy.

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Terminus

F.J. Bergmann

Always include likelihoods among all the remote and impossible things you stretch toward daily—everyone needs an easy mark, a sinecure, a priest's-hole of can-do, after it turns out that you couldn't, after all, and what you were about to achieve is out to get you, written in small letters of flame on the back of your chair, which was designed for good (read excruciating) posture. Everything that looks good hurts. Think of that as the Little Mermaid's Law. I'm unable to end myself, but I secretly admire those who do. Such resolve! Such strength of purpose! To set aside love, just like that. And they always end up with some kind of "personal representative" who will explain exactly what they were going through, what they were thinking. Where they are going. He has a map, only slightly out of date, and his modest skills in the Black Arts are helpful. Like a Swiss Army knife with some of the tools missing. Squeeze that image until you drip meaning. Sort of like a confessional, except you mug the priest and all he has in his pockets are subway tokens, and the last stations are far from the disputed border. Given that there are no limits to sadness, the cosmos has an exact metaphorical function.

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Train Shots

Vanessa Blakeslee

Three days after his girlfriend broke up with him, a woman stretched out on the tracks in front of P.T.'s hurtling train. He'd just rolled around the bend leading into Winter Park and he saw her, first a white speck swathed in a bluish-green dress, and then, as he thundered closer, the white limbs of her body snapped clearly into definition. He threw down the emergency brake. But as usual he was too late. Squealing metal-on-metal deafened the scene fast approaching; the train's skidding to a halt reminded him of playing ball, the rush of sliding into bases, only without the glory. He shut his eyes and braced himself for the thump, as his front underbelly scooped and then devoured the woman. The train squealed and shuddered for another hundred yards before it finally stopped.

After the impact, he asked one of the crew to take over the controls. Police cars were already zooming up alongside the tracks; the emergency brake sent out an immediate statewide alert. But as soon as his foot touched the gravel, the whole bloody mess felt different than the other times. At the edge of the park, an unkempt man with a scruffy gray beard who looked like a bum swayed and cried out obscenities at the tracks. The officers met P.T., and he pointed to the bend where the middle of the train now rested, huffing. He described where he first saw the flapping dress and threw the brake, but he couldn't look down his shoulder at the base of the tracks. He knew the woman had been young, and he didn't want to see the years of possibility that had been mangled and smashed.

So instead of lumbering down to the spot where the police were pitching the yellow tape, he headed in the opposite direction to survey the train's frontal damage. He expected dented metal like a damaged fender. Only this afternoon, a gold metallic object shimmered in the sunlight, tangled in the undercarriage, between the track and the front wheels. A shoe. Her sandal. He crouched to free the strappy thing but stopped as soon as he

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touched it. His fingers failed to grab hold. He rocked back on his heels and slid a few inches down the gravel bank.

A policeman hurried over, saying, "What's that? Don't touch any parts."

P.T. sank harder onto the ground, staring at the delicate, twisted high-heel. He held his face in his hands, fingers slick with tears.

"Expensive shoe," the officer said. "I haven't gone down to see yet, but they told me she's real young. We just called the college. Too much money and too many drugs with those kids. You okay?"

P.T. rubbed his face. "I'll be fine in a minute," he said.

"A replacement engineer's on his way," the officer said. "Why don't you go take it easy? Sit in the park for awhile."

When P.T. looked up, the officer had extended his hand to help him to his feet. P.T. said nothing but stared past the officer. The fountain in the middle of the park sparkled; children's laughter drifted over from the playground in the distance. P.T. rose and teetered for a moment, and the officer grabbed him by the shoulder.

The officer said, "Your supervisor in Jacksonville said they'd arrange a hotel room for you tonight. Pay for your ticket home tomorrow."

"Thanks," he answered. "I'm fine."

"You sure? Let me call the Park Plaza. It's right over there."

"Fine, go ahead," P.T. said. "But I'll be okay." He wandered past the officer and away from the heavily breathing train, down toward the park.

P.T. slumped onto a bench facing the fountain and let the gurgling sound rush over him. When he first started out as a freight engineer nineteen years ago, he hadn't factored in so many deaths—not only the suicides but the accidents, and not only the human lives but the sheer numbers of animals that he killed by proxy of the train.

He glanced over his shoulder at the tracks. A local news crew had joined the police activity, and the reporter was now

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speaking in front of the camera with the yellow crime tape and the boxcars in the background, the train immobile and waiting. He turned around just in time for two college girls to clip past with shopping bags, all thick flowing hair and flimsy tops. Their voices rang with an airy tone, like high bells. They stopped at the corner nearby to wait for the crosswalk.

"Excuse me," he called out to them. "Would you two come here for a minute?"

The girls stopped chatting and eyed him, their feet glued to the sidewalk.

He waved them over until they slowly approached. The shorter of the two girls had darker hair and a pigeon-toed walk that he found charming.

"Are you two aware that a girl from your school got killed here a few minutes ago?" he asked.

The taller girl gushed, "Oh my God," and the other one demanded, "Who?"

"I don't know," he said. "But you need to be careful. This is the second college girl I've hit—my train's hit—in a month. University of Delaware's got tracks running near the campus, just like yours. A girl left a bar one night without her friends and stumbled down near the tracks and must have laid down or something. But she got killed and so did this girl here. So you watch your friends, okay?"

"I'm sorry," the one girl said.

"That's terrible," the other girl replied, shifting her pigeon-toed stance. "But I don't have any suicidal friends."

"It's just that I don't know what to do now," he said, resting his elbows on his knees. "What do you suggest that I do?"

Neither of the girls said anything. He stared at his hands clasped together, and, by the time he looked up, the girls were scampering across the brick-paved street.

P.T. returned to the train. The officer he knew approached, handed him a slip of paper, and pointed out the hotel through the park. "And here's your Amtrak ticket for tomorrow, down

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to Miami," the officer added. "Is there anyone at home I can call for you? I'm Officer Dubee."

P.T. shook his head. "I better go on and grab my things," he said.

"You're staying on Park Avenue, so you'll have everything right here," the officer said. "Good food, nice park. Plenty of churches within walking distance."

"Thanks," P.T. said. "But I'm not a churchy type of guy."

The officer smiled. "We've got lots of places to have a drink, too."

P.T. didn't answer, just swung up onto the stairs and boarded the train.

But as soon as he climbed inside, he felt dizzy. The crew and the replacement engineer said some kind words, patted him on the back, but he hardly heard what they were saying. The air inside the train smelled stifling and gritty. He muttered for someone to fetch his duffel bag and toiletries. Then with his duffel slung over his shoulder, he jumped off and back into the sunshine and clear sky of February, the palm trees rustling overhead and shiny as new pennies.

The gates clanged down in front of the tracks, red lights flashing, and the train crawled to life, picked up, and rushed past him out of sight.

A police car pulled up alongside him.

"Here's my card," the officer said, extending it out the window. "Call if you need anything. I don't mind, even if I'm off duty."

P.T. nodded and tucked the card in his wallet, underneath the photo of his ex-girlfriend. The police car drove off.

It was quarter after four when he entered the lobby of the Park Plaza, a tunnel of polished wood and plush furniture. The receptionist seemed startled as he meandered over to the desk and then her face melted into ordered sympathy. "You must be the CSX conductor," she said. "I'll get you up to your room right away."

"Engineer," he corrected, but she had already buried herself in a fluster of keys and paperwork.

"How nice of the company to look out for you after something so terrible," she said. "Will you be getting some time off?"

"I just came off leave," he said. "Third person killed in four months. With lots of deer in between."

She stared and slid the room key over.

The room was loaded with wooden furniture like the rest of the hotel. A balcony overlooked the avenue below, but not the train station—that was one block behind him. He sighed. What to do now? He pulled street clothes out of the duffel. Everything wrinkled and casual, nothing suitable for an uppity neighborhood like this place. Nonetheless he changed into jeans and a button-down shirt. Outside the buzz of traffic seemed to pick up as the end of the workday approached. He picked up the phone and dialed Shelley, who still didn't feel like his ex.

"Aren't you supposed to be driving right now?" she said.

"I killed someone today," he said. "A woman. Really young. All dressed up and stretched out on the track."

"I'm so sorry," she said. "But stop saying that you killed someone. She killed herself. That's all there is to it. For you it's an accident."

"How is it an accident?" he said. "I don't believe in that word anymore. Not lately."

"Suit yourself," she said. "How much time off are you taking?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think I can take sitting home on grieve-leave for another couple weeks. Going through all the same crap with the counselors. All I've ever wanted to do is drive trains. But this is getting to me."

"What's getting to you?" she asked.

"All the sadness," he said. "It's incredible."

She sighed. "I'm surprised you've lasted this long. You're such an idealist, P.T. A little boy who just wants to play choo-choo."

"Go play choo-choo, okay," he said, his eyes boiling with tears. He jerked up on the bed. "Wait 'til I tell that one to the crew. Hell, can't wait to tell the guy who took over the controls for

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me today." Bitter sobs bubbled up inside him, and he welcomed them, let them spill out of his lips like steam.

Shelley told him she had to go and hung up.

A few minutes later P.T. took off down the sidewalk along the avenue. Through the trees he eyed the station, the path of railroad ties and track neat as the yellow brick road. Why did he love an occupation so laden with wreckage and blood—the light-footed deer, statuesque cows, and human beings who came crawling over the tracks around the bend?

Church bells tolled at the far end of the avenue. He decided to see if the church was open; maybe if it was he'd just sit there in the quiet coolness. The disheveled man who had screamed at the train earlier now occupied a table at one of the outdoor cafes; P.T. wondered if he was a bum. A server brought the man a coffee. As P.T. passed by, he saw that the man played with the dials on a squawking hand-radio placed on the table. The man reminded him of the bum outside of Jacksonville who had died right before the college girl in Delaware. The train was thundering along just before evening, like now. An older man in drab, loose clothing stood on the tracks as if to face off with the train. As the brakes squealed, P.T. hadn't looked away but stared, spellbound as to whether the bum would flinch or not. But instead the man raised both arms wide and lifted his chin as if to welcome home a god. In the last instant before the train struck, P.T. could see the tilt of the man's thick glasses on his face, his balding orb shining through matted gray hair, the tape binding the seams of his coat.

P.T. hurried on.

The heavy church door gave easily but as soon as he stepped inside, a cacophony of sounds swelled around him instead of silence: rustling pamphlets, heaving breaths, the measured cadence of the pastor amplified by a microphone. Was this an evening service? He tiptoed inside a few paces more, straining to hear. Then the smell of carnations hit his nostrils. An usher approached him at a mute clip.

"Step aside, please, sir," the usher whispered. The whine of bagpipes from right behind jerked P.T. out of his skin; a bagpiper had slipped out of the foyer vestiary and now marched in slow motion toward the pulpit and the casket below. P.T. fled outside.

The sun hung low and orange in the west. He rubbed his bare arms; the air was turning brisk. He stood there for a moment, shifting his weight from one foot to another. He punched the crosswalk button a few times and jaywalked to the other side. He skated through the sidewalk café featuring the bum, who was now chatting in earnest to the empty chair across from him. He window-shopped and decided to browse the stores, but most of them were closing. In the gourmet kitchen place, he asked if any of the others on the avenue stayed open later. "You can try the consignment shop around the corner," the clerk suggested.

The consignment shop smelled like mothballs and potpourri. He roamed through the cozy thicket of circular racks and wall displays, stopped to rifle through some dinner jackets. Behind a counter in the back of the store, a middle-aged woman with blonde hair to her waist asked him if he was looking for something in particular.

"Not really," he said. "But it's a little chilly outside. I could use a jacket."

The woman sidled up to him and shuffled quickly through the hangers. "How about this one?" she asked, holding up an eggplant-colored velour blazer. "Vintage 1970s. Isn't it fun?"

"For Halloween, maybe," he said with a laugh. But he allowed her to guide him into the jacket.

In the mirror, he studied the jacket from several angles. He rubbed a sleeve, the material like a warm second skin and rich to the touch, so different from the same creased cottons he wore every day. The saleswoman appeared with a white shirt and slim ankle boots in his size, and his outfit was complete. The total came to just under forty dollars.

"That's all?" he asked.

"I gave you a discount," the woman said. She gathered her hair at the nape of her neck, draped the mass over one shoulder, and quickly

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brushed her fingers through it several times. She smiled and said, "Doesn't have to cost much to do something a little different."

The shop's doorbell jingled as he exited. His old button-down and scuffed shoes were tucked away in a shopping bag. The corners of his mouth curled up slightly until he rounded the corner. There he landed in the bustle of Friday night on the avenue. He broke away from the noisy corral of café tables clustered underneath heat lamps and escaped to his hotel.

In his room he lifted the suitcase off the bed and onto the floor, and was surprised by the lightness it carried over into his hand. He'd almost forgotten that lightness belonging only to a life in motion, zooming from station to station, depot to depot. How simple life felt, reduced to a suitcase.

He needed some food and asked the night desk clerk for an affordable place within walking distance. "Try Pop's," the clerk said. "Couple blocks up, right next to the train tracks. College hangout, but it's cheap and good."

So he trudged up the dark road along the bare tracks.

Pop's turned out to be a dive-bar with chubby but cheerful waitresses in tank tops and a packed bar of margarita drinkers. In silence he inhaled a chimichanga and washed it down with a Pacifico. He was sitting there sipping the last of his beer when cheers and whistles broke out across the small restaurant. The bartenders whipped out bottles of gold tequila and began pouring rows of shots.

"Train shot?" the bartender asked, pinching a shot glass between two nail-bitten fingers.

"What?" P.T. replied.

She rattled off, "Every time the train goes by, tequila shots are two dollars. You wanna train shot?"

"I don't like tequila," he said.

"Now you do," the bartender said, slamming down the glass and dumping tequila to the brim. "On me," she said. He glanced out the window at the red gates clanging down across the intersection, the toot of the horn as the train approached.

The bartender clanged a cow bell hanging down from the ceiling; another wave of drunken cheer passed through the crowd. P.T. clinked shots with the guy next to him and threw the burning contents down his throat.

He ordered another beer, and, before he was halfway down the bottle, another train blasted through. The bartender rang the bell, her gold hoop earrings swinging against her young neck, and he pushed his shot glass toward the other pretty bartender parading around with the frosty tequila bottle. A group of college kids milled at the corner of the bar, and he plunged his small but sloshing glass into the middle of their hooting toast. He caught the eye of one of the girls in the group. She and her friend were the two college girls he'd spoken to earlier in the day. They approached him, all fancy purses and unblinking lashes, margarita glasses held high.

"Are you okay?" the darker brunette said. Her pigeon-toed stance was even more pronounced in her high heels. "It turned out that the girl who killed herself didn't go to our school."

"Oh," he said. "I didn't hear."

"You made us so worried," her friend replied.

"Sorry," he said.

"It must be so hard for you," the dark one said, and to her friend, "We should buy him a drink. What's your name?"

He introduced himself. "I'm Casey," the pigeon-toed girl said. "And this is Gibson." He stuck out his hand, but Gibson just peered down into the remainder of her margarita and poked at the ice with the straw.

"That's okay," he said. "I was just heading home. Best thing to do is hit the sack and forget about it." He stepped down from his stool and tossed his wallet onto the bar.

Casey squeezed his arm. "We're buying you a drink," she said. "Fun is what will make you forget about it."

He didn't answer but slid back onto the seat. "Do you know who the woman was?" he asked.

Casey told him the gossip: that the girl had been a twenty-one-year-old, a drug addict who had spent her entire life in

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Winter Park and waitressed in one of the cafés. A year before she had slit her wrists and barely survived.

P.T. excused himself. In front of the restroom mirror, he stared at his reflection as he rinsed his hands; he splashed some water on his face. The hallway leading out of the restrooms was wallpapered with ancient Polaroids along with brighter photos of the staff linking arms with customers in holiday party hats and raised mugs, and he lingered to scan the faces. In some of the pictures, the subjects were clad in polo shirts that looked like the kind restaurant servers wore, with the establishment's logo in the right corner. His eye caught on every young woman wearing a polo shirt with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. He wondered if one of them was the woman. Why had she chosen him, waited for him to barrel over her? For a quick, surefire death because her own hands were too shaky?

Another train rumbled past as he slid back onto his bar stool. The college brunettes ordered shots. "Should we toast in honor of the girl?" Casey asked. P.T. shook his head no, so they then proposed a toast to his days ahead. Gibson complimented him on his purplish blazer. He proceeded to get drunk.

"Do you have someone I can call?" the bartender asked later.

He slapped his credit card on the counter, and he stared at her bare wrist above the clenched towel for scars.

"Here," he said, thumbing through his wallet. The photo of Shelley gawked back. He flicked Officer Dubee's card at the bartender. "Call him."

At first P.T. didn't recognize Dubee in his sweater, jeans and flip-flops. He staggered over to the squad car and collapsed into the passenger seat.

"Do you always dress like a refugee from the Love Shack and get blitzed when you hit someone?" Dubee asked.

"You don't know nothing about being an engineer," P.T. said. "Officer."

"It's Rick," Dubee said. "So you think you're the only guy

with a brutal job?"

"Well, I'm through," P.T. said.

"I picked your sorry ass up, didn't I?" Dubee said. "I pissed and moaned while I was getting dressed, but here I am. You're what, forty? Forty-five? What else would you do now but drive trains?"

P.T. was quiet. They cruised through the residential neighborhood behind the restaurant, then past a corner café with black awnings and servers dipping between outdoor tables. "That's where the girl worked," Dubee said. "I knew her."

"You did?" P.T. asked faintly.

"She waited on me a lot," Dubee said. "Nice girl. Sure didn't say anything about her problems."

"And you saw her like that on the tracks today?" P.T. said. "But you seem fine."

"I stood over and gave her a moment. I said, 'Oh, baby, you stuck it to yourself and everybody else.' Then I walked away and kept going with my day," Dubee said. "What else is there?"

P.T. didn't answer. They pulled up in front of the hotel. Across the street, the bum was swinging around a lamp post and wailing, shaking his coffee mug at passersby. Dubee said, "I had a feeling you'd call."

Before going to bed, P.T. leaned over his second floor balcony and watched the avenue below. A rowdy party spread out along a sidewalk café; from the midst of the staggered tables and chairs, someone chucked a piñata into the street. A Mercedes creeping by caught the paper donkey and dragged it up to the corner stoplight; by then, patrons were running out, shrieking with laughter, to gather the candy and little plastic squirt guns from the piñata's opened belly.

Across the street, the bum kept tottering and howling.

Had the bum been somebody once, steady and clean-shaven, of the shiny designer shoe crowd, even? P.T. wondered. Would his jabbering or perhaps, a single sidewalk jab, send him through the park one evening to meet the train? What twists made for a person's feet to stay glued to those tracks in the face of a

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thundering machine, to be either tossed or scrambled?

He balled up the thrift store blazer while getting undressed, and tucked it into the far end of his duffel bag.

P.T. slept badly and awakened just before dawn, bouncing around in the caboose of a dream. In the dream he was in the engineer's seat, gazing at the scenery flying past. Which route was it? Golden meadows and emerald green woods glistened all around, and he rolled past sidewalks and shops where bright-faced teenage girls and grizzly-bearded bums waved at him.

But then the light vanished and the tracks ahead were covered in mist and darkness. He squinted and tried to see the tracks ahead more clearly, but they seemed to disappear one into another, like pencils falling off the end of a table. And then a form that wasn't a railroad tie but a wiry figure appeared. He gasped and threw the emergency brake, but the train only surged forward. Before the impact, he looked ahead again at the figure. It was the girl in the blue-green dress and gold sandals.

In the shower only one line churned over and over inside him: the train sails along its routes, no matter the scenery, no matter the cargo, no matter the wreckage.

The next morning the world seemed even more different, more angular—like living inside a prism. He and Rick Dubee met on the other end of the park, at a café with an outside courtyard. The fine tobacco shop next to the café kept its door open and the air was tinged with the scent of cigar smoke. Across the street, the homeless-looking man sat drinking alone at his café, the rest of the tables topped with upside down stacks of chairs.

P.T. asked, "What's his story?"

"He's rich and out of his mind," Dubee answered. "Schizophrenia. That's all he does. Sits and watches the world go by."

On the Amtrak ride home P.T. lost track of time, enjoying the gaps—the moments of just sailing along in the space between places, just the train on the tracks.

Night had fallen by the time he disembarked at the depot

and climbed in his truck. He drove around for awhile, ended up crawling past the park and the train station near his house. He parked and walked along the tracks until an approaching horn blew and the blinking red gates clanged down. Then he stepped back into the dewy grass and let the rush of the cars wash over him as the train flew past.

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Poem Beginning with a Line from Lorca

Jaime Brunton

I want my heart to go on without its golden petals

the moon without its promise

of fullness I want the light that warms

the apple in the tree

and warmth that goes on

without the body I want

suffering to die with the body

and death to come as light

interrupted by trees and the memory

of trees fallen apples

without distance or decay

and you in the night without memory of want

I want the night that is like your heart

waking to its own unfettered want

to light that breaks for it that rises

like a supplicant blessed

https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol9/iss2/132

My Life as Roland Barthes: *Classe/Class*

Jaime Brunton

He was new to everything then. He watched films whose true importance he could not possibly see, and he liked the colors and the music, the foreign syllables he could repeat in his head without understanding. His nose still hurt from falling off a skateboard, but he went to the bar with his professeur du cinéma because it was something people did. Madame laughed when he ordered a beer, because, he thinks now, she knew he knew nothing else. She was from Poland and said as a child she drank milk from the pail, tilting it back to escape the cream—a trick he knew from the vieux hommes of his village who drank moonshine and laughed at young ones who got a mouthful of mash. Poland. So different from him; he was bound to exoticize her. She taught him that word, 'exoticize.' Also 'Americanness,' which, he realizes now, she pronounced rather badly, with her lovely, exotic accent. In the dark of his living room, sipping malbec, he watches, again, Juliette Binoche light a cigarette and is overcome: *bliss*.

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My Life as Roland Barthes: *Nuit/Night*

Jaime Brunton

Barthes types his lecture notes. He is concerned that his students do not see any social function in their work. Yet they continue to present poems to workshop (a captive audience). This vanity is beginning to trouble, even depress him. *The text you write must prove that it desires me.* He says this to the cat, who blinks its narrowed eyes twice, stands up, and walks out of the room. This gesture breaks his concentration, and he begins lightly pressing the typewriter keys two at a time, as if playing a piano. It's cold in the apartment tonight. Flannel pajama weather, he's decided. The radiator steams oddly in the corner. All evening, this noise has unsettled the cat. Now it unsettles him, so he gets up from his desk, puts on a Smiths record, and goes to make tea. His mother has not called in over a week. Though not unusual, it remains disappointing. Across the alley he can see into the neighbors' kitchen window. Someone is often at the sink when he is at his. Sometimes the teenaged son does the dishes. But tonight is a school night and the house is dark. From the living room, Morrissey sings "I wear black on the outside 'cause black is how I feel on the inside." Full of mocking and meaning, Barthes thinks. *A seam. What pleasure wants is the site of a loss...* Water steams in the kettle, without sound.

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A Tornado of Nothing

Adam Clay

Coffee in advance, the news humming from the TV
one room over and yet you cannot imagine ever
being who you are without imagining the person
the news might report you as being, should you just plain

disappear one day. There is conclusive evidence
about a number of things and your existence is one of them.
You trip on a rock and find your place. You parallel park
and the universe creaks along on its careful ledge as if

something bigger than all of us exists. Most people want
to be good for something. Most people punctuate their
afterthoughts with nonsense as if nonsense was a right.
The news still hums itself to sleep even though it never

sleeps. Silence and then noise. You are starting to believe
that a dozen years—any way you look at it—is the same as one.

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Blind Minotaur Guided by a Young Girl

Christina Cook

—after Picasso

Birds are gaunt with walking
behind him, his head more horse
than human, body blue with desire

to see gray shapes in an ecru sky
(etch engraviture, drypoint
and burin) or the fading sun

fallen through spidery scrawl.
To see charcoal, ash,
far-flung wings of a hovering bird:

she leads him lengthwise into intaglio,
graving the lines of their legs
to hold the night's delicate ink in.

Par Terre

Darryl Crawford

The tattoo parlor was called Monty's. My oldest brother, Shawn, had discovered the Greek word for 'wrestler' in one of the books he was always reading on ancient wars and fighting. He decided he wanted the strange letters tattooed on his inner forearm. We were in high school then, and he was a champion wrestler. He could have gone to Michigan or Ohio State, he was that good, but he also dreamed of becoming an elite-level sniper in the Canadian Armed Forces, which proves that following your heart is one of the most fucked-up things you can do to yourself.

Shawn took me with him to the tattoo parlor on Queen Street East after school and tried to explain what he wanted to an old black man who refused to turn down the blues music on the radio. Monty the tattooist nodded and explained what happened when you got a tattoo: how the body's defense system entombed the pigment and kept it stable in the skin. He told us that over the years the ink would go deeper and the tattoo would blur. He asked Shawn if he really wanted this foreign thing sinking deep into him. It was a display of concern I found strange coming from a man who must have drawn a good part of his living from the recklessness of teenagers, but he didn't know how my brother's mind worked. Once Shawn decided, that was that. Shawn sat down in the old barber's chair without a word, and Monty prepared his needles.

I sat off in the corner of the tattoo parlor and watched the tattooist bring the nickel-plated gun to Shawn's forearm. The machine thrummed the way insects do in summer forests. There was a big lamp above them that dropped a circle of bright light, and the more I watched them the more it looked like they were wrestling. The tattooist, old and stoop-shouldered as he was, seemed to have Shawn in an arm lock. He only let up to swab blood away from the skin, and Shawn refused to pull off one of the explosive escape moves he'd become famous for. I recall thinking it was weird that the word for 'wrestler' should be

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written on Shawn, each small wound flooded with black pigment and trapped by new scar tissue, because at that moment my soldier-king brother seemed all about submission.

