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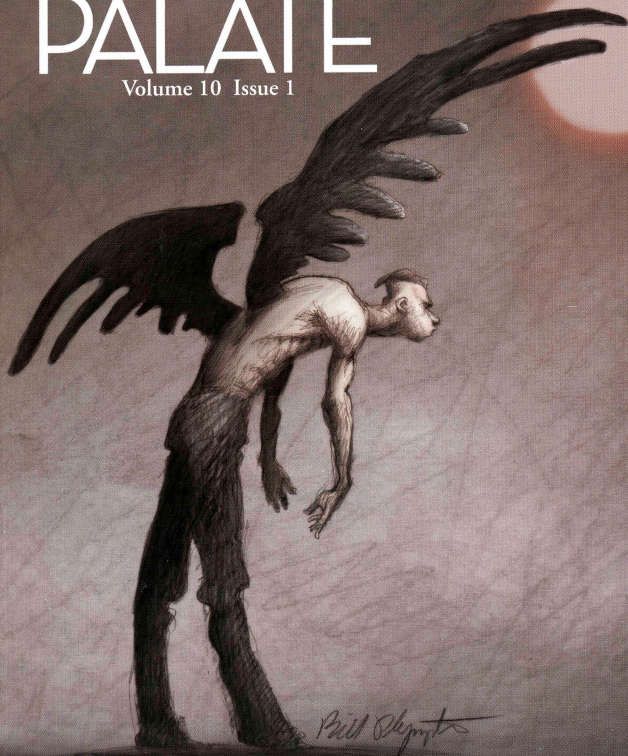
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Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

HARPUR PALATE

Volume 10 Issue 1



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HARPUR PALATE

Volume 10 Issue 1, Summer 2010



Binghamton University
New York

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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

CONTENTS

THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION		
Jen Bergmark, <i>Winner</i>	You First	9

FICTION

Jessamyn Hope	King and Balloon	24
E.G. Silverman	Select All	41
Keith Meatto	Nadia	56
Andy Jameson	The Distances Wear on You	59
Michael Koenig	Bow and String	67

INTERVIEW

Barrett Bowlin	What You Should Be Feeling: An Interview with Bill Plympton	74
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POETRY

Rob Carney	When They'd Gotten the Bear in the Cage	79
Meredith Davies Hadaway	Why the River	80
Susan Briante	Excerpts from <i>Ghost Numbers</i>	81
Michael Cadnum	Sheep's Head on a Plate	85
	The Rock Doves of Istanbul	86
Terry Godbey	Silver Anniversary	88
Nathaniel Bishop	Cordage	89
Justin Runge	On my knees, I salt the porcelain stains	90
Doug Ramspeck	Green Ash	91
Simon Perchik	*	93
Heather Christle	Wallpaper Everywhere Even the Ceiling	94
Weston Cutter	In the Movie Version We'll All Be Computer Animated	95
	Who Shall Be Captain?	97
Chris Caldemeyer	Assembling Prospect Park	100
Michael Levan	To My Infant Son Crawling for the First Time	102
Kathleen Hellen	Diamond Life	104
Jason Schossler	Lavatory	105
Lyn Lifshin	Not Thinking It Was So with Yellow Flowers	106
Stephanie Coyne DeGhett	The U.S. Geological Survey as Fortune Teller	107

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 [2010], Art. 1

Michael Burkard	means to an end	108
	Evening Bird	109
	Placing the Speaker in Relation to the Person	111
	Being Spoken to:	
Toni Thomas	Everyone Wanted Carnations That Year	112
Alita Pirkopf	What We Look at Now	113
Heidi Hart	In Two	115
Anthony Opal	corpus christi	116
Lynn Pattison	Amtrak: East, to Chicago	117
Nick Lantz	How to Walk on a Lake Path at Night	118
	How to Properly Fold and Insert a Letter into an Envelope	119
	How Not to Always Talk about The Same Things	121
Sara Tracey	Donny Takes a Night Class	123
Kate Hanson Foster	Major's	124
Errol Miller	A Rose from Yesterday	125
Alice Pero	Reading the Signs	126
	Empty Spaces	127
Stephanie Kartalopoulos	Funeral Song	128
Samuel Stenger Renken	General Lee	129
Tricia Taaca	Self-Portrait from the Avian Answer-Key	131
	to Test Questions	
Karen J. Weyant	Ways of Writing about Rust	132
Norman Dubie	Untitled for Christopher Burawa	134
	On a Plain of Jars	135
Diya Chaudhuri	Wildcard	136
Tina Schumann	Autumn	137
MISCELLANEOUS		
Contributors		138
Friends of Harpur Palate		147
Subscription Order Form		148
Submission Guidelines		149
Notice of Summer 2011 Themed Issue: Underground		150
Milt Kessler Memorial Prize for Poetry		151

[FROM THE EDITORS]

You're right now holding the tenth anniversary edition of Harpur Palate. As you can see, we've streamlined things. We like our new design and hope you do, too. Here's to the last decade; here's to the decade to come.

Also, here's a brownie recipe.

HARPUR PALATE BROWNIES

(courtesy of Virginia Shank, Poetry Editor)

[INGREDIENTS]

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| *1 c butter (2 sticks) | *4 eggs |
| *4 oz unsweetened chocolate (chopped) | *1 c flour |
| *2 c sugar | *1 tsp vanilla |
| *1/2 tsp salt | *cinnamon to taste (1-3 tsp) |

[DIRECTIONS]

*Preheat your oven to 350°. Grease a 13"x9" pan. Melt the butter in a pot. Remove from heat and stir in chopped chocolate till it melts. Add the sugar and mix. Add eggs and mix in one at a time. Add vanilla, salt, and flour. Stir until blended. Pour into pan. Bake ~20 minutes, a little longer for crispy edges, a little less for gooey brownies.

.. Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION



WINNER

YOU FIRST

Jen Bergmark

Claire announces to the Frolic Room that the ceiling lights remind her of diaphragms.

"Think so, Benjamin?" she asks me. People stop talking. A guy with tattooed knuckles looks up and grunts. Everyone waits for my opinion. I'm straddling my barstool, mouth agape at the ceiling.

"They look like spaceships," I say.

Claire laughs and tosses her head. Her platinum hair flashes. It's pretty clear to all that I'm not her Romeo. She soon has a cluster of watered-down Screwdrivers in front of her and the rapt attention of every nightcrawler in the place.

"That wasn't very smart," I say afterward. We've crossed Vine, heading for our cars. Claire, on my arm, stops every few feet to step on a walk-of-fame star.

"Hey," she says. "W. C. Fields."

"Who knows where those guys have been."

"You're such a skinny baby."

I'm a baby because I'm twenty-seven. Claire, as she puts it, is 'thirty-ish.'

"I mean it," I say. "You shouldn't draw all that attention. I'll get fag-bashed. You'll get raped."

"Been there, done that," she says.

"What do you mean, done that?"

But she's back at the stars, stepping on Grace Kelly.

In Saint Louis I used to cook for boyfriends. I wore a 'Kiss the Cook' apron, which I haven't worn since I moved here six months ago. I thought California would be different. I imagined meeting a nice guy in the produce aisle. I'd be buying avocados. He'd be picking out

eggplants. He'd have a tan and good hair. I'd invite him for dinner and pretty soon we'd shack up and I'd host elaborate dinner parties. I'd get a restaurant gig—assistant chef.

But in West Hollywood everyone eats broiled chicken and egg whites. My craft services job doesn't involve cooking. I lug a picnic cooler filled with sandwich fixings to movie shoots. I set out plastic tubs of Red Vines and boxes of mini Twix bars. My salary just about covers the payments on the convertible I convinced myself I needed.

I was popular in Saint Louis, but now, six months in, phone calls have dwindled. I was the one who got out. I was the one with dreams of glamor. I abandoned my comfortable Midwestern life in search of that elusive more, and I suppose my friends are resentful. Soon I'll be relegated to yearly Christmas card status.

"Maybe you should eat those Red Vines," Claire tells me. "Boys here aren't interested in a skinny kid." She wants me to hire a personal trainer. I had no idea it would be this difficult.

I met Claire during a shoot for a CBS comedy special where I provided food and she designed the costumes. She hung around my table during her breaks. Every guy who approached gave her a once-over. She said she wished I served cocktails, and when I said, "I can make a mean one," she replied, "You'd probably make a mean snatchtail." She was funny. She rattled off a series of drinks I'd never heard of—could I make a Frisky Witch, a Tijuana Taxi? I'd never tended bar. How about a Velvet Crush?

"What's in it?" I asked.

"Kool-Aid and Gin."

She left the table with my phone number on a napkin and the napkin filled with M&Ms. My first date on the west coast was with a straight girl.

It turns out Claire was raped, a month ago, during a movie shoot in Barstow. After last call at the Longhorn Saloon, someone slipped a

pill into her Margarita. She woke up in a motel bed three miles from the trailers and crew, every button torn from her blouse and a fistful of her own hair in her hand. She walked back barefoot. She tells me this at a steakhouse where she has invited me for Bloody Mary Martinis, in honor of the return of her menstrual cycle.

"Thank God," she says. "I peed on about a dozen of those test sticks."

"That's horrible."

The candle on our table goes out. Claire reaches for the sleeve of a passing waiter and asks for a new one. The waiter looks at her chest.

"And the worst of it? I almost got heatstroke from walking in the desert."

I'm holding an olive in my cheek. It feels lewd. "That can't be the worst of it," I say.

"Of course not, baby. That was a joke." She stands and tugs discreetly at the seat of her jeans. "I'll get us another round."

"The waiter will be back," I say, but she's off to the bar. I fold my cocktail napkin into a little square. I watch the people milling around. There's a red glow to the lighting that makes everyone look sunburned in a healthy way. They all seem to know each other. Claire's taking a long time. Her hair should be easy to find in the crowd, but I don't see her anywhere. I've begun folding the napkin into a fan shape when she hustles up, balancing full glasses and apologizing loudly. A man in a sport coat follows her. I mistake him for the manager of the restaurant, but suddenly he's sliding into our booth.

Claire rattles off an introduction—a staccato 'Kurt, Ben, Ben, Kurt'—and I learn that Kurt directs horror films. I've never heard of him. "I could not get the attention of the bartender," Claire says. "Kurt came to my rescue. We worked together on *Dread Terror* way back when."

Kurt laughs, revealing formidable incisors. "I don't even remember Claire!" He turns to me. "Claire tells me you work in craft services. Down in the trenches, eh?" he says. His fingernails are buffed.

Later, while Kurt's taking a leak in the bathroom, Claire says, "It would help a whole bunch if you'd do the yawn thing." Her breath smells spicy and her eyeliner is smudged.

Because I'm feeling a little tipsy myself, my first impulse is to congratulate her on her sexual prowess. Then I remember the reason for our evening. "Do you think it's a good idea?"

Kurt approaches, noticing his unzipped fly just in time. I start yawning.

The freeway is nearby. I head north, past the glow of the Capitol Records building and the angular houses protruding from the mountainside. I land in Studio City, only just over the hills, but it feels like a reprieve. The blinking neon cocktail glass outside The Oasis looks promising.

The Oasis is aptly named. Here are guys like me, who skirt the edges of Santa Monica Boulevard. There's a refreshing lack of muscle tone; some have even given up entirely, the curve of love handles above their waistbands. They're gathered for a night of camaraderie—the ones who are too old, who are losing their hair, who aren't butch enough or femme enough, who dress like leather daddies but drive Saturn station wagons. They're assembled around a baby grand, where an ancient-looking, heavily rouged queen is playing "At Long Last Love."

There is one wearing a dress shirt tucked into belted jeans. He poses as though he knows people are watching him, and at first I think he is pure West Hollywood. But when he turns, I see how average his face is, undefined jaw and close-set eyes. As I watch, he begins to unveil the strain of his effort. He exhales. Rounded shoulders. A slight paunch. I feel an affinity with his doomed aspirations. I sidle up next to him at the piano.

His name is Frank. He won't tell me his job or his age. We comment on the piano player's choice of music. We take turns buying rounds. After closing we head down the street to a rectangular stucco building where he rents a studio apartment. I sit in a computer desk chair and wait while he spends an inordinate amount of time lighting votive candles.

"May I have a glass of something cold?" I ask. My mouth feels like it's been blasted with a hairdryer.

A match sputters between his fingers. "In the kitchen," he says.

I grope my way, finding the refrigerator by the gleam of a nightlight above the sink, a plastic Jesus figurine pressing his finger to his venous knob of a heart. Taped to the refrigerator door is a calendar with a photo of a baby dressed as a pea pod. On the lone refrigerator shelf I find a withered lime. I was hoping for Pepsi. I fill a glass with water from the tap.

When I return I see that Frank's got a cardboard storage box open on the bed. He's pulling things out: a bungee cord; something small, flat and square I can't identify. His hands are deep in the box and the stuff inside clanks. I take a gulp of my tepid water.

"Where is it?" he says softly. He looks much handsomer in the candlelight, the shadows giving him a sharp jaw line. Then he says, "I need to turn on a light."

Illuminated, the studio is more dorm room than apartment. Frank's desk is dust covered with a clean-looking spot here and there where something was moved. His shirt has a stain on it. The small, square thing on the bed is green and rubber. He puts the box in the corner, snaps off the light. "Ta da," he says, holding up another bungee cord.

"What's that on the bed?" I ask.

"Dental dam. We don't need that." He tosses the square over his shoulder.

Apparently Frank likes to be latched to his headboard. I hook the metal ends over old grooves and scratches. Frank lies on his stomach, his arms dead weight, bouncing a little in the elastic cords. His body is spongy, and unresponsive. "Condoms in the nightstand," he says into the pillow.

It's difficult with his body so limp. For him, this is part of the appeal. He mutters encouragement while I arrange his legs and shift his hips. Then, when the whole thing becomes perfunctory, a little boring, with me pushing slowly into him while his arms sway in the bungee cords, he rears up, grabs the headboard and begins to buck violently. His back thumps against my chest. The struggle, the quick

rhythm of it, sends me up and over into that haze just before orgasm where I lose track of myself. I grapple to seize Frank's shoulders before it is too late—but it is too late—and when my head clears, I find I've been thrown off the bed and I've spunked on the bedspread. The open end of the condom is peeking out from Frank's ass.

A few awkward apologies and we lie next to each other. There's a large framed print over the bed, a reproduction of Hopper's *Nighthawks*, with Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart at the counter instead of the usual couple, and Elvis tending bar. The picture makes me uneasy, like Los Angeles makes me uneasy, with the ficus trees and shrubbery on people's lawns wrestled into shapes, trimmed to look like lollipops or strings of pom-poms. Fakery for no particular reason other than to alter things. Frank dozes off. I wake him to say that I'm leaving, and we exchange phone numbers. He hesitates before writing down the last two digits. On the sidewalk below, I look up at his apartment window, watch the light dim by degrees as he blows out the candles.

Early the next morning Claire calls and asks me to come with her to her rape crisis meeting.

"It's tonight. You'll be my sponsor."

I'm groggy, lying on top of my blankets with my shoes on. Somewhere down the street there's a car alarm trilling. I must have left food from my last job sitting out. The apartment smells like garbage.

"Do they have sponsors for rape crisis?" I say. "Wouldn't I have to be someone who—?"

"Just come." She lowers her voice. "I only go because my shrink says to."

"You're whispering."

"Kurt's making coffee in the kitchen."

"Everything okay?"

"Fabulous. He was a handful." There's a rustling sound and muffled laughter. She is covering the mouthpiece with her hand. "I'm being beckoned," she says, and I hear her giggle before she hangs up.

The meeting is held in an elementary school classroom. There's a circle of diminutive yellow chairs set up. Claire explains to the group's moderator that I am "a great source of moral support," and that's why she brought me unannounced. The moderator is wearing a skirt suit and beige pumps. She arranges pamphlets on a desktop and lowers her glasses to look at me. I wonder if she's a psychiatrist. I crunch on an oatmeal cookie by the table of snacks and feign interest in a construction paper depiction of the landing on Plymouth Rock.

My hunch is right. There are no rape sponsors here, and worse, something that didn't dawn on me until I got here—it's really not cool that I'm a man. As the women relate horrible experiences of forced sex, I picture Frank bobbing in his bungee cords. A dramatically thin girl meets my eyes while she tells her story. I start sweating. During the moderator's turn, while she talks about rage and forgiveness, tapping her pumps on the linoleum, I inappropriately think, Why did I ever leave St. Louis? When I'm not idling in traffic, I spend my days stacking cold cuts in a picnic cooler, or tiptoeing around sullen famous people. And I'm starting to suspect that my closest friend here is crazy. Then I feel like a jerk. These people have real problems. The woman to the left of me was attacked by a security guard in her office building. A *security* guard.

It's Claire's turn to talk. She seizes my hand. "The blinding light in the desert—I didn't know where I was." She has a strange smile on her face, like she's thinking of something else.

I murmur, trying to sound especially sympathetic. Claire looks at me and snickers. I get a sickening rush of adrenaline, prickles all over my skin. The moderator stands and asks the group if my presence is disruptive. The women stare us down.

"So that wasn't so bad."

I open the passenger door of my car for her. "Are you kidding?"

Claire sighs and settles into her seat. "I don't need those meetings, you know? It's just what you're supposed to do."

"Is that what your shrink says?"

"It's implied. My shrink understands me. He knows I'm still young," she says.

I'm angry and don't respond. I turn the radio on and adjust the air conditioner vents. The edge of Claire's skirt flutters.

"He told me I shouldn't stifle myself. It's okay to 'sow my wild oats.' He's very intuitive."

"How do you pay him for his advice?" It should be a joke but doesn't come out that way.

"What does that mean?" she says. But then she reaches for my hand on the steering wheel. "Thanks for coming along. You're my guardian angel."

"I haven't done anything."

She turns in her seat to face me. "You're always here for me."

"Where else would I be?" I say. We've stopped at a red light. "I'm here for you because there's nobody else to be here for."

Claire turns back and stares out the window. Now I've done it. "I'm sorry," I say. "I'm homesick."

"It's okay," she says quietly. "You love me."

I suppose I do.

Not a week later, after the *Severed Head in a Suitcase* premiere in Westwood, I pull her to the sidewalk, out of the path of an oncoming bus.

"See!" she wails, throwing her arms around my neck. "See that?" she yells to the women in strapless gowns. "He just saved my life!"

I'm surrounded by an applauding crowd. The paparazzi even take photos of me.

It gets lonely, cooking for one. At California Chicken Cafe, I'm overwhelmed by the dazzle of the guys stocking up on skinless breasts. All that muscularity. The tank tops and brawn. I order a leg and mashed potatoes, take my food to the patio and watch the traffic idle at the intersection. There's a crossing signal that chirps like a bird when the light changes.

Most of the guys sit by themselves. While I bus my tray and scrape the remains of my potatoes into the garbage pail, I can feel one of them watching. Here goes. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. He looks up when I approach like he's been expecting me. Immediately after I introduce myself, he says, "My place is right around the corner."

I'm standing in front of his table, still holding my tray. "I was going to invite you to dinner," I say. "I'm a really good cook."

He leans forward, and in a stage whisper says, "I have a boyfriend for that."

Maybe I don't have it in me. I find Frank's phone number in my wallet and punch the digits into my cell phone. It's a wrong number.

Claire insists I attend the dancing extravaganza at Cherry. There are all kinds of boys there, she tells me. Anything goes. We wait in a long line, the nighttime desert chill all around, girls shivering in skimpy dresses. The doorman stamps the back of my hand and wraps my wrist in a plastic strap.

