

.: Harpur Palate, Volume 13, Issue 2, Winter & Spring 2014

HARPUR PALATE



Vol.13 No.2

Published by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB), 2014



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**BINGHAMTON
UNIVERSITY**

HARPUR PALATE

WINTER & SPRING

**BINGHAMTON,
NEW YORK**

Vol.13 No.2

Published by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB), 2014



**“THEY SAY WE ARE A GHOST TOWN, BUT WE
ARE NOT ALL GHOSTS YET.”**

—Caitlin McGuire, “Centralia, Pennsylvania”

Winter & Spring 13.2

HARPUR PALATE

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ISSN NO. 1532-904610

Harpur Palate is published bi-annually by the Department of English at Binghamton University, PO Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902. Visit our website at: harpurpalate.binghamton.edu

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Typeset in Harpur Palate Franklin Gothic, ITC Clearface, and Monotype Palatin.

Printed by Yurchak Printing, Inc.

Cover art by Deanna Dorangrichia.

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BODIES

DAVID BERSSELL

Press your face into the damp pillow. Breathe in the morning after, the vodka sweat and human odor and gray, reminiscent of waking in a camping tent. Check the clock, one more time. Deep breath. Peel your limbs from the sheets. Hold your dick as you walk to her side of the bed. Step into your bathing suit. Toxins ribbon through your stomach and toward your bowels. Your head feels like fuck. Glance at her body sprawled across the comforter, her eyes closed too tight to really be asleep. Remember how she used to wear sunscreen to school so she wouldn't burn walking between buildings. You are nineteen, home for the summer. Want to say something. Want a shared glass of water. Want to see her sober. Know how that story ends. Walk out the door.

Accelerate away from the

sleeping party with the windows down blinking into the rushing AM to keep your eyes alert because you can't pump the radio because the radio makes the throbbing worse. Break. Open the door. Vomit. Continue to Sam's house.

Sam is a quadriplegic. He can shave and use a fork but doesn't have full function of his arms, so he's technically a quad. He can stand and with a walker, circle his house. Sam was on the wrestling team in college. His sophomore year, an opponent slammed him on his neck.

Sam is twenty-five. At the end of the summer, he's starting a Master's in history. He weighs about one hundred pounds and can grow a beard in three days. He does so to look close to his age.

*

Let yourself in with the key hanging on a nail underneath the porch. Walk upstairs. Sidestep the chair lift. Say, "What up." His furry chest is a board against the bed. Laugh (your head thinks bad idea) when he makes fun of you for wearing a bathing suit, for sleeping in your bathing suit and wearing it to work, this incredibly serious job as Personal Care Attendant, helping him get ready each morning. He asks what time you went to bed last night, gesturing at the bags under your eyes, your overcast face.

Say, "Three," because six sounds like a problem.

Ignore the smell of urine, that sharp warmth, as you put on rubber gloves and open a few disinfectant wipes, lift the blankets, remove the catheter tube from the night bag, cap the night bag, disinfect the catheter tube, and secure it into the leg bag. After throwing away the gloves, secure the leg bag's Velcro straps around his calf. Ask about his kayaking trip and nod at his anecdote because speaking hurts almost as much as driving. Take off his socks. Roll the palm of your hand against the arch of each foot. Take your time. Feet are the precious base. Remember when

you were a runner. Flex his ankles, Achilles. Crawl onto the bed. On your knees, facing the length of his body, lift his leg. His hamstrings are like resistance bands. Feel them quiver as you push from under his knee toward his shoulder, loosening muscles so that he will be able to transfer himself from bed to wheelchair. Repeat. And again, three times per leg. Crawl closer to his waist. Keep the conversation going. Make eye contact so it feels natural to place a hand on the inside of each of thigh and push.

After he showers and calls your name, slide black boxer briefs over his feet and up his legs, not just because he is your friend or because you get paid by the state, but because this is beauty, this is waking up with another, this will make you whole.

DESCRIBING THE SCENERY

BEN BLACK

Far away across green hills a long gray road bending and folding and disappearing and reappearing, soaring up the green toward the blue and white, and on the road a bicycle and on the bike a man in tweeds and an old fashioned cap. He's coming toward you and you hear a calliope and balloons begin to float in front of you and you want to duck and press your face into the grass and then you hear the bicycle chains and maybe a bell, but wait! the man on the bicycle is in the same place; he hasn't moved and come to mention it the balloons aren't moving either and can you breathe? Yes, you can breathe and you turn around and see the other wall, still unpainted, and you rest your back against the painted grass and sigh. When you get up, the grass stays on your back like when you were a kid and would lie for hours on the freshly mown lawn. But your back's not itchy like it was then because it's only painted grass from the wall of your new son's room and now you've left a father-shaped hole on the green hills of his imagination. A carefree man on a bicycle rides towards it, unaware of his fate.

LET'S GET RUN OVER

BEN BLACK

You and I, little old Chinese lady. You with your pink grocery bag and me with my *Mrs. Dalloway*. We're standing here together waiting for the light to change, looking at the girl who crossed brazenly ahead of us against the light. I saw the look you gave her; I gave her something similar myself. But you and I are different, little old Chinese lady, and we're waiting for the light to change.

When we cross, a car will run us over. A midsize white pregnant rollerskate, driven perhaps by a confused tourist. First it will hit me, knocking me to the side, and then you, little old Chinese lady. I'll float through the air and skid, a flutter of arms and legs, and when the car hits you, screeching its brakes, you will crumple quickly in a little heap.

They'll give us hospital beds in the same room, and slowly I will get to know you. You'll tell me stories about when you were young, when you were foolish, when the truth had not yet stooped your shoulders and fractured your pelvis. And one day as our bones knit side by side we'll recall the day it happened, and instead of silence and a cold sweat we'll share a smile and remember the girl who crossed before us, how reckless she was and how cautious we were. And I'll share with you my secret desires, my dreams of seeing the girl again, of seeing her crossing a stream without a rope, climbing a sheer vertical

rock face, jumping across the tracks to beat a train.

I won't see you after they release me, little old Chinese lady, and I'll always wonder how you're doing. Did you recover completely, do you walk now with a cane? At street corners, when the light turns green, do you still make your slow way across as if nothing in the world has changed? Do you give the cars a dirty look before you cross, like I do, saying stay there buddy, I've been hurt before?

Do you visit the same street corner like I do, looking for a chance, waiting to cross with a girl who knows somehow that though the light is against her, the odds are in her favor?

THE PENIS GAME

The Harpur Palate Prize in

Creative Nonfiction Runner-Up

EMMA BOLDEN

At Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic School, there was no health class. There was instead a morning when Brother Benjamin took all of the boys into the Parish Hall basement and told them things I didn't understand about how sometimes they'd go to sleep and wake up wet. Mrs. Mallard took the girls into a room in the library none of us knew about, like a secret passage in a mystery movie. She opened a door that looked like part of the wall and made us sit in even rows. The room smelled like the cotton balls and swabs a doctor used. She showed us a video of what was supposedly the inside of our bodies, the pink and red and purple tubes twisting up and around each other like the climbing bars on the playground. According to the video, some tubes sent out eggs like small balloons

and others caught the balloons with even tinier tubes that looked like fingers without hands. Sometimes the tubes grabbed the balloons, which became what at first looked like the pictures of chickens inside of eggs in our science books but later looked like a see-through baby. Sometimes the balloon made it all the way down the tube that made its way out of our bodies and escaped. Then, Mrs. Mallard said, we would bleed, and hard. It would hurt. We would have to stick a cotton pad into our panties. Some people would tell us we could stick a cotton tube, called a tampon, into one of our tubes, but we shouldn't. Betsy asked Mrs. Mallard why and she said it would mean we needed to go to confession, so no one asked anything else.

After the video we met the

boys in the Parrish Hall. No one looked at anyone. We were all very relieved when the lights went out, even though it meant a slideshow, which probably meant a quiz, too. I poked the blue end of my pen into and out of the threads that wove around each other to make my shoelaces. I looked up when I heard the first slide click into place. On the wall, a wash of white and blue light turned into a photograph of what Mrs. Mallard said were aborted fetuses, pulled to limbs and lying in messy red stacks in buckets. I felt my stomach inside of me and it felt like the time I pushed my body too far up on the swing set. I couldn't look up anymore. I sat and looked at the plastic tube that curled around the end of my shoelace. The wall flashed bright and then dark above me. Sometimes I could see some red and I felt my stomach again.

This is what I knew about growing up: you would bleed and it would hurt, and if you used a tampon to stop it, you weren't a virgin any more. This is what I knew about sex: it was made to make babies, and once you made a baby, you should leave it in your body until it was finished. The girls

in my neighborhood knew more, the ones who didn't go to Catholic school, whose health teachers showed them videos with titles like *Where Do Babies Come From?* and *What Is Happening to My Body?* They wore flavored lip-gloss and turned their shellacked lips upward at me, as if they could only smile in pity at me because I didn't know the secrets they'd been told.

At their houses, I tried to learn, watching cassette after cassette filled with movies my mother wouldn't let me watch, rated PG-13 and sometimes even R. The movies all had the same series of scenes. First: a man and a woman touched faces at their opened mouths. Second: a door closed, or a finger and a thumb turned the lamp's switch. The screen went black. Third: the man and the woman lie in an unmade bed. There were always cigarettes. Sometimes the ashtray sat on the bed between them. Sometimes there were two ashtrays, one on each nightstand. I understood that this was the sequence of events but didn't understand what happened in the dark to mess the bed up and make the man and the woman need a cigarette even if they didn't smoke through

the rest of the movie.

Nicole was the undisputed queen of these secrets because she had blonde hair and budding breasts underneath her training bra, a kind of half-tank-top with padding inside that she liked to show off by pulling up her shirt, shrieking, and then yanking it back down. She lived in the house down the street held up by four white columns which my mother said were tacky because they were just there to show off how rich they were, with a swimming pool and a trampoline in the backyard. All of this should have made her popular, but the neighborhood girls hated her for her columns and trampoline and pool and, worst of all, her training bra. Plus, she had moved to Alabama from somewhere up North and didn't know to put ice in her tea or call any of our mothers *ma'am*, and because no one else talked to her, she decided to talk to me.

After school I'd pull on my jelly shoes and walk the asphalt to knock on the door positioned perfectly in between the two sets of columns. When she opened the door, I'd smell the dusty perfume of flowers and berries from the brass bowls of potpourri that sat on every

end-table in the house, curled shavings of wood dyed mulberry, small pinecones, flat seedpods with wide circles emptied of seeds. Then I'd smell something sweeter, bordering on sickening – Nicole's body spray, the purple kind that the middle school girls would hide in the front pockets of their book bags and spritz under each arm pit after gym. Smelling good, Nicole taught me, was almost as important when it came to attracting boys as growing breasts and wearing a training bra to prove you have them. If a boy told you that you smelled good, you were to blink a few times in quick succession, then smile – just enough so that he could tell you were smiling but not so much that your braces showed – and as you said thanks, you had to lean in towards him. If you followed the steps and positioned yourself correctly, the boy would simultaneously smell your Flirty Freesia body spray and be able to look down the unbuttoned collar of your polo shirt to see the bric-a-brack edged training bra beneath. In that moment he would know you as a woman, a woman with breasts, a woman he should be in love with, both hopelessly

and helplessly. I was technically not allowed to wear perfume, but I told myself that technically it was body splash and spritzed it on my wrists and neck the second I got to Nicole's room, even though there were no boys around except sometimes John and Benjamin Robertson, who lived two streets down and high-fived every time their hamster ate another set of its babies.

Nicole and I spent our afternoons jumping on her trampoline. Usually she would flip up her shirt towards the neighbor's fence when she jumped. She said she did it because she could, because the only person who could see was Theodore, the Henderson's Alaskan Malamute who stayed busy by walking one length of fence, barking, turning slightly, then walking another length of fence. I knew better. I knew that Benjamin Robertson sometimes took a break from feeding his hamster its own babies and walked Theodore while the Hendersons were at work, and sometimes he would stay in the backyard to play fetch with Theodore, which meant throwing a stick at his muzzle so he shook his head and blinked a couple of times.

Benjamin pretended that he didn't see Nicole as Nicole herself pretended she didn't see him and didn't hope he'd see her and her brick-a-bracked bra.

She flipped and twirled her body. I let my knees fold below me but kept my eye on the sod outside the trampoline, careful to not bounce too close to the edge I once fell onto, hitting my pubic bone with a silver-up-the-spine-to-the-eyes-inducing force. We were playing the penis game, which started when her mother walked over from the pool and announced that she had sweated enough for one day and asked if we could avoid breaking any bones or laws long enough for her to shower. We said *yes* in unison, though I added a *ma'am*, and Nicole's mother pointed at me and said, "Nicole. Hey. Manners." Then she wrapped a beach towel over her body and the bikini it wore, a fuschia hibiscus stretched over each breast, and left a line of wet footprints to the door that let her into the house.

We bounced slowly to the edge of the trampoline where we stood, heads pointed toward the door, until Nicole whispered it: *penis*. The idea was to say it

louder – *penis, penis, penis* – and louder each time until you were too chicken or got in trouble or had to stop because you were screaming it in the kind of wide-mouthed scream that hurt the back of your throat. I almost always lost because I was almost always scared. Nicole never was. She could scream penis so loud that I was afraid my own mother could hear down and across the street, and so I had to sacrifice myself to avoid being grounded for a month with no Nintendo or library visits.

“I don’t give a shit if mom *does* hear,” she said. “Then at least she’d pay attention to me instead of, like, licking my sister’s butt all the time.”

“That’s the kind of thing you read about in books, Nicole,” I said. “People doing bad things just to get attention.”

She stopped bouncing and stood for a second, moving slowly up and down with her head leaned to one side and her eyes slid to the sky. “Maybe,” she said. “You don’t have a sister, though. So you don’t get it.”

That seemed fair, so I nodded. We both started jumping again.

“She doesn’t really lick her

butt,” I said.

“She might as well, she loves her so much.” She opened her mouth as wide as she opened it when she screamed, stuck her tongue out until it curved over her bottom lip, then moved her head around and closer to my face.

“Gross meow.” I ran-jumped as close to the side of the trampoline as I dared. She made one big leap towards me then folded her legs so she fell in the center and bounced me upwards. One foot landed on the wire springs that held the fabric to the pipes. I yelped and she laughed.

“Pussy,” she said, holding her fingers up in a V and poking her tongue in between them.

The one time I was allowed to spend the night at Nicole’s, we ate dinner at a Mexican food and bar-b-que restaurant called Pancho’s and Charlies, which was one of the few places her little sister Ashley could eat because they served both quesadillas and chicken fingers, the only two foods without marshmallow filling or sour sugar she ever agreed to eat. Nicole’s mother was a dental hygienist and as we studied the combination platters she

told us about the girl whose parents only fed her off-brand Skittles and full-sugar Sam's Choice sodas. She hated brushing her teeth so much that she kicked her father in the face when he leaned down to put the brush in her mouth himself, so her parents gave up on brushing her teeth at all.

"Every single tooth was rotted," Nicole's mother opened her own mouth wide and pointed inside it. "Every. Single. Tooth." When the waiter came, she told Nicole's stepfather and us that she wasn't driving and wanted a margarita the size of a fish bowl.

"I would like one of those, too, please," Nicole said, and Ashley nodded. They both said please and please and please until her mother rolled her eyes to her ceiling and lifted her index finger.

"One sip," she said, "but only one – and Emily, if your mom would let you, you can have one too." I shook my head and didn't open my mouth. I was afraid if I did one or both of two things would come out of it: vomit, or else the words which were behind the urge to vomit, the memory of my father and I in the backyard cleaning out my fish bowl with a hose, the curled strings of

fish shit, the dirty bath-tub smell of it. I ate a quarter of the burrito I ordered and listened to my stomach push against itself the whole dinner, the whole drive home, the whole time Nicole's mother stood in front of the linen closet, humming the song Frankie sang about relaxing and filling her arms full of Family Game Night Games.