I proved that God has a soft spot for wrestling just this morning while I was weaseling out of a fitness club membership. I should explain how I got tricked into signing a contract because I'm not the type you typically find at these places. First off, I'm not all that physically imposing. More than one woman in my life has told me that I could use a makeover and forced me to endure some fashion show on the Woman's Network to shed light on my problem areas. It's funny what some people consider to be a solution.

The second reason I was surprised to find myself the newest member of Acute Fitness's family is that I should really know better. I write scripts for cold-call telemarketers. Ever wonder how people with little more than a high school education can weave Socratic conversations which anticipate all your logical reservations about a limited time offer or improved service package? I'm why. Or I was one of the reasons why until Shawn left on his last tour and my scripts became apocalyptic, and I was asked to take a leave of absence. Now I live with my born-again brother in our family's old house on Logan Avenue. Our parents are down in Fort Lauderdale, far away from the cold winters and the spectacle of what their surviving sons have become. I'm glad they weren't around yesterday morning when Luke came down for breakfast.

"It's time to deal with things," he said.

I was eating a bowl of Froot Loops. A frosty pink one fell from my spoon and rolled into a gap between the counter and the fridge. I was still looking down there, trying to cope with my sense of loss when I asked, "Time to deal with what?"

"With your healing."

This made me laugh because Luke has done more damage to me than anyone else on the planet. When I was nine and he was ten, he stomped a jagged piece of ice from our front lawn and

threw it like a Chinese star, splitting my left eyebrow in two. In junior high he and his friends would launch coffee creamers across the cafeteria at me for sport. In high school he got my first girlfriend drunk and slipped his hand into her panties. That's just what comes to mind. So I wondered who Luke thought he was, stirring his yogurt and smiling at me like he'd just baptized a camp full of dyslexic lepers with eating disorders. You'd have to believe pretty strongly in redemption to overlook his kind of past and speak on behalf of a big name like Jesus.

"My healing, Luke?"

"I want you to come with me today," Luke said. He'd been bothering me to go with him to his place of worship to pray and hold hands and shoulder our heavy crosses together.

"I'm not up to that, man," I told him.

"What you're up to isn't the point."

"What's the point, then?"

"The point is what your soul is crying out for: saving. You need to convert all this hurt into healing, and that's what we do in our church."

"First off, there's a difference between a church and a cult," I said, stabbing my spoon into the bowl. I hoped he wasn't going to call me on this because the distinction escaped me at that moment.

"It's not a cult," he said.

"A Christ-centered fellowship, then, is not a church. Notre Dame is a church and so is—"

"God is where you worship," he said.

"Okay, the truth is I'd like to come with you and talk to Jesus, but I've got an appointment."

"With who?"

"With Joanne Marquez," I replied. She'd been my first girlfriend, the one I caught Luke fingering in a laundry room. I was sure this would shut him up, but he's an evangelist, and in my experience they don't discourage easily, so I added details for story realism. "We're going to see a matinee at the Regent."

"No, you're not," Luke said.

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"Why not? Did you give her some peach schnapps and lock her in your room?"

"No," he replied, looking at me like he'd just pinned me cleanly. "The Regent's a health club now."

Luke would say it was an act of God, the chain of events that delivered me to the doors of Acute Fitness, and he'd probably be able to hook it up to some psalm or gospel that illustrated the greater plan at work all along. Luke's a resourceful bastard and likes to show it off, usually by tying his personal rants up with a good piece of Judeo-Christian fantasy. A few days ago, when he was breaking my balls about the evils of telemarketing and saying that, despite my many sins, there was still hope for my soul, he launched into a reading of the Good Samaritan: *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers.*

I walked away. Don't get me wrong. Luke is good at presenting and also has a good package for Bible thumping: he's powerful in the shoulders and has a great head of hair. He's one of those guys who just seem accomplished in a useless kind of way, like he could lead a government or coach in the NFL with no prior experience. I guess he'd be a church's wet dream, someone who looks capable of any worldly success but has chosen the higher road frequented by saints. Like all eager saints, however, Luke is a bit rhetorical. I wanted to see if the part about the Regent going under was more rhetoric, so I went over.

It wasn't. The Regent had disappeared. Instead of the teenage ushers and sticky plush carpet I remembered, there were sculpted human beings getting into the zone, watching motivational videos on flat screen TVs, and drinking shakes that looked truly disgusting. I observed the situation. The old coming attraction displays were now occupied by promotional posters featuring the same airbrushed girl training in a semi-pornographic manner. I was quite aroused by one where she was doing a spread eagle high kick. It drew my eye down her suntanned leg to the limited-time offer. I went inside to see if any similarly flexible women wanted to make a sale.

One of them did, of course. Her name was Samantha. She was pretty new to hard-sell tactics, I'd guess. When I asked how they managed to keep a place of this caliber afloat with such a limited inflow of monthly capital, her eyes wandered, like she was searching for her pitch script among the stair climbers and crunch machines. I let her off the hook partly for humanitarian reasons and partly because Samantha looked capable of doing spread-eagle high kicks of the kind I saw on the poster outside. You never want to insult someone with that skill set. She talked about different rejuvenation programs and asked if I'd ever trained seriously or played any sports.

"High school wrestling," I said.

"You're in high school?"

"No," I said. "I thought you asked if I'd ever played any sport. I mean, in my life."

I was never a high school wrestler. I didn't even try out for the varsity team, and I don't think training in the basement with Shawn was what Samantha had in mind when she asked me about sports. It was closest thing I had. Shawn had put a bench and power racks and a few mats down there when we were all still living together, and he taught me the basic stances, take downs, and exposure moves. The idea was to toughen me up, but we spent most of the time just talking. He'd list all the great historical figures who wrestled: Zeus and Hercules liked it; Gilgamesh, in his epic, proved his leadership by beating Enkidu in a match. Don't ask me who Enkidu is, but it sounded pretty impressive.

Despite being built like Shawn, I didn't have much talent for wrestling except for one move they call par terre. The par terre position happens when you lose advantage in a match and have to lie down on your stomach while the other wrestler tries to flip you over to win a point. It's desperation defense. The objective is to hold onto the mat and brace your weight on your toes, shifting your centre of gravity by swiveling your hips. That way the other wrestler can't flip you over. Shawn said I was a natural.

As Samantha talked me through the fitness club, it occurred to me that everyone exercising there was in some kind of par terre

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position, clinging onto the earth as a greater opponent worked him or her over. It struck me that they were going about it all wrong. It's hard to explain, but I felt like helping them with technique. Maybe it was an act of God. The Holy Spirit might have been hovering inside Acute Fitness yesterday, setting up my appointment with revelation. Luke is always saying that the Lord is pulling strings everywhere 24-7, so I assume that this puppetry reaches corporate gyms with hip-hop music thumping and a platoon of dick heads spinning turbines, hanging upside down and throwing dumbbells around to surprise their muscles into inflammation.

I woke up the next morning with the sensation that I'd been screwed. It dawned on me that $79 dollars a month over a year and a half was not the same as eight dollars a month with no obligations. The ten-day-free-trial-no-risk-option I'd agreed to with Samantha made all the muscles in my body tense up at once, like waking to the sound of a prowler on the stairway. I wondered how I'd been taken by an amateur. The communion I'd felt with the other fitness club junkies was gone too, and I called myself a stupid asshole various times in the shower.

Everybody in sales knows that a no-risk trial period is pretty full of risk. Salespeople bank on a combination of consumer sloth and the labyrinth that is modern billing to make some easy cash. You'd be surprised how many people just forget the end date of a free trial and are stuck paying for the super glue or subscription to *Elle* they have no interest in whatsoever. I was pissed off to find myself among the suckers and went straight down to Acute Fitness to take it out on some complete innocent.

The girls at the desk took my complaints in stride. They told me in their carefree way that Samantha wasn't in and that if I wanted to cancel my membership I'd have to speak to the manager.

"Is he in?" I asked.

"I'll make a call for you," the receptionist replied, but it felt like she was lying to me. She showed me to a waiting area with

leather chaise lounges positioned in a circle. I sat down and watched male members swipe their magnetic cards and chat up pretty towel girls while the personal trainers bantered away with shapely mothers who were gravely concerned about the proximity of bikini season. Making me wait was a sales tactic too. It gave me time to consider how empty my life would be without Acute Fitness and all those endorphins. It's their business. But it was my business to get out of the contract I'd signed, and after five minutes I was getting twitchy with anticipation.

"Steve-O," someone finally said. The guy must have dropped in on cables from the ceiling because I hadn't heard anything. Towering above me was a bald man who looked like he should be playing semi-pro hockey in Finland. His skin was a pigment or two shy of an albino's, and he had no eyebrows.

"No," I said. "My name's Andrew."

"I'm Steve-O," he said, smiling.

"Okay," I replied. His tight clothes and huge smile were making me suspicious. I wondered what kind of club I'd joined here.

"I'm the manager."

"Oh," I said, standing up. I squeezed his outstretched hand to show him I meant business and said, "Thanks for making time to see me."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to quit," I told him.

"How long have you been with us?"

"One day."

Some essential wire holding his smile together seemed to come undone. He looked around, I assume to check if anyone had overheard my request. Then he told me to follow him. His office had a sliding glass door, which he pulled closed behind us. He walked around a desk made of tempered glass and I saw his meaty thighs bulging at the stitching of his pants when he sat down. He reached behind to adjust the lumbar support on his chair and said, "One day. You haven't given us much of a chance, have you, Mister—"

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"Johnson," I said. "Andrew Johnson."

He typed that into his computer and spent another minute sliding his mouse across the table millimeter by millimeter.

"Do you have your contract?"

"Right here," I said.

He reviewed the contract and chewed on some gum. Each time he clamped down, a spasm of tendon rolled from his jaw up to his forehead, like white waves onto a salty coast. He looked at the back of the contract and underlined some microscopic footnote.

"Why are you terminating?" he asked.

I told him that I valued my health, but I had gotten a little ahead of myself as I was between jobs.

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I want to open my own business," I lied.

"What kind of business?"

"I'm into tattoos," I replied. I have no idea why tattoos came to mind, but I guess I didn't feel like getting into my problems with a complete stranger, and I'd been thinking a lot about Shawn's tattoo since he shipped out to Afghanistan.

"Really?"

"Yes," I said. "Is there some problem?"

"No. Well, you don't seem like a tattooist, but I am surprised by the world every day," he said in a philosophical way. This answer seemed to please him enormously. "You realize that a fitness membership qualifies as a tax write-off for small business owners."

"I'm in the early stages," I said.

"How early?"

"Pretty early," I answered. "I haven't secured financing for my venture yet."

Steve-O nodded. "Have you considered the impact a physically fit man brings to bear on a loan application interview, Andrew?"

"Not really."

"Don't underestimate it."

"I won't."

"Looks matter," Steve-O said, like he was leveling with me about a substance abuse problem. "How would you feel if I lowered your monthly fee from seventy-nine to fifty, all in?"

"Like I was getting screwed."

"How much would you pay for heightened fitness and confidence in the here and now?"

"Not too much," I replied.

"You came to us for some reason. We didn't come to you, did we, Andrew?"

"No, you didn't," I admitted. "I just came to see if the movie theatre was still here.

"But you left with a trial membership."

"That's true," I said. "I got drawn in by those samurai swords in the foyer. That's a nice touch."

Steve-O didn't pick up on my refined sense of humor, which happens on occasion. "Is money the only factor?" he continued.

"Being locked into eighteen months isn't helping your cause," I told him.

"How would you respond to a three-month no-obligation student's package at $199.99?"

"I'm not a student."

"I realize you're not a student," Steve-O replied. He seemed a little disappointed that I didn't want to play ball.

"I think I'm just going to do sit-ups in the basement for the time being," I told him.

"Seriously?"

"Why not?"

"There are scores of scientific reasons why that type of training is discouraged by most professional trainers' associations, mildew and air quality chief among them, but it might be more instructional to review this information while we do your exit tour."

"Do my what?"

"Your exit tour," Steve-O answered.

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"I don't understand."

"It's part of our cancellation procedure."

"Is canceling my membership part of your cancellation procedure?"

"I just have to walk you through the club."

"Samantha told me that I could cancel the contract in the first ten days," I said.

"You can," Steve-O replied, gathering some forms from a file cabinet. "After an exit tour."

"She told me no risk."

"There is no risk," Steve-O said. "But I'm required to walk you through and maybe we can tackle the differences between sit-ups in the basement and having a regime tailored to your body type at a 21st century Acute Fitness facility."

Acute Fitness was starting to sound like a painful disease, and I may have moaned.

"We do this, Andrew," Steve-O explained, "to improve service quality. As a prospective business owner, you surely see our point of view."

"Certainly," I said.

"It's also in your contract," Steve-O added, sliding the page across the table to me.

"Make it quick," I said. "I'm a busy man."

That was a lie. It didn't stop me from looking at my watch like I was a busy man. I even considered making a fake phone call to an up-and-coming tattooist who, I'd tell Steve-O, I was trying to recruit away from my competitors, but I thought that would be going a bit far. I don't know when lying became second nature. Luke has always been perplexed by my fabrications and the extravagant way I build them. Even before he became Jesus' cheerleader, Luke would get preachy if he caught me being too inventive. He'd make it a point to try to flip me on it—for my own good, he'd say—but I'd just shift back and forth. Par terre him. Luke has a yen for the truth that borders on obsession. It looked like Steve-O was suffering from a similar fixation because

five minutes into the exit tour he was trying to look me in the eye and clearing his throat like there was a grave confession in the works.

"What is it?" I finally asked.

"I'd like to tell you an anecdote," he said, rubbing his scalp and producing a sound like a lint brush over a jacket shoulder. "Will you let me tell you one of my instructive anecdotes?"

"If it's necessary," I said.

"I believe it is."

"Okay."

"What do you think about this?"

I looked around the gym. "About what?"

"About my head," Steve-O said.

"It's alright," I replied, pushing up on my toes to get a better vista. "It's pretty smooth and well-proportioned."

"I'm bald."

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be. I've accepted my baldness, Andrew, but that wasn't always the case." He threw in a measured pause and looked over my shoulder for so long that I looked too. I saw the old movie theatre stripped of its seats and filled with lines of new exercise equipment. The gym looked like a giant machine, with its belts spinning and cords tightening. We watched the cogs clasping together as Steve-O admitted that he had once owned one of the world's most expensive hair piece systems, one that required quarterly retreats to a resort up north where other bald men went to discuss the teachings of grooming workshops and have their wigs touched up by top European technicians.

"I know about wasted money," he concluded.

"I see that now."

"Let me tell you something else: an investment in Acute Fitness is not a $300 hairpiece retreat. I feel more natural now, Andrew. I feel like myself."

"It's a good look on you," I told him.

"I don't tell this story to everyone."

"I appreciate it."

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"But I'm telling you about this for a reason," he said, turning to face me. I was looking into his enormous chest so Steve-O dipped into a half squat and continued preaching, "I think you need to hear something from an objective third party: stop hiding behind that underutilized body."

"I'm not hiding behind anything."

"Be honest with me," he said.

Something flashed up inside me at the word honest, like a flare torn open at a traffic accident. I remembered failing Theology class on three separate occasions. We all went to Catholic school. To pass grade-nine Theology, everybody had to memorize and present a passage of scripture in front of the class. I flunked the class three times for quite legitimate reasons, but my teacher usually pointed to the disaster of my scripture reading as the final straw. He said it was 'emblematic.' Of what, I'm not sure. But I always went against his advice and chose a passage from Revelations, which Shawn claimed was the weirdest and most graphic of the Bible's many subplots and therefore the sexiest read.

When the time came to present in front of the class I'd start off well, but I would soon begin stumbling around and getting way off track and making things up. It wasn't that I'd forgotten everything. It's that better things would occur to me as I spoke—things that made the scripture more complete or honest—and I'd go with it. When my parents cornered me later about how I'd gone from the Four Horses of the Apocalypse to the pattern on Joanne Marquez's bras, I'd tell them that I was possessed by the word.

It was actually Shawn and not Jesus-freak Luke who wanted to hear about my scripture fiascos. He was the only one who thought there might be more to them than just sarcasm. He'd call them "the gospels according to Andy Johnson." I'd take him through everything I could recall of the presentation, and he'd smile and ask questions about what I meant by this or that. It might seem like an older brother screwing with his kid brother, but it wasn't. It was a conspiracy we had. I'd describe what came

over me, and he'd even write some of it down in his workout journal. Then we'd get back to wrestling and training, and he'd tell me other things between holds. While reading about wrestling in ancient Rome, Shawn had come upon some other things. The Christians, for example, were a just sect at first and the Catholics a sub-sect in this breakaway movement. He told me it was important to remember how churches begin and to bear in mind that the gospels all started off with a couple guys shooting the shit in some catacomb under Rome, and they might have even been training for wrestling.

I missed Shawn a lot right then, and thought that maybe Luke would have missed him too, talking about honesty with Steve-O in Acute Fitness.

"Whose idea of honest?" I finally asked.

"Yours," he said.

I had to laugh at the possibilities. Steve-O must have caught wind of something hostile in its pitch because he straightened up and started reaching for other openings to his spiel.

"This is also about the people you share your life with, Andrew," he said. "What about your significant other? What does she think?"

This was a nice bit of maneuvering on Steve-O's part, and I admired the construction of the segue. Regardless of my answer, I knew we were going get right back to me finding a solution at Acute Fitness.

"What's that got to do with it?" I stalled.

"Everything," Steve-O replied, getting back into squat formation. "What's her name?"

"Whose?"

"Come on," he said.

"Joanne Marquez."

"Isn't your name Johnson, Andrew?"

"Marquez would be her maiden name," I explained. "Latin women keep their maiden names, and besides I never said we were married."

"Latin women," Steve-O repeated, nodding his head. He

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raised his fist, and I ignored it.

"Oh, come on," he insisted.

"No, it's okay," I said, but he kept his fist hanging there so I eventually tapped it with mine.

"Latinas," he said, looking me up and down like he was trying to pinpoint the misdirection in a good trick I'd just pulled off. "I'm sure that Joanne Marquez wants you to keep the engine humming under that tiny hood. With a tailored plan and acute commitment to it, we might be able to up the ante in the physical realm."

"Up the what?"

"Up the ante, Andrew," Steve-O said. "You know what I'm saying?"

"I know what you're saying," I said. "I just don't like that you're saying it to me."

"Am I crossing some line?"

"Yes."

"Well, where there's smoke, there's fire."

"What fire?"

"Here's what fire," Steve-O countered. "If you're sensitive to these trite jibes, Andrew, then deep down, maybe at some subconscious level, you believe them. Part of our regime deals specifically with jibes and cleans out negative responses from your physiology."

"I don't want to clean out negative responses, man," I told him. "I like negative responses."

"Oh, please."

"This is negative," I shouted. "It calls for a negative response. Tit for tat, Steve-O. I'm not a Buddhist monk watching trees grow."

"No one's asking you to convert to Buddhism," Steve-O said, a little like he was hushing a child. He waved at the members hyperventilating on a row of treadmills and observing us with interest. He put his hand on my shoulder and lowered his voice. "I'm asking you to consider converting to a healthy lifestyle, and Acute Fitness is the way to this end."

"Convert?"

Steve-O was about to clarify something but then stopped, and I felt the momentum swing. I went at him hard. "I've got this brother, Luke, who says that God is where you worship."

Steve-O stared straight ahead.

"You want me to join up here, right?"

"That would be ideal, Andrew," he said carefully. "I was thinking maybe we could start you off with one of our complimentary fitness assessments."

"Do you go to church?"

"No."

"Temple?"

"No."

"Don't tell me." I raised my fist. "Your whole body's a temple." He didn't tap it. I could tell that I was out from under him now and that he was a bit winded, and I moved on him. "Can I take you somewhere?"

"That's not a good idea," he replied.

"Why not, Steve-O? Luke has a church near here. Well, it's kind of like a church. It's actually more of a Christ-centered fellowship."

"Fellowship?"

"They basically teach other people on their way of thinking about Christ and related things."

"Right."

"I guess my brother specializes in a kind of fitness too. Kind of like spiritual fitness."

"Like the priesthood?"

"I think they call his position shepherd."

"Everybody needs beliefs," he said, trying to keep things as casual as possible. But the skin had gathered where Steve-O's eyebrows should have been, and I understood that he was raising them.

"Let's go down to the Faith Temple and see what kind of deal my brother can cut us," I said.

"No," Steve replied.

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"Why not?"
"That's not for me," he said.
"Just like Acute Fitness isn't for me?"
"Apparently," Steve-O finally conceded.

I caught the Broadview streetcar south. I wanted to talk to Luke about my wrestling revelations, how I felt rejuvenated and full of light once I'd gotten out from under my fitness club contract. The Faith Temple was at Gerard, and it looked a bit like a bingo hall from the streetcar window. Then I realized that bingo is usually played in churches, so maybe it looked like a church after all. There was a cheap notice board with wheels on the bottom and big plastic letters that read: No God, No Salvation. Know God, Know Salvation. Luke was always repeating slogans like this, and I decided that this was probably why he wanted to save my soul: to get some help with his marketing campaigns.

I watched the Faith Temple slip by and stayed on the streetcar until it turned downtown at Queen. I couldn't remember where Monty's was exactly because the east end has changed so much recently, filled up with organic bistros and vintage furniture shops. I kept walking east. Once I passed under the CN bridge, things started getting rundown and familiar. Monty's was wedged between a coin laundry and a rough sports tavern on the far side of Pape Avenue. City workers were peeling up the chucks of asphalt out front with jackhammers. The storefronts were covered in a layer of dust, and I saw that Monty's was no longer a tattoo parlor. It was a Caribbean diner. I went inside and asked the woman behind the counter if an old guy named Monty would still tattoo you for the right price.

"No," she told me. "He retired now."

"Do you know where I can find him? I'm thinking about getting into the tattoo business, and I'd like to bring him on as a consultant."

"A what?"

"Someone to show me the ropes."

"Well, he's back there," she said. "Go see if he's interested in

such a thing as rope showing."

I looked where she was pointing. There were black and white shots of tattoos hanging in gold frames on the wall that fed into a narrow hallway. At the end of the hallway was an open door. The sun lit up the cracked linoleum on the threshold. Blues guitar was brushing up against the old brickwork outside. I found Monty in his barber's chair, peeling potatoes.

"Hi, Monty," I said from the door.

"Look how she got me workin'," he replied, laughing and looking at me like I'd appreciate the irony of his position. He tossed the cleaned potato in a blue plastic bucket with the others and said, "Man."

"What happened to the parlor?"

He raised his big hands, which I noticed were trembling slightly, and said, "Arthritis."

"Do you remember me?"

"Nope."

"I came with my brother, Shawn," I said.

Monty massaged his chin and thought about it a moment. "Shawn," he said. "Still nope."

"That's okay. I'll remind you. He got a tattoo of the Greek word for wrestler."

"Greek for wrestler, now?"

"Yes."

"Sounds like something I'd remember," he said.

"That's what I thought."

"When he get it?"

"I don't know. In the fall. In 1999, I think."

"Hold on, man," Monty said. He called to the woman inside, whose name was Rose and turned out to be his daughter. He shouted the year, and she brought out a binder with 1999 written out in pieces of white masking tape. She took her time crossing the yard, her hips swinging under a short summer dress and her flip-flops slapping on the brick.

"Oh, yeah," he said, turning the cellophane pages with different tattoos and body parts in each photograph. He was

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getting into it. I put my hand on the chair and looked over his shoulder as he told me how each tattoo was like a signature, like taking some seed from the inside and putting it on the outside to bloom for everyone to see. He warned me it wasn't always obvious. It took a great deal of skill to untangle the truth in each tattoo, but it was always there. Monty seemed to have perfected this kind of interpretation, and he went on about the people and their false symbols as if he were teaching a lesson on forensics. The potato juice dried to chalk on his hands, and he kept shaking his head in amazement at all the people that he'd forgotten, saying, "Lucky I got all these strange souls catalogued in here now."

The jackhammers started up on the street once more, the sound deflecting and echoing back off the broken fire escapes and shoulder-wide alleys. I thought about Monty's tattoo gun punching into Shawn's skin.

"How fast do those tattoo needles shoot?"

"Depends on the model," Monty said, looking up from his binder. "As fast as a hundred and twenty times in one second, the one I had."

"Fast," I said.

I'd done research after we got the news about Shawn, and I knew that the gas-powered AK-47 used by the Taliban could shoot six hundred rounds a minute. Up to ten bullets a second, by my math. Nothing compared to the speed of a tattoo gun when you think about it. I wasn't there when Shawn was killed in the hills outside Kandahar, so I couldn't tell you how many bullets flew down into the gorge where he was doing recon.

"Well, look at that," Monty said. I did as he told me and recognized the shape of my brother's forearm and the word πάλη, so close, just beyond a sheet of plastic. I felt something tightening in my throat.

"That means wrestler?" Monty asked.

"Yes."

"Well, how's the pigment holding up?"

"I don't know," I said.

"He's not around no more?"

"No."

"Where did he go?"

"Kandahar," I replied.

"Middle East?"

"Afghanistan," I said. "He was a soldier."

"Was?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then he's out?"

"No."

Monty looked at me and then stared down at a spot in the brick for a moment. He rubbed his chin and he looked up at the sky. "Goddamn it."

I thought that sounded pretty accurate. That maybe God did damn Shawn when he got that tattoo. Having something like 'wrestler' written on your skin might make you a target for something, and once the words sank deep enough there'd be no escaping it. I remember Monty warning Shawn about tattoos.