I immediately lose Claire. The dance floor is jammed with people. The club's long windows are cloaked with purple velvet, and a machine out of view belches fog. There are professional dancers positioned on blocks: a woman with a red wig and short, vinyl nurse's uniform; a guy wearing a silver leotard. I try to get comfortable. I have a drink and exchange glances with a cute guy. Claire eventually appears.

"Buy me a snatchtail, honey." Her eyes look glassy. "Get me a Pink Pussy Cat."

"They won't know how to make that."

"A Little Devil."

"Claire."

"A Wiki Waki Woo." She shakes her hips at the guy who's been flirting with me. "If nothing else, a Gin and Sin."

The bartender makes a face when I order. We settle on a Gin Fizz.

After jostling my way back through the crowd, I find Claire has jumped up on one of the dancing blocks. She's no longer wearing her blouse. She's pale—her skin glows. Her breasts have a gentle slope on top and full curve on the bottom with hard pink nipples smack in the center. For a moment I just watch her. People gather around the block. Then a bouncer marches up to holler at Claire, followed by the disgruntled hired dancer, now blockless.

There's a scuffle, everyone pushing. I try to get Claire's attention. But her eyes are closed; she's caught up in the music. She snaps to attention only when the bouncer grabs her ankle, and then she loses her balance and pitches off the block. I chase her as she's swept away by the throng, Gin Fizz slopping on my shoes.

In the morning I bring her coffee. She buzzes me in and I find her in bed, looking very Monroe in her red sheets. "Hand me my bathrobe," she says.

"You're covered with bruises." I point. "That one looks like a handprint."

"All in the line of duty." She rolls her eyes. We sit and sip our coffee. Claire looks out the window. I notice the picture frame on her dresser contains the sample photo that frames come with when you buy them. "There's been a hawk circling my apartment complex," she says.

I pretend to look out the window. "I don't see anything."

"You don't think it's strange?"

"No stranger than coyotes eating my garbage."

"It's an omen." She draws a red pillow to her chest. There are pricks of stubble up and down her calves. "I'm aging." She points to the skin under her eye with a fingernail.

"Stop being dramatic," I say. It's really not aging that has me worried.

The following weekend I convince her to stay home for an evening. I think she agrees only because she's waiting for a scratch on her cheek to heal. I arrive with the ingredients for scaloppini—veal cutlets, capers and lemon, a block of parmesan, the best tomatoes and arugula from

the produce aisle, and a bottle of Chianti. Claire makes a big show of putting a jazz CD into the player.

"The music doesn't matter to me," I say. I am happily chopping tomatoes.

"We can't do this dinner-at-home-thing without Billie Holiday. And we're going to need more wine." She's at the liquor store for the remainder of the chopping, finally returning with a bottle and a phone number on the back of a receipt. "This," she holds the receipt up, "is why a girl should always have a lipstick."

I'd like a tablecloth to add a little elegance to the meal, but after a search through the cabinets it's obvious that Claire's not much of a hostess. I arrange a couple of straw placemats.

She starts the second bottle of wine before I've finished a glass, but I'm so thrilled to be presiding over a big Italian dinner that I don't notice until she topples from her seat.

"Whoops." She tosses her fork into the air. I gather her from the floor. When I lead her down the hallway, she gazes at me. "Why hasn't a cute boy like you found someone?"

I help her regain her footing. She puts her head on my shoulder, turns and presses her lips against my neck. I manage to get her into her bathrobe. All the while she giggles and tugs at my belt. And then in one yank she tears open my shirt. The buttons ping across the floor. She bites my chest. I try to hold her back. "Claire," I say. She is surprisingly strong. Then we're tangled in the sheets and kissing and her tongue is tracing a line down my stomach to my navel and then lower. "You don't know where that's been," I say.

"Oh, please." Her voice is muffled against my hipbone.

"You never know." My heart is pounding. In a sweep of terry cloth robe, Claire's off to the bathroom.

For a moment it's quiet. I lie in her bed with my jeans crammed to my ankles, staring up at the blinking light on the smoke detector. There's a pleasant after-dinner smell of garlic. Billie Holiday's wistful voice is coming from the living room.

"This should do the trick." Claire's back with an economy sized jar of Vaseline. She abandons her robe in the hallway. I suppose in the dimness, at a certain angle, lying on her stomach with her platinum hair hidden by the red sheet and with my eyes half-closed, she almost looks like a boy. This is what I tell myself to keep the mood light.

The Gateway Arch is one of my favorite places. I'm biased – it's in my hometown. I've brought dozens of people there, and sometimes have just gone alone to watch the Monument to a Dream documentary again, sit in comfortable silence with the others in the capsule train as we climb toward the view.

"You should go home, Ben," Claire says when we wake up in her bed. Her makeup has worn off. I've never before seen her without lipstick. Her skin looks ashen, but her face is serene and childlike. I sit up to find my jeans and t-shirt. She laughs, kind of sadly.

"Sweetie, I don't mean now." She gestures toward the window. I catch a glimpse of a yellowing bruise on her ribcage. "I mean that I don't think this place is for you."

It's a relief that we're not discussing what happened last night. There's another feeling, too. It really might be okay to leave. It hadn't occurred to me as an option until Claire said it out loud. I lie back and look out the window, where I can see the turquoise sky.

Then, suddenly, she is dead.

It's a blur, the whole thing. I've let days go by without returning her phone calls. I've been thinking that we've irreversibly crossed the line, squandered the casual camaraderie. You don't sleep with your friends. At least I don't. Certainly not with one of the opposite sex. I'm afraid to find out what she thinks, maybe that's why I don't call, because truth is, I'd like to. I'm lonely and I miss her.

I know something bad has happened the minute I hear a strange man's voice say, "Do you know Claire?" It's her landlord, who found the napkin with my phone number on it. He tries to feel me

out, determining how to break the news—am I her boyfriend, her brother—while I wait, nauseous.

“That’s not true,” I hear myself saying. Then I find I’m sitting on my kitchen floor.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’ve never done this before. Your number was by her phone.”

My thoughts veer crazily. I’m surprised she needed the old cocktail napkin. Who calls who more frequently—is it me? I have her phone number memorized. Do I know her number by heart because I’m the one with more invested in this friendship? All this time I thought it was the other way around.

“I’m going to be sick,” I say. The landlord won’t let me go until I promise to call back. I don’t get the chance. The horror of his experience has dissolved the lines of decorum. He calls me over and over to unburden himself.

Claire was dead three days before a neighbor asked questions, he tells me. No one knows what happened—an accident, an overdose. He found her on the sofa, a half-empty glass of wine on the coffee table and a bagel with a bite taken from it. The television was playing—music videos. Her door was unlocked. Her medicine cabinet had several varieties of sleeping pills and pain killers.

“She wasn’t wearing clothes,” the landlord says in a dull voice. “She was naked.”

“Don’t say that,” I say. “I don’t want to hear about that.”

“How about the smell?” he says, his voice breaking. “After three days, how about the smell? Do you want to hear about that?”

“Fuck you,” I say. “Fuck you for crying. You didn’t know her.”

I sit on the edge of my bed until the room darkens.

Her parents arrive from the East Coast to gather her things. When I show up at the apartment, neighbors are milling around the carport, peering into the U-haul for salacious details. But there’s nothing to see, just generic furniture and knickknacks.

The landlord has lugged out most of the big stuff. He is panting and his t-shirt is soaked through. He rushes in and out of the apartment with boxes. The parents stand in the hallway. They are older than I expected, befuddled and stunned. I try to talk to them. "She was a good girl," I say, stupidly. "Everyone loved her."

I bend to pick up a box but the mother gets it first. "Let me help," I say. I reach for the box. It's filled with stuffed animals. In my attempt to take it, I jostle out a tattered beakless duck, which tumbles halfway down the stairs. The mother sighs and stares after it as though it's gone forever. She looks like Claire. Same light hair and narrow, arched eyebrows. But she has pillows of fatigue under her eyes, and deep grooves beside her mouth.

"Claire was my best friend," I say, looking into the mother's face.

The father pats his shirt pocket and takes a long time extracting a piece of notebook paper. "I found this," he says. His hands tremble a little. "Maybe you can arrange a service here." It's a list of names and telephone numbers, most of them nail salons. I turn it over. Blank on the other side.

"There must be more numbers in her cell phone," I say.

The mother and father stare at the list, consulting it like a map, looking up at the walls as though they're at the wrong train stop. I'm about to mention Claire's phone again, but the landlord is lurching toward us, heaving a microwave, and he needs my help.

There aren't many people to call. I try to track down Kurt, but he's on location shooting a slasher movie. Claire's body is flown back home, and her parents drive away in the U-haul.

It's over in a matter of days.

I phone the craft service company after-hours, so I don't have to speak to anyone. I'm sorry about the video shoot, I say. Something came up. Then I phone my building manager to break my apartment lease.

You'd think I'd get a tan driving cross-county in a convertible, but it rains the whole trip. Until I cross the border into Missouri and then the sky clears. It gets sunny. Big cumulus clouds drift by. I could hug them.

These days, when I ride the tram to the top of the Arch, I imagine Claire with me. We are a team, the two of us—the blond bombshell and the sidekick. She chats up the other people in the tram. *Isn't this the craziest place*, she says to a Midwestern couple examining a camera, or a woman holding a kid's hand. No one answers her. During the shuddering ascent, she slips her arm through mine. Her mouth is against my ear, but I don't feel her breath. *Nine hundred tons of stainless could make a lot of frying pans*, she jokes. But she is afraid. We are finally at the top, and there is the shock of the narrow observation room, every time smaller than I remember, and Claire, too, suddenly smaller. Competing with the view, she leans into one of the slanted window ledges and announces, *Imagine my feet up in stirrups in this thing*. I can barely hear her voice. I try to draw her back to the important matters: the Arch's impossibly curving steel skin; the expanse of the city below; the room's reverent hush.

"Look," I say. "It looks like a spaceship." I wait for her to agree.

KING AND BALLOON

Jessamyn Hope

The day that ensured I could never go back to God began with a hat.

My people wore head coverings, but not like this one. It was a sunhat made of white denim, and painted all over it, as if by a child, were dripping red hearts and cartoony green saguaros. When I emerged from my bedroom, it was sitting on the wood floor. The apartment smelled of the brownies my roommate, Tamara, was baking for the Fourth of July.

"I can't believe you didn't hear anything!" said Tamara, turning down the TV and rising from the couch. "Six in the morning, and someone's ringing our doorbell like it's a fucking emergency. I jumped out of bed in a panic, thinking maybe somebody'd died, but it was just him with that stupid hat." Tamara never used Devon's name. She leaned in my doorway, crossing her arms. "Kayla, are you sure he's clean?"

Until seven months ago, clean to me meant kosher. This meat was clean and fit for consumption. That woman was menstruating and therefore unclean, and whoever touched her or anything she touched would also be unclean. The last time I heard the word used that way was the day I finally told Papa that I didn't believe in God. He drove me under the Williamsburg Bridge to the unclean side of the neighborhood where delis had beer posters featuring half-dressed women and Latino music boomed out of top floor windows. Ordering me out of the car, he explained there was no place in his heart or his home for a *treifynyak*, an unclean daughter.

"He doesn't use drugs anymore," I assured her, observing myself in the full-length mirror wearing the new hat and my long white nightdress. Laughing aloud, I pulled the front brim down to one side. All Satmar Hasidic girls wore the same clothes: dark ankle-length skirts, long-sleeved blouses, opaque stockings, and flat leather shoes.

Never had I looked as original as I did in this hat. Yesterday when we were sitting on the fire escape I'd told Devon that when I feel like I'm not going to make it out here, I picture a cactus standing alone and defiantly green in an inhospitable desert.

A half-hour later I could still hear Tamara saying, "Oh, my god, please tell me you're not going to go out in public like that!" as I skipped down the stairs to Devon's first-floor apartment wearing my new hat with a Yankees T-shirt and pair of jeans from Goodwill. Grinning, I rang his doorbell.

Devon answered the door wearing rubber yellow gloves.

"Sweet pea!" he exclaimed. "You're wearing it!"

My smile faded when I saw two people sitting on the couch. Since Devon and I started spending time together a few weeks ago we'd always been alone. I liked that. Devon was the only person in this new world I wasn't frightened to be around. Tamara said that was because he wasn't normal and he didn't expect me to be, that we were both outsiders.

"Matt and Tina," Devon said in his southern lilt as he pulled me into the apartment. "This is Kayla!"

Matt looked up from his Backstage and said, "Hey there, Kayla. Are you ready to go to Kenny's Beach?"

"Surprise, sweet pea!" Devon turned to me, his blue eyes wide like he'd just scratched a winning lottery ticket. "Fourth of July adventure! Long Island, Kenny's Beach!"

"An adventure?" Tina stood up, rolling her eyes. She had straight blonde hair, long legs emerging from white short-shorts, and an Eastern European accent. "Long Island is hardly an adventure."

Matt laughed. "It can be if you're with Devon."

Devon did a goofy little dance, which Matt jumped up and imitated.

I had heard of Matt. Devon called Matt his best friend, but really he was Devon's only friend; and even he called so little that once, when the phone was ringing and I asked Devon why he wasn't answering

it, he replied that he'd already spoken to his mom today so it had to be a solicitor. I wondered how someone as generous and outgoing as Devon could go through life without accumulating friends.

"Okay," Devon said, skipping over to the stereo. Rock music assaulted the room. "Y'all just give me two seconds to finish these dishes and we're off!"

"The dishes? Now?" Tina shouted above the music. She'd already put on her black sunglasses. "Do them later."

"Let him wash 'em," Matt said, sitting back down. "It'll only take a moment."

Devon was particular about a select number of things. At dinner he had to have equal portions of the different foods on his plate. He refused to write with anything but a felt-tip pen, even to sign at the grocery store. And he loved to wash dishes and carefully put them away like his particleboard cabinets were going to be featured in *Better Homes and Gardens*. They seemed to soothe him, these small oases of order. Whenever he finished the dishes, he had the peaceful look of a man returning from the mikveh bath on Sabbath eve.

Suddenly, I panicked. "But I don't have a swimsuit!"

"Don't worry," Tina said. "None of us do."

What a relief! Aside from not knowing how to swim, I could never have worn a regular bathing suit where half your tuchus hangs out.

On the way to the car, Devon and Matt strode ahead and I was left walking down the street with Tina, who between pulls on her cigarette explained she'd come from the Czech Republic to be a model, but now that she was getting older was turning her attention to acting. I watched Devon wave hello to the man with the purple birthmark over half his face who sat all day on his stoop blankly watching the street.

As I was climbing into the back of Matt's tiny blue compact, I said, "Your Jeep is bigger, Devon. Why aren't we taking your Jeep?"

Matt held the front seat forward so Devon could get inside. "It's gone," Devon said.

Matt handed Devon back his cooler, which he placed on the floor between his feet. I guessed it was packed like Devon's fridge with a variety of diet sodas.

"Gone?" I asked.

Matt climbed in front and started up the car.

"Yup," Devon said. "Towed. I wasn't paying attention last night, and I parked in front of a loading garage. Since it'll cost at least four hundred dollars to get it back, I'm not going to bother."

We turned onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. To our left the city's gray buildings looked like the packed headstones in the cemetery where my mother was buried. From this distance, you could see how much taller the twin towers were than the other skyscrapers. I took off my cactus-heart hat and carefully laid it on my lap.

I asked, "Just like that? No more Jeep?"

"No more Jeep," Devon said, popping open a can of Diet Mountain Dew. "Truth is, last winter when I was using, I'd park wherever I wanted. I didn't care. I'd pick the ticket off the window shield and just toss it. Soon I owed more than a thousand dollars in parking tickets. And that was on top of the \$800 I already owed from a previous binge. I'm hoping, cause parking tickets are registered under a license plate, that if I never claim that Jeep, I'll never have to pay up." Devon took a sip of his soda and asked Matt to turn up the tunes.

"No problem, daddy-o," Matt said. "Vintage Aerosmith coming your way."

Devon sang along, "*I'm BACK in the saddle again. I'm BACK—*."

Since it was forbidden for women from my community to drive, it being conducive to immoral behavior among the weaker sex, I wasn't sure how parking tickets worked, but I knew I envied something in the way Devon so easily handled losing his Jeep. I watched him from the corner of my eye, singing, tapping his foot, bobbing his head to the song. Devon seemed to always get away with things, get out of things—debts, arrests, injuries. And if he didn't get away with something, it hardly mattered because he seemed to have taught

himself how not to care. Things that would plague anyone else, he flung aside like those parking tickets. In short, Devon never seemed to pay for not playing by the rules and that looked a lot like freedom.

Holiday traffic was slow until the city outskirts, but then the highway opened up, and furniture outlets and car dealerships gave way to stretches of trees. I eagerly stared out the window. The only America I'd ever seen was the Five Boroughs, and, to be accurate, I'd never been to Staten Island.

Devon closed his eyes. I held my breath as he gently ran his fingers tips back and forth along the length of my fingers. Lately, he had been touching me like this, gently, like the tender touches from the Song of Solomon, and I, of course, had never been touched anything like the beautiful Shulamite and was genuinely afraid the others in the car could hear my heart battering.

"Hey, Kayla," Matt said, turning down the music. "Did Dev ever tell you about our Fourth of July at the juvenile rehab?"

"No."

Devon opened his eyes. "I don't know, Matty."

"Come on, bro. It's funny."

Devon pulled on the neck of his T-shirt and sat up. Reaching into the cooler for a Dr Pepper, he sighed, "Alright. But only cause I don't believe in false advertising."

"Ridgeview of Georgia," Matt said, shaking his head. I could see him smiling in the rear-view mirror. "Best juvenile rehabilitation center in the south. No kidding, compared to that shit-hole you were in last year in Queens, Dev, it was friggin' resort, huh? Still, a rehab's a rehab, and nobody likes being locked up anywhere 24/7. So when Dev and I made it to Level 2, which meant we could go on day trips, like to the planetarium or the zoo, we were stoked. We both made Level 2 at the same time even though I'd only been there a month and Dev for over a year."

"How old were you?" Tina asked.

"I was fourteen and Dev sixteen." Matt glanced back at Devon.

"Man, was that all fifteen years ago already?"

Devon squinted out the window. "Probably seems a lot longer to you than me."

Staring ahead at the highway, Matt continued, "Fourth of July and we're going to a goddamn mall, but we didn't care. After all, there's a lot of girls at a mall. I put mousse in my hair and Dev pulled on his signature rainbow-striped pants, what he called his Picasso Pants. He'd say it real effeminate, too: *my Picasso pants*. Anyway, as soon as we hit the mall, we headed straight for the arcade. You know the kind, think mid-80s, Galaga, Q*bert, Double Dragon."

Devon interrupted, "King and Balloon was my favorite. It gave you like a million chances. You could keep fucking up, and the game would still be going."

"As luck would have it," Matt said, "there's a gaggle of girls at the joint, not playing games, but just chewing on candy, batting their eyelashes. One girl in a pink visor was ridiculously hot, and Dev starts hamming it up in an effort to get her attention. Right off the bat, I'm a little wary because I was starting to get a vague idea of what could happen if this guy got going."

Devon tugged on the chest of his T-shirt, and it occurred to me to put on my seat belt. The steel clasp was hot from the sun.

