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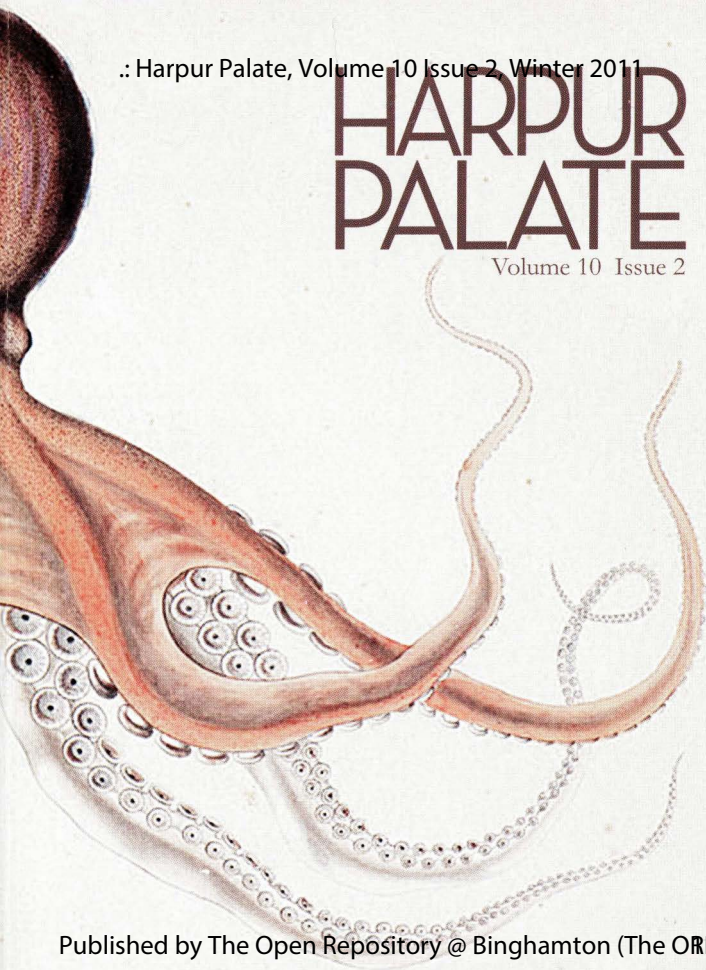
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HARPUR PALATE

Volume 10 Issue 2



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HARPUR PALATE

Volume 10 Issue 2, Winter 2011



Binghamton University
New York

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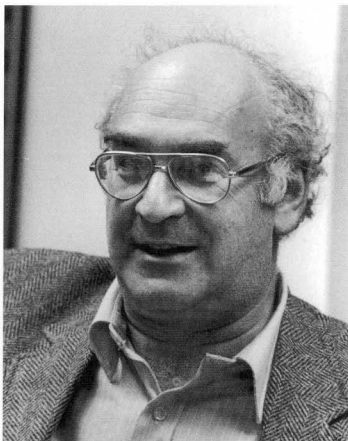
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THE MILT KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR POETRY



MY FIRST MOTHER

Francine Witte

Not the one she turned
into, but the young, dizzy
girl who got through college
with art history and no boys.

Oh, they were all in Europe,
your father, too, she would say
when she became my second mother,
standing at the sink, swirling suds
on the dinner dishes.

And then, my third, fourth
and fifth mother. Each one lost
in a circle of smashed plates
and money fights. Packed suitcases

that never left the house.
Till one day, she was gone.
No forwarding address.
My father blamed the hippies,

all that free love and
not knowing a good war
when they saw it. I watched him
wither after that. Slow kill
of loneliness. No bullet

could even touch. Soon,
I grew past my own
first self. College,

marriage, divorce.

Till one day, the phone.
My final mother calling
from L.A. A lifetime

crunched in her gravel
voice. *Sorry*, she said
and *I'll call again*, which,

of course, she never did.
She backed off just enough
to let my first mother

return, dizzy with art history
and waiting for the man
she would marry to come back
from a beautiful war.

FOLLOWING NATO AIR STRIKES, THE SEVEN DEADLY
SINS SURFACE IN TEXT FRAGMENTS FOUND NEAR
THE DAMAGED PORTAL OF BELGRADE'S RAKOVICA
MONASTERY

Carolyn Moore

Thrones: things are often stained there
and never humble a man's name
carved onto a headstone will swell with
moss and pride once it was all
grace in the lifting at every turn
fiery wheels of wrath never kneel
at a philosopher's grave the stones
of sloth find tombs of prominent
figures in Serbia envy the most
persuasive his life at his back
a man will still covet a lust for life
and the Eucharist gluttons for
the punctual after bishops approve
nine of ten exorcisms holy spoor
soup for the poor never turn on
a vivid imagination spirits make
two chilling sounds the rest are
kept secret patch the willful holes
in memory these are field notes
for healing discourse like weeds
far out on a solitary lake

WEATHERVANE

Sara Tracey

It's a dead battery night on the interstate,
a black ice morning. You've been mumbling
at the doorjamb of sleep again, telling secrets
neither of us will remember come tomorrow.
I'd say goodnight and start walking home
if I knew where that was anymore,
but I've been carrying this suitcase
more days than I've been setting it down.
Instead, I'll stand on the back porch
and listen for the wind to point the way.
Finger licked and aiming skyward.
When I come to your bed, my lips
will taste like wood and earth.
Your breath will drown out the wind.

DÉTENTE

Edward Adams

When you see her name on the window of the phone
you consider not answering but you do
and she starts right in without fooling around
saying she misses you and nothing
about what happened with that guy
and as she talks you remember
how much you enjoyed
your summer with her at the beach
and you can feel yourself
not forgetting what happened
exactly but feeling it slide
into a state of gray irrelevance
and you think
why can't Pakistan and India
have a call like that and then
you decide to call your sister
and your college girlfriend
and all the others
every one
even your mother.

DOUBLE X (LANGUAGE, VIOLENCE)

Edward Adams

—after "Siena Dos Equis," 1975, by Susan Rothenberg

A horse boxed in, all pink and wrong
in ways that slide beneath your skin and wait,
cooler than body temp.

This is no Crayola pink.
This is pink's troubled cousin,
pink gone bad, pink home weary

from years of heavy travel.
This pink tells things
you don't want to hear.

And don't get too close to that horse.
He lost his tail somewhere,
other parts are missing,

but he's still plenty horse.
Look at those fetlocks, cocked like hammers
on Buntline forty-fives.

What really gets you, though,
is that head. Not the one
you see calm and gentle, that's

a mask that doesn't fit, doesn't
quite cover the proto-head,
the fainter head, the one thrust forward,

the one with large bared teeth, the one
you need to stay away from.
So you pay close attention

to those bars between you and the horse
and stagger back a couple of feet
when you see: the bars don't fit.

They don't meet at the corners.
They're not even. They were
thrown up in haste.

They look brittle, old.
You wonder if they'll hold.

LET THEM FALL LIKE HARD FRUIT

Ryan J. Browne

There are measures to keep me safe
beyond the nightsticks with their rubber-band grips

locks and keys and humming doors
Beyond razor wire

one rule allows me to carry myself away:
the crimes all my *Whys?* they cannot be

Let them hang in the yard
as an endless number of pull-ups

and if dropped let them
fall like hard fruit—horse apples—

and huddle in rotting
Leave them for the blinking

shotgun in the clerk's face
for the roaches

rolled and stuffed in elastic bands
for the contusions bloom bruises

for pleads
Leave them for the squirrels

Only once did I stoop in wonder:
in the *New York Times* I found

the bum on the curb
stabbed and black and

as thunder can only name its flash
read the name I've seen stenciled in block

letters on state-issued whites of a skinhead
skinhead

who yanked the blanket back
as his friends drank and drove

a knife into the man And I am
filthy a snoop rubbernecker inquisitor

confidence man whose briefcase clicks closed
like poetry's door who now must forget

in the way we never really
forget our bones

REPORT ON THE CLASS TRIP
Chris Bullard

The firemen led us in name order
up the tower where we watched
for flames in the combustible pines.
This made us thirsty, so the firemen
brought out their garden hose and we drank
water that tasted like rotten eggs.
I went looking for the bathroom
behind the rows of rubber overcoats,
and found where the firemen slept.
Above the bunks, rows of unstapled
centerfolds opened their blouses.
Ruddy breasts rolled out like fire trucks.
I felt the burn of embarrassment.
The girls in the class hadn't started to develop.
I still swam nude with boys at the Y.
On the way back to school, our teacher,
forty-ish, her hair like charcoal and ash,
directed the class to a charred patch:
"Firemen can't stop every fire."
We jostled each other and giggled.
The bus smelled of smoke and sweat.

DIGGING DITCHES

Kara Dorris

My brother's digging a ditch for our mother.
She laughs & helps & I think I would have liked
her as a young girl, Texas size freckles
or that woman in the fridge picture:

Hawaiian lei & Hawaiian man around her neck.
She walks onto the beach with two girlfriends,
leaves with none, contemplates the way a woman
must stride into a room or waves must bully
the sand, how kissing exists somewhere
between the perfect waltz
& terrorizing nerds for lunch money.

The ditch we've excavated behind our barn
is next to the dug dirt pile of burrow holes,
not of dung beetles, field mice or ground
worms but 9mm & 22 rounds.
We lift our guns, a Ruger & a Berretta, pretend
paper targets are terrorists. Shell casings
bounce off the ground, our shoulders, chests, faces.
When that heat hits, metal burn, I always flinch
but it cools before it or my mother's
body touches the ground.

MOSCOW CINEMA
Andrey Gritsman

Through the frozen mud, wind blasting,
plaster falling off the residential blocks
built in a hurry in the late fifties, unlike the movie theater:
sturdy brick, concrete, put together by the Wehrmacht POWs

with their bare hands. Sparkling lemonade in the suffocating lobby
before the show, torture of looking at the girls, giggling, sweating
in their three pairs of pantyhose and thick coats, overhauled from the grandmothers,
staying away from the hoods with sharpened screwdrivers in their pockets,

guys reposed, waiting for the action. We watched *The Crusaders*,
Polish pride at the time, bearded friends of Andzej Vaida fearlessly riding at us
from the screen. In the lobby above us all—Lenin on the huge, dark painting,
standing over his desk, looking at the dusty ficus plant
with his annihilator stare, his hand clutching a tea glass
with the teaspoon broken at the watermark.

CONVERSION

Andrey Gritsman

I am calm now.

This is the beginning of the road.

This is the end of the road.

Once you are born, you invite your soul
to be comfortable, to have a glass of water,
sit by the fire.

In the morning you go shopping
with the soul,
your close ones
left behind and you still
love them all, as if
you just went to the store
to pick up Tropicana and Starbucks,
maybe the matzo and blintzes.

You ask your soul to be quiet;
the supper's coming,
you just have to learn to wait!
At last, the candles, the book, and strange letters
breathe cold, ancient air
as if from the twilight crevices
on the side streets of Yerushalayim.

We get warmer as we taste the wine,
herbs, and hummus. The soul puts a shawl on,
as dark wind sweeping over the water
enters the room. Since now
we always leave the door ajar,
in case Elijah comes by for a drink,
in case we have to leave home again
in the middle of the night
to go back home.

LEAVING HOME

Alec Hershman

Never mind the starflowers, thick as burs,
the weather increasing my poncho
like a trash bag on a stake and still no rain;
the fence-water was stingy with my horse.

There was only a little I could do: sugar cube
in my palm, the weight of the muzzle filling my hand
with the soft shock of a first breast.
Where field came to field the sky

was vast with apathy—the opposite of a room.
To do something as intimate as whisper
into the felt canoe of the horse's ear
was not quite a secret; was not quite forgotten—

we were far enough from the house
that whether or not to hear
the domino-clap of the screen door
almost seemed a choice.

DIALLO, AMADOU? KOSOVO? HEARS VOICES TELLING
HIM WHAT TO SAY?

Susan H. Maurer

Press a button
and out comes his voice, effulgent,
Jamaican, clear, with overtones. Bike messenger.
He pedals by, fast, in the bike lane,
his hair studs his head, spikes the sky,
bristles like a cap of in-driven nails.
He is black as a telephone.
He pedals by, fast in the bike lane.
I am walking as he pedals by
and he says (I think it is to me, timed just so)
“How much confusion is there in a blood bath?”
What has he said to me?
He has said:
“How much confusion is there in a blood bath?”
Fragment. Shard. Bullet in the brain.

