

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 12 Issue 1, Summer & Fall 2012

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**BINGHAMTON
UNIVERSITY**

HARPUR PALATE

**SUMMER
& FALL**

**BINGHAMTON,
NEW YORK**

Vol 12 No 1

Published by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB), 2012



HARPUR PALATE

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ANOTHER COUNTRY

JUDY BEBELAAR

The body in this mechanical bed
is not my body, the mind is not mine either—
a specimen in ether, a was-brain in a was-body
that used to dance.

This is another country.

I've been in one like it once or twice,
bright, murky, somewhere, nowhere.

Out there, from the land of the well, visitors pass by
and can't help but peer into these sickrooms,
rubberneckers at our accidents.

It's natural. I've done the same.

Out there, beyond those who gaze in at us, buildings, hills and
trees, sky.

It's good to look. I leave my curtains open.

Elroy, I've named him, is my constant companion,
with his crown of stainless steel hooks,
his translucent bags, his warning beeps and lights.
I'd like to walk out with the well people,
but this silly gown, and Elroy.

Sometime in the long night
of clatters, of lights and thermometers,
somewhere in a nearby room,
a woman wails her loss.
The body in that metal bed was all she had.
All of us—the well, the unwell, the dying—
are silent. We listen; we know.
She knows, but rails against her knowledge,
long and hard, in undulating waves,
until she too joins the silence.

A sluggish struggle continues in the body-not-me.
The not-mind tries to track it, indolent, impotent.
Sleep comes and goes and comes
until early light filters through the windows.

Men and women in green, smiling, gather at the foot of my bent bed.
They are from the country of the well. Aren't doctors always well?
I don't speak their language, can't remember the important question
before they are gone.

Enter Tenzin, who has never been to her Tibetan homeland.
Every country is yet another country but she makes herself at home,
though she complains she can't just borrow an egg where she lives now,
and people don't just drop by to eat.
Tenzin comes in and dispels the darkness. The room crackles with her
laugh.
They didn't tell you why the antibiotic was changed?
They have to tell you. You need to know. I'll find out. You need a vase?
I'll find one. I'll call the doctor. I'll look it up.
She clicks furiously on the computer. *Ha! That's it!*

Tenzin is indomitable. I'm catching it.
Elroy, come on. We're going out there. I don't care if they stare
at the tubes from under my gown up to your silly crown.

So we go out into the corridor: sad or serious men
hunkering over food that smells strange to my hospital nose,
my stomach three days empty;
a group of women sit on folding chairs and talk,
empathy written on their shadowed faces.

And I know there is no answer,
just negotiation—between the chemical dripping
and my body's response; the something not-me
that's built a nest for itself,
and the part of me trying to get rid of it.

On my side too: friends,
the man in the lab who laughed and flirted,
my cat who looks straight into my eyes with trust,
my husband who's exhausted with worry, who doesn't give up
with his new ideas (the psychic nutritionist, an MRI instead of a CT scan),
dumb luck, Tenzin,
and my own determination.

Let's go, Elroy.

IN JOSAPHAT'S VALLEY

BY

J.A. BERNSTEIN

"I will gather together all nations and bring them down into Josaphat's Valley, and I will plead with them there for my people, and for my inheritance Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations."

—Joel 3:2

The man who shot the Arab last week is eating a tuna sandwich. He's not a man, properly—maybe twenty-years-old, and of the guys in our unit—a company of Israeli Border Police conscripts, stationed inside the West Bank—he's most definably a boy. Boris shouts a lot, argues profoundly, talks with his hands, pounds on the door, and can't do anything without an incredible amount of aggression, such as unplugging the cord from a toaster.

Earlier today, while manning a checkpoint, he began flirting with a co-serving female soldier, and she must have been so repulsed by him that she didn't mind talking to him.

He was smoking profusely, continually taunting her, and slapping her shoulder—what women often refer to as “being an asshole” in men who are muscular. Boris is not muscular. He has a small, sagging paunch—unusual for men on the line—and hair in odd places, including his ears. His nose bridges inward, lending him a stereotypically Jewish appearance. He looks like a falcon.

Most people on this base know better than to take Boris seriously. He's routinely referred to as “son-of-a-bitch,” “whore,” and a variety of swearwords in Russian, which the Israelis, for him, somehow know. Currently, he's chewing a mouthful

of tuna, lounging on his bunk in the Beit Mochelle Outpost, a towering, sandbag-studded building that sits high above the town of Abu Dis, inside the Occupied Territories. The Golden Dome shimmers below, beyond an endless warren of poured cement homes commonly known as East Jerusalem. It's just before dark on this, a Saturday, January 17, 2009. I myself am a reservist in the army, as well as American-born, and I've been attached to the base for about a month.

Three weeks ago, a war broke out in Gaza, about 60km southeast of here, after Hamas and other militants refused to stop lobbing shells into Israel. The Israeli Army responded with a ground-based incursion that has since been entitled "Cast Lead." Our company is not in it directly; we've been providing support, quelling protests that have flared throughout the West Bank, particularly in and around East Jerusalem.

Last week, at one of these protests, a patrol from our company opened fire at close range, using rubber-coated bullets, or *gummim* in Hebrew. One of the Arab demonstrators was hit in the head and, according to the rumors, later died in the hospital. No one knows

for certain who shot him, though the prime suspect, by all accounts, seems to be Boris.

"Do you know if these can kill?" I ask him, holding a couple of gummim, trying to gauge his response.

"Yes, they can kill."

"And these were what were used to shoot the Arab last week?"

"Which Arab?"

"You know, the one who died?"

He gives a vexed stare, hesitates a few seconds before speaking. "Which Arab?"

"The Arab who died. You know, the one who was shot in the head?" Everyone on the base has been discussing it.

No, he implies by tilting his head and arching his black, furry brow.

"You know, gummim in the head." I point to my forehead.

"Ah yes," Boris says. "No, he is not dead yet. And yes, it is what you have here."

"But I heard the Arab died?"

"No, he is in hospital. Not in good condition."

"You know what happened to him, then?"

"Of course I know. I saw it happen."

"You were there at the time?"

"Yes," Boris says. "We shot him."

"You were the one who shot him?"

"Yes."

It's not clear if he's lying. Something suggests that he isn't, however: the artfulness of his gestures, combined with the fact that he plausibly doesn't know the Arab has died, as if no one has bothered to tell him. "I heard he was dead, though."

"Who?"

"The Arab."

"No. He is not dead."

Later that evening, as we're sweeping up the floor of our room, a tiny, white cell that three of us share, I ask him how he feels about killing.

"It's our job," he responds. "It's why we are here."

He doesn't bat an eye as he says it. He has that calm self-possession that cowboys often muster in movies, though it's rarely seen in actual soldiers.

Boris is considered something of a lone wolf on this base. He's on a first-name basis with the Captain, whom the other men fear, and regularly jokes with him at briefings while other men stare on in silence.

And Boris, despite his boyish demeanor, has a certain confidence to him, a certain assuredness to his role, such that no one would question his faith behind the trigger.

"You know, there are a lot of places to go in the army. And many of them are difficult," he explains. "They do some more training. But the Border Police units, they have it the hardest, because they're not in an open setting, not in the desert. They fight among buildings."

"This is harder?"

"It's harder psychologically," he says, and he points to his head.

Upon drafting, most 18-year-olds in Israel are given their choice of places to serve. While the bulk of them enter the military, a select few filter into the Border Police, which has always had a reputation for attracting new immigrants, as well as seedier elements and thugs.

Any quick search on the internet will reveal a medley of videos documenting the unit's brutality.

In one now-notorious incident, which was captured on film in 2008, several Border Policemen detained a young Palestinian and forced him to repeatedly slap his own face while reciting their unofficial anthem, which translates loosely as: "One hummus, one beans, I love you, the

Border Police.”

Other instances of prisoner abuse have been amply documented by human rights groups, including Israeli organizations like B’Tselem. In one 2002 incident, for which several troopers stood trial, a detained Palestinian was killed after being thrown from a moving vehicle. In another, in 2004, a 13-year-old boy was tied to the hood of a Jeep for use as a human shield. More broadly, the unit has always commanded something between respect and horror within Israeli society.

While the unit’s task has generally been construed as defending Israel’s borders—our base in fact straddles the Green Line, the 1967 stalemate line demarcating the West Bank from Israel proper—the unit’s role has evolved over the years from law enforcement to counter-terror. In fact, most of the commanders hail from army units, and the equipment is largely the same, as is most of the training.

Like most bases in Israel, ours is both strategically and historically situated, in this case, along the Jerusalem seam line. A two-story, cement-beam wall, part of Israel’s “Security Barrier,” runs adjacent to the base’s perimeter, and beyond

the sloped hill sits Josaphat’s Valley, where, according to Jewish eschatology, the final battle between Israel and the gentiles will transpire. There, says the Bible, “all the nations will be gathered,” and mankind will be ultimately judged.

Certainly, the nation-gathering has started. Of the 64 men on our base, the bulk are Mizrahim (Middle Eastern Jews) or arrivals from ex-Soviet states. Boris is both. He came from Dagestan at age seven, and he’s proud of his Kavkazi (Caucasus-region) heritage. He also shares a bunk with a friend of his, a younger Ethiopian trooper, whom he openly describes as a “nigger”—although it’s unclear whether that means the same thing in his native tongue.

At the checkpoint earlier, while flirting with the female soldier, Boris counted on his hand for her all the languages he could speak: Hebrew, French, German, Russian, and English. When she tried speaking to him in French, though, he didn’t answer. Strangely, Boris’ mattress is unadorned. It features a single grey blanket, which appears to be his sole personal possession, apart from his Discman and clothes, which are neatly stowed away in his locker. His weapon, an M16A1, is also free from the

embellishments that other men normally apply—no shiny handguard, new buttstock, grooved pistol grip or light. He's been serving on the line for a year and four months, and he doesn't seem to mind it, unlike the others, who more or less dread this existence. He also doesn't mind standing guard at the checkpoints, since he rarely bothers with the Arabs—will not stop to chat with them, as others do—and prefers the lone company of soldiers, particularly females.

Tonight, as he stumbles in from guard, he begins rearranging his boots by his bed, along with his rifle and clips, meticulously lining them up. "Order, order, first thing is order. Who made this mess?" he exclaims.

Later, when he's asked what he wants to do after the army, he sticks his lighter in his Pall Malls, hikes up his pants, and says, "Travel. You know vacation. France and then Greece. Plus, definitely Rome." After that, he'll see what work comes his way, but he's looking for something in security.

"Nothing small-time," he says. "The big stuff. I'll do a course or two"—he picks his balls as he says this, brushes his nose—"and get something that's forty sheks an

hour, not twenty-four. Something important," he says, "like a dance bar. You know 'dance bar' in English?"

He's also interested in psychology, and he says he'd like to get a degree in that, if security doesn't pan out.

"Why psychology?"

He doesn't understand the question.

"I don't like math, can't do it," he says. "But anyone can do psychology if they just sit down and read the book. You have to sit on your ass for a long time, but if you're determined enough, if you have enough will, you can do it. This is the key to life," he explains as he hangs up his fatigues. He's changed into a thin pair of shorts, which have a floral, red pattern and don't do a lot for his waist. Suddenly, he swats at a moth, which he somehow captures mid-air, and crushes the bug with his boot.

Soon, a Russian named Alexei strolls in, cowed in a black, hooded sweatshirt emblazoned with the unit's insignia—a skull and grim reaper. The two steal away for a smoke. Then Boris comes back, picking his eye, scratching his stomach. He picks up his phone and dials up his mother, with whom

he's been talking regularly—at least twice a day—since the Gaza War started. They discuss the rockets that are falling and he assures her, once again, that he's fine.

Earlier tonight, I was chatting with one of the reservists, a former artillery officer and 60-year-old Canadian émigré. Like me, he had volunteered for the reserves and was assigned to the Border Police, since its units are greatly understaffed. "Do you know what the main difference is between soldiers and officers?" he asked. "Soldiers can never be trusted." Of course, when he heard about the Arab who had purportedly died, he raced over to the Control Room and checked the patrol sheets, determining where he had been the night of the protest and whether he might have fired. He hadn't, it turned out, though he didn't seem terribly relieved.

The others on this base have all speculated a bit as to who might have shot the Arab, rehearsing their stories. Most guys deny it—except Boris, of course, who's plainly out to take credit.

The next night, while waiting for dinner, I ask Boris what kind of girl he wants to marry. He says a Kavkazi.

"Why?"

"Because they're not bitches," he explains. "Pure in the head. How you say...virgin?"

He says he doesn't like blonde girls, because they "have nothing upstairs" and "only want money."

"What about an Ethiopian girl?"

"No way. They're good for fucking"—he pounds his fist back and forth—"but if I marry one, what would I say to my mother? Understand, Ethiopians and Kavkazim, they don't get along well." He looks up for a second. "And what would I tell people when they see my son? He's half-white, like a Choco [an Israeli chocolate milk drink]? I do not need that." He scratches his head and sets his gun down on a bed.

"What about an Arab? A Palestinian girl?"

"I would kill her," he answers. "Because that's my job." He ambles to his locker.

"What about a Christian?"

"I would have to convert her." He starts pounding his fist again.

Later, he says he likes Latino girls, because they have "big asses," and while he thinks Swedish girls are pretty, they're also

sharmutot—Arabic for “whores.” Later, when asked if he had a Bar Mitzvah, he says that there were six-hundred people in attendance, mostly friends and family. “All the Kavkazim,” he explains. He also likes discussing the mafia and which Special Forces he admires (Russian, American, and Israeli).

Suddenly, the First Sergeant stomps in and tells Boris to go clean the weightroom after eating. When the First Sergeant leaves, though, Boris explains that there will be two Ethiopians with him.

“They’ll wash the floors and do mopping.” He rubs his hands together briskly then claps. “Kavkazim don’t do this,” he says. “Kavkazim do not do cleaning.” Then he starts playing a game on his cellphone, something with ringing explosions.

The men of Beit Mochelle face a predicament common to men serving in occupational forces: the war is continual with them, yet never predictable or concentrated. Throughout the past month, at least two dozen attacks have been staged in and around the Beit Mochelle outpost, mostly with firebombs and small incendiary devices. None of the troops have been injured. One night, however, at around two a.m.,

while a vaporous rain skitters down, I’m standing guard at a lookout on the roof, facing down the base’s main gates. An unfinished building, comprised of tall slabs of cement and littered with trash, stands across the street from us. Since Arabs have tried to take refuge in it previously while mounting attacks, the ground floors have been sealed with barbed wire.

Nevertheless, part of my job at this post is to regularly shine an overhead search beam inside of the building’s eight floors, searching for any intruders. Having never been a terribly diligent soldier, I drift in and out of sleep, when I’m suddenly awoken by an explosion of gunshots. The noise is incredibly loud, and it sputters from the gates down below, where two more men are on guard. The radio gargles something incoherent, and soon there is echoing silence. The night is pure black.

I’m crouching on the floor, feeling my own heartbeat, watching my breath cloud the glass, when the radio announces there has been a shooting attack. Dozens of troopers run out from the barracks, some clad in boxer shorts, cradling guns, and mount the steel ladders of the roof or crawl into nests behind

guardblocks. Thirty minutes later, by which point the mist has turned to full rain and the air has become shiveringly cold (even though everyone's sweating), the radio control room explains that a small car drove up south of our base and opened fire on a neighboring post. Reportedly, an Arab stepped out, produced a Kalashnikov, and fired off a full magazine at close range at two sentries.

Amazingly, neither was hit, and the Arabs drove off in the car.

A search party's launched, though they turn up nothing. A few neighboring homes are searched, though, as usual, nothing is discovered, and the attackers return to the warren from which they ascended. It's just before dawn, and a blue-orange light settles in behind the cliffs of Jahalin.

Evidently, these kinds of attacks are frequent on the base. None of the men appear scared, at least not openly. Inside the base, Boris is sweeping a floor. As I come back, soaked in a poncho, he offers me tea and a smoke.

The next night, our company is set to conduct an arrest inside the town of Jahalin, a small Arab village located east of our base. We set out in four Sufim, armored green Jeeps,

16 men in all, winding through the night's dripping streets. The tall buildings are silent, their green shutters raised, though a few rocks begin to clank on our roof. The Jeeps take a circuitous path to get there, as usual, in an effort to vary our route.

Twenty minutes later, as we're feeling slightly sick, our Jeep grumbles to a halt by a building.

"Out-out-out" shouts a sergeant. We descend.

Branching off into groups, eight men storm the front staircase of a building, entering the two-story home. Four more guard the Jeep and the streetside, while my patrol scrambles around to the back.

We crouch inside a dark alley, pointing our guns all around, panting and sweating; we've arrived at a small metal gate. The Sergeant removes a pair of cutters and goes to work snipping a lock. There's screaming in the building beside us. Above us, between the twin roofs, a silent moon hovers. It's cold.

We scurry into a backyard and quickly scour the lawn, darting between some shrub lemon trees, watching for anything that moves. The Sergeant, who's been serving for eight years, having chosen to sign on for extra, appears utterly

professional—fearless and calm—as he scampers through a garden, radioing troops in the house. His main concern is friendly-fire, though it isn't lost on him that several thousand Arabs are wide awake and fully attuned to our presence.

Finally, the radio signals that the suspect's been seized, and we scuttle back to the front. Inside the main courtyard, two Arabs are perched on the steps, screaming at us in Arabic. I point my gun at one's head. He continues shouting "*kus uhtak*"—your sister's cunt—while his relative is thrown in our truck. We drive away. The prisoner wears a cloth on his head, a band of striped flannelette, which covers his eyes. He's silent as we move, bounding through the hills to the north.

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at a police station inside Ma'ale Adumim, a Jewish settlement northeast of Jerusalem, inside the West Bank. A few water towers scrape the pink sky, and our patrol group waits beside the limestone-brick station, seated on a bench. The prisoner's led down to a picnic table. His hands are tied with a bind, and he bobs back and forth, shaking, while a couple blow smoke past his forehead. One, a Russian named Slava, asks me if they get a

lot of snow in Los Angeles, where I've told him I'm from.

Nobody taunts or slaps the prisoner, as sometimes happens on our base; the men simply want to go back and get sleep. Most have been doing six-six shifts for the past twenty days—that is, six hours of guarding, six hours of rest, interspersed with shifts for arrests, ambushes, patrols, and rote cleaning.

Most look forward to arrests, since they offer excitement and a break from routine. Tonight, though, everyone's groggy. Talk has centered around an officer from the Kfir Brigade who was killed down in Gaza, a Russian, whom several troops knew.

As we wait around for a major to arrive, who will apparently question the prisoner, he asks if he can go to the bathroom. Another man and I offer to take him, leading him out by the hands and through the sliding glass doors of the police station. The station has an automatic polisher for shoes and a grimy glass fish tank that glows. The clerk is half-awake. "In there." She points to the bathroom.

Inside the stall, we unbutton the prisoner's black jeans and slide them down to his waist. This is one

of the less glamorous parts of serving. He's wearing green "Superman" briefs. He says he can't go, though, not while he's blinded. We decide to remove the white cloth from his eyes. As we slide it down, we can see that this prisoner is fourteen, or younger. The kid's never shaved. Slowly, his blue eyes adjust to the light, furiously blinking. We can see that he has cried and is scared, though he's no longer shaking.

It isn't clear what the kid's done.

Half-an-hour later, he's led off for questioning, and we never see him again.

Throughout the course of the month, thousands will be arrested, and over thirteen-hundred will be killed, the bulk of them in Gaza. Our company claims two of these casualties. One, who hurls a firebomb at a foot patrol next to our base, is hit with a shot in the gut and bleeds to death painfully while waiting for an ambulance to arrive. The other, the unarmed protester, is said to have been killed, although by whom and just how are unclear. His death is not reported in the papers, though the rumors continue to abound.

Back at the Beit Mochelle Outpost, the night before my

departure from the base and return to life as a civilian, Boris is cleaning the floors inside of a double-wide trailer, which functions as our company mess. He's picking up cabbage from the floor, and when I tell him that I haven't eaten yet, having come back late from guard, he shovels out a plate of spaghetti and tells me to sit and enjoy.

We're alone in this trailer, and beyond us, a space heater hums. It's just after ten, and the moon is aglow in the sky. It's not clear if he feels any remorse—if anyone does—or what will soon come of this land.

A few minutes later, Boris looks up from the end of the room, a mop in his hand, a smoke dangling off of his lips. "You okay?" he asks me.

"I'm fine."