"You two enjoy these and stay up here, and for the love of God let Ashley play if she asks you, for once." Ashley shouted from her room that she didn't want to play with us and Nicole shouted back that that was just fine, assface, and Nicole's mother closed her eyes for a second, during which she apparently decided not to get anyone in trouble but instead to start singing Frankie's song – "Relax, don't do it, when you want to go to it" – and walk downstairs. Both Ashley and Nicole slammed their doors after her.

I took Connect Four out of the box. It was a game I didn't understand and Nicole said was lame anyway, so I made it into an art challenge, sliding in coins in patterns of black and red. Nicole lay stomach-down on her bed and propped herself upwards on her

elbows so that you could see the curves of her barely-there breasts through her shirt's V-ed neck. She gazed with rapt attention at the notebook in front of her and at the pen in her hand, the too-thick kind that would write in all different colors if you pushed a button and sent down the right tube of ink. She would write, push the pink button, write, push the purple button, and even though I couldn't see the page in front of her, I knew what it said: "Nicole + Benjamin = 4ever" and "Mrs. Nicole Benjamin Robertson 4ever," a swarm of hearts attacking each set of words.

I decided to lay in the same position on the floor, wondering if maybe that was Nicole's secret, if that was the reason Nicole had curves of breasts which, even if barely perceptible, were still impressive, and had, reportedly, had them for two years, since before she was my age. I was trying to make a new pattern – diamonds of red with one black circle in the middle – while Nicole pushed her lips together and then wiggled them around the way she said you had to if you wanted to make sure your lip-gloss was applied evenly. She was so busy sucking a swarm of pink then purple

then pink hearts around Benjamin Robertson's name that I could stare at her as much as I wanted, which I did, wiggling my lips the way she wiggled hers, even though I wasn't allowed to wear lip-gloss. I moved my bottom lip to the left at the same time as I moved my top lip to the right, concentrating so hard that I didn't notice when the blue light came into the room until it slid up the wall and onto the ceiling, then split itself into waves of lighter and darker blue, like we were in an aquarium looking up.

"What is that?" I said with my bottom lip still to the left and top to the right.

"Why are you talking like that and what is what?" Nicole asked with the same slow exasperated tone she used when Ashley asked if she could use her hot rollers. I put my lips back where they belonged.

"It looks like an aquarium on the ceiling," I said, and Nicole looked up then shrugged.

"I don't know. The pool light. Whatever," she said, then held the notebook out in front of her face, which she tilted to the right and then to the left. "How does this look?" She turned the

page towards me and there it was: both Benjamin Robertson's heart-swarmed name and ten lines of her re-naming herself: *Mrs. Nicole S. Robertson, Mrs. Ben Robertson, Mrs. Benjy Robertson the Third.*

"I didn't realize it was that serious," I said, and Nicole made a noise in the back of her throat and shrugged again. Most of the time, it didn't matter that I was two years younger or, more importantly, that she was two years older, but I could tell that this was one of the times it did. She flipped the notebook page with an exaggerated gesture, flicked the pen to purple, and went back to work. I started feeling bad about being in the same room with her and wished I would shrink myself to the size of her goldfish, or even smaller, so small that I could fit through the tiny opening and closing door in the plastic castle which was too tiny even for her goldfish to hide behind – one of his fins always showed through. I went to the window so I wouldn't have to think about it any more. With one finger I pushed apart two blinds enough for me to peek through to see that Nicole was right: it was the pool light. Its reflection kept appearing and

disappearing because the person inside of the pool kept shifting in front of and away from the light. "There's someone in your pool," I said.

"Yeah?" Nicole didn't stop telling the notebook page what she was telling it.

"They keep moving in front of the light and away from it." Nicole made her noise again, so I kept looking and hoped she'd forget how lame I was. I wondered how the person felt in the pool, how a pool felt at night. I imagined the water was warm around the light, and the person kept moving toward the colder water to feel again how the warm water felt, how much nicer it was. I practiced feeling it with them: *brr, the water is cold over here. I'd better move to the light. Yes, the water is warmer here.* But while I was practicing being the person, the person became two people: first there were two heads, then two backs, one which stood straight against the pool's walls and one which arched its way backwards, and that back arched upwards to a head with its hair falling backwards, an opened mouth. "Um," I said, then stopped and watched to make sure I was seeing what I was seeing. Then

one of the backs moved sideways.
“There are two people in the pool.”

“Yeah?” Nicole said. “So what?”

“So, I mean, there are two people in the pool.”

Nicole threw the pen down on her bed. She raised herself up higher on her elbows but didn’t turn to look at me. “So it’s my mom and my step-dad.”

“Okay,” I said, and the two people became one person again, and that one person moved a little backwards and forwards and backwards again. “But what are they doing?”

“Um, gross.” Nicole went back to her notebook. “It.”

I wondered if “it” was the water moving them or their bodies moving them in the water. “What’s ‘it’?”

“You know, *it*.” I didn’t know and told her that, which made her put down both the pen and the notebook and even though I asked her in my head to not turn around, she turned around. “Um, *it*. You know, like, they are doing *it*, okay, *it*, and can you please take a minute to not be so totally creepy and gross and spying on them like a freak would do?” I pulled my finger

away from the blinds and walked back, staring at the carpet and my Connect Four game, which now seemed lame to me, too, but I kept looking at it until Nicole asked me to admire her hearts again. I looked at them and nodded.

“They’re the best I’ve ever seen.”

Our friendship was over. I knew this even before the next Tuesday, when her mother answered the door in an ironed white shirt and jeans and said hello in a voice just as starched and crisp as the cotton of her collar. When I asked if Nicole was home, she said that she was sorry, and then raised her voice to say that Nicole couldn’t come downstairs and wouldn’t be able to for the foreseeable future because she just didn’t know when to stop and obviously had no idea how to act around people, so why should she be allowed to be around them? Upstairs, Nicole answered by slamming her door and then letting Aerosmith say that she was *F-I-N-E fine*. I tried to play with Ashley, who was two years younger than me, but all she wanted to do was make her Barbie jump off the roof of her three-story Dream Home

Playset. I agreed that this was a good idea but got bored once she'd jumped sixteen times and didn't stay dead, since I'd set up the other Barbies to sit in perfect rows for the funeral. I tried to explain this but Ashley just looked up at me the way that fish look at you from the inside of an aquarium and said she wanted to make Barbie jump because the roof of her house was a trampoline.

"But a roof *can't* be a trampoline," I said, "and plus the funeral is a lot more fun because everyone will cry and take pills and tell each other about how they secretly loved Barbie."

Ashley kept looking at me like a guppy. "But I want the roof to be a trampoline because *that* is fun." I didn't understand why she couldn't understand. I just nodded and listened to Aerosmith singing to Nicole about Janie and her gun in the song I never understood because my mother always changed the channel when it started and said there were things I didn't need to know yet. It seemed like Janie and her gun and all of the thousands of things I didn't understand were just down the hall, locked in the room with Nicole and Steven Tyler and Joe Perry and all the other beautiful

bad long-haired boys in Aerosmith who had names that no one knew and lip-gloss as shiny as Nicole's. Nothing was fair. I was about to either scream or cry or both and didn't want to be in Nicole's house when I found out which. I pushed all the Barbies down and said "Fine, they're going to bed," and then left without telling Nicole's mother good-bye or turning back to see Ashley, who was making the sound "but" with her wide guppy mouth as she followed me as far as the front door.

My mother spent the next afternoon across the street with the neighbor she told me to call Miss Gina, who always kept a pack of wine coolers in the refrigerator and smoked cigarettes over the stove with the exhaust fan on, and when she came back she told me that I wasn't going down to that tacky white house to see that Nicole girl ever again. I told her that was fine by me, because I'd started to understand what I didn't understand, and what Nicole did, and that separated us more than a wall or a door or a lock ever could. I didn't own a single tube of lip-gloss. I didn't shave my legs. I didn't even know what doing it meant, which

meant I'd be better off jumping off a third story roof because I imagined it was a trampoline. Everything was too embarrassing. I wanted to stay in my room with my multiplication tables and bald baby dolls and books about how I shouldn't talk to strangers forever, and I managed it until my father came home and said "hello, hello, hello" to my mother, in a voice like he was singing, like he did every time he came home, which was also embarrassing. She sang "hello" back and then said "let me tell you about that *girl* Emily's been playing with." Their voices vanished until I heard my father say "no shit." This meant that things were interesting, which meant I had no choice but to open the door enough so that my ear and the side of my head could stick out of it.

I heard enough to make a story out of it. While her mother was at work scraping plaque off some kid's teeth, Nicole paid Ashley two week's worth of her allowance to stay inside and watch *You Can't Do That on Television* while she spent the afternoon turning flips on her trampoline. She wasn't showing off her athletic skills but her training bra, flipping her shirt up to show it to the Henderson's fence

and backyard and the Alaskan Malamute that ran in circles inside them both. When she heard the Henderson's back door open, she steadied herself and grabbed the ends of her shirt, counting the seconds to time her jump perfectly so that Ben Robertson could watch as the air took her up into itself and the sun hit her body and highlighted the perfect curves of her new breasts. I knew what she expected would happen: he'd ask her to marry him, and they'd drive to the Mississippi state line and elope immediately. I knew this because I'd heard her say it so many times, then seen her fly with her hair upwards until her skin was one long streak of gold. Ben Robertson had sometimes seen her and once made a sound like choking, but he'd never asked her to marry him, which Nicole said was just because he was shy and he knew he'd blush and he didn't realize yet that when that happened he was like *oh my God like infinity hotter*.

The story my mother told didn't end the way Nicole had expected. Ben Robertson hadn't asked her to become Nicole Robertson, not because he was embarrassed to the point of

blushing but because he had come down with strep throat and was lying on his couch with a wet washrag on his forehead watching *Voltron*, and therefore he wasn't the one in Mrs. Henderson's back yard. Mrs. Henderson was. She was not impressed by the sun and the gold and the training bra and the perfect curves curving inside of them, and she was not embarrassed. She looked straight at Nicole and yelled at her to put on her shirt and march her fanny right back into the house immediately if not sooner. There, Nicole and Ashley sat on the couch and looked at the television, which wasn't even on, while Mrs. Henderson paced and paced and said she would stay and make sure everyone kept their clothes on until their mother came home, at which point she would hear all about this, she would.

"I mean, can you *believe* that," my mother told my father. "She didn't even *cry*, and Gina said that Lori Henderson said that when her mother asked her if she understood what she'd done wrong, she said she hadn't done anything wrong." It was the same voice she'd used when she told my father

she'd caught me pulling out the less popular letters in his encyclopedia set, like *K* and *H*, which no one ever looked at anyway, then scrawling over a random page with a red crayon before closing the book and putting it back on the shelf.

I closed my bedroom door, slowly, both so that my parents wouldn't realize I'd been eavesdropping and because it seemed like the right thing to do, the right gesture, a slow close to an opportunity I'd only just been given, the chance to know all the secrets Nicole kept hidden with a Camel Light in her nightstand, that had only just been taken away. It was almost like I had died. I sat on my bed with my legs crossed underneath me and pulled my journal from its place between my box-springs and my mattress, where I hid it because I knew it wasn't really hidden and my mother might see what I wrote and realize how unfair she was, especially when it came to not letting me wear lip-gloss like every other girl in the state of Alabama was allowed to do. I wrote *everything is so not fair* at the top of a new page, then sat and thought for a minute. When I couldn't think of anything else I could say that was mean enough to

be satisfying but not mean enough to get me grounded, I underlined *so* and *not* and then *fair*, twice, for good measure. Then I realized that it didn't matter if I was grounded, because besides Nicole I didn't have any other friends in the neighborhood, and never would, with my bare lips and complete lack of knowledge about things like training bras and periods and how to smoke a Camel Light or successfully hide it in my nightstand. I didn't even have a nightstand.

I turned to a new page and wrote at the top, in the corner, in letters so small that they looked like a line if you pulled your head back and squinted a little: *penis*. I wondered if I was brave enough to write it bigger, and before my mind could answer, my hand had written it twice – *penis* and *penis*, bigger each time. And then I was writing it over and over, bigger and bigger, moving from page to page and to page, the letters growing until I couldn't fit them all on one line. Finally there was one letter stretched across the length of an entire page, then five pages of letters, from *P* all the way to *S*, and when I was finished I sat on the bed and stared at it. I asked the *S* if I felt guilty. It said I didn't,

and it was right. It was just a letter, a line curved then curved back again, and more empty space than writing, more nothing than anything I could read or understand.

WOMEN SHALL TEACH WOMEN

HOLLY BURNSIDE

In the lunchroom, I admired the bravery of your broken arm
the product of a penny-drop from the clothes pole bar,
and you offered your ante through grinning teeth,
gleeful as a snake, "Do you want to see a naked man?"
So we slipped away, our sandals pounding faded linoleum
to the dry abandoned showers behind the gym, where
standing so close your skirt brushed mine in a cotton kiss,
you unrolled your secret like a map to a crumbling city
revealing torsos, limbs, shining teeth, cocks and balls,
men tanned and moustached like TV private I's.
Our fingers gripped the creased and wrinkled pages
and I saw a crime scene, imagined there must be weapons, injury,
property damage implicit in the tangled bodies, the reddened flesh
but you said, "My dad has lots. He throws them in the trash."
My body jerked away from yours, but when summer came
we played for hours in the beaten dirt of your side yard
with dolls the size of living children, and on rainy days
we raced screaming around the pool table in your living room,
while your father crouched in the corner smoking,
Jack the Ripper in tattered blue jeans, the wicked promise
of naked men laying fallow in the kitchen trash bin
until I came home with dirty jokes my mother thought I'd caught
like scabies. Her eyes studied mine like a hunter reading tracks

before she shook her head and said, "No more. No more."
I might have crumbled like salt under her grasping hands
but I'd already learned how to cache the stolen flesh.
I knew she could not keep me pillared there for long.

I BROKE IT ROLLERSKATING

**MICHAEL
CHANEY**

When I broke my ankle in three places, I was gliding. Down totem from backflip and perfect pitch is reverse roller skating. On that night I had just mastered it. My daughter goaded me, herself a rolling princess of matchless caution. *You're doing it, Daddy* made me fearless. I played down my backwards grace with some of the fastest forward ever. Forty years of skating hummed the ball bearings. No longer the kid who couldn't turn enough to make my own father smile, I could put one careless leg across the other. I thought my wife would speed up for my hand. The way I was going. Into a spin. A full stop. A collapse of neurons and tibia snap. Consciousness slithers into this moment. When it arrives, eternity is waiting. A troll under a bridge, his warted hands out for coin or story. For months I will be asked for a cast explanation. Prisoner of the cast — to the telling of its origin. A cast is like a baby. It confers license to others, their Gestapo questions probing for your papers. Others can be so fast forward. Bones, not so much. This one will take five screws and three months of raise it higher on the pillows, watch for that crack in the sidewalk, another crotch bath on the toilet, and how many pills has it been? The worst will be the omnipresence of this moment. It will never really go away this singular looping, muted screaming, praying and aching that is the other side of pain, its terrifying locus of desire. One learns in the supposed kindnesses of other people's questions not to remember it too vividly. Nothing is so keen. The torturous weight of the skates. No position for the foot that does not explode. The salted dust of the rink. That knot of blemished maplewood usually seen in

glorious passing, now a curb for lips. My wife's panicked eyes disappearing with my whisper for an ambulance. The place where my hands clutch grimy pools of sweat in the middle of this old Vermont rink, beneath that old Vermont lattice of sad ceiling fixtures, a wood pile never noticed, cobwebs on the disco ball and strobes, those ancient pipes in overalls of rust, nails studding the roof in sequins, each glimmer a reminder that ambulances take a while out here — a while of mental, endless, muscled struggle with the devil gnawing my foot. If only I could get a better vantage on it, beyond this supine version of myself. But that way too is barbed. That way stands my daughter, pale and agape, trying desperately to reconcile a head full of cartoons with this new caricature. When the paramedics finally arrive, she asks them if her Daddy is going to die. I hold her hand, and as they raise me up I prepare my story.