RUBY BEETS

Susan H. Maurer

And so we meet again, the Greenmarket Society
for the Adoration of the Naked Vegetables. We have
before us ruby beets which would make Fabergé
weep, their dark green leaves as soft as bunny ears,
veined with blood red streaks. So intense they are,
we hope they will not shriek when cut.

SIDEWALK SUPERMAN
Travis Mossotti

I.

Sitting together at the bar,
Tony held his beer bottle
up to the light as though
he were an anthropologist
brushing time and sand from
the unearthed chamber door
of another immaculate dead
king; he was out of work again
and eager to blame his rotten
luck on scumbags and scabs,
and when I suggested he look
for a different line or trade
he just turned back to his bottle,
and a comical amber rainbow
arced across his cheek.

II.

Somewhere in our past there
was a time when we'd gather
at the corner of an intersection
with bats and two-by-fours,
and pretend to beat the merciless
shit out of Tony, our one hero,
and he would writhe in his red cape
in the fetal position as though
each fake blow actually bruised
and bled him. Sooner or later

a passing driver would grow
bold enough to pull over—at this,
we'd scatter, leaving Tony like
a carnival ride on the fritz, and he'd
wait for the citizen to get close
before bouncing up and yelling
at the top of his busted lungs,
Never fear, Sidewalk Superman is here,
before sprinting off, the hero that
he was, into a darkened subdivision
as fast as his legs would carry.

III.

He guzzled the last of it,
hollered at the young blonde
bartender for another and
thanked me, before turning
back to his list of complaints,
which began with the asshole
shooting Eight-ball for dollar
bets who'd been sleeping
with his ex for months
and ended with a promise
to leave town by October.

IV.

If there's indeed a flowering hell
waiting at the end like a motel room
bed grown sour from the sweat
of a thousand drifters dreaming
up salvation, I think it's a place

we're meant to go and think
about the awful failures of our
virtue. To wake each morning
and stare from a balcony at the
burning edge of the Mississippi.
To watch it meander closer. To sit
and wait for it, the foundation gone,
the ground turning soft beneath us.

V.

I wanted to pity Tony
because pity
would've been cheap,
and it wouldn't have meant
that I had to step in heroically

and pay his tab at the end
of the night after the pool
balls had finally settled
into their pockets. I wanted
to leave him there, and move on.

Instead, I carried him back
to the car, dropped him off
at his apartment door,
and left him to figure out
which key would let him in.

SOMEWHERE IN ILLINOIS
Travis Mossotti

the single red stoplight
is like a piece of string tied
around a finger, but nobody
in traffic remembers for what;
everyone's eyes are glued
to that zit-faced marquee
changer adding the next big
Hollywood scream letter by
letter until it has overgrown
the Movieplex, and one
local dropout hangs his arm
from the rust of his Ford
like he was dipping his rod
into that shitpipe of a river
Big Muddy come Sunday,
burning a cigarette to honor
all the devout townies who
say movie actors are queers
in their powder makeup and
costumes, bunch of faggots
taking it—until he turns away
from the town's only marquee,
eyes like two splats of bird shit
on the windshield, and, as usual,
the light refuses to change.

KATHERINE THE GREAT

Mark Neely

She towered between two crooked geezers
like an Egyptian statue perched on a garbage heap,

and though in all my life I'd only seen her back,
that was enough. The Mill spun like a carousel,

blaring "Sympathy for the Devil."
Lorenzo couldn't help himself.

"Your friend didn't show?" he said,
resting a hand on the back of her barstool.

Katherine said (this was good), "Maybe he just did,"
and walked her martini to our table without a drip.

We talked about the Pixies, eighties movies,
our childhood leaps off Skinner's bridge

into Snake River, our favorite books, the risks
we took, the bus stops and cruddy basements

where we first kissed—until the two of them
ran out of innuendo and cut

right to the point. Katherine touched
Lorenzo's cheek like a museumgoer

brushing the skin of a strange dinosaur.
"You can call me Kate," she said.

But Lorenzo would always prefer *Katherine the Great*.
Then like any ride the night began to slow.

A moon behind black chariots, Katherine
tapped her ring on Lorenzo's glass, and rose.

SAME OLD SPECTACLE

Mark Neely

Katherine was hanging on Lorenzo's every word
as if each were a ripcord and the Mill

a diving plane. He leaned against the juke,
its light on his face like the glow of alien

landing gear and I peered into the dark
circle of my beer, the lake of feeling hidden there,

and watched Kate's hair flash
closer to Lorenzo's gaudy lips.

I decided I wouldn't say another thing
all night. No one noticed, no one cared.

AT THE CIRCUS OF THE DEAD

Jack Ridl

The lion tamer laughs while the big cats yawn and swipe the air; his whip ripples in front of their ancient jaws. Above him, on the high wire, the spangled walker drops her pole, sits dead center, and reads *The Brothers Karamazov*. All we can do is watch her turn the pages. The blue stars across the top of the tent are fading. There are no safety nets or roustabouts. The clowns are in their trailers taking off their makeup and dressing in black tie and ball gown. In top hat and tails, the ringmaster announces,

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are here for one day and one day only, your only chance to feast your eyes, ears, and hearts on the wonders before you!" High above the outside rings, The Flying Alhambra Family sparkle in their tights and steady themselves before performing "the only triple attempted by eight members of a single family, each crossing each in the emptiness of mid-air!" Everything is happening at once, the big cats, wire walker, aerialists, all gathered in one whirl. Enter the jugglers. They stand in

their nonchalance and fling across the ring knives, hats, silver globes, while the Tumbling Barzonis bounce, spin, and somersault over one another, the trampoline sending them high as the lights.

Surrounding the whole mad extravaganza
the elephants and Lipizzaner stallions weave
within one another's walk and trot, their white-
tighted riders standing and waving to us as we
hold our breath and try to take in everything,
knowing we can't, knowing we will have to leave,
knowing they will have to load their monstrous
wagons and find their way to another ragged town.

LISTENING TO CHOPIN IN EARLY WINTER

Jack Ridl

	The first snow is falling.	
	There is no one here.	
wisteria branches	On the dining table, I've	
twisting gray-brown	set the season's candles.	
	This is not the right time to wonder	
	where my father is now.	
	The wind is lifting the dead	beneath the beech tree
	branches. They will or will not	the bird's nest
	break. I'll sit by the window,	
the candles	watch the snow quiet the day, stumble	
the bittersweet	into an impossible hope. I want to pray.	
	The nocturnes are playing. Next	
	the etudes. Then the ballades.	
the evergreens	If I could be these notes.	
	Yesterday was a death march.	
		along the stream
	There is no longer a word	
two deer	for this. There is duration.	

RINGS

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

A thick white whip of Jolene bleach to lighten her downy upper lip,
the newly golden hairs soon jaundiced by nicotine. Her nostrils

rimmed red as her eye whites, cuticles yellow, teeth—front two lower ones
leaned together like sunlit tombstones in receding cemeteries.

Smoke wreathed our rooms like the nine circles of hell.
Her name, my mother, was Beatrice, Mother of Lipsticked Filters,

L-jointed butts piled sour and high in cut glass ashtrays.
Lying on the double bed, cig bobbing between her lips, she pulled her blue

maternity smock up to her neck. With her three girls in eager waiting, she balanced
the ashtray on her five-month belly risen with child number four.

"See how the baby kicks?" she asked, laughing. We girls
were agog at the faceted ashtray wobbling like a séance table.

HONEYMOON

David Starkey

Perhaps from a comparison to the moon, which wanes as soon it is full . . .

—American Heritage Dictionary

that April we hauled
our heads up from love
just long enough
to realize the hotel
window was painted shut
suddenly you were mad
to hear the carillon down
the street ring unimpeded
so I took a screwdriver
and in ten minutes pried
jamb from frame you
threw it open like
someone welcoming
a victorious army

outside rain we'd never
heard falling had filled
a cistern weeping willows
shimmered in sunlight
and the field beyond
was giddy with delphiniums
the very air purple
with their fleeting
glory hellish
spring you muttered
then slammed shut
the porthole on that passing
show so we could return
to our perdurable world

INTO THE GASLIGHT

Wanling Su

For my birthday my friend brings me a fox pelt:
there it is, glistening on the floor of my flat.
At the embassy I speak into an apparatus:
all my words heave,
alight with darkness.

A language awakens during the night—
it is immense as a glacier. This is what
I remember: on the TV screen a president
who is not mine,
on the streets people saying I was

a spy. I sit on the pavement
with my laptop and tabulate, though I am
denied access to my workplace, I sit
so that they cannot fire me
for missing work. Where is my silver fox?

The president is giving a talk so casual
g's twist off the endings of his endin'.
My friend visited again yesterday,
her dark hair sleek as magnetic tape.
We are in a war—two, actually. My fox

tumbles out of my closet when I wake
in the morning, when I rise without prompting
in order to clothe myself for a day
that does not want me.
Advertisements adorn my world.

My journalist says he was beat,
that they poured hot water on him
until he came undone, bulging
like a baked brie.
“So that is why

I missed my appointment,” he says.
“What appointment?” I say.
Now the fox is draped on the edge
of my bathtub, half its fur heavy with water
in which I had wanted to immerse myself.

My laptop is new but no longer turns on.
Within its darkness there is only the billboard
behind me, a starburst galaxy of pixels.
“Citizens,” I say, “let me see your scars.”
I awake thinking:

I never even moved that fox. There are faults
in the glacier, dialects stretch out their limbs:
their language, my tongue.
My friend’s hair is in corkscrews today,
shining seaweed, ribbons around the gift

of her brain—my friend is the one
who fires me. I leave work, get up from the pavement.
The fox is nowhere to be found.
Only the bath water remains, cold as the liver
of my journalist, now rotting

in open air—they told me that it was so.
Yet I am happy.
I cling to the churning of my moods

as if to recall a dream upon waking,
as if to comprehend a mouthful of code.

This nation is bearable, reloaded again
onto the spine, which snaps into place
with a series of cracks. What work was it
that I did not do? Joy, distilled
out of that blank existence as butter

out of sour milk. I dip a glass into the bathwater
and it reeks of the ocean. It is fit for the hand, this glass,
this happiness, the surreal surrender.
My friend is stepping over the wild foxtails:
she is knocking on my door.

PORTRAITS OF WOMEN

Wanling Su

1.

After her hormone therapy was stopped
she looked like a man again.
In the waiting room the nurse called her *Mister*,
and she had to explain in front of everyone
that her estrogen treatment was incompatible
with her cancer treatment, that the prostate cancer
made her lose
her breasts.

2.

When the soldiers came,
her husband offered them all the money
he had—ten dollars. They laughed
and shoved him into the cassava patch,
shoving themselves
inside him.

Now in the village they call him
a bush wife. His hands are limp
as a pair of dead birds.
These hands shy away from her.

Now she wears sadness,
her body rigid as a green plum.

3.

She is the one whose daughter
went to a rock concert
and never came back.

Treading the cobblestones
of memory, she rehearses
what could have been done
differently—*why did I let her
walk out wearing fishnets?
If I called her one more time
before she got into the car . . .*

The pressure of these thoughts—
they strain her.

I know, because my son's
body was found inside a wall
many years ago.

4.
Another woman, O,
lives with them.

O feeds their son.
While the wife makes breakfast
O sits on her husband's lap.
They all laugh together.

The wife is so busy. Such a career.
She cannot resist the white powder
offered by the husband
and shared with O.

When the husband is caught
the reporters chase her,
all their cameras going off, as if to announce
the first day of hunting season.

She pleads guilty.
She wants to plead a divorce, another life.
She wishes she could reveal
to the violent eyes of all the cameras:
it is that other woman
that I love.

RECOVERY TEAM

Robert J. Tillett

—Vietnam, 1992

He brushes the few grains of silicate remaining
from half a mandible at the base of a palm.
It's the right half, this time, a boomerang
with teeth, cracked clean at the chin.

His tweezers flash along the broken
edge; this find, he thinks, will tell
him much about the mission & the great
hunks of metal growing from the ground.

A few inches down, a frontal plate
surfaces like the fin of something
returning beneath his boar-hair brush.
The dull white dish tipped & spilling

for decades. Particle & matter. Sunlight
off a shovel's handle leaning on a tent.
Wind pulls through a wooden crate
of bone flecks & femurs, a man's slick back

arches just about the jungle floor.
Chip by chip we reconstruct this one
body, place the fragments edge to edge,
held together by nothing but our finding.

The howls of discovery draw the others near.