THE MAGICIAN

LENA BERTONE

THE MAGICIAN CALLS UPON
THE SPIRITS OF THE OTHER WORLD
TO ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS
\$2 FOR YES, \$1 FOR NO

THE MAGICIAN PRESENTS
ORMANDO, THE LONELIEST MONKEY
IN THE TINIEST CAGE
HE LICKS HIS OWN TEARS

THE MAGICIAN REQUIRES
YOUR DEVOUT ATTENTION
AND UNGUARDED SENSE OF WONDER
LEAVE WALLETS AT THE DOOR

Are there any hungry boys in the audience? The Magician asked. Many boys raised their hands.

I want the hungriest boys, The Magician said. Who among you are the hungriest?

Boys fought and pushed with thin arms until just three were onstage.

I haven't eaten in days, the first said.

I eat my own fingernails, the second said, and my sister's, too.

The third said, it's lucky that I have no food to eat because my teeth are too soft and rotten to chew it.

You win, The Magician said. Now I wonder if anyone sees that bit of black bread on that high shelf?

The boys ran for the bread. The audience cheered. When they reached it, a trapdoor opened like a gaping mouth beneath them and they all fell through. The audience laughed and laughed.

Serves you right! The Magician said, for trying to steal my bread.

Behind this mirror, The Magician said, stands either a beautiful girl or my wife.

Laughter!

That's not funny, said a young woman with a hooked nose and a weak chin.

I like a girl with spirit and a great rack, The Magician said. He gave her his hand and she stepped onstage. She tried to look behind the mirror.

That's not polite, dear, The Magician said, putting his hand on her waist.

She pushed it away. How am I supposed to see who's back there?

Let's have a chat first, The Magician said, taking her wrist and rubbing her rump.

She tried to wrench her arm free. Let go of me, she said, or I'll kick your mirror down.

She kicked it, and it cracked into many pieces.

You awful, ugly thing, The Magician said. You are very much like my wife.

He slapped her flat bottom.

Laughter!

In these lean, postwar times, The Magician said, we must sustain ourselves with whatever we have on hand. A volunteer?

A woman shoved her boy onstage. He tripped on the broken sole of his shoe. He's ungrateful, his mother said.

The Magician directed the boy to sit on a bench and showed him the swing of his pocket watch. He turned to the audience. Hypnosis! he said.

Soon the boy was cutting the sole of his shoe with a fork and knife. He dressed the pieces with oil and vinegar, salt and pepper. Delicately, he savored every bite that entered his mouth, chewing each one almost endlessly.

Delicious, he said. The best roast beef I've ever had. Better even than my mother's.

A miracle, his mother said tearfully.

A line of people formed to the back of the theater.

THE MAGICIAN PRESENTS
POPO, THE OLDEST MAN ALIVE
WEARING THE OLDEST UNDERWEAR
APPROACH AT YOUR OWN RISK

THE MAGICIAN PRESENTS
THE AMAZING STORGA
THE HORSE THAT HAS NOT EATEN IN WEEKS
LIVE SHOWINGS TODAY ONLY

THE MAGICIAN PRESENTS
MAGIC BEANS BY THE DOZEN
RESULTS GUARANTEED
CASH ONLY, NO REFUNDS

He took off his top hat and displayed it, inside out, to the audience. He reached in with his arm, up to the elbow and pulled out a carrot, tossed it backstage. He reached in again, up to the elbow, to the shoulder, and wrestled out a lean white rabbit by its ears and held it over his head.

Applause!

The rabbit squirmed and kicked its long feet.

What are you going to do with that rabbit? A husky woman asked.

I don't know yet, The Magician said. Are you making an offer? I'll skin it and fry it, she said, if I can have half.

Let's make a deal, The Magician said. I'll take it all but you can have the hat.

And what will I do with the hat? the woman shrieked.

Endless rabbits, The Magician explained. He dropped the rabbit back into the hat. It disappeared into the black.

No deal, the woman said.

Even the most dirty and destitute among you deserve love, The Magician said.

The audience was incredulous. They wanted to be convinced.

Take, for example, this man, The Magician said, and presented them with the smelliest, vilest creature possible, retrieved from a rescued garbage bag. His beard was wormy, his clothes fermented to his body. His rotten breath filled the theater. The clean poor swooned with disgust.

Even this man, The Magician said, has a contribution to make. This man is just like you.

Kill him! a child cried out.

The stench—a woman sobbed.

The Magician led the silent, crusty man to sit in a chair center stage. The grime on the man's face, like heavy makeup, absorbed the spotlight. The Magician pulled quarters from the man's ear and spun them into a bowl: tin for maximum sound effect. They spilled like water from The Magician's hand. Applause!

As The Magician massaged quarters from the beggar's filthy ear, an old man gimped onstage.

What do you want, Old Man? Can you not see that I'm busy?

No, I can't, said the old man. He used his cane to feel his way

toward the spotlight. He followed the sound of clinking coins. Stay away from my money, Old Man.

He moved to the other ear, which released coins like a fountain. The old man, with his rigid gait, continued his approach. The Magician slid out his fancy curled shoe and tripped the old man, who fell on his hip, his cane launching into the air, pennies spilling from his pocket.

I'm blind! he said. I want you to heal me.

The Magician caught the cane and twirled it. His white teeth glinted in the light.

Do I look like a healer to you? He picked up the pennies and threw them into the crowd.

THE MAGICIAN PRESENTS BOOFO THE GIANT HIDE YOUR CHILDREN

The Magician pulled an invisible string and released a noose from the rafters, climbed an invisible stepstool and placed the rope around his neck.

Stop! yelled an old woman. What are you trying to do? You'll hurt yourself.

Just testing the rope, Mother, The Magician said. Would you like to test it in my stead?

The old woman waggled toward the stage, her thick hips shifting with difficulty.

Is that really your mother? murmurers in the crowd asked.

The Magician held both his hands out to the woman. She took them and stepped first onstage, then onto the unseeable platform beneath the noose. Her feet, beneath her long dress, were swollen around her slippers.

Who but a mother, The Magician asked, would be this stupid? Mother, he said: The noose. The old woman slipped it around her neck.

And now I present—The Magician swirled his cape—appearing for the first time in public since her tragic accident: Lucintha, the dog-faced girl.

He swirled his cape again and again. Whorls of sawdust cycloned at his feet. The audience looked, mesmerized by the whoosh and clap. His feet danced in the dust. The light onstage dimmed. They all squinted to see the movement.

The blind man said: but where is the girl? His voice was absorbed in the group's shallow breathing.

The Magician swirled his cape.

I paid my ticket, the blind man said. Where is the girl?

Shut up, Old Man, The Magician said. I'm working.

I want to see the girl, he said. I want to see her with my hands.

The Magician swirled his cape furiously and then drew it up, revealing behind him, clutching at his backside, a tiny girl with the head of a dog: long snout, big brown eyes, pointy ears. A German shepherd.

The audience gasped.

Is it a mask? they asked. A trick? An illusion?

No, the Magician said. It was an accident. It was an accident of birth.

The tiny girl cowered behind the cape. When the Magician coaxed her snout, she snapped at him with long white teeth and grimaced. She hid her face with her girl hands and whimpered.

Leave the girl alone, they said. What have you done to her? Small girls gathered in the pit. They reached out their hands to the tiny girl with the head of a dog. Come with us, they said. The Magician pushed her off his cape. The tiny girl slid across the stage. See what you've done? he said. You've made them think poorly of me, Dog Girl. You've made them misunderstand, Dog Brain. Now: show us all a happy dance.

The boos and shouts quieted as the tiny girl stood and tapped out a gleeful dance, arms and fingertips outstretched as her

heels and toes sang in speedy, sprightly snaps on the hollow wooden ground. There was no doubt, the way her fingers and wrists flicked to the music in her head, that she was a happy dog-child.

SUICIDE MISSION

BRAD BISIO

With crazed crack eyes,
he boards the bus
from the back entrance.
The hatchet in his hand hangs at his side.
The driver sees all in her rear-view mirror
just another day on the route.

The man sits at the first seat he sights
next to a woman whose wide-ass spread
hangs over into the space next to her.
There's still more than enough room
for his frail frame, clothed with filth-caked cloth.
His lips are parted enough to see
a tooth missing and rotting teeth.

When the bus rolls on,
the man lowers his gray-bearded chin
to check the polished blade. He scrapes
the back of a fingernail against its edge.
White shavings like crushed crystal
fall to his forearm on the tattooed wings,
"171st Airborne" scrolled above them.

The bus halts blocks before
the next stop. Two of San Francisco's
finest enter with their belts loaded:
cuffs, club, holstered steel, a second clip.
They instruct each row to exit
behind them as they walk past.

We are all that remain—three of us
in the last few rows, plus
the woman next to the bearded man.
The frontman gives his orders,
but The Beard ignores him.
The same man draws his nine-millimeter,
extends stiffened arms and repeats himself.

Without taking his eyes off the gun, The Beard
unleashes a backhand swing
like an uncoiled spring. The woman's head
falls against the window, hanging
from the remaining tendons of her neck.
The carotid spurt reaches my lap.
I cringe, the shot echoing
throughout the bus.

A BORROWED CHILDHOOD MEMORY, NEW YORK CITY, 1923

**MARK JAY
BREWIN, JR.**

—for Dan Elkin

Stoop banisters and fence chains, fire escapes
and car fenders all held the June heat like a fireplace
poker left in the coals. Watery heat-fumes
rising from the fresh-tarred parking lot.
Fescue sprouting through cracks in the curb,
the feathery tips drooping and bobbing
in the humid gusts lagging down the street.

For a nickel apiece, we packed hatboxes
full of praying mantises—pencil-holes
punched in the lid, wilting grass blades—watched
their rocking crawl, one over top of the other.
Spiked forelegs hooked on rotting cords of beef fat
baited on sewing thread we drug along the bottom:
their hunger saved for whatever looks alive.

BALL AND CHAIN

**ANHVU
BUCHANAN**

He is the bloodhound on my trail. Hunts after me clippers in hand if I haven't returned for dinner. I'm waiting for my escape plan to dry. I never wanted to pollute this neighborhood with my operas. The hatchet in his grin creeps closer. This is the opposite of picnic. There's no one left for me to barter my earlobes to. He finds me skipping stones across the lawn. He's chained me to the table. This isn't a meal but the interrogation I always knew would happen. My mouth stuffed full of metal. He tells me to warm my hands with the bacon he's brought. I'm confessing to the kitchen sink. I'm stalling until my left cheek feels naïve again. He tacks my hair to the wall and goes to check the mail. How can I ever be giddy about silverware? The smell of monkey bars lingers in my stomach and I'm counting up from one to warmer weather.

LOVE AS A POSTSCRIPT

JOSHUA BUTTS

Envious of someone's *Sketches of Spain*
I hear playing in the next building
I wonder how then to get through the day.
I get lazy, check email, then walk,
taking pictures of trees, power lines, road signs.
I walk past Bellows Lane and end up in town.
The pool is empty. The graveyard is full.
There's a grave for one Grace Happy.
At the Landau Grill a daughter and mother do life insurance:
"Mom, you have to have it. When you die
I won't be able to bury you."
A server puts a loaf of bread between them.
The daughter is poised over her wings and a pint
of regional beer. For the mother
it's clam chowder and a small Budweiser.
If it had been Italy, it would have been a Peroni
and I wouldn't have ordered a hamburger.
The mother gives a silent refusal. Trucks and cars pass
and I try to think like a cop, who would I pull over?
Last week a man set a barn fire
before robbing a bank and leaving a stolen dark
green Honda still running on Tanglewood.
My first day in town, I thought the law—local, sheriff, state—

would be looking for me driving to buy groceries.
There they were, parked under a canopied field line, car-to-car talking.
So I reverse it. Play it. Look at that gray-beard
with the load of car parts, or the kid, seventeen,
drumming the dash of his dark green Honda
with the tied-down trunk. That's just a *little* paranoia.
There's my great-grandfather in the Thirties not wanting
everyone to go in the car, so the family wouldn't all be killed at once.
That's just fear. That's just real fear, not even paranoia. But then
one day, out in the garage, escaping the family eye
the same man was able to fire his gun. Is that a change of plans,
a contradiction? Is that just going through with it?
The bank robber was clearly prepared to risk
much more than riding to town, buying groceries.
At lunch there was even a bit of risk. Out in the sun
people were drinking water and the fry grease needed changed.
The burger was under-seasoned, a non-meal then.
And there was a place on my glass that I remembered
not to touch. With a napkin I'd wiped an eyelash away.
And the daughter's pleading carried on:
"You are not thinking about Josh and me.
You have to. If you die I cannot bury you."
The mother had a tattoo—I'd noticed it as they sat down:
"Josh & Heather / P.S. / ♥ I Love You."

BLOB OF JELLY, SHRIMP IN MY BELLY

ELISSA CAHN

On the lemonade-soaked streets of the fair, we ignore vendors hawking fried dough and cheap jewelry. Just yesterday, we'd planned to eat funnel cakes, maybe shoot water into the mouths of clowns. Now Rob and I are barely speaking because this question mark hangs between us. Head to tail, it's apparently about two centimeters:

?

Blob of jelly, shrimp in my belly. Mushroom bloom, yolk and plume. The haphazard jam band on the makeshift stage is so loud it's hard to think. It's hard to think, anyway, which has nothing to do with the band. Rob keeps taking my hand. He asks if I want an ice cream, a stuffed dolphin, a pair of plastic earrings.

"I don't know," I say. I don't know. I don't know.

We pass a popcorn stand, and he steers me into the alley. By the dumpster, he presses a diamond of dubious value into my palm. I say thanks, either out loud or in my head. The ring won't fit over the second knuckle. Looks absurd sitting in the middle of my finger.

"I'm very confused," I say.

Rob sinks to his knees, brushes his lips against the growing knot in my stomach. He draws a breath, looks at me, and says "I want to get married. I want to marry you. I do."

I imagine myself in the future: nine weeks, nine months, nine years. Even then, the knot's still growing.



ALLISON CAMPBELL

Ampersand “per se.” Ampersand “and.”

Ampersands look like broken-legged number eights. Overweight question marks. Half pirates ready to arm-wrestle. Or round-backed babies finding out how, by pressing hands to floor, they can launch their feet up from the ground.

You dance across a floor constructed entirely of ampersands. You twirl and your skirt twirls and the ampersands expand themselves to keep up with your reach. When you leap, when you land the ampersands will be exactly at the level you left them. You keep time, but they allow you to keep it. You are light and ampersand is heavy. The music whispers, then picks back up.

Ampersand, a mouse, sneaks up around the corner of what would have been the last word and asserts itself like a smell, not pushy but unmistakably present.

Ampersand like smoke. Ampersand like the strings of a well-played violin. Ampersand, and the way you say it, leads me to believe you are hinting at something, even as you say goodbye.

The way one feels between a sleep’s dream and the dreaming

entered during real life [see DREAM]. The moment of eye-opening pause [see WAKE], when you recognize yourself, those seconds are ampersand. The everything between this and that.

It's clarity only that something has stopped [see entry on END] and something else is about to begin. Most of our ampersands are invisible, but some are marked by ceremony. Birth, birthdays, graduation, marriage, anniversaries, death—any time there is a marking of what has come before the moment and what is likely to follow can be considered a celebration of ampersand.

Someone wise may witness the ampersands operating all day, the moments between and connecting every observable moment. The space amid breaths that feels, if you catch it, the most like breathing.

The goal after the goal. And they lived happily every after and.

JULY 23, 2011

DOUG PAUL CASE

It was never safe
for us, dancing

(by which I mean
hip swiveling, chanting

no, no, no. . .
clapping, condemning

men that done us wrong)
around the kitchen,

screaming
notes, approximations

against rattling dishes—
bass high—before

daddy came home
from work, when he'd ask

about the noise &
about my feet, rocking

the fuck-me pumps
even his daughter

wasn't allowed to own.

THE SOONER'S SON

JOSEPH CELIZIC

He dreams of the Oklahoma fields where they used to live, bronze and blackened, the sun failing past distant hills. There's a continuous panic, never starting nor stopping. There's a force, a pressure behind him, but he does not turn around. Slowly, the horses come. They begin as shadows ambling over hills, gathering around him like water, surrounding him until there is no ground. He swears he can smell their bodies, feel their breath, even here in the dream. And they are watching him, waiting to see what he will do.

It's his father behind him and he does not move; his presence is enough. His father has the gun and the gun fires and a spray of bullets spins him like a stormed wind mane. They force him to face his father's menace, his eyes, the horses, his father, the horses.

He is dying in these dreams, always traveling from life to death, can feel the transformation even before the bullets hit. When he dies he enters a stasis, a soundless place, and he lies there as a witness permanently embedded in the ground. He watches the field, his father, the horses; he is dead and watching. He never vanishes, never fades away into space or fire or clouds. He remains a witness, here in his death, where he is somehow still alive.

The old sallow curtains in the boys' bedroom stirred when the Lincoln Navigator crunched onto the ranch's gravel driveway, the driver a formless conjecture behind the car's black windows until the opening of the door and his brash emergence into hot Kentucky June. The stranger moved quickly as if dodging the sunlight, and he circumvented the porch where the doorbell hung loosely by one screw. Eliot Coldfield could only glimpse the man's tan dress shirt, his hat and jeans, before he turned the corner of the house. He was heading to the backyard, to the barn where an old El Camino growled and sputtered, Mr. Coldfield beneath it cursing just as gruffly, and so Eliot followed through the house. At the kitchen, he propped himself on the sink and peered out the window, face half-hidden by the frame.

This ain't no monkey tree, Mrs. Coldfield said. She pulled him down by his shirt until he slid off the sink.

Who's he?

Who's who?

Man who pulled up.

Mrs. Coldfield shrugged. Someone for your father.

But what's he here for?

What are you here for, aside from bothering me with your questions?

Eliot climbed back up the sink and looked out the window. The man was standing at the barn's doublewide entry, sleeves rolled snug on his brazen hairy arms. Mr. Coldfield met him, wiped his gray hands on either side of his jeans. He was smiling thinly. With the El Camino dead, Eliot could almost hear their words through the glass.

Boy, you're begging for it.

Mrs. Coldfield yanked him down again. She blocked the sink with her body, her sturdy hips, and Eliot dodged them carefully, uncomfortable with their shape. She was rinsing plates from breakfast and the running water shushed the room.

He's here for Scram, ain't he?

Mrs. Coldfield didn't answer.

But Pa said they couldn't take him.

Things change.

How so?

On account of your father meeting some new folks at
Curly's. Said they can make it more feasible.

What's that mean?

Are you going to do something, Lee? Or are you planning
to sit and hassle me all day?

I don't want them to take Scram.

Mrs. Coldfield ripped the grocery list off the refrigerator.

The paper tore with a pop.

Here. Go down to the store and get me some cornmeal.

Make Buck do it.

Buck's out with that Abels girl. No telling when he'll be
back.

Eliot frowned. He didn't like when Buck went out with
Sarah Abels, didn't like having to hear about the things they
did together, where Buck said she let him touch her, the words
he used, the way he laughed almost like a mockery, a game he
was playing without her knowledge.

I want to watch over Scram.

Nonsense. You need to get out of the house. You can stop
by Matt Decker's on the way.

Eliot thought it over while pretending to read the list. He
remembered the hole of baby rabbits he and Matt had found
the day before and wondered if they were still there, their
small warm bodies, the downy fur that reminded him of great
white clouds that bulged like distant mountains, like towers of
heaven. "Kingdom clouds," their preacher called them.

Will he still be here when I get back?

Who?

Scram.

Mrs. Coldfield sighed heavily.

Come off it, Lee. They're not taking him today. But it's going to happen and you can't get upset about it. Dying's part of living. Lots of animals get slaughtered.

Scram's different.

No he ain't. Not anymore. Same as any other horse.

Eliot went quiet, sat that way for a long time. He eventually looked at the list in his hand, went to the kitchen where the newspaper was dismembered on the table like old gift-wrap, and dug for coupons. He found bargains for milk, broccoli and cooking spray, each on the list. In the kitchen, the running water stopped. He went back to see if his mother was gone, if he could get another look at the man in the hat before he left, but halfway there his mother cut him off and grabbed his wrist with her hard, wet fingers.

How many times I got to tell you? Coupons are for gritters. This family may be a lot of things, but we're not gritters.

He dropped the flimsy paper squares on the counter and Mrs. Coldfield snatched them—her hands like hawk feet—and threw them in the trash.

Take some pride in yourself, Lee. Don't you care what people think when they look at you? Your father's given you a good name and you carry it around wherever you go. Don't go dragging it through mud by making people think we need a handout.