"First Dev says real loud, *'That girl's so delicious I could sop her up with a biscuit!'* And the girl kind of giggles and points at herself, as if to say, *Who, moi?* Then Dev turns to me and starts talking in this big voice about all this crazy shit we did together, shit like blowing up cars and running away to Mexico, when I'd only just met Dev in rehab. So I'm mumbling under my breath, hey, let's just play some Blasteroids or something, trying to get him to bring it down a notch, when all of a sudden, Dev jumps up on the pool table and starts singing. Loudly, legs apart, pretending like he's Jon Bon Jovi with a microphone, you know, running his fingers through his hair... Thing is—and hell, it was exactly those daring antics that drew me to the guy—it was working! The girl in the pink visor was eating it up. Eyes all shiny, clapping and laughing with her stupid girlfriends."

Devon shook his head. We drove by a billboard: *Giuliani Didn't Give Up on You. Don't Give Up Giuliani! Give the Mayor a Third Term.*

Matt laughed. "And then all of a sudden Dev comes to a halt and eyeballs this kid, this kid in an Iron Maiden T-shirt. I still don't know why. It wasn't like the kid did anything. But boom, all at once, without a word, Dev's jumping off the pool table and charging at him. Even though the kid was older and bigger, he didn't stand a chance because Devon was out of control! Grabbing the kid by his hair, he swung him around and smashed his face into a pinball machine."

Was this supposed to be the funny part of the story? I wondered. I looked to Devon. He was staring blankly at the back of the gray car seat.

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, Matt made a fist with the other one and acted it out.

"Clutching the back of the guy's head, you know, by the hair, Dev keeps smashing him face first into the pinball machine, again and again, the backboard flashing and ringing like somebody'd made a new top score. He doesn't stop until he breaks the glass with the kid's face."

We happened to pass a roadkill deer, and its red innards made me think the worst of what the boy might have looked like when Devon was done with him.

Matt shook his head. "Dev, man, do you remember the expression on that pretty girl's face then?"

Devon took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, I remember."

There was a honk. Matt checked his rear-view mirror and sped up. Realizing we'd lost the radio station, he announced, "Bessie Smith," and pushed in a CD. *I'm gonna drink good moonshine and rub these browns down/See that long lonesome road, Lawd, you know it's gonna end—*. Devon's eyes locked on a roadside shack topped by a large sign: *Live Girls and Videos-XXX*. He craned his neck to look back once we'd passed it.

We turned into a rest stop so Tina could use the washroom and buy a pack of cigarettes. A dozen giant semi-trucks napped in the parking

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lot, their chrome trailers glinting in the midday sun. I imagined them filled with supplies for the city, canned pineapple wedges, laundry detergent, umbrellas. As soon as were out of the car, I put on my new hat.

The three of us waited for Tina around a wooden picnic table under the shade of a tree. Matt lay across the tabletop, I sat on the bench, and Devon stood with his arms folded and his legs crossed at the ankles.

Devon said, "You know what that was, Matty? That Fourth of July?"

Hands under his head, Matt stared into the tree whose rustling leaves muffled the drone of the highway. "What?"

"A bender without the drinking."

"What's a bender?" I whispered. Sometimes I felt like a sage in this new world where people rarely seemed to think about anything profound, and at other times I knew I came across as a naïve girl or even an idiot. I could argue about free will, but I didn't know how to use an ATM machine.

Matt turned his head toward me. "I was never like Devon. I was in Ridgeview because I partied too hard one night and threw up in my parents' bathtub. So what did they do? They send me to this nut-job institution where I could meet the likes of this character. For me, I could get enough. Enough alcohol or chaos, or sex or whatever. I could be satisfied. But Dev? Aw, man, it was painful. Nothing ever hit the spot with him."

I looked at Devon. The dancing green leaves behind him made his eyes look awfully still and blue. He smiled at me, closed-lipped. He always smiled closed-lipped as if he were ashamed of his teeth. "A bender is when you keep going until you're dead or out of money, whichever comes first." Knocking on the wooden picnic table, he added, "As luck would have it, I've never had too much money."

Tina came sauntering back from the convenience store, smoking the first cigarette from her new pack. College-age boys in a Land

Rover whistled at her, and she flashed them a smile. Though once in a while I'd catch a *bochur* stealing a glance at me as we passed in the street or were filing into the separate entrances of the synagogue, the only man who'd ever actually told me I was pretty was Devon.

As we were making our way back to the car, a sudden gust of warm wind blew off my cactus-heart hat, and Devon and I both went after it. Every time one of us was about to snatch it, the wind blew it a few more feet, and the hat rolled across the parking lot on its brim. At last it came to a stop in a dirty puddle, and Devon walked back with the sullied hat in his hands. Looking ashamed, he said, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, pea. We can wash it, right? Oh, pea, I'm so so so sorry." It occurred to me that Devon apologized a lot.

It was well into the afternoon by the time we arrived at the small beach town. Matt led us along little paths between modest summerhouses with dry wood porches and tinkling wind chimes. We climbed through long wild grass to the top of a dune, and there was the Atlantic.

Matt said, "It's not the prettiest beach, but that's why we have it to ourselves."

Devon yodeled for the gray ocean, opening his mouth like he wanted to swallow the universe. I noticed that his teeth were in fact packed with dark fillings. "Man, look at that! Look at that ocean!" he said, kicking off his flip-flops. "Hallelujah!"

We all took off our shoes and scampered down the dune. I'd never been barefoot outside, and the scalding sand and pricks of twigs felt strange beneath my feet.

Still walking, Matt started taking off his T-shirt. Throwing it down, he said, "Last one in's a rotten egg."

"I can't remember the last time I went swimming," Tina said, laying out a towel. She proceeded to shimmy out of her white short-shorts. I realized what they meant by nobody had swimsuits.

Tina pulled off her tank top. Matt was already down to his plaid boxer shorts. Devon pushed down his boxers and I quickly looked away. Raising my hand to my eyes, pretending it was to block out the sun, I sat cross-legged down on the sand.

Devon went into another one of his dances. Putting his hands behind his head, opening his legs wide, he threw his pelvis forward and back, making his penis flop to and fro. Tina snorted, "You clown."

I shook my head at Devon, careful to keep my eyes on his face, but I could still see it—a grown man's penis! Devon's penis!—in the lower periphery flapping around in a mass of hair. It was disturbing. It seemed tacked on to him, like it didn't go with the body's streamline. I thought, How could anyone believe God made Adam in His image, that God would have something so inelegantly affixed to him like that, like a tail pinned on a donkey?

"Aren't you coming in, Kayla?" Tina asked. Her lacy bra off, wearing only a black thong, she looked like a gangly child with breasts the shape of small yarmulkes.

"I don't know how to swim," I said.

Matt was incredulous. "What? I've never met anyone who didn't know how to swim!"

Devon stopped dancing. "Really, pea? You can still come in. Just don't go in too deep."

"Maybe later," I lied.

Matt called, "One, two, three, go!"

They dashed for the water. Matt and Tina looked free, running in their underwear, her long blond hair whipping in the wind. But Devon, who quickly abandoned the race, looked more than free. Hasidim danced ecstatically as a means to joy and hence to God, because they believed God can best be reached through joy—indeed God *is* Joy. Now Devon, completely naked, was dancing his way to the water, spinning around, kicking up sand, whooping. At the water's edge, facing the great expanse of gray, he swayed his hips from side to side, before crouching into a small ball and springing up, arms

reaching toward the heavens. It was a euphoric dance for the ocean, and I wondered how someone so susceptible to beauty and life and vastness could smash a person's face into a pinball machine.

Devon ran into the waves to help Matt splash Tina, who'd only gone in knee-deep and was hunched over, crying, "It's cold, it's cold." I enviously watched them flail around like children, and then laid back and let the sun beat down on my face.

I remembered the night, not long after Mama died, when I reached for the Nutella on the top shelf of the pantry, and Papa saw that I'd rolled up the waist of my skirt. Despite my protests that I wasn't trying to make it shorter, that it had been Mama's skirt and was too big for me, he still pounded on the table and told me to change immediately and bring the skirt back to him. Muttering under his breath that I was an immodest girl with no respect for law, he cut the skirt up with a pair of scissors, Mama's favorite skirt. And yet I missed Papa, even his anger, his anger that was a part of home.

I was roused from my thoughts by a sprinkle of cool water on my arms.

"What are you thinking about?" Devon stood, drip-drying.

I sat up, still trying to keep my eyes away from his nakedness. Matt and Tina were walking along the shore. "Nothing."

Devon tried to shake the water out of his ears and sat down on the towel next to me. "I don't believe you," he insisted, closing his eyes and offering his face to the sun. "Sweet pea's always thinking about one thing or another."

"Was the water nice?" I asked.

"Nice? No. It was sublime."

I nodded. Devon looked sideways at me. "Kayla, you sure you don't want to go in?"

I shook my head.

His blue eyes searched mine. "No, as in no, or no, as in you're not sure?"

I nodded.

Devon gave a slow nod back. Then he didn't encourage me anymore. He didn't try to help me out of my clothes or offer words of encouragement. He waited quietly as if nothing special were going on as I dug my teeth into my bottom lip and pulled my baggy T-shirt over my head.

My undergarments weren't anything like Tina's. I wore a practical full-coverage bra the color of cheap drugstore pantyhose and large brown nylon underwear from the dollar store. Devon kept his eyes away from me, but I knew I had to be loitering in the corner of his vision a little tempting to look at. I realized then that I wanted to be more than a little tempting. I wanted him to want me. Badly. I shook. Was I really doing this?

Devon smiled at me. Not at all lewdly. Actually his smile reminded me of the one Papa would have whenever one of his children achieved something—a smile that was both proud and sad. The first time I reached the faucet by myself, Papa had to go lie down. Years later he said that something in the sight of me on my tiptoes, gleefully reaching over the sink, brought home the fact that one day, maybe not for a long while and hopefully he wouldn't be around for it, but there was going to be a day in which his little girl would die.

"Ready?" Devon asked.

"Ready."

Devon took my hand and together we ran for the water. The salty air rushed at my stomach and thighs. Sunlight fell for the first time on my shoulders, chest, knees. I screamed. It came out as a long "AAAAH," but it meant: 'Hello, World, here I am!' In the distance, Matt and Tina cheered and clapped.

The cold water shocked, but Devon didn't let me dawdle. He pulled me in, smiling open-mouthed for once. The waves crashed into us. The salt stung my lips. Suddenly, I remembered sharks, immediately saw a shadow between the waves, screamed and jumped onto Devon. My whole life I had been forbidden to even shake hands with a member of the opposite sex and now I was holding onto a naked man. His wet skin was slippery. My heart pounded in my ears.

"What if there are sharks?" I screamed.

Devon laughed, "Don't worry! I've got you, sweet pea! I've got you!"

The drive home was quiet. The setting sun was a crimson globe in a blood orange sky, and it occurred to me that things are at their most exquisite just before their decline. The day most stunning on the verge of night. A fruit tastiest in the instant before its ripeness gives way to rot. A woman most physically appealing in the final moments of her youth. I was in the final moments of my youth. Almost twenty, I was supposed to be at my zenith as the young beautiful wife with small children. I glanced over at Devon, who had his hand up against the glass as if he were trying to touch the dusk. He seemed surprised when I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

Matt and his girlfriend dropped us off at our building. They were going to a party in the Meatpacking District. Inside his apartment, Devon put the cooler down on his kitchen counter and started packing it with more diet sodas and snacks for watching fireworks on the roof. I lingered by the wall of DVDs and videos, where interspersed among *Metropolis*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Amadeus* were *Nasty Girls*, *Amateur America*, and *Cum and Play*.

"I want to see one," I said.

Devon looked up. "One what?"

"One of *those* videos."

Devon laughed. "I don't know. Maybe we should try something else first. Like, first base."

We climbed through Devon's bedroom window and up the fire escape. The last part to the roof was a straight-up ladder, rusty and wobbly.

Devon said, "It's beautiful up here, huh?"

A rooftop in Williamsburg provided the most sweeping view of Manhattan. The glittering buildings of the financial district soared to the left, and to the right, midtown's famous mass of skyscrapers. The Empire State building was lit a holiday red, white, and blue. It seemed the whole neighborhood had taken to their roofs. All around

were the silhouettes of parties, pop music, shouts, laughter, the heavy clink of beer bottle toasts.

"That's my building," I said, pointing at a dark project high-rise just to the south. "My family's right there. On the nineteenth floor. We can practically see our window."

We'd arrived just in time. Sparks whistle-screched into the sky. Devon and I sat down. Through the worn-out blanket we could feel the roof's rubber still hot from baking in the sun all day. We watched in silence. Devon appeared preoccupied. He kept on looking down at the can in his hand and back up at the fireworks.

Right now they're all crowded into that little apartment, I thought, unable to ignore the old building. Since my family lived on one of the highest floors, it was a tradition for the Hasidim in the building to gather at our place to watch the show. No beer or barbeques or bared midriffs like the blacks in the courtyard below, just a short recess to watch the colors exploding in the dark above the city. Then one year Mama was too weakened from the chemotherapy to stand at the window anymore, so she sat at the kitchen table surrounded by the other wives, who all assured her, *Beila, the Lord is looking out for you*. The next Fourth of July, however, Mama was beyond chemotherapy; Papa had to carry her out of the bedroom in his arms, and she spent the evening laid out on the couch, expressionless, while everyone ooohed and aaaahed more than usual. *Children*, Mama said, her voice croaky with disuse and death, *I oohed and aahed my whole life, but you know what?* My sisters and brothers and I shook our heads and leaned in to try and hear her better. *I was faking. I never thought fireworks were that interesting.*

Devon gently turned my face toward his. Meeting his gaze, I smiled. He leaned in.

"Devon!" I held him back. "Everyone can see us."

"What's the worst that can happen? We'll get arrested."

"Arrested? For kissing?"

"We're not just kissing."

Devon took hold of my thigh, and it sent a jolt through my body.

As the whistling, booming and crackling intensified, so did the cheering on the roofs and the hollers from the kids down on the street. It was the grand finale. As we kissed, a frightening need swelled inside me, and I grabbed hold of his shoulders. Devon's hand peeked under the hem of my t-shirt. It lingered warm and cool on my waist, threatening to move upward. A rat-a-tat-tat like the banging on a cosmic drum, one final crack, and the fireworks were over, the sky abruptly black and silent.

Devon pulled away and started to gather the Doritos and cans. Realizing he'd been joking about doing more than kissing, I found myself disappointed. I asked, "Don't you want to sleep with me?"

"Oh, sweet pea, don't look so sad!" Devon said, head tilted to the side, looking at me with both compassion and amusement. "Well, of course I want to. But I don't know. Do you?"

We decided to wait until people left their roofs. Not only for the privacy, but because Devon said that would give me a chance to change my mind. I nibbled awkwardly on a Dorito.

"Want to hear something funny?" Devon asked, popping open another can of Mountain Dew. "This morning, I was walking by the dry cleaners and the hangers—it was crazy—they all looked like upside-down martini glasses."

When the only party that remained was on a roof two blocks away, Devon pulled the blanket over us.

According to Hasidic tradition, the husband and wife should be alone in the bedroom. The couple should remove all their clothes except for the man's *kippa* and the woman's headscarf.

Devon left our t-shirts on and barely pulled our jeans down.

Relations must be had on a bed, not against the wall or on the floor. No Holy Books should be exposed to the act. The woman on top is strongly discouraged, as is the man coming in from behind.

His kisses were gentle, at first. They moved down my neck. He pulled at the collar of my t-shirt to plant a few on my shoulder. As

he kissed between my shoulder blades and down my back, he tugged harder on the collar and it dug into my throat. He rolled me onto my stomach. My face pressed against the smell of tar.

It is of utmost importance that the couple concentrate on virtuous thoughts in order to conceive a virtuous child.

Devon reached down and held his hand firmly between my legs as he thrust in and out of me. My mind stilled and my senses took over. There was an unfamiliar pulsing below, within, all over. Confused, I gasped. His panting grew harder. It didn't feel like Devon knew he had grabbed a fistful of my hair and was pulling my head back.

Afterward the husband should comfort his wife and then they should both go to sleep.

I lay on my back with Devon on his side, holding me. Staring up at the sky, I was thankful that one couldn't see the stars in New York City. A myriad of stars would have had me crying. Why? I wasn't sure. Devon kissed my cheek. His body odor was at once foreign and soothing. I wriggled closer into him.

Climbing down the shaking iron ladder was far more unnerving than going up. Below, the small courtyard wavered. Finally, I clambered from the fire escape through my bedroom window.

"You okay, sweet pea?" Devon asked. "You sure you don't want to spend the night downstairs?"

I kneeled on my bed, which was really just a mattress on the floor, and stuck my head out the window. Devon stood on the fire escape with his hands clenched into two tight fists. Behind him, the sky was indigo and the silver tops of the twin towers peeked over the shadowy five-story walkups.

Instead of saying goodnight, I heard myself asking, "Why, Devon? Why did you smash that boy's face into a pinball machine?"

Devon shrugged. "I don't know."

I stared at him unsatisfied.

He gave me a quick kiss. "Goodnight, sweet pea. I'm going to wash your hat tonight."

I watched him go down the stairs, head bowed. He glanced up one last time, and, before I could see him turn away again, I fell back on my mattress. The sheets were cool compared to the summer night, and I lay listening to the day's straggling ends: the wailing of a tired baby, a siren, the TV, whose blue light glowed under the bedroom door. Tamara was watching the eleven o'clock news: *In a day of expanding violence, an Israeli helicopter gunship killed three Muslim militants crossing the border in a car packed with explosives...* Papa always said the State of Israel was living on borrowed time. Upstairs somebody dropped something heavy, and my ceiling lamp rattled. Poor Mama knew what it was like to live on borrowed time. Tonight the whole city, the whole world around me, seemed to be living with the meter running out. Or maybe, I acknowledged, it was just that I was feeling that way for the first time.

And then I heard an odd word to be said so softly—

Sabotage.

I sat up and looked out the window. Devon was still where I last saw him, stooped forward on the escape with one hand on the railing.

"A day out, people trusting me, a new friend looking up to me, a pretty girl: it's that need, you know, if everything is going too well, if the pond is too still, too quiet, to throw a rock at it and make waves."

I came forward, leaned on the windowsill.

"When things are going too good," he said. "I get anxious. Anxious I'm going to fuck everything up again. Eventually the anxiety gets so bad that I'll do anything for relief. I'll purposely fuck things up just so I don't have to sit around anymore waiting for me to fuck things up."

The TV turned off, and I heard Tamara patter over to her room and shut the door. Her bedroom light switched on, casting Devon in a dull yellow, like a faded photograph.

"Are things going too good between us?" I asked, voice shaking.

"Sweet pea, I'm falling in love with you. And that's why, I swear, things are going to be different this time."

SELECT ALL

E.G. Silverman

Kevin Van Slyke sat at his computer and opened two new files. He labeled one *Leaving You Note* and the other *Suicide Note*, keeping them both open so he could window back and forth.

He wasn't sure if this was the best plan. It might make more sense to type one note first, save it as the other, and then make the few small changes that would be required. It would be easier that way. The problem with two open files was that he'd have to be jumping back and forth, cutting and pasting.

But working on both notes simultaneously had one big advantage. It was more neutral. Completely neutral, really. Free of prejudice. No need to favor one over the other. No need to give either greater weight by writing it first. No threat of having it perhaps unconsciously, unavoidably influence the tone of the other.

It was bad enough that, after he was gone, in one scenario he would come off as the guilty party entirely, no matter what he said, whereas in the other, surely the finger of blame would be pointed at his wife. It seemed so unfair, the way an act had the power to retrospectively allot culpability. It made no sense. The truth was that the note itself, even the deed itself, whichever it turned out to be, would have no bearing whatsoever on responsibility. Only by maintaining his impartiality to the outcome could he remain untouched by such ramifications and thus loyal to the truth.