ONCE MORE "THE SONG REMAINS THE SAME"

William Varner

After the flaming gong, the height of pyrotechnics then,
finally you see the whole crowd, see the seventies t-shirts, iron-on prints
and cuffed short sleeves, the girl in white-flared corduroy pants
looking just like my cousin that year, straight, parted red hair willowing over
the glittering silver blouse, standing behind the Cadillacs
and their diminished fantails the band drives away in

like the one my aunt drove when I'd sneak out their guest room window
summer nights and slide into the front seat, punch the big radio buttons
then walk the neighborhood slipping into other people's pools
underwater swimming in the blue womb, the drowned spiders'
legs curled up into tiny loose fists, I floated around
the bottom drain as if without gravity, breaking the surface without sound.

Christmas evening celebrations with the whole family,
shooting Eight-ball downstairs with all the much older cousins
who let me drink the last sips from their stolen beers,
Zeppelin IV blasting from scratched vinyl, Bonham
pounding his three floor toms, Page's twelve-string guitar,
"crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good ..."

Deemed too young for funerals, I listened to my uncle tell me
to let the dead bury the dead and I did not understand
looking back, looking back. I stayed home, walked
the front yard collecting cicada shells, delicately undoing
the frail claws hooked into the red maple trees,
backs split open where their wings sliced through.

AND ONCE AGAIN WE FETCH A SPOT OF BOTHER
Thom Ward

Let us hear reports from all the standing committees, the sitting committees, and those that wish to lie down. Forget the rain; never get in a spitting contest with a llama. My intelligence quotient got ticked when my creativity quotient muscled into its territory, so the former whacked the latter. Soon after, my emotional quotient disappeared. In any venture, when sixty-percent talks, forty-percent listens. Wouldn't you rather your child be a drug dealer than a drug addict? Fighting the new Russia is like fighting comfort food, a comfort feud. I can't look, yet I must peek. Is it time for early dismissal? We attempt to hide in graves but medical students bring flashlights and shovels.

NOT ONLY
Francine Witte

was the sun a tired eye
that day, but the birds
were starting to fidget
the wind. Somewhere, a woman
was up to here with her man
and his constant disappearings.
I deserve better, she said,
as she billowed a blanket
above the bed that was only
half slept in. Third time
this week. Love graveyard,
she thought, and that's when
she heard the birds, all of them gone
vulture now. Tapping their beaks
at the window pane, hungry to gnaw
on the corpse. And rather
than hiding this one time,
she flipped out the shutters
and let in a sickness of birds,
while she, sorry angel, stepped
out on the porch, looking up
at the bloody sun, which, we can
only imagine, was trying
its hardest not to stare.

For Not Playing Dead
Catherine Woodard

With a blue book bag,
Two fat pencils, and a rule
Not to leave school

With my father in a car,
I start first grade.
Mother says we can die

If he's drinking.
She says to scream,
Kick if we must.

HORIZONTAL MEMORIES OF TEA
Catherine Woodard

Holland blue buried under
Sweaters, wrapped to protect
The breakable from the fragile.

My dime store trove, my tea set.
I sing the cheerful chatter
Of a five-year-old who spies

Her father on the couch
In sunlight. His big toe wiggles
From a sock hole.

Out the cups and saucers
For communion, four lemon wafers.
I can't find the teapot top

Or his blue eyes that blur
To the applause of a game
Show. I offer a cookie.

My father stretches for another
Beer, pops the ring, pours secret
Shots foamy into our tea cups.

A SMALL MARKET

Bipin Aurora

The woman with the baby carriage came to the register. She used the carriage in different ways: to carry the baby, to carry the baby and the groceries, to carry only the groceries. Today, since the baby wasn't there, it was used—probably—only for the last purpose.

"So what do you think?" said the woman. "Are you scared?"

"Of what?" said Kim.

"You know," said the woman.

"No, I don't," said Kim.

"The other day. Wednesday night. You mean you really don't know?"

"No, I don't," said Kim. His heart sank.

"The holdup, the robbery. Everybody knows."

"Oh," said Kim. He was barely audible.

The woman paid for her goods. "I don't know how you can put up with it," she said. "You should go back to school, get another job."

The man from the liquor store came. He was muttering. Kim rang up his Coke and cupcakes. "Thank you," Kim said. The man said nothing and left.

It was always busy at this time: three-thirty in the afternoon, four. The children were coming home from their schools. Also, it was the change of the shift.

Dale, the manager, was in the back room. He was making the deposit, filling out the vendor sheets. Kim wanted to talk to him, to ask him. He had said nothing when Kim had come in an hour earlier.

Mike, who also worked there, came in through the store doors. He winked at Kim; Kim smiled. The line was long and, instead of walking past the customers, Mike made an immediate left turn. He went past the sodas and past the ice cream, making a right and going along the detergents and the eggs and the cheeses. In this way he walked to the store room—and to the small office there—in the back.



Kim had begun at the store eighteen months before. He had learned a lot. But the customers? They were not nice.

"Are you married?" they said. "Do you work here?" they said. "I would never work here," they said.

They were proud people. "Are you Chinese?" they said. "Are you Japanese?" they said. "You did not finish high school—why don't you go back and finish high school?"

In fact, Kim was in college completing his second year. But they were busy and important people. What did they care?

But, yes, Kim had learned a lot at the store. He ran the cash register and he stocked the shelves. He stamped the prices. He swept the floors and he mopped them. He checked the vendors when they came in with their deliveries and made sure that the store was not cheated. He reconciled the receipts at the end of the day.

He had learned a lot about food. He had learned about tuna fish and sardines and kidney beans. He ate kidney beans at home, but, before, he could not tell the beans apart. Now he could even tell a kidney bean from a lima bean. He had learned to tell apart the vegetables as well. The fruits. The different sizes of milk.

So much.

But the customers—.

Mike came up to the cash register. He had put on his green smock, tied in the back with a string. "You want me to relieve you?" he said.

"Sure," said Kim. "Only ten minutes."

Kim slid up the narrow aisle between the two cash registers. He made a left and walked towards the store room in the back. There was a lock there—newly installed about two weeks before. Kim used his key to get in.

Dale was in the small office next to the room. He was a man of medium height with short black hair—almost a crew cut. He was

licking the seal around the afternoon deposit. Kim wanted to ask him, but he did not want to seem too obvious. It was a sensitive and unpleasant topic.

Kim took a shopping cart and began emptying some cans into it: peaches, peas, dried milk. He was pretending that he was filling the cart to take up front and stock the shelves. He made only enough noise to let Dale know that he was there, being careful not to seem too obvious.

"So what's new?" said Dale, glancing over his shoulder in Kim's direction.

"Not much," said Kim.

"How's school coming?"

"It's all right," said Kim. "Not good, not bad."

"You passing everything?" Dale swiveled in his chair to face Kim.

"Too early to tell," said Kim. "We haven't had exams yet. First exams are next week."

Kim stood on his toes and peered at the higher shelves, as if to make sure that he had not missed anything.

"You'll do all right," said Dale. "Just study hard."

"I'll try," said Kim.

Kim turned the cart to face the door. He slowly pushed the cart as if to go back out.

"I guess you've heard," said Dale, when Kim was almost to the door.

Kim stopped.

"When it rains, it pours, I guess."

He knew what Dale was talking about. Of course he knew.

He pulled back the cart and retraced his steps. He stopped at the office archway, next to Dale. "What happened?" he said. "Was it very bad?"

"At least a little funny," said Dale. He laughed softly. "There were these two black guys—niggers, I say, they're always the same. They

pulled out a gun and said, 'This is a stickup.' So Mike—he was behind the counter—he says, 'Hell, no.' They slapped him and asked him a second time. 'Before I give it to you,' says Mike, 'I'll put it in my own pocket.' So they grabbed him by the throat, pushed him down. Then they took the money. All of it."

"Was anybody else in the store?" said Kim. His heart was pounding.

"A young couple—I'm sure you've seen them before—but they were by the egg section. Didn't see a thing. An old man was by the frozen foods but he didn't see a thing either. He's too blind anyway. The old man walks up with his purchase and gives Mike a \$10 bill. When Mike couldn't change it, 'What kind of place is this?' says the old man. 'You can't even change a measly ten.'"

As he spoke, Dale imitated the speech of the old man. He laughed.

"Is Mike all right?" said Kim.

"Oh, he's all right," said Dale. "Only next time, I told him, don't be such a hero. Give the guy the money."

Dale laughed again, but it was not a funny laugh. It was short and choppy and unnatural.

There was a long pause. Dale had spoken. What was there to add?

"Well, I better go up front," said Kim at last. "Mike is waiting for me."

"I'll walk out with you," said Dale. "I've got to make this deposit."

The safe was in the front, to the right of the second register and near the beginning of the produce section. It was a funny place to have a safe, in the open like that.

Kim walked up to the front, stocking along the way the few cans he had brought. Then he went back to the register.

The lines at the register were getting long now. Mike was fast but

not as fast as Kim. Kim could, if he wanted, add the totals in his head even before the register. In the early days, to impress the customers, he had sometimes done just this: tax and everything. But that was so long ago. The customers were not so important now—he had given up the habit.

Kim took over at the register. Mike helped with the bagging for a while. Kim rang, Mike bagged. Kim rang, Mike bagged.

At last the lines got smaller. Mike left and went to restock the drinks cooler. It had been a busy hour. A lot of people had bought cold things.

The cooler was in the middle third of the store. As you came in you had to walk up about fifteen feet and go left about five. It was a fairly big cooler: five sections, each separated from the outside by a glass door, and each with three shelves. On the left two sections were the milk cartons; in the middle two sections were the fruit juices and fruit drinks; and in the extreme right section were the miscellaneous milk products.

Kim liked the cooler. It was here that he had learned to visualize, for the first time, the different sizes: pints, quarts, half-gallons, gallons. He had learned also about half-and-half milk and—during the Christmas season—about eggnog.

Seeing that Kim was watching him, Mike began to make faces from inside the cooler. Kim smiled. Mike was a middle-aged man, about 40, with short, graying hair. He was a little chubby, but not fat, and Kim liked him. Mike did not think that Kim was handsome, but he was nice to him as well. He told him jokes. Sometimes he played pranks.

Two girls from the Catholic school came into the store. They were dressed in light blue uniforms. They walked towards the cooler. When they saw Mike making faces, one pointed to him: “He was the one who was slapped,” she said. “A real case study,” said the other.

Seeing the girls, Kim’s heart began to pound again. He cleared his

throat so as not to get a lump there.

"Hello," he said to the girls as they came to the counter. They smiled but did not say anything. Kim began to blush. He put their milk and bread in a bag. "Thank you," he said, but the words stuck in his throat. The girls took their bag and left. Outside, as they closed the door, they began to laugh.

"Proud girls," said Kim.

As Kim's eyes turned towards the cooler, he saw Mike again. Mike smiled, making a face. Kim smiled and, this time, made a face in return. Mike laughed.

Two more girls came in from the Catholic school. They were not in their uniforms. They were with their male friends, and they were talking loudly.

Again, Kim's heart began to pound.

"Hello, amigo," said one of the girls when they finally came to the counter.

Kim smiled and nodded.

"Bonjour, amigo," said one of the friends. "You no speak?"

"I speak," said Kim.

The friends and the girls all laughed.

"Are you Chinese?" said one of the girls.

"Japanese? Korean?" said the other girl.

Kim was ashamed, not so much of being Korean but of looking like one. "Korean," he said quietly.

"Are you married?" said the girls. "Do you have a girlfriend?" they said.

Kim was ashamed of his looks and the questions made him blush. He did not answer.

"Rouge," said one of the friends, and they all laughed.

When they left, Kim's face felt warm. His heart was pounding even more.

"Proud people," said Kim. "They do not know that I also speak French. That I go to college. And how do they think that I am

married? I lied about my age even to get this job.”

“Proud people,” said Kim again. “I do not like them.”

The time passed. A few minutes after six, Dale came to the front. He had taken off his smock but he was still wearing a tie. He always wore a narrow tie, usually black, sometimes blue. It was a clip-on tie, not the type you knot yourself. “Those knots are a nuisance,” Dale said.

Dale limped as he walked. The limp seemed to be getting worse. It was an old disk problem, but the company would not pay for it. “It is a chronic disease,” they said. “You had it before you joined us.”

Dale had been with the company for some time now, almost eleven years. When Kim began he thought—because the person who got him the job had told him—that managers made a lot of money. But Kim did not think that Dale made a lot of money. And he thought that Dale was always working: six days a week, seven days. Ten hours a day, eleven.

One day Dale had explained it to him. “It is the budget,” he said. “They give you so much money—so many dollars—for the employees. After that, it comes out of your own pocket.”

“But it is not fair,” said Kim.

“I guess not,” said Dale. “In the smaller stores it is all right. But this is not a small store—there is so much more work. It is like a small market.”