ELASTICITY

LIZ N. CLIFT

To the woman reading *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus*, while walking around the lake this cold October morning: the answers aren't in there, or in the pages of any other book catalogued "self-help." That's a marketing scam meant for women like you, women who believe throwing crisp bills at problems will make them disappear and if there aren't crisp bills, then ones so worn their wrinkles aren't even visible, the way we all might be some day if life grants us that, the way my grandmother's skin worn rough by alcoholism and tobacco was baby soft again by the time she died, the elasticity gone. Elasticity, the ability to stretch and bounce back. You might wonder who am I to talk, with my headphones in and hands shoved deep in the pockets of my coral-colored coat, a beacon among the grays and browns and blacks, wanting to be noticed, wanting to stay invisible, dropping my eyes when a stranger says hello. He wears flannel and jeans and has black Xs tatted on the backs of his hands. *Hello*, I say, barely more than a puff of steam, and he smiles and asks if he can pet my dog, and what's there to do but say yes, or no, and I choose yes because there's no risk in saying no, and with all the packs of jumpsuits and baby joggers, there's no risk in saying yes, and because what I want more than anything is the *blipblipblip* of someone on my radar, or to be on someone's radar, to connect. The stranger's hands massage my dog's ears and my dog wags her tail and leans against his legs coating them with long white

hairs, and our breath converges, and the lake patrol is just starting their boat, the engine revving, and maybe men are from Mars and women are from Venus, but we've been on Earth long enough that we should stop reading books to understand each other, and just actually talk to each other, maybe about being straight-edge, or from Iowa and vegan, the silent conversation of two bodies walking in tandem who don't know each other but know this is a moment that's supposed to stretch, or how we ended up *here* wherever *here* is, and especially if *here* is on a path around a Colorado lake, with the aspens coloring the backdrop of mountains in a Bob Ross of purple, yellow, red, and orange.

REPORTORIAL

BY

SUSAN COHEN

**THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

I met them young and frightened.
It was San Francisco in the '80s.
In the Castro, the last bitter Irish bar
held out against their gayness,
and boys who had survived
a father's belt, boots to the ribs,
bottles smashed against their skulls,
showed a different kind of bruising,
smacked purple by a cancer
that spoiled their handsome faces.
Some seemed baffled
by the microbes in their brains.
I came to them as a reporter,
and they'd offer up their stories
with a cup of coffee I would sip
to show them their saliva did not
scare me. I remember one—
his army jacket hung on a frame
that had carried twice the weight.
Now he was a hanger for his coat.
We talked in a cafeteria, and then
he stood and hugged me too hard
for a stranger. He was a tall man
in his twenties who needed me
to know he was not a ghost yet, and
clung as if I were the raft to save him.
Or as if...and I'm still sorry, sorry
I imagined, face pressed against
rough cloth and the sharpness
of his shoulder, he almost hoped
to give me his disease. A reason
to remember how he felt.

THEY MISS YOU, GEORGIANA WILLARD

GEORGE DREW

By they, I mean your loved and loving ones.
Your family. Your dear friends. Your sixteen cats.
They loved you and the bag of good luck bones

you brandished everywhere—the skeletons
of mice and spiders, toads, lizards and bats.
By they, I mean your loved and loving ones,

the hectoring Hannahs and dismissive Dons
who loved your frumpy duds and shabby hats.
They loved you and your bag of good luck bones,

those who never would have heard the moans
coming from you and not your sixteen cats.
By those, I mean your loved and loving ones,

the naughty Nancys and the jaded Johns
who loved your cauldrons slick with bubbling fats.
They loved you and the bag of good luck bones

you boiled until they gleamed like moonlit stones,
the stew of bones you spiced with slugs and rats.
By they, I mean your loved and loving ones.
They loved you and your bag of good luck bones.

THE OWL SITS APART FROM ITS TREE

BY

SHAWN FAWSON

**THE HARPUR PALATE PRIZE FOR
CREATIVE NONFICTION**

I'm twenty-five. I meet Steve at my college graduation party. He tells the story of a fire that turns the trees into shadows dancing with many arms. There are animals with bright eyes, who seem to be smiling. He thinks up new adventures for each guest. First he thinks up fog and wind. Then mountains dripping with water. He thinks up a silver owl who speaks. Rain flows into the lake. I shut my eyes and hear, *Jump in!* I feel a fish swimming at my arm.

A week later folding party-chairs still sit on the wooden deck. In my mind I cannot imagine the fish anymore. I don't see the silver owl. But a beak asks me questions: *Can you save yourself?* I cannot save myself. *Will you hide?* There is no place to run.

Each time the beak talks I sit very still. Near dawn it tells me I have answered correctly: I may call myself a woman, have friends in my life, forests, and vases full of flowers. I may live near the sea. I am to search through darkness my whole life, looking for something I insist is missing — looking in the wrong

places, knowing great panic.

I'm twenty-six. On Steve's back is a large freckle shaped like a lake I've been to. A rush of water grows wide and slow. Somebody slips; no one falls. *Stay as calm as you can*, the beak says, and it seems possible without something fearful shouting out.

We marry, and Steve paints like crazy, full of ideas. A portrait of an old woman holding a dragonfly between her thumb and finger. A landscape of a mountain behind Mirror Lake catching clouds at dusk. The scenes are simple, painted on canvas-board. Their light spins with emotion.

In bed Steve pulls me on top of him. There's blue moonlight all across the white sheets. He smooths the shirt open and puts his palms on my waist. He tilts me forward, and I sink over him. I feel it the next day, the echo of it. A memory that makes my skin respond. A hot wind billows over dune-grass and cools. He's on the shore, touching me.

I never knew the pond

in the back yard could gather such warmth. When the days grow long the pond widens as if spreading were more important than flowing.

Our baby sits up. The shelves fill with books about bears, dogs, and trains. He begins to crawl. There are fistfuls of tugs at my skirt's hem.

I look at this man who's my husband, and I'm unable to remember who I was before him. When we're apart I can imagine his body as though I were inside it, seeing what he sees, tasting bread and curries, feeling the bend of his elbows, the impact of his feet when he walks.

I'm twenty-eight. I feel as if Steve's body were moving uncomfortably. In the rocking chair his body slouches, his legs cross. All I feel is his grief and the distance of everything around us: the dormant lake far out in the mountains, the shuddering pines. *How did it happen?* he asks over and over. *Tell me again*, his voice full of sadness. As if words ever make sense, I say, *I left the screen open. I heard a noise. I was*

drying dishes. I turned. He was asleep. I was drying dishes. I was putting them away. It was ten minutes. I turned. He was gone. I ran everywhere. He was floating in the pond. Steve would concentrate with his hands clenched together and clear his throat with soft sounds. But he didn't want to hear my story. My story always drowned his son.

Some days I stay in bed on the edge of sleep resisting wakefulness. Sleep is the only tolerable place, and then dreams invade. *Close your eyes and go to the pond*, the beak says in the middle of the night. Sparrows flock around and teach me to fly totally unafraid. One sparrow carries our boy over rooftops and parks. I see his shadow running across the lawn. I feel his small body press against my chest, his head's sweet sun-smell. Then he is gone. I cannot stop crying. I cannot stop biting my hands.

Steve roams the house. He stands in the yard.

One morning I find him asleep in the hallway, legs drawn up to his chest. He has no language for how he feels. I lie down

next to him and stare at his sleeping face, his slightly parted lips. It was as if the carpet had absorbed him and he fell into some other world where time didn't exist. Maybe some things can't be shared — they carry a kind of secrecy with them that isn't to be violated.

I look at the freckle on Steve's back and remember us rowing on the lake. We know about watery escapes blooming into shrubby magnolias, the duckweed, violets underwater. I lie next to him and remember running until the ground gave way at my feet, and I fell under once, then a second time, my hand outstretched and splashing through the water. I saw our boy's knees at my cheeks, his heels at my chest. I waited for a sound, but none came.

The beak tells me, *Hold your breath as long as you can but you will never die.*

It might go on forever this way.

In the park later that summer Steve says, "Okay, we'll just keep walking." We face each other. "I need to get out," he says.

At first I think he means he has to get off of the pebbled path.

"You mean leave?" I say. "Leave the house?"

"I don't know what I mean," he says.

"I hate that house," I say. My eyes burn. I meant I hate the backyard. "I didn't know where he went."

Steve stops and shakes his head. "Why?" he says. "Why? For God's sake." Tears fall from his eyes. "I can't stand it," he says. "I can't stand it another minute. It's too much. Every day. Too much."

"I know," I say.

"You do." He sucks tears off his lips.

"I was banging dishes around. When I got to him he wasn't moving," I say softly. "I was kneeling and touching his neck and pulling him. I was running then not running. Next to him, but also leaving him and running to the phone. And then I was standing above the EMTs, who lifted his body and shook their heads, and said words I couldn't hear. Then I was kneeling again over his

body or running.”

Steve looks at me, his head tips slightly, and he begins to sob.

I move forward, catch him in my arms. He grips my shoulders and puts his face against my chest. Sunlight glints off the waxy leaves. I feel Steve’s heart beating, his moist skin, our bones fitting together.

“I need to leave,” he says.

I keep asking, “Are you coming back?”

After a year he says, “Yes.”

I try to remember what our lives were like before. I remember Steve across the room at a winter-gallery opening, a party for his paintings. People walked between us or stood in groups, shifting so he came in and out of view. His palm balanced a wassail cup. Behind him frost patterns swirled up the window. Later he said, “I knew exactly where you were at every moment.”

Once when our son was a baby, Steve stopped the stroller in front of that very gallery and held him up to the dark, the stars glittering. Steve swept him up, arms outstretched, down,

then carefully up into the air again.

Each summer we begin again. We turn toward each other but our fingers move away like wounded insects across bed sheets.

It feels as though all these things happen before they happen. As if everything exists all at once, going forward or backward, into the past or future. For a moment I see into the place where the pain blurs. What else could I have said? What question or apology during the embrace of us — who only want to escape from this constant grief — like exhausted wrestlers who lean into each other’s bodies and take a break.

In an act of love, I dip a thin washcloth in warm water and wash Steve’s face. Careful to wash every ear-fold, I remember he’s really the first man I loved. He’s my husband who married me and said things like, *oh jesús, jesús* while nestling his face into my shoulder.

I wake up in the middle of the night. Steve says waking’s a sign. Not for anything bad now, but

maybe later. Like your mind has gone on ahead, glimpsed what's to come and startled you awake. You think you hear noises: a helicopter's blades or a siren's wails. It can't be good. Then no siren. It's quiet, but the sounds are still in your head. The future calls the present, but we're not there yet.

Steve and I box up our son's room. Toys, plastic trains, red, blue, and green. A yellow dump truck with big black wheels. Paper stars hanging from the rafters. I remember the night I lifted my son to my shoulders and moved slowly, showed him the gulls circling overhead, how one after the other would break from the flock. I walked him to where the low branches of trees hung over the pond and dipped into water so he could lift his hand and touch the outline of trees with his fingers. Everything is gone. Everything but one small shoebox and the rocking chair.

I'm thirty. Over the rocking chair Steve throws his pants over my shirt. Pant legs droop over the sleeves. It's a simple thing, but

it makes me feel as if a stream is rushing through my heart. I walk past the rocking chair and stand at the window. I feel the weight of the moon — so heavy it feels ready to come down. I remember all the things to come. But not now.

Steve cooks me my favorite mashed potatoes with mushrooms on the side. We pile the dishes in the sink for tomorrow. I push my hands under his shirt. The future calls for us; fear eats our words.

I used to be mad at Steve. *How can you be afraid of love?* Now I know. Exactly. The truth is nobody goes back in time. You as a couple can't return before anything had happened. For a brief moment you can forget, sometimes you wake in the mornings, and your mind blanks until a dark awareness creeps through you and you must realize it's true all over again.

I'm thirty. At the park, children run around the swings and shriek. Other mothers' high-pitched voices chase their children down from trees, *Ready or not!* Or shout without strain, without that ache for a name

just out of reach, *Found you!*
I despise their antics because
I have a much more serious
notion about this life. But to
get their attention I'd like to
count higher and higher by tens
so deep inside, each number
shatters when it hits the air. I'd
like for those mothers to see my
boy flying over the rooftops, and
to holler out in earnest as his
shadow crosses the lawn.

LET ME TELL YOU

RICKY GARNI

Let me tell you a true story about the funniest man on earth who sold pinkie rings backstage in vaudeville and whose father was a jeweler and who sat in a tub with water up to his neck and told funny stories to his dictaphone and who Groucho called “probablythe funniest man who ever lived” and who Jack called “the greatest gag man who ever lived” and who signed a contract one day and was the funniest man who ever lived and he was happy and sad and then he went to bed that night and then he woke up the next morning and died and had a deep subtle understanding of the foibles of human nature and a nimble mind but he died and he had sad eyes but of course that’s why they say he signed a contract.

COLOGNE OF THE GREATS

RICKY GARNI

Creed Tabarome Millesime, the men's cologne,
costs \$120. That seems like a lot, but
with it you get The Maltese Falcon, Casablanca,
They Drive By Night, In a Lonely Place,
Lauren Bacall, Africa, whiskey, cigarettes, trench coats,
and everything Humphrey Bogart ever saw.

Not only that, you also get World War II, Malta,
the feel of a big cigar, what Stalin's mustache looked like,
the smell of a blue wool overcoat, rain on a battleship
and everything else Winston Churchill ever saw including
Pol Roger Champagne which is so good you can
almost taste it from here. When you think about it,

\$120 is really kind of a steal for Creed Tabarome Millesime,
because four ounces is a lot of Creed Tabarome
Millesime, Creed Tabarome Millesime will last a long time,
Creed Tabarome Millesime comes in a pretty bottle,
will give you secret things, precious things, will make you
love, will give you memories, and best of all,

when someone in the elevator says "Pardon me,
isn't that World War II?"

you can say, "No, it is Creed Tabarome Millesime"–
a terrific name to be sure and handy
and nice smelling

on the face.

THIS IS WHY WE'RE GOING

JOHN GIFFORD

They're writing songs about it. They're making movies about it. Not because someone says they have to. It's because they want to. You see that pickup truck across the river? The hombre who owns it decided that's what he wanted. So he walked into the pickup truck store, pointed with his finger and said, Give me that one, even though he could have bought this one or that other one, see. And get this: the man—or the woman. Could have been a woman—who built it said, I want a job making pickup trucks. There's nobody telling him he has to build trucks. He does it because he wants to. If he wanted to, he could be running a market somewhere, or fixing people's teeth, or laying the bricks on these new homes they're building up in Texas. They tell me there's lots of work in Texas. You can work every day if you want. Me, I want Sundays off. But every other day I'm going to stay hooked up. That's how you do it, see. These men you hear about, the ones with their own pickup trucks, with new boots and pretty wives? They've already figured this out, see. That's why we're going. When I'm old and my teeth fall out, I want to know that what they put in there is better than what I started with.

DENVER INTERNATIONAL

CHRIS HAUG

On nights like this, I dream
about being delayed
at Denver International

because walking around this airport
doesn't leave me with any dread
though its air is thick with delay.

There's no fear; I don't long for home
as the small whispers
of ticket counters breathe *delay*.

If you've had occasion to visit Phoenix,
you know what I mean: the dry
desert air just can't hold longing.

When I say I miss *Denver*,
its intoxicating necessity, I'm a lunatic
on the surface of the moon.

When I say *Denver* at the bar,
the word is smoke
and the glass at my hand is a talisman of ambergris.

When I say *Denver* at the gate,
(on time) the word is the sea
and I am the dinghy resting dockside.