Having labeled the two files, Kevin set to work, but immediately he was stymied by the issue of to whom to address the notes. Naturally, he'd assumed that he'd address them to Dixie. After all, it was she he was leaving, one way or the other. But what about the children? Weren't they the intended recipients of his message too?

Then it dawned on him—didn't he owe his son and daughter something extra, some words to help them over the shock of it, especially for the suicide note? And what about the other outcome?

Wouldn't he owe them an explanation of his desertion as much alive as dead?

Yes, well now, that did complicate matters a bit, didn't it?

Okay, so he would have to draft separate notes—two to his wife and two to his children. Yes, that would work, wouldn't it? In the ones to Dixie, he would feel no inhibitions of paternal responsibility, while in the letters to his children he would need to exercise maturity and restraint. With his children, it would be important to maintain a positive tone, full of love, hope, and promise, and he would frame the whole episode in a light meant not merely to console them, but to point them forward, to let them know how much he loved them, how full of great things their lives would be. He would tell them that they should put this little setback behind them, move on, and never give him a second thought.

That was what he wanted, wasn't it—that his children never again gave him a second thought? Perhaps he should ponder that a while. Perhaps there was a middle ground to tread—some means by which he could still reside fondly in their memories without causing them any trauma, any sense of loss.

Well, at any rate, this all meant that he was up to four letters. He'd have to work on four files simultaneously: *Leaving You Note—Dixie*, *Leaving Note—Children*, *Suicide Note—Dixie*, and *Suicide Note—Children*. It was going to get awfully confusing, juggling four open files, keeping track of where he was in the cutting and pasting, every time he caught a typo in one, making sure he fixed it in all four.

At once, another complication became glaringly obvious. How could he be so insensitive as to treat his two children as a single unit? They were so unlike. Roy, his ten-year-old son, was already so rambunctious, independent, athletic, and self-assured. How could he lump him together with Annie, a butterball of a sweetheart and barely more than a plaything for his wife? So then, was he talking about drafting six letters? How in the world was he going to juggle six letters, all with different objectives and demands?

Of course, the easy way out would have been simply to make a decision, thereby reducing his requirements to three documents. But he had always believed that once you had a system in place, you should stick with it, especially when a subject with such great importance was at stake.

Okay, he told himself, let's go back to the original plan. He already had the two files open and labeled. Why not get those two letters drafted and then go from there? If he could cut and paste, fine. The only way to know for sure was to get the blasted things written.

He stared at the blank screen. Getting starting was always the hardest part. He ordered himself to stop procrastinating with all this nonsense about numbers of letters and cutting and pasting. What difference did it make how he labeled the files or how many versions there were?

Get on with it, he lectured himself. Write the letter.

Tell the truth.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? What was the truth?

Dear Dixie, he typed. *I love you.*

Started with a lie already, didn't you? he told himself.

But was it a lie?

He tried to remember when he had been certain of his love for her, hoping that in the memory would lie the truth.

He typed: *I remember when we fell in love.*

He gazed at the words for a while and then wandered into the kitchen and poured himself some more coffee. He could hear his wife upstairs with Annie, dressing her or cleaning her room or arguing about something. It all sounded the same. He forced himself back into his office and sat again before the computer and ordered himself to concentrate.

Abigail, their little brown scruffy furball of a mutt appeared, seeming to materialize out of nowhere, as she frequently did. Kevin watched as she hunted the perimeter of the room and then curled up on the old recliner in the corner, not caring that she was nestled on a stack of unopened mail.

"Fleeing from the war zone?" he mused. The dog wagged her stump of a tail. "I'm going to miss you," he said. Abigail yawned and put her head down between her front paws.

I loved you the first time I saw you, he typed, hating how insidious it sounded. He could see the way she'd roll her eyes and shake her head at his sentimentality. How could you love me if you didn't even know me, she would say. It would be truly a chastisement, a rebuke of his feelings, a betrayal, a slap at his emotional cravings, but she would disguise it as a playful swipe, a mild tease that meant nothing, thereby depriving him even of the privilege of showing his pain. That's what he should be telling her, but it was nothing she would understand, and this was no time for bickering over misunderstandings. The idea now was to stick to common ground. Stick to the points that she would absorb. The idea now was to make her understand his decision, whichever one that turned out to be, and there was nothing to be gained by confusing the issue with digressions that were beyond her comprehension.

He highlighted the sentence and deleted it.

But wait a second. It was a true statement, wasn't it? Whether she understood it or not. Whether she rolled her eyes or not. He loved her the first time he saw her, and it was important to say that. Without that point, nothing that followed made sense, did it?

So he reversed the deletion and there the sentence was again, black on white. Reading it made him feel better. He would leave it for now. It was a good sentence, sentimental or not. Maybe if she read it and thought about it until it sunk in she would begin to understand.

That was the problem. Always had been. She didn't understand. Because it was a sentence that she would never have written, had it been she writing the note. At least she never would have written it about him.

He wasn't sure if she would have written it about others. He had asked her about others, but she had laughed at him dismissively. He knew that had to be a lie, that there had to have been others whom

she had loved, and her dissembling had filled him with the fear that they were not all in the past. Perhaps that was why she had never truly loved him.

But whatever her feelings for him, he smiled as he read the sentence. It was as fine a sentence as one could ever hope to write, assuming of course that it was sincere. All true love is love at first sight, he thought, although that wasn't something he would put in his note to her. Perhaps it was something he should say in his note or notes to his children, but he would put off deciding that for now.

He typed: *You were planting geraniums at my sister's. Around the pool. You were wearing short overalls and a T-shirt and you had the tops of the overalls folded down. You were wearing a yellow and pink hat and tan work boots and white socks with some sort of blue logo, and your hair stuck out from under the hat. Your hair was bothering you, and you kept pushing it back with your wrist. You were so intent on getting the geraniums planted that you didn't see me staring at you. I don't know why I fell so in love with you, watching you planting the geraniums, but perhaps it was because I was so lonely. Certainly when you're lonely, you're more vulnerable to love. But I don't think that was it. I think I would have fallen in love with you whether I was lonely or not. Oh, and there were petunias, too. I remember now: there were white ones and some pink and some purple petunias. You were making a great effort to plant the geraniums in the middle of the pots and then surround them with equal arrangements of the various colors of petunias. I remember thinking that if it had been me, I would have thrown them all in haphazardly and what difference would it have made?*

He sat back and read what he had written. His coffee was cold. His wife had bought a new coffeemaker. It automatically shut off after two hours, and then the coffee was cold. He hated that. When he'd complained to her about it, she had rolled her eyes and shaken her head. "Then why don't you make some fresh?" she'd said. "Then it would be hot."

She didn't understand. He'd liked the old coffeemaker that stayed on forever. One pot would last all morning. At lunchtime he'd dump out what was left, rinse the pot, and that was that.

Maybe it was her way of expressing some repressed hostility because he didn't go to an office every day like everyone else. But no, that was silly. She'd known what she was getting. She'd known all along that he worked from his little office in the back corner of the house, amongst his books and his things and private secluded world, and that was where he wrote his little reports about topics with funny names whose essence she never seemed to grasp or to care about. It was his sanctum and only Abigail came to visit, although sometimes the phone on the separate business line rang and once in a while the fax machine beeped. He had a radio, which in the afternoons was tuned to the classical music station he liked unless there was opera. He didn't care for opera when he worked.

The new coffeemaker made cappuccino. That was why she'd insisted on it. Then, if they ever had a dinner party, she could make cappuccino after dinner for their guests.

But they never had any guests, other than relatives, and they didn't make cappuccino for their relatives.

Oh, they had friends, all right. Or at least she did. But they were more friends whom she had play dates for her daughter with, or whom she had lunch with or played tennis with or served on the Shade Tree Committee with or volunteered at the school with, and none of those activities called for cappuccino.

He typed: *You were drinking lemonade. I remember you had three glasses of it. Each time you came over to my sister, you complained about the heat and took off your pink and yellow hat and readjusted your hair, and that gave me a chance to see your smile and your eyes and to hear your voice. How was I to know that when you went into the kitchen to refill your lemonade, you were dumping vodka in with it and that your fierce flower-arranging persistence was alcohol-fueled? How was I to know that I was falling in love with a drunk?*

You were such a happy drunk. Did you know that? Did you know that is what has changed? That is why I am doing this. Not that you're no longer a happy drunk. That you are no longer happy. Ever. Not around me anyway. You never smile. You never laugh. I fell in love with your laugh, your smile, the twinkle in your eyes, the merriment that lit up your face, the way I was awestruck that you could make my stomach do somersaults that pushed my cheeks up, and I was happy just watching you plant flowers. Now I think you hate me because I have stripped all that happiness away from you, and what choice does that leave me?

This choice. That I am making now. That will be made by the time you read this.

After planting six pots of flowers and drinking three glasses of vodka-laced lemonade, you strode over to the couch where my sister and I sat watching her four-year-old, and you stood there with your hands on your hips demanding to know what we thought about your planting job.

Little Melissa threw a ball and it hit you in the shin. My sister and I laughed, but you feigned great insult and announced that you needed to go for a swim.

You stripped off your shoes, socks, T-shirt, and overalls, and underneath you had a white bikini. You stood there with your clothes in a pile at your feet and your hands on your hips, wanting to know which of us was going to join you, and all I could think was how incredibly sexy you were. Then you shrugged your shoulders, trotted to the edge of the pool, and dove in. You swam lengths, first crawl and then breaststroke and then backstroke, and then you floated on your back, spouting fountains of water like a whale.

Would you try not to gawk so much? my sister said to me.

I wasn't gawking, I said.

You were gawking, she said.

What's gawking? little Melissa said.

Never mind, my sister said.

Follow me, my sister said to me.

We went into the house, and she gave me a pair of her husband's swim trunks and two towels, and she made two vodka and lemonades. She told me she'd take Melissa to the park and would I please try not to do anything obscene or make a mess.

I went back out to the pool with the towels and the two drinks. You floated on your back and ignored me, and when I dove in, you complained that I splashed you. But when I told you I was onto your secret about the drinks and I'd brought you one, you told me I could kiss you if I wanted and I did.

That kiss must be why I imagined that you were in love with me like I was in love with you.

And need I remind you that it was your place we went back to that night, and it was your bed we spent the night in, and it was you who said the whole thing felt like a dream. No, you added, it felt like a honeymoon.

I remember being so struck by how different you were from everyone else I knew. Everyone else was struggling. Everyone else was trying so hard to find their way. Everyone else was so full of ambition—to be a doctor or lawyer or scientist or executive or movie star or professor or politician or—or anything. Something. Everyone else wanted to be something. Everyone else wanted to be successful. Everyone else wanted to be rich. Everyone else wanted to somehow change the world. Everyone else was out to establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with. But not you. You, who were smarter and prettier and more graceful and sexier than any of them, you who could have done anything, you were the only one who had figured it all out. You had only one ambition. I remember so clearly how we lay in your bed that first night, after making love—(I remember it was awkward and over so quick and you laughed so sweetly and told me not to worry that you would show me how to make the most fantastic love—and that was one promise you did keep—at least for a while you did) how you paced around the room naked and wonderful, explaining it all to me, so full of life and excitement. Your one ambition was to be happy. Your plan was so simple. You would spend your whole life living

plainly, free of goals, and you would have a lover who would support you, and you would read and paint and listen to music and plant flowers and a vegetable garden, and you would have children when you were ready and, now it was really important that I digested this part, you said to me so seriously, sitting on the bed now, taking my hand in yours, fixing my eyes sternly with yours, that I absolutely had to understand that this was no pipe dream, that you were no flake or romantic or starry-eyed fool, that you were no retro-hippie, that you weren't talking about free love or living in a commune or sitting around meditating, no, it was nothing like that at all. No, it was just plainly, quite simply that you were going to live a perfectly normal, everyday life. But your ambition was to be happy, to lead a perfectly normal everyday life, happily. I know it doesn't sound like much, you said, and you were starting to scoot over, to straddle me, but you show me one person who has managed to pull it off.

And then came the best part, probably the best moment of my entire life. Because then as you reached down and put me inside you (and I'll bet you don't know this—that when you did that, you bit down on your lower lip so I could see your front teeth like a beaver gnawing a log), you told me that you needed a partner for this life of yours, someone who thought it was a worthwhile vision, someone who would be willing and able to support you. You didn't need to be rich, but you did need to be comfortable—that's what you said, and I asked if having me inside you felt comfortable and that was the end of that conversation. As we made love again, I knew full well what we were agreeing to.

He sat back, sipped at his cold coffee, and read over what he had written. It wasn't at all what he had meant to say. So far, all he'd told her was what she already knew, and what was the point in that? The problem between them wasn't what she knew. It was all the things he didn't know how to tell her. That, and probably a lot of things about her that he didn't know, but there wasn't much he could do about that now, was there?

He typed: *I never thought then to ask you about love. I never thought to demand to know what role love played in your grand scheme.*

But how could I have thought to ask it? You told me you loved me. I believed you. It seemed so obvious. So inherent. So intrinsic. Of course I believed it.

No, that wasn't what he wanted to say either.

Did you ever love me?

No, that wasn't it either. She must have loved him. Sometime. Some amount. Or else none of it would have made sense.

What has happened? Where did we go wrong? When did you stop loving me?

But what difference did that make? She had and that was all that was important.

Was there a flaw in your plan? Was it that your plan could only work with a partner whom you truly loved? Has it failed because of me? Am I the flaw in your plan?

Okay, perhaps he was getting close.

He sipped his cold coffee. The fax machine beeped and started printing.

Yes, he thought, now I am getting to the heart of the matter. He sat staring at his words on the screen and then he typed: *I am leaving you before you leave me.*

Yes, he thought, that's what this is really about now, isn't it?

Then he typed: *But no, that's not it precisely. It's not that you would leave me. You would never physically leave me. To leave me would be to admit failure, and that is something you have never done. No, it's rather that you have already left me. You have deserted me emotionally, have stripped your love from me. You have isolated me and left me alone. You hate me and are repelled by the sight of me. As a result, I am miserable.*

He could not believe what he had written. There it was. He'd said it. He had thought it for a time now—he'd lost track of how long, but he'd hated himself for thinking it and each time it came to mind he'd castigated himself and pushed the thought away. He'd never dreamed he would say it to her, and yet, here it was, staring him in

the face, and once it was down on paper (or on the monitor, anyway) by God, it did ring true.

The fax machine was done printing. He went over to see what was there. It was an advertisement from Staples, offering two cases of paper for the price of one. He read the small print to make sure delivery was free. It was a good offer, although he wouldn't need paper for another month or two.

He sat back down in front of the computer.

Suicide would be easier, he thought, because if he left her, he would need to deal with so many practical concerns—where he would live, how he could afford it after the alimony and child support he would be obliged to pay, how he would replace his little office, what would become of Abigail, how he would have to send his new address to his clients—the few thousand souls who paid ten dollars every two months to receive his twelve-page newsletter on astronomy for non-scientists getting started in the field.

So many problems would go away if he chose suicide. But then there was the hurdle of technique. He had stockpiled pills, but he had little faith in them, and he couldn't bear the embarrassment of trying and failing. All the other methods were too gruesome to contemplate. He couldn't imagine shooting himself or jumping off a building or a bridge or driving a car off a cliff or any of the other means that seemed to be popular of late. When you came right down to specifics, there wasn't any easy, reliable way to kill himself.

So was that it, then? Was he going to leave his wife and children because he didn't have the courage to kill himself?

Or would he remain faithful and miserable because he was a coward?

But he had been over all of this too many times, and he'd made up his mind. Well, he'd made up his mind to do one or the other, and the thing now was to concentrate on getting these letters written. That was the task at hand, and he'd always thought that that was the key to getting through life—keep concentrating on the task at hand.

He typed: *I remember you making all the plans. You made a list, sitting on the park bench in your apartment, in your short jean overalls and nothing else, my favorite outfit, your hair bleached from the sun, freckles on your shoulders, wearing a straw-hat that I said made you look like Huckleberry Finn or Tom Sawyer and you insisted that it was Huckleberry Hound and you made that hound dog face, panting with your tongue hanging out. You wrote the list on an envelope because you said the list would be the song of our lives together, and the best songs are always written on the backs of envelopes. You'd seen a song written by John Lennon on the back of an envelope at the British Library in London when you'd lived there for two years after college. I suggested that an envelope was fine if you insisted, but why not write it on the front so you wouldn't have to deal with the creases, and you said that was what you loved about me, my fierce sense of practicality. You said that we would make such an excellent and balanced team, my fierce sense of practicality and your cockeyed romantic impetuosity. You said that you would fill our lives with fire and spice, and I would be our rock of stability. I said I couldn't quite see how that would work, in a practical sense, and you said hush and let's work on our list.*

I should have wondered then how you would mesh your cockeyed romantic impetuosity, your fire and spice, with the list. Or rather, I should have asked, should have demanded that the list be prioritized, rationalized, decoded. I should have forced us to see the stark reality of it. I should have asked you which of the things on the list were the most important. I should have seen that half the items on that list were incompatible with the others, that they were virtually guaranteed to suffocate them.

But I was too in love with you, and I did as you said. I married you and made love to you and made babies with you. Now you hate me because your plan didn't work out. It turns out that your life—that our life—is not enough for you.

He could hear her in the kitchen now. It was close to noon, and she was probably giving their daughter lunch. He wasn't sure if his

wife ate lunch nowadays. So often she was somewhere else, at school or a meeting or tennis.

He'd fallen into the habit of eating at his desk. Usually the house was empty, and he'd go make himself a sandwich and take it back to his office. But he needed a break from the letter. He could use some company. So he saved the file, closed it, and ventured into the kitchen.

His wife and daughter were sitting at the kitchen table. His daughter was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, holding it with both hands. Her paper plate was a pink pig's head with a snout indicated by two black circles. His wife was wearing a yellow tank top and jeans, and her hair was back in a clip. Her elbows were on the table and she was studying her daughter as if it was the first time she had witnessed such a feat of agility and wonder.

"Hi, Daddy," his daughter said, glancing up at him, smiling, holding her sandwich a few inches from her mouth, still somehow chewing as she spoke.

"Want me to make you something?" his wife asked.

"Okay," he said and he sat down at the table across from his daughter.

"What would you like?" his wife asked.

"I don't care," he said. "Anything would be fine."

She reached over to hand a napkin to their daughter. "You've got jelly on your cheek, sweetie," she said and then to him, "I'm not a mind reader. If you'd like me to make you something, you'll have to tell me what it is you want."

He got up and wiped the jelly off his daughter's cheek.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll make myself something later."

He checked the coffeemaker and found that sure enough she had dumped it out and rinsed the pot.

She said, "Do you want more coffee?"

"That's okay."

"I'll make more if you want it."

"No, that's okay."

He got himself a Diet Coke from the refrigerator, returned to his office, sat in his chair, and reopened the file.

He typed: *You are still beautiful. There is an eternal youth about you, and yet you are so different from when I fell in love with you. When you look at me, your face is so downtrodden now, as if the mere thought of smiling is almost too much to bear. You don't seem angry or upset or even irritated. It is more something like tired, but somehow worse. It is as though the life has been erased from you. It is as if you have forgotten how to be happy.*

Is it my fault? Am I to blame for what has happened to you?

Perhaps that is what hatred is.

And perhaps it is how I feel too.

"Do you have a minute?" his wife said, standing in the doorway of his office.