Kim had gotten so upset that he had sent a letter to the District Supervisor. Six handwritten pages, maybe seven. “It is not fair,” he had said, “making a man work like a slave.” He had sent the letter through the company mail.

The District Supervisor had made a special trip and come to see Kim. “I appreciate your comments,” he said, “I really do. But it is not like slave labor. Just a budget, a management tool. Even I am under a budget.”

Dale had appreciated the letter, or so he had said to Kim. But

nothing had happened, nothing had changed.

"Everything okay?" said Dale, coming up to Kim and standing in the aisle between him and the second register.

"Sure," said Kim. "Everything okay."

Mike also came over. "Everything's fine, boss," he said. He saluted.

Dale made a mock fist at Mike, as if to hit him.

Mike covered his face and ducked.

"Carry on, troops," said Dale.

Kim smiled.

"Ciao," said Dale, and walked out of the door.

Friday nights were always busy—always people going in and out. Kim remained at the register. The people came, they came.

Mike restocked the drinks cooler. Then he unpacked boxes, stocked the shelves. Then he emptied the register for the eight o'clock deposit.

When Mike left to go to the back and make the deposit, Kim became nervous. It was dark outside now. "But it is all right," he said to himself. "Nothing will happen: too many people."

By nine o'clock things had begun to settle down. Mike came up to the register. "You want to take a little break?" he said.

"Sure," said Kim.

Kim walked around the store and collected himself a sandwich, a bag of potato chips, and an orange drink. He went to the register, paid for these. Then he walked to the back room.

The employees seldom paid for their goods. Kim was different. Sometimes the employees even took things home at night.

Kim went to the office in the back. He sat in the simple wooden chair, he ate his food. In ten minutes he was back.

It was 9:15 now, and the store was almost empty. It had begun to rain outside.

Mike was leaning back against the second counter, smoking a cigarette. He was a chain-smoker—up to two packs a day.

"Feel better?" said Mike.

"Yes," said Kim. "How do you feel?"

Mike took a deep puff and blew out the smoke. "I'm okay," he said after a pause.

Kim also paused. "Were you scared?" he said finally. He spoke carefully, timidly. "Wednesday night?"

"So you want to know, just like the rest," said Mike. He laughed.

"No, not like them," said Kim.

Kim took his right hand and rubbed the back of it across his face. At the same time he cleared his throat. He did not want Mike to see the lump that had gathered there.

"I wasn't scared then," said Mike. "But a few minutes later I was shaking."

"And where was Gustavo?" said Kim. Gustavo also worked at the store.

"He was in the back, resting. Sleeping probably." Again Mike laughed.

A customer came and Mike rang up his goods. "Thank you," he said. The customer said nothing. He opened his umbrella and hurried out of the store.

The rain had become much harder now. Every few seconds, thunder could be heard. Mike exhaled from his cigarette, looked at Kim. He smiled.

"The people," said Kim, looking more at the floor than at his companion, "are they cruel to you? Do they ask you questions? About the holdup? Laugh at you?"

"You think that they are cruel?" said Mike.

"I think so," said Kim. Again he spoke carefully, timidly. "They—like the man who just left—they do not even say 'thank you'."

"They're all right," said Mike.

"No, they are not," said Kim. "Not even the neighbors are nice."

"You mean the man from the liquor store?" said Mike. "I wouldn't worry about him."

"But I mean the others, too," said Kim. "The dry clean man, the drugstore man. The barber. Two weeks ago I went to the barbershop and he asked me if I liked getting robbed. I asked him for a haircut—he looked offended. I got the haircut; I even gave him a nice tip. He got even more angry—he did not even look at me."

"He's all right," said Mike.

"They own their stores; we don't. We just work here. We are low-class people. Is that it?"

"Oh, they're all right," said Mike. "Here comes a customer."

Mike rang up the goods. The customer said thank you, commented about the weather. Then, covering his head with a newspaper, he hurried out.

"See?" said Mike. "Now he said 'thank you'."

"He does not live here," said Kim. "He is the exception."

Kim tried to laugh, but he was getting emotional now; his voice started to crack. The thunder had increased and streaks of lightning could be seen across the sky. The store was empty.

"This is our home now," said Mike. "Noisy out there, quiet in here." He took a long puff from his cigarette. He smiled.

"Yes," said Kim. His voice fell. And then, slowly, quietly: "Tell me, Mike, why do the people not like us? Why are they always rude?"

"I don't know," said Mike. "Not rude, maybe just negligent."

"What does that mean?" said Kim.

"That means that they don't mean to be rude; they just don't know better. They're too busy with their own lives."

"But that is no excuse," said Kim.

"Maybe not," said Mike. "But they're not all bad."

He dropped the cigarette butt and crushed it under his foot. He looked at the rain—a few drops had sprinkled inside from the door opening when the customers went in and out.

"I don't know about the neighbors either," he said. "Maybe it is because, as you say, they own their stores. They are a part of the community. We—we are just employees. We just work here; we're open late. And we get robbed."

"People enjoy that? Us getting robbed?"

"Maybe," said Mike. "It's human nature. It's exciting. You might enjoy it, too, if it happened to someone else."

"I don't think so, Mike."

"I don't know, Kim. You say people are rude, but how much attention do you pay to the employees when you go to another store? When you get on a bus? When you go past a toll booth? It takes time and effort to be kind. It is easier to be, well, negligent."

Kim did not say anything. He looked at the floor.

"Forget about it," said Mike. "You go to college and get your degree. I'm the old man—gray hair, 40 years."

Mike lit a second cigarette and took a deep puff. He looked at the rain outside. It showed no signs of letting up.

The days passed. Kim went to school, he came to the store. He went to school, he came to the store. He worked four days a week—sometimes in the daytime, sometimes at night. He minded the day shift less: he would work with Dale, and it was broad daylight. He felt less nervous.

Dale was a nice man. Sometimes he got angry at the employees and he lost his temper. "You work for me, or I work for you?" he would say. He never lost his temper at Kim, though. He let him work any hours he chose: full-time in the summer and whatever hours suited him during the school year. Dale said that Kim was a good worker and that he never complained.

One time Dale asked Kim about taking computer classes. "You think that I could take them?" he said. Another time he said that he might leave this small place and go work for a supermarket. "The aggravation here," he said, and his voice trailed off. Kim encouraged him to quit.

"But I won't be manager," said Dale.

"Not at first," said Kim, "but you can work your way up."

"I don't know," said Dale. "I don't know."

Kim wanted to help Dale, but he did not know what to do. He did not know what to say.

Dale was the manager, but most of the time Kim worked not with him, but with Mike. Kim liked working with Mike as well. Mike was a funny man. Sometimes Kim would say the Buddhist chants, and Mike would try to copy him. They would both laugh. Kim especially liked Mike when he counted the money for a deposit or at the end of the day. He made sure that the bills all faced the same way. He licked his right index finger with his tongue to prevent the bills from sticking. And he counted the bills—again and again, again and again. Sometimes, as he counted, beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead. Even his lips moved silently.

"I get goose bumps watching him," said Kim one time.

One day as they were working two customers came in. They were well dressed, middle-aged. They were arguing with each other. They argued and they argued. Kim looked at them for a long time.

Other customers came. One was an old woman, she walked with a cane. One was a boy—about ten years old, perhaps eleven. He had come to get ice cream. Customers and customers—from where did they come?

One of the customers dropped a carton of milk. The carton broke and the milk splattered all over the floor. Kim hurried to the back and got some paper towels. He also got a bucket and a mop.

First he got on his knees and tried to clean as much as he could

with the paper towels. The paper towels he had brought were all soaked. He hurried to the back and got more towels.

There was so much milk, people were walking in it, stepping all around it. Then he used the bucket and the mop. It took a long time—20 minutes, almost 25. But at last it was all done. He was pleased that it was done.

“Success?” said Mike.

“Success,” said Kim. And they both laughed.

The days passed. There were small successes, and Kim was grateful. One day passed, nothing bad happened. One day passed, nothing bad happened. If nothing bad happened, was it not for the best?

Kim worked at the cash register, Mike bagged. He worked at the cash register, Mike bagged. When it slowed down, Mike went and restocked the drinks cooler.

Sometimes, for a change, they switched around. Now Kim did what the other had done.

One day it was the day shift, and Dale and Kim were working together. Dale was not feeling well. “You go home,” said Kim. “I’ll take care.”

Dale protested, but Kim would not hear of it. “You need your rest,” he said. “You need to get better.”

“But the others won’t be in for another few hours.”

“That’s all right,” said Kim. “I’ll manage.”

At last Dale agreed. It was drizzling and business was slow. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.

Dale left and things were indeed not so bad. Customers came, they left. They came, they left. Kim was a good worker. He could take care of them.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon. A group of teenagers—all black—came into the store. Maybe five of them, maybe six. They roamed and roamed around the store. Kim locked the register and kept his eyes on them. They asked him prices and then put back the

goods. They asked him prices and then put back the goods.

They roamed around the store for almost ten minutes. Then they came to the register and formed a semi-circle around Kim. One of them was wearing a blue jacket. He had his hand in the jacket pocket.

"This is a stickup," he said.

"You're kidding?" said Kim.

"No kidding," he said. He pointed to the register: "All of it, chinko."

Kim opened the register and gave him all the money. His hands were shaking but, for some reason, his heart was not pounding—not at all. He remembered that detail later—he remembered it many times.

The teenager removed his hand from his pocket, showed a gun. He waved the gun around, and then threw it up in the air. The gun bounced on the edge of the counter and then it fell to the floor.

The gun was plastic.

The teenagers laughed. They took the money and they ran out. Kim called the police. When he spoke, they had difficulty understanding him.

Two days later Kim was given a lie detector test. Dale objected, but the company insisted on it. It was "company policy."

It was Kim's 18th birthday. He told Ahmed, one of the other people who sometimes worked there. He told him the occasion—not the age.

"Happy birthday," said Ahmed. Was there irony in his words?

A few days later, Kim went up to Dale. Dale was in the back room, preparing to take the trash to the dumpster. He had put on his leather gloves; he was standing next to the canvas trash cart with wheels. The cart was overflowing, and it had begun to smell a little.

"I have to leave," said Kim.

"Leave?"

"I have to leave."

There was a pause. Dale understood. Of course he understood. Kim did not like the place. And he was afraid—he was always afraid.

"I might leave, too," said Dale after a while. But there was no conviction in his voice. There was only sadness. Only resignation. Only that.

Many months passed—six months, maybe seven. One day Kim got a call at home. It was Ahmed. "Dale got his operation," he said. "The company paid for it."

Kim was happy, and he sent Dale a get-well card. He thanked him for everything. He said that he had, after much looking, finally found another job. He also said other things.

But he did not want to sound too sentimental. So he signed his name backwards.

A few days later Kim picked up the phone. It was Dale. "Is Mik there?" he said. He put a special emphasis on the word. They both laughed. They talked for quite a while—for over half an hour. They promised to keep in touch.

TRACKS

Kate Blakinger

All that winter they drove into storms. Rex steered them through snow and hail to Lake Erie, while Angela smoked his cigarettes one after another until she was dizzy. She always felt a little lightheaded sitting next to Rex. Smoking just buoyed her up faster, floating her through the drive toward the moment of arrival, when his hands would hold her instead of the wheel.

Even with a storm coming on, their car was never the only one on the road. Other drivers would honk at them at stoplights, laughing at Rex's surfboard, which was tied to the roof with rope.

You could surf on Lake Erie when a winter storm churned it up—otherwise, there were no waves worth catching. The water was the color of milky coffee, and a chemical tang hung in the air around it. After surfing, sometimes Rex would get ear infections or pink eye, and once he got a rash that started at his hands and neck and spread up his arms and down his chest for days, like a slow-moving parade of tiny red ants. Angela remembered how he'd clawed at himself. She'd spread calamine lotion all over him, and it stained his clothes. She still let him touch her with those red-spotted hands.

Her mother told her Rex was trouble. "You better open up your eyes, Angela," her mother said. "Take a good look at what you're getting into." That made the girl laugh. It was what she liked about him: all the trouble he stirred up. Her mother told her a sixteen-year-old girl belonged in school. She sure didn't know what to say to change a person's mind.

Rex had a fancy dry suit he propped up in the backseat like a third passenger. He had to wriggle into it through the zippered slit that ran from shoulder to shoulder, across the back. That day in January, as he wriggled, he told Angela that divers peed in their dry suits.

"Liar," she said. "They'd be wet inside, then, and what would be the point?"