And later, when I say *Denver* to you
in the dark, you are the ticket counter,
and I am the chill on the Lucite surrounding you,

as planes fly in from everywhere
and hover in a holding pattern
above Denver International.

6 A.M. MONA LISA

CHRIS HAUG

Nothing in life has any business being perfect.

-James Goldman

Early this morning,
when light was just a rumor,
I spied one of your green socks
on our bedroom floor
next to the white plate
with the silent remains
of the dessert you made for me
still clinging to it,
and I started wondering
if the Mona Lisa
ever wore socks.
Probably not,
but if she did,
I think she'd leave them
indelicately out
wadded up and just out of sight
near the hem of her black dress
perched there on a remnant of beige carpet
beside her own half-eaten brownie.

READING *METAMORPHOSES*

CHRIS HAUG

I awake to find that I am become
an enormous supermarket potato
reading Ovid's story
about Narcissus and Echo.
I find I desire someone
to plant me in a garden, any garden.
I feel my tuberous eyes
beginning to sprout.
They'll no longer notice
the florescent buzz overhead
and forget the neat rows of beans meditating,
the gentle bunches of lettuce, asleep.
I can feel the tentacles
of my own making
wrapping themselves
around my glasses,
and I shudder
as I sense them
turning their gaze back at me.

WITH DAD

IVAN HOBSON

In the high-country on horseback
we saw that rattlesnake
get taken into the sky.

What was wrong with the hawk
that it did not finish the job?

The snake striking until it was freed,
falling until it crashed
on the rocks below,

and the hawk drunk with venom
fluttered to the ground
where you told me it wouldn't survive
the afternoon.

There I was, an unsure boy
when I cleared my throat and asked you
if you still loved mom.

WE SEE INTO THE LIFE OF THINGS

ERIN HOOVER

From trucking money, John Hall built
a mansion with a tower of carillons,
Swiss bells his wife played, striking the keys
with her half-closed fists. Twenty summers
have passed since the estate sale where locals
offered the kind of money they paid
for their own homes, women ran fat fingers
over heart-shaped fireplaces, kids shot hoops
on courts stacked with crates, heavy
bells that used to fill the tower with sound
singing in Nashville, Ohio, Puerto Rico.
They say the son who ratted him out
for embezzlement still lives there,
shooting soup cans out back. No one knows,
most of the time, how fires start, but this
was once the richest man we knew.
For years the tower's shell has stood over
the whistling interstate, and closer,
Fuck everybody scrawled in red
in the foyer. How often I have returned
there—from my car on the highway,
extending my hand to replace the gray finger
of the tower with my thumb, or watched

disasters play out in my mind, as climbing
the spire, neighborhood kids split their skulls
on the floor of the elevator shaft. In them
I see my own small body, wedging my sneakers
inside the tower's spine, bound for the stars
that beamed through wall slats, a penthouse
whose couches bowed with the imprints
of junkies, ghost cigarettes dangling
from their lips. Mrs. Hall danced there
in a white dress, tan shoulders carrying
the hot husk of Tahiti summers, to humanity's
strange, hollow music. Once bells rang
brighter than gunshot, the caretaker
who takes out chicken noodle, beef broth—
a few hard, sharp dings, the shells landing
soft in the tower's shallow moat.
I come back here as if there is a thing
I forgot, some sound or sight or just
the heft of concrete, a monument to love,
the quiet night clamoring around me.

CELLO, 8TH GRADE

AUSTIN KODRA

Like holding a telephone at your fingertips.

Our teacher turned her hand from ear to chest-level
as though she was hanging up an old desk phone—

it was how we were supposed to grip our bows,
press them to string, our hacksaws with bundles
of fine nylon teeth. But instead of carving notes
from steel, we drummed the hollow out of f-holes
and laughed when told to quiet down.

We're here to find another way to speak,
she said, showing us how to slick the bows
over sticky rosin like tongues over hard candy,
unscrew and draw out endpins like measuring tapes,
and we thought to ourselves the time to speak had passed.

And when she played Bach's Prelude to Suite No. 1
on the school's old Casio cassette deck, the boy
in the last chair who'd always kept to himself,
who couldn't play scales without a rabid screech
on the bridge, said the gruff sweeps across the C-string

sounded like his father he spoke to once a week,

barking orders through a prison phone
faster than his son could carry them out:

Clean the gutters. Change the deadbolt.

Wash the windows. Flip the mattresses.

Make me proud, son.

And for what felt
like the first time, we didn't know
what to say or do, we only let his last note
linger in our throats until our teacher lifted
her hands and we were forced, once more, to play.

RAHAB

ADAM LAMBERT

They didn't blow their horns but beat them
Regular and right as the mason's hammer.
They didn't march but paced with god's gleam
In their eyes and hearts for six days,
And on the seventh his rage. Pure devotion
Is to give something up entirely;
So in piety they barked as saints bark,
And with their torches ready, tore through
To burn my every neighbor's child
In the Lord's Name. They spared me—
Whore to god, whore to Canaan—
Whore who hinged a war for nothing.
I still sleep but often wake to woodfire
Snapping out in the wee hours,
Mocking like a prayer the six-day's din.
Morbidity belltower of Jericho alive.
The clack of their horns echoed for miles.

LOVE LETTER

RICHARD LUFTIG

I have written
 exactly one
perfect poem

in my life.
 it is
to you.

After I am
 gone you
might wish

to read it.
 I keep
it in

the drawer
 of our
nightstand

with my father's
 watch, a photo
of us when

we were
 young, and
my upper bridge.

FIGURE/GROUND

RICHARD LUFTIG

In psychology the perceiving of two distinct objects, but whenever one is identified, the other fades into the background.

He believes
 for a second
that he sees
 faces
 of his children

wrapped amid
 cloudbanks
in that fulcrum
 of moment when
dawn overtakes dark.

But he knows how
later they will fade,
 overtaken by
a winter bitter
 as lost chances,

harder to grasp than

ash on air,
that fades west,
always west
into a night of lost hills.

CENTRALIA, PENNSYLVANIA

CAITLIN MCGUIRE

They say we are a ghost town, but we are not all ghosts yet. We are the unshod, unshorn, we are the sulfurous. We know the smell of carbon, our boreholes, our highway's gashes. Our feet are warm. We remain.

The fire began as a blessing. For years, we burned our trash outside the city, the places where our fathers and our grandfathers and their fathers had opened the earth for mine shafts and then abandoned. But the fire spread to open coal, lighting anthracite seams that ran like veins under summer skin: lifeblood, invisible, easily forgotten.

We tried to stop the fire's clot. We piped water through the mine shafts, making inky clouds of steam; we drove bulldozers, held dragline shovels. We dug for burning rock, covered the fire with fly ash, the residue of coal-burnt power plants. And the fire continued to burn.

And the burning made life better. Underground, the rocks and the soil leached away heat, and under our feet, the asphalt was like barely broiled anything. Mrs. Hubbard's tomatoes grew ripe and red even in winter. Snow melted when it touched our ground.

And so we sold our snowplows. We paved new pools, filled our home-made hot springs. We were the world's first sauna city. We put bells on kitchen tables and called our houses B&Bs; we brought in tourists. We read books about beauty; we learned how to give facials. Our smell was eucalyptus oil and new-tarred highways. We grew our town into a city. Markets and theaters and shopping malls and restaurants, side streets, housing tracts, spas. Our sidewalks were clean and white and we did not feel what was

underneath our pumiced feet, below the soles of our calf-leather shoes, our alligator skin boots.

Ten years passed before the bark-stripped trees told us their roots had been cauterized, their tops too heavy. We learned the smell of bonfire; each felled tree coming up tangled and charred. We planted new trees. They died as well. Mrs. Hubbard's tomatoes shriveled, clung sundried to their vines. Our pumpkins: only shells.

We'd forgotten that the fire was spreading still below, eating our fuel acres. But the fire had not forgotten us. It ate miles of anthracite, burned hard without air. By then, its smallest veins had been exhausted, coal turned to ash.

And so our hot springs buckled, sunk into the earth, inch by sodden inch. We slicked over earth with cement, trying to pave the pools higher, but the cement refused to harden. The silt slid from the pool's sides and into the water. We added and added. The water took the gravel and set, our hot springs turned to blocks of mortar and sand. They sunk down farther. They left hard-finished holes.

The tourists left us after Mrs. Hubbard suffocated in the attic bedroom of her B&B, her visitors still in their beds, all dead. The fumes held tight to the wallpaper; everything cleaned away by men in plastic jumpsuits. They installed gas alarms in our buildings that warned us of our smothering. We slipped in sinkholes, in sidewalk cracks split wide enough to hold us.

They came then for our neighbors. They traded checks for our homes and drive-ins and grocery stores. They took our zip code, they razed our fume-bleached trees. They bought our broken highways.

But the six of us traded our shoes for our neighbors' houses, and they left us, holding boxes full of leather. We turned off their sirens and lived in our silence. We broke their windows, pulled doors off hinges, and let the inside out and the outside in. We share each room with one another and with nested bats and blue-tailed lizards, pink lemonade moths and green-winged butterflies that lay so still they look like leaves once healthy, until they leave our trees. With bees big enough to knock on the sides of our houses, waiting to be invited in. With ants big enough to carry us away. We have no doors to close to them, no windows to shut them out.

When we are gone, they will unearth our burning. They will shovel it away, and they will keep what remains. We are not yet gone.

There is time to die. And we *will* die, our last six souls. But for now, we light our stoves with ground-touch matches. We wear gasmasks where fumes smoke through the splintered ground. We paint our nowhere roads with the names of those who left us. We leave tomatoes for Mrs. Hubbard; they roast themselves on granite graves. We groom our cemeteries for older ghosts. We shred the curtains to our windows and sleep in every bed of every home left except ours. We watch storms hung heavy over the hills of other places, we watch lightning strike the other mountains. The bottoms of our blistered feet are bare and we are hot-stepped; still, we dance with fireflies through the gouges and the gullies in the ruins of our town.

LEMON TREE

**LINDSAY
MERBAUM**

We laid Gramma to rest in the yard, beneath the lemon tree. The doghouse sat in its shade, though the dog had run away. Right then, the lemons began to swell from the blossoms. We didn't notice them. We stood there at the grave with our heads bowed, exhausted from grief, too stunned to cry. A lemon fell at our feet, making a crater in the moist earth.

Gramma always loved that tree, though she wouldn't eat the fruit. "Too sour," she said and puckered up. Gramma with white-silk hair in a braid, blue-tinged teeth and a wooden cane stolen from a witch with one leg, so she couldn't give chase. *But can't witches fly?* we asked. Gramma with teas that could cure sadness, with crumpled lists in her pocket, written in script we couldn't decipher. Gramma with her spicy stews, her dark puddings with the skin on top, her wooden salad bowl she said belonged to her mother's mother's mother that she rubbed down with cloves of garlic. Gramma with orchids perched atop the beams of our two-level round house. ("Dome sweet dome," Gramma liked to say). The orchids bloomed all year round, their leaves growing so big they covered the window.

The lemons grew overnight, fat and thick-peeled, big-nippled and stipple-skinned. We collected them in our aprons. Their sourness was sharp as a fine blade. We made lemon pies, lemon cream, lemon bars, lemon jam, lemon oil the way Gramma had taught us. They tasted divine, like the most exquisite sorrow. We garnished fish we caught in the stream. With the rest, we carved faces into the peel, made up the characters of good and evil and put them to work in plays.

But the lemons kept coming. Every morning there were more. They filled the yard, tumbled down in piles towards the house. The smell was intoxicating. The ones at the bottom rotted sweetly, adding a fermented scent to the fresh fruit, like a citrusy wine.

All day we hefted buckets of lemons, bailing out the yard. But each morning it was full again. We put on our old snow boots and began to stomp on them, reducing the top layer of fruit to pulp. The juice squirted us in the face and made our eyes red and swollen. "We killed them," we said.

The dog house got filled up, then buried. The tire swing disappeared. We could no longer open the back door. We watched from the only window in the house as the wooden fence began to buckle and bulge. Later the window cracked. Then it shattered in the night and the lemons filled the sink beneath it. They rolled across the floor, hit the wall, hid under Gramma's rocking chair. In the morning, we found them in the dog's bed, under the couch, and, inexplicably, in drawers and under cushions.

"Gramma, stop!" we cried. But she couldn't hear us. She was dead.

We scrambled up the crooked stairs to the second floor, sang loudly as we could to drown out the thumps and bumps as the lemons began to fill the downstairs. It was as if they could move of their own will, rolling this way and that. We crouched against the wall with our hands over our faces. If the house had had corners, that's where we would've gone. We were hungry yet nauseated from the scent: rot and sad-sweetness, earth and fruit pies, perfume. That's what they smelled like.

We were beginning to realize that we were homeless, that the dog was never coming back.

"It's too late to make any more pies, isn't it," we said, and as the stairs began to moan and creak, we both began to laugh until tears rolled down our faces, fat as lemon seeds.

THE ASTRONAUT KISSES SATURN

**SARAH FAWN
MONTGOMERY**

When the man who wanted
to be an astronaut holds a bottle
to his aching lips like a kiss,
drinks deep the amber warmth inside
until it goes down where the hurt starts,
he thinks about space—silent as a curse
but sparkling with the souls of the dead,
or like a million wishes for the taking,
him as a boy watching on the porch,
trying to decide, his parents fighting inside.

He thinks about the way the bottle
might float in front and away from him
in space, avoid his grasp, resist him.
Or the way he couldn't chain-smoke Camels,
because you can't light a match with no oxygen.
He thinks he wouldn't feel deadweight heavy,
could get out of bed for once, weightless.
How even with all that dark he'd catch a glimpse
of light—more than now—in the marbled giants,
and even tiny, he wouldn't be insignificant like here.

Soon the astronaut is sloppy swimming
on the dirty carpet—hair, cigarette butts, stains—
like there's no gravity. He's laughing and crying
like he sees the moon. He's talking to no one,
saying he can see why God made it all,
looking through the empty bottle like it's a helmet,
eyes wide, almost panicked to take in what he sees,
mouth still open like a kiss as he swivels, swerves,
stumbles to caress the watery color around him,
glowing rings like Saturn around his world.

(POOR) ROGER MARIS, 1964 TOPPS

M. G. MOSCATO

Pocket-weary, scuffed, and battered, Roger Maris gazes skyward in defiant optimism. More than anyone, he should know how pinstripes can suppress the ecstasy of flight. At age 29, the navy blue cap sits atop a ravine-furrowed brow, conceals bald patches and tufts of gray – distressed vestiges from 1961. An expanse of black netting looms behind his back. In high, deserted tiers, no crowd of a thousand empetalled faces quivers with applause. But even bold trajectory always dips eventually. So Roger plays with bone chips, a broken hand; he wracks his knees on grandstand dives, and, come retirement, he combats the Hodgkin's lymphoma whose cytology reveals periwinkle profusions among white blood cells. What history has since transpired: wrinkles extend in cellulose varicose veins from center to edges frayed. Yet still he stares through folds of time; he lifts his head, as if to trace the measured beat of ash wood – its resonant, aerial song arcing through the pale-blue down above.

CONTROLLED BURN

DEVIN MURPHY

You have an outing with your wife and kids, one of those “You never spend enough time with us and you’re going to regret it” deals your wife laid on so thick that you agree to shut the clinic down early on a Sunday. Noon, instead of three, to take the kids to the flea market. Let them rummage through the junk. Show them nostalgic items from your and your own parents’ childhoods. A fun, inexpensive activity. Together.

But you have a full morning of people filling the lobby with pets. Then the Macklans call up and say they’re ready to put their dog down, which you’d told them was necessary three days ago. Stomach cancer with a tumor that was about to rupture. They needed time for the kids who were away at school to come say goodbye. So the couple come in and sit in the lobby because the receptionist said there might be time if there’s a gap in appointments. But there are no gaps. You’ve got a St. Bernard with mange, an adopted greyhound with a torn ACL, and a bunch of violent cats you have to pin down by the shoulders to work on.