He was startled, spun around to her, and then quickly saved the file and closed it.

"Writing letters to your girlfriend?" she said.

"No, I—I was—."

"You do have a girlfriend, don't you?"

She marched in towards him as if she was going to push him aside, open the file, and see for herself, but instead she went to the long shelf they had had built along the windows, where he kept mounds of papers in a mess that she used to make fun of. She neatened a couple of the stacks, picking them up and banging them a few times to put them in order and setting them back down.

"Well, I hope you do because I have a boyfriend," she said.

She gazed out the window, turned around, took a deep breath, and stood staring at him, waiting to see what he had to say.

"I have to take our daughter to a play date. I'll be home in a few hours. We can talk about it more then." And with that she was gone.

He watched her walk away. He tried to recall the last time that they had made love. It hadn't been that long ago, probably sometime

in the last week or two, but he couldn't remember for sure. He wished he'd known then that it would be the last time so he could have tried to make it something special, could have relished it more, could have stored it in his memory clearly.

He turned to his computer, reopened the file, and read what he had written.

Then he typed: *Well dear, that was quite a surprise. No, it wasn't a surprise that you are having an affair. If that's what you meant. An affair. Whatever that is, exactly. That you are sleeping with someone. Having sex with him. Fucking him. That's what you mean, isn't it?*

Or does it mean that you love someone? Not me. Someone else. You always have. Or wanted to. Or did. Not me. Someone else.

I guess I always knew. Suspected anyway. No, I knew.

I hoped not, but I knew.

But still, you surprised me. Shocked me. Not so much what you said, but the way you said it.

I mean really, you just waltzing in here like that and saying it that way. What am I supposed to think?

That you don't love me. That's what I'm supposed to think.

You made that clear all right.

Well, I guess I ought to be relieved. Now I don't have to do either of the things I was dreading. Not now that you've taken care of it for me.

Heck, come to think of it, I don't have to write all these damned letters either.

Heck, come to think of it—

He clicked on Edit, then Select All, then Delete.

There, before him on the screen was a blank, open file. All he had to do now was create.

NADIA

Keith Meatto

Steve was our best guy friend until he met Nadia. Then he disappeared like it was South America, 1973. She banned him from Trivia Night and Karaoke Night. She said not everyone cares about minutiae or wants to sing for fun. Maybe so, but then she banned him from Midnight Movie Night at the Alamo. She said she hated movies in the theater; she got bored, she got restless, and she had a small bladder, and whenever she went to the bathroom she missed some crucial scene. Sure, Steve could have come out anyway. But when it comes to women he has no backbone. Or else he knew he could be lame and we would still be his friends.

Nadia was pretty but less pretty than she thought. She had pipe-cleaner wrists, and her mouth puckered like she sucked on Sour Apples, and no way that was her real nose. And how many girls can make a sweatshirt look slutty?

Meanwhile, she acted all superior because she had never worked a day job. Steve called her an Entrepreneur. Really, she was a This and That Girl. Her talent was to convince rich people she was useful. Before she met Steve, she was a Nutritional Consultant; people paid her to tell them to eat more vegetables and fewer cupcakes. She laminated photos of Swiss chard and kale and gave them to her clients as reminders. Another time, she was a Holistic Organizer, which meant she told housewives how to arrange their furniture and cutlery. There may have also been some Buddhism involved. But her best racket was when a family in the Hill Country paid her to clean out their mansion. She rooted through their attic and basement and closets, made lists, sold the valuables online, and hired a Dumpster and guys to cart away the rest. For this, she charged \$1,000 a day, plus expenses.

Later, she decided she wanted to be a boudoir photographer and take saucy pictures for women to give to their boyfriends or husbands. For this, she needed our help. She needed a portfolio to get clients,

but she didn't want to pay models. So she wrote us an email and asked if she could photograph us in our bras and panties. Tasteful photos, she said. Nothing pornographic. But we did have to sign a release that allowed her to post our pictures on the Internet. And P.S., she wrote. Don't worry. I don't want super pretty or thin people. I want regular, plain women.

When we read that, we wanted something senseless and violent to happen to Nadia, like those women in India last week who got trampled in the school stampede. But Steve is our friend, so we said we wished we could help, but we were too busy with work to slink around in lingerie. And later, when Steve asked our opinion of Nadia's latest business, we grit our teeth and said it was brilliant. We hoped he would get bored with her shallowness and narcissism. But they stayed together for weeks, months. And this is Steve, who used to think signing a cell phone contract was too much commitment.

Time passed. We saw Steve less and less often and when we did, he had changed. He pursed his lips like Nadia. She had bought him all new clothes that made him look like a hairdresser. He had even adopted her vocabulary, words like 'approximately' and 'more or less' and 'actually.' But there were no drill holes in his skull, so she must have sucked out his brain through his nostrils like the Egyptians did with the mummies.

This went on until their one-year anniversary. Then we called a Crisis Meeting. Stacy said we should sleep with Steve and then stand back and watch the flames. But who would be the home wrecker? Stacy said she had the most experience. I said it depends if you mean Quality or Quantity. Paula said Steve had grazed her boob once. I said they were sluts; I'd never sleep with a friend. They both laughed and said, Yeah, right.

What if we took him to a strip club? What if we treated him to a special massage in Chinatown? What if we poured fertilizer on his lawn and spelled out 'Nadia Sucks' in burned grass?

While we debated, Steve moved into Nadia's apartment when his lease expired, which meant we couldn't visit him without an

appointment. She booked him every weekend they were in town. They took vacations to Mexico, to Europe. Steve didn't make that much money. So either he went into debt or she bankrolled everything. Either way, he owed somebody something. With interest.

One day Steve called and invited us for drinks at Lockstep: just him, no Nadia. We were thrilled. Only when we got there, he had a bottle of champagne in a silver ice bucket. Before he said a word, we knew he and Nadia were engaged.

We toasted and said we were happy for him while we vomited inside our mouths. We should have known. We should have done something. Why hadn't he told us before?

Then he said he wanted us to be in the wedding party. We said women weren't allowed to be groomsmen. He laughed and said that Nadia wanted us as her bridesmaids. She was an only child and didn't have any close friends. And she would have asked, only she was afraid that we would say no.

We drank champagne so fast the bubbles went up our noses and then somebody knocked over the bottle, and, by the time the busboy mopped up the puddle, we had pulled our act together enough to tell Steve: We would be honored.

THE DISTANCES WEAR ON YOU
Andy Jameson

Garnell tells you lots of things you don't care to know—how sex with his wife is like sticking his dick in a big mass of pudding. Or that gunpowder rubbed on a pit bull's snout will enrage it so much that it becomes a death machine, a guided missile with teeth. He tells you about the terrible ways someone can get hurt in the joint: "They got this concoction called a Freddy Kreuger. Make it with Magic Shave and some other shit. It's like acid. I seen some sissy throw it on this guy was hassling him. Face just slides off like hot cheese on a pizza." He asks if you would "hit" any of the girls you drive past: "Look at the ass on her. You know you would be all up in that." You grin and smile sheepishly and tell him you are married. "Shit, so am I. Don't keep me from being human."

Later, at the end of a day hauling cheap furniture up and down the wobbly, defeated stairs of another apartment building, with its bouquet of piss and garbage, you almost welcome the reek of Garnell there beside you in the cab. He smokes one last cigarette, you feel the sweat drying on your brow, and you are reminded that you took up smoking once in college for a period of one week. You brooded around the midnight campus, unfurling deep exhalations of smoke and agony like a typical fool, thinking the sensation of the mist from the fountain in front of the library so achingly ephemeral on your skin. Nothing at all, you know, like the feel of drying sweat.

The company's motto is "We'll get your stuff where you're going." After four years the guys all call you Professor. Some say it with a measure of respect. Others, lifers like Reuben, are just looking for an opportunity to show you how smart you really are. "You want to carry this here piano like a man, Perfessor, or should we get the straps?" He smiles so you can see the gleam of his gold teeth; his eyes are hidden by Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses. He

doesn't look it, but he is stronger than any of you, except maybe Louis, who is Samoan and played football for a junior college somewhere in Missouri.

"All right," you say. "Man up."

"Yeah, man up, bitch."

It's Reuben's catch phrase, but you use it now. You know what the challenge behind it means. Some guys can't take this kind of work. They could be big as a Clydesdale, it doesn't matter: man up when the time comes or let your partner down.

You've seen what Reuben can do, how he'll make your life hell if you show the least bit of weakness. He hated Benny, in particular, a mealy boy with mutton chop sideburns who complained incessantly and disappeared when the heaviest furniture had to be lifted. Reuben taunted him ceaselessly.

"You ever lick pussy, B? 'Cause when I get close to you that what I smell. I smell that ol' fish pussy smell. But I know you never even dip a finger, so where that smell come from?"

"C'mon, lay off," Benny says.

"I'm just saying you smell like pussy, and act like pussy, maybe you is pussy."

Later on, while wrapping up a dresser in blankets, Benny makes his case to you: "I don't know why he always got to be picking on me." You just keep working, trying your best to stay out of it, but he wants so desperately to be consoled, for someone to take his side, almost, you think, like your four-year-old son, who mews in the irradiated darkness of a thunder storm. But Benny is a grown man, soft, torn, and fearful.

"He better watch himself," Benny says. "One of these days."

Later in the afternoon, Benny loses his grip while carrying a wardrobe up a steep flight of stairs with Louis. Luckily, Louis wedges his massive shoulder underneath the bottom edge to keep from being knocked back down the stairs with the wardrobe tumbling on top of him.

"What I say?" Reuben comments to no one in particular. "Boy gon' get someone killed."

Sometimes you are amazed that it has come to this—that you find yourself at seven in the morning punching in the security code to the office: your old basketball number from high school tripled. The repetition makes it even more pathetic.

You are the only one that the owner, Troy Spears, will trust not to rip off the place when he's not around. He has taken you aside into the office filled with boxes of paper and old weightlifting trophies to praise your dedication, your reliability.

"I know what I'm getting with most of these guys," Troy says as he strokes his yellow-colored goatee, "which is why I have so many rules. These guys could care less. But you're a real find, John. A real find." Nausea grips you, a cloying feeling that sits in the center of your chest all day.

And later that week when the Indian convenience store magnate takes you by his side and says in a too loud voice, referring to Reuben and Garnell, and even Louis, "What will we do about these guys? You get them to work. I pay you good money," you want to say to him: "I'm just the same. I don't want to be here either. I'd chunk your fucking Stairmaster over the balcony if I could." Instead, you grin and tell him you are all working very hard to make sure everything will make it safe and sound to his new mansion on the golf course in Fairfield Acres.

One morning Reuben is riding Benny again before you've even left the building, and Benny is looking at Reuben with hatred, but you all know he won't lift a finger.

"C'mon," Reuben says. "Let's pump a little iron." He sits down at the weight bench, a castoff off from Troy's steroid days. There are mirrors and rows of dumbbells. Reuben puts two plates on each side—225 in all—and pumps the bar three times without even straining.

"Now you go, B. We need a warm-up."

Benny edges to the open back door where a few guys are smoking. He has a sully, sour look on his face. He dons those glasses with the hazy lenses that always make the wearer seem guilty. "Shit, why I got to lift that?" He looks at you, then Louis, for support. Garnell lets out a strangled laugh. No one says a word. "I ain't got nothing to prove," Benny says. "Why you gotta be that way?"

"Cause I want to know what I'm working with. Do you have it in you?"

"Shee-it."

Louis gets up from one of the horrible, abandoned couches that populate the back room. He motions to Reuben to move off the bench, then lifts the 225 five times. Now you all feel it; some line has been drawn. You take your place and bring the bar down across your chest. It sits there for a second, and then you haltingly get it up. When you are finished your arms feel rubbery and hot, but you are also strangely exultant.

"See, even the Pefessor can do it."

Benny seems most hurt that you have taken Reuben's side.

"Fuck all y'all. I don't need this job," Benny says. Then he starts muttering. "Big screen half paid off. Let them come take it. I don't care."

At the same time, Reuben is crowing, "Go on, then. Go on. You go. Call you momma to come pick you up. Go on."

The next morning a guy, some temp, is standing out front waiting for you to open up the place. He has on jeans but shivers in the early morning cold.

"You ever done this kind of work before?" you say.

"Naw, man." He grins, showing a grill of chrome. "Another day, another dollar, right?" He won't last long, you think, but at least Benny is gone for good.

It is amazing what some people find dear. The wife of the convenience store magnate has hundreds of saris, cream and hunter and puce, bangled and stitched. She could never wear that many in

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a year if she wore a new one every day. Some are encased in plastic, perhaps containing still the desiccated air of the sub-continent, all baggage that must be hauled around.

Like the old couple moving to Sun City. He had been a biology teacher. They still have an entire room of their children's toys. You pick up a brittle, sun-bleached plastic dolly, her blond hair now a tangle, one leering eye opened, the other drooped closed as if she is falling asleep. "Sometimes the grandkids come," the man says to you, knowing he can't really defend this silly nostalgia, this unnecessary burden on the moving van's precious space.

You find teething marks on the legs of dressers and bureaus. The indentions in the wood are soft. You like the feeling when you run your fingers over the ridges. In the closet or perhaps the pantry, you find the chart, the progression of childhood. Look how much he grew that one year. Even when the house is sold, they can never bear to paint over it. Leave it to the next occupants to cover up, add their own hieroglyphs. You interpret the artifacts, follow the migrations, carry with your hands and shoulder the accumulation of a lifetime, however sad or superfluous.

Others are more haphazard and will just give you things, because they are the castoffs, the out-of-date and just plain ugly, the kind of stuff that makes them say, "What were we thinking?" This is where the couches in the shop's back room come from: all golden harvest yellow or avocado green Naugahyde and wrapped in duct tape to cover the scars made by some dog or rambunctious child. The pressboard dressers with crooked drawers like misshapen mouths. The forgotten exercise equipment: a bike that will take you nowhere, those red plastic weights filled with sand. And TVs all faux wood and heavy as hell, heavy as all your burdens. Reuben calls them "Sega specials." Sometimes after work you all sit around and play, hooting at the blips as if you were eighteen again without wives who have transformed into Jabba the Hutt, without kids who should be medicated, without bills. In those last few minutes before you step out into the deep blank of another night, you sit and

try to breathe in the lingering sweetness of late-blooming honeysuckle coming from somewhere in the back lot. You try not to think at all.

Occasionally, the people can be ruthless, cutting to the bone, divesting what they loved most. You have more respect for this type, the ones who seem intent on what is to come, knowing they have to be light. The woman who tells you she wants to be sober when she sees her grandchild for the first time. Would you please just take away the contents of her bar? She doesn't care what you do with it, just get rid of it somehow. The collection is quite extensive—blackberry liquors and crème de menthes and Kahlúas—the exotic bottles tinted the color of an alcoholic's rainbow. Garnell's eyes get as big as the Cheshire cat's. You select one bottle of single malt scotch, about half full, and tell him he can have the rest.

That night you come home to an empty house because your wife has gone shopping at the outlet mall with her mother again. You sit down at the kitchen table, and before you even warm up some leftovers, you pour a glass. You pour several more glasses, and, when your wife finally comes home, bags bunching and rustling around her, she finds you lying on your back on the bathroom floor, giggling. You can't stop, even when you see her reddening face peer down at you.

"What's wrong?" she keeps saying.

If you knew, you would tell her. You swear you would.

There is a specific way to pack a van. Kitchen chairs first, in the attic above the cab. Then the mattresses. The couch is turned up on end, feet against the wall.

After the couch you get the boxes. Then dressers and book cases, anything rectangular. It's like building a wall, layer by layer, intricate and perilous. One mistake and you have shifts, you have furniture rubbing and cracking.

Over the years, you've learned your lessons well. You pack it in tight.

There is one particular move, though, that you just can't get out of your mind. You must drive out to a little town called Between—the whole ride over Garnell asks you at consistent intervals, "Are we in Between, yet?"—to help a woman move out of her daddy's house. "She's divorced," Teresa the secretary has confided that morning. "She finally has enough money to get her own place. Just about cried when she called." When you get there, you can see why: her father is a real piece of work. In the front hallway, he has dedicated a giant glass case to his collection of Nazi memorabilia. On the walls are various weapons—maces, axes, swords, and daggers. Garnell stands gaping at a set of crossed swords.

"Them's for sticking, not cutting," the old man says, poking Garnell in the ribs with his index finger. Garnell smiles and laughs hesitantly.

"Just these two rooms," the woman says, asking in her harried smile to be forgiven for her father, for everything you would see and hear for the next few hours. You notice, then, a fragility that you find beautiful. You wish you could wrap her in soft tissue paper. Two children, a pale boy and girl, peer silently out at you from around a corner. You know how terrible this house is.

"This ol' boy is bat-shit crazy," Garnell says when you are in the basement to get the refrigerator. "What you bet he's putting it to her. Them kids look like all in the family, you know." You dislike Garnell at that moment.

"She seems nice. She's in a bad spot," you say.

"I bet you'd put her in a spot."

You tell Garnell to shut his mouth and for once he obliges.

At the end of every day, you go through a routine. Count the blankets and make sure they are stacked correctly, crease facing out. Count the thick rubber bands you use to hold the blankets in place. Troy will dock your pay if any of the numbers don't work out right. A blanket costs \$35, or so he claims. Make sure the truck has gas, look

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at the oil dipstick. Write down your mileage for the day. Everything ticked off on a check sheet. Everything accounted for.

The new house, a rental, is not much to speak of, but you can tell how happy the woman is to be there. She smiles in a different way, begins to ask you questions and joke around.

"You look like you are in shape," she says.

"Well, you know, the job—."

"I'd like to run in a marathon," she says. "Every day I try to run a little farther. But the distances wear on you."

You tell her that you used to run cross-country, so you know what she means. "Sometime, if you're lucky, your legs get numb. You're not even thinking about how long you've run; you just pick a spot and make for it." She nods her head.

Finally, there is nothing left to move. Everything is in its place.

"Can I get you anything?" she asks. "Something to drink? Something for the road?"

You stand before her, immobilized by some need you can't acknowledge. "Yes, that would be nice," you say.

She smiles at you one last time and, for some reason, reaches out and smoothes your hair down as she would a child. Unconsciously, you flinch and she looks embarrassed. "I'll go get that drink," she says and goes into the house

"Let's hit it," you say to Garnell, who is shaking his head and grinning.

"What's wrong with you?" he says.

Pulling out, you see her waving in your side mirror.

Later that night you fall asleep on the couch, hunched like a question mark. Even in your dreams you are lifting.

BOW AND STRING

Michael Koenig

All throughout the last month of my sabbatical, you were telling me you wanted us to stay on, even though you knew that it was simply not possible.

I thought you hated living here. You hated the rain. All along, I assured you that everything would be fine and went on with my work. I told you to go make friends.

It was Anna who suspected first. She ran into you at the market and you spontaneously began telling her how happy you were with me. You went on in this vein for several minutes. She immediately suspected foul play; she knew you never liked to share.

Of course I suspected you; every night you were absent I slept on top of the bedcovers with one ear to the door. In the morning you'd be there to wake me from my stillborn sleep, bringing deli coffee and a prosaic excuse, a newspaper, a compliment and a kiss. (Even though you'd never offered excuses for being late before.)

Car trouble was endemic that year, and you were always tired, but never needed any sleep.

I thought of confronting you, but a dying marriage is like a bad job. You wait until you get fired. You make them fire you.

I began to enjoy arguing; it was the only thing in my life that resembled progress.

After a few more months it was settled: we went home together. All three of us.