"I'm serious. There's this condom thingy you wear with a tube on the end of it, and the tube attaches to a valve at your knee." He told her it was called the P-valve.

"What about girl divers?" Angela asked, but she was thinking about condoms, how they hadn't used one that time in the backseat, her sweaty butt sticking to the vinyl. She hadn't made him stop.

Rex shrugged at her question. "Diapers, maybe," he said.

It wasn't snowing too hard yet, so she got out of the car and walked with him through the drifts from an earlier storm, which gave way to sand as they approached the water.

There were a couple surfers already out on the lake; probably people they'd seen around before, but it was impossible to tell from the beach. Not a lot of folks surfed Lake Erie; you had to be a little crazy to get into that water. The waves were highest right before a blizzard, pushed up by the wind. Icicles formed on the surfers' suits, and their goggles froze to their faces. They had to watch each other for the glazed eyes and slurred speech of hypothermia.

Snowflakes caught in Rex's eyelashes as he leaned down to kiss Angela. She frowned and he asked, "What's with you?"

"Nothing."

"You'd tell me if something was up, right?" Rex's hands were huge. He cupped one around her cheek.

She wanted to tell him that she felt sick and scared, that lately each time she pulled down her underwear she looked for blood that was never there, but all she said was: "There's nothing, really. Go surf before the snow gets too thick."

Rex waded into the water, slid onto his board, and paddled through the whitewater to beyond the breaker line. Angela listened to the lick of the waves against the shore. When she closed her eyes, it was easy to mistake that sound for the ocean. She'd never seen the ocean, except in movies, but her mother had a tape of ocean waves that she listened to as she lay in bed, trying to sleep. When Angela was little, sometimes she'd sneak into her mother's bedroom, crawl under the covers, and

snuggle up to her big warm body, listening to the waves crash again and again. Her mother would scold her, tell her not to touch her legs with those cold toes. She'd ask Angela why she always went barefoot in winter. Did she want to catch her death?

Angela walked a little further up the beach, the wind whipping her hair into snarls. She wished there were shells to collect, but all she found was a used Band-Aid by the edge of the water. She nudged sand over the Band-Aid with the toe of her boot.

That morning, she'd lifted her shirt, unbuttoned her jeans, and looked at the pale dough of her belly in the cracked mirror hanging in the gas station restroom, trying to detect changes. She touched her breasts, and they were tender. Her period was late by three weeks, maybe more. She almost wanted to talk to her mother, but she'd stopped buying new minutes for her cell phone long ago, and Rex's needed to be charged. Besides, she could just hear her mother. "That boy's a rotten apple," she'd say, "and you went ahead and took a bite."

Angela retraced her steps across the beach, returning to the car to read her magazine, but she couldn't concentrate, not even on the pictures. Wrapped in a T-shirt at the bottom of her backpack was a home pregnancy test she'd bought at the drugstore next to the gas station. She'd purchased several candy bars, too, setting everything down in a pile as if chocolate could camouflage what she was really there for.

She hadn't had the guts to use the test while she was in the restroom. She'd stood there, dancing back and forth on her toes, her bladder bursting, trying to work up the courage, but finally she just sat and peed, unable to hold it any longer. She pulled the box out now and stared at the pictures on the back: a plus sign would appear if you were pregnant and a minus sign if you weren't. As if bringing another person into the world was a simple matter of arithmetic.

She didn't want a baby; she didn't want anything growing inside of her. She could picture her belly ballooning outward, stretching

her belly button wide. Rex wouldn't dump her and tell all his friends she was a big slut—the fate of Angela's lab partner sophomore year, a Chicana girl who'd stopped coming to Chemistry when the baggy overalls she wore no longer disguised the round push of her pregnancy. Rex would never do that, but she wasn't sure what he would do. She wasn't even sure what she'd do. She'd need her mother's consent to get rid of the baby. There was some kind of law.

She shoved the test deep into her backpack when Rex returned. He retied his board to the roof with the knots he'd learned in Boy Scouts and eased into the backseat where he proceeded to strip off his dry suit, dripping lake water everywhere. Some night when it wasn't so cold they'd end up sleeping back there. She'd stretch herself out and the smell of the lake would push into her nose, taste like car exhaust in her mouth.

"Couldn't you change outside?" Angela asked.

"It's like negative degrees out there."

"You're getting the seats wet."

He shrugged. "It's just water."

Angela balled her hands into fists and stared at them in her lap, curled and small, as Rex climbed into the driver's seat. She'd already started the ignition and heat was pumping from the vents. He held his hands in the streams of hot air, his fingers white and pruned, the skin shrunk close to the bone with cold. Then he patted a hand around under the driver's seat, looking for the film canister he kept his pot in. Once his fingers were thawed and nimble, he rolled a joint.

"We should go," she said. She didn't want to get stuck on the road in the storm. She imagined snow piling so high around them that they couldn't open the car doors. Someone would find them during the spring melt. They'd be naked, maybe. Angela had heard that freezing people ripped off their clothes near the end because they felt so warm, like their skin was burning.

Rex nodded but lit the joint. When he passed it to her, the end was soft and wet with his spit. She hesitated for a second then put it

to her lips. They smoked with the windows closed, letting the car get foggy and pungent, the scent of the pot overwhelming the lake smell on Rex's skin. He put a tape of the Ramones into the tape player. The snow was really coming down now, and the wind rocked the car. "If you squint a little," Angela said, "the flakes look like flower petals." They squinted at the snow together.

"You want to go to Tino's tonight?" Rex slurred his words just a touch, holding each one in his mouth a fraction of a second too long.

"OK," she said. Tino was a friend of Rex's who had a studio apartment that was a straight shot up Route 90, a fifty-minute drive in good weather. Everything in that apartment was all piled up in one room: the bed, the fridge, the rickety kitchen table with its sticky stains and the folded napkins slipped under one leg. Tino was a slob. When the garbage can started to overflow, he'd pull out the bag, tie it, and set it on a chair. Sometimes all the chairs were taken and there was no place to sit but the bed, which was just a twin mattress in the middle of the room. But Tino was also a gentleman. He let Angela sleep on the mattress when they crashed there, and in the mornings he'd get her a coffee from the mini-mart on the corner, done up hot and sweet how she liked it, with six sugar packets. Once he showed her his wrestling trophies, a cluster of plastic towers on a shelf in the closet, a tiny gold man shining astride each one. He'd flushed when she touched the tallest. Tino had been state champion.

Rex drove slowly into the snow.

"You ever think about what you're going to be?" Angela asked.

"Be?"

"When you grow up."

"I am grown up, Ange." Rex was three years older than her, and he liked to point that out.

"So this is it? This is what you're going to be?"

"What?"

"Just some surfer who's never been in the ocean?"

He laughed and reached over to burrow his hand under her shirt, but Angela pushed him away, saying she felt carsick.

The night she'd met Rex, he'd taken her to the 24-hour Kroger. She waited in his car until he came back with a chocolate cake. He'd gotten someone from the bakery to write her name across it in neat, blue letters, the name he'd learned only an hour earlier. Slipping into the driver's seat, he started unzipping his pants. He reached into his jeans and, as though he were doing a magic trick, pulled out two bottles of shoplifted beer. That night, for the first time ever, she missed her curfew. They ate the cake with their hands, licking icing off their fingers, and she couldn't stop smiling. She smiled so hard her face hurt and Rex smiled back, dimples popping up in his cheeks.

The first time they slept together, Angela thought about all the things she should have been doing instead. Rex fumbled with her bra clasp and pressed his weight on top of her, and she thought about how she should be reading *Madame Bovary* for English class, or picking the dirty clothes off her floor, like her mother was always after her to do, or even gossiping on the telephone with her friends. But soon Rex was the only thing she thought about, Rex and his hands on her.

The snowflakes looked like angry white insects now, attacking the windows.

They drove past a warehouse. Except for the sharp tips of the 'A's, each block letter of the MATTRESS GIANT sign was peaked with snow. They must have missed the entrance to the highway. She didn't say anything, though. Rex hated it when she tried to direct him.

"Are we moving?" she asked, after what seemed like hours had passed in silence. "I can't tell if we're moving."

Rex laughed. He pointed to the speedometer, which showed they were going 27 miles per hour.

"That's fast."

He didn't answer. He was staring out the window again, getting hypnotized by the snow.

Angela saw the lights first, headlights cutting through the white air

straight ahead of them. The collision vibrated through her an instant later. Her head jerked forward then back, and she was thrown against the door. The car spun. Then stillness.

"Are you OK?" Rex asked, gripping her arm. She nodded.

"What the hell was that?" he said. He rubbed his head gingerly. A lump swelled by his temple, the skin going purple with blood. Angela touched the sandpaper of his cheek, but he was already turning away, getting out of the car.

Outside, the snow fell in thick curtains. She could just make out the glow cast by the headlights of the car they'd hit.

Rex knelt by his old Volvo, cursing. The whole front was crumpled up, like a wad of tin foil. He tried to lever the hood free with his palms, but the metal was twisted and stuck. "Are we in the middle of the road?" he asked, suddenly agitated. "We have to get out of the road."

Angela couldn't tell where they were. She walked through the snow to the other car. The battered hood had been pushed back, exposing the car's engine, and the bumper dangled. The impact had pushed the car's back tires up over the curb. Rex must have let their own car drift across the road into the wrong lane.

She brushed snow off the windshield and saw a web of cracks, the glass green where it was broken. She ran her fingers over the glass and chips fell away under that slight pressure. Through the jagged gap, Angela could see the driver: a woman, all twisted around backwards, her long black hair falling over her shoulders, her face buried in the back of her seat. "Ma'am? You OK?" Angela realized she was whispering. She jerked the car door open and reached out to touch the woman's shoulder, her hand trembling violently. The woman's shoulder was damp. That's when Angela noticed the blood. Matted in the woman's hair, soaked into the fleece she was wearing, and there on the fingertip of Angela's glove, a red smear. She took a step back, air hissing out of her mouth, her tongue pressed against the back of her teeth.

At first, Angela thought she was making that sound, that howl. But the howl came from inside the car. In the back, strapped into a car seat, was a baby. His eyes were squeezed into little slits, and his round face reddened as he cried.

The back door wouldn't open, though it didn't look damaged. Angela went around the car. The doors on the other side were locked. She walked back to the woman's side and stared in at her, glad she couldn't see her face. Maybe the woman had pulled over to tend to the baby in the backseat; maybe that's why she was facing backwards with her seatbelt undone. Angela tried to lean over her and unlock the opposite door without letting their bodies touch, but she didn't have enough reach. She had to get close to the woman, intimate. Her breasts pressed against the woman's back, her nose near that dark hair, inhaling the wet-metal smell of blood.

Finally, Angela unbuckled the straps and lifted the baby awkwardly, careful to support the head. He flailed his tiny fists, still wailing. She couldn't imagine something like this coming out of her.

She looked the baby over for scratches or bruises, but he seemed fine. He smelled like baby powder and warm skin. His poof of black hair was the softest thing.

"Maybe your mommy's sleeping," she whispered to the baby. "Let's find out." With the baby balanced against her shoulder, she slid into the passenger seat and reached toward the woman again, lifting her limp wrist. The woman was wearing a wedding ring. Thinking of a husband waiting for her, worrying, Angela's stomach flip-flopped. She couldn't tell if she felt a pulse or not, her hands were shaking so badly. She got out and backed away from the mangled car.

Rex materialized out of the snow, dragging his surfboard by the leash. His face was white, and he swayed slightly as he stood there, looking at the car and the woman inside. "Is she OK?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

Rex pressed his fingers against the woman's wrist. "No pulse," he said. "I don't feel anything." His voice wavered.

"I can't believe it," Angela said.

Rex dropped the dead woman's wrist. His breath fogged the air in quick puffs. Angela could hear him panting. Embarrassed, she glanced away from his frightened face and looked down at the child she held.

Fine, translucent lashes lined the baby's tiny lids. "Look what I found," she said, but Rex's gaze was fixed on the woman and her bloody hair. Angela touched his arm and he jumped.

"We have to get walking," he said.

"How old do you think he is?"

Rex didn't even look at the baby. "How would I know?" he said. He kicked at the snow with one foot and muttered about how the car wouldn't start and they had to move quickly, before the cold got to them. "Maybe you should put the baby back. Maybe it would be better off in the car."

"I'm not leaving him here."

"The police will come. We'll call them from a convenience store or a restaurant."

"No," she said. "You're not making sense." Who knew how long it would take the police to show up? They weren't on the highway, where the state troopers patrolled.

"That baby's going to be too heavy for you to carry very far," Rex said. "It's going to slow you down."