Eliot looked in his mother's eyes. They were flat eyes, sagging in their sockets, and she looked like she thought he was the dumbest boy in the world. He considered what she said about his father's name, what her eyes said, and he realized she knew nothing. His father was a fool; even Eliot knew that. And the way Mrs. Coldfield spoke, as if she couldn't recognize something so obvious, as if she were willingly believing something she knew wasn't so, made him angry. He'd been feeling this way more often, a restive wildness rising up in his chest and hands, distinct from childhood rage, and it made him uncomfortable. But he grabbed hold of himself, said nothing

and went out the front door.

Eliot was still in the driveway wiping his wet wrist on his pant leg when he walked headlong into the chest of the stranger.

Cuidado! the man said, then, Lo siento. Sorry.

His tone was unforgiving, accent stuffy like he had a cold. Eliot sidestepped to get a look at his face in the sunlight. A thin black mustache ran unevenly above his upper lip, nose dipping over it like a hook. His cheeks wrinkled in long lines as he smiled, the skin dark and leathery, beaten from the sun, and everything about the man—his sunglasses, his hat, his dress shirt, his tinted windows—tried to hide that fact. He was the type of man who worked outside and dirtied his hands but didn't want others to know it. The type of man who did things he wouldn't talk about afterward.

He wanted to speak, say something to stop the man from doing whatever he would do with Scram, but he had no words. The stranger said nothing beyond his smile, had no other obligation to an eleven-year-old boy, and Eliot watched him get in his Navigator, watched him think nothing of kicking up their driveway stones with his oversized tires, the amputation of a hundred gravestones, leaving only dust to hover in his place.

—
Before leaving on his bike, Eliot stopped by the barn. He heard the El Camino sputtering, the industrial clank of metal on metal. He didn't want to see his father, but didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to Scram, didn't trust his mother enough to believe the horse would be here when he returned. So he circled the outside of the barn and rested his back against boards bedraggled with peeling red paint. Splinters tugged at the fibers of his shirt as he slid down to a seat, hugging his knees, and he waited for breaks between his father's futile working so he could hear Scram's hoofsteps, his breathing. He denied his own breath to hear it, held old air tight within himself. And when he exhaled, gasping, he mouthed

things to Scram he wouldn't say to people, things about himself and his father that he didn't yet understand. Things he wanted only heard, nothing more.

In Hester, Oklahoma, Mr. Coldfield had been known as a con-man.

He had been a mortician. Started at a small funeral parlor selling caskets he claimed delayed decomposition. He pointed to the rubber seals that supposedly kept out the air, sold separate bottles of anti-aging chemicals to keep loved ones' bodies rot-free for fifty years guaranteed. He opened his own company where he marked up plots three-hundred percent, sometimes four. They made a kind of money foreign to Eliot now, and whenever someone in the family brought up his father's old job, Eliot pictured him dressed in a suit, his brown hair oiled black, perhaps twenty or thirty pounds thinner. He pictured him pretending to sympathize with crying widows, grieving sons and daughters, while tenderly pushing grave robbers' insurance. Eliot was only three when they had to move, fleeing the state before the rumors of lawsuits manifested real, before his father could be found out for his falsified NFDA license, his fake degree from Central Oklahoma framed in his office.

When they arrived in Ravenna, Mr. Coldfield came with a fresh name, but he wasn't so successful. He bought a two-story fixer-upper in the hills but couldn't get the plumbing right, water always brown. Tried to flip another by the railroad tracks before finding its cracked foundation, home broken to the core. He refused to hire professionals, couldn't afford the taxes, and sold both for less than he paid. It was later when they bought their ranch, when Mrs. Coldfield started working as a lunch lady at the boys' school, leaving their father home to invest in old cars he thought he could fix, horses he thought would race again.

Most recently, he bought guns: .223 Remingtons, .30-30 Winchesters, old .22's and varmint rifles. Those hillbillies love

their firearms, he'd said, though most of the guns still littered their garage and closets. He taught Buck and Eliot to shoot the .22's, let them work up to thirty-calibers. Eliot's favorite was the .338 Winchester Magnum, though he was never allowed to shoot it. Kicks like a bull, Mr. Coldfield said, but Eliot knew the real reason, had watched his father try to shoot it once, the kick knocking him backwards, butt in the dirt. He'd laughed at his dad, couldn't help it, and Mr. Coldfield marched inside. Nobody touches that gun, he ordered. It's hazardous. Though Eliot was sure his father didn't know what the word meant.

The boys cut through the torrid sycamores and shingle oaks where the Decker's property-line dissipated into tall green hills. There, at the opening of the forests' dark and cool underbelly, Eliot and Matt returned to their day-old finding: a shallow brown notch in the dirt, no bigger or deeper than a man's footprint, its contents warmly covered. They removed the protective makeshift bedding of dry grass and branches just as tenderly as they'd laid it, pulling back the last few leaves to reveal small newborn rabbits. There were four of them, all balled up tightly against each other to form one mass, one beating heart the size of a fist. Eliot reached down and touched them, their soft fur, and found their bodies cold and lifeless, no longer beating. Died the night before.

Eliot picked one up and examined its face: eyes scrunched, mouth propped with two teeth. He felt sadder than he thought he should. They were only rabbits, and he'd anticipated them not lasting through the night, imagined what it might be like to find them this way. But these bodies were new, were designed to be lived in, the teeth and fur still intact, still useful. To be abandoned so prematurely was a waste.

The boys ran to the house and told Mr. Decker about the dead rabbits. He poured three ginger ales and they sat at the table as he explained the science of decomposition, about autolysis and the way enzymes and bacteria in the rabbits' own

bodies would eat away at the flesh before enlisting worms and insects to finish the job, breaking the carcasses down into carbon dioxide and water, food for the earth. Eliot listened, wide eyes stinging. He wouldn't blink, refused the demands his sore drying eyes made of him, and his pupils tightened, layering the world with blurs, transforming it into something new.

He bought the groceries from the superstore that hummed with fluorescent lights and voices. He paid in cash, left with two dollars and seven cents, and decided to use the change at Fat Morrow's on the corner where they sold comics in the back. Eliot liked going there, liked listening to the men as they came in and out for coffee and talked about work.

He swung the door open, bell chiming, and Fat Morrow was leaning on the counter, giant belly poured out on the surface. He glanced up from his car magazine as he grunted, "G'afternoon," and Eliot smiled politely. It was mostly gas station rations filling the shelves in dramatic packaging. At the end of the aisle, Eliot leafed through the comics' bright pages, heroes filled with purpose, clear expressions he could understand. On the same shelves sat the tops of dirty magazines, the issues stacked, and their women stared at him with cat-like eyes darkly lined. They sat like tigers in a jungle, eyes out, remainder of their bodies concealed, and he turned his back to them. He'd looked at those magazines once before, alone, and had been equally rapt and confused by what he'd seen. He'd felt a strange frustration: wanted to keep looking, didn't want to see more before he could make sense of their faces, their parted lips, that incongruous mix of distress and aggression that made him feel weak, unsatisfied.

The bell chimed again. Thick boots thumped on the tile, keys clinking.

How's the wife, Deputy?

Dry and cranky.

Eliot peeked his head out from behind the end of the aisle.

Deputy Brown's tan and russet uniform shifted in front of the counter, shirt tucked tight in his pants, pants tucked tight in his boots. The uniform was neatly pressed, firm lines leading down his pant legs.

Just a coffee, he said.

No hotdog today?

Coffee's fine.

He wiped his face with a red kerchief and dug at his nostrils, stretching them and scowling as if a bug had flown up his nose.

Found a dead mare on the Riggins' property.

When?

This morning.

That's two in a month, Fat Morrow said. He furrowed his brow. Foxes get to it?

Starvation. Had dry scat all 'round its mouth, probably all the creature had to eat for weeks. Left the foulest odor I've come across.

Awful way to go.

Deputy Brown rubbed his coffee with his hands and he looked happy to have it. He ripped the tops off three sugar packets, poured them all in at once.

Worst part, said the Deputy, is she would've brought in a couple hundred selling to the Cavel plant not three years ago. Would've been taken care of right. Until they slaughtered her.

Eliot had heard similar stories in school this year, dead horses found all across the state. Teachers said when owners couldn't afford to feed the horses, they released them to the wild rather than waiting to ship them to Mexico or Canada where slaughter was still legal.

Deputy Brown sipped at his coffee as he surveyed the store. He locked eyes with Eliot.

Say. Is that little Lee Coldfield?

Eliot stepped out from behind the aisle, stood straighter, though he didn't know why. He was still playing with the

comic, took a second to realize what his hands were doing, put it away.

Not so small these days, are you Lee? How's your pa doing?

All right.

Your pap's a no 'count Sooner and you can tell him I said so, Fat Morrow told him. Got no more horse sense than a Hindu cattle farmer. Fat Morrow laughed at himself.

Both men frequented Curly's, played poker with Mr. Coldfield on Fridays. Eliot often passed the old red wooden building in town, its low black roof and dim tinted windows, a place he'd always pictured as noisy and smoky inside, where men drank and spoke loudly, saying things they normally wouldn't, outing their true natures. On Fridays, Mr. Coldfield came back tired and drunk, usually broke, and Eliot wanted to go just once with him, wanted to see the transformations, what men became in dark recesses, women and children barred.

The Deputy motioned for Eliot to join them at the counter. Up close, Eliot could see the skin creases splaying from the corners of the Deputy's eyes, gray hairs mixed up in his flattop.

Your old man still got that racehorse pent up? Scram?

Yessir.

You know what that horse is named after, don't you?

Yessir. Named after the Scramjet. Fastest plane in the world.

Deputy Brown smiled.

That's right. First owner was an old NASA man. I'd say the horse nearly lived up to the name, too. You know he got third in the ninety-six Derby.

Eliot nodded. Got fourth a couple years later, too.

Deputy Brown made an impressed 'm' sound with his closed mouth and shook his head. He didn't mention Scram's last race, the Kentucky Oaks in 2001 when the jockey pushed him hard through a turn, leaned too far and rolled them into a violent collision with the dirt, breaking Scram's left hind leg.

Two months later, Mr. Coldfield bought the horse thinking he could get him racing again, or at least sell rides to kids in town, though the only riding he got was from Eliot and Buck, taking turns plodding around the yard no faster than they could walk.

A bad investment, Deputy Brown said. A great horse, but a bad investment. Of course, your pa's gambled away that horse ten times over. Could've had a whole stable full for what he's bet on pocket queens over the years.

How much could he sell for now? Eliot asked.

Singles don't get much at the foreign plants. Too expensive to ship. Couple hundred, maybe. But they have to wait for the trailers to make their rounds.

Conditions are pretty bad in Mexico, Fat Morrow said. They pack'em like sardines there, and I've heard they get cut and stabbed if they move too slow.

Does anyone still slaughter around here? Eliot asked. Illegally?

Illegally?

Eliot nodded. Deputy Brown shifted his stance, looked at Fat Morrow who was gawking at him with the same curious expression as Eliot.

The Deputy smirked.

No one I know. Of course, I'd be about the last person they'd tell. I imagine there'd be more than a fine for a crime like that. For both parties. A boy down in Florida just got five years for killing horses, and they're still looking for the folks he bought them from.

Some could get away with it, though. Couldn't they?

He wouldn't look at the Deputy, stared at the dark clouds forming outside, grays swirling like the iris of an eye.

The Deputy drank, swallowed hard.

I don't know. But there'd be a lot of money in it for them if they did.

—

He rode over tracks on his way home, the old train station

mounted down by the river, that wide and living road. He wished the train still ran, that he could see it snake through the forests, get lost in distant hills. If the station still ran, if it were more than just a landmark, a venue for the Ravenna Railroad Festival, the train would come eight times a day, his teachers said. It would roar through the tracks and tunnel the earth, its whistle fading in and out like dying breaths. It would rotate passengers and cargo, would circulate the state's resources the way blood circulates oxygen. And Eliot imagined it would roll into town angry, trumpeting as in conquest, less than a god, less than an army or lightning, but still with a purpose carried by bullhead rail steel and diesel. And the first time people heard the distant wail of the whistle, for that brief second before they could place the sound, it would bring fear to them. They would wonder if judgment was coming, if this was the end. They would look at their hands and feet. And if his father would've heard it eight times a day for all these years, he'd be a different man. All that fear stored up inside, building reverence for a greater good, one that surely does not approve of who he has been allowed to be.

The sky was dark. He could feel the storm before it met him: humid air, damp smell. There was no thunder, no lightning. Only the flash of rain, heavy streams dropping savagely, a gray and white curtain. He struggled to keep his tires straight against the current, handle bars weighted by the groceries, and water soaked through his shirt until the heavy fabric made a new skin. But he wasn't bothered, knew his body was sixty-percent water, knew it was just a body and that souls didn't get wet, weren't altered that way. The rain raged and he couldn't see the road ahead. It would be the same, whether he saw it or not.

—

He entered the house with the plastic bags heavy and beaded with rain. He dropped them in the kitchen. Where have you been? his mother demanded, but Eliot ignored her, went to

shower. He immersed his head in running water, closed his eyes, the heat and noise a place all its own.

He finished and went to the bedroom he shared with his brother. Buck was changing, brown and purple bruises dirtying his bare chest and neck. They were marks he'd demonstrated on his own arm once, showing Eliot how he'd gotten them. Still in his towel, Eliot turned his back to him and went to his own dresser.

Nice bacne, Lee, Buck scoffed. You could make a roadmap with all those bimples.

He poked at Eliot's swollen red spots and named off cities: Richmond, Frankfurt, Mount Vernon.

Stop. That hurts.

I never heard of a sixth grader with back pimples, Buck chuckled. You're like some sort of mutant. It looks like Dad's back.

Shut up.

I'm serious. You look just like Dad from behind.

I said stop!

Eliot shoved his brother to the wall, Buck losing balance. He hadn't fought Buck in years. He felt lighter, like someone closer to his own age, not five years older. Eliot kept shoving. He pushed Buck into his dresser. Pushed him back to their closet, kept grabbing him and shoving until his brother was deep inside, covered in hanging clothes. Buck took swipes at Eliot's face, some landing solidly, but Eliot stood and met them, kept pushing until Buck was on the ground. There was a kick—Eliot didn't see which leg—and Eliot went down, Buck fast on top of him. He felt punches in the face and stomach, each more painful than the last. Eliot cried when it got to be too much and Buck relented. He left Eliot laying in the quiet of the room, left him to hold the warm and throbbing areas he'd been hit, and Eliot almost regretted what he'd done. But he'd do it again, he knew. He'd do much worse.

—

They sat in the dining room without light. Shreds of the plunging sun captured their empty plates in orange, the bowls of potatoes, salad and breaded chicken still full. The steam poured up only to die in the shadows, the air smelling sweetly of butter and chicken fat. The boys shifted in their seats, heads cradled in their hands.

Can't we eat? Buck groaned.

We wait for your father.

Eliot sighed loudly, enough to get a glare from his mother, though not so brassy that she would say something about it. But they made eye contact, and Eliot did not look away from her. She was tired, used, had already spent herself in the kitchen, and for a moment Eliot entertained who she was, what her life was like, and he felt hopeless for her.

And wasn't it fear they felt? When they heard him, the slamming of the bedroom door at the other end of the house, his steps pounding the floor? The room choked with their silence, and he entered, body swaying as if he were dodging blows on either side of his body. He sat with an apparent authority, and he looked over the table, the food, the faces that waited for him.

His words were not words, but weather, formations that could be neither created nor killed.

Let's pray.

They bowed their heads.

He spoke to God like a salesman. Explained his needs. Lifted up the family, his boys' future, rationalized why they should be blessed by "financial peace" and security. He thanked very little. He didn't bother to mention who God was, why He might be one to hear such prayers, and Eliot wondered if He wasn't, if God didn't think even less of his father's words than he did.

Mr. Coldfield served himself first, started eating before they were finished passing. He ate the chicken first, tore the

flesh apart. He ate with his mouth open and Eliot watched as he chewed the flesh, the white and brown mixing with his saliva, mashed into a vile scum that swam in the crevices of his mouth, new pieces of flesh added and destroyed. Eliot sat frozen in fear and he did not know why.

Should be next few days when they haul off the horse, Mr. Coldfield finally said. Mush whirled inside his mouth.

Scram, said Eliot.

Mr. Coldfield grunted, chewed.

You mean *Scam*? Buck said, grinning at himself.

Mr. Coldfield smacked the back of Buck's head for talking with his mouthful. He chuckled a moment later, though, thinking of the clever nickname. He began giving Scram his own names. Daddy's New Transmission. Old Retirement Fund. Mrs. Coldfield caught on, added New Bathtub and Weekend Trip, giggling her way to the words. Before long, all three were laughing at themselves, acting out the names, clapping and eating and drinking and laughing, and they asked Eliot what name he would replace Scram's with, what he would do with the money, but all Eliot could think about was the time when he was four years old and he had wanted to charge his toy rifle in an electrical socket, wanted to make it shoot lightning and so he'd created an elaborate plug using paperclips and tinfoil, came so close to sticking it in before his mother caught him and tore it apart, told him he could've died, could've burned the house down, and she made him sit in his room in the dark, with no light, until he learned to respect the power of electricity, of the fragility of life, of things he didn't understand.

Before he grabbed the gun and went to the barn—before he put on his shoes, loaded the .338 Winchester with four rounds and cut through the dark yard with a flashlight—Eliot defecated. He didn't want to go, didn't want to sit ankle-tied by denim, waiting, prisoner to the discomfort, the strain of it. But it was coming, and he had to sit and wait. After, there was a

sharp odor, more sordid than most. He flushed, cleaned himself, left as quickly as he could, but the smell seemed to stay with him. He remembered learning that odors were actually microscopic molecules in the air, that we breathed these small pieces inside of us and that by the time we were aware of the smells the molecules were already part of our bodies whether we wanted them or not.

Eliot was quiet as he left the house, as he walked over moist patches of grass in the yard, small window of light in front of him. He would need to stay quiet for most of it, he thought. At the end, though, he wanted to be loud. To wake them with fear. Show them what he'd done.

He stepped onto the barn's concrete floor, into smells of hay and motor oil. He took slow steps, the flashlight painting faint ocher renditions of the wooden walls, ceiling rafters, and the gold El Camino. The barn seemed to breathe, panting humidly in the after-storm, but Eliot knew it was really the horse breathing so heavily, exhausted from its long life, these last few miserable years in the Coldfield's barn, and it was as if it were waiting for him. Eliot aimed the light to where the horse's head drooped over the stall's frame in the back corner, light reflected in its eye, a perfect pin. Eliot kept his gaze on it to orient himself. The gun lay heavy in his hands.

The horse was a bag of an animal, torso sagging between his legs, thin mane matted to its neck like a bandage and mouth hung agape with its breathing. It looked wise, in a way, as if a portion of the world's intimacies had been entrusted to it. God knew it held some of Eliot's. He prayed for the horse, prayed more like his preacher and less like his father. He thanked God for the animal. He recognized much of God in it, its strength and patience, and he only asked that God keep its soul, its honor, that death would not rob the horse of all it had been to him. And wasn't the horse's head made for that barrel? That hollow tip of the metal that nestled so perfectly between its jaw bone, flesh pinched between? And yes, this was a better

way to go, here with Eliot and God and the gun, where the stranger with the leather skin would not touch him.

He turned the light off so he wouldn't have to see.

When Eliot fired the rifle he immediately regretted it. There was the flash, the bang, what he'd expected. But there was a startling explosion of liquid, buckets-full, splattering the barn black in the night. It soaked Eliot's face, his shirt, the concrete and El Camino, all sticky and warm. The horse's blood was in his eyes, dripped off his lips and chin, and he ducked away from the body already fallen, twitching briefly on the ground like it had been interrupted while in the middle of something. He wiped his face, grabbed the light. He didn't have much time.

He ran out to the yard and to the end of their property. There was an acre of knee-high brush behind him, weeds and bushes and long dead grass that glowed a pale and ghostly white. And at the end lay the forest, a black thickness waiting for him.

The lights came on in the house. First the bedrooms in the back, then, the hallway and the kitchen, each new light a heartbeat. They were coming closer. He stood there in the dark, still holding the gun, barrel kissing the dirt, and the blood was thickening on his hands, gluing them to the stock. He listened for their movement in the house and as he waited for the first figure to emerge, he prayed again to God, this time selfishly. He prayed his father would be the first one out.

He came forth like a bear. Large and quick, limbs moving in tandem, a smooth descent down their steps to the yard and barn. He moved faster than Eliot thought he would, and Eliot went cold for a second, thought his father would catch him there in the yard, would punish him without mercy, no witnesses in the dark. But Eliot managed to lift the heavy rifle and balance the butt on his shoulder. And though he fired at the sky, the sound was for his father. A rapture sound. He couldn't see, but he heard his father dive to the grass, cursing and mad

with fear.