We are bow and string, horsehair and catgut. You are an irritant, rubbing on my skin.

This is what I've been doing while you've been away: I've been holding my suitors at bay. I've been chopping up the house for firewood; I've been making a spectacle of myself.

I left you a note on a parking ticket appended to your windshield. Why waste my time being subtle? That never worked with you.

Oh go on grow up, and I say, no, you grow up.

Consume me, I said. Let it be you and not the fire.

Let's close the book on this tawdry little episode, you said.

And I said: This is a public place. You can't have me thrown out of here.

Tell me how it all began: with a drink? With dinner? Did you feel awful about it the first time?

Were you able to convince her that it was all her idea?

A long time ago, one of your students became distracted in her work, prone to extravagant metaphors about the color of your eyes and the beauty of your smile.

You tended to belittle such metaphors, but you found her persistent flattery pleasant. She continued her studies with another teacher, but after that she found that she was no longer especially gifted.

As years passed, she tended to your reputation on her knees, with cotton swabs and alcohol, occasionally adding a few paintstrokes in the style of the original. She loved her work, as she had once loved you.

And though she never completely abandoned her admiration, she eventually became your equal.

I met her at one of the parties, your lover. I shook her hand and shared a few ideas with her, then made excuses when she ran out of things to say. I thought her work derivative. I thought her unworthy of you. I spent the whole evening dumbfounded at the thought of her wearing sandals to one of these affairs.

You didn't notice. You were talking with someone else.

She put her finger in her glass and licked the wine from her finger. You came over and kissed her hand.

I let my wine glass fall on the floor, but you didn't come to see if I'd been hurt.

(You can't blame me for trying to press my advantages.)

I knew all along you would choose her.

I have gone back to the places you went with her. I have been sitting at a table in the corner, plotting the trajectory of your fall. And after

the last customer has left for the evening, I will stay to sweep out the floor.

I see her through a window, shabby with longing. Sitting there with her textbook and her notebook, shuffling her props on the small round table with uneven legs.

She's wearing a pretty black dress. Imitation velvet. I don't think I could pull it off, but you certainly will.

(I should tell her to make you wait. You're always so much nicer before dinner.)

She's early. You're late. She wonders whether you're coming at all.

You're so late she has to touch up her lipstick, or maybe that just what she always does when you come. She leaves the imprint of a kiss on the coffee mug.

I overhear you talking to her. She laughs at something you said.

You ask her to tell you a little about herself.

You pass compliments back and forth like a flu; you love her hair, she loves your tie; you love her legs, she loves your shoes.

She's eager for you. She'll probably invite you over to her apartment.

She'll sit outside in the car with you, jiggling the door latch; maybe she'll kiss you on the lips, maybe she'll blow you off with a handshake.

Maybe she'll invite you in. She's already tidied up. You'll never catch her unaware, not even in her sleep.

Make your pitch. Baby, it's cold outside. Don't just sit there saying nothing, but don't be too bold. Even if it's a sure thing, she's going to make you do your entire presentation.

She's left the porchlight on. She says her roommate is out of town. She invites you to come in for a drink. You know what that means. I know you do.

She stretches out her arms like a scarecrow. Take off those warm clothes. Put down those heavy things.

She opens the bottle of wine you brought and pours it in a coffee mug. She keeps the cracked one for herself. You sit with her on a well-worn couch. She's saying something but you can't hear; you're looking for an opening, a chance to propose a toast.

You're so charming and by now she's drunk.

Touch her nipple. Go for it.

Now go be charming in your moment of triumph.

She's done for.

Is sex like music or is music like sex? Duet for tuba and violin.

Still life of prey artfully arranged. Dot and dash. Moss over stone. Tonight you'll make one shadow.

Every sunrise from now on, you'll be there to describe it to her. How will you ever find the words, without duplicating yourself?

She'll wake up with you on her breath. And the more she tries not to think of you, the sadder she gets.

She'll think that all the sarcastic things you say are funny because you never say them about her. She'll think that your roses were grown in her tribute.

She'll begin to believe your flattery, even if it doesn't convince her that it's true.

She'll exaggerate every kindness and disregard every slight. She'll have to think back hard to remember when she's ever been angry.

She will never fail to hold your interest. She will be endlessly accommodating to your funny little moods, amuse but not upstage you, brighten every room, make good of every disaster, speak intelligently in support of your arguments, until she can't stand it anymore.

I know that by the time you stop seeing her, that necklace will be in pieces on the floor, replaced with a far more delicate thing.

You'll keep everything you own, but she'll sell the jewelry.

Her love for you is drawn with crayon, vivid, but not indelible.

She doesn't know your barbarity yet.

You told her about me. You described me sympathetically, like someone with a lingering illness. These days I'm a catch in your throat.

You say it's a matter of the heart. That's the phrase you use for every bit of behavior that you can't explain.

You've sent everyone an apology. I used to write those letters for you.

You have the nerve to bring your new fiancée to dinner: mounted and now stuffed.

I come to dinner and leave early, apologizing profusely to the hostess, who barely takes note of my absence.

One more place set at the table. A few chairs shuffled around.

I think it's awful how quickly everything returned to normal. Even for me.

It seems now as if I have hated you for as long as I loved you. It seems now as if I live merely to do you harm.

I am a firing squad, turned upon itself.

I've given up lipreading and gone back to my studies.

I have stopped trimming the roses. She has a garden of her own.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE FEELING:

AN INTERVIEW WITH BILL PLYMPTON

Barrett Bowlin

Bill Plympton's career in animation has spanned decades, and his work has remained wildly and internationally popular despite changing trends and troubled economies. His distinct style and subject matter have pushed cartoons into unfamiliar but welcome territories, and his short and feature films have earned him acclaim from hundreds of film festivals, critics, and prize committees. His first feature to be nominated for an Academy Award, for example, was 1987's "Your Face," an outlandish and brilliant short film that featured voice work from Maureen McElheron. As one of the hardest working artists in the business, he knows what it's like to single-handedly draw and color an animated full-length feature, the first of which was 1992's The Tune. In order to finance his films, Plympton has worked in the commercial industry, as well, producing spots for companies like Geico, United Airlines, AT&T, and Nike. As independent an artist as they come, however, he has worked tirelessly to promote his creations, the latest of which is the full-length feature, Idiots and Angels, which will be released in New York on October 6th, at the IFC Film Center. We recently had the opportunity to speak with Bill Plympton and discuss the film, the changing face of media, and why thought balloons are awkward, little bastards.

With Idiots and Angels, how have you noticed that your personal style and artistry has changed? Why do you think it has changed?

That's a function of the technology. The feature film I did before *Idiots and Angels* was called *Hair High*, and, at that time, the cost to transfer digital to film was really expensive—like \$100,000 to 200,000—and that was way beyond my budget. In the last three or four years, the transfer cost has come down, and now it's about \$25,000, and that I can pay for. Before that, I had to take my

drawings, make a Xerox copy of my drawings, and then paint on the Xerox cels from the drawings. And the Xerox process didn't have very good resolution. But now, when I scan it on the computer, the resolution is so precise and so sharp that I can do it all the shading with pencil and do all the texture and all the detail, and the resolution is perfect. So that's why it's a totally different style. And, quite frankly, when I was starting out, doing illustrations as a kid, the pencil was my preferred form of making art, so it makes sense now that I'm making a feature film now of pencil on paper; it feels like I'm home, like I'm back to my roots.

Does working with a pencil and paper go a lot faster for you in the process?

It goes a lot faster; I don't have to hire so many people to paint the cells and clean the cells. That was a very backbreaking and time-consuming process. But now they can clean the cels digitally. It goes twice as fast, and it's much cheaper in the process.

In contrast with some of your previous feature-length films, why did you opt to have Idiots and Angels run without dialogue? What constraints did this pose for you during the film's creation and process?

The idea of doing it without dialogue is not new, as you know; Sylvain Chomet did *The Triplets of Belleville* without dialogue. But it just felt to me that the film was more about emotions and about visuals, and not so much about talking. So I wanted to try and experiment and see if I could make the film without dialogue. A number of my shorts have been made without dialogue, so I knew I could do it in a short film, and I wanted to see if I could do it in a feature. And, quite frankly, it was a big success. A lot of people come out of the film not really realizing there's no dialogue. The story just feels very clear without words. Another reason it's been successful overseas is because there's no

dialogue. There's no cost in doing subtitles; there's no cost in dubbing. It just makes the process a lot easier to sell overseas.

What constraints do you find are there when you work without dialogue?

A lot of the interior dialogue is difficult—you know, when someone is thinking of something they did in the past—so then I have to go to thought balloons, which are a little awkward. Wording would be a little bit clearer there, and, normally, when someone's angry, they'll yell epithets. But the storytelling is quite easy without words. To bring up another issue, the music really becomes the dialogue. It becomes the explainer of what's going on and what you should be feeling.

In terms of innovation, where do you see animation and cartooning heading?

I think it's diversifying. I know there's a big push on computer animation, and a lot of money is being made by computer animation, but I think there are other styles of animation that are equally powerful and popular. For example, stop motion (the Henry Selick and Wes Anderson films), claymation (which is Nick Park), traditional cel animation (which is Japanese manga), and then mine, which is pencil animation, and also a lot of flash. There are a lot of great flash-animated feature films that are coming out. So I think the audience is open to any technique so long as there are interesting characters and the story is told well. I don't think there's any real limit on animation; the future's very bright for cartoons.

What obstacles have you seen or do you anticipate for cartoons in the near future?

Personally, my obstacles include trying to get distributors to handle my films and to believe in them, which is a mystery to me because I know that my films are popular all over the world and that I have a big

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 [2010], Art. 1

audience. But a lot of the distributors are afraid of my films because they're not family entertainment. So I'm always butting my head against the stereotype that animation has to be for kids. And they can't get behind the idea that mature ideas are the perfect subject matter for animation. Whenever I try to sell my films to distributors, they say it's a little racy for animation. "Sorry, kid, we just can't handle it." So that's why I have to self-distribute the films. It's very discouraging. It's a tough, uphill battle fighting against Dreamworks, Pixar, and Disney, but I'm having fun and I'm enjoying making my films.

Looking back at your syndicated newspaper strip, Plympton, when did you stop working on newspaper cartoons?

I started in 1975 and ended in 1985.

What was behind the decision to move away from that medium?

As a kid, I always wanted to be an animator. I always loved Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse and Goofy, and that was really my lifetime goal. When I moved to New York in 1970, animation was a dying art form, and it was very tragic. So the only option for me was to work in print—illustrations, gag cartoons, political cartoons. That was the way to make money and still do cartoons. But once animation started coming back in the mid-1980s, with MTV and Japanese anime and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and *The Simpsons* and the whole Disney resurgence, then I felt the time was right to get back into animation, and there was a market again for cartoons.

*Like you've done with several of your other full-lengths, do you plan on releasing the storyboards of *Idiots and Angels* as a graphic novel?*

No, we should, though. I tried that with *Hair High*, but it didn't work out very well simply because it didn't get a major release. Very few

publishers will release [an animated film's storyboards] as a graphic novel unless it gets a major release, like *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*. I just don't have that kind of muscle power.

[Plympton does have a big art book coming out in the spring called Independently Animated: Bill Plympton. It will contain art and anecdotes and reproductions of his work that no one has seen before.]

What do you find are the challenges of working within the print medium?

The problem with print is that it's static. There's no movement; there's very little storytelling. It's very local and doesn't get all over the world. My films are shown all over the planet and on television, and they move and they're funny, and they've got color, and sometimes they're twenty feet high. In print, you just don't have those kinds of specifications. You don't have that kind of impact, that power. So I was sort of happy to leave print. It was pleasant but it didn't fulfill me as an artist, which is something animation does.

Bill Plympton's latest film, Idiots and Angels, will be released in New York, on October 6, at the IFC Film Center. For more information on Plympton and the film, visit idiotsandangels.com.

WHEN THEY'D GOTTEN THE BEAR IN THE CAGE
Rob Carney

it was punished for their anger,
for taking up space where they would've preferred potted plants

or a pretty aquarium: a shimmer of fish
like the room's own rainbow,

and bubbles coming from a deep-sea diver,
and there on the glass their own faces smiling back.

It was punished whenever a growl escaped.
Then threatened with worse for its silence.

The next morning, they hammered up signs all around it:
No quiet unhappiness allowed.

They hung banners demanding that it laugh more,
colored pie charts of all of its problems,

threw sticks in its cage and told it to go fetch,
which all makes perfect sense

if you twist sense like a corkscrew
and the only wine you ever open is the bottle of your own desire.

WHY THE RIVER

Meredith Davies Hadaway

because it is a body

because it rises in our sweat,
marries our breath to the cold

because it spills light back to us
and hoards our shadows

because it leaves when gravity insists
but always comes back

because it traps the clouds so we can sail across
both heaven and earth

because it carries our tears, swells
with our salt

because it is a body

because it bears our weight

EXCERPT FROM *GHOST NUMBERS*

Susan Briante

—from the author: “In May 2009, I began recording the closing number for the Dow Jones Industrial Average. I’ve let those numbers randomly guide me to texts: plugging them into Project Gutenberg, Bartlett’s quotations, and various search engines, which led me to lines from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, quotations from the Bible, and many other unexpected sources. I allowed those texts to exert their influence over a series of poems much in the same way the closing number of the Dow exerts an influence over our lives.”

May 7—Dow Closes Down: 8409

a mouth without words
makes a cave,
intimacy carves
such narrow spaces,
ravine at the trail’s edge,
the distance between
these trees (8409 inches)
not found anywhere else
in the forest

the corpse sings happy
from care I’m free
an odd song, swamp
dwellers sing in intervals
toad after cricket after frog
composite song,
airplanes through the night sky
white out silence
in darkness our hands

make the next step possible,
touch sends waves,
we move through
one another's lives—
moth wing night creature
—love makes radio stations,
a night sky is a pocket-
watch face, hand in hand
we make its silver chain

May 11—Dow Closes Down: 8418

on the mountain
what looks
like mountain
lion is brother
what looks still
is a hill
of flickering
grass
a pickup truck
sounds
like a mouth
full of birds
these flowers
have teeth
but no throat
in bower and field
even friends
lay their bellies
across narrow roads
thoughts crawling

up the back
of their legs
bloodless knives
sewn into
their upper thighs
thoughts
like an aqueduct
across the path
water turns
a wheel
to pound
a stone
until the wheel
breaks, aqueducts
clog with pine
needles, our bodies
become simpler
vessels, to begin
such a long
uncarving.

May 12—Dow Closes Up: 8469

You cannot tell me how it happened
how a soul escapes the body,

can't see the path from the top of the hill,
can't catalog this early morning bird song.

The Pacific swirls, seeds
go unsorted, unsown, inharmonious.

Today, it is best to link by reflection,
reverberation, scent or status (Basho).

A deer wades through the meadow, shivers and eats.
Your soul escaped your body,

and I was left—a mosquito at a screen door
testing mesh with the worry of a seamstress.

NOTES

"May 7—Dow Closes Down: 8409" makes oblique reference to the phrase "Happy am I from care I'm free!" (from the Opera of *La Bayadere*, Bartlett's quotation 8409). The number 8409 is an odd number, a composite number, and a deficient number.

In "May 11—Dow Closes Down: 8418," the first four lines are a play on Euripides *The Bacchae* (Project Gutenberg e-text 8418).

"May 12—Dow Closes Up: 8469" makes oblique reference to the Canadian Government's National Areas Report on Area 8469.

SHEEP'S HEAD ON A PLATE

Michael Cadnum

Flayed, emptied, stripped
to red carpentry, these remains
are ready for the fire.
Why were we ever in doubt?
We lived to celebrate,
and now there is no evidence of
the slaughter-mallet, the skinner's knife,
or even of the hooks that
suspended the sacrifice—only this
bounty, eye to eye.

THE ROCK DOVES OF ISTANBUL

Michael Cadnum

Soldiers with machine guns and green helmets
stood in front of the bank. He had to ignore
the *taksis* that beeped at him as he paused
outside the agreed-upon tea garden, the trees
painted white up to where their dark branches spread.
She was there already, waiting.
The small drinking glasses rattled in red and white saucers,
and there was a plate of sugar cubes, and the shovel repairman
beyond the garden gate crouching,
his hammer peeling against the bent and
broken blades. Too much
to name and gather, the traveler
a shadow in a chorus of color. If he had to
pack it all into the decreed hull, two and by two,
flood promised and beginning to shiver down from on high,
would he remember the pigeon, or would
the pigeon even count as a creature—
ash-blue fowls the boys were catching, one after the other,
the same bird endlessly replicated. There'd be no problem
remembering the hawk skimming the street,
or the sharp-note hammer,
as though the tool were alive—
and who was to say the shovel and the hat the tool
repairman was wearing were not creatures, too?
So what to save and what to let drink darkness?

As though he had to choose the words
that he would endow with survival, letting others disappear,
and he couldn't. He would always gather
the wrong expressions, and miss the syllables

he would actually turn out to need: the *hmm*?
when he thought she had said something,
the cube of sugar already dissolving into joy.

SILVER ANNIVERSARY

Terry Godbey

No party, no cake, no
flowers. He's across town

in his new apartment. I'm getting acquainted
with the lawn mower and pool pump.

After dark, rats sneak
into the attic, wake me at three

with their parties. Mornings
he stops by, carries them down stiff

in traps, tongues coated
with peanut butter.

There are things I want
badly enough to die for, traps

I edge close to
again and again for a taste.

It's been only four weeks. I haven't told
my mother, but the rats must know.

Even now, I hear them. One
is leaving. Another has arrived.

CORDAGE

Nathaniel Bishop

The net must be twined
from the pith of cattails, & the bark
of a willow made wet so the fiber doesn't break
when twisted around itself, & around itself, & plaited

to more fiber. Three children winding
three threads each into string as a fourth
turns their result into a single rope suitable

to contain a fish, or lash together boats
against a shamal.

There is strength, here,
in numbers: the willow's inner bark married
to the cattail's test, each plant made plural
& that plural made single,

so that when the cord breaks they mend it,
& not its principle parts that look
and look the same.

ON MY KNEES, I SALT THE PORCELAIN STAINS

Justin Runge

On my knees, I salt the porcelain stains with abrasive and work against its rings, what's accrued, like a tree's, over years, a buildup of rust and of scum, the green-blue of copper that lolls from the faucet to the drain, the iron oxidized pale pink, this ugliness painted invisibly, minerals and bacteria that compose the bathwater left to blemish the tub for so long I scrub until muscles burn; the project of erasure is a physical one, as we've proven now over this week of defacing and refacing a home so many have occupied, filled with little scars, pins setting the fracture of a curtain rod, grafts of contact paper taking her days to apply to the leprous kitchen cupboards, because what hangs in these rooms is moisture, breathed in and bred without the vents or windows needed for escape, wet bending books, chewing paint off the walls, the ceiling scabbed by mold that has lived healthy above the bathers; I discover it over me like an ominous weather, like invasion, and am goaded into a last scour, gloves damp with the humidity of my hands, working for something, a blank slate, a clean bill, so she can soak after work.

GREEN ASH

Doug Ramspeck

A green ash beside the Comal River
offers its shadow to the road, offers
its shadow to the passing hoods of cars.

And Donna, when she is naked,
sits with a small acoustic guitar in her lap
and strums her painted fingernails like picks.

And the shadow of the ash closes its eyes
as she drives through it, the dark stain
of the shadow's body opening in the heat of day.