"What's wrong with you?" Angela could hear the rise in her voice. "You're taking your surfboard, but you want me to leave behind a baby? The baby is alive, Rex. Your surfboard is just some foam and fiberglass."

Rex threw up his arms in a gesture of surrender. "OK, chill out. Lug the damn thing around if you want to."

"It's not a thing."

"I'm just saying that it's freezing out here, and we don't know where we're going." Rex stared past her as he spoke, twisting the leash of his surfboard around his fingers. His eyes were glassy and strange.

Angela turned and started to walk, slinging the diaper bag she'd found in the car over her shoulder and hugging the baby to her chest. Rex just stood there at first, but then he stumbled after her.

She should have been scared, walking into the blizzard with a baby that wasn't hers, the wreckage of two cars collecting snow behind her. Thinking of the woman made her feel sick inside, but some other feeling was there too, smoothing the edges off that sorrow. Lifting her feet high over the accumulating snow, she strode forward, following the chain-link fence that ran alongside the road, a nothingness of snow yawning open beyond it. They might be headed back toward Cleveland, or they might be headed toward nothing at all. They could be walking in the exact wrong direction; it was impossible to tell. She wondered at how this didn't trouble her, how her feet didn't falter. She let the snow fill in her tracks and erase where she'd been, and she made her way into the storm.

NOW, THAT'S A SIGN

Randall Brown

His mother had been listening to astrophysicists on tape during the drive from Boston, and over eggs and ham she talked of cosmic clutter and the Theory of Everything, one sentence that defined the universe.

"And what would be your sentence?" he asked her between bites.

"Oh, I think you know that answer." She poured Tabasco sauce onto breakfast. He found himself fascinated by the folds under her neck. It took his mind off her yellow skin, the yellow eyes.

He knew her sentence. "Life without parole," he said.

"Not you." She looked at him with wonder. "You escaped it. The boy who lived." Free of addiction, of the inevitable death of liver cells, pickled and drowned. She leaned over, whispered, "What's your secret?"

"It's not a secret." If he loved her before with that desperate, clinging kind of love, it no longer registered. A myth of what might've been.

"But, oh, you did." Had he spoken aloud? He'd heard it before: how she'd let no one hold him, how they slept curled in the Green La-Z-Boy chair, she reading Dr. Seuss and telling stories of Peter the Popcorn Eater who solved mysteries, like where jewels could be found and monsters unmasked. "You were like a collie."

"Colicky," he said. "I was colicky."

"That's what I meant." She winced at some unseen pain, maybe in the bones, in the gut, and she reached for a drink that wasn't there. He knew what the failed rehab visits had indoctrinated into the families, the nature of it all, its origins in the brain, a disease, not a choice. But he wondered if there'd been something to save her, to stand against that desire. He imagined it to be the love that he'd never found to give her.

They drove around that evening, searching for her last meal, or at least that's what she called it. She said she wanted something else,

other than what the world had given them. They passed the fast food chains, the Chinese restaurants, Italian hoagie places. They drove out of town and into the hills. She leaned her head on him as he drove. The headlight caught the leaves, rusting, the color of his mother, orange-yellow.

"I wish—," she kept saying, stopping.

He slowed down, and she looked up with that same wonder of before.

"Oh, honey," she said. She kissed his cheek and her breath smelled of basements, long since abandoned. "It's perfect."

The neon blinked. The something different. The something never before seen. The last meal.

Texas Pete's Stir-Fry Tofu.

That juxtaposition of things that didn't belong together.

"You'll miss me," she'd say sometime during that meal, surrounded by Texas and tofu, and he would feel it rise, like all that her liver no longer processed—and maybe he'd let it this time, let it overwhelm him until it cried out something that sounded like 'mommy.'

TRANSPLANT

Peter Grimes

The protocol is for us to follow behind the transplanter, crouching above black plastic; we must cover the strawberry roots Mr. Tomlinson and Pedro drop into the machine-punched holes. Riding six inches from the ground, with a double wheel of puncturing cogs between them, they toss the stock crown-first into each fresh rupture. Fish emulsion from the tank above sloshes on top. In my opinion, they should leave the roots beside each hole since we always have to dig deeper: it's necessary to create a more secure place in the fishy soil. Until we arrive, the roots stick out of the plastic holes like starved arms reaching in the wrong direction.

I joined the workers at Gates Farm last summer after spending many years at Arnest International, a company specializing in industry-related physical therapy. I entered patient information and still remember some of the more gruesome injury codes: 802.6 for fractures of the skull, 944.3 for burn with full-thickness skin loss, 986.4 for degloving of the hand. The codes were as close as I got to the mutilations—very often farm-related—because therapists seldom attach photographs to their descriptions. I'd planned to quit on my fortieth birthday. Instead, I met Randy Jameson.

One afternoon, I stopped at a fruit stand situated on the highway from Arnest back to the city. Randy, a long-haired, peaceful intern at Willow Branch Farm, insisted I taste each organic berry before making my decision. He spoke of the different soil conditions that gave each fruit its distinct flavor and texture, how the farm used natural fragrances to ward off pests while attracting pollinators, how they utilized only animal labor, never machines. I was suspicious at first, taking him for an out-of-touch granola. But when he found out what I did for a living, he boasted that Willow Branch workers had suffered no injuries during the young farm's first five years. That was something, I thought.

Randy was half my age, and we dated mainly out of loneliness at first, but we cultivated our relationship with care—no TV while we ate together, just conversation; walks through the woods, noticing the trees and animals; equal contribution to expenses, though I made much more. All this in stark contrast to the decade of dead hours I spent at Arnest, cataloging injuries. This contrast in my life remained after we got serious and decided that I would continue at Arnest, where my salary could support us both until Randy got through his bachelor's program. Then I would leave the office for good, and we'd start our lives together in the fresh air in a place like Willow Branch, a farm of our very own.

Three weeks before Randy's graduation, he was decapitated when a semi jackknifed in rainwater on Interstate 76. No code for that. In line with his wishes, his liver was donated to a boy in Houston. Even with immunosuppressive therapy, the boy's body rejected the organ. It seemed Randy's sacrifice meant nothing. Quitting Arnest was automatic. With the money I'd saved I could afford to take a break from salaried work, so I sought employment as a farmhand. I wanted Randy to live on in what I did with my days, but Willow Branch had no openings. Their workers were happy. I could only secure a position at Gates, a more conventional farm, one with chemicals, machines, and injuries. The transplanter was the machine that most of all reminded me that, to fulfill Randy's dream, I had far to go. A puncturing, twisting, creeping parasite on the landscape, it must have certainly mangled a few limbs in its tenure.

My sowing partner behind the transplanter today is Mrs. Tomlinson. Kevin, the overseer, told us this morning in the barn that the quickest way to get the root stock out of the baking sun is to match up and keep pace with another of the women. We squat on opposite sides of the plastic and dig in our respective holes, starting about five behind Encarna and Inez, five in front of Sarah and Consuela. Each time we reach roots already covered, we skip into place at the front of the line. In this way, the group of us moves worm-like behind the

machine.

Mrs. Tomlinson works only two days a week compared with my five. She and Mr. Tomlinson, the root-dropper ahead on the left, are retired farmers from Illinois who came to Pennsylvania to be near their children. They'd thought they were through with farming, but, when they found a long road of empty years stretching through the farmland north of Philadelphia, they had to get their hands back in it. Their years of familiarity with the soil make them the people even Kevin turns to with questions about Japanese beetles and misfiring tractor engines.

Being around such a veteran of the fields and her husband, I can't help but think of Randy and our plans. When he disappeared in a crush of metal, I felt like I'd lost half partner, half child. I lost the child that would have been our marriage, the marriage that might have soon produced an actual child, connecting me—us—with a chain of others to come. Company of our own making. Lately I've thought of telling Mrs. Tomlinson my own ideas about how farm work might heal my loneliness, how digging my hands in the same earth that conceals Randy forty miles away might help me to let him go, a seed left in the earth.

"A scorcher today," she says, as she must have a million times in the last thirty years.

I nod, watch her dig and tuck, trying to match the dexterity of her fingers. She squats flat-footed, allowing flies to rest on her arms as she works. Most of the other women came today wearing cotton white shirts and hats, but Mrs. Tomlinson wears what must be her everyday style of clothing—tennis shoes, some khaki shorts, and a multicolored T-shirt that says *Spain!*. No sunglasses. No hat. No bandanna. She works as she lives, lives as she works. Maybe she's found that all the accoutrements Gore-Tex or Banana Republic can come up will never stand up in the end between us and the sun. Indeed, despite various precautions, many farm injuries start with heat exhaustion. I still remember a case of a woozy farmworker who was pulled into the

tailgate area of a hay baler: 897.2 for a unilateral amputation of the leg below the knee.

A practiced sower, she moves quickly, but—for the good of the whole operation—I’ve determined to keep up. Still, it takes some willpower to forgive myself the roots I’ve imperfectly sealed when I move on to the next hole. I’m still very detail-oriented, a demand of my job at Arnest. I wanted to get every injury code right to avoid any loopholes insurance companies would seek in a worker’s comp case. I only manage to keep pace now by focusing on the 500 waving roots still wilting in the sun.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say, “about how much I’ve missed this in my life.”

“What’s that, honey?”

“Farming. Planting, weeding, harvesting. The whole process, I suppose.”

“You aren’t missing nothing. Dave and I are back at it just because we’re crazy.” She glances to the side to locate her husband, riding low behind the transplanter. He and Pedro are flinging the roots down frantically, as if they’ve been behind from the beginning. I share a knowing smile with Mrs. Tomlinson, but, when I look back at the men, I decide that, rather than frantic, their motions are simply fast, as precise and effortless as the dropping of road cones. We stand and move to the next empty holes. At the end of the row, Kevin’s already turning the tractor to work down the third, coming at us head-on and two feet to the left.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” I say. “I think something like this is really the only sane thing to do. You can’t imagine what it was like being in an office all day, away from everything that truly sustained me. The sun, the air, the earth.”

When I put my thoughts into words, they seem silly, dissolved into romantic ideals. They glance off the on-coming machine like glare. However, as with the flies, the swirling dust, the monotony of farm work, Mrs. Tomlinson doesn’t seem to notice.

"Earth, sun, air," she repeats. "Tell me about it."

My calves have grown tight from squatting on tiptoe so that I might always be on the move. By the time the worm of women reaches the row's end, my fingertips throb where dirt has gotten packed under the nails. It would all be worth it, I think, if I could go home to Randy. I'd push through the front door and find him at a desk, reading entomology. I'd hold my hands out to him, bleeding and smelling of fish.

But Randy's gone. Even the kid he tried to save, the transplant recipient, has gone, taking a part of Randy to a different place. A grave in Texas.

We start the next row without taking a break for water or stretching, the Gates way, and I change tactics. I'll do it my way, Randy's way: concentrate on every hole, making sure to fold and press each beginning of a plant into the earth without worrying about the hundreds yet to come.

"I just want to feel like what I'm doing today will have some effect in my lifetime. I'd like to see these strawberries grow, taste them, make a pie, whatever."

"We better." Mrs. Tomlinson chuckles. "If Kevin announced he'd given us dead roots, he'd have twenty madwomen after him come fall."

Fall. I chuckle to match her but feel a sudden confusion, as if the world has just begun spinning in the opposite direction. Dizziness from fume exposure: 780.4. Randy brought home cartons of strawberries from Willow Branch in summer. They must have been planted in the spring, not on a July day like this one. I feel as if a small miracle has descended upon my understanding, as if Randy is speaking through me to correct a mistake here. Aren't we planting too late? Isn't this just another wasteful oversight, labor without the reward of life? But surely the Tomlinsons would have noticed. This past year I've developed a tendency to wreath even the most light-hearted chats with black ribbons.

"These berries are late bloomers, I take it?"

Mrs. Tomlinson waits while I press dirt around the crown. The women have bunched up behind us, discussing the hold up. My partner doesn't answer until we move up front again.

"These are an autumn variety," she says, flipping one over and cupping soil over the roots in one fluid motion.

Strawberries in fall. Her words are ripe with an automatic meaning for her that I can't yet comprehend. Her fingers tuck in another crown. Yellow, cracked, they tell me the answer must be in me, too, waiting for the right time to show. Maybe I'll see 50 first; maybe I'll understand by morning.

Speeding our way down the fourth row, Kevin and his low-riding assistants drop the endless roots into their unready holes.

"How's it coming, girls?" he shouts over the throttle of the engine.

Mrs. Tomlinson, our spokeswoman, gives him the thumbs-up and then flicks off her husband, who rides comfortably in a slight breeze. He replies with an obscene gesture using his tongue and two fingers. They cackle, and Mrs. Tomlinson resumes her work.