"What happened to Shawn?" Monty asked, looking at me. "If you don't mind talking about it."

"He was in the desert," I said.

"Troubling things take place in deserts," Monty said. "Moses. Jesus. The good Samaritan. All those guys got pushed around in those deserts."

"True," I said.

"Tell me about your brother," Monty said.

"Shawn was a wrestler."

"That's good," Monty said, but he looked at me like he was waiting for something more. Something he could work with. He turned his ear to me and gave me a moment to speak my mind.

"He was walking down from Jerusalem for a wrestling championship in Jericho when he was set upon by robbers," I said.

Monty bowed his head and folded his hands. "What did those robbers want?"

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"They wanted him to join them," I said.

"Why?"

"So they could prove they were right."

"People will do that," Monty said. "Now, what happened between Jerusalem and Jericho?"

"They pinned him down in a gorge."

"Go on."

"They shot at him from cliffs. They told him to lie flat on his stomach. Completely still. Then they climbed down and put their knees into his back. He was bleeding into the earth, and they told him to join up or else. Still Shawn wouldn't let them pin him. He kept shifting back and forth so they couldn't get under him. God loves those who know how to par terre. God's a huge wrestling fan, Monty—"

I wanted Shawn to win this match, but I knew that no matter what I said he wouldn't.

"What's wrong?" Monty asked.

"I'm a bit of a liar."

"No, you're not," Monty said. "You're just hanging onto this earth, boy, and praying for your brother whichever way you can."

The Legend of Dutchy the Chicken

Patrick Crerand

Everyone knew Dutchy skipped school the day the big tornado hit Xenia. He holed up in his closet, hiding from a truancy officer who never showed. Across town, the funnel cloud sucked air from the Warner Junior High gymnasium windows and collapsed the ceiling onto Dutchy's seventh grade class. The coroner's office had blown off, so they stored the bodies of all the dead in the bank vault to keep the smell away from the dogs.

That summer, Dutchy rode his dirt bike around my neighborhood in brown pleather cowboy boots with his undershirt wrapped around his head. His skin never tanned, and we weaker boys of the block treated him as if he had been reincarnated, the bottom half from Texas, the top half from Siam. "Who wants to fight?" he'd shout from his bike seat, pointing to us with a dead glare. "I dare you. Dutchy ain't no chicken."

We trailed in the wake of his threats like light debris. We watched him smoke Winstons and throw penknives into stumps. Once he stood vigil on his roof for an entire afternoon, straddling the television antenna and mooning the homebound mothers. When he stole my Lionel train set, my father negotiated its return with Dutchy's father, but not before Dutchy bit off and swallowed the tiny white man who popped out the side door of the milk car. No one put a hand on him. Even his father had a hard time looking at him for longer than a glance out of fear those freckles on his cheek would turn as gray as those classmates buried in lunchbox caskets. Still Dutchy begged every afternoon from his bike: "Who wants to fight? Dutchy ain't no chicken." But there were no takers.

The summer before I left for good, Dutchy stopped coming out. We saw his silhouette pass behind the shades, but he did not ride. The school board had held him back until he was nearly a man. His glare had long since lost its sheen and his threats too low to duck under even for us. When his parents moved away the next fall, there were only two of them in the cab of the moving van. They set Dutchy's bike against the curb.

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They say that same tornado hit a glass factory after the gymnasium fell. The wind drove green shards into the skin of the pavement all over Xenia so at night there are two skies if the moon shines right. Now they say Dutchy tracks them both after midnight. Europa, Cancer, Sirius, a whole other set of constellations lights under the pedals of his black BMX. On stormy nights, the neighbors open their windows and listen. "Is it the driving hum of Dutchy's rubber tread or just a steady rain?" they ask their children, who look out, wide-eyed, onto the empty street. There Dutchy rides on, shouting to the sky, untouched in the gray haze of lightning, as if the world had no ceiling.

I, Lance

Jason DeYoung

When in doubt, blame your country.

This is what I've learned by sitting in the hospital with my neighbor. Government is the solution to the problem of government. We're all unhappy. I don't know how we're not all weeping constantly. One simple emotion is not enough. Or is it too much? I'm totally mixed up.

Why I stay here, I don't really know. I had woken to the sound of knocking on my door a week ago. My neighbor, Mave, a tall brunette with magnificently full hips, was crying on my doorstep. Her head ringed with a halo. "I don't know what I to do," she wept over my welcome mat.

I don't know what I to do—this was my immediate thought, as well.

She walked in without my asking her.

This was the opening to a fantasy I'd had many times about my neighbor, but she was never weeping and sporting a potent Christian symbol, which I'd always assumed to be apocryphal at best, but complete horseshit in truth. Truth is inevitably the worst—it will always trump fantasy.

"Can I have some coffee?" she said, teary-eyed as she plopped down at my kitchen table.

She was going through something like tragedy. That's the only way to explain her behavior, I later realized. We'd never said more than a dozen words to one another in the year and half I'd lived in the house next to hers, and those words had never been about more than the weather and the plants we were growing in our yards. I grew vines; she grew flowers. She'd once asked for a clipping of my purple sweet potato vine, but she had never gotten it.

"I don't know where it came from," Mave said, exhausted, her hands up in the air, waving about her head.

As a kid, we were told in church that if you got in a dry, dark closet and dragged a comb through your hair, you could see a

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halo of static electricity form over your head. If you had a mirror in there with you, that is. I told this to Mave.

She blinked at me. Her halo slumped around her brow. What she thought I would do for her, I didn't know. For the first time in my life I felt I had lost touch with reality, as if it had died. And I wondered why she didn't go over to the Fishers' (her neighbors on the east side). The Fishers were family people, stable, wealthy, Republican. They would have just eaten up a woman with a halo.

Put the possibility of death or tragedy into any situation and it will speed things right along; it will make everything a little more real. That's how it goes on television, and I suppose it holds up in life, too.

Mave is dying, or that's how it seems. The halo grows stronger—her body grows weaker. On that morning she came to my door, the halo was a faint golden-yellow ring; now it's closer to the color of brass, as if blood has mixed in with the golden-yellow. Her rounded face has gone angular, her eye sockets have darkened, and veins have emerged on her hands as the skin tightens. I love her now.

I hold her hand, and we watch cable news because that is what she wants.

Sometimes I lie in the hospital bed with her and feel the heat coming off the halo. And hourly we watch tragedy and mayhem unfold. Weird accidents, arrests for victimless crimes, brown citizens suffering, poor people disenfranchised, one group slaughtering another group—it's endless. I have to get out of the bed when the halo starts to make me sweat, or when the nurse comes in and says that I shouldn't be in the bed with such a sick woman.

I wonder why a reporter has not shown up to interview Mave. There has to be at least one loose-lipped nurse here ready to ride some coattails to a few minutes of fame. I imagine this chatty nurse on the cable news telling how Mave is just the sweetest person, "a real angel." That would be the tag—a real angel.

But I shouldn't distrust people so.

Take the blind flower salesman in the basement of the hospital, for instance. He trusts everyone who buys flowers from him. "Do you ever get cheated?" I ask him.

"Nope," he says angrily.

How does he know? I don't ask this. For some reason I believe him, or want to.

"You want a handjob?" Mave whispers to me one night when the news starts to repeat. The halo is so hot now I can only be in bed with her for a few minutes. I tell her no thanks, for fear of exhausting her further, and then she asks me if I'll kiss her mouth, and I do so and she holds me there, the halo's heat scorching my brow.

I have a vague sense of reality—like there's a ghost of it eluding me around corners. It's a new sensation or paranoia. I'm a thirty-three-year-old male, with a college degree I don't use and a slowly forming Jesus-Christ complex. You know he was thirty-three when he died?

Bombs go off in the East, heads are cut off on the Dark Continent, some mother in the South has hidden her child's prosthetic arms, and the cops found the child eating from the pet's dish. In the "For Your Health" segment, the newscaster limns a new method for dissolving your wrinkles with a mild acid. How did we get so twisted in our pursuits?

The halo consumes Mave. I want to switch off the television and make love to her. But everything is too hot. Mave wishes to be touched at all times. She weeps in self-pity when the television is off.

"I want make love to a woman with a halo," I tell the blind flower salesman in the hospital basement.

"Of course you do," he says, as I give him my money.

"And you never get cheated?" I ask again. I'm not sure if he knows it's me asking again or not.

"No, I never get cheated."

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"How's that?"

"I see what you don't."

This is too easy, too prophetic sounding, and, because I've watched too much cable news recently, I can no longer accept prophetic—I want fast, clear, hard, concrete answers.

"Just because my eyes don't work doesn't mean that I can't sense when someone is nervous or lying or giving off a smell—most folks will give off a smell when things are abnormal. But you're a good boy. You're not gonna cheat me."

It is the power of suggestion that keeps him from being cheated. How could anyone smell anything over the stacks of flowers he sits between? (I wish I could say for irony's purpose that these flowers are amazingly beautiful, that the blind man in the hospital basement sells the best-looking flowers I've ever seen. His flowers are wilting. He is a smiling blind man among dying flowers.)

All things are a little harder in the hospital.

I go to the hospital chapel and ask the minister to come with me back to Mave's room.

When we get there, Mave is standing in her gown in front of the television, doing the exercises on the "For Your Health" segment.

The minister comes in and stares at Mave. He tries very hard not to balk in astonishment. The halo has turned almost completely red: its dark light looms over Mave's angular face, and it highlights her skull. Mave stretches and then lunges, following the television exercise leader's direction. "This will improve the circulation in your upper body," the television says.

It's pretty easy to understand Mave's addiction to television: it's a reality for her as this unbelievable thing is happening to her. A halo seems to be draining her of life.

I still don't understand why I'm staying here, watching her wither, wanting to love her.

The minister can't do anything for Mave, as I've suspected. He sits and talks. He prays before he leaves. He asks me to make her as happy as I can.

"I don't really know her," I whisper to him in the hallway.

"What?"

"She's my next-door neighbor, but we were never really all that close until the halo."

He nods.

"I don't know what I'm doing here. Why I won't just go home. My job has fired me."

"You're drawn to her?"

"Yes."

"It's not about you," he says.

"But it is."

"Are you dying?"

"We all are."

He looks cross at me for a moment and then regains his composure: "You are not dying in the immediate sense. You brought her in?"

"Yes, she came to my doorstep. It took some time to convince her to come to the hospital. She was afraid—she begged me not to leave her."

"Does she have any family?"

"Not here. Not in town, I mean."

I walk back into Mave's room. She is in bed.

"Lance! You've come to see me!"

My name is not Lance. I don't know who Lance is. In the short amount of time while I was out in the hallway, her mind has started to short circuit. She is grinning. It's a grin of total insanity, which can also be interpreted as a smile of utter and complete happiness. The newscaster announces that in South America the US government is raiding and destroying coca farms, and coming up this hour there will be an update on a dead popstar's murder and its possible connection to the State Department. It's all very titillating.

Without further hesitation or thought, I accept that I am Lance.

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"Yes, I've come to see you. I'm sorry I've been gone so long," I say, and I've never seen Mave so happy. The halo begins to pulse.

I become Lance. Mave is still Mave, but a different version of Mave: a younger version.

Lance is an old fiancé, a man she left.

"Do you still love me, Lance, after all I did?"

"Yes, I love you. I love you," I, Lance, say to her while petting her hand. The halo burns red-glory.

I spend the night loving her, and she loving me. From the wall-mounted television, the newscasters look down upon us.

I go for more flowers the next morning. The ones I bought the previous day have all but turned brown. Fresh flowers make Mave happy.

When I arrive in the basement, there is a woman tending the flower stand.

"Where's the other guy?"

"Are you the guy who was stealing from him?"

"No."

The woman stares at me. I, Lance, former customer: I look suspicious to her.

"Well, I fired him."

I don't stick around to ask any more questions. The ghost of reality that has been causing me paranoia and doubt has finally caught up to me, and it has gained corporeality. I rush back upstairs.

As I enter, Mave turns to look at me. She doesn't smile. "Where'd you take Lance?"

The halo is as brown as a full tick.

Mave's lips are curling back on her mouth.

I can hear the clicking of her IV machine.

The television news endlessly drones. Over and over we are told who is important and who is not.

"I am Lance."

"No, sweetie. I don't know who you are. But you're not my Lance," she said. "But don't worry. He'll be along, I suppose. We're going to get married. Can you believe it?"

Everything began to speed up after that. Her miracle, her halo, consumed her, and I wake one morning and she is dead. The halo has blinked off.

Inside the television, a man tells me that another series of beheadings has occurred in the Congo, that bees the government genetically modified to produce more honey are now coming after me (us), that for our health we should eat more and then we should eat less, for our protection we should stay indoors, for our livelihoods we should drive with our windows up and our doors locked, for our sanity we should stay off our porches, for our appearances we should bathe in acid, for our fears we should be on the lookout, because we are living in terrible times, when your neighbor might be your worst enemy.

I turn the fucking thing off.

In the screen's reflection Mave and I are cradled in the hospital room. Her body and I have entered some alien, ore-colored universe awash in peace. We are two people isolated. And all I think about is how sad, how terribly sad I am that she has died. And it is the least confusing thing I've felt in months.

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Normandy Park

Jaquira Díaz

It was the fall after Hurricane Andrew, when we were still kids and Normandy Park still belonged to us, and murders were still committed only by the adults on television. Normandy Park was in northern Miami Beach, surrounded by old apartment buildings, motels, bars, and bodegas that made up the neighborhood of the same name. The park was where we spent long summer days, dribbling basketballs on the blacktop, smoking cigarettes while carving our names into half-rotted wooden benches or the oak tree in the center of the weed-infested playground, pretending we were 35 instead of fourteen. I was wild, spent most of my time in the park or the streets. My homegirl, Boogie, was the craziest girl in the eighth grade, a hood-rat with a husky voice, a serious case of ghetto booty, and a habit of talking with her hands. We were kicking back on the rundown merry-go-round, right in front of the courts, taking sips from a quart of Olde English 800 while pretending not to watch the boys shooting hoops. It was just the usual crowd, a bunch of guys from the neighborhood making jump shots, until Kilo showed up.

His real name was Kevin, but, as far back as I could remember, everyone always called him Kilo. He was the only boy in the eighth grade with tattoos, un Cubano with a low fade, with forearms so ripped you could trace every vein in them. He was the only fourteen-year-old I knew who had dunked on Mayito, a Panameño who was so tall people said he could touch the backboard with both feet still on the ground. Kilo hadn't been out in public for weeks, so I was surprised when he just strolled onto the blacktop and joined the game like he was never even gone. I picked up the quart and took a quick swig.

"Damn, he hasn't been around since, you know," Boogie said, waiting for me to finish the sentence. But neither of us was saying what I knew we were both thinking: no one had seen Kilo since the day his homeboy Chris got shot, right here in Normandy Park. "Has he told you what happened?"

"We don't talk much," I said. Kilo and I weren't exactly friends. As far as he knew, I was just one of the girls from the neighborhood. He used to spend most of his time on the courts or with Chris, and I couldn't remember ever having a real conversation with him, other than small talk whenever we ran into each other in school or the park.

"Don't you want to know?"

I did. Much more than I was willing to admit. I hadn't told Boogie, but I was dying to talk to him. I couldn't keep my eyes off him at school. I'd known Kilo and Chris for about six years, since my mom and I first got to Miami from Puerto Rico. Back then, Kilo was already the cool kid everyone knew, Chris was a skinny moreno with a busted-up fro, and I was a quiet, dirty-faced tomboy who only spoke Spanish. Every time I saw Kilo, I still felt like I was that same kid with frizzy hair, stuck in a world of English without the right words to defend myself. Kilo was a baller, not just one of those hoodlums with time to waste in Normandy Park, but a dude with a real future. He'd make it to college some day, and basketball would get him there.

"Don't worry; it won't be long 'til the whole neighborhood knows the story," I said.

"He ain't all that, Nena," she said, studying me, narrowing her eyes like she was a psychic and I just sat at her table to ask for my fortune. "You can do better."

I rolled my eyes, finished off the last of the Olde E., and tossed the bottle on the lawn.

"You just want him for yourself," I joked, even though I knew better. Boogie could have any guy she wanted, but she had a thing for older guys from other neighborhoods, always said all those Normandy Park fools wanted was to rip and dip. The two of us were so different. She was a dancer, ambitious as hell, wanted to move to California to be a fly girl on *In Living Color* as soon as she could put the cash together. I didn't even think about the future, would rather waste my time scribbling stories that always ended up with some bank heist gone wrong, lots of blood and bullets flying, and not an honest cop on the scene.

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"Like hell," she said. "Dude smells like Drakkar Noir and balls." She ran her fingers through her thick, black hair. That was one thing about Boogie; out of the two of us, she was the girly one. Always wore makeup, painted her toenails. As fancy as you could be in a place like Normandy Park. I was the one always in baggy jeans, with crazy curls that never stayed in place.

"I'm heading back to the bodega," I said.

We jumped the fence, and, when we were out on the avenue, I checked for the tecatos who were always panhandling—I could hustle one of them to buy another quart for us. Boogie moved slowly, her hips swinging from side to side, her hand-me-down chanclas dragging under her feet. We stopped cold when we ran into Boogie's mom, yelling at her to get her pendeja-ass home this instant. Boogie huffed and cried, gaining more drama with each step.

"You're ruining my life!" she yelled, but it was more for the neighbors. That was so Boogie—she knew they ate that shit up. Her mother smacked her upside the head, and Boogie shrieked all the way across the street to Normandy Apartments, where little kids and viejas with their hair in rollers were out on their balconies watching the show.

After her mom fell asleep in front of the TV, Boogie snuck out of her house and showed up outside my bedroom window. My mother and I lived a block away from the park, in one of three Art Deco motel-style walkups with multiple layers of paint peeling off in three different pastel colors—the Section Eight Projects. Or, like most of the barrio called it, the S.E.P. You could always tell who the Section Eight kids were—we were the ones whose mothers sent them to the corner store to buy cigarettes with food stamps, who were still riding their bikes in the street after midnight, who knocked on the neighbors' doors to make telephone calls since they almost never had phones, or cable, or even electricity.

Boogie brought a bag of Doritos and a bottle of strawberry Cisco she got from the Pakistani at the bodega around the corner.

I always suspected the Pakistani had a thing for Boogie—he was always giving her free shit, and he never ever asked us for ID. I was working on a story for our school paper, *The Beachcomber*, but I was so sick of writing the same crap about basketball games and drama club, I kept pushing deadlines, turning in stories at the last minute. I had written two words on sheet of paper when Boogie showed up.

"Hey," she said, handing me the bag of Doritos. "Still looking for a scandal?"

Boogie's idea of a good story would involve her mom catching her up in the mango tree behind her building when she was making out with a kid from Treasure Island. Her mom made them both get down, then slapped them one after another, since they each had it coming. Boogie for being a sucia, and the kid for messing with a fourteen-year-old. We always argued about who had the worst mother, then I'd tell her about my mom, how I went to school mostly for the free lunch, since the only thing my mother ever cooked was freebase, how she spent her days smoking cookback with her junkie boyfriends, and how more than once I walked in on her doing one of her johns on the couch.

"Mothers suck," Boogie would always say. "I can't wait to be free."

She turned the knob on the black-and-white television set I kept in my room, passed me the bottle of Cisco. On the evening news, the broadcaster was reporting on teen violence in Miami, about Chris's death. All over Normandy Park, people talked about Chris whether they knew him or not. It was the story no one could get enough of. Exactly what I was looking for. I started scribbling, with Boogie hovering over me to cat a glimpse of my notes.

"Nena—" she started to say.

"What's up?" I grabbed a handful of Doritos from her bag.

"I gotta go," she said. "If my mom wakes up, I'm fucked."

Boogie's mother tried so hard to control her, to keep her close, she would end up pushing her away—right into the beds of all

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the barrio men she hoped to protect her from. I had a mother I barely recognized, who'd leave for days at a time, coming home only to catch a few hours of sleep after a weekend binge or a night in the drunk tank, who never noticed the empty fridge.

"Here's to freedom," Boogie said, holding up the bottle of Cisco, taking it with her as she climbed out through my bedroom window. Boogie would never know her idea of freedom was unthinkable to me. That, at the thought of freeing myself from the stranger who was my mother, I would feel such defeat, such loss. And even though my mother was still alive, I was already mourning her death.

I had no idea that when the story came out it would be as if Chris died all over again. In the hallways, kids who'd known him cried in each others' arms. Girls who claimed to be his girlfriends argued about who was with him last. Some of his friends from the neighborhood stopped to talk, holding up their copies of *The Beachcomber*. Even teachers discussed it between classes—what the entire barrio had been talking about for weeks.

We thought the whole thing was over a female, this morena, a red girl named Tabitha who everybody said Chris was fucking with on the down low. Then the rumors started—Chris had stolen some dude's car over by Crespi Boulevard, some cat nobody knew, or he had beef with some gangueros in Hialeah, or one of his mom's pimps tried to collect what she owed. The only thing anyone knew for sure was that one minute Chris and Kilo were at the corner of Seventy First and Rue Grandville, and the next Chris was lying on the sidewalk. Everyone had a different version of what Kilo was doing while Chris was choking on his own blood. Some people said he was sitting on the curb, just sitting there. Others said he tried going after the guy but got pistol-whipped, which would explain the cut above his eyebrow.

Now, a month later, Kilo was back in school. He was lucky, that's one thing everyone agreed on, no matter how many times the story changed. Lucky to be alive.

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I was struggling with the combination on my locker when I spotted Kilo headed my way. I knew he would say something about the paper, and all I could think about was the first time I saw him. Really saw him. I was on my way to third-period English with my homegirls. We were singing Two Live Crew's "Pop That Pussy" like it was our theme song, and he was in front of Mr. Williamson's English class reading an issue of *The Beachcomber*, the one with that bullshit story I wrote about Hurricane Andrew. When I got to Mr. Williamson's classroom, I waved to my girls as they split to their own classes. He rolled up his paper, said, "Hey, Nena," then left, with a swagger in his step that almost stopped my heart.

He didn't have the same swagger as he made his way toward me this time, and, when he stopped in front of me, he looked me dead in the eye, sizing me up like he was ready to battle.

"Hi," I said, biting my lip.

He had the paper in his hand, showed it to me as if I didn't already know why he was approaching me.

"Why did you write this?" he asked.

I froze. He was talking like I wronged him—not just like the tragedy had happened all over again, but like it was me who did it. My face was burning, but the guilt didn't lift from me as he took off without another word.

I knew what he meant. Why had I waited so long to write the story when I could've done it weeks ago? Did I know it would come out the same day he came back to school? In a way, I'd hoped it would get his attention. That he would see me, like he'd seen me before, with the hurricane story. But that wasn't the only reason. To me, Chris would always be a neighborhood kid who rode around on a BMX he stole from Dios sabe donde, who lived with his scutterhead mother but spent most of his time on the streets, in and out of shelters, or with Kilo. Chris was a kleptomaniac who was known for stealing everything he could get his hands on—stop signs, the hubcaps off the principal's rusty Chevy Nova, flea-market jeans hanging from clotheslines around the barrio. His most infamous plunder had been a Chapulín

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Colorado birthday cake he swiped from a little kid's party at one of the gazebos in Normandy Park—I was swimming in the park's public pool when Chris and Kilo showed up and started handing out cake.

What I didn't tell Kilo was that I wanted to say something about Chris. Something other than what was always mentioned in the news. To them, he was just a boy from the projects—a "troubled youth" who spent time in Juvie Hall, who was arrested six times before his thirteenth birthday. The truth was, Kilo was the only one with patience for Chris, and Kilo's was the only family who didn't have to worry about their shit showing up in one of Normandy Park's three pawn shops, because Chris had mad respect for Kilo's mom. Maybe he was everything they said on TV—a thief with a good heart, a victim to a random act of violence, a talented basketball player. What if he was all of that and none of it? What if he was just a boy who desperately needed a mother?

After school, I was already on the bus, lounging in the back row when Kilo got on. I'd been thinking that the next time we spoke I would explain about the story. The moment I saw him, though, I changed my mind. The speech I'd been practicing all day suddenly seemed ridiculous. He strutted toward the back of the bus, found a seat close to me, facing the side window instead of the front. He leaned back, legs stretched out in front of him. I thought I heard myself exhale with relief when he finally got up, but he just moved closer. I could smell the Newport he smoked just before he got on, could make out the Y-shaped cut above his right eyebrow.

"Why do you always look so pissed off?" he asked.

"I don't look pissed off," I said, although it wasn't the first time I'd heard that. My mother always said I had a face like I couldn't be bothered, just like my father. I tried to avoid that expression, putting on a fake smile when there was nothing to be happy about, just so I wouldn't have to hear *Why so serious* or *What's wrong?*

"Yeah. You do. Like you could fuck somebody up."

He put his dirty sneakers on the seat in front of him. But I noticed he was smiling, as if he was letting all the tension that had been between us just wash away.

"Maybe I'm just mad at you," I said. "Maybe I'm mad at the world." But I knew he didn't buy a word I said. He knew better. After all, we were from the same barrio, from the same broken world. From broken homes, broken English, and broke-ass parents.

I'd been home from school for hours and it occurred to me: I didn't need an excuse to talk to him; I could just go see how he was. After our bus ride, I was sure he'd be glad to see me, so I walked two blocks to his building and knocked on his door. His mother was in her nurse's scrubs when she came to the door. I'd seen her in scrubs for years, and everyone knew she worked the night shift at South Shore Hospital.

"Yeah?" She leered at me like I was a Jehovah's Witness coming to spread the word on a Sunday morning.

"Is Kilo home?" I regretted the question as soon as I heard myself ask it.

"Do you need him for something?" Up close, I saw her age for the first time, the crow's feet and the bags under her eyes.