And you get done with all that, and it’s ten minutes past noon, and there’s the Macklans who’ve been bringing their two yellow labs to you for over a decade.

Last week their old dog ran off into the woods and lay down in the bushes. “Sort of seemed like to die,” the woman had said earlier when she first came in. “Since then she’s been laying in front of the door when we leave so we have to push it open with our shoulder to slide her away. And she’s stopped eating.” The woman looked sick.

It was a good dog. A healthy pup. Lots of good years with a nice family. Tons of checkups, tons of money this family has spent for your services over that time. You're already ten minutes late, but these people are crushed in the lobby, their hands digging into the old dog's fur.

So, what do you do?

You're in the back room where the vet tech and you have picked the old lab up on the table, and this couple is balling their eyes out. This dog caused fights when no one picked up the muddy paw prints, cuddled up on them on cold nights, and at times felt like it was there to love and save them.

This part never gets easier. You put the animals down all the time, and the most terrible part is being around the people acting like you're robbing their souls. You talk them through the whole thing. You know your vet tech has made plans for a half day on a weekend, and you let her go after the dog is down. It's almost one and you hear the phone ringing in the lobby and know it's your wife, but the Macklans want to spend some time in there with the dog. The kids will just have to wait to filter through junk, and your wife will have to be angry and disappointed. It doesn't matter if she questions your love for her or your kids, this is how it is right now.

The room is quiet. The dead dog is still as a chair in an empty farm house.

"Do we take him?" Mr. Macklan asks.

"No. We take care of everything here," you say, answering a question you've answered dozens of times before, practiced at hiding your surprise that no one thinks about the logistics of this part of pet ownership. Did these people think they were supposed to take the dead dog back to their car? The dog, heavy in their arms, walking through the lobby with its head lolling, tongue slack, cold eyes reflecting the other patients and pets in the lobby.

You get home at two-thirty and there's no one there. No note. You could have left the dead dog until the next day but it seemed only fair to treat it the way the Macklans would have. When they finally left the room, after giving the dead dog a forty-five minute vigil, you said goodbye to them, locked up the clinic, and wheeled a stainless steel gurney into the

room to lug all seventy pounds of the dead dog to the freezer. Then you make the calls to have it picked up in the morning.

You know people never think of this when they get their puppies from breeders. They never think of this when they have years of getting to train and love these creatures. You wonder how many of them even know what happens to their pets when they leave the clinic. How there has to be someone, and today it's you, to move that carcass around, to arrange it being disposed of, but what does that even mean? You bet none of them think about it. How cremation is too expensive. Even landfills cost too much. How the rendering truck will come and get them for free and the rendering plant will break Snoopy, and Opy, and Fido into tallow and hydrogenated animal fat for makeup and household products, and you don't like that part of it, but it is part of the deal, and you do it because someone has to, even if it means being home late from work when you were told that would not fly if your family were to stay healthy and happy together, but you do it.

So you have a sunny afternoon to yourself with no note as to when your wife and kids will be back. You have a drink. Beefeaters gin and tonic with a wedge of lime floating on the ice. You sit on your back deck and watch the birds resting in the field of saw grass, cattails, and Russian Olive. Red wing black birds flutter, and there are the warbling calls of grouse hidden in the dry brush. At the far end of the field, over three quarters of a mile away, you see a work crew in bright yellow vests cutting at the vegetation. A fire crew and police officer with their lights off pull onto the grasses from the nature reserves access road. You have a look at them through the binoculars you keep handy for your bird list, for the lift and twitch of purple martins, red tail hawks, and barn owls. The fire crew is fitting on their gear. The police officer is sitting in his car. You refill your drink. It's nice to have time to yourself. You are a responsible man. You get little rest and it's nice to have it now, though you will pay for it when your family gets home. If you only left them one message from work, inquiring where they were, to call back, if you should go meet them.

You watch through the binoculars in one hand. In the other is the Beefeaters. A firefighter walks into the field with what looks like a propane torch and touches it to the grass. He walks another ten yards and dips the

flame to more dry grass, and then ten more yards and touches the flame again, and again, like he is ministering the sacrament to the heads of the willow bushes. You watch as the flame follows him and widens, and in the distance, through the binoculars, you see the waves of heat warping the air. Soft orange licks of fire seem translucent in the sunlight. The fire crew is larger than you first thought. You see several dozen firefighters with shovels and picks working the perimeter of the blaze. But the blaze keeps swelling, keeps eating more of the field.

You've seen the remnants of a controlled burn along the side of the road, but you've never seen one from the start. You've never seen the flicker and spread of a blaze as you're watching now. Over the first hour, you fill your drink twice more. The phone has still not rung. The smoke across the field is black and dense and gray as it rises. You can no longer see the firefighters behind the new wall of smoke, and over the afternoon, the wall moves closer to your home. It's a quarter mile off when the sun begins to set.

You wonder what work schedule the firemen have. Do they work six and half days a week? Do they have round the clock schedules? Do they have debt and mortgages and child care expenses that feel overwhelming? You watch the fire move closer and know you shouldn't, but pour another drink. Your cup is half full of cut and tamped limes under the fresh ice. You are not aware of your neighbors, if any of them are on their decks, looking at the flame. Perhaps they have gone elsewhere because they knew of the burn. Or they see it has grown quicker than the fire crew can contain. You hear the phone ring, but you don't answer. You hear it ring several more times, but you don't care. When do you get to watch the world burn? When do such things happen in your life?

You know this is a special moment. One you will remember. You are drunk as a lord when you pull the ringing phone from the wall and go back to the deck. You are aware that it is a sick fantasy, but you want the fire to run its course and flow over you, your home, incinerate you, turn you to ash and let you drift away from all this. You are happy to be ash and free of yourself. The sound of the door opening means nothing to you. Neither does your name being called, or footsteps coming down the hallway, calling

your name louder, then stopping when you are spotted out on the deck.
None of that is for you now. You are in the fire, your matter breaking
down in brilliant orange light, your essence drifting away in the gray smoke
pillars high overhead where you know nothing and feel nothing and know
nothing of burdens.

JUDAS

**JACOB
NEWBERRY**

"Take me to the hill," my father says,
"where Judas was hanged."

I interrupt. "He wasn't hanged," I say,
"he hanged himself." Now we are arguing again –
"Semantics," he replies. "Just take me there."

I will refuse – three times,
as it turns out – but I am weak; his insistence
is too strong. He needs to climb
that hill of blood where the branches are heavy,
where the olives pave the earth like stones
fallen from a limestone
tree. He asks again. I have lived here too long.
We are standing
on my rooftop and the tower near my house
is tolling all its Sunday bells.
Everything is ringing and there are
too many sites of dying to be seen while he is here.
Jerusalem is a graveyard
and we walk within its walls and we give thanks
for what we see and all the headstones here are trees.

"I just want to go," he says,
and for some reason I cannot explain how long it's been
since I have visited a place where no one died.

I'll go, I say,
if he will understand the difference, how the meaning
of those words is changed – the active of the *hanging*
from the passive of the *being hanged* –
but he is unmoved. "To die
or to be killed," he says, waving his hand,
"the ending is the same." I disagree.
"In either case," he says, "it is the Lord
who did the hanging."

Except
that it is Judas, always swinging
by that unholy neck, not God, with silver
scattered on the ground inside the temple,
always Judas
who performs the dying. The difference is real.

Like on another day,
the week before, also sitting on my roof,
our folding chairs pulled close to the makeshift table,
this time no tolling bells or clouds diffusing
through the atmosphere. He was on his second
helping of a simple dish I'd made.
When he went inside for thirds, I tossed two
spoonfuls of my own over the ledge. The crows
leapt from their cypress perch
and down into the courtyard. My father
came back and I pretended I'd been eating.
He sat.

"Why did you toss your food over the ledge?" he asked.
I said nothing. "I saw you through the window."

"The crows looked hungry," I told him.
"I see," he said. "Anyway,
it's good." I nodded. He watched me then,
not touching his own plate.

I cut
the meat into twenty pieces and
spread them out among the rice,
then took bites so small they might be missed
and chewed them twenty times.
He thinks *to die* and *to be killed* are just diversions
to the final state of things; there is no action
in his mind that bears repeating
if the ending is the same. So I must be forgiven
for my anger when he asked:

“You can’t quit counting, can you?”
as though the calories would be paid for by the Lord
through my unknowing, that thinking
something has no consequence can make it so.
But Judas, writhing while the capillaries burst
and while his eyes filled up with blood
and while his narrow spine
was cracking –
he had a number in his head, he had a consequence,
a wish for thirty pieces of undoing.

Father,
you will forgive me, it is three days now
since I last ate and I am having trouble
knowing words when they appear, except
this time is clear: *being hanged*
and *hanging himself* are not the same.
You will forgive me, Father, all
my trespasses: I am
so hungry now, and it is Judas who is hanging,
not the Lord, it is Judas
with the weakness traveling outward
through the flesh, refusing at some peril
when his friends insist he take their bread and eat it –

This do in remembrance of me –

it is Judas, with the nights turned red,
who in his dreams is eating, silent as he can,
nearly everything his house contains;
it is Judas,
 reaching for his heart
beneath the ribcage that extrudes through his skin
like paper straws under laminate,
seeking that undoing once again,
his back hunched over while he kneels
in search of absolution, yes,
even in his dream, a certainty of no forgiveness
for his body's last transgression;
 it is Judas who awakes,
trembling from the memory of food,
 all hope escaping as the skyline turns
to scarlet and the fibers from the rope
are broken elements of shale that he remembers
as a child he liked to pass across his arms to watch
 the blood begin
to show itself while somewhere close his mother
waded in the sea and all around the gulls
 were screaming, screaming, screaming.

JARILO (MOONLIT)

JOHN A. NIEVES

So this is what it has come to, Moon: you
eyeing me from across the lawn, making crushed

cans look romantic, throwing the soil under
the bushes into strict darkness. Some nights

long ago, when shaking would take me, you
would pretend to be the sun, open up the sky

and say, *There is nothing lurking. There is
nothing but dust in the hall and snow out*

the window. All that and now this. The people
who walk by throw trash in our yard

for no reason other than the fence is low and you,
moon, throw a halo around it, give the ants a satin

glow. And I stand bitten, wondering
if this is the same spell you always cast, if

the danger was always right at my feet waiting
for you to make it beautiful.

SKELETON

DAVID O'CONNELL

After Christopher Smart

For I will consider the bones of the world
For the bones of the high-rise he lives in are steel, and give, just slightly, to wind
For the bones of Denali, he thought while descending, are made of sterner stuff
For on discovering bones of Civil War dead, they agreed to tell no one, afraid that their land
would be seized
For a sliver of bone may be magic, so implies the bishop as he consecrates the altar
For 1.5 million years pass before his bones are reassembled, and since what he once was
is no more, they name him Turkana Boy
For what radiated from the elbow where she struck it on the table, was not, no matter what
bone she hit, funny
For give a dog his due, the bone, a little meat like a stole around the joint
For on traveling a great distance to see him, and handing him her ring to toss the bones, she
gave up her decision to the way they fell
For after he lost his leg—the Airport Road, IED—it was flesh and bone, some nights, he felt
below the knee, still burning
For her bone to pick with him left her in the E.R. with a bullet, him in Rikers
For on Saturday morning's *Creature Feature*, and then in nightmare, dead men rose: all clean
white bone and empty sockets in the dark
For *Life Magazine*, May 22nd, 1944, published the photo of a Japanese skull, war souvenir, set on
the desk of a girl, bow in her hair, penning a thank you to her beau

For the mass graves of Rudnica, Kigali, Treblinka all shuffled bone, all cry, still, one horror,
one body shared

For at 92, she lay down her weary bones, thinking these are mine, these bones I rest, though they
are weary for bearing me all these years

For later she woke him, the money he'd lost a bone in her throat

For so it is written in the most respected journals, taught in the halls of great universities,
the first weapon was bone in a clumsy hand, the first hook a needle of bone

For by extension, he said, leaning in, every bone in your body is star, nova, accretion, and time

For his cat Jeffry's 240 bones lie forever far from him, his own 206 bones far from the
madhouse that held him

For, make no bones about it, before she was gone she was gone

LIMP SAINTS

ANDREA
O'ROURKE

Croatia, Early War Years

He undid her coat, talked, snaked about
while rain dripped from the recessed doorway.

Vaffanculo, she swore, looking over her shoulder
at cork oaks weathered into still black worms.

He poured *mirto*, clean as baby breath,
into frosted glasses, talked until his words

were streaming schools of fish. She edged back—
No, cazzo, tu resti qui—and slammed the door.

His lip twitched, the glass spilled, his body stiff
like a Pompeian. That was an old movie on channel two.

Meanwhile, our open windows let the clouds in—
muscular, fibrous—and the air reeked of ox dung.

An angel hung on a clear fishing line, limp
over the kitchen sill, above a soup bowl

filled with lake water and a floating lotus.

At the window, the pond-eyed gypsy

begged for coffee and sugar, her fingernails
clogged black with dried squid ink. She'd hum

Delem delem, and it seemed as if the melody
was the pulse of makeshift shanties—

scraps of ridged vinyl and burlap—her people
squatting around the ashes, horses roaming,

grubby children slingshotting tin cans distant as boats,
and a bull that saunters by, swings his massive bullhood.

Later, in the city, after we mastered the curfews,
taping blankets to windows, the hysterical air raids,

we'd run out, strain our eyes guessing where the planes
were coming from. Men couldn't throw *boće* in the basement,

so they sat on beer crates, played *briškula* instead,
listened to the radio. Kids flocked to a pinball machine,

an old toy, learned how to flip-slam until their palms ached
and the worn metal ball was beat to a shade of dull lead.

The soccer field gaped vacant and stubbly, a derelict,
the sea tight-lipped like a thug. I'm not sure during

which blackout the old woman pulled the rosary out,
but there it was, on top of the folk music of patriotism,

more drama—thumbing beads—each tiny skull
at a time: one knot at its neck, another at its crown.

DEATH IS BORING

JACOB OET

The porcupine and I walk out
during the funeral. A ghost tags behind,
but disappears when we cross
the street. Years pass, we become
traveling magicians. We astound
with feats of clairvoyance:

“Calvin hurries his mom back
to the white cot, lips stained from her
drink at the water fountain,”
intones the porcupine. And I add:
“She shivers and burps. Calvin wraps
his tiger fur coat on her. He leaves.”

We pull clean diapers out of our hats.
We walk backwards. I tell every child:
“Look at the dark changing clouds
that you are.” And when we are
alone, the porcupine sings
walk one way, and never come back.

BORNEO

PETER SEARS

Boycott my funeral and tell everyone not to come.
Tell them the funeral is a sham, that just a week ago
you saw me in Borneo in the jungle. I didn't look great,
maybe, but who looks great in the jungle? I was in a hurry
and said I would meet you at the hotel, in the lobby,
in those big hard-cushion chairs. I know they don't call it
Borneo any more. Those folks arranging my funeral,
ask them what's in the coffin? Rocks? Rocks and worms?
Remind them you just saw me in Borneo, and I looked
healthy enough. You've got to be in good shape to be
in the jungle. You and I, we paused outside the hotel
and watched the light come down through the branches
on to the ferns. You recall that I suggested we stroll out
on to the veranda for a round of those spiked iced teas
to toast the moon dripping up over the tall bamboo
and wonder if the world really is still at war.

PETALS

PETER SEARS

There you were in the first X-Ray slapped up on the office wall.

“See,” the doctor said, pointing at you with his cue,
gingerly, as if not to arouse you.

Cancer tumor, you looked like a doughnut

— no, more like an igloo —

but you had not begun to spread. “So we’ll get right in there,”
the doctor said, “and operate on that tumor”

— as if I was going in with them, in with the doctor and the nurse,
to see you up close,

touch you, watch you be sliced out of my lung,

then dropped in a dish. Then what? Tossed in the garbage?