Or notice how the Comal River moves
with the slow music of the earth,
as sleepy as the wind that barely stirs
the oval leaflets of the ash.

The first time we ever spent the night together,
Donna had a nosebleed come morning while buttering
her blueberry waffles, which she took as a sign
we would have children together,

and the last time she visited New Braunfels
she told her father he'd be a grandfather
several times over, the way a green ash
is a grandfather to the river,

the way the river is a grandfather
to the months and years.
Donna, this morning, is driving to New Braunfels

to visit her father who has died, but all the tree knows
is how to spill itself out of its body,

and all the car knows is how to drive through
a shadow then be gone.

Sometimes the river beside the ash looks gray or green
or black, and always the tree keeps opening its shadow,

its reflected oval leaflets that sway as faintly
as the real ones, the way a reflection of the moon
sways in the Comal River after dark.

Her father used to burn ash wood in the fireplace
in dead winter—

and the smoke rose out of the chimney
the way Donna's voice rises
out of her chest and throat

whenever she strums with the picks
of her painted fingernails, whenever she sings
naked to that strumming—

the way the shadow of the green ash
keeps opening and opening its body,

and then a little dust lifts in the air and floats away
across the river.

*

Simon Perchik

Though they give nothing back
they're weak and in the bargain
both eyes are overgrown

with branches, with hillsides
calling out from the dirt
that no longer knows the difference

—what they can still point to
you drink as thighs and breasts
and rainwater stroking the Earth

shaking it, almost a mouth
almost a sun, a smell
burning between, half roots

half far away, half squint
and your heart too is emptying
struggling, moist, around you.

WALLPAPER EVERYWHERE EVEN THE CEILING

Heather Christle

What is that thing that can happen A garden
is that thing You are walking around and sudden
Oh no dahlias You know that feeling like also
a family Oh no dahlias and you are giant with offspring
sudden all tethered in the world like zinnias dahlias
unabashed and blooming like another thing that can
happen love That is just an example Love is this
thing An example of love is the wind moves that warm
air square along a face and then love I love you tethered
like a rose sudden Oh no love and all alive in the garden

IN THE MOVIE VERSION WE'LL ALL BE
COMPUTER ANIMATED

Weston Cutter

At night I leave the boots beneath
the chair next to the bed as if I'll need
to escape. This itch for fence-hopping,
it's genetic: not me+mine, but all us+
ours. Isn't the tug named *escape* the glint
in everyone's eye in line at the grocery store
next to the display of gum, bubbly sparkles
catching glare+tossing it, repeating
the senseless bright like some drooling
retard? *Is is is is is is is*. To chew+chew.
Like light's enough, like something pink
for the mouth ever will be. How the food
comes boxed and in servings always too large
therefore leftovers as borderline psychological
malady. In each aisle there's too much
of everything but nothing satisfying: such is
life as driven home, all those dark streets
branching away, certainly *someone* must be
driving them, and how many mysteries aren't
even mysteries but somebody else's bored
routine? Those kids in that next car, the shining
red one, music louder there, them laughing
harder than you do. Usually. Heavenly father
of deli meats and removed shoes kept close,
what's the way out of wanting a way out?
To sometimes make it through the almost
of the yellow light before coming to a complete
stop even if none of us will taste all the selves
we've craved. In the grocery store late after

everyone's been fed a woman will wrap
a mylar balloon in double-sided tape, will wander
aisles with her satellite way up+shining,
gathering all those balloons that that day
floated away, and will if asked say *Well,*
either I catch them or they just shrivel and fall
eventually, and she will if asked admit that
when they pop up there they're not
as loud as you'd expect.

WHO SHALL BE CAPTAIN?

Weston Cutter

When we were younger we caught
 snakes, held them
 by their tails while they writhed and flailed,
kept them in buckets till our sisters
 got incensed+dumped them,
 gave us our first lessons in false liberation

but then we quit catching live wildness
 like that. Caught instead
 colds and itches for girls or smoke, caught
each other cheating on each other with
 each other's girl(s), so when
 I was talking with J three night back and saw

the mouse on the orange couch I thought
 just for a second
 I should get a cage but instead bought traps,
two old wood ones and one black plastic
 square thing that has
 a circular pit to put the peanut butter in it

and three days I watched, waited, heard
 the fucker rustling
 in the papers I'll never bother making real
places for, and when I woke this morning
 the trap snapped
 not two minutes after I'd woken from a dream

I'd been having about that time we spent
 a whole summer day

∴ Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

throwing rocks at our street's streetsign,
never throwing hard or big enough rocks
to dent the thing, and of course
the trap didn't kill the mouse, just caught his

(I just assume it was a him) back legs
and by the time I got out
from under the sheets, the mouse had squirmed
almost half a foot, had—with the trap locked
onto his ass and back legs—
moved to bury himself under some papers—

an empty candy box, a newspaper I read
only one story in. Had
buried himself like to save me the trouble.
They didn't always get to the snakes: once,
we figured we'd beat our sisters
to the punch, caught a snake, toyed with it,

dropped it into a bucket and for awhile dropped
lit matches on it till
we got bored and tipped it over, grabbed
one of our dad's axes, chopped the thing into
pieces no bigger than the half-
size candybars we got on Halloween. When

I saw the mouse the first time I thought
rabies and *cute* simultaneously,
and I know I knew, as I undid the trap
outside, a block away, underneath a dying tree,
the frost glittering in sunlight,
that he was already basically dead—couldn't

(or didn't) move once I set him facing east—
that maybe the good thing
would've been a quick stomp from a big boot.
Maybe not. I left him there, facing sunrise,
convinced myself
I only killed him because I had to, him or me,

my health vs. his. Told myself there was
some honor or decency
in leaving him out like that, religious beneath
the winter tree, all in sunlight. And when
I came back in
I made breakfast and set the trap again.

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

ASSEMBLING PROSPECT PARK

Chris Caldemeyer

Listening to the march
of a crow,

I hear the muraled cry of a child
knowing somehow that it's not

a crow
and that it's not human.

*

Somewhere there are
glimpses of deer,

necks craned, backs bow-like,
hidden by falling

new rose and a bean-heavy catalpa.

*

The cement steams
with the bracken haunt of use.

A child runs past me
careless of traffic

and the shrill
voice of his mother calling

something
that neither of us understand.

*

The soft rolling back
of the seal-grey clouds passing

an immeasurable girl
perspiring

in gentle bright breaths,

arm raised, a hand spread wide
against my chest.

*

The wind is an illusory
force,

a spiral.

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

TO MY INFANT SON CRAWLING FOR THE FIRST TIME
Michael Levan

Your grandmother practices for her death
 scene on the loveseat, her arm limp

 over the velvet cushion and coming so close
 you must know what it is to want

only to be welcomed by the rain. Rain that sounds
 off shingles, tin gutters which usher

 each drop to sewer and stream,
 river and then ocean, which has always

been full of questions: Where is that girl
 from down the street now, the one who always grows

 tall and beautiful one summer and then fails
 to see you? When will the nightly

prayers we whisper turn brittle
 like dried blood? When will quiet become

 all there is to say? I don't want to hurt
 you before you need to be. I don't want

the starling who sits and sings
 on the maple's bare branch to sour

 sun breaking open the long winter's afternoon.
 I know you have no secret to hold

remembering back. No way to keep memory
from coming like tulips or thunder,

sudden and beautiful. All you can do
is crawl to the rocking horse, push down

on the seat, its springs uncoiling a tinny clack
that stirs the living and the dead.

—*Anso Pioneer*

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

DIAMOND LIFE

Kathleen Hellen

Walk me to release on legs of one great body running.

Desire me the leaving in the hour of the bee.

Ghost, how well you hide.

I hear your footsteps fleet in dust of time behind
the ochre-colored mound, sometimes giving ground
in unfamiliar skin. In rabbits' cunning.

You didn't see it coming. Your
"third in stolen" stolen. Invisible, you said.

The keys you couldn't find
in the pocket of your jeans.

The coach who clocked your sprints
clocked your disease.

LAVATORY

Jason Schossler

Sister Irene pressed her finger against her lips
as she led them down the hall,
nine boys in slacks and navy blue button-downs,
marching single file, the girls waiting their turn
back in what the old nun called the *Homeroom*.

For one boy, the promise to see it—
the network of electrical wires,
crackling transformers,
the globes and dials and switches—
was what got him through the first hour
of that first day,
kept his eyes on the chalkboard
and off the summer wrens singing
in the copse of trees
outside the schoolhouse window.

He dreamt of a human body stitched together
from parts of different corpses stolen from graves,
a platform rising toward an open skylight.
Instead he got a pair of toilets and three urinals.

"What kind of experiments go on *here*?" he asked.
To which the nun could only shake her head.

"Next," she continued, "is where you'll eat lunch,"
and as they climbed the stairs and turned left,
he made his own promise: if they didn't cook food
at this so-called *cafeteria*, he'd light out for the woods.

NOT THINKING IT WAS SO WITH YELLOW FLOWERS

Lyn Lifshin

At night I
dreamed that
same dream,
the one full of muscles
and thighs
that aren't you.
Later the fear
came back
crossing into
Mexico tho
at first
when I woke up
I thought it
wasn't true
the air was so
bright and
yellow flowers
were falling
from the pepper tree
like suns

THE U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY AS FORTUNE TELLER
Stephanie Coyne DeGhett

The only tiny black square on the 1908 USGS map
of that stretch of road stands for the hired man's house,

enclosed on three sides by cornfield in full tassel each
August. The geological survey does not include the cornfield

on its legend or the maples by the road that, in spring,
hold buckets at four points of the compass. Season to season

there was always a hired man although not always the same
man and the children who were a little ragged,

perhaps, in the midst of the cornfield, were not always the same
children and the map does not show them. In spring, the fire

department volunteers hold a training drill, torch this long-
abandoned house, and, of course, the map gives no sign of them.

The blaze shoots up through the fallen roof and licks the ribs
of its frame, leaving a charred bathtub, fire-blasted bricks,

pigeons wheeling, looking for a new roost, the maples
in full leaf, unscorched, and now the black square on the map

is a blackened square of cellar hole, the surprisingly
small and inadvertent prophecy of the old map.

MEANS TO AN END

Michael Burkard

the voice of my voice is coded,
so now it is a beginning instead of an end,
after years of being an end, a means to an end –
sometimes the end came sooner than one like i thought –
but this too was still an ending and a code and not a beginning
or a bough or branch early in the day or even earlier in the a.m.
or morning –

night leans on night as it always did and always shall –
night is at once somewhere everywhere on the globe –
and i have to face it – the earth that is – the earth really is a globe –
a very limited place – all i would have to do is to be somewhere out
there instead of here in order to constantly say and see so –

night needs my help no longer –
i am not sure if the night ever needed my help –
whether it needs yours is not for me to say –

the boat says i am moored i am not moored –
i am a boat and also a swab of mooring which has taken exodus –
i said that even though i did not know what i was saying

when i was an early eighteen –
tonight i say it once more time

EVENING BIRD

Michael Burkard

You know something before you do,
and then you walk off without knowing you do
know, because the first part—the first note—
of the melody of not knowing is not—
it takes the form of a moth gently entering
your ear when you were suffering as a fifteen year old
from a disease—like whooping cough—when as in
some of life—then and now—you could not get
your breath—and the lack of breath would come
unexpectedly.

But the moth has entered gently as you now
know—and you know because the moth is flapping
its wings inside your ear—it sounds like the moth
it is—but to tell anyone as you did then and now
sounds like an impossibility—but the moth was
never gotten—not believed either except by yourself
and the melodies it contributed to over places and years
—places and years of breath in song sometimes—
the melodies and “ideas” would just start—often
with a trigger—often without.

Evening Bird.

O Evening Bird.

I knew you before I knew you.

Take flight if you need to, to another.

You have gifted me enough.

∴ Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

But if you choose
I will be more than glad to keep keeping you.
Evening Bird.

3/22/06

in memory of Charlie Bagley

PLACING THE SPEAKER
IN RELATION TO THE
PERSON BEING SPOKEN

TO:

Michael Burkard

the man-friend in
the red sweater kept
appearing in his friend's
face the next day: in
other words the friend
saw his red sweated
friend close-up—
momentarily like
a fast presence—
not like some fate
would take place
or some wrong or
harm would come—
but as if we
were all dreaming
very differently—
translation among
everyone on earth
is required—and
complimentary
red sweaters are
one gateway to
this need. Snow
is another gateway.
Another is even
more snow . . .

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

EVERYONE WANTED CARNATIONS THAT YEAR

Toni Thomas

droves of them
like an ammunition against pain
so my mother sunk her teeth
into azaleas
oriental poppies—refused to be pried
from their ledge.

It was the year of the crippled summer
consummate rain
wind spewed
the shed in the yard half buckling
the tomato vines a miracle in their
resolution to hold fast to the fruit.
I bracket want behind a
barbed wire fenceline.
Make my face an emblem
of the world's calculated geometry
as if nothing terrible ever happens anymore
and my mother is not bleeding to death invisibly
inside the four walls, the part-time sales job
the children's lunch meats
the eggshelled bed.

Agitated summer.
The butterfly bush stampeded with rain.
My mother's soaked sojourns to stake
the lilies back up with her bamboo poles.
As if she was bred for rescuing
all small things.
Her mary immaculate cursed body towing.
Even in the rain.

WHAT WE LOOK AT NOW
Alita Pirkopf

Photos
of my friend's
relatives look
like mine—
my relatives,
my inherited photos.
I don't always know
who I am looking at.
Like the pictures
in a stereoscope,
the photos of our families
come together into one image.
Our stories, too, are similar.

Up to a point.

My German great-grandfather
came to America
to escape war. Hers did too
the only one in her family
to escape war.

And this is the point.

Her family, house mice
to Nazis, were trapped
and exterminated.
They traversed Galicia,
climbed the Carpathians,
and ended

in heavy clouds
of smoke.

That's what we look at
now. That's the point.

IN TWO

Heidi Hart

All up and down the street, the young men from the blue van
load new phone books on their shoulders, crunching snow

from porch to porch—one of them sings in Spanish, I wish
I could understand the words. I picture columns of inked

characters, hundreds of people with the same last name
and restaurants far easier to look up on the tiny screens

we pocket and flip open at red lights. Who uses phone books
anymore? My son's been practicing the art of tearing them

in half, a trick he learned on a TV show, how to break
the book invisibly from inside, ripping pages one by one,

as if with love. The shredded remnants he saves in a bag
for kindling in the house where we all lived as family

once. I don't have a fireplace where I live. I sit at the table
in my kitchen, candle burning with the scent of lemongrass

and coriander, watching my twelve-year-old son who sings
a song about the French king headed to the guillotine

as he works the book of names apart, shreds of newsprint
all over the floor and snow outside the window, light as dust.

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

CORPUS CHRISTI

Anthony Opal

bruised drop
hung among

the elements
by some

milky metallic
thread, thread

me alongside
your silver

rain falling
now fallen

AMTRAK: EAST, TO CHICAGO

Lynn Pattison

a kid will skip through an undulating club car,
and never once need to clutch the seat backs

train wheels can go flat

the person you've decided is schizophrenic
can act more civilized than the one sitting across from you at dinner

snowed-in shacks look romantic in the Rockies
but grim in North Dakota

there is a new perspective to be gained
from situations where you only figure out
where you are as you pass

sometimes latches fail, the doors between cars
slide open to the blurred grade

cattle face north or south in pastures
it appears to be a group decision

HOW TO WALK ON A LAKE PATH AT NIGHT

Nick Lantz

You look down. The ground, writhing.
Little toads, or frogs (who can tell?).
None bigger than your thumbnail.
But hundreds, multitudes, moving.
You stand there, afraid of what another
step might do. Try not to think
of the steps that brought you here
through the runny moonlight, what
you may have already destroyed.
It's a numbers game, life, and you
are just the instrument of chance,
this time aligned with tragedy. Maybe
tomorrow a gull will carry the discarded
ends of your sandwich to its nest.
Maybe even now the mosquitoes
coalescing around you like an aura
of hunger will feed the chirping bats.
There is your house, folded in the woods
like a splinter the flesh has grown
over but remembers with the slightest
pressure. There is the path that leads
to it. A window, gaping, golden.
And in the darkness where your hands
and feet are invisible, there is her
voice, and yours, speaking together.

HOW TO PROPERLY FOLD AND INSERT A LETTER INTO
AN ENVELOPE

Nick Lantz

All the forest fires start
with some poor sap burning

love letters in an abandoned
campsite.

Maybe while he's driving away
from the ashes he thought he put out,
he imagines parts of his life falling away

like spent booster rockets as he roars
out of some self-made crater.

You and I would be burning the world by the acre
if not for the intervention of the door
that I close behind me to keep
from being cruel, like the valve of a heart that keeps
the blood flowing in one direction.

When we are silent, that silence is an empty parking lot
visible from space.

I get up early, you go to bed late.
You cultivate orchids that look like discarded

wedding dresses. Those orchids fold

and unfold themselves. They do not throw magazines
at the wall. They don't refuse to look you in the eye.

In the Atlantic Ocean, there is a nuclear submarine,
and in that submarine is a safe. And inside that safe

is another safe. And inside that
is a sealed envelope.

And in that envelope is a handwritten letter telling
the submarine commander
what to do if his homeland is burned

to a cinder. Some days, I don't know
whether I wish I was the submarine, the commander,
or that letter. Some days, yes,

I wish I was the smoking homeland.

At night the smoke detector in our apartment
goes off for no reason. And who remembers
what I said
or what you said? When we awake

to its shrill proclamations, it's only
us, standing in our worn-out underwear, scared
then laughing.

HOW NOT TO ALWAYS TALK ABOUT THE SAME THINGS

Nick Lantz

A hawk nested on the roof of your building,
and for six years every
poem you wrote, every kiss you gave

your wife, was a rabbit that either escaped
into the hedges or died in the air.

Millipedes are born and die by the thousands
on the laundry room floor and never dream
of the moon. The book's spine is broken

out of love. The trumpet sings
with borrowed lungs.

You could try bending the mended wheel, weeping
tears of milk. Jesus won't appear twirling
a sword like a baton.

To wit, the overturned garbage can,
locks of hair swept
across the barber's floor, the crow whose head
swivels like a closed-circuit camera.

The bus stop shaman claims man has not one
soul but many. A soul
for drinking wine. A soul for kissing,
for laughing. A soul for taking out

the garbage. A soul for peeling apples
at the sink, for losing

utility bills. A soul for writing checks.
A soul for doing
nothing. A soul for sucking a blackberry-stained finger
until the stain is gone.

Carbon from all of the burned books is born again
in the mustaches of generals and the long ears
of rabbits. If you can hear

the tremor of the marching band
practicing on a field miles away, count
yourself lucky. The world's oldest

musical instrument is a flute carved
from a vulture's leg bone.
Though it is more correct not to say *oldest*
but *oldest surviving*.

Can you imagine: those lips? that throat? that music?

You see a truck with "James Tate Plumbing"
stenciled on its side panel, and you imagine
the eponymous plumber
elbow deep in a drain, coming up not with a fist

of hair but snow globes of Pompeii, the jawbone
of an ass, the endless red ribbon
of a rabbit's intestine, the half-darkness

of our bedroom when
the shades are drawn.

DONNY TAKES A NIGHT CLASS

Sara Tracey

There's no time to shower
between work and school; he shows up
in boots, Wendy's sack
in one hand, clipboard in the other.
He sharpens his pencil with a pocket knife,
folds like a love note
into a desk that wobbles, eats his burger
in three bites, wishes for beer.
He thinks the teacher's younger
than his favorite bartender,
not nearly as smart.