Amazing, these two. How could they love each other? I imagine them having sex, their heavy, 70-year-old bodies sweating with the honesty of pigs, rolling around the bed, snorting, her spider-veined legs rubbing across his hairy back. Another thing I'll need to learn.

With the tractor moving farther and farther ahead, we work in silence for a while, only interrupted by sporadic conversation in Spanish to our left and right. I sneak a glance at my partner's knee, listen for the hum of her husband's drawl.

"That is one hell of a machine," Mrs. Tomlinson says, calling me back from a place she'd never suspect.

I follow her gaze to the transplanter and its three passengers, chugging along. At this rate, it seems the last roots will be long dried out before we ever get to them. Likely, though, they're more resilient than I give them credit for.

"I don't think I've seen something quite so lazy in my whole life," she says. "You'd think that with all those wheels and hoses and levers, they'd have one little mechanism to finish the job. It doesn't seem hardly worth it to have us crawling through the fields."

The men reach the end of the row, fan their faces with hunting caps. I agree there's something not quite right about the setup. We'll always be needed to follow behind on our knees. I move to the next spot, opposite Mrs. Tomlinson, and reach into my hole. No root. The droppers have missed this one, as they're bound to do sometimes. A second miracle, or a mistake? Kevin told us this morning to mark these empty holes with red ribbons he'd stuffed in our aprons. We'd come back later with leftover root stock.

But I don't mark it.

I reach instead into the earth, turning it over, feeling dirt jam into dirt under my fingernails, the small rocks and hard clumps making way for my insistence. I crumble up every stubborn piece I find, preparing a place for something. With none of the other holes have I taken so much care. I churn until Mrs. Tomlinson waddles over to the next hole, and then I leave the empty one, unmarked and ready.

BAD

Shirley Sullivan

Kate didn't know anyone at the funeral, or the reception, including the deceased. She never did. She would check the obituaries in the newspaper then show up. It calmed her that there were no expectations of her among strangers; she could say whatever came into her head. She could say she'd been out of Hollinswood Hospital for three whole months, following her six-month stay for depression. It was lovely that no one fussed over her or even cared for that matter; she wasn't that important. What she didn't ordinarily discuss with anyone was the reason for her depression, since she and Dr. Springer, while searching for the definitive fix, had yet to get to the bottom of it. All they knew was that she'd taken a spiral down, after Elliot Markham slept with her once then disappeared without a single phone call. Kate dutifully took her prescribed meds but didn't buy the notion that the explanation for all her troubles could be as simple as one thoughtless boy. The afternoon she left Hollinswood, Dr. Springer walked her to her father's waiting sedan, sparkling from a recent polishing, and handed over her suitcase. "You're just fine."

"She's just fine," her father said.

She tried to smile. "I'm just fine."

The receptions which followed the burials were filled with welcoming family. In spite of faces filled with painful astonishment, she found them ready with outstretched arms and comforting hugs. "Thank you for coming," they would say. "How very kind." There was also plenty of liquor. There were tables of food, hams and gelatin salads, ambrosia, piles of biscuits. "How will we go on without him?" A squeeze of the hand. "God knows." Often, there were little iced cakes.

Today's reception followed a service at Our Lady of Redemption, a Catholic Church, not far from her apartment. The mourners filed from the church and walked, in twos and threes, the younger ones

supporting their elders the short distance to the family home. Kate walked among them. Entering the house, she saw a photo displayed on a hall table of a somber young man in a dark suit. A mere boy. There were rosaries next to the frame and colorfully wrapped Christmas gifts, as if he were expected. Women in dark clothes took their seats against the walls, looking at something Kate couldn't see, while the children played at their feet. She wandered through the rooms of the house before she came to a bedroom with a mirror attached to the door. In the mirror she saw herself, dressed in a good black dress, with her mother's pearls at her throat, and looking, at age 28, like someone she never thought she'd resemble: a wild-eyed, slender, and fragile woman with flyaway hair who spied on the bereaved.

She returned to the living area and found the makeshift bar, a table protected by a white cloth, where shot glasses of tequila were lined up in rows. She picked one up, finished it off then picked up another. Knowing she wasn't supposed to drink while on the meds Dr. Springer prescribed for her, she downed the second shot.

As people began to crowd in, she found herself standing next to a man in sunglasses and combat fatigues. The name on his jacket read 'Sergeant Morrison.' "You a member of the family?" he asked, and she knew he was mocking her. He was sunburned, hipless, with his hair flattened from wearing a beret. Later, she would say he seemed guarded, measuring and evaluating something in the air between them.

She looked around at the mostly Hispanic crowd. "Do I look like I'm a member of the family?"

"Nope. You look like an Icelandic princess."

"What about you?" she asked. They moved to the buffet table and helped themselves to the guacamole.

"I guess you might say he was family." He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "We were in the same unit."

"Where was that, Sergeant?" They moved back to the bar for refills.

"Kandahar."

"Afghanistan?" She took a step backward, splashing tequila on her skirt. "God, I've never known anyone who's been to Afghanistan."

"Figures." His gaze was directed at the front of her dress.

"What a terrible Christmas for this family. Of all the funerals I could have wandered into, I guess I picked the wrong one."

"Meaning?"

"I don't know any of these people."

"I knew it," he said. "You've got the look."

"What look is that?"

"The looking-for-trouble look. You teach school but you're bad."

That annoyed her. She didn't care to resemble a teacher. She wouldn't tell him that's what she did. "I'm not a teacher," she lied.

"But you're bad. Right? A bad girl? That's why you're here: looking for what? Kicks? Escape? Oblivion, huh?" She saw herself reflected in his glasses. "Here among the mourners," his smile was brilliant, "you can bet your ass someone feels worse than you."

The word 'bad' echoed in her head, and she suddenly wanted to be anywhere other than standing with this soldier. Without a word, she walked off.

At the place where she'd been sent to rest, she'd been told repeatedly that she wasn't bad. But there were others, patients who stole the food off her plate; they were bad. There were daily therapy sessions held in rooms with large windows, overlooking fields of grazing sheep, and everyone sat on the floor in their socks, smoking and eating jellybeans and talking nonsense. She wanted to tell them all to shut up. There were gardens of flowers that flourished there, azaleas and hibiscus, great patches of color. The air smelled delicious.

On visiting day, she sat in the garden with her parents, in chairs set out by the staff, wishing her mother could stop asking, "Is it our fault?" Her father, avoiding her eyes. "There's nothing wrong with our girl," he would say. "Look at her. She wants to come home."

"No, she doesn't," Kate would say, and, while they discussed her, as if she weren't there, she painted her nails the same color of lilac as

the wisteria growing against the wall. Her mother brought her things wrapped in tissue, things she'd kept for years: a child's nightgown with pleating at the bodice and a coloring book, along with some valentines. Kate put them in a drawer in her room, alongside a package of Moon Pies.

One month in, she ran away. It took them three hours to find her, in a Trailways bus terminal, wearing aerobic pants and a gray sweatshirt, seated on a wooden bench next to a young priest. She tried to explain to him about Nancy, the woman in the bed next to hers, who'd been trying to chew off her feet. She wanted him to know what it felt like to live like a child confined to her room. Speechless, the young man offered her part of his fried-egg sandwich, which, at first, she accepted then handed back. Afterward, after they took her back, exhausted and no longer able to play gin with Nancy, she took up bird watching and spent a good amount of the day leafing through *The Audubon Handbook*, studying the different species, spotting them from her window. She learned all their names: 'Orioles,' 'goldfinches,' 'pygmy nuthatches.'

'Warblers.'

The sergeant was at her side again. "Don't make a scene," he said. "I just need to know if there's anything to do in this town," he asked.

"Like what?" she asked, hands on her hips.

"I'd like to buy you a drink."

She felt the heat in her face. She thought a moment, making her decision. "Okay." Then, "I have a 25-year-old bottle of scotch at my place."

"Well, goddamn." He took Kate by the hand and pulled her through the crowd until he found the dead boy's mother. "Mrs. Salazar, I want you to meet a friend of mine—."

"Kate." Kate stepped close, no longer a stranger, and took the woman's hands in hers, so warm and moist from being held. "Hello. I'm so sorry. It's a dark day."

"Que guapa," the woman said. Her head was covered by a black

shawl. The two women embraced for a moment.

Outside the house, the afternoon had passed. The air smelled sweet. They walked without speaking, moving through oblongs of moonlight that lay along the sidewalk, until they reached the short distance to her apartment. Up one flight of stairs, she inserted the key in the lock and pushed open the door. "Forgive the mess, I wasn't expecting company." She turned on a lamp and closed the door to the bedroom. A noble pine stood in a corner, hung with colored lights and angels made of flaxen yarn. "What's your first name?" she asked, noticing his cheekbones were pink with sunburn, his neck, the back of his hands.

"Jimmy. Who're you again?"

"Kate." She plugged in the tree lights, pleased with the glow they cast, like a twilight inside the room.

"Okay." His eyes were all over her.

"Merry Christmas." She rubbed the back of her neck beneath the blondish hair. She was going to have to tell them, the members of her therapy group, Brad and Harry and Foeie, what she'd done. She'd have to face the questions and explain. "Okay, okay, at least I wasn't alone. I was socializing, like you suggested. I was living."

And someone would speak up and say, "Forgive me for stepping in here, but I do want to get this right. You did what?"

There were shelves and shelves of books and more on the floor. Inexpensive prints covered the walls, of elephants gathered at a watering hole, herons standing on one leg. "Make yourself comfortable," she said, picking up newspapers scattered around. Then she went to the kitchen area, separated from the living room by a tiled counter, where a dark-eyed canary sat on a perch inside his cage. "Hey, Benny," she said.

Benny went, "Peep," and dropped to the floor of the cage, seizing a seed. Kate pressed a finger through the bars to rub his head.

"Silly bird," she said affectionately, as he rustled his feathers, then she took a tray of ice from the fridge and began the familiar ritual of

mixing drinks. "You like Manhattans?"

Jimmy removed his jacket and dropped it on a chair, then undid the collar of his shirt. He shook a cigarette out of a pack and lit it, blowing smoke at the ceiling. "You can skip the vermouth."

She poured strong drinks and mixed them with her finger, then handed one to him. Maybe tomorrow she'd defrost the chicken in the freezer, roast it in the oven. Use her china and good linen napkins. The two of them, a dinner together, with candles. Like regular people.

He took the extended glass. "This is good. You know how good this is? Being here, with you? Usually if I have a drink with a woman, I get stuck with the bar bill. Sometimes my lighter disappears." He lifted the glass and took a long pull. "So how come so many books? You a writer?"

She'd always wanted to be a writer. "I'm a translator." Another lie.

"Get outta here. You speak Iraqi?"

"Do you?"

"I know how to say 'fuck off.'"

"I'll bet you do. Was your father in the military?"

"My dad's a minister." He punched the pillows on the sofa then sat. He sat with his legs wide apart. "He doesn't believe in my war. Or any war."

She walked to the sofa and dropped down next to Jimmy, clasping her arms around her knees. "What does he believe in?"

He passed a hand over his eyes. "A disciplined life."

"Do you go to church?"

"I went inside one of those Muslim temples once or twice. Rows of people on their knees, their heads to the floor. I envied them until I began to wonder how many of them were blowing us up."

"My father served in Vietnam." Kate glanced across the room, at a photo of her father in uniform, and looked away. "I actually think he liked killing. He talked about what he killed for sport, like he was proud of it, the monkeys and the parrots. He talked about the Mekong

River, the boats passing, with low-slung masts, on their way to the China Sea. He told me what he could buy on the river, the women and the drugs. He talked about the clubs."

There had been dances at the hospital. She wore her dancing dress while, from the terrace, piano music floated in through the French doors. She had closed her eyes, pretending her partners didn't resemble baboons. One, two, three. One, two, three. Around they went. Rapturous. Later, they ate vanilla ice cream, the smell of jasmine vine permeating the air.

"So are you a hero?"

Jimmy fiddled with his watch. "I was just one more faceless motherfucker standing on a road, knocking the dust off my boots, waiting to be suited up after Salazar got hit. Manny-fucking-Salazar."

"The boy in the photo?"

"We shoveled him off the road after the bomb he was trying to dismantle went off."

"You dismantle bombs?" She fingered the pearls at her neck, cool against her skin.

"It's like the moon over there. Only worse. Not knowing who's civilian, who's military. Who's holding a cell phone or a detonator that looks like one. They're just waitin' for us to leave. Best we could do was play the radio all night."