Buck and his mother were close to follow on the back steps, bodies silhouetted by the house lights. He told them not to move. Told them that after he left, they were to look in the barn, at Scram, at the truth of things. And then he rattled off what he'd heard earlier that day, facts about decomposition, autolysis, what happens to a body after it dies, and that this is only a body, that the horse is God's, and all these things are not for them to understand yet for he barely understands them himself. All while his father scrambled on the ground, cursing in the dark.

And this is when Eliot leaves, enters that field that leads to the forest. He'll be back, maybe brought back, either by his family or Deputy Brown. Most likely he'll return by his own concession. There are consequences for what he's done, but he does not fear them. There are consequences, but they are for some other boy. He's with Scram, screeching across the sky, his tail slicing both time and space. The consequences are for the Sooner's son. But he is somewhere else.

He walks in the darkness carrying the rifle. He holds it straight, barrel parallel to the ground. It is heavy in his arms and the muscles in his hands cramp around the wooden stock, tight like a lifepreserver hugging a child's neck. It is a victory to hold it, a gun his father could never handle, and he is upright walking with it. He walks and he cannot see his feet or the grass or the dirt as he approaches the mouth of the forest, trees looming in front of him, their black trunks and susurrant heads. He stops before them, stands and waits as if to ask entry into some great foreign castle, anticipating their king. The trees acquiesce in a stillness of their own, permitting him, a new citizen. He will enter it unafraid. He will live there. He will find a cavity in the side of the Kentucky hills and he will make a home that will not rust or splinter. He'll make a life with what the forest gives him, always sufficient, and he won't think of his old life, his

parents or his brother. He'll carry the gun, rule over the animals with patience and discernment, the way all things should be done, and he'll be his own father. He'll grow a beard. And in time, he'll take a woman—not his mother, but a woman—and they will live together unafraid. They will have a son. And the son will be him. The son will be his.

SONG FOR MY FATHER

SEAN THOMAS
DOUGHERTY

1.

Home from work my father would slump
down in his chair, take the bottle of Bacardi
and a can of coke, pop the tab and fill
the glass to the rim with rum. He'd sip,
then pull the Horace Silver record from its sleeve,
hold it tenderly as if it was a cool hat's brim,
and place the needle to the first track,
the vinyl's crackling hiss, and then the trumpet.
It was 1972, a small apartment in Toledo, Ohio.
My white mother was gone to night school.
He drank his tall glass until his eyes half lidded
the chords carried him out of the walls.
What is the song that can save you?
Beneath every old record a kind of spin

where I can hear my father's quiet hum.

You are asking for this blouse
of rain
these notes
to never stop

to tell your name
inside the letters
of the song.

2.
a song to arrive
in an embrace.

3.
For with each chorused chord
we are searching the grooves
for an untranslated sound
cannot reveal what is behind
the veil's hem

The way Coltrane reached
as if the inside of every note
were a new shade
of blue. Or how the body
stretches

to touch another body
and in the inter
course of telling
makes
a mouth
new.

4.
Suppose never sleeping
without one's name or one's age
passing without a wave
of wanting anything other
than the face of the falling
light across the floor
you've never crossed

an unmade memory
waits as if an accident
travels up
your spine.

You are asking for this blouse
of rain
these notes
to never stop
to tell your name
inside the letters
of the song
you are asking
for this blouse
of rain
to never stop
to tell these notes
to spell his name
inside the letters
of his song.

5.
Speechless is the act of listening.

6.
Is your father a cantata
the air blows in off the coast of Kalamazoo
a cantata made from the flames of Flint

made from blacktop and porch rocking,
a cadence of boot laces and concrete slabs

a cadence of yardwork and slaughterhouses?

A concerto of the UAW Hall and the old neighborhood?

And who will compose the symphony
for my father and the long hours

he traveled selling toilet paper, candy
whatever money paid he took he gave

driving through the cornfield small towns
of Ohio from supermarket aisle to aisle

in his corduroy jacket with his neatly trimmed black beard afro tie tied and wing tipped, he was my father,

brown skinned brown playing Miles on eight-tracks
he sold, he spoke polite to rude white managers

to keep his job he ate his anger, he rolled
his left sleeve up and the window down

let the rain brush him lightly like the hush

of a brush across a cymbal rim, the job

is not my father, but the job
could eat my father, the men

who tell your father

what he is, and the money

that isn't enough to fill the hand (now the horn bellows)
that holds the glass when he comes home

as he drinks, the other
on the shoulder

of the boy watching the war on TV
the child he has taken as his own. (push the tempo push the tempo)

what song is an unmuted trumpet
blown against labor spent, a part of you

to never forget in the falling hour

of the poor the dishes washed by hand
not a reverence that revels when he left

but when he arrived

inside these notes

of rain

to never stop

inside the letters

of your name

this song

you are asking

for this blouse (the piano speaks)

of keys pleads for work this is your telling time
for your father mending his hem
this litany of fathers not just mine (let the drummer drive)
and your father hammering the drywall,
or driving the diesel down the highway,

or cutting the birch board, or lacing up his boots
(the piano decrescendos) to step
so each must will a wanting
song that swallows the way your woman
might open, like an iris
after a long day of work
and how her hands tell
how little you have died (the bassline slides)
or your man whose hands
are gentle as your father swinging
you through the air.

7.

your father, and your father working in the mines,
rising to punch a clock, in some southern town, or you in Chicago
washing the blood from his smock at the butcher shop, or
your father fitting the pipe, holding his asthmatic chest,
or yours who never took a vacation, or yours who fixed
or mopped or bent of late night trains and jackhammer drills
father shoveling coal head shaved close shaved cook or caddie
or cab driver file clerk mailman studying Dante, the arithmetic
of blowing a fuse, night man outside the iron gate, ball player
after the game swinging your sister over his shoulders
smoke hushed ghost colored orange light long corridor
your father on a hospital gurney pushed and pulled
a song of late night dives, buttered grits and black coffee grinds—

a tempo so tender
it's as if looking
into the inside
of a face
far away
from any fist

wrapped around a glass of rum

as the ancient vinyl spits,
my silver-haired old man
listening to Horace Silver
in his chair, worn down
his brown face creased
like a record's groove.
Soon I'll have to carry him

to bed and change the pan.
Your father holds your fingers.
What dream does the blue rain
speak inside the trumpet's solo
of his snore? When I was small,
no matter how tired or drunk he was,
he never raised his voice, he tucked me in.

THE SLEEP ROOM

JOHN GRITTON

Past the main road, on the ill-kempt side of the village, at the mouth of an alley known by all but spoken of by none, the boy stands. More accurately, he is propping: propping his thin frame up on his crutches, mouth agape, since he can barely believe what his eyes see; it is broad daylight, after all. And there is only one reason for a white man to come here, to this alley, to this side of the village. But it is. It's him: Pemberton. And the sight of Pemberton moving quickly down the rutted dirt of the road brings laughter to his lips; he does not bother stopping it.

It has been two weeks now since Butterworth, the old policeman, left the village in the back of the rattletrap ambulance. He had been wrecked with Blackwater. But even before DC Butterworth—*former* DC Butterworth—left, the village was growing wild, sinking back into the jungle. That is, if ever it was truly a village at all: the reed-thatch huts are rebuilt every year, after the rainy season. Reed runs to soil, soil to Madera, Madera to reed. It is only jungle. There is no village here: just a word, a kind of lie.

Now young Pemberton brushes past the boy, into the alley proper. To the boy, he is a gust of odd buttery stink, the faintest scent of palm wine, and a cloud of gnats. The boy thinks of the stories: his cousin is Mahomet, Pemberton's houseboy,

and Mahomet swears they are true. He swears that every night, from under Pemberton's door, you can hear the sound of his crying. Mahomet swears that there are days Pemberton does not even leave the office, where his cot is kept. He swears that one morning, just after the rains quit, Pemberton did not answer when Mahomet came with coffee; did not answer later, when Mahomet brought tea; did not answer when Mahomet came holding nothing, calling only: "Missah Pemron, sah? Missah Pemron?"

But there he is, Pemberton, blustering down the alley, a cloud of dust scattering the chickens and pye dogs. If the game leg could have carried his body on, the boy would have followed, laughing his head off.

And maybe twenty feet down the dirt lane, an old woman is rearing up, driving her crooked frame into the millet, rearing up and coming down, again and again, stopping to watch Pemberton pass before the open doorway of her hut. She knows there is one reason, one reason alone, for a white man to be in this alley. In an instant the village gossip floods her mind, like water in a gourd: stories of palm wine, of whores, of some unfathomable debt Pemberton owes the Syrian merchant, Yussef. She almost laughs to watch him pass, too. But something checks her. There is something in Pemberton's eyes, something like a swamp's quiet oozing: he is afraid here. Afraid, that is, and lonely.

Ten feet down the road, the woman's granddaughter is making her way home from the schoolhouse. To her, Pemberton is just a rush of gnats and khaki, rancid butter and Communion Wine. Rot. She remembers a day, maybe two or three weeks hence, Pemberton came to Father Clay's mass; but rather than sitting in the pews, he'd just stood against the mud wall, watched with his strange blue eyes. Father Clay had stuttered through liturgy and sermon, and Pemberton had leaned mute

against the wall, like a length of dead wood against a stove.

And when it came time, the girl knelt for the wafer in the swept dirt of the church floor, tugged at Father Clay's robe, pointed to Pemberton: "He no take the wafer, Father?"

For a moment more, she watches Pemberton moving quickly down the alleyway—and then, with something like shame, she turns away. From down the lane comes the sound of him knocking on the heavy wooden gate of the brothel.

And at the gate stands the strongman, who undoes the latch to admit Pemberton, who meets the glassy blue eyes with complicity and mockery, and, smiling, lowers his head until he hears the deeper click of the iron latch in the oak door—

And in the dark foyer bows the squat eunuch doorman, muttering a winsome greeting to District Commissioner Pemberton of His Majesty's et cetera and so forth, now whispering as to an old friend: "And your health, Pemron, sah?" and "Pemron desires tea?" And all the while, the eunuch is thinking that if a man comes to his brothel twice, then he will come a hundred times. The policeman refuses tea, says that his health is fine, thank you. His eyes are two black shadows in the light of the hurricane lamp. He is still shy, thinks the doorman, and so he claps his hands once and calls the name of Pemberton's favorite girl, "Fatima!", and she enters then, filling the air with the smell of hair oil, of henna, of rose water—

And Fatima thinks to herself that she has somehow been expecting him, Pemberton, as one might expect rain. She greets the policeman warmly enough, but, taking his hand in hers, she dreads the inevitable pant, the confused, shy moment of his orgasm, the sight of acne dotting his shamed back like fire ants. Now, his hand in hers, they make their way past the low furniture in the ill-lit lounge, out the back door and up the shallow staircase to the place they call the Sleep Room.

It doesn't turn her stomach as it once did: the soiled sacks of rice, the gray light, the close, already-breathed taste of the air: it is like a visit to a latrine. With a deep breath she guides Pemberton to the mattress, knowing that, like last time, she will have to start, to fiddle loose the khaki uniform, to kiss narrow chest and stooped shoulders, tease prong from strut and cracking leather.

She helps him, as she would help a blind man or a cripple, with the sheepskin, until bearing up, bearing up one final time, she fits their bodies together. When it is over, he faces the wall. She lies on her side with an arm over his body, connecting the red dots on his back—until finally he turns over and, frowning a little, speaks his strange words:

"Cigarette, love. Tobacco." He reaches across her body, tugs the pack from the heap of his uniform. With a small laugh, he says, "Where're my manners? Vous desirez, mademoiselle?"

She shakes her head: "I no like, Pemron." He smiles. The blue eyes are strange and otherworldly to her, but his smile has a childish niceness to it (if you can ignore the beak of a nose above it).

"You always refuse," he goes on, when she says no more. "You don't like them? Humbug you, do they?"

"Humbug my stomach," she says, rubbing the flat space between breasts and navel.

"Has the opposite effect on me." He speaks the words casually, almost absently; but still she can tell he feels nervous in their talk, that he talks for her sake. So she says nothing, and they sink again into their old, their usual, quiet, as into a tub of tepid water. For a moment his eyes trace the contours of the Sleep Room's ceiling before coming to rest. She follows his gaze, up to where a green fly twitches in a spider's web. "What is—" he begins, staring. "What is it you say about us?"

"What *say*?" she echoes.

"Yes," he says, almost curtly. "What do you say when

you—when you talk about us? Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she says, almost half-certain she does.

“What did you say, for example,” Pemberton goes on, “when you talked about Commissioner Butterworth?”

She studies Pemberton now, wondering how much he has guessed already. Has he guessed that Butterworth was, as Pemberton is, a kind of breathing joke? The truth is that, before he contracted Blackwater, Fatima had only seen Butterworth once or twice, and then only in town. She knew that he had been sick almost since the day he arrived in the village. The story runs he thought his servants were poisoning him. Butterworth is supposed to have gone through a half-dozen cooks before realizing, finally, that he could not stomach the food in Africa very well. After that, he’d caught Blackwater fever: strange, unmarried man who had never, not once, come to her brothel.

But there is, too, she thinks, what they say about Pemberton: of crying in his office with the door closed; of the money he owes Yussef; of palm wine (of whores); of a framed photograph of a girl, buck-toothed, faintly cross-eyed, skin the dun of corpses, which is kept on his desk at the police station.

“It’s all right,” says Pemberton now. She stares at him. “Butterworth was a nasty poor man.”

She says: “I no like Bumworth.”

“No.” He turns on his side and knocks some ash on her breasts. “Oh, dear—” And now, as he takes a drag, squinting at her body but not wiping it clean, a stream of ejaculate dribbles from his penis, which resembles a very small yam partially buried in dirt.

“Humbug you?” says Pemberton. “Humbug you, Butterworth, did he?”

She meets the terrible blue eyes and beneath the reek of the Sleep Room is another smell: of sour milk and coffee and palm wine. Him, Pemberton. His smell.

“Bumworth he no come here,” she says at last. But it is as

if he has not heard.

“And me?” says Pemberton. “I humbug you? Pemron humbug you?” Her stomach churns, twists. She shakes her head, wondering how to tell him how much she hates what he is doing now, the question itself. But Pemberton persists, repeats the question until it flattens itself out, until she can hear his voice finding the cold fact in the words.

“I humbug you,” says Pemron. “You no like Pemron. No like.”

And the strange thing is this: that she is finding the truth in these words, too, a thing buried somewhere out of sight of her indifference, like a viper coiled at the bottom of a dry well.

Above them, spider watches fly; light fades from ceiling.

“You no like Pemron,” he says. No like, no like, no like.

When he leaves the Sleep Room, night is come like some vast smudge of lampblack across the horizon. The eunuch doorman takes what he is owed, bows, opens the door. At the gate, the strongman nods and snickers. “Bloody nigger,” he curses, but feels no better. In the streets, there is no one to watch him go. Nothing in the alleyway stirs, in fact, but the pye dogs, bold, now, that their masters sleep.

The town is theirs now, Pemberton sees.

And Pemberton sees how at some nameless point, the town ceases to be town and becomes jungle. And he thinks how the jungle never really ends, how the village is just some lie that Africa tells itself, some voodoo to keep the hyenas out. And all this he considers, walking the quarter-mile back to the other side of the village, to the pale-painted square that is the police station, to his room in the rear: How, how, how? And the thought is coursing through him like a greasy river, even as he strings the knot about the picture railing, slips the noose about his neck. And that is what his ghost considers when it leaves his body with a sound like a rubber ball against pavement, floating above him until the next morning, when the

houseboy Mahomet comes and finds the corpse of Pemberton and, without shouting, closes the door and goes for the village's other white man.

A priest, thinks Father Clay, holding Pemberton about the legs while his houseboy severs the cord with a pocketknife: a priest in the jungle. Then Father Clay thinks, How light he is. Laying him upon the bed, for a moment Father Clay studies the blue eyes in the pale face, the village gossip flooding his mind: debt; liquor; the whore called Fatima. All that day, Father Clay considers the eternal soul, the forgiveness of God, failing to remember that in Africa a soul does not go to heaven or hell but stays, rather, and sort of watches things.

These are the sick months, the months after the rainy season, and to breathe is to drown slowly. A sleepless night follows the five o'clock mass. And then the next day, a day that flows by like a curse, the commissioner in the capitol sends a detective named Scobie, and somehow it falls to Father Clay to show him Pemberton's body. And bending over that pale figure on the plain cot, the severed cord still dangling grotesquely from the picture rail, Father Clay turns to him.

"Mightn't there be a hope that it's murder?" says Father Clay.

"Hope?" says Scobie.

CACHE IN CONEY ISLAND

EMILY JANOWICK

While Knox and I wait at the shore's edge,
the sandy wet cuffs of our jeans blueprint our ankles.

Two men with metal detectors weave in and out of the thin water.
One in a wetsuit,

the other carries a shovel, digs
scattered holes down the beach,

a plastic bag
half-full of treasures.

I take three photos of gull footprints in dry sand, tiny triangles
bisecting one another,

a pattern
too ugly to even be wallpaper.

I always want to take things with me,
little round pieces of glass or sweaters on the side of the road,
purple cardboard.

I take three photographs of my old grey jeans,
their smudges of yellow paint,
leave them folded on the stairs that lead to the D train,
force myself to walk away.

When Knox finds a 12-gauge shotgun shell
in the twisted wood, straw,
I wonder why he sets it back down.

RIDDLE

JENNA LE

Even now, an adult living alone,
I often surface suddenly at midnight
from symphonic dreams of which her heartbeat is
the metronome. Or, looking up, I see
the barred and bell-shaped shadow of her rib-cage
hovering overhead, dripping dark drops
in my fear-cold tea.

DEPARTURES

**BRENNA
LEMIEUX**

I sledded into a tree once, saw
what would happen halfway down the hill
but couldn't slow or steer, just felt
my bones shrink with a helpless,
thrilling terror, which is exactly
what meeting John felt like.

- July -

I'd knead my neck at work and picture
Montana, John stitching blisters
on his feet, the needle sterilized with matches
because alcohol weighs down a rucksack.
He packed light but still he burst a disc,
its gel lapped onto a nerve, which feels,
he says, like someone holding a flame
to the bones, like tingling and numbness,
or like hell, depending on his mood.

When he left, he discarded a last box
of belongings, the contents sagged
with their own weight. He wanted nothing
to *belong* to him; he wanted to belong

in the mountains, alone with his castoff Army bag, first issued to K. Benecke, who I guessed was Kevin and he said probably Ken. Its pristine condition had hinted grief more than fastidiousness, irrelevant and potent grief, which I had no strength for and ignored.

I'd offered to take his stuff to Goodwill, and so returned to my apartment box-laden while John marched south to the bus. At home I drank coffee till my eyelids purred and scrawled on the calendar: *July, a month for departures.*

- August -

John hefts crates of cabbages and tugs up beets. I level mountains of papers with a red pen. The harvest in, he drifts to California, finds work at a megachurch, and lies on his faith pledge.

I execute eighteen mice for shitting in the kitchen. He sighs in the way of snow-cumbered trees, so that he's lighter after and an avalanche begins (his own, eastward) and settles on the dotted line

of our lease. We root out an old laundry set, some second-hand pans, sit on the porch sticky nights and slap cards on the table. Sometimes, I roll pasta, hours of sifting and pinching, the noodles briny

from my sweat. Sometimes, I call him from the shower and draw back the curtain. Little thrills. We travel together and he never packs the Army bag; I haven't seen it since the move. I'd like to ask

where he put it, what he thinks happened
to its first owner. I'm ready now; I could ponder that,
as long as my hands were busy in the kitchen:

He enlisted right after high school,
(flour talcs my arms) acned,
the age of my students, who aren't
so much younger than I am,
patriotic, (my shoulders burn
with kneading) at least at first—
but then he comes home and marries
his high school sweetheart
and it's summer and there's no
hint of breathable air—

(The mattress needs to be in the kitchen, he thinks, with the window unit—it's the only room that ever gets cool. He hasn't slept in weeks. Who puts a window unit in a fucking kitchen anyway? Ninety-four degrees inside and humid. No circulation. Bedroom feels like a goddamn sauna. He shakes his wife, says he's taking the mattress, but she doesn't wake up, just shifts her weight and he shouts that he's moving the goddamn mattress and she can either help or see where gravity dumps her, and that gets her, the shouting, and she sort of scissor-kicks her legs and her feet smack the floor and he's already lifting the head corner and she lurches to the foot and grabs it and starts talking real low, the way she has since he got home, saying okay now, easy does it. Her slim arms go ropey, straining against the load, and he remembers he likes that, the way her hair's all messy too, and pauses a second to watch her but she keeps going and sort of butts into the mattress. In the kitchen, he slides it across the tile and it flops flat, blowing a draft, and he sees right away this will work, he'll be able to sleep here, and strides to the bedroom for a pillow and when he returns she has a glass of ice water and she's saying why don't you drink this, saying I'm worried you're dehydrated and it looks delicious and he gulps it and feels better

even though it kind of sloshes in his stomach after. He lies down and she refills the glass and sets it by his head and switches off the light and he doesn't notice falling asleep but suddenly he's back in Iraq and everything's exploding around him and inside him and all he can think is I shouldn't have had that water because it's oozing out his stomach and everyone thinks that it's blood and he's dead and he tries to shout but can't and can't move and they zip him up and now he really might die because there's no air and he wakes tensed, sweat-greased, his wife kneeling beside him breathing *shh* and swabbing his forehead, where veins bulge like tree roots rupturing a sidewalk.)