Put in an urn?

I look up again at the X-Ray slide; I could swear

your clean borders have shifted,

have begun to leak.

“We’ll try to get you into surgery within the week,” the doctor said.

This morning, on my way to the hospital, April petals

float at the traffic light while I wait

for the red to turn green,

petals so light they glance off the traffic light,

back into their slow flowing.

I ask you, cancer cells, did you come to me
like these morning petals
and fall and drift on to other cells?

Tell me, did you pile willy-nilly like snow, or did you float and fall
and grow in obedient rows,
building, building, row house after row house?

DEAR GIANT SQUID #2

PETER SEARS

I am trying to decide if it's worth signing up for the Mars colonization trip. Probably not – too old, too shot. Anyway, I'd miss my wife, my daughter, my cat. Oh dear, here's another show on TV about Giant Squids. Can't we just leave them well enough alone? This time it's in the Sea of Cortez.

You squids, listen up, they will attach a camera and a long, long line to a small squid and drop it into the water. Down, down, it drops to where you live. Now they have photos of one of you big guys chomping down on a little squid. They couldn't see all of you. But they could see your eyes,

so they measured the distance between your eyes – and that way measured your size. Over 60 feet. A record. That's not good. It's got these humans really excited. The next time you see a camera, eat it. The photos on the tape they'll show over and over and get more excited.

That's the way we humans are. Get an idea and we gnash on it until we go nuts, like dogs nashing a stick. You don't have dogs, sorry, but maybe you've got fish that chase seaweed or something until they go nuts. Or you go nuts watching them. Or you don't go nuts at all

because only we humans go nuts. That might explain a whole lot of things. As for being there in the Sea of Cortez, where you've been gliding around for millions of years, you've got to leave. Hey, do you think we like the idea of colonizing Mars? Well, maybe some

humans do, but they are not well adjusted and suffer probably from massive illusions of grandeur no matter how well they score on the tests. We are colonizing because we are frying this planet and sooner or later we have to vamoose. Here's the thing though,

you can't go outside on Mars. If you do, you fry, and if you stay inside too long without gravitational pull, your bones go. You don't know about bones because you don't have them. With us gone, though, you would have the oceans all to yourself if there are any oceans left.

THE OLD WOODS

PETER SEARS

As a kid I learn the woods are spooked, so when I go in,
I make piles of pinecones, cake them with mud,
and place them through the woods.
I'm small. Small is good for hiding. I walk
in the woods, too – I wait to feel something watching me,
maybe even following me,
to scare me, to see if I spook and run.
What I like to do is step off the trail into the underbrush, wait,
covered up like a bush ball, and see what comes by
and where I might be
if I was still walking. I might catch sight of the dead
and spook around them,
slip up behind one of them, and make him flutter
and get caught in the branches and tear himself.

I dream of being in the woods again with the dead and the owls
and my pinecones. Then I lose the dream.
I wait for it to come back to me as if I have gone ahead
and have to wait for myself to catch up.
Days later, I wake early. Light is coming up,
I watch it rise behind the trees.
This is before dogs and cats and kids,
before anything looks like anything I can trust. It's so early

turkeys are floating down in the dark
from the trees where they sleep.
They don't fly down, they drop,
slowly, like tents swaying, a half dozen of them
pecking the ground and another half dozen
standing in the middle of the street, twitching their heads.

DEAR HOSPITAL,

CARRIE SHIPERS

I hate your smell of potatoes
and alcohol wipes. The forced cheer of your lobby,
with its dried flowers and holiday displays.
Your elderly volunteers, their kindly greetings
and inability to answer any question except
where the restrooms are. I hate your coffee shop,
its weak brew and insufficient hours,
live piano music that sets my teeth on edge.
I hate your winding hallways, signs pointing
places I don't want to go. Your waiting rooms,
awkwardly arranged and stocked with pamphlets—
*What to Expect in the ICU, When Caregivers
Give Too Much*—I shove in my purse
when no one's looking. I even hate your chapel,
which is too close to the elevators although at least
it's dimly lit. The plastic shoes your nurses wear.
Your parking garage, the NO SMOKING policy
that covers your entire campus. I hate
that you call it a *campus*. Dear Hospital,
I hate how many of your windows
I've looked through, how many hours I've spent
observing your routines. I hate how safe
you make me feel, how every time
my husband leaves you I worry it's too soon.

TROUBLE

ANTHONY SPINNER

My mother was cooking crazy food again and the apartment smelled wild. My parents were throwing another party during the summer of '65. I was four years old and felt the atmosphere change before parties started. My mother put the weird food on round, metal trays while my father lined up big, clear liquor bottles like soldiers preparing for a war. Mom looked pretty, my dad looked handsome, and my pajamas were clean. I got to say hi to familiar faces and strange ones too. I even got to taste the foods I'd never seen before, like deviled eggs and what mom said were "pigs in a blanket." What a dumb name for food. My father was the most important man at the party because he served the drinks. The drinks made our

guests speak louder than normal. The best thing was that I got to stay up late. My mother and father were so busy with their friends they forgot about me.

After I was put to bed I could never sleep because I listened to the loud laughs which seemed to come all at once or sometimes not for a long time. Sometimes the same person laughed much more than the other people. It was easy to recognize the sound of my mother's or father's laugh. Sometimes I'd count to see who was having more fun. There was music too, that sometimes got very loud. After the music had been on for a long time I'd walk slowly to the bathroom to watch the dancers move crazily before closing the door.

During one party my mother opened the door of my dark room and took my sister, who was one, from her crib. After a long time she still was at the party. This didn't make sense. I walked to the bathroom and saw my sister in my mother's arms. My mother and another lady were laughing. In the bathroom I was very, very sad and wanted to cry. I was in bed and I was madder than ever been before. She was one and I was four. *I* should be at the party and she should be in her stupid crib.

I opened the bedroom window and started throwing out her toys. A crowd of teenagers gathered four floors below and started chanting "more, more, we want more." Every time I threw something they cheered. They really liked me, and then I ran out of toys.

"I don't have anything else, sorry." My father opened the door and turned on the light. Apparently someone rang the bell and told him who knows what?

"Excuse me, sir, Ken and Barbie just committed suicide

from one of your windows."

"What are you doing? Are you crazy? That xylophone could have shattered somebody's windshield. Get your sneakers on we're going outside and you're going to pick up everything." On the way out the smell of liquor and cigarette smoke hung in the air. The few remaining guests wouldn't look at me and the apartment was stone-quiet. I was too young to know I embarrassed my parents and ruined their night. For me, the evening was a profound experience. *Being bad felt good and it was fun.*

Five years later my parents told me we were moving. I didn't want to. I had lots of friends and experienced a sense of well being on a daily basis. I was walking myself to school and took great joy in buying Twinkies at the local supermarket. Selecting them off the shelf and counting out the exact amount of pennies made me think anything was possible.

The summer after third grade we left our apartment in Yonkers and moved into a house in Scarsdale. I remember

riding my bicycle for the first time through the clean, quiet neighborhood wondering if there were any other kids around.

I hardly saw anybody, except adults in cars and short, brown-skinned men clipping hedges. Frustrated, I'd go home and eat, figuring *someone* would be around later in the day. After a couple of days panic set in. For the first time in my life I felt alone. Yonkers was so easy all you had to do was leave the apartment. There were always people hanging out and things to do.

Once school started I found out people my age were at camp. Adjusting to the suburbs was a rocky proposition. Only fifteen miles away from Yonkers it could have been a different planet. They made fun of my accent. I said "winta" instead of winter and they'd never seen a boy with such long hair before. They also made fun of my clothes. When it came to art and fashion my mother was on the edge of the cutting edge. These suburban kids didn't know what to make of my two-tone pants. Blue from belt to knee, red from

knee to toe on the left leg, the right had the complete opposite color scheme. I looked like a pimp.

We had nude paintings on the walls. Every one of my new friends were shocked and had to make a comment. These were just the walls in my house but to them I was living inside a *Playboy* magazine pictorial.

"How come you have so many pictures of naked ladies all over your house?"

"I don't know, guess my mom likes them."

"They're dirty."

I can only imagine what they told their parents.

"Mom, Anthony's mother collects pictures of naked ladies."

The biggest adjustment was decoding how to socialize out of school. You had to call someone and make a "date." It seemed a bit formal for fourth graders. I couldn't imagine what these calls were like.

Hello.

Hi, Bradley, this is Lockwood.

Hi.

Would you like to have a date tomorrow? You could come

over after school till around
5:30.

I can't. I have yoga at 4:00.
How about Friday?

Sorry, I'm meeting with my
accountant.

Tuesday?

I'm having a colonoscopy
How about Wednesday?

Hold on let me check my
book...you know things are
really crazy right now. Let's
shoot for after the holidays.

Okay see you at recess.

One night we came home
and there was a car parked in
front of our house. My mom
joked, "Looks like we have
company." When we opened the
front door we were greeted by
the sound of *breaking glass*.

"We've been robbed." Her
words didn't register until I saw
all the clothes spread crazily
on the floor of my parents'
bedroom. Two indifferent cops
came over and took some
information from my father. It
seemed like they were talking
forever.

"Are you going to catch
them?"

"Like I was just telling your
father, we're going to try but it's

unlikely. They come from other
towns. They're probably far away
by now. We may never catch
them."

"I'm not sleeping tonight."

I barely slept for a whole
year.

The noises from inside
and outside of our new house
made every night a symphony of
terror. They came unpredictably
from the belching boiler in the
basement. The plumbing system
played high and low notes of
different lengths. Startling
percussive sounds from opening
and closing doors of neighbors'
houses and cars made me tighter
than the strings on my father's
steel tennis racket. While our
zip code 10583 correlated with
Scarsdale, we didn't live in
"Scarsdale Proper." We lived
in the unincorporated town
of Greenburgh. It was typical
suburbia. The houses were
unremarkable and close to one
another. I'm from the wrong side
of the tracks of Scarsdale.

Some nights I'd be falling
asleep and all of a sudden hear
feet frantically running on the
roof directly over my head.
I was sure we were about to

get robbed again. Over time I figured out these feet belonged to squirrels. There were skunks in our new neighborhood too. Late at night they'd climb into and knock over garbage cans. The sound of their awkward, fat, shimmying bodies and ravaging paws unnerved me. They sounded *wild*. One night they knocked a couple of metal cans into the street and they rolled down the hill in a crescendo of chilling steel thunder.

One evening there was knocking on my window. I looked out and saw four glowing, green eyes and *literally jumped off the floor and felt the hair on my neck stand up*.

"Dad," he came upstairs half asleep, fully angry.

"What is it?"

"There are two people outside my window." He stared at me and eventually saw his son was about to become unhinged. He walked to the window and looked.

"There's nobody out there. Go to sleep."

"They're out there. I saw them."

"Just relax and try to sleep.

There's nobody out there. I'll see you tomorrow."

That was the first time in my life I prayed. I asked god to make the eyes go away as I lay frozen in bed.

They didn't.

"They're back. They just knocked a second ago I swear." He looked.

"There's nobody out there. I promise. Go to sleep." A couple of minutes later there was more knocking. This time I looked and I saw six glowing, green eyes.

"Dad"

This time he *ran* up the stairs. He swung at me but knocked over the lamp and everything went dark. My mother turned on the big light.

"You animal!" There was blood and glass on my sheets. He missed me and broke the hot light bulb. Seeing his finger was bleeding, he went downstairs to care for his wound. Mom changed my sheets and cleaned up the glass. Nobody said a word.

The eyes belonged to raccoons.

My parents took turns reading in the kitchen just

below the stairs where I could hear them. If I didn't hear a comforting cough, creak of a chair, or conversation I'd go downstairs and look.

"It's OK. Go back to bed." Most nights one of my parents went to bed after one in the morning. Every night they had to decide who was on "kitchen duty" after working long hours in their high pressure jobs in the city in a state of semi-sleep deprivation.

"Don't sit in the kitchen anymore." I knew he was going to say that. According to Dr. Millman, this was the answer to our all our problems. I'd get over my fears and sleep eight hours a night and mom and dad could have their lives back. That night my parents shut their door and ignored me and the repeated *thwaps* from the ping pong paddles and shoes.

"If you don't open your door, you're gonna lose a son." Standing outside clutching my six ounce can of Sacramento tomato juice (I needed it for the road), I felt the snow creeping into my slippers and up my ankles and calves through my

pajamas. The condensation on the living room windows made it clear where the warmth was. Hell, I didn't even like tomato juice.

I started getting in trouble in school. I couldn't sit still and talked way too much. I was scared the first time I was sent to the principal's office. This never happened in Yonkers. After the second or third time it was no big deal. I met with the school psychologist.

"You have some learning disabilities and you're in the 99th percentile in creative thinking."

"What's that mean?"

"It means in creative thinking you're a genius. I think you should see a psychiatrist."

Every Wednesday afternoon my mother picked me up in front of school at 3:15 and drove me to Dr. Schact's house/office. She was a short, old lady with a thick German accent. She had short black hair except for the areas above her ears. They were white and shaped like wings. Her head looked like the helmet of the Philadelphia Eagles.

For a kid who couldn't stop talking I rarely said a word during these rides. I'd get nauseous and throw up in Schact's bathroom several times. *All I wanted to do was play after school football with the normal kids.* My mother knew I hated going but she still made me go. Schact gave me the Rorschach test. I couldn't understand why she wanted to know what I thought those stupid black spots looked like and how they were connected to getting in trouble.

"There are no wrong answers." I didn't believe her because she kept showing me the same spots over and over. We also played word association. I fantasized answering her inappropriately.

"OK Ansony here ve go... sunshine."

"Hitler."

"No Ansony...sunshine, ze sun in ze sky."

"Got it."

"OK ve go again... telephone."

"Chile con carne."

The worst part was she put me on Ritalin. I had to discreetly swallow these little yellow pills in

front of everybody in the lunch room with my small carton of Dellwood milk.

"If anybody asks just say they are vitamins." The thinking was the Ritalin would counteract the hyperactivity and calm me down.

The thinking was wrong.

One day in English class the word "damsel" danced across the page. I thought damsel was a funny word.

David Deschamps was a tall, overweight kid who looked like he was forty. He had jowls and drooping basset hound eyes, by far the most un-damsel like kid in class. I don't remember there being anything special about his personality. He was just a normal kid. For no apparent reason I started calling him damsel. At first he just smiled and laughed. But I kept doing it until he started getting angry. That's when the fun started.

"Daaamselll.....daamsell."

Fortunately I was faster than him. We both knew if he caught me he'd beat the crap out of me. I'd let him get real close and whirl away at the

last second. This game went on for months. His face would get red and tense and then all of a sudden he'd spring toward me like a raging buffalo. After a few minutes he was an exhausted buffalo and I was a laughing lunatic. Sometimes I'd get the sense that something was wrong with me. Why did I like this so much? I thought maybe I was gay even though I had a crush on Claudia Lubell and was making out with Monet Fischel. *Something was definitely off and it bothered me.* Why are you tearing around campus again? You never plan it and it keeps on happening? It was physically exhausting and he almost caught me a couple of times.

One day the principal, Mr. Undercoffler, saw us fly past his huge, open window.

"Heeeeeeeey, you two, get in here. What the hell is going on?" Panting and perspiring, a frightened Deschamps told the principal.

"He's been tormenting me for months." I'd never heard the word tormenting but knew exactly what it meant.

Undercoffler growled. "How?"

I completely lost it when Deschamps told him. "He's been calling me damsel."

Insane, uncontrollable laughter.

"Shut up, Spinner. What did you say, Deschamps?"

Staring at the floor Deschamps told him again. After a three-way uncomfortable silence he got angry at Deschamps. I couldn't believe it and felt myself siding with Deschamps. He probably had better things to do than listen to a fat, sweaty boy who's upset because someone has been calling him damsel.