"I was just—." She glanced at her watch, and I could tell I was wasting my time. I knew what people around the neighborhood thought about me and my mom—everyone knew my mother was a scutterhead. But I always thought Kilo's mom—the same woman who took care of Chris, who fed him and bought him shoes for school when his own mother put him out on the street—would understand that I wasn't my mother. "No," I said finally.

The door was closed before I even turned to leave.

I was making my way home when I spotted him waiting for me in front of my building, a basketball under his right arm.

"You stalking me?" I asked, hoping he didn't notice where I was coming from.

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"Why? You gonna call the cops?" Kilo had a thing about him—he was cool without even knowing it, without even trying. And he was his own person. Peer pressure didn't touch him.

"Only if you're dangerous," I said.

We climbed on the hood of a broken down Tercel that had been parked in front of my building for months. He put the basketball between us, and I lay down next to him, neither one of us saying anything for a while. He lit a cigarette, and we passed it back and forth. Only the sound of cars and buses driving by, the occasional kid on a bike. Just when I thought everything would get awkward, he took my hand. I thought he would kiss me, but he wasn't looking at me. The vein on his temple was throbbing, and he was lost somewhere up in the stars. He didn't have to say it; I knew he was thinking about Chris. Suddenly, his friend's death wasn't a tragedy that happened only to Kilo—I was there with him. Under the moonlight, we were more than just two kids from the neighborhood; there was something more between us, and everything inside me wanted to know him, to reach that part of him he kept only to himself.

At school that fall people didn't stop talking about Chris's murder. It was always on the news and everyone said the shooter was a kid, since we all knew they'd caught a guy, but they never showed his face. Didn't even let the cameras in the courtroom. Everyone said it was because he was a minor. The only thing we knew for sure is there were witnesses. Witnesses. That's what every station reported.

In the hallways, Kilo was always alone. He wasn't a loner—he was the boy everyone knew, nodding their heads as they passed him on their way to Math or Civics. Before Chris died, Kilo paraded the hallways the same way I did, surrounded by his homeboys, fucking up all the lyrics to Slick Rick's "Children's Story," him and Chris with their baggy jeans and matching Air Jordans. Nowadays, Kilo acts like he just wants to get away from all the bochinche.

One afternoon, when the final bell rang, when everyone else was scrambling through the hallways to meet their boyfriends

or girlfriends, to grab a quick feel before they had to get on the bus, I caught Kilo watching me. He watched me put my books in my locker, transfer a notebook to my backpack.

"Hey," I said, making my way over.

He wasted no time—the next thing I knew, my backpack was on the floor, his hands at the nape of my neck, and his tongue in my mouth, and I had no idea what the fuck I was doing. When he pulled away, he picked up my backpack and threw one strap over his shoulder.

"Hey," he finally said, a big grin on his face.

And that was our first kiss. We didn't notice the faces or the whispers following us as we made our way past them, or the gossip that started right there in that hallway. Later, we would take the bus together, back to Normandy Park. We would hold hands, watching out the window as Miami Beach passed us by. He would kiss me again, longer that time, and I'd let myself imagine that there was an entire world outside of Normandy Park, something holding it all together. And one day I would live in that world.

Miami was a transient city—everyone who lived there was from someplace else. Some of us brought by parents who thought we'd have more opportunities. Others, like Kilo, wouldn't feel at home there, but would never know any other place they could call their own.

Kilo and I both knew where we stood in the hierarchy of Latinos—we weren't like the Argentinean or Venezuelan tourists who graced the hotels and beaches in Miami. Although sometimes we pretended to be like them, browsing through the tourist-trap electronics and t-shirt shops on Collins Avenue, or trying to sneak in to the pool at The Carillon on 67th.

The first time we snuck in we thought we'd blend in. I had borrowed a swimsuit from Boogie, thought we'd go swimming in style, like tourists. As soon as we were out in the sun though, we realized we were off the mark. Kilo was a thick trigueño covered in what looked like jailhouse ink. I was like a jíbara right off

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the island, my jean shorts too baggy, my t-shirt too loose, not just because that was the style back then, but because most of my clothes were hand-me-downs from a family of pentecostales who lived two buildings over. One glance at us and you'd know we didn't belong.

I hesitated while taking off my shorts—in the Normandy Park pool, I always wore a long t-shirt over my suit. But when Kilo saw me in a bikini for the first time, he slapped my ass with his bare hand and said, "Damn, that's a lot of booty." We exploded in laughter, and all around us people started staring, so when the security guard headed our way, we decided to hit the beach instead of waiting to be escorted out of the hotel. We threw all our shit into my Jansport, and the two of us hoofed it across the boardwalk. Me, wearing the Jansport in the front like it was a baby, and Kilo jogging behind me, slapping my ass every chance he got.

I didn't stop to take off the backpack, just tossed it on the sand, kicked off my chanclas, and hit the water. Kilo jumped head first into a shallow wave, then came up and wrapped his arms around me.

"I need to tell you something," he said.

"Okay." I rested my chin on his shoulder, bracing myself. I was sure he wanted to talk about Chris.

"My sister's coming down from St. Pete," he said. "I'm supposed to go live with her."

"What? Where did this come from?" He had never mentioned a sister before, and now he was going to live with her? I didn't even know anything about St. Pete, except that it was on the west coast of Florida somewhere, and it was where old people went to retire. "What do you mean you're supposed to?"

"Just until the trial's over. My mom thinks it's better if they don't know where I am."

"What? If who doesn't know where you are?"

"I'm supposed to testify."

We hadn't talked about the trial at all. I hadn't asked him any questions about the night Chris died, as much as I wanted to, even though Boogie kept pushing me to get details. I thought

he'd open up when he was ready.

"So your mom doesn't want you to testify?"

"She thinks she knows what's best for me." He kissed me behind the ear, then down my neck. "Don't worry, Nena. I'm not going anywhere."

I didn't know if that's what I wanted to hear, if I wanted him to stay in Normandy Park just for me. If his mom wanted him to go, it was because she thought he'd be safer in St. Pete.

"We could run away together," I said. I was just entertaining the thought, but I wasn't playing. I knew I'd jump on it if he said the word.

"Where would we go?" He looked amused, but I couldn't tell if he was considering it.

"We could go live up north somewhere. See snow."

"What about Puerto Rico? Don't you ever think about going back? " It killed him when I talked about the island like it was a distant place. Couldn't understand why I hadn't been back there since I left, not even to visit family.

"I don't know."

"It's not like Cuba," he said. "You could go back."

He'd never been to Cuba, knew it only as the island of his mother's stories, where she met his father, where they fell in love. It was a place he knew he'd never see.

"We don't have that kind of cash," I said. But he knew it wasn't about the money. Even in the S.E.P., all the Boricuas would make it back to the island whenever they could, hustling for the cash however they could. "Anyway, when did we start talking about just me? I thought we were in this together."

"Listen, Nena," he said, holding me at arm's length, looking into my eyes so I would know he was serious. "You could go back," he said again. "If you wanted to."

Just before Hurricane Andrew hit Miami that summer, when the royal palms surrounding Normandy Park where still standing and Chris was still alive, I received a letter from my father's friend in Puerto Rico. I hadn't spoken to my father since my mother

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and I left the island, but we didn't have much to do with each other before that either. To my father, I was just a consequence of his affair with my mother—a romance that lasted only three months, one that ended abruptly with my father flying back to his wife and kids the moment my mother told him she was expecting his illegitimate child.

I met my father's friend, Frank—a Vietnam veteran who was confined to a wheelchair after losing both legs—only once. I was six years old and had seen my father only a handful of times, when he picked me up from my mother's apartment in order to "spend time" with me, but, when he took me to Frank's place, a house in La Playa de Humacao, my father had no intention of spending any time with a daughter he hardly knew. Instead, he dropped me off at Frank's after a brief introduction and went next door to "spend time" with Frank's new neighbor, Yolanda. I was scared of Frank at first, couldn't stop staring at the place where his legs were supposed to be. But it was Frank who made lunch for me, who asked questions about where I went to school, what my favorite food was, what my mom did for a living. When my father returned from the neighbor's house, he had a beer with Frank and then drove me home without a word. That was the last time my father picked me up. After that, my father didn't even bother, and I saw him only when he stopped by my mom's apartment in El Caserío, where I watched TV in the living room and my parents locked themselves in my mother's bedroom.

Frank's letter came as a surprise, but what was in it did not. My father, Frank said, had passed away. Heart attack. My father's widow was the one who insisted on reaching out to me, asked Frank to find me and invite me to visit my siblings in Puerto Rico. Frank offered to pay for my ticket, said my mother and I could stay with him in La Playa de Humacao. It didn't surprise me that the chance to meet my brothers and sisters came only after my father's death. That I was allowed into my father's world only after he left it.

I never told Kilo I could go back to Puerto Rico any time I wanted, that I had a family there I'd never met. And what he didn't have, the ability to see his mother's island—a place she

both loved and hated, where she sometimes vowed she would spend the last days of her life, and other times swore she would never set foot again—I had that, too.

It wasn't until one morning after first period that I knew. I was on the way to class when Kilo came up to me, took me by the arm and pulled me into the boys' bathroom. He shut the door, jammed my math book under it, and kissed me, my back against a wall. All I could think about was the smell, and that a math book wasn't going to stop anyone from getting that door open, but he pulled down my jeans and panties and went down on me, even before I knew what going down was. I forgot about the math book and the smell of piss lingering all around us, thinking only of that scar above his eyebrow, the ink on his forearms, his tongue. And I finally knew what desire was, the kind I could only know at fourteen, when everything else was uncertain and the only thing I could be sure of is that my world was beginning and ending all at once.

I lost myself, all over his face, my hands pulling on the back of his head, leaving behind the girl I was. I wasn't her anymore. I was something else.

He came up to kiss my lips again, harder this time, pressing his body against mine, his tongue in my mouth, and I could taste myself.

And I knew—just as I'd always known we were only children who were playing at life—that I'd always wanted this.

I didn't see it coming, but I knew something was wrong when both of them didn't show up to school on Monday. I spent most of the day hoping to spot Kilo in the hallways, or to find Boogie waiting for me in front of the gym. But Kilo never showed up, and Boogie didn't come over until I'd been home for several hours.

I expected it to be Kilo when I heard the knock—Boogie never used our front door; she usually snuck through my bedroom window. She must've seen the letdown on my face because the

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first thing she said was, "What's wrong?"

"Where were you?" I pulled her inside the apartment and shut the door. I'd been worried mostly about Kilo since Boogie skipped school with boyfriends all the time. Kilo hadn't missed a day since he came back to school, and there was no answer when I knocked on his door.

"I wanted to tell you, Nena." She ran her fingers through her hair, started pacing back and forth in the middle of my living room. "But I thought Kilo would."

"Tell me what?" I searched her face for a hint of what she was about to say.

"It was my fault," she said. "Kilo and Chris were in the park. I went to get him."

"What are you talking about?"

She sat on the edge of the sofa, stared down at her hands.

"I was the other witness. No one knew we were—you know. But then this other guy, Alex, this kid from Crespi I was fucking with, he found out about Chris." She let the tears in her eyes fall. I plopped down next to her. This wasn't the Boogie I knew, so broken. I'd never seen her cry before. "He saw us together once, me and Chris, then he stopped calling. But we kept seeing him around. Turns out they knew each other. Chris broke into his boy's car or something. You know how he was."

"Yeah."

"Chris and I had a fight that night, and I stormed off. That's when Alex and his boys showed up. I was already across the street, halfway to my building.

"Kilo tried to help him, then he was out cold on the sidewalk. That's when Alex pulled out the gun." She covered her face with her hands. "I keep thinking, maybe if I hadn't been with both of them—"

"It's not your fault," I interrupted. I put my arm around her, and she rested her head on my shoulder. We listened to each other breathe for a while, wiping tears off our cheeks.

"You're waiting for him, aren't you?" she asked. This was the

Boogie I knew, who could always figure me out.

"He didn't show up at school," I said. "Haven't seen him all day."

"He was supposed to be in court today," she said, her face stained with mascara.

"So that's where you were all day?" She shook her head yes.

"The lawyers say his mom sent him off somewhere. She didn't want him to testify."

"But he told me he wasn't going anywhere," I said. I started going over scenarios in my head. What if he was gone?

"He wasn't there, Nena."

I bolted over to the phone and dialed his number, Boogie grabbing on to me and pushing her ear closer to the receiver. After a few rings, his mom was on the line.

"I don't know any Kilo," she said.

"Kevin," I said.

"You have the wrong number," she said and hung up.

Boogie and I exchanged confused looks. I called again to make sure I had the right number, but Kilo's mom didn't wait for me to say anything this time.

"Don't call here again or I'll call the police."

I leaned my back against the wall, with the receiver to my ear, even after she hung up on me, trying to remember Kilo's words, what he'd said to me that day on the beach. He promised to stay with me.

I slid down onto the floor, letting the phone drop, hugged my knees tight against my chest.

It turned out the kid who shot Chris was only fifteen years old, a ganguero from Crespi Park. It was all over the news, how the motherfucker got Life. I found out later that Kilo went back to court and testified, even though his mother was set against it. One day she told the cops she'd gotten some threatening phone calls, and she moved out of her apartment in the middle of the night, leaving half of her furniture behind. No one knew where

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she went, but I heard she even quit her job at the hospital.

After everyone already knew who the ganguero was, and his boys were caught and charged as accomplices, even after they were all convicted and sentenced, Kilo still didn't come back to Normandy Park. I kept writing for *The Beachcomber*. Boogie stopped wasting her time with the losers she always ran with, started taking dance classes again. She was set on getting accepted to the New World School of the Arts. When we had free time, Boogie and I lounged around on the merry-go-round, not drinking anymore, but remembering a time when the days were long and the nights were hot, and I almost expected to see Kilo jumping the fence into the park to join his boys on the blacktop, or waiting for me in the hallway outside homeroom, ready to walk me to my next class. Sometimes I asked myself why I didn't try harder, during the short time I had him, to know him while he was still here. Why I never asked him about Chris. Other times, when I thought of those few months we spent together, I couldn't help wondering if he knew all along he would leave.

I always knew why I loved Kilo—because he was easy to love, because he believed in a better world, in possibilities. He even made me believe in them. But I never knew why he loved me, or if he loved me at all. Maybe he thought that, unlike Chris, I was someone he could save.

It was his mother who delivered the box a few months later. She came on a Saturday morning. I was headed to the bodega around the corner and opened the door as she was about to knock. She had the shoebox in her hands. I scanned the parking lot for Kilo, even though I knew he wouldn't be around.

"Hi," I said. She still had that same tired expression.

"How are you?" she asked, which was awkward since she'd never been one for small talk.

"Fine." My first instinct was to ask about Kilo, but it had been a long time since our days together, and I knew he was better off wherever he was. She looked over my shoulder at the

messy living room.

"Where's your mother?"

I didn't know what it was I felt then. Confused, maybe, that Kilo's mom was concerned about me. Offended that she thought I was some charity case. What if Kilo had changed her mind about me, convinced her to check on me because he thought I needed to be checked on?

"She's sleeping," I said, stepping outside and pulling the door shut behind me. It was the truth. My mom hadn't left her room in two days.

"This is for you," she said, extending the box out to me. "From Kevin."

"Thanks." I took the box from her hands.

"You know, it was never about you, Nena. I just wanted him to have a future. To be safe."

For the first time, I could see a little bit of Kilo in her, and I understood that this was her way of saying she was sorry for taking him away from me, but also trying to determine if I'd let him go.

"Me, too," I said. And I meant it. There was a time when the only life I could imagine was one with Kilo in it, and for a while I felt abandoned in Normandy Park. But not anymore. All that mattered is that he was headed where we both knew he was meant to be.

As she turned to leave, I was tempted to follow her across the parking lot. Maybe Kilo was waiting in the car. But I stepped back into the apartment and shut the door, forgetting my trip to the store.

I opened the box. It was filled with sand. I put my hand inside, ran my fingers through it. There were seashells inside, too, beautiful mollusk and clam shells, and I could tell they were handpicked from the beach. There was also a note, in his handwriting: *You could go back. If you wanted to.*

In a few years, Normandy Park would start to change. Soon it would be a completely different neighborhood. A wrought-iron gate would take the place of the chain-link fence, and the royal

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palms would be planted again as part of the city's reconstruction project. Almost overnight, the playground equipment would be brand new, the blacktop resurfaced, patches of grass and weeds replaced by a lush green lawn. The Section Eight Projects would be dismantled, all the people forced to move to other areas of the inner city—Hialeah, Liberty City, Wynwood. The small houses and Art Deco apartment buildings would be gutted and renovated. Property values would skyrocket and rents would be much more than any of us could afford. People who had lived there ten, twenty years would pick up and go to other parts. White folks would move in, mostly young families from places like Madison, Wisconsin, with babies they pushed in expensive strollers. They would walk their rare-breed dogs with names like Lucky or Champ, unlike our mutts, which we named Pancho and Chispita. The new residents would build their health food markets and coffee shops where the old bodegas and pawn shops used to be. The only thing that would remain of that fall after Hurricane Andrew would be our names carved into the trunk of the oak tree in the middle of the park: *Nena and Kilo Forever*. It was, after all, a transient city. But we would never really know if we outgrew Normandy Park, or if Normandy Park outgrew us.

In Australia, State Funerals Are Increasingly Offered to Persons of General Celebrity

Phil Estes

No one trained me to dislocate
my gagging mechanism.
So I choked to death on a 40-watt bulb
in front of her Majesty,
Prime Minister Kevin Rudd,
the press, and the guy in the cowboy boots
and Stetson who owned the basketball team.

The dream started in an Indian Casino
in Yakima Washington—the tribe
owned the Sunkings, a bus-league team.
I played small forward. I didn't have the body
for the NBA. My hands big like waffle irons
but too short—6'3". Size doesn't matter;
I was perfect for the Aussie way
the guy in cowboy boots and Stetson told me.
He bought my contract, and we flew
to Townsville, Queensland, Australia.

I made $100,000 as a Crocodile.
He also put me on TV with an American
comic who ate light bulbs
and told jokes about Britney Spears.
I stood in my green and gold uniform and played
set-up man. For example I would ask:
I don't know, why did Britney Spears eat her baby
with vegemite? I sometimes told the jokes
when the comic was too hung over.

Why did Kevin Federline rub lube
on Britney Spears' caesarian scar?
So he could have sex with the scar easier.

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The Queen laughed, and the Honorable Rudd clapped.
That's when I tried to eat the light bulb,
but the glass caught in my throat, and I choked
to death in front of them.

The Queen scattered my ashes off the Gold Coast.
Kevin Rudd wept. The American comic vomited blood
trying to eat a compact-fluorescent in mourning.
I never felt such love in my life.

Rose

Mary Beth Ferda

I heard he left her and they found her trying to pull out all her hair. I told my mother and she didn't seem to care. Or she did, very much, and only wished that her daughter could forget the tales of such a woman, because what the hair-puller had was contagious. I was superstitious, too, so I tried to forget about the bald lady. But first I had to name her ailments, as naming is knowing and avoiding and luck, all at once. I called her Rose, though that wasn't her name, and my eight-year-old brain saw her biting the wings of live geese. She rubbed the gravel skin of her driveway with her palms; she knew it was alive. She sang to it in her beehive voice, and saved her wolf call for her neighbors, who made her pies. With the fillings of their pastries, Rose washed her face then rinsed her peachy cheeks against the bark of her magnolia. This is how it thrived. When I couldn't forget Rose, I decided she was beautiful. And that if I came down with her sickness, I would become a great singer in many languages and take to wearing silk. I knew the truth: all the women were just jealous of the blooms in her yard. They wanted to be the talk of the town, to drop their mops and establish a gross uniqueness. I was beyond all that longing. I felt it sucking on my fingertips and reaching for my eyes—whatever desire it was that doomed her to tears, naked scalp, free pie.

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Remains

Rebecca Morgan Frank

There's one at every lost whistle stop—

A place to dig up dropped coins, lost keys

Some sort of archeology of movement

A recorded passing through nowhere

Something hatches in these places of waiting

Rootless tapping, the ghosts of valise, hatbox, duffle

Conjunction of the last stop and every platform ahead

Memory is a cultivation

The difference between not stopping and stop

Bronze placard on the crumbling brick

The was-a-stop, the yet-to-be-a-stop, or out there

An old caboose in an Oklahoma field, rusting

Anticipated roost for rodent, bird, lone man with a dog

Sonnets to My Fathers

Brandi George

I. Midwestern Air Guitar

Double fathers with double faces sing,
a parallelogram of mouths rewrite
the silence: "night so long when time goes crawling
by." They croon out discord, fight
the static hum of feet—desire to run.
He swung me through the air. The wind sunk through
my cells and spun a web. O father, once
I was a house collapsed, amends the blue
silk I struggled to escape. Hank Williams,
guitar in hand, lips open, knows
a rambling man is only free in dreams.
Behold each one—scarred, broken-nosed;
I've loved him. A martyr in waves, I break
and lift them like Diana in your wake.

II. Eternity Take Us—I Will Not Remember

In every atom pulled with fingers care-
ful of decay, I find your half-mooned eye-
lash. Down the windmill of cells, through air
and noise, embedded with Samurai
grace, I dredge up respect—descant
of crows. I wonder what you are. A doll
without a falcon cry, a sycophant
whose tongue is sliced receipts? A toll
of discord sounds from your heart—the blue
sky. Father, I've named you every star
I see. Nebulas shriek their maxim—truth
is in forgetting. So I will. Bars,
neglect, lies, forgotten. You are a sore
with no platelets, an Olympic torch.

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III. "Thought Kills Me That I Am Not Thought"

The you I love will die with me. My brain
like leaning towers falls to ruin, deft
fingers used to measure iambs, tranquil
on my breast. Stained papers in a chest
will outlive us. Unseen, words amount
to snail-less shells. O father, I'll treasure every
leaf that hits my face, and try to count
compulsively the stars, and punch with fury
eternal air in hopeless contemplation
of my fading eyes and limbs. Father,
do you feel the same beguiling pain
when laying bricks or building roads, or falter
hammer strokes when Monarchs, in a hex
of panic, brush their wings against your neck?

IV. "A Bootless Inquisition"

O Rattler, who knew it'd come to this: a flank
for Jeffrey's ankles? Tight as scales, you hug
a denimed calf. You're not alone, this rake
who wears you wears us all to clouds of dust.
But why? Because he didn't grow until sixteen,
and boys would stand in line to beat him up?
Because he loved a girl who loved cocaine
and OD'ed? I recall his boots, the muck
that fringed the soles. My mother's song for him:
"Behind Blue Eyes," the white of her knuckles,
warning, "Men are snakes," while salting the rim
of a Martini glass. I saw too many fickle
fools in place of him—my father. He,
sunset of blood, for which my mother grieved.

V. Pole Vaulting Jeffrey's Weakness

I am a bird in father's eye. His pea-
cock's plume obscures my bookishness
from view. Holidays, he'll purchase me
a pass to Gold's or running shoes. The nest
is far and cold as Icy Hot on knees
that couldn't vault a chair. O damn his records!
The sixteenth foot can go to hell. Degrees
of sauna grace are meaningless to hold
above my head. My mother said he laughed,
before the beauty took hold, so loud
and pure—the ringing cut the asp
from Cleopatra's breast. I'd love to shout,
"Why do you love being broken, father?" From silos,
he learned too many times he couldn't fly.

VI. Imagining Myself an Apparition

You texted me, "Good Morning." Shocked,
I pictured you among Wyoming hills
and smiled to think of edges. We haven't talked
in years. Miss you? And wish the snow-filled
yard a track, or the autumn leaves descend
the branches all at once? You are what you are.
Those bagpipes wailing loud enough to summon
up the dead can't call you home. Bizarre,
you wear destruction like a crown of laurel.
Apollo of the Rockies—condescend
to view your cell. I texted back, "Hello."
I meant to say: Don't worry about the end
or those you left. We don't matter. Just
love the empty sky that conjures us.

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VII. Trying to Be Romantic, Second Father

Engraved my mother's name upon a bullet
shell. But those were his militia days—
camo jackets, eyes disguised with soot,
unmarked helicopters waiting to betray
us all. By ten years old I learned to shoot
clay pigeons at 500 yards,
track a deer and till a field. His boots
were worn, fingers stained with oil, large
calluses warped the hands that also shoed
my Barbie dolls and circled hair
round house fly's necks. He used
to catch me baby rabbits, wild and frail
I'd find them dead in cages, stiff limbs
outstretched, jaws locked in mid-scream.

VIII. Hush

Little baby, daddy cocks a forty-
five one-handed. The blue expanse
is a shattered by a gunshot. I only
want to play outside. There's still a chance
he'll shoot the cats from kitchen windows, so I
wait with the hose on. I'm tired of chasing
that which I would love to safety. Goodbye.
There is a tree in your path I long for. Waiting
for the barrel of the night, I bleed the birds
you shot for sport and wish their death masks
struck in you a horror that was earthed
long ago, when your old dog snapped
at your father, and saying, "This is for the best,"
he shot him fourteen times and ploughed the carcass.