—never mind. I don't want to do this.

But it's no good. The soldier's loose now,
it's his poem too.

Fine then.

K. Benecke,
you were shipped to Iraq and it scorched you.

You leaked into my life and I ignored you.
I hang a peace sign flag in the living room,
as if it absolves me.

Mr. Benecke,

this was meant to be a love poem.

EMERGENCY ROOM

DONALD
LEVERING

My daughter was screaming
as the aged doctor repositioned
the tendon back inside her wound
and began to stitch her thumb
when this unknown man appeared
to hold her other hand.

Said he was here for his father,
who'd been mugged but was stable,
but when he'd heard my daughter,
he'd slipped past all the rules,
smelling of marijuana,
to hold her hand.

I bless you, and I bless all doctors,
he said in his Spanish accent.

This one here is the best.

Look at this scar on my wrist.

*I was six when this doctor here
pulled the pane glass out of it.*

He smiled sadly. *That wasn't
the only time I needed fixing up.*

Look at my eyelids.

Her eyes fixed on their scars.

They were welded closed

*by the heat of the exploding truck
that threw me four stories up
before I landed fifty-seven feet away,
came down like a cat, breaking both wrists,
my collarbone, my spine in three places.
Paralyzed when the doctors
slit open my eyes.
I shouldn't be walking now,
shouldn't be able to see.
But God bless the doctors. This one here
is the best. You'll get your thumb back.
My daughter had stopped whimpering.
But I'll never get back my daughter,
he said with brimming eyes,
killed in a car wreck,
as he squeezed my daughter's hand.*

IN A BREEZE OF DATES AND OLIVES, 4000 YEARS BC

LYN LIFSHIN

The first poet we know to have signed her name to what she wrote. She lived 2285-2250BCE, high priestess in the Sumerian city state of Ur. After her death, Enheduanna continued to be remembered as an important figure, perhaps even attained semi-divine status.

in the shadow of a
white glowing house,
a young woman moves
through reeds and barley.
Her hair shimmers in
the hot light like
ripples on the Euphrates.
In the distance, the
soft sounds of a
stringed instrument.
Children singing to the
Oud. She is Enheduanna,
daughter of Sargon.
Sun turns her copper breasts
fire. How can she know
this man who brought her
berries in a clay dish

is not only the founder of
one of the first empires
in history, a reign that will
last long after his
daughter is no longer
stunned by the majesty's
terror and is wild
to carve her heart's
words, chisel stone with
her fierce passion, a
world grounded in
desire for gods and
goddesses but is her father?
She feels braided to her life
with irresistible power
and ripeness. Birds no
one now living can
see dart through brambles
but Enheduanna hardly
sees them, already
humming, burning
lost in the rifts of love,
carving her breath
and heartbeat into a clay
tablet with a small knife
like a stylus that might
as well be part of her
body, seething and wild
to become the first writer
in recorded history to
sign her name to
what she wrote.

ENHEDUANNA

LYN LIFSHIN

a last light
leaves slashes of
scarlet ribbon

she can't let
the day go, she
is obsessed,

she is carrying
the embryo of a
poem in her fingers

soon it will
be dark but while
the temples are

blazing, as if the
light came from
the crude clay

bricks, she can't
stop pressing
clay as if

each word,
each image
was exorcism

I THINK OF ENHEDUANNA'S WORDS

LYN LIFSHIN

in the fruit of
date palm trees

just out of reach.
Stone will hold

her words long
after the dates

bloom for ages,
beckon like

the trees in the
scorching summer

wind. They seem,
like her words,

precious.

PROPOSITION: IN WHICH THE HEROINE WEARS THIGH HIGH BOOTS FROM RICK'S TOY BOX

**BRANDI NICOLE
MARTIN**

Dear sir, I should warn you—
I'm the kind of filthy you can't ever scrub off.

I hear voices slither straight from the hearts
of all those whiskey dicks with calloused grips
who say I've got that itch, that sickness,
that backwoods, no good,
would fuck an evergreen if it was hung,

so I could never do better.

—

Can you blame me?

Imagine liquor. Damp leather.
Bondage for beginners.

Picture rope burn. Bruises blooming.
Vomit matted to the floor.

His movements, blotted as always,
while outside, tomcats yowl praises

Altogether now, with *feeling*.

—

But tonight, it's high time for black smudges,
cobwebbed red lace.

If you'll have me, I will hear voices for you.

I'll let them crawl under my skin to the pit of me
because isn't that what I'm supposed to do?

I will unbutton for you.

Strip down to nothing but bones and skin
stretched so tight over this poor whore heart
I swear you can see the ripples,
see the rhythm, see it beating.

AHMED'S BICYCLE SHOP

BY

CULLEN MCVOY

The morning sun splayed across the orange African sky as silent throngs of cyclists rolled along dirt roads into a spotless metropolis of bleached low-rise buildings and boulevards flanked by purple-blossomed Jacaranda trees. There in Salisbury they scrubbed floors, washed dishes, and swept streets until dusk, when they retraced their tracks and disappeared into the bush-dotted countryside to sleep. Many of them got their wheels from Ahmed's bicycle shop.

As far as I knew, in 1960 I was the only American teenager in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), a British colony subject to white minority rule. My father had joined the American foreign service and uprooted his family of six to this strange land, where the Rhodesian government promised

him a house and schooling for his children.

I was a skinny kid with straw hair and glazed, sky-blue eyes, who felt most at ease in the company of my own thoughts. I grew up in rural Florida next to a swamp, where I wandered barefoot amongst the prickly palms and Spanish moss, seeking solace from a world that already felt too harsh, and scouting for some warm marsh, real or imaginary, where I could feel safe and at home. When I wasn't roaming in the swamp, I was in the backyard tinkering with bicycle parts and an old lawnmower motor, trying to build a crude motorbike for the next chapter in my childhood wandering.

Now and then in the swamp I ran across a fellow traveler—a half-naked black girl moving ghost-like

along the path, her fist in her mouth and eyes looking nowhere. I didn't pity her, nor did I decry the world's inequities for her plight. I just caught a glimpse of her lost gaze, and could have mistaken it for my own.

Landing at Salisbury airport, we were met by Mr. Holmes, a state functionary charged with getting us settled. A stout man with a flushed face and a bushy mustache, he wore khaki shorts and a tan pith helmet. Nearby stood a shiny limousine with its trunk open to receive our luggage. Soon we were loaded up and headed for our new home.

Expecting modest quarters befitting a civil servant, we were astonished to find ourselves driven up a long, tree-lined driveway to an elegant, sprawling mansion perched on a hill at the edge of town. It had a wrap-around porch and French doors opening onto terraced gardens and manicured lawns.

"This place is known as the 'Ranche House,' formerly occupied by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court," said Mr. Holmes, surveying our brood, which included my parents and me, my older brother Steve, my three-year-old sister Ruth, and my infant brother Michael.

"With a suitable staff of servants

you should be comfortable here."

"Impressive," said my father, a tall, square-jawed man of modest manner who shunned ostentation. He had come to Rhodesia to be of service, not to be served. "But tell me, why is this house not occupied by some high state official?"

"Fair question." The man squinted his eyes and lowered his voice, speaking in strictest confidence. "The neighborhood is no longer what it used to be. Mind you, it's not black. But it's not white either. Mostly somewhere in between—Indian, Syrian, Lebanese, and others."

We looked on in silence.

"Not to worry," Mr. Holmes hastened to add. "The area is perfectly safe. No place in Salisbury is unsafe for whites. But if I may—a word of advice. For shopping, services, and entertainment, I would suggest that you go downtown, where you will be more at home with our own kind."

"Our own kind?" said my father.

"Mr. McVoy, you may, or may not agree with the policies of the Rhodesian government," said Mr. Holmes. "But remember that you and your family are guests in our country, and are expected to

conduct yourselves with discretion.”

Despite its pretentious appearance, our new home had its charm. The “U” shaped structure wrapped around an enchanting, vine-draped courtyard where we ate and spent much of our time, eschewing the formal living and dining rooms. Lizards roamed free on the floors and walls, tolerated for their ability to control the bugs, much like spiders did in our Florida home.

Contrary to our staunch family tradition of doing for ourselves, we bowed to local custom and employed a staff of live-in servants: a cook, maid, houseboy, and gardener. I found their presence disconcerting, but didn’t say so. I was the loner child, set apart from the rest of the family. My father pursued his work, my mother cared for the little ones, and my brother Steve took courses at the local university.

It was hard to muster the indifference expected in the master-servant relationship. The houseboy was about my age, and when he came to clear the table in the courtyard, I greeted him with friendly chatter.

“Hello Benjamin,” I said. “So what’s going on today?”

“Yes, Master,” was all he said as he stood there with watery eyes

and gleaming teeth.

In the hallway I ran across Sarah, the maid, on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. I was startled to see her there. Why did she have to clean the floor when all I did was walk on it? I wanted to rush over, lift her to her feet, and brush off her soiled smock. It looked so wrong to me, such down and dirty work for the poor woman.

In the backyard was a private tennis court enclosed within a tall chain-link fence. Through the crisscrosses of the fence I could see the servants’ quarters, a windowless block of crudely laid cement with a dark opening for a door. Leaning with tiny fingers clutching the chain links was a little girl—perhaps a daughter of the help. Her vacant gaze seemed familiar—much like the swamp girl in Florida, and myself as well. We both had the same faraway eyes as we wandered aimlessly in the marsh.

There was no school for white boys in the neighborhood, so I was assigned to one on the other side of town. Churchill’s School for Boys was housed in white-washed masonry; its classrooms stood in a row like soldiers. Each room was packed with chunky oak chairs with desks attached. The desktops

chaffed my elbows with their gouged dirty words and primitive depictions of genitalia. Underneath, my knees grated against stalactites of petrified chewing gum. At the front of each room stood a giant chalkboard on which the teacher wrote, and students copied, a course outline to be reiterated at the final exam.

Students addressed the teachers military style, with "Sir" at the beginning and end of each sentence. "Sir! May I go to the loo, Sir!" We wore uniforms consisting of shorts and knee socks, blazer and tie, and a flat-brimmed straw boater hat, all bearing the school colors in stripes of purple and gray. Uniforms were mandatory, not just at school but in any public place, day or night, even weekends. Compliance was policed by prefects—upperclassmen who got extra points for turning you in.

"Hey Yank," the boys called out to me in the hallway. I was the only American, thrust into a role of high visibility. If I belched without putting my hand to my mouth, they assumed all white boys did the same in the United States. I missed the anonymity and solitude of the Florida swamp, where amongst the alligators and snakes, all I represented was the human race.

Churchill was nearly an hour from home by bicycle, my only means of transport. A long ride, but it was the high point of my school life. The sunny, dry weather made it imperative to do things outside. I had brought with me a turquoise blue, ten-speed Japanese bike, and enjoyed shifting up and down according to the terrain—and my mood—as I weaved among the throngs of utilitarian cycles with their thick tires, hard leather seats, and push-rod brakes. I rode with a sense of freedom, assuming my fellow travelers felt the same way.

Then I passed work crews digging ditches along the road. Strong glistening arms pushed shovels in unison, while straw bosses barked commands as if lashing a race horse to go faster in the home stretch. They were bound to the dirt and had nowhere else to go, and I wondered what had I done, in my fifteen years, not to be one of them.

Once I ran across a car stalled at the side of the road. The driver jumped out and shouted "You! Boys!" at the riders approaching from behind. They promptly stopped, lay down their bicycles, and gave the car a push. They'll get a good tip, I thought, but there was no such exchange. The engine

snorted and the car vanished in the dust without a wave of thanks. None of the men looked surprised.

Feeling like a red-white-and-blue butterfly pinned to a cork board at school, I coveted my carefree commute on two wheels. So I was dismayed when the first week my vehicle broke down. I heard a high-pitched screech of metal on metal—worn-out brake pads. Remembering the caveat to shop downtown with my own kind, I headed that way, but en route I spied something that made me drag my foot to a stop.

Just off the busy main street, on a gravel lane, stood a sagging shack made of dusty, whitewashed wood. It had an open front and dirt floor, and a bicycle wheel lashed to a faded green sign that read “Ahmed’s.” I parked my bike and went in.

Entering from the sunny street, it was dark inside. But before long I could see a row of bicycles sitting upright on their stands, all serious work horses like the ones that were all over the streets. Behind the bikes was a dusty old motorcycle, a shop-worn relic that had been there a while. To the right was an opening to a small yard, strewn with scavenged bicycle parts. Weeds

sprouted from the rusty carcasses of junked motorcycles. It was like in my backyard in Florida, where I was surrounded by sprockets and wheels awaiting assembly into some kind of vehicle for my next exploration. I knew there was something here for me.

In the back of the shop, leaning against a makeshift plywood counter, stood a portly man in his late twenties with a cherubic face and thin mustache. His large brown eyes smiled at me. Stepping forward, he extended his hand.

“My name is Ahmed. What can I do for you?”

“I’m Cullen,” I replied, surprised at his formality. “Do you carry brake pads for the bicycle out there?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But nobody has parts for that machine.”

“I was afraid of that.” I turned to leave.

“Don’t go,” he said quickly. He reached into a box on the floor beside him, pulled out a fistful of small chunks of rubber with chrome backings, and spread them briskly on the counter. “These pads are the best I can do. They might work.”

“Might work?”

“In this country things don’t always go together. We make them

fit as best we can.”

I expected him to add, “You’re not in America, Yank, so get used to it.” Instead he invited me to sit down with him on a stool behind the counter.

“Smoke?” he asked with twinkling eyes, pulling out a trim, yellow and white paper box bearing the name “Matinee.” The top hinged up like a cigarette case, exposing a swatch of gold-colored foil, folded back to display crisp white cylinders lined up in a row.

Smoking was a way of life in Rhodesia, where tobacco was a major crop and cigarettes were tasty and cheap. Filtered Matinee were top of the line, selling for three shillings six pence (about fifty cents) for a box of fifty. At the bottom end was unfiltered “Star,” the black man’s weed, which cost “tupence” (about two cents) for a box of four. If a Churchill Prefect had spotted me at Ahmed’s with a cigarette in my mouth, he might have overlooked the smoke when he spied the school uniform I wasn’t wearing.

I nodded and plucked a filtered Matinee out of the box.

“Where do you come from?” I asked.

“I am from Syria. Very poor there. People starving. I came here

hoping for a better life.”

“I’m from Florida. We lived in the woods by a swamp, and I liked it there. But my Dad wanted to see the world.”

We chatted freely, and the brake pads fit. I had made my first friend.

After that, I often stopped at Ahmed’s on my way home from school. His shop was my sanctuary, a welcome respite from school and unrelenting exposure as The Yank. With Ahmed I felt no judgment and no intrusion. Sitting behind the counter facing the sunny, dusty lane, we talked and smoked. I brought my own pack as well, and the offering of a smoke—holding out an opened box with the foil wrapper folded back—became a ritual that reaffirmed our friendship. I didn’t tell anyone about my liaison on the wrong side of the tracks, unsure of what the consequences might be.

Elsewhere, friendship was hard to find. At school the boys continued to call out “Hey Yank” and then snickered and walked past. It was a long time before I finally heard a different greeting.

“Hey Mac,” said a voice behind me. “I’m Larry.” I turned to find a stocky, muscular boy with dark wavy hair and an overbite smile.

Mac was short for McVoy. Larry was a farm boy whose warmth more than made up for his lack of intellect. His family owned a tobacco farm where he would go to work after graduation, which should have been a year ago.

"I tell you Mac, you gotta watch your step around here. For bugger-all you can get The Cane." He leaned over close to my ear. "Headmaster—we call him Buzzard 'cause he looks like one—whacks you on the bum with a long stick... hell, it's more like a whip if you ask me." Raising his right hand to count on his fingers, he went on. "Late for school gets you two cuts. Three cuts if you don't do your lessons. Six is the most you can get. Don't mind your tongue with a teacher, or get caught in town without your purple and grays. Six is bloody hell, like it never stops. You wanna die."

"That bad, huh?" I said, a cramp grabbing my stomach.

"Not half," he went on. "Some blokes stuff newspaper in their pants, but if Buzzard finds out, he makes you bend over with your head under a table. Every cut jerks your back up so your head bangs against the table. Bloody hell, Mac," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Bloody hell."

The next time I was at Ahmed's, I told him what Larry had said.

"Oh yes, the flogging," said Ahmed. "It happens all over." He took a deep drag on his cigarette and slowly let it out, staring at the countertop. "The blacks get flogged more than anyone, some with canes more like a club."

My mind flashed on Benjamin, the houseboy. He brandished a smile, and then turned to show zebra-like stripes across his back. I wondered about the girl behind the tennis court fence. She's young and fragile, I thought, but still not exempt. And neither was I.

"I'm done for," I said to myself. "Never was much for rules."

Before long, I arrived at school fifteen minutes late, and was ambushed at the bike rack by a prefect. I asked what he was doing outside after the bell had rung, but he just glared at me, grabbed my arm with a pinching tight grip, and ushered me in to the headmaster.

The office was small and plain, furnished only with an oak desk, a couple of metal file cabinets, and a table on the side—the one Larry told me about. Standing behind his desk, the man they called Buzzard loomed tall and menacing.

His craggy face, pointy nose, and protruding Adam's apple, made him a ringer for the creepy scavenger that was his namesake. Leaning against the table close at hand was a slender, polished wood cane nearly three feet long.

For a moment I saw the headmaster—the highest ranking official in the school—as nothing more than a common thug, waiting for a victim to be brought in, then beating the crap out of him until the next one arrived. He impaled me with his steely gaze, which felt like punishment already. Slowly he stepped over and picked up his cane, and motioned me to bend over. My mind rushed back to Florida, where the swamp girl and I roamed blissfully, dampening life's jagged intrusions. Now, more than ever, I needed to be there.

The first stroke burned through me like a brush fire. The high octave throb raced down my legs and up my back, and stayed there sizzling. Worse than the pain was the panic that it would come again. The second stroke laid sharply into what felt like an open wound left by the first. I was as wretched as the houseboy, and the girl behind the fence, and just as powerless.

On the way back to my classroom, I passed a woman on her hands and knees scrubbing the hallway floor. This time I didn't mind so much, being more concerned with the sting that lingered in my pants. At least she wasn't out slogging in the dirt like the gangs of ditch diggers I saw along the roads.

Grueling as it was, my encounter with the headmaster was not my last. Somehow I was always getting into trouble, suffering two or three cuts a week due to tardiness, coming into class empty handed, and other misdemeanors. One time I forgot my tie, and tried to get by with a mock-up. I penned some stripes onto a piece of paper, and tucked it under the front of my collar.

"Bloody clever, Yank," said the prefect, sending me up anyway.

As the floggings continued, the headmaster's countenance began to change. What I had first assumed to be a look of sadistic glee, slowly settled into resignation, and finally distaste. If only the cycle could be broken, and we could go our separate ways.

"Ahmed, I'm not a trouble-maker," I said through the smoke drifting over the counter. I was sitting on my usual stool in full uniform, having just come from school.

"Why won't they leave me alone?"

"You offend them," he said gently.

"But I try like hell to stay out of arguments."

"You don't follow their rules," he said, as a truck rumbled past on the main road. It drowned out Ahmed's words, but I wasn't listening anyway.

"In America they left me alone."

"Let me tell you something." Ahmed got up from his stool, walked around to the front of the counter, and leaned over into my face. "The authorities know me as Ahmed the shopkeeper. I own a small stand in a run-down part of town where I sell bicycles to the black laborers so they can get to work. I don't offend anyone, so they leave me alone."

"But surely you take business away from the shops down town."

"Oh no. They don't want a black man walking in the door, even if he has money to buy something. So I let them in. I have no quarrel with these people. Without them I have no living."

"Don't offend anyone," I parroted, brushing a fallen cigarette ash off the counter top with the back of my hand. "That simple, is

it?"

"That, and friends in high places," said Ahmed with a sly grin. "I help them out, and they do the same for me."