"What was the toughest part?"

"I don't know. Maybe the sandstorms. Staying away from the Russian tanks. We didn't have anything to kill a tank." He flashed a smile. "Is this turning you on?"

"How do you deal with it?"

"Oh, I deal with it. The docs load us up with all kinds of shit—Zoloft and Valium—then send us back in."

She was on Zoloft.

He sat forward, his elbows on his knees, doing something with his shoelaces. "I've been extended. I'll be back over there in a week.

In time for Christmas.”

They finished their drinks and looked off in different directions.

“So what’s next?” he asked, squinting through hazel eyes.

“More liquor.” Kate pushed off the sofa and headed to the kitchen. Through the window she saw it had begun to rain, pounding the dark street silver.

“Who’s this?” Jimmy asked. He’d followed her into the kitchen and, spying the canary’s cage, bumped it, causing the bird to spread its wings in alarm. “This your bird?”

She walked quickly to the cage and steadied it. “It’s okay, Benny.”

“Benny, huh? Birds make me nervous. They never shut up. Right, Benny? You ever shut up?”

She saw that the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. She wondered why she wasn’t afraid.

Returning to the living room with the bottle, she refilled their glasses. She stood in front of him. “Why’d you come on to me at the reception?” she asked.

“You wanted me to.”

Leaning forward, she touched the front of his shirt, where it was damp and warm. He took her hands, putting both of them behind her, holding her captive. “I’ve been dreamin’ about you,” he said.

Dancing with baboons, dreamin’ about you.

He put a hand on her throat and slid his tongue deep inside her mouth. “Know what I’m thinking?” he asked. “You are bad and we should get loaded. You an addict? ‘Cause I’ve got some good stuff here, and I figure you for one of those intellectual chicks who wants to get in over her head. Right?”

“I don’t do street drugs,” she said.

“You don’t do drugs. That’s okay; there’re other things. I know what you want, standing there all dressed up in your good dress, pearls and all, waiting, right? You want danger in your life. I can do that. I’ll take your clothes off, lay them on the floor real careful. I won’t rip

anything. I'll show you what you want." He rubbed his hand over his mouth.

She took another sip. When her glass was empty, she would pour another. When the bottle was finished, she'd find the next one.

"Kiss me," he said. "I know you want to."

She didn't say anything. She turned her face toward him, opened her lips, not caring if he was diseased. "I'll do everything," he said. He pulled her to the sofa. "Sit on my lap." He found the buttons to open her dress. "Raise your arms. Good, you're my good little bad girl. Jesus, look at you. Now close your eyes. We'll pretend we're on the river sailing toward carnival night, and there're orchids growing on the masts." The air between them grew humid, thick. "I won't hurt you. I'll take care of you. I'll fuck you all the way to the South China Sea."

Slowly, as the hands on the clock ticked away the passing time, the apartment filled with shadows cast by the single light from a lamp. Kate, in a state of suspension from all that was ordinary, felt something change in the night air, a forfeiting of all claim, and with it an unfastening, a loosening of her skin. She imagined that someone had set fire to the trees growing out of the sidewalk, and the flames grew as she watched, grew 20 feet high.

When she next opened her eyes, it was still dark, although she knew it must be dawn. Last night's rain had chilled the room. She had dreamed a river of fathomless depths had flowed across the floor, and, as it rose, reaching the bedclothes, she saw her father in an open coffin floating on the water. Thinking she was sinking, she clicked the lamp on next to the bed and read the time. Five o'clock. There was blood on the pillow slip and more on the sheets. In disbelief, she rose, leaving Jimmy asleep, and walked naked and barefoot through the living room and into the kitchen. That's where she found Benny, on the floor of the cage, his head at an odd angle. There was enough light from the Christmas tree to see the blood on his feathers.

With an intake of breath, she realized Benny was beyond help. Wondering if anyone was in the street, she walked to the window and looked out. There was no one up except for a man at the window of a neighboring apartment, both his hands to the glass, staring out. She opened her mouth to scream and stopped. The minutes ticked by.

Back in the bedroom, she sat on the edge of the bed and waited for Jimmy to stir. "What happened to Benny?"

"Go back to sleep," he groaned.

"I need to know."

He pushed up and looked around before he saw the dried blood on the palms of his hands. "What the fuck?"

"Benny's dead."

Jimmy put his head in his hands. "Christ. What happened?"

"You killed him?"

"Lemme think. I can't think." They sat in silence. "My head's killing me." He looked thinner in the light and pale. Diseased. "What I remember is being pulled in by some sound, must have been a waking dream, like crazy squawking. I followed it to the kitchen and it grew, this noise. It got louder. It just kept on coming, I had to make it stop." His eyes, unfocused as a dog's, avoided hers.

It was his story. The cool air washed over her like water. She folded her arms around her torso and imagined lying at the bottom of a lake, wings wrapped around her body. She fell back on the bed. Benny was innocent. He wasn't bad and neither was she.

"Don't cry," Jimmy said.

She listened to the bedsprings give as he got up. She listened as he crossed the room to the bathroom, urinated, washed his hands and dressed. She heard him say something, something about Salazar being the lucky one, then she heard him open the door. Close it. Footsteps in the hall. Then nothing.

The world wasn't even up yet, hadn't had its coffee. She jerked up.

Where are you, little dark-eyed Junco? White-winged Crossbill? In

response, she heard the sound of their wings stirring, flapping, and beating against the air. *Fly, fly*, she cried. *It's no longer safe*. She left the bed and ran to the kitchen. She watched from the window as Jimmy stepped off the curb and into the road. Even from that distance, she saw the defeat in the set of his shoulders. As it began to rain, he turned up the collar of his jacket, set his black beret squarely on his head then took off running in the direction of the bus stop. And as he ran, he resembled her father, but only for a moment, then he was made of undulating lines of water as rain hit the glass, leaving him distorted and dissolving.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Susan H. Maurer has six little books, and her full length *PERFECT DARK* is published by Ungovernable Press. She has been published in 15 countries and received her fifth Pushcart nomination from *Minnetonka Review*.

Carolyn Moore's poetry has garnered over sixty awards and honors, including the New Millennium Writing Prize, the Foley Poetry Award, and the C. Hamilton Bailey Fellowship from Literary Arts, Inc. Each of her three chapbooks won its respective competition, as has her first full-length collection, *Instructions for Traveling Light*, to be published in 2012 by Deep Bowl Press. After years of teaching at Humboldt State University (Arcata, CA), Moore is at last able to function as a freelance writer and researcher working out of the last vestige of the family farm in Tigard, Oregon.

Travis Mossotti is currently a lecturer at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and his poetry continues to appear widely. His poem "Decampment" (winter 2010 issue of *Southern Humanities Review*) has recently been adapted to screen as an animated short film (www.decampment.com).

Mark Neely's poems have appeared in *Boulevard*, *DIAGRAM*, *Indiana Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Salt Hill*, and elsewhere. His chapbook, *Four of Kind*, won the Concrete Wolf chapbook contest. He teaches at Ball State University and is the editor of *The Broken Plate*. Mark lives in Muncie, Indiana with his wife, writer Jill Christman, and their two children. His website is markneely.com.

Jack Ridl's *Broken Symmetry* (Wayne State University Press) was co-recipient of The Society of Midland Authors' book award for 2006.

His collection *Losing Season* (CavanKerry Press) follows a small town through a long winter and a long season with its losing high school basketball team. Ridl and Peter Schakel are co-authors of *Approaching Literature* (Bedford/St. Martin's Press).

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro's novel, *Miriam the Medium* (Simon & Schuster) was nominated for the Harold U. Ribelow Award. She has published in *NYT* (Lives), *Newsweek*, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in poetry. She teaches writing at UCLA Extension.

Shirley Sullivan attended graduate school at the University of Texas at El Paso. After a lifetime in the city, she and her husband moved to a farm in New Mexico, which they share with the coyotes, quail, cottontails, and all the wandering spirits that inhabit the region. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Fourth River*, *Quiddity International Literary Journal*, *Pisgah*, *Sou'wester*, *DUCTS*, *Salt River Review*, *The Talon Magazine*, *Concho River Review*, *The Chaffin Journal*, and *Writing on the Wind: An Anthology of West Texas Writers*. She was a finalist in a 2008 fiction contest with *Blue Mesa Review*.

David Starkey is the Poet Laureate of Santa Barbara and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Santa Barbara City College. His most recent full-length collection of poetry is *A Few Things You Should Know about the Weasel* (Biblioasis, 2010).

As a Henry Hoyns Fellow in creative writing at the University of Virginia, Wanling Su is the Poetry Editor of *Meridian* and serves on the editorial board of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. She has a BA in Neuroscience from Mount Holyoke College.

Robert J. Tillett currently writes and teaches in Rochester, NY. His awards include a Bread Loaf Scholarship, and his work has appeared in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Coe*

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Review, Pearl, Poetry Northwest, Red Wheelbarrow, River Oak Review, Southern Indiana Review, and other magazines.

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 has recently appeared in *Crab Creek Review, Pebble Lake Review, Arsenic Lobster*, and *Harpur Palate*.

William Varner's work has appeared in *Boston Review, The Cincinnati Review, Vallum, Green Mountains Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, The Greensboro Review, Poet Lore*, and others. In 2010 he placed third in the Erskine J. Prize from *Smartish Pace*.

Thom Ward is a poet, creative writing teacher, and editor. He has published five collections of poetry. His latest collection, *Etcetera's Mistress* is forthcoming from Accents Publishing. His vices include golf, martinis, and reading.

Francine Witte lives in NYC. She received her MA from SUNY Binghamton and her MFA from Vermont College. Her flash fiction chapbook, *The Wind Twirls Everything*, was published by MuscleHead Press. She is the winner of the Thomas A. Wilhelmus Award in fiction from Ropewalk Press, and her chapbook, *Cold June* is forthcoming. Her poetry chapbook, *First Rain* was published Summer 2009 by Pecan Grove Press. She is a high school English teacher.

Catherine Woodard lives and plays basketball in NYC, was a journalist and president of Artists Space, and is on the Poetry Society of America centennial committee. More poems about a Southern family miming Egyptian death rituals are in *Poet Lore, Southern Poetry Review, Pisgah Review, RHINO*, and other journals. Woodard curates *SeePoemsHear* and is working to return *Poetry in Motion* to the NYC subways.

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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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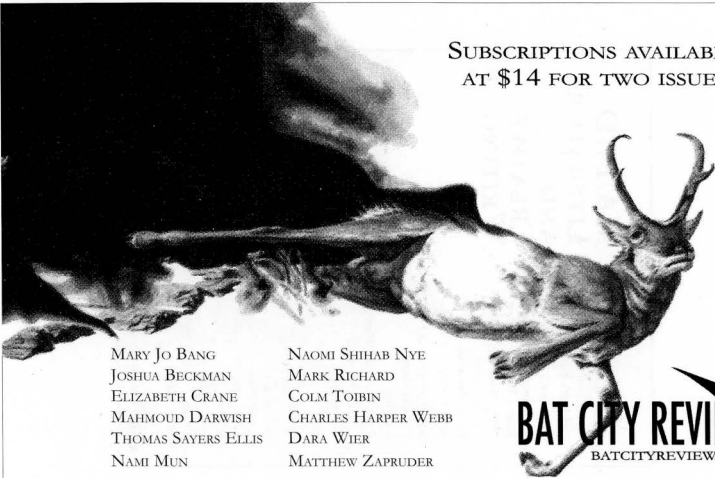
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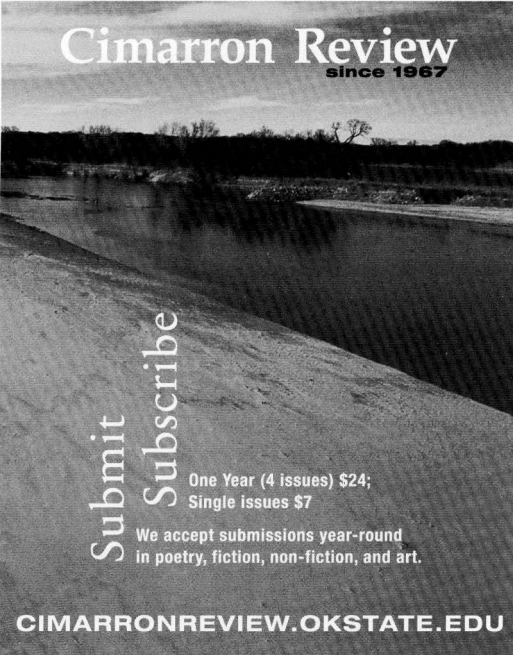
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