Once more I'm in one of the trouble chairs while they talked behind the principal's closed door. *Will I have to stay late and clean classrooms? Suspension? Is mom going to have to leave work early again to come get me? What are they doing in there?*

"Spinner, get in here." The phone rang and I ended up standing in front of his desk and scanned the office even though it was familiar territory.

I liked his plants and looking out the big window. I was afraid to look at him because his face was pink-red from being angry all the time and his blue eyes weren't straight. I was probably thinking about homework I wasn't going to do, or girls, or sports when he covered the receiver.

"Spinner, cut the shit and go to class."

I couldn't have told you I was scared and angry. I was too young to recognize these emotions, same with therapy, I was 10. What did they expect? As if one day I'm going to look at Schact at say, "You know, Dr Schact, I'm feeling very vulnerable and I'm grieving the loss of my old environment and having a hard time assimilating to the culture of my new one. I'm disconnected, disassociated." I couldn't have told you trouble was my way of relieving the pain of a suddenly foreboding, incomprehensible world. When I was acting up, things made sense. I was in control. Nobody's breaking into my house and no one is forcing me to move. It was my show and I loved it.

Being bad was fun and it made me feel better...much better.

from
**NOT EASY TO BUY A
BUS TICKET**

**DENNIS JAMES
SWEENEY**

We Made Our Way Up The Coast

We made our way up the coast filling trash bags with bottles and cans from the rest stops. Frank was our ticket. He had a beard and wiry muscles and came to the boardwalk the same way we did, hungry, and started talking the way we used to think, with stars over every horizon, cities at the end of every trip. He wasn't staying in town any longer than he had to. We liked the sound of that. His rusted Corolla had bungee cords hanging off sides like streamers and the back seat was nothing but a metal hump above where the wheels sat. We got in anyway. This country isn't that long.

At the rest stops Frank would get out, eyes shining, and rush long-legged to the nearest trash can. He'd stick his whole head in there and start to windmill bottles into the garbage bag he had tied to his waist. Then move on to the next one. Soon we got the hint. You could fill a whole trash bag at a good station, with three of us working, and in fifteen minutes we were back into the Corolla and rumbling down the highway's right lane. Frank would strap the bags to his roof, jam them into his trunk, clump them in the backseat. What's all the bottles for? we yelled the first time over fifty-five miles per hour of highway gust through the open windows. He brandished a bottle he had gripped in his hand. You can get ten cents a piece for these! he shrieked, leaning into the gas. They're like gold! Then he threw it out the window in a fierce display.

We were inland almost to saguaro country when Frank left us. Just

a matter of time, I guess it was, and we should have known, but we didn't. The cartop belched outward with bags and the trunk couldn't go any higher. Darlene sweat death in the backseat with the black plastic smothering her legs and little arms. At the rest stop we got out as we always did, tying bags to belt loops and reaching shoulder deep into the decorated trash cans. When we came up for air, Frank was gone.

I couldn't blame him. It was his car and his plan, and we were hanging on just the way he was, except to less. But Darlene screamed until long after his car had mounted the exit ramp and disappeared. I looked around and the only thing was more road that way and more road the other way, and a thousand citizens sitting on it in boxes that don't give. There was no point even in beginning to walk. So I sat down at a picnic table covered in french fry crumbs and waited for Darlene to yell herself out. She was pretty, there, wrenching in the wild sun. Everywhere are gems.

Sequoia Semper Something

Sequoia semper something. America's redwoods. The tallest trees in the world, or at least the tallest until lands besides America are discovered. We walked into a grove of them In Memory of Carl A. Schenk, Ph.D., Forester, Teacher, Democrat, sun basking low behind horizons we could not see, last cars pulling from the dirt turnoff on their way to the motels and hotels of Crescent City for the night. We would bed ourselves down on the soft pine-lit ground of Carl A. Schenk grove, stare up at the trees stopping only shortly before they converged at that distant impossible point in the sky, strip our clothes and feel the nakedness of America all around us in small, humming clusters of air. We stopped in the clearing and set down our packs. Took out our sleeping bags. Spread them and lay, looking up, at the promised sky.

Everything growth, ferns and luminescent fungus over every inch besides the walked-on. And yet everything silence. Impossible to feel the awe you ought to feel until you let that silence come on, cover you, slip down nose and throat into the intestines and aerate the blocked internal pores. Like the forest was hunting us. Like there was something inside it

that wanted to be inside us but would wait patiently if it had to until the end of time.

We made love on our side-by-side sleeping sacks and lay again, stilled, heaving breaths lost in the oncoming night. Darlene asked me: Do you think there are mountains lions in this forest? No, I said. These aren't mountains but hills. Ah, she sighed. Hands folded under our heads. The fog settled in the clear air and covered our naked skin in fine dew. We slipped into our sacks. Said nothing else. Until I woke to shakes, Darlene slapping me, pointing her finger through the utter blackness at further utter blackness. A rustling, certain. I breathed as silent as a man can breathe. We both sat, our bags curled upward in an L. Able to see nothing for no moonlight penetrated that redwood forest. And then a pinpoint, bobbing its way with footsteps, widening in the curves and roots of the path until it was at the head of the grove then past, illuminating the upright of a walking-sticked form with straightened mouth and downcast eyes. In a khaki shirt and slacks. Padding softly across the needles.

The next day we were walking highwayside with our thumbs held out again. The forest so great, we agreed, that we were not able to hold its greatness. The nights so clear our intentions wept for they were themselves polluted by the coughing world.

You begin to notice, eyeing the other rough couples walking roadside with packs, or flattened bikes, or signs: everyone with his thumb held out is trying to leave. But everyone had to get here somehow.

The School District

The school district. Cul-de-sacs. Walking distance to the local natural foods store. Bicycling distance. The fire department. Average age of neighborhood families and their children. We had it set. Ethnic diversity. Cost of living. Relative width of the neighborhood roads. Darlene sipped her coffee and I leaned into the booth's plush faux leather and the waitress came to take our order and I waved her away, smiling at my wonderful wife. We sized up the folks walking past the picture windows that made up the diner's whole front. Nodded at the men with plaid shirts and the women with their

strollers. Frowned when the street urchins shuffled by, hands outheld at no one. I grabbed Darlene's skirted knee under the table and squeezed it. She yelped. We are going to make a beautiful life, I said, holding my mug and clinking hers as the rest of the restaurant went about its business tinkling forks, scraping across ceramic. We were invisible, finally. I moved my hand up her leg. Darlene glared at me and the waitress came back again and I held up the coffee for a refill. We were no longer the assailants but the assailed. She returned with the steaming stainless steel thermos and topped us off and smiled and walked away. I took that to mean we might stay as long as we liked. We had worn our best clothes that day, fooled almost even ourselves. Strolled into the diner and stripped two dollars off the tip at a dirty booth and sat calmly in the next one. Smiled the smiles they smile at us when we are seated on the curb next to our packs and they do not mean to give us money. The smiles of the guilty and the forward thinking. Where the two dollars is inside you already, and you could die and they would know what to do *a priori*. Bury you with your best suit, and serve waffles at the luncheon.

WHITE GOLD

SARA WALLACE

rue the day

rue the bed

rue the worn sheets

rue the stars above my head

Prettier than platinum but not as strong, the salesgirl said. Pick careful. You're going to wear it forever and you don't want no regrets.

rue the headlights yellowing my walls

rue your beauty a walled garden

rue your pliant skin

rue your pliant lies

rue your face like a bank of daisies sparkling and always bending in the wind

rue Donna the middle-aged woman you first stole from

rue Samantha *it's not using* you said *it's utilizing*

rue Terry *she follows me around like a puppy*

rue Robert the rich man who called the one who said *there's something you need to know*

rue the others I don't know their names

rue thinking you didn't sleep with them

Hush, you said. The smell of rotting greens and new mint from the open window,
your tongue fused against my ear.

rue New Orleans

rue Bourbon

rue Royal

rue Burgundy

rue the live oak

rue loveliness slippery and humid

rue every dollar you left by the bed

rue the leather string adorned with animal bones you wore tucked under your shirt to the
bank

rue your secret in a knot of skin

You said, *The leaves never die here, they just fall.*

rue pulling the blinds shut all the time

rue the deer bones in the back of the pick-up truck

rue the gun I dreamed about holding

rue driving down Oracle the levee like oven walls

planes and stars lit like electrical coils

Your ex-girlfriend said, *he gets in you gently but he gets in so deep.*

rue the power plants red on the river

rue Cancer Alley

rue crocodiles rippling the black water

rue Chartres

rue Ponce de Leon

rue de la Course Café—

de la course the course of my life

rue thinking *oh that was just talk*

*Oh, that little blob where we cut the ring to size? The salesgirl said, You can just turn it around and
no one will ever know it's there.*

I called up your mama and I said *I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree*

I called up your dad and he said *it sure causes a lot of pain but it makes the ol' world go round*

I called up the state attorney's and someone said *we can mail you xeroxes of the forgeries*

she said *do you want to press charges*

she said it didn't surprise her at all

rue not asking when you changed your name again

City Courthouse Orleans Parish

rue words set to music

rue the needle stuck in the groove

rue when your mother gave me a sheer nightie for Christmas

every woman needs something beautiful she said

WAGYU FUNGO

SOON WILEY

I hate when customers order their steak well-done. We cook *wagyu* steaks at my restaurant. And don't give me any of that shit about real *wagyu* beef being illegal to import because of new trade restrictions with Japan. I go to a butcher in Little Tokyo where they bring it in for the few reputable restaurants in L.A. that don't sling that half-breed "faux-be" beef to the wannabe foodie-masses. This is the real fucking thing: steaks with marbling so wide and white that you swear you could dive right in and swim through the channels of luscious, supple fat. I'm talking about steaks so beautiful, you'd give yourself a black eye, just so you could slap a raw one on your face.

I hate seeing these parentheses under the order: well-done. It's a sign of disrespect; not to me, this isn't about my ego. This is about the meat, the cow, the feed that cow consumed, the rainwater that cow drank. Sometimes I wish I had a live, black *Okayama* cow on-hand, just so I could trot it out the double-doors of my kitchen, down the sloping hallway into the dining room and show it to the customers. "Look at this spectacular animal you are about to eat," I could say. "Look at what you are asking me to cook to death." Then I could ask them where the sirloin comes from. I could ask them to point out the flank and brisket cuts. These people – they think steak comes from Styrofoam plates wrapped in plastic. They think medium-rare is raw.

I only have twelve steaks tonight, like every night. And I

already have to char the life out of two of them. On the ticket it says they're meant for table ten. I want to get a look at these people, see who I'm committing this culinary crime for. I give the steaks to one of my line-cooks. "Leave them on until they're black," I say. He looks at me, worried. He knows what well-done orders do to me. If these people want well-done I'm going to cook these steaks until they're tougher than a bull's neck. They're going to think they just bit into a truck tire. I want their teeth to crack into chalky dust when they try to chew through their excuse of a steak.

It's only six-thirty and the restaurant is nearly empty – except for table ten – a young couple, maybe mid-twenties. I should go over there and say something. Who the fuck eats a steak this early on a Friday night? That's what I want to know.

I need to learn how to detach – back away from the moment and gain some perspective – that's what my shrink keeps saying. Can you believe that – a chef who needs a shrink? I started going to him after I had my first fainting episode in the kitchen, brought on by a single order of eight well-done steaks.

The guy really isn't that bad. He's up in Beverly Hills. He's probably used to dealing with all sorts of fucked up actors and actresses, celebrities recovering from their latest indoctrination into Scientology or Kabbalah. Not me. I was his first non-celebrity chef, or so he said. I wasn't suffering from PTSD after getting my ass kicked on *Iron Chef America*, or considering turning in my knives after failing to transform a basket of shit into something delectable for the "judges" on *Chopped*. Nope. I just had this "rage" problem; that's what he called it at least.

"Try to articulate what it feels like when you have to cook a steak for that long," my shrink said to me. I was sitting in his office, trying not to ask him how he liked his meat prepared.

"Can you make that thing any louder?" I said, pointing to the noisemaker by the door.

He shook his head – all gray, curly hair and gold-rimmed glasses.

"It's like taking your brand new Aston Martin to a Jiffy Lube for a tune-up. Does that articulate it any better for you?" I said.

"It's interesting you would assume I drive that kind of car. Do you make assumptions like that about your customers as well?" he said, picking at the heel of his shoe. It was this tick he had. He did it when asking stupid questions. It made me sick – just thinking about all the germs underneath his fingernails.

"They aren't assumptions – just facts," I said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm enabling all these people to eat overcooked food. I mean, I'm committing a crime, you know? I have this guilt for days afterward, where all I can eat is beef tartare. There's this Korean joint below where I live that serves the beef cut real thin, like *sashimi*, with an egg cracked over it. And that's the only thing I can eat, for breakfast lunch and dinner. It's the only thing that takes away the guilt."

He scribbled something in his notepad then put the pen in his mouth. He just licked the bottom of his shoe, I thought. "And this Korean restaurant – they serve you this raw beef three times a day?"

"Yeah. I mean. They think it's fucked up and tell me I'm gonna get sick, but they still serve it to me."

"And eating this makes you feel better?" he said. "Emotionally better that is."

"It does until I get sick, and then the only thing I can think about when I'm on my knees over the toilet puking my guts out is how I'm cooking for a bunch of culinary philistines. It's like my customers sucked on a bunch of hot pokers, thinking they were lollipops, and burned off all their taste buds. They could eat cardboard for dinner every night and they wouldn't care."

"Interesting," he said, going back to the heel of his shoe.

I don't tell my shrink about the nightmares, where all the steaks I've cooked well-done come back to haunt me. They form whole, beautiful, black cows that stand around me in a circle, their eyes watery, like they've been crying. They ask me why I cooked every ounce of juice and flavor out of them; they want to know why their meat was so dry and chewy, why they were burnt instead of seared,

charred instead of loved. I kneel in the middle of the cow-circle with grass stains on my black and white checkered pants. The sun is shining. The sky is blue. "I don't know," I say. "I don't know," I plead. "Please forgive me!" I scream, the circle of cow eyes spinning around me, the sun going wobbly in the sky.

On my way back to the kitchen a waiter scurries past me, eyes down. He's carrying the two steaks, black like thousand-year-old gum on a New York City sidewalk. Back in the kitchen my culinary team sings: knives cut vegetables, water boils, flames bark. The kitchen smells like sweat and fire.

Tonight's specials: *mahi mahi*, poached lobster, the *wagyu* beef, and rabbit. The waiters bitch and moan, complaining that there are no vegetarian options on the menu. I don't understand vegetarians. Ethical reasons, dietary reasons, karmic reasons, they all seem moot. I don't pray, but if I did, I'd pray to Dionysus – the god of wine, the god of ecstasy, the god of desire. Give me a god that promotes the endless quest to quench our most basic yearnings. Poor vegetarians – fools! They'll never taste the briny saltwater of a Limfjord oyster; they'll never smell the buttery aroma of *escargot*; they'll never crack crispy Peking duck skin between their teeth; they'll never know what it means to lose themselves in a bowl of Beluga caviar – a glistening sea of symmetrical black pearls: these are the things that matter in life, not reincarnation or moral utility.

The ticket machine whines and spits out a long strip of glossy, white paper. I stand at the stainless steel tabletop, preparing for the worst, waiting for the dizziness to bubble up inside my head when I hear the order for well-done steak. I look down at my hands, scrubbed and rosy against the swirling grains of my cutting board. I tell myself this will be the one I walk out on. This will be the requested desecration of bovine perfection that makes me quit the restaurant for good.

But then I hear Juan, my *Sous-Chef*, as he slides the ticket down: "Four steaks, rare."

I swear I get a hard-on for just a second, like my heart doesn't

know where to send the blood. "Yes, Juan. Rare!" I say, running to the walk-in-fridge, where I unwrap the steaks from their wax paper and set them on a plate.