This made me wonder. Did he think I was one of those friends? I did live in the biggest house on the hill, and was the son of an American attaché. I could buy gasoline at a tax-free government filling station. My diplomatic passport ushered me through customs with no questions asked, and I was immune from arrest anywhere in the country. Had I thought of it, I might have claimed immunity from The Cane. But even with all that, I really couldn't help anyone, not even myself.

"I have no strings to pull," I said.

"Of course not. You're still a schoolboy."

Relieved that Ahmed was not hitting me up for a favors, I went on with my own problems.

"So what can I do?"

"Don't offend the authorities at school, and they leave you alone."

"How do I do that?"

"Like I keep telling you; follow the rules."

"I'm not good at that. In America I missed homework and

other things. But they didn't seem to mind so much."

"How hard are you trying?"

"But what about that stupid school uniform rule?" I went on, not hearing him again. "I'm supposed to be wearing mine all the time, even in your shop. God knows I'm not a dandy, but I can't stand wearing the same as everyone else. Purple and gray stripes? I feel like a clown." Standing up, I did a half-hearted jig. "And these silly shorts are for kids."

Ahmed shook his head. "I'm just telling you..."

"OK. OK." I blew a smoke ring towards the alleyway. "I'll try harder at school, but forget about wearing these awful rags all the time."

That was the first time Ahmed spoke about race. At Churchill nobody talked about it openly, but now and then there were whisperings about attacks against white-owned farms by bands of renegade blacks. I had just overheard something about an incident in a nearby province where Larry's family had their farm.

"Aren't you afraid?" I asked my plowboy pal.

"Naw, the bloody Kaffirs don't scare me," he said quickly. "They're too stupid to know how to fight.

A good kick in the balls and they

crawl away."

A chill raced up my back and froze my jaw tight. Never had I heard such brutal talk, and from someone I called my friend. I imagined Benjamin, the houseboy, keeling over face down into the dirt. Chest pounding, I doubled my fists to tear the miserable hayseed apart. But instead I just glared at him. We had both leaped into different skins. Larry was not the gentle soul I knew, and I was not the guy who always tried like hell to stay out of arguments. It was a danger zone, and I had to get us both out of it.

"I'll be sixteen next week," I said. "Can't wait to get my driver's license."

"Jolly good, Mac," he replied. "When I work at the farm, my Pa's gonna to give me his old pickup truck." In an instant, the ugly intent vanished, and he was dreaming out loud about his first set of wheels.

It was true, I had been waiting all my life for the day I would be old enough to drive. At last I could pick up on what I started in Florida, building my own motorbike. Now I could buy one. Cycling was one thing, but motorized, I could go anywhere.

"Those little red Mopeds around town," I asked Ahmed,

"what do you think of them?"

"Very dangerous," he scowled. "You need weight, something that can move with the traffic." He pointed over the counter to a large black motorcycle standing next to the bicycles. "Matchless 500 cc, single cylinder—police bike," he said. "This is a strong machine. If you like, I make you special price—seventy-five pounds."

The Matchless had a dented gas tank, cracked seat and worn rubber footrests. But it looked like a dream machine to me. And at a price I could afford—about 200 American dollars.

"I'll take it," I declared. "Will you hold the bike for a couple of days? I have to tell my folks and get the money."

"Of course." He spread his arms grandly towards me. "Anything for my American friend."

That evening at the Ranche House, we finished dinner in the courtyard, and the others drifted inside, leaving my father and me alone with the lizards. Seeing my chance, I told him about the Matchless.

"Very dangerous," my father scowled. "Do you know how much those hulks weigh? You're just

a skinny kid. How will you keep it from tipping over when you're stopped at a red light? You should get a Moped."

"But Dad," I pleaded, "Those little mopeds are death traps. Everyone knows the bigger the bike, the safer it is. Just ask Ahmed."

"Who's Ahmed?"

I didn't want to let on that he was my friend, so I said as little as possible.

"Some guy who's selling the Matchless."

"Some guy who'll say anything to make a sale," said my father, tossing his napkin on the table like a Royal Flush.

"Come on, Dad," I pleaded, as he got up and started to leave. "I spend half my life puffing back and forth to school on that old bicycle." That ploy won him over—or wore him down. No matter that the ride was the high point of my day.

I leapt from the table and hurried to the front porch, keen to savor my victory. There my thoughts were preempted by a magnificent African sunset. The Ranche House was perched on a hill that overlooked Salisbury to the east, but the house itself faced west, away from town as if turning its

back upon that enclave of exclusivity. From the front porch I looked west across vast pristine savanna, habitat of the people long before any settlers arrived. Fingers of orange reached down from the sky and touched the terrain with such tenderness as to say; one day this land will have its champions.

The next morning, cash in hand, I dashed down to Ahmed's. I burst into the shop high as a cloud, only to find that the Matchless was gone.

"Where's my bike?" I asked.

"Oh, the Matchless? It was sold."

My stomach dropped. Ahmed had been my shelter in a place where I was over-exposed and under-protected. Now he too was one of its hazards. I cast about for an explanation. Perhaps one of his friends in high places wanted the Matchless for his son. Might Ahmed have been forced to sacrifice our friendship to appease the powers that be? I didn't want to consider the obvious: that someone had offered him more money.

My Syrian comrade was an enigma. He seldom talked about himself, and I, being less than forthcoming myself, never asked. Just the other day a man showed

up in the alleyway. Ahmed excused himself and walked out to greet him. Their words were muffled, but I could see Ahmed wringing his hands and rocking from one foot to another. When the man left, Ahmed returned to his stool shaking, beads of sweat behind his ears.

"Where were we?" was all he said.

I wondered what Ahmed was up to. Perhaps he was trafficking in illegal arms on the black market, or worse, drugs and prostitution. Better I didn't know.

I waited for his kind, soft voice to somehow make it right. But nothing. So with tight fists and flushed face, I turned and stepped out to the sun-parched lane, anxious to get away before I said something I would regret.

Ahmed ran after me. "Wait!" he called out. "I have something else. You'll like it better."

I stopped and turned to look back. "Oh yeah, what?"

He beckoned me to the yard behind the shop. "Just got this in. BSA Golden Flash, 650 cc twin cylinder. Better bike all around. You can have it for the same seventy-five pounds."

Like the Matchless, it was a retired police motorcycle, but this

one had no dents on the gas tank, no cracks in the leather seat, and there was still lots of rubber on the footrests. The missed Matchless vanished from my teenage mind, replaced by this dazzling BSA!

But then I remembered: this man had betrayed me once. Could he be trusted now? I looked at Ahmed with dark, accusing eyes.

Ahmed stepped over in front of me. "Listen here, this is a great bike," he said in a low, earnest tone, looking me straight on. "You have my promise, as long as you own this machine, it will always start on the first kick. I'm telling you, my friend, always the first kick."

"Fat chance," I spat back at him. "You always complain that those ex-police beasts are hard to rouse. First kick every time?"

Ahmed didn't answer. He just stood there facing me without a blink. I wanted to believe he was still my friend. Looking down, I reached into my pocket for my handful of cash, and handed it to him.

Grabbing the handle bars with both fists, I climbed onto the BSA and stood straight-legged with my right foot on the starter lever. My body weight plunged the lever towards the ground, and just as

Ahmed had promised, the engine roared to life. Aiming down the alleyway, I gunned the throttle and popped the clutch. With a throaty rumble between my legs, the ungainly hunk of steel leapt forward like a gazelle, kicking up dust and scattering gravel that tinkled against the thin walls of Ahmed's Bicycle Shop. The wind was on my cheeks like never before.

The next day I motored to school, cruising in the car lane where the sea of cyclists was just a blur in the dual rearview mirrors of sparkling chrome. Arriving at the school bicycle rack, I parked my prize and had just stepped back for another admiring gaze when a prefect blocked my view.

"Hey Yank, the headmaster wants you in his office."

"Can't be," I said. "I'm ten minutes early."

"Just come with me," he said with a sly smile, his envy no doubt adding sweetness to his mission.

"McVoy, you were seen on the street without your uniform," said the headmaster in a low growl. Without saying more, he reached for his cane and motioned for me to bend over.

This time it would be six for sure. I recalled Larry's words, "Six

is bloody hell, like it never stops. You wanna die." Two or three cuts were bad enough, but my God, I never thought this could happen to me. In my mind, I tried to escape to the swamp, but blissful illusions of solitude didn't help me. Feeling fearfully alone, I closed my eyes and cast about for help. As I did, I felt the presence of others around me. First Benjamin, then Sarah, and then the girl behind the fence. After them came the ditch diggers and cyclists along the road. Their faces paraded before my mind's eye. We're all in this together, I thought. Nobody is safe.

Like a lightning bolt piercing a sunny sky, The Cane was the assault that enforced the lopsided social order around this placid countryside. Severe pain and the fear of more, or even worse—worse than might happen in the office of the headmaster of a school for the children of the ruling class.

The ominous bird man hovered over me and raised his cane to strike. I cringed into the floor and held my breath. But after a moment nothing had come down.

"I say, McVoy," he said in a nearly casual tone, "do you have corporal punishment in America?"

"No Sir. We don't, Sir," I

answered, breathing again but still bending over. I was speaking of my own school in Florida, having no clue about the rest of the country.

"You don't say. Why not?"

Once again, Ahmed's voice was in my ear. If ever there was a time not to offend, this was it. But a certain answer was on its way from my mind to my mouth, and before I could intervene, out it came.

"Because, Sir, it's considered barbaric, Sir."

The headmaster gasped. I braced myself for a cut that would come out the other side. Nothing came.

"Young man, listen to me," he said. "The headmaster's duty is to maintain discipline. It's not an easy job, and I tell you, most chaps your age need The Cane."

"Yes Sir. I understand, Sir." All I could do was keep the Sirs coming. Any moment the talking would stop and the thrashing would begin. But then he spoke again.

"I said most chaps need The Cane, but not all." He lowered his weapon and set it back against the table. "Go back to your classroom," he sighed, "and please try to do better next time."

My new wheels gave me a

fresh sense of freedom, and spun out another chapter in my childhood wandering. I rode all over Southern Rhodesia: up and down the bare stone face of Mount Dombashawa, and through the jungle basin of the Zambezi River. I rolled along the beaches of Mozambique, through the Copper Belt region of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and on the Great North Road in Nyasaland (now Malawi). Ahmed's promise held true. The BSA always started on the first kick.

As I rode, an ethereal jet stream followed me and imprinted the course of my explorations from beginning to end. The path of my journey drew a divine portrait of this land, which was both celebrating its humble majesty and struggling to find its voice. As the miles ticked by on the odometer, I neared the end of the search that had begun in the Florida swamp. I felt safe and at home, and breathed a quiet sigh.

My travels showed me freedom of the wind-in-your-face kind. The speak-your-truth kind was another matter. Far from being emboldened by my triumph with the headmaster, I chose instead quiet obedience. My invisible liaison with the houseboy,

the maid, and the girl behind the fence found no voice. I simply held my breath, waiting to return to the land of the free. Until then, my sympathies would remain unsoiled. Or so I thought.

Two years had passed when I left for America. A boat took me up the West Coast of Africa and through the Suez Canal to dock in Venice, where I checked into a small, back-street hotel. In the hallway, I came across a woman on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. I was startled to see her there, and wanted to rush over, lift her to her feet, and brush off her soiled smock. It looked so wrong to me: such down and dirty work for a white woman.

BONES

ANN MINOFF

the small bones
in both my hands are stiff painful
my crazy sister's finally moved in
a dog will fix everything
something to take care of

my mother loves being held
she is dying
and I am already so cold
when she curls into my shoulder
her face against my chest

I look over her white head
and watch the sky download yet more water
into the river on the already flooded streets
against the windows
in my face down my clothes
water smooth clear
time dissolves each one of us

WHY I RETURN TO WEST AVENUE, DRIVING DOWN THE STREET SLOW

DEVON MOORE

Everywhere I look is an eight ball and slanting green felt covered slate, the future I daydreamed, the bull I rode down to the river, the barrel over the falls, the length of a finger and a thumb, wrapped around a wrist. The way tape works.

Everything I taste is a heart, is the mother I would have killed, is the bed the girl burned, the eyes I closed and closed, the queen of spades, the card of the sun, is what I turned over under the dark closet eyesight and the cigarette butt's glow. The skeleton baby brother I talked to in the toilet. The stories I wrote. There was the dancing in the bedroom and the baseball in the kitchen, the lamp I didn't break, the teeth that broke out, the home alone, the mother I saw cry, her resurrection, the stab, the way I hear everything. Don't listen. Don't listen. Don't leave well enough alone.

Everything my mouth reaches for is a blister, the arm of the candelabra that fell off when it got too hot and everything I don't hear is rosebuds in the bathtub with the clawed feet, the water too hot, how I keep taking my foot out and putting it back in, taking my foot out and putting it back in, the dial tone and deep breaths. How the cold bruises the lungs and the way the snow accumulates around a tire. How we dig. How we dig. The building next door that burned down, the black spot, the girl who drowned with flowers, the alphabet and elements taped to a wall, a tongue mouthing zinc, two palms, cupping a pink-yellow heart, steering a wheel, tasting sweet.

THE SKELETON PIER

DEVON MOORE

All this falling I saw in the Carolinas,
the summer the eye of the hurricane let loose
its calm, the red ants hunting for safety, biting
my sandaled ankles, remains—the dirt is sand here,
the house is still there, the pier is broken wood,
we're always shifting—dark grey bone-hard chairs,
the porch on which a bright green lizard froze.
Do you know there are companies that rent the beds
on which our fathers die? The metal frame and mattress
have been aired out and sent to the home
of a different dying man—

We were surprised then, at all this falling,
even though it was the most certain thing—my father
teetering over the threshold, my shock at beholding him,
a skeleton pier, too tall and narrow to stand—
and this was all before the tumors moved, hinged
black masses on white spine and he would fall
down to the ground every time he rose—

See the scene I replay, the restraints, beige
and velcroed, the complicated straps used to
hold him down when he wouldn't stop standing and falling—
standing and falling—*This is for your own safety—*

Eyes wide, the same shade of coal as mine—
see the terrified ocean animal in him crawl
up to peer behind his eyelids, see it reach out
its deliberate strength and peel back each strap
trapping him down, see my chest bone cracking
open to show this hurricane heart still
circling hope—*please, don't die...*

Later, when the nurse came in and saw
the disassembled straitjacket splayed out
like flayed skin drying across a cannibal's hearth—
she said to me, *if you're going to unstrap him, we won't be
held responsible for his safety*—and when I tried
to explain that it wasn't me, she said,
it's not possible, he's not strong enough—

I should have said then that she had no idea
how strong we can be—the animal of my father's life
was heaving itself over the metal bed frame.

It wanted to stand.

SCORE FOR LIKNESS

ALLYSON PATY

Taste pennies out of nowhere and my nose is about to bleed.

Self-portrait in which you eat from the eyes of the dead.

The family doctor says *Not pennies. Iron.*

Self-portrait of Grandfather's immigrant grandfather laying track.
That old kind of work with its pincers and sweat.

Self-portrait the morning the tunnel collapses.

Say my face is a ribbon cutting.
My face is broken ground.

You know that the water you're drinking is ancient.

Self-portrait as condensation.
Condensation as effigy.

Every day of your life you have been a woman.

What about when you're bone char.
What about dirt.

Say your life's work.

Say burning the haze out of summer.

ASSAULT F-150

**ALISON
PELEGRIN**

I never draw on tombstones with pieces of brick.
I'm careful about who at the beauty shop

sweeps up my hair—because of voodoo, because
God don't like ugly, and because I'm spooked

—even in daylight—of the ghosts I might conjure.
In New Orleans, voodoo would get blamed for deer

played open and hung inverted from trees, for an owl's wing,
its white underside lifting from asphalt to speak

the language of the fan. But in the rural south, across
Lake Pontchartrain, no one's sneaky about violence.

Blacktop bears the smear of an endless game of assault
F-150. A pattern—every other mile yields a dead dog

pounded by ritual wheels, the bright entrails spilled
like a gallon of paint. Shooting skeet and shooting stray wild piglets

that remain after pit bulls pin the boar down for the blade—
no worries if your aim is off, because all creatures

surrender eventually. All creature-fur is rained on,
swells until the hind leg lifts and the tanned skin splits—

a feast for articulate crows, and buzzards, mute,
hunched like tombstones among wasp-haunted fruit.

BARE LIFE

NINA PURO

There is the recent past and there is the distant past. There is the sound of windchimes—eerie, somehow. As if they know something in the low tones, as if they are warning in the high tones. As if the ghosts are back. In the close-packed concrete room, I could see the whorls in the girl's ears, the darkness that hung around her—the sense of unnamable damage, something torn, rent—and that was part of it: the witnessing. The way her hair fell in dark wings along her scalp, the mark the blade had imprinted. A long gash shorter than the length of what we could understand—scale, irrevocability.

UNDERPAINTING

NINA PURO

In the kitchen we whistle with the kettle. Our shoulders slump in our chairs. We need to buy salt. Sometimes we still laugh. All the smoke blowing strangely, sideways. Following us. Later, when the room is full of smoke, it hangs perfectly still as if waiting for us to speak; as if we were in a painting without knowing it. In the painting, your hands would not be as hard and never curl themselves into fists. The light should slant on both of us equally, and we should look lit from within, our skin soap-commercial clear, my brows perfectly plucked. People who would never debate about which book to do rails off of. The folds in the blankets behind us should cascade like togas on statues. The room's composition as well-balanced as our guileless faces in the painting, turned toward each other at three-quarters.

But there are things you should know. One thing: my voice doesn't waver when I lie anymore. There is so much we don't notice. Under the table, there are feet and legs wriggling. The upper halves of the bodies do not move. How much I wanted to be left alone. How much there is of lonely in strangeness. Another thing: she took the furniture when she left, so there are lawn chairs to sit on, but I don't mind. I have been sitting here a long time—years, maybe.

Quiet fires burning strange, casting a second set of shadows in the room. I want to say, tell me who to love. Make me the muddy water

of your well. I do not care about clean things the way she did—I know we are not that. Let the painting show us leaning toward each other. In the painting, what we are doing should look like a good idea. I should look like someone who is good, who would never make a man hurt her. You'd look like someone who never would. How much there is of lonely in strangeness. It ought to show us like people who would bake things for fun, things not from a pre-mixed box and/or containing scheduled substances. Who would spend their Sundays scrapbooking and watching the game with their folks. Who do not shake sometimes, mornings. It should show us as people who would have Christmas cards printed, who would, indeed, take the photo in this very room, the smoke making us glow. With a pet and/or small child. As if I would sign it from all of us, with a heart dotting the I.

IN RUSSIAN, THE NAME FOR WOLF IS VOLK

LANA RAKHMAN

A ceramic woman
floats in the Volga,

either swimming or drowning [can you

hear the locusts?]
she sings of forgotten

poets [Tsvetaeva, do you see her?] she
wants to touch the bottom, the rocks

[fish bones under the sand] get stuck

in her mouth, but her
throat [that pearl

of a tongue] submerges,
tastes salt. Now

cleaner, quietly [she
waves or paddles]

against the current, the Volk-matushka

[wolf-mother] holds
her feet close.

Reservoirs will be named after that

voice [Gorky, please
help her]. Curves

on body and bank; indistinguishable

from air [they wear her down, down
into] a picture of momentary life—then

back under, collecting
the Caspian sea.

SURROUND SOUND

**KATHARINE
RAUK**

Harold had an orgasm every time
he saw, or even thought about,
a safety pin. His wife overlooked
this idiosyncrasy because she found it saved her
a lot of trouble, and even when the seizures began
to lock Harold in their terrible embrace
so he thrashed about the bedsheets like a rainbow trout
baptized by air, she remained unmoved.

But one Thursday, when Harold reported
that he'd received word—O
holy word, word of low slung creeks laving rocks,
word of blue bottle glass, phlox, and every empty
straight backed chair, word of the wind's susurrations
in grass and a feather poised on the lip
of a cloche, word of 4am and its yardbird wings
in the alley behind Hotel LaRue—yes, word

made manifest and sounding in his ear
as clear as the sheen on Gabriel's horn, as sure
as the microwave's beam mystically pierces
the deepest recesses of a bean burrito—she decided
enough was enough. The doctors informed Harold

that he had a tumor nestled in his temporal lobe
and it must immediately be removed.
Afterwards Harold would pass

his wife's sewing basket without a thrill,
or cruise the third aisle of Rite Aid over lunch
without even an itch of titillation, or hear the cardinal
as just a cardinal and not a vowel bleeding secrets
from the spare branches over the snow. And so
they shuttered the pistachio-sized room in his brain
where God, fiddling with the antennae on a shortwave radio
was looping, "Come in... Come in... Come in..."