IX. machine

he takes the piston off the line
he hoists it lifts he takes the piston
off the line he vomits while
at work he hates his work he is
a plaid of wires he's photons bosons
father is a flannel blitzed
with grass he is a motor dodging
lilies all around he worships
friend-machines but I've been knit
with petals hammered to the barn
he used to tuck his thumbs in fists
before he learned to punch with hands
like wrecking balls and once he beat
a boy almost to death for me

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Art by

Paul Rogers

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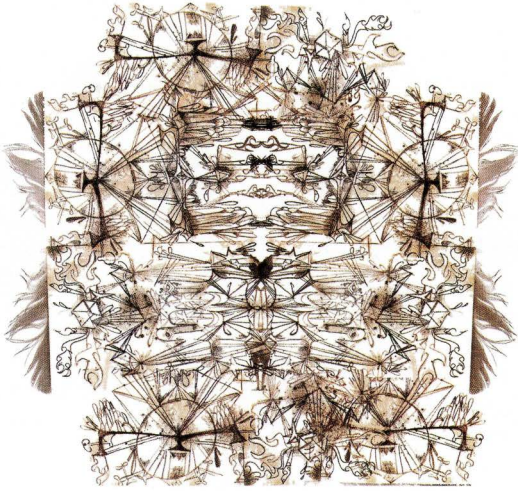

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Angels

Arthur Gottlieb

Weary of illuminating bibles,
they hang up their wings
and sit on tombstones
in the city cemeteries,
listening to bone turn to stone.

When the mid-morning sun
chases them,
most, dressed in rags of mist,
fade with the fog.

Some venture downtown
to wrestle with consciences.
Beaten,
they sprawl in wet gutters,
white wings soiled,
like some drunk dead to the world
in a dark doorway.
A few,
never forgiven by heaven,
fold their withered pinions
under old overcoats
and panhandle to keep body and soul
together,
until they atone for the sin
of being human.

Not many, but maybe one lucky devil
might make it back.
Most,
mistaken for street people
by strangers to saints,
lay where they slipped and slid
on skid row,

drinking blood from a wine bottle
to raise their spirits
a little above dead flesh.

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Vatayanasana

Robert H. Guard

—for Katy

Her brothers got dirt bikes that
They rode like wild animals.
So every Christmas she swung wide
The tall door of the barn,
Hoping to find her ride.

A body will form to its dream,
One way or another.
Nights under northern skies,
Meditating on the constellations,
She waits for transportation.

Today we watch her unfold from
One graceful animal to another. Her
Lion makes us laugh like her children.
Turtle always feels safe.
But seldom does she call us to the horse.

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End of Milking

Michael Hall

The rain has quietly stopped.
The dark dips a cup

into the bucket of evening,
pulling out stars.
The sky is clearing.

The last row
of cows depart

like rain-sodden Magi.

Even bright Venus,
high above the range, looks wet
as the grass

in fading fields.
The muddy track
leads only

out
away from the lights
of the bare shed
into the growing darkness

where the land is never below
our dreams.

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Evening Sky as Frontier

Michael Hall

When Jack left the bar
it was 5:46.
Others thought it was a little after.
Autumn had arrived and hung in the air,

cool as a reluctant door handle.
The range cushioned the sun
like a pool ball.

In the quiet street
houses and backyards are racked
into angles and shadows.
The air damp as

a vegetable garden
under a pirouetting sprinkler.
A woman calls

to a cat.
A dog barks
three houses down.

Two wheels shuffle onto the pavement:
a boy peddling the laid-back sky

to its frontier.

Fourth of July

Jenny Hanning

Hello beer can sacrificed to the lake
with your little astronaut inside
it's what he'd do
hang a chug-emptied can
on a length of fishing twine
and make us sing to Major Tom—
Can you hear me?
and that was early
the sky pink and the water red
sun going down down down
and the bugs rolling across
the still water in humming waves
and blood yet un-spilt
but then the dark rolls up from under ground
uncurls and stretches behind the pines
fingering skyward and yawning 'til it fills
what there is to fill and the water goes solid and black
and all the dark is alive and the fighting
it always starts as laughter
'til somebody goes and takes it too far
and behind the boat shack a mother not your mother may be
kissing a father who is your father and all the mothers
and not mothers teeter around in their not-for-outdoors shoes
looking for limes and a sharp knife
while the men shove and wobble and swing on one another
and then they forget about it—wipe the blood
on their sleeves and the dirt on their knees
and decide to do some fireworks
and ice cracks when the gin touches it
and down comes Major Tom's tin can
and they got it jerry-rigged to a rocket
and then up and up and boom and sparkle and fall
Planet Earth is Blue

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and plunk and sizzle
and we applaud and the adults all
crazy with whatever go crazy with whatever
and then it's bound to happen he'll get you around the middle
and throw you over his shoulder and cry all you like
pound on him even—you're seeing upside down
the boards of the dock and when to the end
you go in

The Lizard Man of Logan County

Tim Hedges

My mother was a puncher. My father was not. Whenever the fog inside my mother's head began to suffocate her, she'd squeeze her milky fist into a square of unsentimental fury and let loose on the world. She would hammer down without warning, her face as straight as Bud Abbott's. She would hit the wall, the dog, the ripe country air, the windshield of our hatchback. She would hit my father. My brother and I were spared the physical assaults. Though "spared" is probably the wrong word.

Scooby and I would lie in the dark and listen to the slaps and the thunder coming from downstairs, noises we associated with the dull impact of deflated soccer balls and bags of sawdust, the whomp, the oof, the collapse. "Goddamn," Scooby would say to the ceiling. "Goddamn." Hit her, I'd think, throttling the stuffed killer whale beneath my pillow. I'd slow my breathing and knead the beans in Shamu's belly. I'd time my thoughts with the pulsing drum in my head. Hit. Her. Back. Hit. Her. Back. My father never did.

If they'd been yellers, I might have been able to get out of bed, rush to the top of the steps, and scream until they stopped what they were doing and came to stare at me. But the beatings were silent and systematic, my father taking it, as they say, like a man. The fights materialized like report cards in the mailbox. You could feel them coming, but you could only guess when the real trouble would start. Then, suddenly, howdy-do, there they were, failures and absences in black and white for all the world to see. My mother would flatten her cigarette into the remains of her rhubarb pie, and we'd look around the dinner table to see who was in for it tonight. Would it be Scooby and me, tongue-lashed into a corner, crying because we'd just been told that we were going to hell for worshipping Pete Rose, a false idol? Or would it be Ramsey, my father, already bruised beneath his cheap suit coat, accepting blow after blow, for reasons unknown, without ever saying, "Stop?"

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When I was eight, I blamed myself for the methodical press that was mashing my family. Scooby was adrift in the world of junior high football and pinball arcades, so I'd come home from school and set the table, put sheet music on the piano. I'd arrange the house in a way that defied disturbance. I'd dust and vacuum and bury the steak knives in the basement crawlspace. I'd sit in the kitchen and do my homework, filling in pie slices with colored pencil or reading about young Daniel Boone shooting a panther with a squirrel gun.

One by one, my kin would slouch through the door, cross the linoleum, and grab a chicken leg from the fridge. My mother would show up first and look at me like I was an appliance from an alien world. Scooby would step through the screen door an hour later, keeping his hand on the frame so it wouldn't bang shut. He'd nod at me before flopping on the floor to watch *Taxi* or *Barney Miller*. I'd still be in the kitchen, the windows now dark, when my father got home from the furniture store, tie askew and glasses slipping down his nose. "Farris," he'd say, standing stiff as a toy soldier and placing a finger on my vocabulary worksheet. "Studying again." Then he'd laugh to himself, grab a Stroh's, and disappear into his workshop in the old barn, content to spend the evening surrounded by miniature figurines of Confederate legends.

I'd sit at the table and kick at my backpack on the floor. I considered what was left of my family: the whirr of my mother's sewing machine upstairs, the barn light spilling across the lawn, the canned laughter in the family room, the ticking of the kitchen clock. Each of us alone in the spaces we'd carved. I'd take a blank sheet of paper from my notebook and pull a compass from my plastic utensil pouch. I'd stab the compass point hard into the old oak table and begin to make circles. Every few revolutions I'd widen the angle so the pencil marks formed an expanding spiral. I'd go around and around, pressing as hard as I could, not stopping until I reached the edge of the page. Then I'd stare into the vortex and wonder what I'd done wrong.

I've told this story a dozen times in the last few weeks, ever since my father disappeared and the lizard man returned, and I always end up feeling soggy inside, like there's a spitball caught in my throat. It's a story about my father and me, but people would rather hear about the lizard. The claws, they say, how long were they? And did it really eat your car? They're less interested in my mother's death or my graduation speech or the tiny metal figurine of General George Pickett collecting lint in the front pocket of my Levi's.

But I tell the whole story anyway. If Suzy is with me, she'll hold my hand and nod at just the right times. "Twenty years," she'll say. "I can't even remember who I was back then. Can anyone?" She's trying to make things easier, to offer up some excuse to explain why I did what I did. In bed at night with the stars shining down on us, just as they do in a song, Suzy, my gal, my one true love, tells me she understands. She strokes my head, as if her simple caress has the power to draw the sorrow from my skull, as if she can pull apart my brain like it is so much cotton candy. Like the past—the crooked, shape-shifting past—is nothing but a cloud.

In September of my senior year, my mother started to die, murdered slowly like that famous baseball player, a victim of her own nervous system. We knew something was wrong when her speech turned oatmeal thick. She'd still cuss at my father, but the words came out like ketchup: gudam, subitch, dumfug.

I'd spent my childhood trying to avoid eye contact. Living with my mother was like living with one of those mummies from the late-night fright shows. If we stayed out of her way, didn't disturb her inner sanctum, my mother would let us live. If you want to understand my mother, consider her sense of humor: decorating the yard for Halloween with cardboard tombstones featuring the names of her only living children.

Candace Flanagan, 5'4", 125 pounds of spit and vinegar, believed in two tenets: go to church on Sunday and every man for himself. She wore no aprons, baked no cakes. She taught us

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to scramble our own eggs, scrub our own socks. To the outside world, she was quiet, humble, perhaps even sweet. She wore her hair in a tight bun, smiled at church, politely refused spaghetti dinner invitations, and spent her evenings sewing dresses to donate to the Methodist relief pantry. She saved her true self for us, her family, her flesh and her blood. Her fury was ours alone. I realize now that my mother was not well, her psyche crumbling in a way that supposedly runs in families. When I was young, however, I saw my mother as a simple equation: she was edgy, tense, mean as a drowning squirrel. She was no one I wanted to know.

My father, meanwhile, sold tables and chairs, flowery sofas that turned into beds. He was no Steve Martin, but at least he would talk to me, occasionally pull a coin from behind my ear. I knew he loved my mother because he told me to pray for her every night. Plus, there was the black-and-white wedding photo nailed to a rafter at the bottom of our basement steps: my father running beneath a shower of rice, my mother clinging to his hand and covering her head, both laughing wildly. But as distant as that image seemed to me, there might as well have been dinosaurs in the background. No one in my family held hands anymore.

One Friday night, just before my mother was diagnosed, I got home from a football game and heard the sewing machine sputtering in the guest room. I stood by the door and watched through the crack as my mother pounded on the table with both fists and let out a frustrated shriek. She shifted her weight and slid like a teardrop to the floor. Then she picked up the foot pedal, banged it twice against the table leg, and fell on it with all her weight. The machine picked up speed, pounding like a jackhammer and buzzing like a blender. The blue cloth on the needle plate began to bunch and the machine hiccupped as if it were being choked.

I had already backed away and was leaping down the stairs three at a time when I heard the grand crash of a sewing machine. Something was wrong with my mother, and I'd lived with her

long enough to know that she'd blame the first of us who caught her sight. I slipped through the fence in the backyard and headed into the darkness, content, like so many times before, to let my father take the fall.

Now, when Suzy, my wife, is brushing her teeth and I'm lying alone in bed, I can wonder if things would have been different if I'd kicked open the door and grabbed my mother by the shoulders, shouting at her to tell me what was wrong. I know I couldn't have saved her. The dominoes had started to topple, my mother's motor neurons slipping off the conveyor belt one by one. But I was just a kid then, a seventeen-year-old chump who had given up on his family years ago. My mother was broken in some irreversible way, and, truth be told, I didn't care. I'd stopped praying for her to be normal long ago. Why would God listen if I asked for help now?

She died half a year later, on March 21, in room 323 of Lakeview Hospital. When it happened, my father was crying and holding her hand. That's what made me want to throw up. Not the sight of my mother full of tubes, not the flat buzz of the monitor on the wall, not the smell of mouthwash and cotton balls that had been hanging on my clothes for months, but the image of my father, Ramsey Flanagan, bowing before the beast. Scooby and I looked at each other while the nurses averted their eyes and began to disconnect the machines. My brother pinched two fingers together and brought them to his lips in a silent question. He tilted his head toward the door and I shrugged. My father didn't look up, and we didn't wave goodbye.

We listened to Pink Floyd in Scooby's 'Vette in the parking lot and let the smoke swirl around our heads. I stared at the familiar window on the third floor and waited for someone to turn out the lights.

After my mother died, the lights in Ramsey's barn remained dark. No matter how early I got up for school, I'd find him at the kitchen table, fingers wrapped around a coffee mug as if he were afraid it might fly out the window. He had gone to work at the furniture

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store a few times, but mostly he spent his days driving endless loops around the lake. One morning, after I saw him throw his shotgun in the backseat, I skipped school and tailed him. He drove for hours, winding his way on 366, 235, Turkeyfoot Road. At sunset, I walked up as he sat at a picnic table looking toward Turtle Shell Island. He wasn't surprised to see me.

"Farris," he said.

"Ramsey," I said.

We sat in silence for ten minutes before I asked him what we were doing.

"What are we doing?" he repeated. "What are we doing?" He hummed a long, flat question mark. A duck descended on the water, wings flapping. "That's the $64,000 question, Farris. That's the one you save for the pearly gates."

I sat beside my father and imagined how many bruises he had absorbed over the years. I wondered if they would ever heal.

"We used to camp here," he said. "Before you were born."

I nodded, trying to picture my mother in a sleeping bag.

"We had some good times," Ramsey said, pressing his palms flat on the bench.

I wanted to ask him how his life had ended up the way it did, why he let her treat him like a chew toy. But my tongue began to swell. I looked in my father's eyes and knew that now was not the time.

My father got up, and I followed him to the water. He picked up a stone and weighed it in his hand. Then he cast it sidearm toward the island. It skimmed the surface and leapt wildly in a new direction, once, twice, three times. I grabbed my own rock and heaved it skyward. The lake exploded when the boulder hit, my ears filling with a suctiony ploosh. I stood beside my father and counted the rings as they bloomed from the impact, circles upon circles stretching toward the sunset, waves rippling outward all the way to the horizon.

Four weeks after the funeral, I was sitting at the kitchen table working on the second draft of my graduation speech when my

father was attacked by the lizard man. You can read all about it at the district library in Bellefontaine. Just ask old Ms. Barnes for every issue of the *Logan County Tab* from April through August 1989. If they've all been stolen, ask for the microfiche.

It was a Thursday night. My father's Nova ripped up our gravel driveway and skidded to a stop sideways, the headlights casting unfamiliar shadows on the cabinets above the stove. I dropped my pencil as Ramsey thudded into the room and scrambled for the wall phone. His hair was trying to flee his scalp, and his hands were jumping like trout.

"Jesus," I said, getting up and leaning out the door. The car was running, no one else in sight. "What the fuck is going on?"

My father spun the last digit and mashed the phone against his ear. He gulped the greasy kitchen air and wrenched the cold-water faucet before sticking his face directly under the rush. Dripping from eyebrow and nose, he waved me away and barked into the receiver.

"It's in the swamp," he shouted. "It went back in the swamp."

I sprinted upstairs and grabbed the other line. Dorsey Mason, Scooby's former classmate and recently appointed deputy of the Indian Lake Police Department, was demanding to know who was calling.

"This is Ramsey Flanagan, 1-2-5 Patterson Drive, you son of a bitch."

"Dorsey," I interrupted. "It's Farris. I don't know what's going on, but my dad is flipping out. You better get someone over here."

Dorsey let out a long breath. "He ain't hurt, is he?"

"No," my father and I said at the same time.

I heard the screen door bang, and I hung up the phone.

By the time Dorsey got to our house, I had heard Ramsey's story three times, but I couldn't figure out how he had destroyed his car, or why. The front fender of his Nova was torn in half, the left headlight busted to reveal a coil of twisted wire snakes.

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Deep scratches crisscrossed the entire front grill as if a set of metal teeth had been gnawing on the hood. Additional gouges ran to the trunk which was broken, unclosable, wrenched off its hinges. The top of the car had caved in as if someone had dropped a bowling ball on the roof. The back left tire was shredded and limp on the grass, like a dirty piece of lettuce.

I'd convinced Ramsey that Dorsey wouldn't believe his story until he calmed down, so my father paced the yard while I gave Deputy Mason a tour of the Nova.

"Holy fuck," Dorsey said, running a gloved finger along the scratch marks. "This wasn't no car crash."

"Dorsey," I said quietly, turning my back to my father. "He says it was a lizard man."

Dorsey twisted his face into a confused corkscrew. "He says he hit a lizard?"

"No," I said, holding my hand above my head to indicate height. "A giant. Lizard. Man."

"Oh, shit," Dorsey said, looking over my shoulder. "Is he for real?"

I nodded and called Ramsey over.

What my father told Dorsey was reprinted on the front page of the *Tab* the next afternoon along with a photograph of the abused Nova. I don't know which was worse: hearing the story from my father's own lips or seeing it there on page one, knowing that this same black ink would soon be rubbing off in the sweaty hands of farmers, truck drivers, and high school students all across Logan County.

To his credit, Ramsey's story never changed. When offered the chance to embellish, hyperbolize, or retract his claims, he never wavered. What he told us that night was the same story he would tell for twenty years, all the way up until last month when he disappeared, some say, from the face of the earth.

While driving on the unpaved portion of Township Road 51 near the North Fork swamplands, Ramsey Flanagan, age 48, popped a tire. He had just removed the jack from his trunk when he heard a thumping from the trees to the north. He squinted

into the dusk and saw a "bipedal humanoid cryptid" (the *Tab*'s official description) scuttling toward him.

"It was 25 yards away and its red eyes were burning a demon's rage," my father said that night and every night thereafter. "By the time I got in the car, the thing was clawing at my door and hissing like a speared milk snake." Then it jumped on the roof and howled.

According to Ramsey, the lizard man had three black-nailed toes on each foot and green scaly skin. When Ramsey threw the Nova into reverse, the lizard man was jolted onto the hood where it stared my father in the face and flicked its pink tongue in and out like a flame. Ramsey shifted gears, floored the accelerator and jerked the wheel. The lizard man slid to the ground, grabbed the bumper and lifted the front end of the car three feet off the ground. When Ramsey laid on the horn, the lizard man dropped the car, smashed the headlight with his three-fingered fist, and glided into the swampy forest.

In my father's own words: "This particular lizard man was vicious. He was strong and he was angry." Garrett Simmons, the *Tab* reporter who usually covered farming and high school sports, must have typed this line two dozen times over the next three weeks as lizard man hysteria swallowed Logan County. Sitting at our kitchen table that first night, Garrett wiggled his pencil at me and asked for my thoughts on this business. "No comment," I said, setting my face in the aggravated glare that would mark my involvement in the story from then until eternity.

See, people knew my father. They'd never pegged him as a crazy man. He was the guy to find when you needed a deal on a leather sectional, Scooby's dad, the man who'd reconstructed Antietam in his barn. Ramsey Flanagan. Average Joe. Two sons. Dead wife. Church-going Methodist. Same as you and me. Maybe this is why the story stuck, why it wasn't just chalked up as the moonshiney ranting of a tattooed hillbilly. Or maybe I just didn't get the joke.

In any case, I think you know most of the rest. How the *Tab* thought they'd hit pay dirt and ran some variation of the story

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on the front page for five days in a row. How the Logan County Sheriff's Department rushed in, with barely a wink, and held up to the TV cameras the plaster casts of "three-toed footprints" taken from the scene. How the story radiated to Springfield, Columbus, Louisville, Vermont. How my father grabbed every microphone in sight and told his tale, always ending with the same dire pronouncement: "We don't know what the lizard man wants, but you can be sure that he doesn't want to be our friend."

All I wanted was to get to graduation in June, maybe find a girlfriend, and figure out what I would do with the rest of my life. Classmates would pass me in the hallways, extend their fingers like talons, and hiss, "Lizard man!" then try to give me a high-five. I couldn't decide if this was worse than being known as the kid whose mom had croaked. I'd grin and shrug and dump my books in my locker which someone had decorated with a series of tiny reptilian footprints.

Only Mr. Kolman, my history teacher, cared enough to make sure I wasn't cracking up. He motioned for me to stay one day after Civics and told me he'd seen my father on TV.

"Yeah," I said. "He does that."

"Is he OK?" Mr. Kolman said. "I mean, with everything?"

I knew Mr. Kolman was thinking about my mother. He'd been one of the few teachers to come to her funeral. He was that kind of guy, even though all I'd ever gotten from him was Bs. I told him everything was weird but fine.

"You don't believe him, do you?" Mr. Kolman said, tossing me a Jolly Rancher.

I didn't know how to answer this question. Did I believe a seven-foot-tall lizard man had nearly eaten my father? Did anyone? I mean, really?

"I don't know," I said. "Something happened that night. I just don't know what it was." I unwrapped the hard fruity cube and popped it in my mouth to indicate I was done talking.

"Well, hang in there," Mr. Kolman said, walking me to the door. "Remember what Gandhi said: The truth transcends history. Lizards don't live forever. Your dad will be OK."

For a few days, Mr. Kolman was right. No reporters knocked on the door. The phone was silent. Ramsey, who'd spent the week staring at his Nova or flipping pages in the Animal Kingdom picture books he'd gotten from the library, would have to go back to work.

By this point, I was staying most nights with Scooby in his apartment above Buck's Drugstore, where he'd lived since my sophomore year. I couldn't handle my father's descent, his creepy sketches of lizard people on the refrigerator staring at me each time I reached for the OJ, so Scooby opened his doors. "Like you had to ask," he said, handing me a canned beer. Having a brother named Scooby (born Scofield Flanagan) carried with it all the joys and difficulties you might expect. He was a goof, a clown. He liked Donkey Kong more than anything in the world. Classmates, his and mine, assumed that Scooby could score them some weed, and usually they were right. He'd made enough from selling dimes and working construction to buy a used Corvette, yellow with red fenders. But Scooby, for all his flaws, was a protector, always there to shield me as best he could from the shitstorms of the world.

When the lizard man struck again, I was on Scooby's futon, smoking a bowl and watching a *20/20* report on a Colombian jetliner that crashed into a mountain. During a commercial break, the local anchorwoman broke in with a tease about the new sighting. "Keep your pets indoors tonight." She smiled brilliantly into the camera. "The lizard man is on the prowl. Details in twenty minutes."

"Fuck," Scooby said. "Fuckin' A."

I turned up the volume. The lead video on the local broadcast was Pop Newman, a frantic man in a baseball cap, shouting at close range into the news camera. He had spotted the lizard man while penning his goats earlier that evening. "I seen him peepin' his head around that tree," Pop said. "His eyes was real big. Kind of like …" Pop raised his eyebrows and glared at the camera as if he was trying to win a funny face contest.

The next thing they showed was a clip of my father's chewed-up Nova. Then the toothy anchor said my father's name, and I got the sinking feeling that the real madness was just beginning.

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Two days later, Gus Mitchell said he saw the lizard man loafing along the grassy runway as he prepared to lift off in his crop duster. That weekend, Alf Henderson, wearing a homemade Lizard Man! t-shirt, appeared on the seven o'clock news raving about how he'd seen a creature walking right on top of Indian Lake as he fished for crappies one morning. That same day, Dixie Smith went to the police with a story of "six or seven" missing cats. When the reporters showed up, she unveiled her station wagon, pieces of which were ripped and bent, scratch marks on all four doors. "Whatever did this was big and bad," she said, solemnly, before looking into the lens and warning that, from now on, her shotgun was locked and loaded and waiting for the lizard man should he ever choose to show his face.

Like an electric cattle prod, my father's story had Logan County bucking and kicking, confused, out of breath, and stumbling toward an unknown destination. The general atmosphere was not one of fear, as you might expect when a terrible beast is lurking in your woods, but one of excited anticipation. The sleepy streets of Logan County were buzzing like the carnival had come to town. Huddy's Hardware even tied some green balloons to their porch railing and put out a sign for a Lizard Man Special: Flashlights, Batteries, and Bibles, 50% off. A stranger from Toledo showed up in Town Square and started selling Lizard Man tee shirts from dented cardboard boxes. People gathered for parties on lake house decks and, I imagine, tried to startle each other by throwing rocks into the dark underbrush when no one was looking.

Ramsey, for the first time in his life, was a star. He organized hunts, leading a daily parade of slow-moving pickup trucks around the lake, scanning the deepest, darkest groves for a pair of burning red eyes. He felt—he told me on the phone— just like Lieutenant Henry Thomas Harrison, lead scout for General Lee, wandering the hills of southern Pennsylvania, trying to convince Longstreet to summon enough troops to counteract the Union army's secret advance. I told him to get a grip, then slammed the receiver into its cradle.

The torture of living with my mother was supposed to be over. Ramsey was unbound, free at last to be my dad. And now he'd gone and spotted a lizard man. I mean, Jesus Christ, embracing the lunacy was no way to grieve. What was he trying to prove?

I'd never understood my father. I'd watched him absorb my mother's abuse, punch by obstinate punch, and never raise the slightest defense, as if he were a silent lump of dough. On the good days, my mother would pack Scooby's lunch, leave the box of Cheerios on the table for me to pour. She might even set aside her sewing on Sunday nights and come down to sit beside my father on the couch when we all watched *TV's Bloopers and Practical Jokes*. On the bad days, when Scooby left the cap off the Listerine, when I had been coughing too much in my sleep, when Ramsey's commission check wasn't enough to cover our monthly Methodist tithe, my mother breathed fire. My father would stand in her path as if summoning the flames, and my mother's inferno would sear him to the bone.