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

MAJOR'S

Kate Hanson Foster

I remember this bar
only it was called something different—
I was underage, we hadn't met yet,
it doesn't matter.

You tell me
how you once placed my photograph
in a copy of James Wright's *Above the River*
and then returned it to the library.
Because you loved me.
Because I had recommended it
to you.

I want to tell you
about the time I sat next to your wife
at a bar. How awkward it was, silently drinking
side by side, like two empty households.

But I do not say anything.
I did not mean to come
to this bar again.

At this hour
the light makes a shadow out of everyone.

I remember that.

A ROSE FROM YESTERDAY

Errol Miller

Dark, full-moon girl,

What can you want with my desire?

—Federico Garcia Lorca

Paper, pen, & ink, I

have been waiting

for you, for your rustling of the still

waters within my soul, O how I

seek more than flesh upon

the hill tonight

incarcerated

in this flimsy body though it be fastened

to the Earth for a little while, so

I am rather forlorn tonight,

swinging to another music long ago

& far away, again & again

the haunting lullaby

as

if a rose from yesterday

was dying on the vine, waiting for my

innocent touch to start the beating

of her heart again.

READING THE SIGNS

Alice Pero

We are free to read signs
or not
I think it's better to observe directly:
Rocks as they fall
Floods as they come
Deer as they run in front of the car

I prefer signs that read:
"Warning: beach site brings passion"
"Careful: affectionate birds"
"Not responsible for bad poems inspired by pigeons"
"Moon may bring on madness. Gaze at own risk"

We need protection against the very worst dangers
At home, flashing lights when the wife is angry
Sirens when the husband's steak is overcooked

Traffic signals have it wrong
Red is for passion and means "Go"
Green indicates the coming of spring when we slow down
to smell the sweet air
Yellow means jaundice and for that we need bright sunlight,
so the light should stay on indefinitely

I understand why people in cars are confused
They have the wrong priorities and don't know
how to read the signs
They have been in cars too long
reading instruction books
memorizing signals

EMPTY SPACES

Alice Pero

At the beach all my exclamation points
turn upside down
I am caught staring
at the empty spaces sea pulls out of me
I fill myself with discoveries:
a monster mussel, ancient shellfish warrior
clinging to a huge mass of seaweed,
wiggling starfish
and dozens of delicate sand dollars

I am a sea relic addict
I can't stand the silence inside me
I scurry for tiny things
to clutter a mind washed too clean

The bucket fills with oddities:
a haul of clamshells covered in barnacles,
the barnacles wearing sea grass like mole hairs
and broken mussel shells all worn down to nothing,
blackened outer covering gone,
leaving pure mother-of-pearl,
a shining filling me up,
all those old holes mended

FUNERAL SONG

Stephanie Kartalopoulos

O crooked plough, you have forgotten the disk harrow.
The years of melting and weaponry. The always-raised surface
of your mouth, even in the middle of a great dust. How
I can trace my fingers across you. What will happen now?

The field behind my old house is now full of houses.
You have been left to rust in the shackled barn,
an overgrown corner, that space beyond
the farmers' graves. How will your work song get sung?

Who will join your chorus? On visits home,
I walk by your weathered cage. For you, I will
remember the prayers for a healthy crop, the eroded
sediment, the river soil, the field of bent wheat.

GENERAL LEE

Samuel Stenger Renken

My grade school friend,
Brant Haze, was helping
start their stubborn Suburban
one morning before third
grade, accidentally turning
the key when his adopted
father asked him *not* to start it.

His skin is two tones
darker than small town, and it's true,
his attention span was nothing
to write his home country,
Brazil, about. His heart
wanted nothing more than to be
accepted. That morning the fan took
two of his father's fingers, and
Brant was heartbroken by his own
actions, so much so, that he began
acting out even more than usual
in class and spray painting the modules.

He is gifted
at making people laugh and drawing
cars, but that could only take him
so far through the maze of acceptance
that forms in rural America like
Imperial, where he found the time
to restore an exact replica
of the General Lee between
joints and keg stands in the fields
on the outskirts of town.

When he did finally find the nerve to drive that Charger with the Confederate Flag painted on the roof out of town, he didn't make it very far before missing a mandatory turn on Highway 81 in York, Nebraska, where he drove that shiny old Dodge through the sidewall of Napa Auto Parts and waited for a tow truck that would extract the vehicle from the spot where it quit driving beside the radiators and a wall of belts next to the showroom.

SELF-PORTRAIT FROM THE AVIAN ANSWER-KEY TO
TEST QUESTIONS

Tricia Taaca

1.) To estimate the probability of drowning:

I pruned in a bathtub, listening
to your mixtape until drained
batteries pulled corners

of heavy metal songs down
into dirges. In the window,
starlings skeined

the sky, unraveled a black-beaded net
to haul up another
weary dawn.

2.) For the short essay on longing,

I will try to hatch
an egg in my mouth.

3.) If breath is a plea

for fire

and between us, pitchforked
rhythm loads hay bales for pyre,

then love is the barn owl
that cannot smell _____.

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

WAYS OF WRITING ABOUT RUST

Karen J. Weyant

Use a red pen. Push October's blood moon into every line.
Scribble down an old barn and a children's game of tag

that will end with a nail's scratch and tetanus shot.
Remember to cross all your t's.

Save the graffiti, the stick figures and sharp letters,
even if you are not sure if the words are a Bible verse,

or lyrics from an old rock-and-roll song.
Scrawl down corner bars and closed stores.

Trace the Z shape of fire escapes and half hearts
of coke ovens. Scribe the signs of girls who want boys

drunk with drivers' licenses and dares, boys
who drive through red traffic lights and railroad crossings, flashing,

and the mothers who teach their daughters to cut away,
but slice apples with knife blades coming toward them.

Pluck the jewels from Queen Anne's lace, throw away
the white blossoms, but keep the tiger lilies, the fields of sunflowers.

Never use a pencil. You won't want to erase.
But always proofread. Just cross out the spring trillium,

the first frost, bedsheets that bounce in the breeze.
Use every margin. Stencil the last railroad trestles,

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 [2010], Art. 1

roadside mailboxes sealing shut,
a bicycle left out overnight, its spokes turning.

UNTITLED FOR CHRISTOPHER BURAWA

Norman Dubie

I told my friend
that hundreds are now dead
from cholera in West Africa

and he asked is that rats
or water— my grandfather
went out to his barns
in Iceland in the early dark
and if he had rats he would have placed basins
of sweet bourbon
at every third stanchion
and then from lamplight
he'd pull the unconscious rats out of straw
and into copper pails
of ammonia and water. With the yellow-gloved hand
he would drown them.

This world grows to be too terrible,
he says— I know it can't last— take the weather
by example . . .

ON A PLAIN OF JARS

Norman Dubie

The water buffalo walks away
into the dark trees to the left, fly-papers
on red and yellow stick
emerge from enormous termite nests . . .

like stupas seemingly milkless . . .
but with eyes of honey
and red lips,
with the list
of two meats and two vegetables
and that green pack of cigarettes,

please just forget us.

WILDCARD

Diya Chaudhuri

*If you hurt inside, get certified, and if life should
treat you bad . . . don't get ee-ee-even. Get mad!*

—*The Killing Joke*, Alan Moore

for (but not about) Z. Graves

We live in a city that has never worn a summer
or washed in a clear shower. We've lived
wintered lives. What's changed around us:
license plate designs, 3G technology,
popular flavors of brand-name ice cream.
Tomorrow the mayor will fuss at his cuticles,
then announce that sadly, but again, there is no room
in the budget for a teachers' raise. A babysitter
will ignore a child's skinned knee because the skin
never broke, only blushed. In some gravelly quarter
of town, I will think of my favorite quilt
as I gulp at coffee, a fish gasping on a pier.
You might be crouched over a water main,
loosing toxins that leave fish Cheshired and cherry-lipped,
but otherwise delicious. You might be in a condemned apartment
that doesn't look so bad, watching your staff
strip a woman down to warm, bloodied flesh, gag her, bind her
at the ankles and wrists while you wipe down
the lens of your camera. You'll be what you've always been, dear.

AUTUMN

Tina Schumann

You know how the world comes at you like that?
You're driving down some tree-lined street
with Vivaldi or Corelli
lilting their way from the radio.
The sun casting prisms on the leaves,
the leaves easy in their fall.
All questions have quieted.
You are convinced that even the asphalt is happy
to be what it is: solid, stoic, the backbone of a day.
Up ahead the next three lights are green,
you are passing the schoolyard at St. Paul's
and all the kids in their blue and green uniforms
are bright angels, bearers of light.
There goes Stone Way Cleaners where they are steaming and pressing,
steaming and pressing just for you. The world is stuck
on go, proceed, *avanti*. No one could imagine
how enlightened you've become
in the cabin of your car, on the rim of tears
with your velocity, your clarity at the wheel,
your rapid rolling toward some small truth, on and on like that.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Michael Cadnum has published more than thirty books, including *Peril on the Sea* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and his newest novel, *Flash* (also with FSG). Cadnum enjoys hearing from visitors to his website: www.michaelcadnum.com.

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 [2010], Art. 1

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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

Rock, and *Dalhousie Review*. Her poem, "Anthracite Dreams," was a 2009 award winner in the *Spoon River Review* Poetry Contest. Her recent chapbook, *No Longer Any Place But Here*, was published by Finishing Line Press. She is the poetry editor for *Blueline* and teaches at SUNY Potsdam.

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Heidi Hart received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College in 2000 and currently teaches creative writing at Westminster College, in Salt Lake City. Her published work includes the memoir, *Grace Notes: The Waking of a Woman's Voice* (University of Utah Press, 2004), and the

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 [2010], Art. 1

four-poet collection, *Edge by Edge* (Toadlily Press, 2007). In the past three years she has received a Pushcart Prize for poetry, a Utah Arts Council Established Artist Grant, an Honorable Mention in the New Letters essay competition, and a Jentel Foundation Residency Award. Heidi's poetry and essays have appeared in *Lumina*, *Cimarron Review*, *Pleiades*, *Quarterly West*, *Monkscript*, *Pilgrimage*, *Western Humanities Review*, *BrokenPlate*, *Ellipsis*, *Dialogue*, *CityArt*, *Irreantum*, *Cortland Review*, *Friends Journal*, *The Salt Flats Annual*, *Northern Lights*, *Isotope*, and *qarrtsiluni*.

Kathleen Hellen's work has appeared in *Barrow Street*, *The Cortland Review*, *Nimrod*, *Prairie Schooner*, *RUNES*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Terrain.org*, *Witness*, and other journals. Her chapbook, *The Girl Who Loved Mothra*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Awards include the *Washington Square Review* and *Thomas Merton* poetry prizes, as well as individual artist grants from both the state of Maryland and the city of Baltimore. She is a contributing editor for the *Baltimore Review*.

Jessamyn Hope is a native of Montreal living in New York City. She most recently had a narrative essay appear in *Ploughshares*, which was nominated for a 2011 Pushcart Prize, and a chapter from her novel-in-progress published in Canada's *Descant*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Sarah Lawrence College.

Andy Jameson has worked a variety of jobs, including bookstore clerk, construction worker, FedEx driver, mover, and the person who rolls up rugs in a rug factory. He currently lives in bucolic Greenwood, South Carolina, with his wife, Misty, and he teaches writing at Lander University.

Stephanie Kartalopoulos is a Creative Writing Fellow in Poetry at the University of Missouri, where she is also a doctoral student in Creative

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

Writing and Literature. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *32 Poems*, *Subtropics*, *Grist: A Journal for Writers*, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, and *Barn Owl Review*. Stephanie is the poetry editor for *Center: A Journal of the Literary Arts*.

Michael Koenig is a writer, editor, and designer who lives in Oakland, California. His short story, "The Man who Never Sleeps," was recently featured in the Soft Skull Press anthology, *Awake! A Reader for the Sleepless*, alongside work by Joyce Carol Oates, Aimee Bender, and Margaret Atwood. His short fiction has also appeared in *The Old Crow Review* and *The Pacific Coast Journal*. He has published a poetry chapbook, *Swimming Underwater*, and his poetry has been featured in *Anything that Moves*, *Cathartic*, *Poetry: USA*, *Night Songs*, *Prisoners of the Night*, *Spitball*, *Aethlon*, and *Elysian Fields Quarterly* on several occasions.

Nick Lantz is the author of two books of poetry, *We Don't Know We Don't Know* (Graywolf Press) and *The Lightning That Strikes the Neighbors' House* (University of Wisconsin Press). He is a former Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and he is the current Emerging Writer Lecturer at Gettysburg College.

Michael Levan received his MFA in poetry from Western Michigan University and is currently a PhD candidate in English at the University of Tennessee, where he serves as assistant poetry editor of *Grist*. His poems can be found in recent issues of *The Pinch*, *Cimarron Review*, *CutBank*, and *Nimrod*. He lives in Knoxville with his wife, Molly, and son, Atticus, who crawled for the first time shortly before this poem's acceptance.

Lyn Lifshin's publications include the books, *The Licorice Daughter: My Year with Ruffian* (Texas Review Press) and *Another Woman Who Looks Like Me* (Black Sparrow at Godine), along with *Cold Comfort*,

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 [2010], Art. 1

Before It's Light, *Desire*, and *92 Rapple*. She has over 120 books and has edited four anthologies. Her most recent books include *Nutley Pond*, *Persephone*, *Barbaro: Beyond Brokenness*, *Lost in the Fog*, *Light at the End*, *Jesus Poems*, *Ballet Madonnas*, *Katrina*, *Lost Horses*, and *Chiffon*. Her forthcoming works include *All the Poets Who Have Touched Me*, *Living and Dead*, *All True: Especially the Lies*, and *Ballroom*. Her website is www.lynlifshin.com.

Keith Meatto's first published fiction appeared last year in *Harpur Palate*. Since then, his stories have been in many journals, including *Opium*, *Writers' Bloc*, and *Artifice*. He reviews books for *New Pages*, *The Forward*, and *The Texas Observer*, and is co-editor of *Frontier Psychiatrist*, a Brooklyn-based music blog. He has also worked as a teacher and a journalist. He's a graduate of Yale College and the New School (MFA) and was a writer in residence at the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts in Nebraska. You can visit his website at www.keithmeatto.com.

Errol Miller, "The Woolworth Poet of America," has been publishing since 1973. His poetry has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Rattapallax*, *Fence*, *Confrontation*, *Poetry International*, *Montserrat Review*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Paris/Atlantic*, *First Intensity*, *Verse*, etc. He has several full-length collections, has been nominated for several Pushcart Prizes, and was a featured artist in the 2000 *Poet's Market*.

Anthony Opal lives in Chicago, Illinois, where he is Associate Poetry Editor of *River Oak Review*. His poems have recently appeared, or are forthcoming in: *South Carolina Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Rhino*, *The Christian Century*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Redivider*. He is 26 years old, and an MFA candidate at Northwestern University.

Lynn Pattison is a Michigan writer. Her work has appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, *Diagram*, *Rhino*, *Poetry East*, and elsewhere. Pattison is

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

the author of the collection, *Light That Sounds Like Breaking* (Mayapple Press), and two chapbooks: *Walking Back the Cat* (Bright Hill Press) and *tesla's daughter* (March St. Press). She is currently seeking a good home for her newest manuscript, *Banjo String Theory*.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. For more information, including his essay, "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities," and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

Alice Pero is a right coaster who became a left coaster and founded the popular reading series, Moonday, in Pacific Palisades, California. When she is not stuck on the freeway, she enjoys concertizing with flute, winds, and piano. Her book, *Thawed Stars*, was praised by Kenneth Koch as having "clarity" and "surprises."

Alita Pirkopf received her Master's Degree in English Literature from the University of Denver. She then became interested in feminist interpretations of literature and taught several related classes. Later, she enrolled in a graduate poetry seminar, again at the university. It was taught by the poet Bin Ramke, who for several years afterwards continued to advise her on her work. Poems of hers have been published in literary journals which include *Griffin*, *RiverSedge*, *Caduceus*, *Lullwater Review*, *Chaffin Journal*, and *Ship of Fools*.

Doug Ramspeck's book, *Black Tupelo Country*, was selected for the 2007 John Ciardi Prize for Poetry and is published by BkMk Press. A new book, *Possum Nocturne*, is due out in 2010 by NorthShore Press. Several hundreds of his poems have been accepted for publication by journals that include *Kenyon Review* and *Prairie Schooner*. He was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for 2009. He teaches at The Ohio State University at Lima.

Samuel Stenger Renken writes and lives in Laramie, Wyoming, where he teaches English and runs a horse program at a residential treatment facility for kids. He and his wife, Maggie, are parents of a three-year-old daughter, Zuri, and a seven-month-old daughter, Ella. Sam received his M.A. in Literature from Clemson University and his M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Wyoming. Sam's poems have been published in *Main Street Rag*, *The Pinch*, *Plainsongs*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Xavier Review*.

Justin Runge's work has been published or is forthcoming in *Fault*, *Softblow*, *DIAGRAM*, *Linebreak*, and elsewhere. He is the editor of *Blue Hour Press*, an online chapbook imprint.

Jason Schossler's poetry and fiction has appeared in *The Sun*, *North American Review*, *The Antioch Review*, and the *Blue Mesa Review*, where his work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Ragdale Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Oberpfälzer Künstlerhaus in Germany, and he is the winner of the 2009 Edwin Markham Prize in Poetry, sponsored by *Reed Magazine*. He teaches writing at Temple University.

Tina Schumann's manuscript "As If" was awarded the Stephen Dunn Poetry Prize for 2010 and will see publication by Parlor City Press this year. She is the 2009 recipient of the American Poet Prize and her work received honorable mention in *The Atlantic Poetry Contest* for 2008. She received an MFA from Pacific Lutheran University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various publications including *Ascent*, *Cimarron Review*, *The American Poetry Journal*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Cranky Literary Journal*, *The Raven Chronicles*, *Poetry International* and *PALABRA*. She lives in Seattle, Washington.

E.G. Silverman's fiction has appeared in the *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Fugue*, the *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Talking River*, *Wisconsin*

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

Review, *Lullwater Review*, and many other literary journals. He has written three novels. He divides his time between Skillman, New Jersey, and Dingmans Falls, Pennsylvania.

Tricia Taaca is originally from the Midwest but moved to New York to earn her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and become a cheesemonger. Currently, she lives in Harlem, where she spends her days teaching aerobics, baking sweets, writing poems, and cavorting with her dog, Mr. Peanut.

Toni Thomas' poems have appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *the minnesota review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Poetry East*, *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *Ginkgo Tree Review*, *Slipstream*, *Lake Effect*, and the *Southern California Review* as part of a 2006 Ann Stanford Poetry Award. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and received an International Merit Award from the *Atlanta Review*. She lives in Oregon with her family and enjoys studying the quiet disposition of the moon from her chair.

Sara Tracey is a poet and teacher in Chicago, Illinois. Her chapbook, *Flood Year*, was released by dancing girl press in September 2009. Her work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *After Hours*, *Arsenic Lobster*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, and *Pebble Lake Review*.

Karen J. Weyant's most recent poems have appeared in *5 AM*, *Barn Owl Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Comstock Review*, and *Slipstream*. Her chapbook, *Stealing Dust*, was published last year by Finishing Line Press. She lives in Pennsylvania but teaches at Jamestown Community College in Jamestown, New York.

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: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

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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. 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 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:

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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. 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.

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 10, Issue 1, Summer 2010

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Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 10, Iss. 1 [2010], Art. 1

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