AH, NO CHOO

MICHELE RUBY

After tap class I hurry to pick up my mother for a lunch date on the way to the hospital—one last fling for her taste buds before the chemotherapy renders them unreliable. Chinese? Why not? We make bad jokes: moo goo bed pan, surgeon's chop suey, the last supper as ciao mein. We pull into the parking lot of the Inn of Three Happiness and I shock my mother by pointing out that the restaurant's sign sports three pandas who appear to be happily engaged in group sex. She shocks me by laughing, a musical trill that dies suddenly, like a card flipped over.

"Mom?"

"Damn strangest thing. I can't catch my breath. It feels like half a sneeze. You know—'Ah' but no 'choo'! I feel like I'm wearing an iron bra. Isn't that what a heart attack is supposed to feel like?" She is suddenly pale, a black-and-white version of herself.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"Take me to the emergency room. I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here and guess."

By the time we near the hospital, her color returns. I am looking at her, not at the street signs, and I miss the turn into the emergency room entrance. All the streets are now one

way against us. At the red light on the corner, my mother gets out of the car. "So I'll walk the half block back to the emergency room. I—"

"Mom, you can't just stroll into the ER complaining of a heart attack." I know my interruption will be futile.

"Why not?" She shrugs as she shuts the car door. "I'm feeling better. It'll be fine." She strides toward the ER portico.

Another half block and a parking space appears like a gap in a row of teeth. I jog breathlessly to the ER entrance where, for the moment, no one is bleeding.

By the time I negotiate the ER labyrinth and feed some insurance cards to the Cerberus at the desk, my mother is talking recipes with a nurse while her blood pressure is being taken. It's a little high, but the nurse, whom my mother is already calling Gracie, assures us that pre-chemo stress is not uncommon, and what my mother is experiencing is an anxiety attack rather than a heart attack.

Gracie escorts us to a small cubicle to wait for the doctor to confirm my mother's diagnosis, but she is called away before my mother finishes advising her on how to make bourbon balls. My mother sits on the gurney, swinging her legs and humming under her breath. She looks surprisingly polished; her dark hair has not yet begun to desert its sinking ship and her Rum Raisin lipstick is unsmudged by any hint of lunch.

I am embarrassed to discover that I'm hungry, and I can't seem to remember what to do with my own arms and legs. My feet are working out the new tap step we learned in class that morning: flap spank dig step, flap shuffle dig step. The shuffle crosses over and the step changes direction unexpectedly. No doctor materializes from behind the drawn curtain. As triage priorities, we have been demoted. We can overhear conversational bits, some urgent, some steady, as the nurses and orderlies bustle by. I pull the curtain open so we won't be forgotten. Flap spank dig step, flap shuffle dig step.

"What is that? Slow it down so I can follow it." My

mother hops off the gurney and begins to pick up the steps.

Our flats make a soft slapping sound on the linoleum. We are wedged in between the gurney and a small equipment table, moving laterally toward and then away from the doorway as the combination changes sides. Our feet are perfectly synchronized and our voices murmur in unison, "Flap spank dig step, flap shuffle dig step." With a tilt of her head, my mother brings us on stage, in a pool of spotlight. She smooths her hands across the air and we are wearing top hats and tails.

A doctor stands at the door staring and then glances hastily at his clipboard. "Which one of you is the patient?" he asks. We finish the combination. The doctor claps, my mother bows, and I step out of the spotlight. Our last shared moment is over, and my mother moves toward the steps that cannot be shared.

YOKO SUGIYAMA

NOEL SLOBODA

The steady grunt and bang at New Year
comforted her after her husband
disappeared; she never understood why
women shouldn't wield a *mochi* mallet.

Her daughter helped her, turning
wet rice as it began to take shape.
The steady grunt and bang, the shaft
chafing her palms, reminded her

of Kimitake, brush flashing across parchment,
slicing through sheets, as though he traded
blows with someone on the other side
of the page. He had a different face

thudding against her in early morning,
the same one he wore when pressing
barbells toward heaven—as if
gods accepted iron sacrifices.

HOMEMAKING

GEORGE SUCH

A dung beetle stands on his hind legs and rolls a monkey turd forward against a vertical rise of the stone steps I'm climbing, near the top of the Daulatabad Fort. He pushes the olive-colored sphere up the step as high as he can reach. Then, unbalanced, it falls and knocks him on his back.

He wants to make it his home, an Indian boy says, who's come to see what I've been spying. They eat the dung and lay their eggs inside it. We watch the beetle push his boulder up the step, wincing as it bowls him over, rolling him down to a lower step, holding it tight against his body. And he won't let go. He keeps trying to hoist it up.

TO LIVE BY THE LAKE

BY

RANDOLPH THOMAS

**The John Gardner
Memorial Prize
for Fiction**

I grew up in the mountains, beside a natural lake that covered about fifty acres. My father drowned in the lake a year or so after I was born, under circumstances that were never completely clear to me, and throughout my childhood my mother forbade me to go near the water. Like many of the families that lived by the lake, we had a pier, but after my father drowned, my mother put a chain across it, for my protection and the protection of anyone who might wander onto our property.

In the garage, there was a long green aluminum boat that had belonged to my father. It too was forbidden to me, and my mother kept it piled with old flowerpots, newspapers, a birdcage, and boxes of old magazines and books, anything she could think of to hide it from view. At times she talked of selling the boat, but she kept putting it off. I hoped she would never sell the boat. When I was very young I would stand and look at it for hours, memorizing the texture and hue of the paint, which was worn down and chipped away by many long-ago trips into the water. Sometimes I gathered up courage and touched the boat, and the bow felt cold like it still held the temperature of the lake water. I imagined what it was like to sit in the boat as it slid into the water. I could feel the oars in my hands, see the sky over my head while I drifted.

My parents had only been married for two or three years when my father drowned. My mother parted with most of his things easily. She got rid of his guns and fishing gear, his old Army uniforms and other clothes, but there were still pictures of him around. A photo from my parents' wedding hung above the stairs, and there were a few of his army, fishing and hunting pictures hidden away. I would eventually discover those, along with pictures of my mother's other lovers and friends, of her life before she came to live by the lake. There was also an old Army surplus cot in the garage, and I sometimes unfolded it and lay down on it. I would open his toolbox and go through it, taking out the tools, examining them and playing with them

carefully when I knew my mother was out of earshot.

I claimed even then to remember my father although my only memory of him came from a time when I was so young it may have been imagined. It was in the evening, and my parents were entertaining friends. They were in the next room eating and drinking. Maybe they were playing a game or watching television. All I know is that I heard their voices. I was in a playpen in my room, with a girl, the child of the people who were visiting. Hearing the adults, I grasped the mesh wall of the playpen and called out. The adults came into the room. I stared up at my mother, at the two people I didn't recognize, and at my father, the man who had to be my father, darker than my mother, with short dark hair. He stared down at me and smiled. He made his hands into fists and told me I had to fight. I shouldn't let anyone push me around.

No one was pushing me around, I wanted to tell him. It was just the girl and I in the playpen, and she was doing nothing, playing with some plastic stars. I called out because I was lonely for the people I knew best. Not because I was afraid.

Don't be a sissy, he said. I won't raise a sissy. He put his fists up in front of him like a prizefighter, and the others laughed. My mother laughed.

During the day, my mother helped me load my dump truck with gravel. She clapped her hands when I emptied it. When she waxed the floor, I rode on the mop. She pulled me across the hardwood floors. We got up early every morning, listened to the farm report on the radio, and ate breakfast. The house smelled of bacon and coffee.

By the time I was five or six, when my mother could no longer deny me playtime away from her, I'd slip into the woods, come to a place at the edge of the evergreens, behind the big rocks, where I could watch the lake. Mysterious items, trash and dead animals, lay along the shore. I longed to go closer and study them, but there was no place close to the water where I was

out of view of the house.

Sometimes even then, I dreamed about the lake, about riding in the green boat, but more often floating on my back. Whenever I submerged, I felt dizzy and disoriented, too weak to fight my slow descent under the water, which appeared gray in some places from shadows of clouds and birds and the moon. And worse, even scarier, were the shadows in the lake, darkening the water below the surface, hiding things that stayed down there, hiding the bottom. My arms and legs were dead weight, my body grew heavier, sank deeper, and I could not, with all my strength, lift myself.

My grandmother, who was tall and stern with thick glasses, came to stay with us, to watch me while my mother worked. My grandmother liked board games, but she accused me of cheating. When she read the newspaper at the kitchen table, I sat under the table looking at her long legs. When I rode on the side of the couch, on the edge, she saw me through the window. She came in the house and said, What are you doing that for?

I didn't answer because I wasn't sure myself.

My grandmother said I really shouldn't do that, and if I ever did, I should make sure to do it where no one else could see me. I should never do it in public. She patted my head and said it would be a secret between the two of us.

My grandmother talked about the lake while I was in bed, getting ready for my afternoon nap. She talked about swimming in the lake.

What's it like? I said, although I was afraid of what she might tell me.

The water is refreshing, she said. If it's hot outside, the water cools me down. I can sprinkle it on my arms and legs. I can lie still and float. I can swim.

At night, I dreamed about my father under the water. I saw his hair moving in waves above his body. I saw his gray, leathery skin. I ran to my mother's room, woke her up, and

she held me in bed beside her.

My mother always bathed me at the sink with a washcloth, but my grandmother lifted me into the tub. I sat between her legs while she filled the tub. The water was warm. When it began to rise around us, I started gasping for breath, but she sprinkled the water over my head, on my skin. Trust me, she said. She held me between her legs. She brushed her fingers over me, rubbed them between my legs. The water heated me up. When we got out, the water stayed on us. My grandmother rubbed me with the towel. She said I was not to tell my mother.

It's sad, her fear, my grandmother said. Your father, what happened to him, all of that is long over.

Despite my grandmother's asking me not to, I told my mother what she had said and done. It was in the morning, before my mother left for work, after more of my nightmares. My mother was putting on her make-up. I lay in bed and watched her while I spoke.

My mother said she couldn't do anything about it now. She was in a hurry to leave, but I didn't have to do the things my grandmother said. In fact, I should play in the woods as much as I wanted today.

I did as my mother suggested. I stood in the woods and watched my grandmother call me. When I was so hungry I had to return for lunch, my grandmother wanted to know where I'd been. She appeared worried and asked me to stay close to the house in the afternoon, but as soon as I'd finished eating I ran into the woods.

My grandmother left abruptly, after a tearful, awkward goodbye, during which she seemed to want to tell us something, to make a parting statement, but feared my mother, who might, at the wrong word, send her away without any goodbye. I was sorry and not sorry for what I'd done. It was what I'd felt I had to do, and I stood stiffly by my mother, holding her hand, as my grandmother kissed me and went away.

Who would look after me for the rest of the summer? My mother told me about the Crislips, our neighbors, a farm family who lived a couple of miles away in the direction of town. She told me about the Crislip daughters, the beautiful Laura, who was finishing high school. Laura and Mrs. Crislip would both look after me. The younger daughter, Ginger, was close to my age. We would be playmates. Mrs. Crislip was a warm woman, a real Christian, my mother assured me.

My mother said the Crislip girls were missing their father too. He had gone off and left them. My mother said I was not to point out this connection I had to them. It was a secret.

A man who worked the farm would be there. He was the uncle, the brother of the missing father. I would have to get used to using the toilet outside, and other things. All of it would be good for me, and I would be a long way from the dangerous lake.

The next day I met the Crislips. Their house was much older than ours, with big rooms, high ceilings, and a tin roof. The Crislips kept hogs, chickens, and a few cows. Aside from the outside toilet, they had other interesting things: a washing machine in the kitchen with two big spools that mashed the clothes together before Mrs. Crislip hung the clothes on the line behind the house, and a stove in the living room with a bucket of timber, or sometimes coal, sitting beside it. The Crislips had what seemed to me a big barn. Mrs. Crislip was a tall, freckled blond; she wore flowery farm dresses and called everyone honey. Laura, the oldest daughter, was a thin wispy redhead. Ginger was a year younger than I, with light red hair, almost blond, and very pale skin. The uncle was tall and thin, in overalls and a straw hat. He only grunted at me when our paths crossed. Mostly Ginger and I played *Shoots and Ladders* and other games, and on nice days we played outside.

When I was inside the house, I avoided looking at the pictures of Mr. Crislip, the missing father. They were all around the rooms, much more on display than the pictures

of my father in my home, but the Crislips' pictures were very much like ours. Mr. Crislip was also in the Army. In their wedding pictures, he held Mrs. Crislip exactly as my father held my mother in our pictures. Mr. Crislip looked like my father in our pictures, looked like the man staring down at me in the playpen: stout and ruddy, with dark hair and eyes. If I looked at the pictures, when I dared to, it appeared that his lips moved, that he spoke to me, saying my name the way my own father would say it. Again and again, I asked my mother about Mr. Crislip, and she squirmed uneasily in the car the way I had squirmed when my grandmother, or others, had accused me of cheating at games. My mother repeated that he had left them high and dry, he had skipped town. She had known him. Well, she had met him once or maybe a few times. Was he ever in our house? No, not that she remembered. Had he known my father? Yes.

When the summer ended I began the first grade. In the afternoons I got off the bus at the Crislips' house and stayed with them until five o'clock, when my mother came home from work. Some afternoons in the winter, the uncle sat in the living room by the stove rubbing his long hands. I drew or watched TV with Ginger, or we played games. The uncle snorted and coughed. When he spoke to me I didn't understand him, but it didn't seem to bother him. He smiled or laughed, and I saw that he was missing most of his teeth.

Laura rarely helped her mother or looked after me, but some days she sat at the kitchen table talking to her mother. Sometimes I sat where I could see under the table. Laura's legs were long like my grandmother's and smooth without stockings. I watched her and went into the living room. I climbed onto the armrest of the chair. I lay across it, rode it, rubbing myself against the armrest. Ginger sat on the floor coloring, pretending she didn't see me. The back door opened, someone was coming. Although it was hard for me to stop,

I stopped. I climbed down and lay on the floor beside Ginger and pretended to look at what she was doing. One day while I was riding the armrest of the chair, I looked up and saw the uncle watching me through the screen door. He stared at me, smiled, and walked on.

At school I had a few friends, kids who had the same sense of humor as me, who liked science fiction and horror movies, who were also allowed to stay up late watching television, who read some of the same comic books and monster magazines. None of these friends rode my bus, but some of the kids who did ride it knew enough about me to call me names, to whisper stories that I was a bastard, or that my father had molested me and gone to prison, or that my mother had murdered my father, had hidden his body in the lake. My only friend on the bus was Ginger, and Ginger was not like me. But Ginger sat beside me every day telling me about her conversations at school, about friendships that were less than she believed them to be. Sometimes at her house I caught her cheating at board and card games. There weren't many games or toys at the Crislips' house, and many of the toys there were broken, the games suffered from lost pieces. Once I brought a pair of gold-framed glasses that had belonged to my great-grandmother to school for Show and Tell, and I couldn't resist showing them to Ginger that afternoon. She wanted to wear them, and we fought over them, pulling them apart. When I showed the broken glasses to my mother, she became so angry I thought she might black out, but she recovered herself. I still couldn't stay on my own in the house beside the lake, she said, and the broken glasses were part of the price we had to pay.

At night, I fought sleep and snuck into the living room because channel 27 broadcast monster movies between midnight and four. I watched *Son of Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman*, and *Dracula*, but my favorite monster movies were *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* and its sequels.

Many days as I walked into the woods, I felt the pull of the lake and glanced that way, half expecting, maybe even hoping, to see the creature rising up from the water.

One day when Ginger was watching TV and I was riding an armrest of the chair, Mrs. Crislip came into the room. She grabbed me by the collar and lifted me up.

We don't do that, she said. Not in my house.

I sat down on the floor, and she kept watching me, her eyes blazing. Before it was time for my mother to pick me up, I walked out in the front yard. Mrs. Crislip watched me through the living room window. I waited and when I saw my mother's car, I ran to stop her before she turned up the driveway.

It was May, only a few weeks before summer vacation. In the car, on the way home, I said, This summer I want to stay by myself. My mother was quiet at first. I was sure she would react in the way she always had, and I was a little afraid of returning to the Crislips' house, but this time my mother said she'd think about it. I'm sure she'd known this moment was coming, had dreaded it since my father's death. When we arrived home, she led me down to the chained pier and repeated her fears and warnings. There is your father, she said. That is how he died.

Yes, I would be careful, I promised. Yes, I would avoid the dangerous water. I would never go on the lake without her permission. No, I would stay away from it always. Period.

My mother hugged me, and I vowed to keep my promises. I stayed by myself that summer, contemplating the lake from a safe distance.

I was fifteen when my mother saw the uncle's obituary in the newspaper. We were eating breakfast, and my mother read the obituary to me, then handed me the paper. In the picture, the uncle was wearing a suit. He looked more haggard now, but had the same long, craggy face. I read the column quickly,

the list of the living and dead relatives, a brother living and a brother dead. I remembered the loose connection my mind had once drawn between Ginger's father and my own. It seemed silly to me, and yet I was still curious.

Didn't you say he was strange? my mother said. Sounds like he'd wrecked his brain with drink.

My mother gave me a judgmental glance. She'd started dying her hair, and she looked almost pretty, almost young, when she was dressed up and made up for work. By this time, I had confronted her numerous times about my father's disappearance in the lake. She'd said his body had never been recovered, then she said it had. I wanted to see his grave, but she claimed he had none. My father had been cremated, she'd said, his ashes spread over the mountains he loved. I wanted to see his death certificate. She had it somewhere, but finding it would take pains. She'd come up with it if I really needed to see it. When I pressed her, she would cry. Why was I picking at old wounds? My father was dead, and we were together, we were a family. Wasn't that enough? When I said I was going to write to the hall of records for his death certificate, she became so withdrawn and depressed, I promised her I'd leave my father's death alone. However, I spent hours in the town library reading newspapers on microfilm about the college student who disappeared, whose skeleton was found years later when the lake dried up for a season, and about the woman who was abducted from the Holiday Inn lounge, who was brought to a cabin near the lake, raped and beaten to death with a steel-toed boot. There were lots of unpleasant stories about the lake, but none that fit the name and the timeframe I was looking for.

My mother and I fought over matters that cropped up: my bad grades and cutting school. She complained about my roaming the woods and walking the road to town alone, about my coming home late. She was tired of hearing my excuses.

You want to talk about lame excuses, I said, but I didn't

carry it any farther. We both knew what I meant.

We've all made mistakes, she said. She said she ought to sell the place, move us out of there, away from the lake. It had been a mistake to stay so long.

We didn't speak for hours, sometimes days, moving through the house separately, knowing each other's patterns, and then, in the hallway, as we passed each other, she'd mumble something, and I would throw my arms around her, and we would both apologize.

One night, drunk and stoned, I took the sledgehammer from the garage and carried it down to the pier, which creaked with each of my steps. Glancing back at the house, at my mother's dark window, I raised the sledgehammer high above my head. I brought the hammer down, easily breaking the rusted chain. Stepping back, wobbling, I dropped the sledgehammer and it thudded onto the pier. I leaned on the handrail, which shifted with my weight, and vomited in the water. A catfish swam to the surface, and I stared down at it, then into the eddy where it dipped under. The water was murky, impossible to see into. A few dead ducklings had washed up along the shore, and their twisted, sand-covered bodies lay by the weeds and small flat rocks. The pier and the water swayed under me, gravity beckoned me to go lifeless, to crumple and fall.

In the morning, neither my mother nor I spoke of what had happened although I was sure she'd been aware of it even as it was happening, that she had perhaps watched me from the window of her bedroom, stricken with fear that I would fall into the lake.

After my mother had gone to work, I took the newspaper with the uncle's obituary out of the trash. I hid behind a tree in the woods and watched the uncle's burial in the small family graveyard at the back of the Crislips' property. It was early March. I watched all of the Crislips gathered together. The mother's long hair had turned gray. Laura, who was married, had put

on some weight. Ginger and I still saw each other at school and on the bus, and she looked almost identical to Laura when Laura was in high school. There were a few older people I'd never seen before, and there was a stout, dark-haired man who stood beside Mrs. Crislip; perhaps he was the brother of the dead uncle, perhaps the father of Laura and Ginger.

When the graveside service was over, when the Crislips all began their long walk back to the house, I stayed behind and watched the workers from the funeral home remove the tent and shovel dirt into the grave. When they too were gone, when I was alone with the chirping birds and the tall creaking trees, I walked to the grave to pay my own respects. As of yet, there was no stone for the new grave, but the one right next to it was shiny and slick, casting my reflection across another Crislip's name and years. During the service, the sky above our woods had cleared, and now the sun had come out. The air was still cold, but all around me a bright glare filled the woods, lighting the still, bare trees, casting a glaze on the stone in front of me, making my own image there translucent, rippled with gray light.