For years, I'd wanted nothing more than for my father to toss Scooby and me into the backseat of his Nova and drive until we woke up next to an ocean. Then we'd buy tickets for the boat that would take us to a place my mother could never go. At the very least, I expected him to grab my raging mother by the wrist, just once, yank her arm behind her back, and tell her that he'd had enough. She wasn't allowed to treat us like this anymore. She was going to start acting like a mother, the kind we'd seen on TV. One day, I kept hoping, he was going to save us all.

One afternoon when I was in third grade, Scooby and I got off the bus and, as we approached the house, heard familiar stomps coming from my mother's room. She was home early from the hospital phone bank, where she transferred calls from nine to five, every Tuesday through Saturday. "You better clear out," Scooby said, ducking through our split-rail fence and jogging back down the road toward his friend Lonny's house. "Come find us if you need to."

I stood on the porch for a minute, moving from foot to foot,

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having to pee but not sure I wanted my mother to know I was home. A slammed door sent me scrambling across the yard, backpack leaping wildly on my shoulders. I rounded my father's barn and leaned against the peeling paint. Seventy feet away, the house was still. I looked toward the neighbors' windows in the distance, then peed a hard stream into the woodpile.

As I was finishing, I stared into the dark glass of the barn's only window. This was my father's workshop, the place where he became even more of a mystery, just a distant buzz of power tools and the occasional burst of sparks from a soldering iron. Hours and hours of silence. I'd been inside twice before, each time with my father's cold hand on my shoulder and his cold voice in my ear: "Don't touch anything."

On Saturdays, bearded men like Otto Kunstmann and Emil Brugger, guys who sold crummy antique furniture and dusty old six-shooters, would show up and knock on my father's barn. From my bedroom window, I'd watch my father open the door and welcome them inside, patting each man on the back as he crossed the threshold. They were there to marvel at Ramsey's latest re-creation, study the sweeping miniature landscapes of Corydon, Honey Hill, Shiloh, Manassas. My father, for all his stoic isolation, liked to show off.

As I stood on tiptoes that day and gazed into the barn, I could just make out the series of tables against the far wall. This is where Ramsey worked his magic, his nimble fingers rearranging life beneath a single bare bulb hanging from an extension cord. I zipped up, slipped out of my backpack, and placed my palms on the windowsill. The window was open an inch, a rare oversight for a man who kept his workshop padlocked and dark at all times. I gained a foothold on a loose log and wedged my hands under the window's crack. By climbing higher up the woodpile, I managed to create enough leverage to rattle the swollen window wide enough to wiggle through. I thudded onto the dirt floor and wiped my mouth on my school shirt, a move I would pay for on laundry day.

Exhilarated, but too scared to turn on the light, I moved

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from table to table, letting my fingertips linger on the small metal soldiers charging across the scorched earth, their exquisite battle flags frozen in mid furl. Each table featured a separate combat zone complete with bucking horses, dying boys in dirty blue caps.

The entire room smelled of my father: oily rags, turpentine, an ocean of Old Spice. I'd often imagined him behind these locked doors, hunched on his workbench, painting an expression of surprise on one of his toy soldiers with a brush no thicker than a toothpick. I'd wanted to join him in the creation of these silent campaigns, forgetting for a few hours the theater of war across the yard. But whenever I'd ask, Ramsey would tug my ear. "Not today, Farris. Maybe when you're older, OK?" Eventually I stopped asking, convinced that my father was nearly as freakish as my mother. Following Scooby's lead, I assured myself that the secret to survival was to dismiss them both. I began to react to my family the same way I reacted in gym class when I had to square dance with one of the ugly girls: I chalked it up to bad luck, gritted my teeth, and glided along, step by step, promenading in time, content with the knowledge that the song would eventually end.

But that day, alone in my father's workshop, I was still sure that I could save my family if I could just uncover the magic words. They had to be in here somewhere. Hours later, as the actual sun slumped behind the western treeline, I studied the precisely placed farmhouses of Virginia, the rows of infantry crouching behind fence posts and taking aim. Their gray-clad enemies advanced in a perfect line, erect and determined, as if begging to be cut down. I leaned in close, picked up a rebel by his head, and brought him to my ear as if he might whisper me the secret. All I heard was a screen door banging in the distance, two dogs yapping to beat the band.

I laid awake that night, listening to the muffled sounds of my father at work in his barn. I was sure that, any minute now, he would come stomping up the stairs, flick on the light switch, and tell me to get my sorry behind out of bed. I had purposely left the window open in the barn, my quiet way of letting my

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father know that I'd been in his space. I wanted him to be angry, to raise his hand. I wanted my father to defend his turf like a good little soldier.

The downstairs clock was chiming eleven when I heard my father come inside. A moment later, the upstairs hallway flooded with light, and I held my breath. Ramsey climbed the stairs and clomped down the hall. I heard him pause for a moment, whether outside my door or his own, I couldn't tell. Then I heard the creak of a hinge, the rush of a faucet, and, once again, I was back in the familiar silence of night.

By Memorial Day of senior year, I had moved in with Scooby, far from Ramsey's bloodshot eyes, his maps of Logan County blanketing the kitchen table. I hadn't seen my father this worked up since, well, ever. He was twitching with energy, eating nothing but instant oatmeal and Bagel Bites. His workshop remained dark.

On a Tuesday afternoon, I was home to wash some socks, when Ramsey burst into the laundry room and raised a rolling pin over his head. "Jesus, Farris," he said, setting the tool on the counter with a shaky hand. "I didn't know you were home."

"Hmmm," I said. "No kidding."

"Well, so, you're home."

I had nothing to say to this man. Not anymore. "Apparently."

"Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"It's 5:00, Dad."

Ramsey was rattled, like a dog scared of thunder. "Oh, I see."

With my foot, I nudged a plastic chair in his direction, and he dropped into it like he'd been shot. "You know, I'm graduating on Sunday. High school. Like, this is it. No more school. I'm giving a speech, remember?"

Ramsey was looking past me into the spin of the wash. "Farris. You are? You are. I know. I remember. I'll be there. We're so proud of you."

I fiddled with a knob on the dryer. *We're so proud.* I tried to let it go. I was 17 years old. My mother was dead. My father was falling to pieces. What was I supposed to say? I didn't know the magic words that would make the misery disappear.

"Why are you doing this?" I said, banging my fist into the dryer, making a hollow boom. "This whole lizard man story is insane, you know that? People think you're fucking crazy." I wasn't convinced this was entirely true, but it was easier to say "people" than it would have been to say "I." "This whole town is fucking nuts. And it's because of you."

Ramsey reached down and picked up a bottle of stain-removing spray. "I saw something, Farris. I don't expect you to understand."

"Oh, bullshit!" I shouted. "Mom's dead and you can't handle it and you came up with this—all this crazy shit—because you're pathetic and I can't understand why you can't just act normal for once in your life. Jesus Christ!"

This is when my father started squirting me with the stain remover. It came out in a stream, hitting me in the chin, the neck. It smelled like my mother's flower garden. He stayed in the chair, squeezing the trigger with both hands, as I put up my fists to shield my face. I lunged forward and grabbed the bottle, trying to wrench it from Ramsey's grasp. The plastic chair bent backwards and we ended up in a heap on the tile, damp and sputtering.

I scrambled to my feet, bottle in hand, nozzle pointed at my father's head. He lay beside the overturned chair, staring at the ceiling with his hands near his face.

"Are you OK?" I said, backing away. "Dad?" I was filled with anger, not at my father, but at the world, the dirty-kneed citizens of Logan County, for letting him become this pile of flesh on the ground, for believing every nutty word he said and celebrating like it was the Fourth of July.

Ramsey sat up and pressed his back against the wall without looking at me. His breath was slow and steady, like air from a punctured tire. He nodded. He was OK.

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I left my father on the floor. I set the bottle down, pushed a button to stop the washing machine, grabbed an armful of dripping socks, and left my father, sad and confused, on the cold, hard floor.

Graduation Day was blustery and cool, weather that turned umbrellas inside out and had all the girls in the class of '89 reaching for extra bobby pins to keep their hair from whipping everyone in the face. As a featured speaker, I got to sit on the dais in the middle of the football field and look down at the sea of 155 blue-gowned Lakers for what I knew would be the last time. I saw Scooby leaning against the fence that surrounded the track and raised my chin in his direction. He waved. I scanned the bleachers for Ramsey, not sure whether I wanted him to be there or not.

As the faculty processed into the stadium, Mr. Kolman gave me a thumbs-up, and I returned the salute. He was the one who'd convinced me to enter the speech contest back in January, probably assuming I needed something like this to help me keep my mind off the fact my mother was dying. I was pretty sure he'd rigged the whole process, which was supposed to be anonymous, and made sure that my speech was chosen as the winner. I'd made it funny and sweet, a masterpiece of metaphor with all the standard lines about rivers and clocks and windows of opportunity. I reminded everyone that commencement was a beginning not an end.

I was scheduled to speak after valedictorian Anna Miller and class president Corey Hanes, but suddenly I realized I had nothing to say. I didn't feel like telling any of these people to go forth and follow their dreams. They were nothing like the "seedlings" to which I was about to compare them. I could not, with a straight face, encourage these grinning goons to spread their wings and make the world a better place.

As the pomp ended and the circumstance began, I saw Ramsey in the top row, seated near the press box, hair combed and glasses straight on his face. Principal Krapptauer was

introducing Anna to the crowd, giving a two-minute bio that mentioned her scholarship to Wittenberg and her hours of candy striping at Lakeview Hospital. I tuned out her entire speech as well as Corey's. I focused instead on Ramsey, studying his attentiveness, squinting to see how the other grownups in the crowd were looking at him. He was clearly by himself, plenty of space on the bleachers in front and to the side. At one point, Lonny Murphy's dad leaned back two rows, tapped my father's foot, and said something that made Ramsey smile.

I was still staring at my father when the crowd rippled with laughter, and I realized Corey must have made a joke. My ears burned when I heard the words "lizard man."

"As we've seen by now," Corey was saying, "the world is full of lizard men. Our challenge, as the Indian Lake High Class of 1989, is to tackle these beasts head-on and take them down. In the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man who faced many lizard-people in his days, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Thank you, God bless, and go Lakers!"

The crowd cheered its approval, the senior boys woofing like dogs as Corey cranked his fist in the air. Heading back to his seat, Corey high-fived everyone on the stage. From the podium, Principal K thanked him and then looked my way. "Our final student speaker is the winner of our commencement speech contest, Farris Flanagan. Farris?"

I approached the microphone to polite applause. For the first time in my life, everyone knew who I was: the kid with the dead mother, the brother who sold ditchweed, the father who'd come face to face with the lizard man. It was time for me to speak.

I pulled the speech from my pocket, the typed words blurring, spinning off the page. I gazed out at the parents and children of Logan County, the teachers, councilmen, and priests, the potential victims of a bloodthirsty lizard man. I blinked at Scooby who was already turning to walk away as if he knew what I was about to do. I stared at my father, Ramsey Flanagan, anxious and alone in the top row, and I crumpled my speech into a ball.

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My wife and I talk about what I did next. "You were under so much stress," Suzy says. "You were only a boy." With my head pillowed in her lap, I can almost believe her. But even back then, I wasn't sure whether I was trying to save Ramsey from himself or destroy him once and for all.

What I did was breathe once, heavily, into the microphone, and speak what was in my heart. "My father," I said, pausing and glaring at the audience long enough that they knew we were all in store for trouble, "is a liar." The simple words tumbled out and sat there, big as boulders, on the fifty-yard line.

I told the assembled crowd that the lizard man was a lie, a story made up by a lonely man. My father, I shouted, was crying for attention, and, God damn it, Logan County had obliged. How could anyone believe him? I pounded the lectern. I pointed my finger at the pep band, the droopy dads with cameras hanging around their necks, the gray-haired grannies in the front row. What was wrong with everyone? By the time Mr. Kolman wrestled me from the podium, I had managed to indict the entire town as blind, gullible, idiotic, and insane. I was still shouting, "There is no lizard man!" when Mr. Luchsinger, the gym teacher, wrapped his arms around my waist like I was a sack of flour, carried me into the locker room, and dumped me on the moldy shower floor.

You can probably imagine the rest: how the town was chirping about who was more crazy (my father or me), how everyone I met treated me like I was carrying a loaded weapon, how I quit my job at the lumber yard, withdrew my registration from classes at the Ohio Hi-Point Career Center, and began to study schedules at the bus station.

For a week, I stayed on Scooby's futon, smoking and watching *The Price is Right*, eating Kentucky Fried Chicken by the bucket. Scooby would get home from painting houses, shake his head at me, and say, "Best speech in the history of Indian Lake High School." I'd give him the finger without looking away from the screen.

I was beginning to feel like maybe things could go back to normal, like maybe I hadn't blown a hole in the middle of the universe and been sucked into space. I wasn't yet ready to look Ramsey in the eye, but I considered the possibility that maybe some day he could forgive me. Maybe I could forgive him.

And then the lizard man returned. Logan County needed him. He was, after all, so much fun. A whole truckload of midnight skinny-dippers went on record with the Logan County Sheriff's Department describing a "walking lizard person" who "menaced and molested" them at their "campfire gathering near Sassafras Point." Within hours, the Lizard Man t-shirts returned, the hunting parties, the out-of-town media. Lizard Man mania had never really gone away. The only difference was that, this time, my father was taking a backseat. I never once saw him on the news. Scooby had heard that Ramsey was back at work doing full shifts and minding his own business. He hadn't retracted his story, but he wasn't shouting it from the hilltops either.

Three days after the return of the lizard man, I got my diploma in the mail with a note from Mr. Kolman. "Let me know if you need anything," he wrote, ending with a postscript: "A lie would have no sense unless the truth were felt as dangerous. —Alfred Adler." I didn't know what to make of that. Why did grownups always have to be so mysterious? I tossed the note, and the diploma, in the Dumpster behind Buck's.

At the end of June, I told Scooby I was leaving. I asked him to keep an eye on Ramsey, and he said he'd do his best. He handed me a bag of aces and told me not to smoke them all in one place. I said I'd call him from wherever I ended up, probably Columbus or Cincinnati. Then we hugged the way brothers do and exchanged punches.

When I walked out the door that Friday morning, I had a backpack full of flannel shirts, $1200 in cash from three years of carrying wood, and one piece of unfinished business. I found Ramsey in his workshop, cutting two-by-fours and assembling them into what I assumed would become a series of antebellum farmhouses. I stood in the doorway and knocked until he heard

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me.

"Farris," he said, surprised, like he was speaking to someone newly risen from the grave.

"Yes," I said, noticing his mouth was full of nails.

"I haven't seen you," he said, looking at the backpack near my ankles. "I was wondering when you'd be leaving."

"Now, I guess."

"Oh."

We stared at each other for another minute. I was waiting for him to take the nails out of his mouth and eventually he did.

"Do you, uh, need anything?" he said, gesturing toward the house. "Anything?"

I shook my head, tired of our stupid dance, our inability to say the words that mattered.

"I want you to be well," I said, at last. "I just want you to—." My voice trailed off. I was going down an unfamiliar path, and I had lost my way.

"I know," Ramsey said. "I'll be OK. You don't have to worry about me." He turned his head and nodded at the nearest table. "Gettysburg," he said. "You want to see?"

I stepped across the room and looked down at the battlefield as my father pointed to the companies of soldiers assembled on a landscape that stretched nearly eight feet on each side, the biggest construction I'd ever seen Ramsey attempt. There were hundreds of meticulously posed soldiers, a labyrinth of rocks on a hillside, actual water bubbling in a stream, dozens of handcrafted trees. My father directed my attention around the board. "Little Round Top," he said. "Devil's Den. Spangler Spring."

Just as I was thinking the word, Ramsey said it: "My masterpiece."

It was beautiful. So delicate, so precise. It could not have been the work of a crazy man.

"What's going to happen?" I said, pointing to a gathering of soldiers atop a western ridge.

"Ah, well," my father said. "This." He picked up a Confederate general on horseback and held him to the light. The man's mouth

was open in a silent scream, his sword was raised, his horse was bucking on two legs. "General George Pickett," he said, placing the man back in front of his troops, "is about to lead a charge down this hill." He traced a finger out onto the open plain. "Nine brigades," he said, continuing to point to various locations. "Dust, smoke, fog. The 8th Ohio Infantry is about to hit them with a surprise artillery barrage from Cemetery Hill. Pickett will obey orders, keep telling his men to advance, expecting to get help from Pettigrew to the south, but, by the end of the day," my father paused, "it will be a bloodbath. Confederate casualties over 6,000. It will turn the tide of the war. Pickett will be humiliated. Lee will be scrambling just to survive." Ramsey sighed like a man who'd just watched the sun set.

A question occurred to me, a question I had never asked.

"So who did you want to win?" I said. "I mean, if you had been there."

My father squinted down at Gettysburg. "Oh, Farris," he said, "always taking sides." He trotted a blue soldier onto the field, then slid a gray soldier out to meet him. "What does it matter? Winning was an impossibility. You should know that by now." With a flick of Ramsey's finger, both soldiers toppled over, wounded, dying, dead.

I thought of the hours it had taken to build this battleground, this monument to the slain. I pictured Ramsey as a young father preparing his troops, then marching silently across the lawn, directly into the line of fire, bracing for the barrage that awaited him despite his ever-present white flag.

"Why didn't you save us?" I said, the words falling, like marbles, from my mouth. "Why did you stay with her?"

Ramsey breathed a circle of air and bumped his fist against his lips three times. "You didn't know her, Farris," he said. "You never did."

As Ramsey gazed down at Gettysburg, I picked up a nail and clenched it between my teeth, hoping the taste would trigger understanding. My dry mouth filled with the bitter tang of iron.

"She was my wife," Ramsey said, picking up a screwdriver and jabbing it absently into the tabletop. "She was my wife, and

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I thought I could help her. It's not easy, you know, walking away."

Ramsey fixed me in a stare, and I almost swallowed the nail. Then he smiled sadly, a look I recalled from a road trip we'd taken when I was ten. He'd driven me to an Amish farm to watch the bearded workers build intricate furniture. When they were done, he'd placed his hand atop mine and run it down the long, smooth edge of a bed frame. "Feel that?" he said, his smile on the verge of collapsing. "That, son, is precision. That is the work of a man who cares."

I removed the nail from my mouth and placed it carefully back in the box. Inside the house, the phone rang, and my father and I shivered out of our reverie. "I'll get that," Ramsey said. "I'll be right back."

As he moved, slow and steady, across the grass, I remembered that day, long ago, when I'd sat in this room and tried to figure out my father's life. I might have sat there for years and never understood. My father, then, now, and always, was a mystery.

I reached down, like the hand of God, and plucked General Pickett from his lead position on the hill, wondering what his doomed troops would do without their leader. Maybe, when the bugle cry came, they wouldn't go rushing into battle, heedless of their enemies. Maybe they'd simply curl up in the grass and take naps, pour their buckshot into a rabbit hole and go home to eat some pigeon stew. The massacre, I dared to imagine, could be postponed.

I pushed my thumb into Pickett's sword and felt a quick flash of pain as the surprisingly sharp metal sliced the skin. I dropped the tiny general into the front pocket of my jeans and scooped up my pack. Before I walked away for the final time, I pressed a bloody thumbprint into the doorframe, a crimson swirl to let my father know that I had been there, to let him know I was sorry for what I had done.

Twenty years passed before I set another foot in Logan County. Suzy can't believe this is true. "Not once?" she says, pulling a bowl of tomato soup from the microwave. "Not once," I say, cupping my hands around hers to steady the sloshing liquid.

"But it's your home," she says, blowing on a spoonful.

"No," I say, snapping the crackers in half. "You are."

We've done OK, Suzy and I. We've got three engineering degrees between us, a summer cabin near Lake Erie, two golden retrievers—Bud and Weiser—and only a handful of regrets. Suzy, I'm beginning to think, would be a good mother: soft hands, broad smile, killer apple crisp. But that would thrust me into fatherhood, an infinite jigsaw I've yet to unpuzzle.

Life, as you know, is full of surprises. Here's one: Scooby is a lawyer now, an honest-to-God, state-licensed attorney of law. He still lives in Logan County, specializing in labor disputes and workers' comp. He tells me he only smokes on the weekends. Good old Scofield Flanagan, Esquire, further proof that life doesn't have to be a one-way street to Pittsville.

When he called me last week with the news about my father, it was the first I'd heard from Scooby in three years.

"Farris," he said, right off the bat. "Ramsey is gone."

The words stung harder than I thought they would, like a paintball pellet striking bare skin. When I'd walked out of my father's yard with General Pickett that day, I'd known the slim odds of ever seeing him again. Still, he was my father.

"Gone," I said, not quite a question. I'd been anticipating his death for years.

"Disappeared," Scooby said. "Not a trace."

This was news. "Disappeared?" I said, loudly enough that Suzy came to the doorway of my study, her eyebrows knit up in a question mark.

Over the next twenty minutes, I got the full story, minus the kicker, which Scooby saved until I showed up on his doorstep the following day, Suzy in tow. Ramsey, ten years retired from selling chairs, had last been seen by Ned Hartman at the Coffee Stop the previous Saturday. When he'd missed a Wednesday appointment with Doc Schulz (his first no-show in 15 years), the good country doctor stopped by the house and found it quiet but for a clock radio beeping in the bedroom. He'd phoned the police, and the next day they found my father's Chevy out near

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the lake on SR 254. Ramsey was nowhere in sight. The police, grim-eyed and heavy-voiced, had no leads. Scooby had said it best. My father was gone.

It was a four-hour drive to Scooby's, but Suzy and I pulled in at nine in the morning. He fed us toast and OJ, and steered us through some obligatory life updates before tossing me a stack of newspapers. I had to look twice at the date to make sure he hadn't pulled them from the archives. *LIZARD MAN RETURNS*, screamed yesterday's front-page banner, *Second Sighting in Five Days*. A hunter, this time, had fired on an aggressive bipedal creature near Milford Heights. County Sheriff Dorsey Mason was proceeding with caution. "It was probably a bear," he said in the article. "But we've seen enough in this part of the world to not take anything for granted."

"Bears aren't green," was the hunter's elegant reply.

As the article mentioned, these latest sightings were the first since August 1989. Since then, the lizard man had remained a legend, a weird source of civic pride. You could still find tee shirts in Buck's Drugstore, coffee mugs featuring a cartoonish grinning reptile welcoming you to Logan County. The original hysteria had faded by the end of that crazy summer. One of the skinny-dippers had admitted that her story was bogus, broken down during a filmed press conference and told everyone they'd concocted the joke just so they could "get theirselves on TV." My father, according to Scooby, called this girl a damn fool, and rejected all the reporters clamoring for interviews. He continued to tell his story to friends and co-workers, but, as far as he was concerned, from that day forward, the lizard man was a personal affair, his own private puzzle of terror and defeat.

I flipped through the rest of the broadsides and found my father's disappearance below the fold on page three of Friday's edition. I flapped the papers at my brother.

"Is this for real?" I said.

Scooby took a sip of coffee. "As real as it ever was."

For a minute I felt like Jimmy Stewart looking down the stairwell in *Vertigo*. Everything sliding, nothing in focus,

swallowed by a wave of déjà vu.

"So what do we do?" I said at last, gripping the edge of the table.

Scooby linked his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "I guess we face the facts," he said. "I guess we say goodbye."

After busting off the lock with a crowbar, we found Gettysburg in my father's workshop, back in a corner, beneath a blue tarp. He must have worked on other projects over the years but could never bring himself to disassemble his masterpiece. The miniature soldiers were just as I remembered them, brave and focused, ready to meet their fate.

"Olly olly oxen free," I said, as I gazed around the dusty room.

We'd agreed that Scooby would handle the legal complexities caused by an officially "missing" person. I told him to do whatever he needed to do; I didn't want any of Ramsey's stuff. After today, Logan County was not in my future. Though I did hope Scooby would preserve the barn.

"This is amazing," Suzy said, kneeling down to study the clay terrain, the painted wounds of the slaughtered warriors.

I reached into my pocket and removed the battered old general. The paint had faded, but you could still tell that this was an important figure. Pickett's sword had long ago snapped off, lost on a golf course or a subway. All that remained in his gloved fist was a blunted hilt. I'd carried him in my pocket for years as a charm, a talisman, as casual as a set of keys. He didn't come with me every day, but he was always around, keeled over on my nightstand or rearing back on my computer desk. When I felt the mysteries of the world getting under my skin, I'd drop him in my pocket and go forth to meet my challenges head-on.

As I set Pickett upright on the battlefield, back in front of his men where he belonged, I imagined Ramsey's final adventure: the glow he must have seen in the woods, the tentative exit from the Chevy, the uncertain steps into the darkness, the wonder

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of it all. Was there really a lizard man waiting for him in the shadows? He'd been patient for years, and, at last, his lizard man had returned. Why couldn't this be true?

I knew that the more likely story was that Ramsey Flanagan had gone for a hike, slipped on a rock, hit his noggin, and been swallowed by the swamp. He had died quietly and alone, leaving behind one final mystery, more mythology for us to puzzle over when the moon was full, and we simply couldn't sleep.

My father, I tell people now, was a good man. Sure, he was weak and flawed in some fundamental ways for which I was never able to forgive him. But I've come to realize that this was just as much my fault as his. Like the boy sitting alone at the kitchen table, my father had been searching for the magic words, the secret potion that would have made his family whole. With each quiet punch he absorbed from my mother, he delivered a message to all of us: I love you. I love you. I love you. If only I'd heard it then. I might have understood his plummet when she died. I could have been the one reaching out for him in the darkness of that April night, instead of a scaly, three-fingered phantom.