"Chef is getting a chubby for the meat again," Juan yells over the dicing of onions. The Line erupts in a chorus of moos.

I wipe down my cutting board and position the steaks next to each other. For seasoning I make a few passes with my peppermill containing *Tellicherry* peppercorns. Then I dust them with a sprinkling of *Iburi-Jio Cherry* smoked salt. Then I flip the steaks and repeat.

The grill is hot and I lay the steaks diagonally, the fat sizzling and spitting, flames licking the red underbelly of the *wagyu*. The kitchen subsides around me as I watch the steaks, tongs in hand. A velvety darkness tunnels my vision as I bend down and watch juices from the steak drip and pop in teardrops of fat. I count the steady beats of my heart like seconds: ninety beats, then I flip them. This is what I live for: the moment when my body is in unison with the creation of perfectly cooked steak. Ninety more beats. I hear myself tell Juan to have plates ready. Then they're done, I lift them from the grill with my tongs and place them, one by one, on the cutting board to let them rest.

"Four steaks, cooked rare," I say, folding the ticket over once and putting it in my shirt pocket. I always keep my "rare" tickets. When I get home I roll them up like miniature scrolls and slide them into a plastic bottle in my medicine cabinet.

Juan lays the plates, one by one, their clean, white surfaces beckoning the seared *wagyu*. Before he goes back to his station, Juan inspects the plates once more, running a cloth around the edges. Dissatisfied with the cleanliness of one of them, he gives it to the dishwasher and returns with another one.

"Ready, Chef," he says.

Juan has been working under me for five years. He's the best *Sous-Chef* I've ever had. In three years I'll send him out on his own. He'll have learned everything I know. Eight years is enough. I'll have

nothing left to show him.

I was watching a documentary on this sushi chef named Jiro who owns a restaurant with three Michelin stars in Tokyo. He's eighty-five and still kicking. This guy's son – poor bastard – is fifty years-old and still working under his old man. Can you imagine that? In the movie he said it took him a year just to learn how to toast the seaweed – then another year to perfect making the sushi rice. But that's the Japanese; they're on another level when it comes to patience.

They have a word for it, the Japanese, *nagekomi*, or something like that – it's the repeated practice of a single action: mopping a floor, de-boning fish, fielding groundballs – that whole “wax on,” “wax off” shit. I was reading an article about this baseball drill they do in Japan where guys have to field 1,000 groundballs in succession. It's called the fungo drill. After a while, when you've reached exhaustion, your body just takes over, the mind shuts off – it's all muscle memory – a kind of meditation. The record for successfully fielded balls during the fungo is 900 by Koichi Tabuchi in 1984. Now that's the guy I want cooking my steak.

Two more orders for rare steak come in, and just when I think I'm in for a perfect night in the kitchen – I get the order – six well-done. It feels like someone skinned me alive, made small incisions behind my ears and just peeled the skin right off me, my muscles pink, red, and twitching.

Juan doesn't say anything. The Line doesn't say anything.

I try to remember what my therapist told me – what exercises he said I should try to calm myself down, but all I can think about are his dirty fingernails and his saliva dimpled mouth sucking on the end of his pen. My stomach weakens, it feels like old cheesecloth ripping apart, letting my innards spill onto the floor. I wonder if the Korean place will be open late tonight. I wish I knew how much raw beef I had to eat to absolve me of my sins.

The order is for table fifteen, and I hand my tongs over to Juan and tell him I'm going to the dining area for a moment. I need

to see the people who think it's acceptable to desecrate something so sacred. The waiters give me nervous looks as I walk by and scan the room, trying to remember which table is table fifteen. I think about the cows in my dream, and their watery, round eyes. I roll up my starched, white sleeves as I weave my way through the dining room. All around me patrons talk and text, their heads bobbing from their phone screens to their dates. I pass a table of two eating the rare steak I just cooked. The sight lends me some solace until I see them dragging the meat through globs of brown A.1. steak sauce on their plates. My head hurts and I feel like I've got a cow tongue in my mouth – thick and swollen. To my right, four men share a platter of raw oysters. I watch in horror as they drench the delicate bivalves with horseradish, cocktail sauce, and lemon, popping them in their mouths like fat kids at an all-you-can-eat jellybean buffet. I try to remember where table fifteen is; I stumble on. My ankles feel swollen, like I'm walking on balls of mozzarella. The floor moves under me. The last thing I see before I fall is a girl cutting off all the edges of her steak and pushing them to one side of her plate. "I just really don't like the fat parts," she says.

Then I'm falling forward. I see the hardwood floor coming up to greet my face.

Two strong arms are underneath me, grabbing my damp armpits, the floor zooms away and I'm standing again. Someone is leading me outside with the promise of fresh air.

The Scottish bartender Louie sits me down outside on the curb, gripping my shoulder, like he's afraid to let go.

"What were you plannin' on doin' there, Chef?" he says, his brogue making his words sound like they've been soaking in molasses.

Sports cars cruise past us on the strip, women strut by, their dresses cut narrow and short. Above, palm trees don't sway so much as lean with the breeze. It's amazing that this whole city is in a desert. It never rains, never snows, the seasons are forgotten out here.

"I was just going to talk to table fifteen," I tell Louie.

"No, mate," Louie says, letting go of my shoulder and joining me on the curb. "I know what you were gonna do. You were gonna ream them about your precious steaks."

"Maybe," I say. Outside the kitchen my vigor is gone. It's all fire and brimstone when I'm behind a stove, wielding my knives and tongs. But out here under the starless sky, where all I can see are billboards and office buildings burning up the skyline, I feel tired and weak.

"Stay here mate," Louie says, patting me on the back. "I'm gonna get you some *agua*."

I think about standing, but I can't manage to face my clientele and witness the defilement of my cuisine just yet – better to sit and wait for the water. Two motorcycles rev their engines at a stoplight, calling out to one another. The light flips green and they're off, squealing down streetlight-speckled lanes. My head feels heavy, and I think that if I just lie down on the sidewalk for a moment I'll be better. No one will bother me – plenty of homeless guys in L.A. – even chefs.



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Dean Anne E. McCall, Professor Robert Micklus and the English Department, Professor Maria Mazziotti Gillan and the Creative Writing Program, the Graduate Student Organization, the Graduate English Organization, and Binghamton University President Harvey Stenger.

With special thanks to Colleen Burke and Dr. David Bartine.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Harpur Palate has no restrictions on subject matter or form. Quite simply, send us your highest quality short stories, flash fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Almost every literary magazine says this, but it bears repeating: please familiarize yourself with our publication before submitting.

We prefer to receive submissions through our online submission manager, accessible from harpurpalate.binghamton.edu. Please note that *Harpur Palate* does not accept unsolicited email submissions.

PROSE: Fiction (100 to 6,000 words) and
Creative Nonfiction (100 to 8,000 words)
accept one longer piece or three flash fictions
per author.

POETRY: Up to five poems, no more than
fifteen pages total.

DEADLINES: Sep 1 to Nov 15 for our winter
issue, and Jan 1 to Apr 15 for our summer
issue.

Simultaneous submissions are acceptable if you notify us immediately upon acceptance elsewhere. Include your manuscript, a brief cover letter, and a self-addressed, sufficiently stamped envelope (SASE). Manuscripts without a SASE will be discarded unread. Copies of manuscripts will not be returned.

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal, Vol. 13, Iss. 2 [2014], Art. 1
Address submissions to the appropriate genre editor and mail
them to:

Harpur Palate
English Department
Binghamton University
P.O. Box 6000
Binghamton, NY 13902-6000

Due to the number of submissions we receive, we cannot
respond to questions about whether your work has been read.
Unless otherwise noted on our website, our response time is one
to four months.

BOOK REVIEWS

We are now accepting book reviews via Submittable for
publication on our blog. Please visit [https://harpurpalate.
submittable.com/submit](https://harpurpalate.submittable.com/submit).

THE HARPUR PALATE PRIZE IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

AWARD: \$500 and publication in the winter/
spring issue of *Harpur Palate*

OPENS: September 1st

CLOSES: November 15th

We are pleased to announce the *Harpur Palate* Award for Creative Nonfiction. Developed by Marissa Schwalm, former co-editor-in-chief of *Harpur Palate*, the prize will be awarded in November of each academic year.

Essays in any style and form are welcome, provided they are no more than 8,000 words and previously unpublished. The fee is \$15 for each entry of three poems and includes a one-year subscription to *Harpur Palate*. You may submit as many times as you wish, but no more than one piece per entry fee.

We prefer to receive entries through our online submission manager, accessible at harpurpalate.binghamton.edu. Include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address, and story titles. Your name should appear only on the cover letter and nowhere else on the manuscript.

THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE IN POETRY

AWARD: \$500 and publication in the winter/
spring issue of *Harpur Palate*

OPENS: September 1st

CLOSES: November 15

Milton Kessler—poet and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the Creative Writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce the annual Milton Kessler Poetry Prize.

Poems in any style, form, or genre are welcome, provided they are no more than five pages long and previously unpublished. The fee is \$15 for each entry of three poems and includes a one-year subscription to *Harpur Palate*. You may submit as many times as you wish, but no more than three poems per entry fee.

We prefer to receive entries through our online submission manager, accessible at harpurpalate.binghamton.edu. Include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address, and poem titles. Your name should appear only on the cover letter and nowhere else on the manuscript.

THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE IN FICTION

AWARD: \$500 and publication in the summer/
fall issue of *Harpur Palate*

OPENS: January 1st

CLOSES: April 15

John Gardner—prose writer and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the Creative Writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, Harpur Palate is pleased to announce the annual John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction

Short stories in any style, form, or genre are welcome, provided that they are no more than 6,000 words long and previously unpublished. The fee is \$15 for each entry of one story and includes a one-year subscription to *Harpur Palate*. You may submit as many times as you wish, but no more than one story per entry fee.

We prefer to receive entries through our online submission manager, accessible at harpurpalate.binghamton.edu. Include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address, and story title. Your name should appear only on the cover letter and nowhere else on the manuscript.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

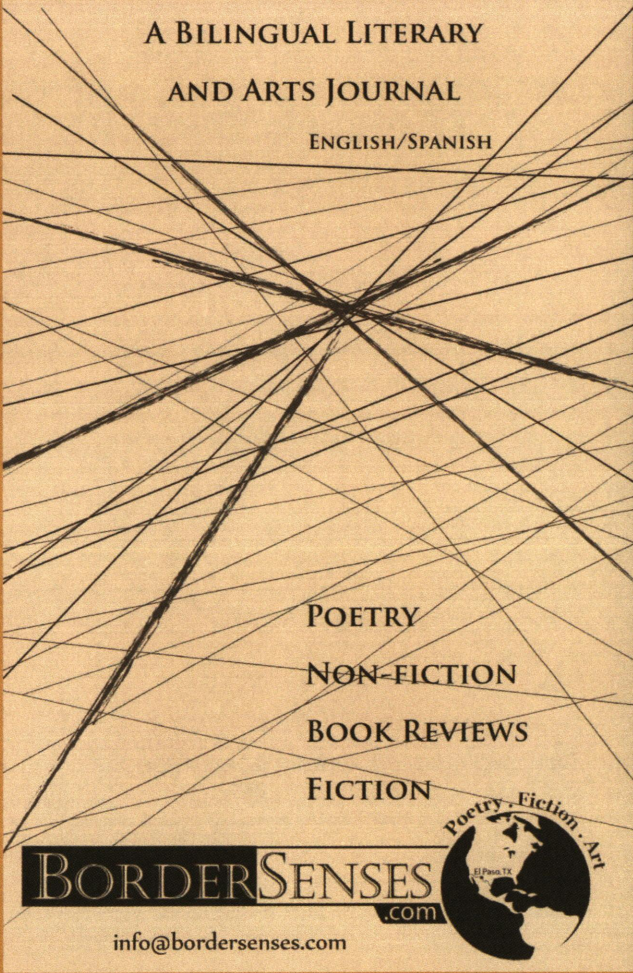
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Subscriptions, contest entries, submission fees, and donations can be sent to:

Harpur Palate
English Department
Binghamton University
P.O. Box 6000
Binghamton, NY 13902

Contest entries and fees are also accepted via Submittable. Please see our website for details.

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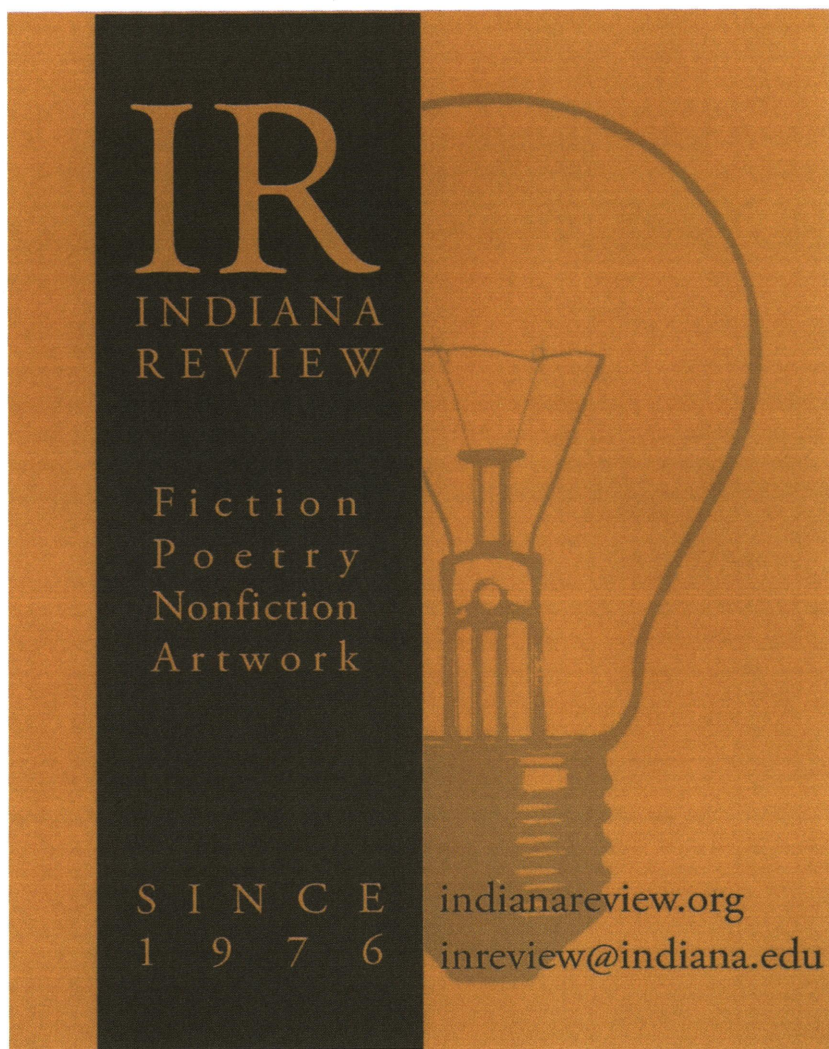
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The cover of the Indiana Review journal is divided into two main vertical sections. The left section is a dark, solid black rectangle. On this black background, the letters "IR" are printed in a large, gold-colored, serif font. Below "IR", the words "INDIANA" and "REVIEW" are stacked in a smaller, gold-colored, serif font. Further down, the words "Fiction", "Poetry", "Nonfiction", and "Artwork" are listed in the same gold-colored, serif font, each on a new line. At the bottom of this black section, the words "S I N C E" are spaced out, followed by the year "1 9 7 6" with spaces between the digits. The right section of the cover is a solid gold color. It features a large, faint, gold-colored illustration of a lightbulb. The lightbulb is oriented vertically, with its base at the bottom and its bulbous part at the top. The filament is visible inside the bulb. The overall design is minimalist and elegant, with a strong contrast between the black and gold colors.

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