I saw Ginger on the bus, on the way home from school. Those days were windy and cold, and every day I wore a long gray raincoat I'd found in a trunk at home, and a black beret I'd found while I was rooting around a dumpster behind an apartment building in town.

I touched the shoulder of Ginger's denim coat.

Sorry to hear about your uncle, I said. For a moment she said nothing, just looked at me like she was thinking about it.

We saw it in the paper, I said.

She spoke about how they were coping with his death. He'd been sick for some time, but they'd been splitting up his work. Some of the farm work had been let go.

Things are fucked up at home right now, Ginger said. I don't like being there.

The bus shook as the driver took the turns along the lake road. We were coming up on Ginger's mailbox, her house and barn coming into view. I couldn't see another soul, not in the windows of the house or around any of the buildings.

Through the venetian blinds in my bedroom window, I watched my mom leave for work. I sat at the kitchen table and drank my mom's liquor mixed with soda. It was windy by the lake, and when I walked by the place in the woods that overlooked the lake, I watched the gray waves rippling far out and close in. There were small ducklings, lines of them, little more than dots, lowering their heads and bracing against the wind, against each cold wave.

In my fantasies, Ginger came walking up the driveway, into the house, her eyes outlined in dark eye pencil like an Egyptian goddess's. We went back to my bedroom, and I put on some music. I took my bong out of the closet, and we smoked and kissed.

You were a horny little kid right from the start, she whispered. You know what I'm talking about.

I could feel the blood rise to my face. She could feel it too, and she grinned.

Don't worry, she said. We were just kids, and kids don't know anything. Hey, your secret's safe with me.

While Ginger was riding me, her head back, her hair cascading, her throat arched and tense, we were also on the water, on the lake, the surface of the bed bending and rippling.

I went into the garage and stood looking at the boat, chewing my thumbnail. I reached in and lifted out a Chinese checkers set and a dented lampshade with a map of the world on it. There was a lot in the boat, all stuff my mom had never needed to save, magazines still in their paper sleeves, rusted and bent garden fencing that should have been thrown away, except that it was covering the boat.

After moving an old clothes dummy that had stood in front of the bow, I saw the name of the boat in faded white script. I'd never known that the boat had a name, and as I read it I tried to imagine my father saying it.

Seeing the boat so differently made the size of the room look wrong, like I was looking at it through the wrong lens, like I'd caught it at the wrong angle. I took a step back, my face sweaty and warm. I lowered myself to the concrete floor and lay down on my side. As I looked up at the light coming through the garage door windows, my vision narrowed. I was in the water, and my father, somewhere below me, grabbed at my legs. When he caught hold of one, pulling me under, I saw his pale, gelatinous body. His eyes were milky and still. Snakes and small fish swam in and out of his mouth, in and out of bloodless gaping holes in his face and abdomen.

Sit up, my mother said. She was kneeling on the concrete floor beside me, cradling me in her arms. She held a glass of water to my lips. I drank.

What happened here? she said.

I got a little weak, I said. I guess I didn't eat enough lunch.

She looked me over and glanced around the garage, at the boat and the things I'd removed and piled in the corner.

What's been going on here? she said, even though it was obvious.

I wanted to walk by myself, but my mother pulled me to her and held on tight like I might collapse.

She walked me into the living room, to the couch. She said I should lie down, but I wanted to sit up. She brought me a cold soda from the refrigerator and I held the can to my face.

God, I was a fool not to get rid of that boat a long time ago, she said. I'm going to sell that damn boat as soon as I can. I know people who'd want it.

It was my father's boat, I said, as though this might mean

something.

We don't need it, she said. We don't need anything or anybody else. She closed her eyes a moment. We should have gotten away from here a long time ago.

About two in the morning, flashlight in hand, I followed the path through the woods, past the sewage plant and the salmon farm, under electric fences and beside stables of snorting horses, yards of barking dogs. The wind was blowing a fine snow. Standing at the edge of the Crislips' property, looking at the house, I felt like I was tripping, like I had fallen out of kilter with everything, and the miles I'd walked through the woods seemed like nothing, a sleepwalk.

The ground was rough. There had been plowing before the cold spell. Stumbling along the hard rows with the house bouncing between the ground and the sky, through the snow, I saw the dead uncle striking the ground with his hoe. We glanced at each other, knew each other, but didn't speak.

When I came to the back door, I stepped up on the concrete block step and opened the screen and the back door. I went in. Engulfed by the sudden heat of the house, I shut the door softly behind me. The old washing machine with its wringer was gone, and the kitchen had been painted. There was an electric stove and a dishwasher.

I left the kitchen and walked along the dark hallway. At the end of it there was the door to the front room, the living room where I'd lay on the floor playing games with Ginger, where I'd ridden the furniture until Mrs. Crislip had caught me.

The house smelled of damp laundry and heater ducts. I came to the door to the front room and pushed it open. I stepped into the room, which was lit by a floor lamp in the corner. Ginger was sitting on the couch next to the wall, and there was a man sitting beside her, kissing her. He sat pressing himself against her, and she stroked the back of his neck. One of her legs was stretched over his thigh, pulling him

against her. A liquor bottle, plastic cups, and a bong stood on the coffee table in front of the couch.

When Ginger saw me, she pushed herself back from the man. The man turned and looked back at me. He was the man I had seen in the woods, and he rubbed his face and glared at me like he couldn't believe I was there. Ginger looked at me dully like she barely knew me, like I was some strange memory or hallucination. Her eyes seemed too small for her head. She was barefoot, in the same jeans and blouse she'd been wearing on the bus.

The man jumped to his feet. He was wearing a white undershirt and khaki pants. His paunch sagged over his belt. He was twice as big in the chest as I was, but no taller, with thick arms and short dark hair. His small eyes were burning me up.

Footsteps above us, and then Mrs. Crislip, in her robe, was on the stairs. What the hell is going on? she said. She glanced at me, seeming to recognize me.

The man said something about an intruder and struck me twice in the face with his fists. I lost my footing. A door opened, and I saw a crib in a room, children in it, watching us, stone-still with their hands in their mouths. Then they disappeared into the swirling rooms, the swirling wallpaper, and the swirling heat.

The man grabbed the back of my coat and shirt. He yanked at my collar. He let go and struck the back of my neck so hard I thought my neck would break.

Ginger never moved, never left the couch. Mrs. Crislip grabbed hold of the man and held him back. I could hear them fighting as I moved in slow motion down the hallway, my hands touching the wall for support.

In the kitchen he caught up to me. He slapped me across the top of the head and pushed me down on the kitchen floor, face first. I hit my forehead hard against the linoleum.

Mrs. Crislip got hold of him again, and they rolled and

fought on the floor. I took hold of a kitchen table leg and pulled myself up. He had her pinned down on the floor, and she was scratching his face. I grabbed the wall, then the door-frame. I pushed myself outside, and the screen door slammed.

The cold air and the fine snow felt good stinging my face. I held my hand over my right eye and stumbled away from the house, toward the tree line. I stumbled off the path and fell to my knees in the shallow snow and leaves. I lay down behind a stump, held my hand over my bad eye, and looked back at the house. Someone, a blur, came out in the yard, searching for me. I heard Mrs. Crislip calling, saw her leaning in the doorway, and the blur went back inside.

I stayed put until there seemed to be no more movement in the house. The snow had stopped falling, but I didn't feel like walking the trail back through the woods. Hunching, I pushed open the shed door, went in, and closed the door behind me.

Something smelled rank. After a few seconds I was able to make out the shapes of the old tools, a few sacks of fertilizer, and rusted beer cans and bottles scattered on the floor. I poked around with a stick and found a decomposed opossum among the filth in one of the corners, and I kicked it out the door. I eased down on my knees, which ached like everything else. I laid my head down on a burlap sack.

When I woke up, Mrs. Crislip was leaning over me. The shed door was open, and the sun was up. Mrs. Crislip wore her housecoat. Her lip was cut, and there was a bruise on the side of her face. Somehow I was still wearing my beret, and some of the blood on my head had dried, pasting the front of my beret to my forehead.

Let's get you inside, Mrs. Crislip said. You think you can walk?

I sat up. My face and neck throbbed, but now I could open my bad eye a slim, bloody crack, although doing so made the

pain worse. I could see a big, brown bump in the right side of my vision. I stood, Mrs. Crislip helping me. She must have figured my being there had something to do with Ginger, that I was one of her secrets.

You're lucky you ain't dead, she said.

The more I moved, the more I ached, but it felt good to move.

The grass was still damp, but the snow was gone. When we got close to the house, almost to the door, I stopped, and Mrs. Crislip said it was okay, they'd gone. She led me to a bedroom, bare and neat. The bed had a white chenille spread. Mrs. Crislip ran water in the bathtub and helped me undress.

You want me to call your mother? she said.

We don't see each other in the morning, I said. She'll think I've gone to school.

There was a mirror on the back of the door, and as Mrs. Crislip helped me out of my clothes, I stared at my shaggy hair, my bruised face, almost unrecognizable, and my undernourished body. I looked like a corpse that had washed up on a beach somewhere, except for my erection from Mrs. Crislip's handling me. She acted like she didn't notice it. She gave me a towel, led me into the bathroom, and steadied me while I lowered myself into the warm water.

After my bath, Mrs. Crislip made me a fried egg sandwich, which I ate ravenously, even though my head ached when I chewed. It was afternoon when I started walking home. I was sore all over, and the soreness made me very aware of every step and movement, of ordinary things: the tall bushy evergreens lining the road, the bend just before our house, our driveway, and our house perched on the low ridge above the lake.

A car I'd never seen before, a two-tone Buick, was backed into our driveway, and a man I'd never seen before stood at the garage door looking in the window at the boat. The man, who was stocky and wore glasses and a cap, didn't even notice

me as I walked up the driveway past him and the house, across our backyard to the lake and the pier. The late afternoon sun was behind the clouds. Nobody was on the lake, not even any ducks, and the water looked still and gray like smoky glass.

I was standing by the pier when my mother's carpool driver let her off at the bottom of the driveway. I heard her speaking with the man in the driveway and heard the door to the garage open. In a few minutes, the man's car started. He drove away, and my mother opened the door to the house and went in, probably thinking over what she was going to say to me, how she would break her decision, for she had made up her mind that we needed to sell the house, to move as far away as possible, as soon as possible. She would have been happy, or so she believed, to pack and leave before nightfall.

As she did every evening, my mother walked through the house to the kitchen, where she took the bottle of gin from under the sink, the tonic bottle and ice from the refrigerator, and made a drink at the counter. Going to the back door, to the deck, she glanced down at the pier, saw me, and dropped the glass she was holding.

The way my mother looked, frozen and transfixed, standing over the broken glass, sent a warm wave through me. I have gone over my memory of that moment again and again, searching her expression. At times, it has seemed to me that she did not know me at first or that she was refusing to know me. Other times, I have believed she thought I was someone else, someone she was surprised and pained to see again after so many years. Either way, from what she saw, she concluded I was now lost. Even our leaving would fail to save me.

I stood where I was, by the lake. My mother turned, without speaking, and went back inside the house.

GERTRUDE STEIN AS THE WHITE RABBIT VISITS COLETTE

LEE UPTON

I remember the plush, the powder,
a peach dimpled with rainwater,
to deliquesce, to mask, to tighten a chin strap.
Whose face looks whapped with a salmon—thwack?
The body was not an excuse
and not a set of blocks.
The beret on the head squashed,
a disguise that hid lead around the eyes.
She wore leggings like kindling.
You're not going to be late, are you?
The garden path is lovely,
if you have enough of a garden
to hold a path.
So why not wear a watch and a waistcoat
and meet those acrobat-trained hands?
To reappear as a powder puff
with a heart thumping inside it.
A rabbit's shadow is a walrus.
We're late—just open the hutch.
So many important dates,
who can remember them all?
So many ways to live
within a face,
to take your body to lunch,
to carry around a hole in the ground
and disappear in it.

CALM DOWN

LEE UPTON

People love to say, Calm down.
Don't have kittens.
As if I'd have kittens.
I'd have tropical ports of call.
Calm down, my banshee,
calm down.
Is that a tattoo,
or were you
painted in the womb?
Calm down.
You're not going
to rob a bank, are you?
Not when you can rob
a perfume counter.
Calm down.
Flea circuses aren't real,
are they?
What about flea clowns?
Close those
circuses down.
Who painted pinwheels
on our turtle?
What famous historical
figure
was born clutching
a blood clot?

Take that down.
While you're at it,
close down
all that racket
inside my head.
It's a test in crowds.
Does a lizard
judge itself harshly
or the rock
it slithers around?
I store anxiety like a camel.
I couldn't be any
other animal.

DILUVIO

SARA URIBE

no el arca en mi memoria ni las horas tibias de un naufragio pactado
no la salvación que nunca pedí ni la huída del mar como una quijada
en mitad de mi columna vertebral no la estrella errante que jamás
duerme y que no sabe guiar sino a la deriva no la lejanía de un lecho
de sal ni la mentira inexacta del futuro no la mirada de la lluvia y el
húmedo tacto de las aguas desatadas en otro cuerpo que no sea el
mío

DELUGE

SARA URIBE

**TRANSLATED BY
TOSHIYA KAMEI**

not the ark in my memory or the tepid hours of a self-imposed
shipwreck not salvation I never asked or the flight of the sea like a
jawbone in the middle of my spine not the wandering star that never
sleeps and doesn't know how to guide but to lead astray not the
remoteness of a layer of salt or the inexact lie of the future not the
gaze of the rain and the wet touch of loose waters in another body
that is not mine

MEDITATIONS ON SPECIES IN A TRAIN CABIN

NICHOLAS YB
WONG

*"I've never been good at these things; at deciding what they
really are."*

—Matthew Gavin Frank

That girl with a Mohawk is fingering
the slot machine on her iPhone.

The jingle of virtual coins falling is a godsend,
each always of the same volume, same sharpness, never detuned.

An old man holding an Aawai Walkman
with the speaker on plays fifteen seconds

of Greensleeves. The clicking of black plastic buttons
nestles nostalgia on buttocks of the present.

A mother urges her son to watch Siamese twins
on cabin TV. He laughs, pointing

at the uncanny. She says some people are born like *that*—
belly-blended, navel-less, a body that is over complete.

Slowly the train enters the station, the screen doors
open. I see a gap wider than usual. At the bottom

of it, what do I expect to find if not single shoes, contorted
umbrellas, and a sense of what is going on in the world?

QUIET POEMS

FELICIA ZAMORA

incept

adam/atom, callow

sole

if I am your rib, *whose home?*

& space binds

to rules; flesh & rules.

molten

cast from/cast into

core

where hands inch together, *unable*

& a temporal lobe catches

chants carved in lobes.

incipit

cords gathering

motet

in congregation, *here lies*

& in interment we all

hush—find place.

caducity

D minor/limp

notes/nodes

immunity in body—contrapuntal

itself—*The Art of*

unfinished, *Fugue*—

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JUDY BEBELAAR taught high school in San Francisco for thirty-seven years; her students won many prizes for their poetry, including seven National Scholastic awards. Her work has been published widely, including in *Pearl*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *folly.com* and *Flyway*, where she was a finalist in the 2009 chapbook contest. She is co-host of a reading series that features Bay Area Writing Project teachers in Berkeley, California.

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JENNA LE is the author of *Six Rivers* (New York Quarterly Books, 2011), which was an SPD Poetry Bestseller. Her poems and translations have appeared or are forthcoming from *AGNI Online*, *Barrow Street*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Salamander*, *Sycamore Review*, and other journals. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the PEN Emerging Writers Award.

BRENNA W. LEMIEUX really did sled into a tree once, and she survived to write about it. She currently lives in Illinois, which is mostly devoid of the sorts of hills that lead to violent sledding accidents, though that is not the only reason she chose the state as her home.

DONALD LEVERING has two poetry books forthcoming in 2012. A chapbook, *Sweeping the Skylight*, is being published by Finishing Line Press. A full-length book, *The Number of Names*, is due from Sunstone Press. He is a former NEA poetry fellow and a featured poet in the Academy of American Poets Online Forum. More information is available at: donalddlevering.com.

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CULLEN MCVOY spent his childhood in the Florida swamps, his teenage years in post-war South Korea and colonial Southern Rhodesia, his young adulthood in Florida, and his later years as a public service lawyer in New York City. He never forgot the solitude he enjoyed as a swamp child, and when exterior events encroached, he often withdrew into his private world. Now Cullen is retired and writing about his life. Having failed to pay attention the first time around, he wants to go back for a second look. His essays have appeared in *Jaguar Magazine* and *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*, and they won first prize in an essay contest given by *Literal Latte Journal*.

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NINA PURO's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Third Coast*, *Reed Magazine*, and other publications. She will soon graduate with an MFA in poetry from Syracuse University. Next year, she hopes to live in Bangladesh. She is bad at thinking of clever things to put in places like this.

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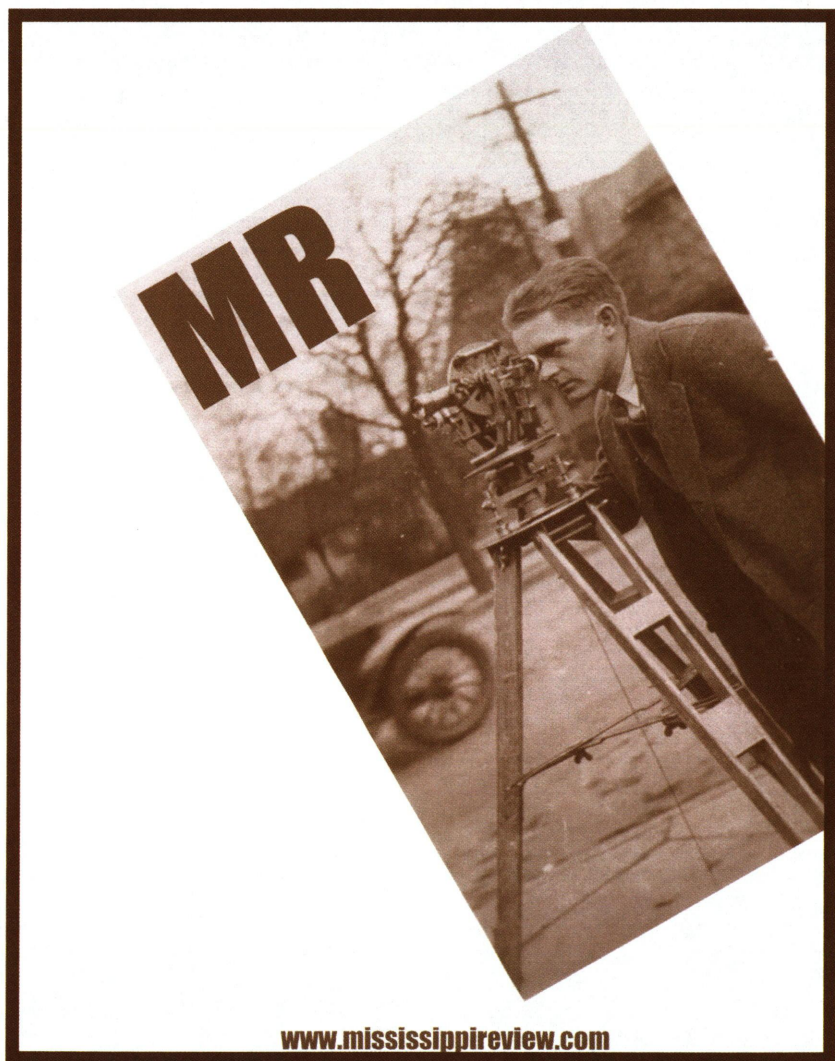
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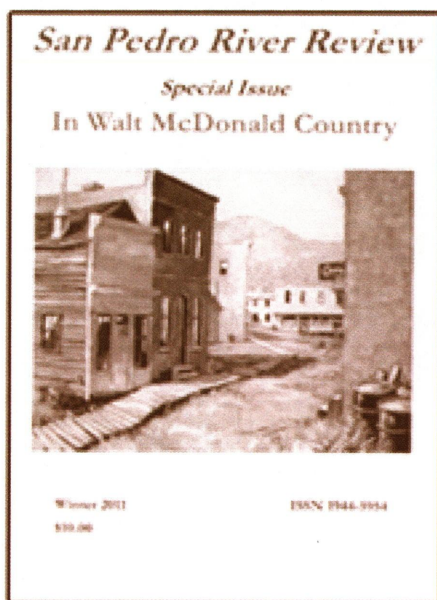
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