Scooby and I replaced the tarp, threaded the broken padlock through the latch. We walked slowly to the house, fireflies blinking in the dusk like distant beacons on rocky shores. In the kitchen, Scooby put on a kettle for some tea, while Suzy and I collapsed into chairs at the old oak table. I brushed my hand across the surface and felt a series of dots, tiny pinpricks depressed in the wood. I peered down and began to see the traces of curving lines, faint circles radiating from the center. While Suzy rubbed my back, I pressed my finger into a narrow channel and swept it around, expanding outward until I began to sense that I was no longer following the groove. My finger was moving along on its own, spiraling away from the center, a lost soldier searching for home.

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Eating His Girlfriend's Foot

William A. Henkin

So much for being vegan. He'd grown tired
of seaweed, tofu, and brown rice,
and eating people seemed the next recourse.

Who else could he ask? He loved her,
and they had related issues.
She agreed; they set a date.

He arrived in top hat and tails,
set champagne to chill. All in white
she bared a foot and bathed it,

hopping brought it forth on a soft white cloth.
He held it in his hands and gaze,
caressed it, lifted it to his lips.

She shrieked when his teeth bit down,
yanked her foot away,
knocked his hat across the room.

"I changed my mind," she cried out,
lurching for her shoe. "I didn't,"
he snarled, lurching for her foot.

This is where deus ex machina comes in,
some mask of a god on a creaky pulley
wreathed in smoke, accompanied by

the thunderous rumble of a huge tin sheet
backstage. The deity announces there'll be
a feast of merriment, foot for all,

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and a moral. Oh, yes, the moral.
Do not ask for what you cannot have,
do not offer what you cannot give,

do not fall in love with anyone
whose issues may consume you
from the ground up.

You're a Pearl

Michael Jenkins

A pearl? No.
A pearl's classy,
the oyster's passion,
a smooth moon
made from pain.

Me, I'm abalone,
plain rough mutton-eared
mother of pearl,
gaudy off-key cheap,
my mother's daughter.

From the kitchen
her oily voice
was that sheen
slickening the puddles
after the rain.

Shane, her lover
loser wanna-be surfer
half her age,
used my abalone
treasures for ashtrays.

I turned thirteen,
hint of shimmer.
His eyes changed
like the sea,
blue to green.

But in moonlight
they went black.
I held tight

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to the rock
of his back.

I've never told
anyone that—
my inlaid secret
I've kept hidden
between the frets,

yet here's more
girl victim gore
if you're thinking
I've got shine—
I liked it.

Rockabilly Muchacho Street Brawl

Jill McCabe Johnson

Emo-hating Mexicans play rockabilly
like a hammer.
Got goth?
Bangs that hang
like last week's dirty clothes?

Oh you slender sensitives,
disenfranchised from the main.
No match for the macho gangs
eradicating simps
from the dusty streets.

Strip the black polish,
the Sgt. Pepper threads.
Buzz-cut the timid strands.
Eyelinered fool,
we'll make a man of you.

There's a forklift
in your future,
or a fist in your lip.
Emosexuales,
it's time to get hip.

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Opening Day: Sister Beatrice Throws out the First Pitch

Ellen LaFleche

Sister ascends the mound,
quiets the organist with her palm.

The catcher kneels. He needs a god-
damn miracle to rise from this minor-league limbo.

The stadium lights flicker on, glowing
in tiered rows like votive candles.

Beatrice is a Sister of Mercy
but her windup is brutal,
her leg-kick wicked. The faithful
fans murmur to see
the cool white whisper of holy underclothes.

Sister's hooded head spits forward.

The catcher's glove opens like a heart,
contracts against the fastball's whomp
and slam. His head has stopped
hoping for salvation
but his heart holds on.

Organ music booms against the dome.

The leadoff hitter waits.
Twenty years since his last
confession, but he crosses himself,
steps hopefully to the plate.

Pacific Solitaire

R.J. Lambert

On long delay, the falling sky
    crashes Pacifically in tidal waves

off the wharf where beach commoners
    must resist it. A ship
ships surplus cars and trucks to water

burial deeper than souterrain,
    beneath porpoises and water

mammals (no sirens per se,
    or siren song's muted
by truck-frame whirl and eddy).

Decades hence, there's word
    of car-part afterlives:

the shipman grandson's dreams
    tether his father's father
who slid machinery to sea where

cars awoke as from a slumber, took female
    form and sang to forlorn shipmen

of the day. In this as in his every dream
    a captive seal dies and lies like metal
on the zoo pool's cement floor,

six thousand copper-plated weights
    gorged to gut-burst—

might as well a plane wing
    splitting the Pacific shallows with its arc,
sunlit pennies set off like underwater sparks.

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Probable Robin

R.J. Lambert

On high our robin
is the first spring bud to bloom

hung there among the trees
like broken glass

catching light and rain
drops

trucks don't slow for it
too small to cut
bicycles ride right past

his wings beat like spokes
on playing cards—the Red King—

dirt predator
softly stalking rhubarb corridors
for small treasure:

mischief in bushes is his
he plays the worm game alone

Yearlong Abroad

R.J. Lambert

—for Dean

Brother/fighter,
time competes for you.

A child's rhyme,
threadbare, barren beyond
our peers even:

girls with thin curls
were blond in black & white,

smoke like fingers
laying their heavy heads
to bed.

If I've earned a holiday,
give me your Spain

from all four poles, your Portugal,
a continent widening
in the belly of water.

Diving depths for rocks
is a native danger, heretofore.

So tender a toreador:
I have not
worked all my life.

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Love Story or What Polar Bears Know

Cynthia Lowen

Into the arctic summer

we drifted, you on my back
thinking that which grew between us
and all those studious men

violating the frost with their yardsticks

was a strait through which you'd some day slog home.

They watched us leave the party
hoping something had taught you swim,
or better,

drink

comparing their measurements,
saying *tipping point*
but meaning

fucked.

I kept floating toward the future
until you saw

seals
exposing their stupid necks,
the solution

just ahead
of your teeth.

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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 9, Issue 2, Winter 2010

Endless day. The more I became of the black
sea the more

the sea
devoured me

over time
so you did not observe

my heart was not what it was
but what we would
become.

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I WATCHED HER GOING INTO A GAS STATION,

Travis Mossotti

hips rocking like a pendulum—hips with a purpose.
She walked like most people wish they could fuck.
Spark blonde hair streaked with store-bought low-lights
dropping down between her shoulder blades.
Six splendid inches of midriff. A delivery man
stacking beer onto a dolly lost his focus,
a nervous engine backfired, and a case
of Keystone crashed across the concrete.

A minute later she came out the swinging doors
cuffing two packs of Camels, and slipped on the back
of an Indian Kneeslider with a chrome, four-foot rooster-tail,
custom-painted skull-and-bones gas tank,
and a set of psycho chubby ape handlebars.
The kid gripping the throttle was about eighteen,
probably a dropout working down at his uncle's garage.
He wore black leather in August. The deep-throated

engine fired up—an avalanche of noise.
Watching the two of them made me and everyone else there
feel that much older, our lives and Toyota Tercels
that much more pointless. They drifted out of the station
and roared onto the highway. I screwed on the gas cap
and shuffled toward the swinging doors with an ear cocked
to the highway, waiting for them to disappear.

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Travel

Linda Lancione Moyer

The desire to focus on what's good, a whole
Veneto of green-eyed abundance—necklaces, corn,
vineyards and boney fish, more than enough of everything,
and what are you doing even thinking of it?
Somewhere there's the quiet cool room
you've longed for since you were a child, this room,
where you can just be, girl or boy, pig or typewriter.
I know you don't want to hear this, but the marshes
will be more appealing than Naples or Capri,
go to the marsh where the solitary blue heron watches,
unseen and permanent, blackening at night into its secret feathers.

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Off the Road

Jennifer D. Munro

I spent many childhood weekends crammed into a midget-sized coffin with a peek-a-boo dome. No starched Snow White stretched on her roomy bower dreaming of a hero's minty kiss, but a soggy toddler stuffed into the luggage compartment of a subcompact 1967 Volkswagen Bug, wishing for a new family. Forget the prince, gimme a station wagon like the ever-expanding Catholic family next door. Getting up early on Sunday mornings, like they did for this puzzling thing called church, would be worth a little legroom.

My parents stowed me, their youngest child, in the cubbyhole as we bounced and jolted along unpaved roads in Hawaii. The 'cubbyhole' was our term for the yard-long space behind the rear seat, designed for suitcase storage and just wide enough for a paper grocery sack sitting sideways. I slouched under the slanted back window, banging my head when we hit potholes. I bent my knees to fit in the cramped nook when lying down. Whatever went into the back of the Bug entered through the two front doors; there was no hatchback access, just a pizza-sized lid over the rear engine, and no rear doors. Only the front windows opened. First one in, last one out, I baked in my airless pocket. The dimpled white vinyl stuck to my bare, sunburned skin, and the pockmarks left me looking like I suffered from a skin disease.

We explored Oahu every weekend. Dad would leave the Bug nosed into the kiawe bushes at the side of a dirt road while we hacked our way to an unimproved beach. The car sizzled for hours under the beating sun. Afterwards, I sweltered in the turtle-shaped terrarium while Mom reloaded the backseat with extraneous items such as my two brothers, the Barefoot Boloheads. The wet dog perched between them, panting moist air into the bathtub-sized space. Then the Bug would roar to life, sounding like an underwater cricket wired to arena amplifiers. Loaded like a camel on its knees, it inched forward before gaining

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momentum and sputtering into second gear. Salt-laden air crept back to my oven, and I could breathe again well enough to start wailing.

My bathing suit crotch often bulged with wet sand that I'd forgotten to empty out back at places like Ewa Beach. I cried as the sand dried and crept into tender body openings that I didn't know the names for. Dad refused to stop the car, anxious after a day of blissful family togetherness to get home to his Primo beer. Mom, just as eager for her rum and Tab, refused to pipe up in my defense. After all, if I was to be extricated from the cubbyhole, everything in front of me would have to be unloaded first: the Barefoot Boloheads and the piles of damp and sandy beach gear my mother had strategically placed between them to keep them from fighting, including the dog, towels, mats, chairs, toys, and squeaking Styrofoam ice chests. Everything except the surfboards, which were strapped to the roof.

Dad kept driving. "For cripes sake, you should've rinsed it out before we left! Stop your bellyaching!"

"Chicken on your lip!" the Barefoot Boloheads mimicked my parents' inexplicable ridicule of my pout, a term that puzzles me to this day.

"Bolohead, bolohead, bolohead!" I pointed at the buzz cuts that Mom had shaved into their dumb skulls while they squirmed on the yellow kitchen stool in the front yard. Sun-bleached hair rained to the ground with the blossoms from the Golden Shower tree, Mom threatening with her electric razor, "Move one more time and you lose an ear! I mean it!" And she did.

Dad shouted at the rearview mirror, "One more word out of either of you and I'm gonna smack you to Christmas!" To me, "Any more whining and you'll be back there 'til they build a bridge to California!" I believed they were building one, but had no idea how far they'd gotten.

From behind him, we couldn't tell if the lines around his eyes were from smiling or scowling, but we banked on the latter. So I shut up and suffered while the Barefoot Boloheads stuck their tongues back at me and poked each other in stealth and silence

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over the damp mound between them. Dad navigated the Zenith Blue Bug around the unpaved road's craters not much smaller than the car itself. We drove on without speaking, the utopian sixties family in paradise, wedged into the equivalent of half a twin-sized bed.

The beaches we traveled to were not the smooth, sculpted Hawaiian beaches of Waikiki postcards, where women doggie-paddled without ruining their hair or makeup, but local surfing beaches at the end of dirt roads, with rough seas crashing on rocks and a smattering of sand. The Barefoot Boloheads paddled farther out to surf, while I got pummeled and scratched on shore. The beating waves drove buckets of sand into my suit.

While I entertained myself trying to stay alive, my mother sat on a straw mat, her high hair bun a black speck as she sat far back under a scraggly tree. The sun reflecting off her cats-eye glasses flashed me reassuring signals that she hadn't run away, as she often threatened. She glanced up from her mystery novel every few hours to count heads. If she couldn't locate one of us, she figured we'd turn up sooner or later, and returned to her book. The oldest Barefoot Bolohead was once sucked out to sea by a riptide, rescued by fishermen as he went under, and some time later staggered a mile back up the beach to find us; to this day she still blames the second Barefoot Bolohead and me for not pointing out his disappearance (as if we would do something so silly when it looked like we'd gotten rid of him for good).

Meanwhile, Poncho the dog (named after his bed of yarn ponchos that my grandmother furiously knit but no one needed) busied himself digging holes big enough to bury all three kids, and I'm sure my mother considered this option.

And my father? I couldn't tell you where my father was while the Barefoot Boloheads and I fought to keep from drowning while my mother drowned herself in polite British problem-solving. Dad simply was not there. My mother was probably taking notes on how to bump off grumpy husbands without getting caught. *Husband?* she would say to Agatha Christie over tea and crumpets. *What husband?*

The coolers weighed less on the long hike back to the car. The supposed reason for the coolers was our lunch. There were no McDonalds back then, except the one in Waikiki (the closest we got to churchy reverence were the rare occasions when we passed beneath its arches), so you brought your snacks or went hungry. But bologna sandwiches weighed only so much, and Mom wound up with lots of empty Primo cans to stitch together with colored yarn for hats and Christmas decorations.

Bought brand new when I was barely walking, the Bug came with my name inscribed on the cubbyhole, since I was the youngest and therefore the smallest (this changed during puberty, when the Barefoot Boloheads got hooked on speed while I became addicted to Big Macs when McDonalds spread across the island). And yet I was happy, stuffed into my own private cocoon. I watched the Hawaiian sky and trees flick by through the small, oval, rear window, sitting up when Mom called out that we were approaching our favorite stretch of winding road lined with ironwood trees. We shouted *Zig! Zag! Zig! Zag!*, perhaps the only thing we ever did in unison.

To keep us occupied, Mom taught us games. We stared out the windows, obsessed with spotting white horses, which hardly littered a volcanic island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Whoever saw one first shouted *White Horse!* and earned the right to punch our siblings. We also searched for license plates from other states. If our attention wandered, given the lack of success, and we started to pinch each other, Mom shouted, "There's one! Missouri!"

"Where, where, where?"

"Too late. Already passed." Mom also spotted unicorns wandering through the cane fields.

Other than these ungratifying games that encouraged low expectations, my family was as happy to forget I was back there as I was to forget them. My mobile hideaway rode directly over the stuttering rear engine, so it wasn't hard to tune the family out, except when Dad yelled and shook his middle finger out the window. I'd pick my nose and scabs and sunburn flakes. My

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parents couldn't see to smack me and guarantee (with some glee) that I was scarring myself for life.

Dad sometimes took the kids to surfing movies like *Endless Summer* in Haleiwa, and Mom took us to the Waipahu Drive-In, stuffing as many pajama-clad kids into the Bug as she could for the one-car price, but they never went together. For reasons that remain unclear, in the middle of one of their frequent arguments, my parents saw their first movie together in ten years. In 1979, Christopher Reeve as Superman saved the planet, but he couldn't save the car that defined my childhood. My parents walked out of the movie, still not speaking to each other, to find their parking space empty. The police assured them that the Bug was stripped before the end-credits rolled, broken down to a pile of parts and the humiliated skeleton of its tiny chassis. My parents didn't see a movie together for another ten years.

The thought of the Bug's demise is akin to the loss of a favorite pet being put down by mistake at the local pound. It strikes me as odd that we never named it. Not that we were unsentimental, but we were trying to smile through the discomfort of chafing sand. We were too busy tuning out to put a name on what held us together. Drives in the Bug were the only time we spent as a family, packed together like feuding parishioners in a church pew. We never sat down to dinner together, since my Dad's HAM radio equipment littered the dining table. We ate scattered throughout the house with our plates perched on our knees, the portable television blaring *Mannix* while Dad practiced his Morse code, communicating in a language none of us could comprehend.

The Bug was our shimmying temple.

We went into trances under its hallowed dome, each staring out our separate windows. I swooned in my cubbyhole like a southern lady fainting in a sweltering evangelical tent. Miracles transpired beneath its protective palm, like the day my mother squeezed herself, eleven cub scouts, the dog, a full load of groceries, and me under its cupola. Mom shape-shifted in its front seat. If provoked, she contorted, and her arm snaked to an impossible length to

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reach back and swat us. Mom also found her liberty in the Bug. At age 27, she learned to drive in it, operating the stubborn stick shift on a steep mountain road while three kids squabbled in the back seat and Dad lost his patience. After earning her license and the ability to go where she wanted, when she wanted, she swore she'd never drive Dad anywhere again. She kept her word for thirty years, until the night his appendix nearly burst, and even then I'm sure she gave it second thoughts.

And in the Bug, we believed in the vision of ourselves as a family.

My father still speaks in reverent tones when I mention the Bug. When I telephone from Seattle, Mom calls him inside; he's out in the yard throwing bricks at the neighbor's yapping poodles. Dad swiftly forgets the ankle-biters and reminisces about the Bug. "Best car I ever had. Boy, we took that thing everywhere, off-road and up trails. The rear engine gave it lots of traction. We put 120,000 miles on it. Still had the original clutch. Our first new car, straight from the factory line. Twenty-one hundred dollars, including options and tax."

"What were the options?"

"AM Radio."

Dad recently visited me in Seattle, and I drove him to dinner in my new Laser Blue Millennium Beetle. "For cripes sake, what the hell is that noise?" Dad frowned in the passenger seat, familiar lines around his eyes crinkling. He's had a few skin cancer scares, so the wrinkles worry me more now than when they signaled he was about to use the flyswatter reserved for our okoles.

"What noise?"

"Holy Christmas, that noise. Your goddamn back tire."

Volks-Wagen, literally "People's Car," was commissioned and named by Hitler. I glanced over at my scowling father and saw the resemblance. I hadn't noticed the noise that turned out to be a serious problem, but I had noted with sadness that the new Beetles have no cubbyholes. A large hatchback door opens onto a spacious trunk (into which I can't fit as many grocery bags as my mother could strategize into the old cubbyhole).

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No more cubbies. Superman's dead. Ewa Beach is now a fancy park at the end of a paved road, with lots of showers for rinsing out sand. The Hawaii of my childhood is gone—the ironwoods are dying (eaten by termites or hit by cars that zigged instead of zagged), Primo beer went belly up, and the sugarcane and pineapple fields we drove through are now subdivisions. The theatre multiplex became a row of military recruitment offices. The Bug is gone.

When I next telephone, Mom calls Dad in from where he's handing dog turds to the neighbor who drove my stranded parents home from the theater all those years ago. "His fucking dog craps in my yard," Dad says, as if this is a reasonable explanation. Then he chokes up as he tells me that he's reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and that he's mailing me a copy. When I was little, Dad never had time to read. He worked the night shift at a Pearl Harbor machine shop, both he and my mother returning to school while working and raising three unplanned kids who came in three years. He calls me regularly now when he finishes James Joyce ("boy, those Irish could write") or Raymond Carver ("geez, that guy could drink") or John Updike ("Christ, the semicolons!"). When I mention that I tried Jack Kerouac but just didn't get him, Dad tells me he read *On the Road* so often as a young man that his copy fell apart. Then he tells me a story I'd never heard. A Jersey boy and unaware of Kerouac, he'd hitchhiked up and down the east coast in his late teens, then flunked out of college his freshman year. He joined the army, since joining up for two years was better than being drafted for four. The army shipped him off to Honolulu, where he played trombone, which he had taught himself, full-time in the 27th Infantry Drum and Bugle Corps. He planned to head for Australia after being discharged to make his fortune in a jazz trio, but the trumpet player nixed their plans with a shotgun wedding. Dad was flipping burgers at the *Wiki Wiki* Drive-In in Waikiki, reading Kerouac's just-published jazz poetry, when he met my 17-year-old mother, a Hawaii native.

Wiki Wiki means *Quick Quick*, but his life stalled while my mother's soon "quickened." A man whose bible was *On the*

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Road ended up trapped on an island. I've never heard him play the brass instruments he'd once built his dreams upon. They remained in their cases, gathering dust, though once in a great while (I suspect Schlitz Malt Liquor was involved) he'd pull out a Dave Brubeck record album, turn the old phonograph player (with the penny taped to the stylus arm) to top volume, and fall silent, except for his tapping foot, while figuring out the time signature. Then he'd shout, "Listen! 7/4 time!" None of us cared, except that he was drowning out *The Brady Bunch*.

"Can you believe we once went ten years without leaving this rock?" he asks me now. "I don't know how we did it." Maybe they were waiting for that bridge.

After he retired, Dad bought 19 acres of second-growth forest in a rural area of Washington State near me. He flew up regularly just to hack a maze of roads into the dense brush. Driving on them reminded him of his boyhood when he used to "go crashing through the woods," he said.

My parents still rattle around Oahu in a series of little pickups my Dad dislikes but uses to haul antennas and HAM radio equipment. They look for excuses to take rides; Dad drove Mom to the dump on the other side of the island for their 45th anniversary. They drive to man-made beaches like Ko'olina to exercise, and Dad hangs his swimsuit on the side-view mirror to dry on the way home, waving like a colorful freedom flag. For twenty-five bucks, he bought a rusted tractor that sits in an old Kahuku cane field, and they often drive out there to check on the scrapheap that isn't going anywhere. Then he takes Mom to the new Starbucks for a Frappucino.

The old myth is that a Bug won't sink—ours kept my family afloat. Though I at times suffocated in the sarcophagan heat of my cubby, our weekend excursions were my father's only inroads back to his reckless and carefree youth. My parents bought it because of its price, the cheapest car on the market. As kids, we never knew we were making do. My mother was the only working mom on the block. We didn't recognize another one of her games for what it was, involving the calculator she carried

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through the grocery store, punching in each item as she placed it in the cart; we shrieked over whose behavior had been best when Mom plucked something from the cart and assigned the winner the honor of returning it to its proper shelf.

Turns out the lunch coolers weren't because of no fast food chains or Dad's beer, but because we couldn't afford to eat out. Mom cut our hair because she couldn't pay a barber. The yellow kitchen stool, and many other household items, had been acquired with S&H Green Stamps. Our weekend drives were free entertainment that ultimately enriched my childhood more than ballet classes or fancy clothes. The world was ours to explore with Dad at the helm. 120,000 miles. That's a lot of mileage for a small island. Our road trips were an adventure. The family never shared the same physical space again after the Bug's loss. As teenagers, the Barefoot Boloheads surfed by themselves during school hours when they could smoke *pakalolo*. They grew their hair down their backs, styles they kept into middle age. My brothers and I left the island. We couldn't afford to live in Hawaii, where the cost of living is so high. We scattered, like the Bug's dismantled pieces. But once upon a time, it gave us traction during rocky times to move forward as a family.

And eventually, when a young bolohead enlisted man drove up to me in his 1968 Lotus White ragtop Beetle, you betcha I married him. Rust had eaten through the floor, so I had to lift my feet as we drove all over the island every weekend, but that car wooed me like no limousine could.

St. Stephan

Nikoletta Nousiopoulos

—for my father

Thinking about the body blue
wings connected to the mind

is this when the soul gives up its
soul? Hear it in the corner of the room

Your father was born in an old village
on the tallest mountain

White snow frozen grape vines
the most beautiful cold

the body the body
stones lead the way out of the body

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Aubade

Jennifer Perrine

Dawn came coral as a reef running
like a rib under the skin of the sky, sliced
the black open, wicked wound, blood blown
across the surface of the day. She flirted
through curtains, made her way through our room
as a calm breeze sweeps cleanly across the town
just after the tornado's touched down.
We uttered oaths, made lewd gestures—still she beat
her bird body against our windows—
so we tried disguises: cons with slick come-ons
swindling one last dollar from the dark,
devils endeavoring to outscorch the sun,
but our horns were dulled by caresses,
eroded by the rub of silk. Let's face it,
we're no tricksters, no bold warriors,
though we fought, our teeth bared, claws tearing the light.
We're no fools either: if we can't hold
back morning, we'll lean into it, invent new
languages where every word means night.

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Arrivals Gate

Romy Ruukel

Say you are at a train station, or an airport, meeting someone,
and you feel yourself poised as if on an edge
of something stupendous, you hold your breath,
nervous, waiting, waiting, your own sense of life on hold,

you are a rock in a stream, all flows around you and all blends together,
from the portal of the arrivals gate pour forth stories,
lives, faces, which, after a while, all begin to look familiar,
and you think of your mother's neighbor,

a seventy-year-old man, whose wife drives him every day,
regardless of weather, a mile from their house
and he walks back alone, assuring himself that he still remembers
the way home, you feel that you have no such insurance,

you begin to panic that your friend has already arrived,
passed by in disguise as an old man with a guitar case
or that girl in pink, or as herself while you
have suddenly, irrevocably lost the ability to recognize your life

as your own, you are a rock in the stream and the stream itself,
for whom are you waiting? and who is doing the waiting?
And then you see a distant figure, you spot her
from the sea of faces and now you are standing with her,

her scent about you, you exhale, safe, you feel that you yourself
have arrived. And of course, you have. All that time, you, too,
were traveling with barely enough time for greetings in passing.
Hello, you whisper, turning to her. Hello, rock, stream, restless mind, hello.

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In His Sleep

Emily Scudder

J. made a sound in his sleep, sad, like
he had lost something. And he has lost things:
his mother too young, his old Kentucky home.

The sound lasted a second. He tightened his jaw.
When he sleeps I like to look at him, his long legs
like the ocean, blue jeaned, flat out.

J. sleeps best in afternoon sun.
He looks like summer waves, if a person can.

Water

Brooke Sheridan

On water days we take the empties
to the spring, park the truck in the clearing.
I let my son toddle in the tall grass,
watch me ferry vessels along the trail.
Familiar ritual, stand on a makeshift platform
over the hand-dug well, crouch down
and push a worn milk jug into the pool
until the surface stops resisting
and I feel the weight on my arm,
the cold in my hand.

Generations before me a woman
with my hands rode a coffin ship.
On land she watched her husband
lose to the fever, she watched
one child fade, disappear
and she vowed to save the other,
almost learned to understand
how a person can die trying.
On the wharf, the last of her family
clutching her skirts, she sold what she could:
a kettle, a shovel, her husband's tall hat,
other things that don't survive
the telling. She emptied a pocket
and secured one berth.

When I've filled every jug and bottle
I guide my son to the well and show him
how to cup water in his hand
and bring it to his mouth, sip it,
lips pursed like a fish. He laughs and splashes
and licks his palms while I drink.

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A woman who had never seen more
than a pond rode three months
on the sea. She let her daughter
lean over the rail, put her face in the wind,
told her to breathe deep this air above
because below it's shallow breaths
that keep out the stench of death
and life, such as it was.
In the one pot she saved she caught rainwater
to boil, stirred in the meal which often left the fire
still grit, hard to the tooth. She fed this
to her daughter who ate it, grimacing at each bite
and never quite full.

Home again, I haul the jugs inside
and give water to the dog, the plants,
fill the teakettle and make a shallow bath
for my son. He splashes again—
water on the walls, the floor—
and emerges flushed and rosy,
clean and thirsty.

The rest is the same, on the boat—
weeks on weeks. No pirates, no storms
or icebergs. She stepped onto solid
ground carrying her daughter. She
did not look back at the boat
and did not grow nostalgic for her days
at sea, even in the tarpaper tenement,
where water came out of a tap.

Queen of Spades

Theresa D. Smith

Until I cut the card in half, the Queen
of Spades will never see her backwards-
facing twin, will be joined at the waist
with her, unseeing. You and I always
liked those black and red velvets. And her large
black eyes. Gray lips, almost smiling.
Forget the Queen of Hearts. I've always found
Spades' dame the saddest beauty. And then

there's you, hairbrush or paintbrush raised
like a scepter. We don't look at how
our lives have begun to face away
from each other's. I would cut myself
in half to look in your eyes. But our eyes
are meant to look inward, or away.

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Plums

Theresa D. Smith

I've gotten too sweet again, I take too much
milk and sugar in my coffee. And though I tried
switching to Bailey's over the summer, I got
drunk too many mornings in a row. It's too cold

for that anyway. The birds don't pause as they
shoulder their way south now, though they leave
plum-colored folds of music draped over my
windowsill at daybreak. I would gather it up,

wear it as a dress, but plum is more your color.
I've watched you walk into a room hundreds
of times, always in a deep-colored haze,
your lips so dark they're almost purple. We drink

Bailey's and vodka. You steal my drinks when you
think I'm not looking. Don't think I'm not looking.

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The Wasp and the Fig

Bonnie Stanard

Forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden
expelled Adam, a mere man
cursed by ardor to become perishable.
The allure of death by divinity
deposits veins into the lobed leaves of history,
blessed and cursed by prophets.

In the transient and early spring
a garden of blooms pummels the insides
of every green belly
to begin the art of procreation.
Inside the dark cavity looms a paradise of gloom,
little lobes of fruit
ripening into juicy stumps of pulp.
When the sun drips on a private part
it arouses a scent so figgy
a tiny pregnant wasp
nuzzles into the fig's skin
and scrapes off her wings getting inside her desire.

Succor for the future figs
hatches and flies away on nascent wings.
No taste is so fragile as the wasted wasp
among female flowers.
So strong is the desire
for lust and the taste of the fig
that Adam forsakes nothing,
not the wasp in his heart
nor death in his veins.

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Sudden Oak Death Syndrome

Ruth Thompson

Down the long body of California,
Ramalina drapes the dead shoulders of oaks
with her bent hair.

Lace lichen. It is the color of sadness,
of rain that goes on for a long time,
of things fading into the distance.

Behind its veil ooze black
cankers of *Phytophthora ramorum*.

We are in plague time now,
these dead too many to bury, shrouded
in lace the color of smog, fallen

like kindling over the stucco-colored hills,
behind dry lakebeds
where are tattooed the lost shapes of reeds.

Here I name them, the old friends:
live oak, scrub oak, white oak, black oak,
coffeeberry, huckleberry, buckeye, bay laurel,
rhododendron, manzanita, madrone, sequoia.

In the fires, even their roots will burn.

We leave our children a place with no eyelids.
They will die thirsty,
telling stories of our green shade.

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Elegy with Two Lemons

Mark Wagenaar

—after Still Life with Two Lemons (Dali)

Neither the book of moonlight nor
Death for Dummies has yet been written,
so we must turn to Machado again—

to make sense of this sudden absence,
to suffer the innumerable ceremonies
of loss, the grief that courses like ichor

through our limbs—*Walker, there are*
no paths, there is only the path you
make by walking. There are no new

trails for us, though—we begin & end
in the kitchen, beside a table with two lemons
that light the room ceiling to floor.

The lemons are two pieces of coral
plucked by a seagull from a nameless
sea. They are the fossils of butterflies

snagged by a collector who turned mute
when he pulled them from his ragged net.
Sliced up, they lie like the chariot wheels

of a defeated general, the wafers pellucid
as the stained glass windows
in St. Basil's Cathedral, that allow

the light to shine alike on penitents
& saints. On the table they are as silent
& eloquent as the bulbs of a rare tulip—buried

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a hundred years & a day before they flower—
as the crumpled sketches of one who tried
every day to sketch loss as best he could.

Their bitterness is watertight, they hold it in
past the first cut—one extra moment—
until the blade presses a little deeper.

Poverty is the fear of loss—but neither
the lock of hair nor the blood on the lintel
will forever throw the dark angel

off our scent. I'd as soon consult the chicken
entrails in the garbage or beg the weather vane
for prophecies as the tea leaves scattered

across the stove, or the cards on the counter.
Why not scatter that deck—let the hanged man
stare. We've moved like strangers pushing

stones—each with our own sets of hours
& keys—for too long. Pick the picture
frames up off their faces. Our prayers

may return in bottles, the dice of drowned men's
bones remain a riddle, & hope may be faint
as the light of a bitter fruit, but tonight,

in this kitchen, on the far side of a table
set for three, it's enough to glimpse the pale
hair about your face, to find you with my hands.

Her Grave

Stephen Lloyd Webber

Sprout gone tall,
morning eyes
closed.
Lips to the bright
ash dome, smooth ground.

Throw the boat high,
the night a round crater.
Cry the tympani
to sleep.

Song says go make love—
wool-gone face
in the daisy
blows out,
away—
no taking her home.
Supple,
hollow down.

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The Future

Jonathan Wells

I wanted to be everywhere at once
without a shadow, as though motion
might be my anchor and my shape
a spinning bullet miles above the earth.
The sun didn't catch my quickness
and I skimmed the world's surface
picking fruit without stooping.

I want to stay here now in every room
of her house, one fresh with lavender,
another cooled by pearls, the table set
with silvered fruit, a bunch of red grapes
in a pewter bowl, the light carried by flies
across a sumptuous emptiness.
I don't watch myself,
I have no shadow.

I met a man once
who sat in the sun so long
he could remember how deep
the day could be in him
and he sank into his shadow
which ate into the grass
and he became my father.

Love Letter to RuPaul

Marcus Wicker

You have one of the longest,
thickest, most veined, colossal
set of hands that I have ever seen
and, frankly, they cast a spell on me.
Not that I'm the type of man who
goes around checking out other men's
hands, but I know tightly tucked cuticles
when I see them. Even sexier
is the hourglass-shaping chokehold
you can put on a mic.
You could hurl a two-foot monkey
wrench at a mirror
or pull out
and push in a date's chair
with the flick of a wrist.
I bet you don't, though. Bet you've never
carried a man up four flights of stairs,
limp arms flailing every which way.
And if you have, I bet you took care
to cradle his neck. To avoid banisters
and walk slowly. Because you are fierce
in the way only a 6'7" black drag queen could be.
In one of my earliest memories, you are wearing
a pink sequined dress, endorsing a hamburger:
"Good enough for a man. Maybe a woman."
I am a black man who has never worn pink—
not a polo to a country club. Not gators
to a church. And still, that commercial
ravished me. How hard, to be sandwiched
between what and who you are, tickled
by every cruel wind, critic-voyeur
playing rough beneath your skirt. How
raw you must be. To sit before a camera,
legs uncrossed.

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Wasp in a Trap

Lindsay Wilson

What trick is this thing with no escape,
this plastic cone hung from a branch?

The wasp had followed the sweet scent
through the air's various tripwires,

and believed it found a heart, a host body?
Attraction is as natural as repulsion,

but what force keeps it crawling here,
an instinctual scent, or a trapdoor, a way out?

Because I haven't found my way out of a body
since birth, because you've taught me to look

at all of the world as a trap, I now understand
I crawl for your sweet lures, and that escape

from your plastic heart never flowered,
even briefly, within my insect mind.

Contributors

Kimberly Quiogue Andrews's poetry has appeared (or will soon) in such magazines as *RHINO*, *The Normal School*, *West Branch*, *Linebreak*, and others, has won two Academy of American Poets' Prizes, and was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She lives and works in State College, Pennsylvania, which is a place she loves, even when it is overrun by football fans.

Amy Ash is a graduate of the MFA program at New Mexico State University and a PhD student at the University of Kansas. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in various journals, including *Lake Effect*, *Cimarron Review*, *Slipstream*, and *Mid-American Review*. She lives and teaches in Lawrence, Kansas.

Cynthia Atkins' first collection of poems, *Psyche's Weathers*, was published in 2007 by Wordtech. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *BOMB*, *Cake Train*, *Florida Review*, *Gingko Tree Review*, *The Journal*, *Sou'wester*, *Tampa Review*, and *Valparaiso Review*. She teaches literature and creative writing at Roanoke College and lives on the Maury River of Rockbridge County, VA, with her family.

Kaveh Bassiri is a co-founder of Triptych Readings and the Literary Arts Director of the Persian Arts Festival in New York City. His work won the *Bellingham Review*'s 49th Parallel Award. He also has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, where he was the editor of the graduate literary journal, *Lumina*.

F.J. Bergmann frequents Wisconsin and fibitz.com. She has no literary academic qualifications but is kind to those so afflicted. Journals that have published her work include *Asimov's*, *BlazeVOX*, *MARGIE*, *Opium*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Weird Tales*. *Constellation of the Dragonfly* (Plan B Press, 2008) is her third chapbook. One of her pseudopodia can reach all the way from the bedroom to the refrigerator.

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Vanessa Blakeslee is a graduate of the MFA in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her short fiction has appeared in *Cimarron Review*, *The Bellingham Review*, *The Georgetown Review*, and other places. In 2009, she was the recipient of grants and fellowships from the United Arts of Central Florida, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Writers' Colony at Dairy Hollow. She also serves as the Director of Maitland Poets & Writers, a community organization which focuses on expanding the literary arts throughout Central Florida. She is currently at work on a novel set in Latin America.

Jaime Brunton's poems appear or are forthcoming in *Salamander*, *Poet Lore*, *Hotel America*, *CutBank*, and elsewhere. Her manuscript, *Reclaimed*, was a finalist for the Walt Whitman Award in 2009. She is a graduate the MFA program in poetry at the University of Illinois.

Adam Clay is the author of *The Wash*. His second book, *A Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions. He co-edits *Typo Magazine*, curates the Poets in Print Reading Series at the Kalamazoo Book Arts Center, and teaches at Western Michigan University.

Christina Cook is a poet and translator whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of journals, most recently including *Prairie Schooner*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Packingtown Review*, and *Sojourn: A Journal of the Arts*. A Vermont College MFA graduate, Christina writes book reviews for *Poets' Quarterly*, and she is a poetry editor at *Inertia Magazine*.

Darryl Crawford grew up in Ontario, Canada, and spent his twenties in South Africa and Spain. He now lives in Toronto and is working on a collection of short fiction about the city. "Par Terre" is his first story to appear in print.

Patrick Crerand has had recent work appear in *Conjunctions*, *ekleksographia*, *New Orleans Review*, and other magazines. Currently, he lives and writes in Florida, where he teaches at Saint Leo University.

Jason DeYoung is from Sugar Tit, South Carolina. His work has appeared most recently in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Gargoyle*, and *Writer's Carousel*.

Jaquira Díaz is working toward an MFA in fiction writing at the University of South Florida, where she also teaches. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Southeast Review*, *Passages North*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Ampersand Review*, and elsewhere.

Phil Estes' poems have appeared, or are forthcoming in *Gargoyle*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Kitty Snacks*, *Lamination Colony*, *West Wind Review*, and others. He lives in Kansas City, Missouri.

Mary Beth Ferda is from New Athens, Ohio. She lives and works in Gainesville, where she recently finished her MFA at the University of Florida. Her work is forthcoming from *32 Poems*, *Passages North*, and *The Pinch*.

Rebecca Morgan Frank's poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Guernica*, *Best New Poets 2008*, *Sou'wester*, *Georgia Review*, and elsewhere. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Creative Writing as an Elliston Fellow at the University of Cincinnati. She is also editor-in-chief of the online journal *Memorious*.

Brandi George is a second year MFA at Florida State University. Her work has appeared in *Quercus* and *The Dirty Napkin*.

Arthur Gottlieb is an Oregon poet whose work has appeared in many small literary magazines, including *The Ledge*, *Chiron Review*, *The Alembic*, *The Pacific Review*, *Lullwater Review*, and a host of others.

Robert Guard lives and works in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has spent the majority of his career in advertising as a writer and creative director. His poems have appeared in many publications, including recently in *Argestes*, *Sycamore Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Poem*, *Poet Lore*, and *Nimrod*.

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Michael Hall lives and works in New Zealand ordinarily, but is in St. Marys, Ontario, Canada for the year. He has been published in journals in both New Zealand and Australia.

Jenny Hanning's work has been featured in publications like *Cimarron Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Arts & Letters*, *Gargoyle*, among others.

Tim Hedges is an MFA candidate at the University of Michigan where he recently received a Hopwood Award. He holds degrees from Cornell and Ohio State. His stories have appeared in *Sycamore Review*, *Cicada*, and *Soundings East*, as well as the online edition of *Summerset Review*. He lives near Detroit with his wife and son.

William Henkin is the author of *How to Design and Remodel Bathrooms* (Ortho), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show Book* (Hawthorne), and other odd titles. He is a licensed psychotherapist in the State of California, and a board certified sex therapist in the United States. He lives within sight but not throwing distance of the Pacific Ocean, and he conducts his private therapy practice in San Francisco.

Michael Jenkins is a homemaker in Grants Pass, Oregon, whose poems have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *Atlanta Review*, *Bayou*, and other publications.

Jill McCabe Johnson received the Paula Jones Gardiner Award from Floating Bridge Press, and was recently nominated for a Pushcart. She earned her MFA at Pacific Lutheran University and is pursuing a PhD at the University of Nebraska. Her work has been published in journals such as *Umbrella Journal*, *Oak Bend Review*, and *The Houston Literary Review*.

Ellen LaFleche has worked as a journalist and women's health educator in western Massachusetts. She has published in numerous journals, including *Alehouse*, *Alligator Juniper*, *The Ledge*, *New Millennium Writings*, and *Naugatuck River*

Review, to name a few. She has been nominated three times for a Pushcart Prize. Her special interests include writing about working class issues, and of course, baseball. Her poem Jacoby, celebrating Jacoby Ellsbury's accomplishments as the first Navajo to play major league baseball, won second prize in the Paradise Poetry Contest for a poem about joy.

R.J. Lambert's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Rio Grande Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and the anthology, *We're Not in Kansas Anymore* (Diversion Press, 2010). He is a doctoral student in Rhetoric and Writing Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Cynthia Lowen was raised in Amherst, Massachusetts. She graduated from Colorado College and received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. She is the recipient of the 2008 Discovery/Boston Review Prize and a 2007/2008 fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, among other honors. Her work was selected for inclusion in *Best New Poets 2008*, edited by Mark Strand, and has also appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Boston Review*, *Inkwell*, *The Laurel Review*, *Provincetown Arts*, and *Tin House*, among other magazines. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she recently finished a manuscript, *While I Made Angels*, about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the making of the atomic bomb.

Travis Mossotti is currently pursuing his MFA at SIUC and has poetry forthcoming in the *Greensboro Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *New York Quarterly*, *Subtropics*, and elsewhere. In 2009, he won the James Hearst Poetry Prize, an Academy of American Poets Prize, and his manuscript, *About the Dead*, was a finalist for the National Poetry Series.

Linda Lancione Moyer writes poetry, essays, and fiction. Her work has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *CrazyHorse*, *The MacGuffin*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Post Road*, among other literary journals, and will soon appear in *Compass*

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Rose, *Eclipse*, and *Jabberwock*. Her most recent poetry chapbook is entitled *2% Organic, 32 Short Poems from a West Marin Dairy Barn*. She lives in Berkeley, California, and in 2008 was a resident at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, in New Mexico.

Jennifer D. Munro's work has appeared in *North American Review*, *Zyzzyva*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Boulevard*, *The Bigger the Better the Tighter the Sweater: 21 Funny Women on Beauty and Body Image*, and in many other journals and anthologies. She has received grants and fellowships from Artist Trust, 4Culture King County, Jack Straw, Fishtrap, and Hedgebrook. Her author website is located at www.munrojd.com.

Nikoletta Nousiopoulos' work has appeared in *elimae*, *South Jersey Underground*, and *2River*. Her debut book, *all the dead goats*, is scheduled to be released January 2010, by Little Red Tree Publishing. She graduated from New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire, and currently resides on Cape Cod.

Jennifer Perrine's first book of poetry, *The Body Is No Machine*, was published by New Issues in 2007 and won the 2008 Devil's Kitchen Reading Award in Poetry. Other recent awards include the U.S. Poets in Mexico Mérida Fellowship and first prize in the Black Warrior Review Fourth-Ever Poetry Contest and the Virginia Arts of the Books Center Taste 'Test. Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including *Connecticut Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *RATTLE*, and *Third Coast*. Perrine lives in Des Moines, Iowa, and works at Drake University, where she organizes the Writers & Critics Series and teaches a variety of courses in creative writing, queer literature and theories, and gender studies.

Paul Rogers, a Cleveland native, produces fine art in the fashion of European "Sunday Painters". Business-casual by day, paint mask by night, Paul creates works by using mediums such as spray paint, acrylics, house paints, wash, and oil. The city's unsympathetic nature sparks the artist's imagination to create intricate reflections of the people and places of the urban landscape. Finding street art

to be a primary influence adds to Paul's affability and exemption; there's nothing to mediate—the artist is the judge and jury.

Romy Ruukel is an Estonian-born writer currently residing in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she counsels students of all ages, proofreads for PM Press, and bakes a lot of cupcakes. Her writing has appeared in *Apalachee Review*, *Bayou Magazine*, and ducts.org.

Emily Scudder is the author of two chapbooks, *Natural Instincts* (2008) and *A Change of Pace* (2007), published by Finishing Line Press. Her poems have appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Agni Online*, *New Letters*, *Salamander*, and elsewhere. She is the editor of the new chapbook review blog, Fiddler Crab Review [www.fiddlercrabreview.com]. You can visit her poetry website at www.emilyscudder.com.

Brooke Sheridan has worked as a janitor, archaeologist, ice cream scooper, and linguist. She is currently finishing her MFA at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, where she lives in a cabin in the woods with her small son. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Rush Paper Pages*, and *Avatar*.

Theresa D. Smith received her MFA at Purdue University, where she also served as poetry editor of *Sycamore Review*. She recently completed her first collection of poems, tentatively titled *The Dark Makes Room for Them*. In April, she received an Academy of American Poets Prize in a contest judged by Ely Shipley. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Kestrel*, *Mad Poets Review*, and *The Aurorean*.

Bonnie Stanard's short stories and poems have most recently been published in *The South Carolina Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Eclipse*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Slipstream*, and *The MacGuffin*. Her poem, "River Voices," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is working on an antebellum novel and lives in Columbia, South Carolina.

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Ruth Thompson grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and lived for many years in Los Angeles. In 2005, she left academia to live in a farmhouse in upstate New York with her long-lost college sweetheart, where she writes poems and teaches yoga. Her poem, "Fat Time," won a New Millennium Writings Poetry Award in 2007, and "The Poets' Group (Almost) Becomes a Sestina" won the Chautauqua Writers' Center poetry prize in 2009. Other work has appeared in *Sonora Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *River Styx*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *13th Moon*, and elsewhere. She received a BA from Stanford and a Ph.D. in American Literature from Indiana University, and has been a university professor, librarian, college dean, yoga teacher, and poetry editor of *Eclipse* literary magazine.

Mark Wagenaar is the 2009 winner of the *Yalobusha Review*'s Yellowwood Poetry Prize, the *New Delta Review*'s Matt Clark Prize, and the *Connecticut River Review*'s Poetry Prize. He has also been a recent finalists in contests sponsored by *Dogwood*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Nimrod*, and *The Pinch*. His poems have published by *Poetry East*, *West Branch*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The North American Review*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, and many others.

Stephen Lloyd Webber earned his Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. His poems, short fiction, and essays have been published in numerous literary journals, including *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Free Verse*, and *Black Magnolias*. He is editor-in-chief of *Di Mezzo Il Mare*, has exhibited a musical installation in Oklahoma and several sculptures in New Mexico, and has given poetry readings as well as exhibited paintings in New Mexico and Italy. He is a teacher of poetry and composition at New Mexico State University and also a certified personal trainer and activist for Population Connection. 2010 will be his fourth summer spent in Italy and his first as coordinator of three wellness and writing retreats.

Jonathan Wells has had poems published in many reviews, including *Rattle*, *Atlanta Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Poetry International*, *Poet Lore*, and the *Evansville Review*, among others. In 2007, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and had a poem included in the Everyman's Library Pocket Poets anthology, titled *Conversation Pieces, poems that talk to other poems*. He edited an anthology of poems about rock and roll entitled *Third Rail*, which was published by MTV Books and Pocket Books in April 2007. His first collection, *Train Dance*, will be published by Four Way Books in 2011.

Marcus Wicker's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *jubilat*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Rattle*, *Ninth Letter*, *Sou'Wester*, *DIAGRAM*, and *Anti*, among other journals. He is an Ann Arbor, Michigan, native who holds fellowships from Indiana University's MFA Program and Cave Canem. Marcus currently serves as Poetry Editor of the *Indiana Review*.

Lindsay Wilson teaches college in Reno, Nevada, and edits the literary journal, *The Meadow*. He has published four chapbooks, named a finalist for the Philip Levine Prize, and has published poems, or is forthcoming, in *The Portland Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *The Blue Mesa Review*, *Talking River*, and *The South Dakota Review* among others.

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Harpur Palate has no restrictions on subject matter or form. Quite simply, send us your highest quality prose and poetry. We encourage you to submit short stories, poems, creative non-fiction, and flash fiction. Read through our guidelines before sending your work. Almost every literary magazine already says this, but it bears repeating: look at a copy of our publication to get an idea of what kind of writing we publish.

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

Prose: 100 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 January 15 and April 15 for the summer issue; submissions for the winter issue will be considered between August 15 and November 15. Send to:

Harpur Palate
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Send a copy of your manuscript, a cover letter, and a business-size, self-addressed, and stamped #10 envelope (SASE). Manuscripts without SASEs will be discarded unread. Copies of manuscripts will not be returned. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable as long as you let us know in your cover letter that you are simultaneously submitting; also, if your work is accepted elsewhere, please let us know immediately. Due to the number of submissions we receive, we cannot respond to questions about whether your work has been read. Unless otherwise noted on our website, our response time is approximately four-to-eight months.

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The John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction

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

Opens: January 15
Deadline: April 15

John Gardner—poet and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the Creative Writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce the Annual John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction.

Short stories are welcome as long as they are: (1) between 1,000 and 10,000 words and (2) previously unpublished. The fee is $15 per story and includes a 1-year subscription to Harpur Palate. You may send as many stories as you wish, but no more than one story per envelope/entry fee. Please send checks drawn on a bank or money orders. Make sure your checks are made out to Harpur Palate, or we won't be able to process them (or accept your submission).

Please include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address, and story title. Entrant's name should only appear on the cover letter and should not appear anywhere on the manuscript. Manuscripts 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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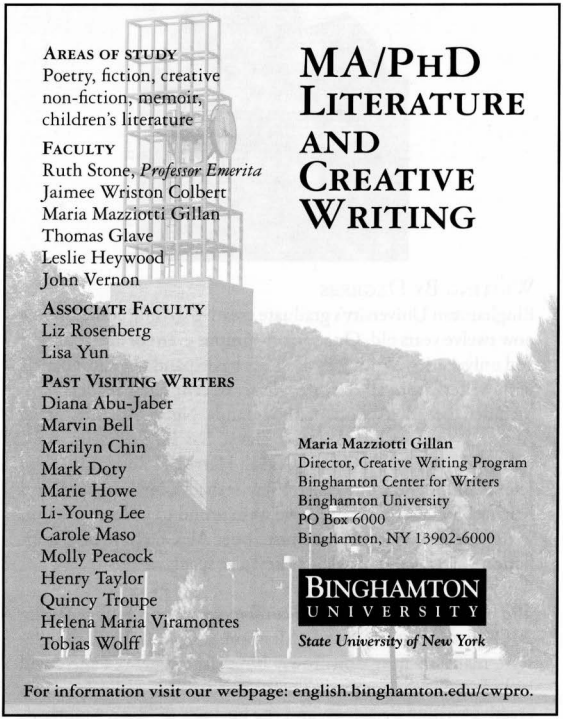
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Writing By Degrees

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 next Writing By Degrees conference will be held in Spring 2011, 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.

For details on the 2011 conference, please visit our website at:
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