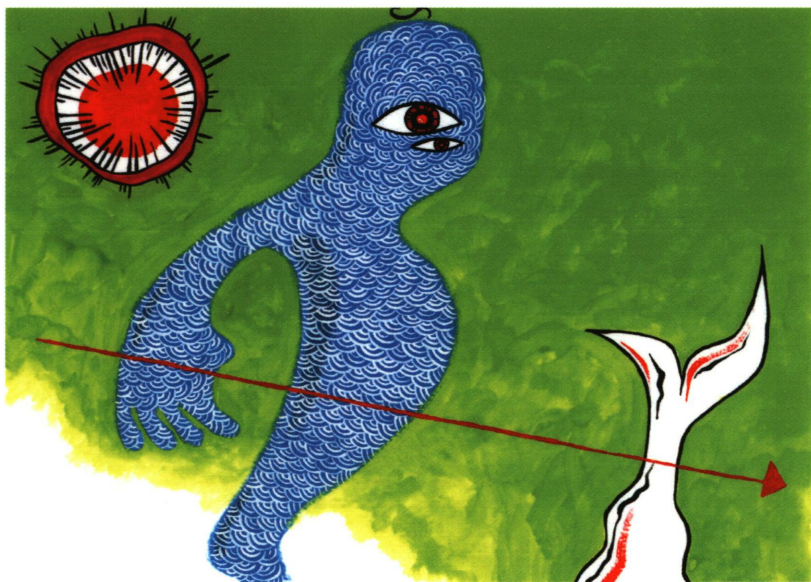


# HARPUR PALATE



Vol 14 No. 2

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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 14 Number 2, Winter & Spring 2014

**BINGHAMTON  
UNIVERSITY**

# **HARPUR PALATE**

**WINTER & SPRING**

**BINGHAMTON,  
NEW YORK**

**Vol.14 No.2**

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



**“We listen bent to the call we'll  
remember forever.”**

—Jeff Ewing, "Sic Transit"

**Winter & Spring 14.2**



# HARPUR PALATE

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## AFTER LUNCH

**REBECCA  
BAGGETT**

They are dead now, those women  
who in their middle or older age read to us  
after lunch from *Mr. Popper's Penguins*,  
*The Wizard of Oz*, *The Yearling* –  
their voices rising and falling  
while we rested, heads lowered onto arms  
folded on top of our desks,  
sunlight flickering through the scrim  
of our half-closed lashes. The teachers  
are dead, and so are some of the children,  
and so are those classrooms,  
with their blackboards and their lazy  
golden air with its haze of chalk dust,  
the wooden desks with their nicks  
and gouges, their inked initials,  
and the peaceful half hour after lunch  
when we bowed our heads  
on our arms and pretended to sleep,  
straining to hear the twig snap,  
the fawn draw near.

# **SCIENCE SECTION**

**BY  
HARRY BAULD**

**THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL  
PRIZE FOR POETRY**

*I hate infinity*, you say, spreading  
the paper's latest news  
on the cosmos under a blueberry  
lowfat muffin in this old cafe, one graph  
after another of universal vastness  
you'd love to dismiss, so you close  
the paper in disgust and I sip an iced tea  
and feel embarrassed for the inability  
of math or science to find a conclusion  
concrete as a blueberry  
in the face of so much taste and conviction.

Infinity is hard to love,  
someone else's spoiled child  
who doesn't know  
when to stop. Small magic  
is wonder enough, a penny appearing  
suddenly in the hand, a son  
crying *I have a tornado*  
*in my mouth*, a crocheted ball  
vanishing under a candlestick  
that never held a light to anything.

But infinity soars out of reach  
even when we are sure the long-dead stars  
in our eyes are not pictures of themselves  
nor equations nor probabilities,  
not even figures of speech.



## MR. ZEBRA MAN

**BRANDON BELL**

Megan asks me to hook up after she sees my new Chevy Super Duty in the McDonald's drive-thru. I dated Megan in high school. She stands on the running board, leans into my open window and nibbles my chin. Her breath is a turnoff (smells like McNuggets), but I have no plans for this sticky summer night and am like, "Sure, let's bone, for old time's sake."

We agree to meet at the overlook, our old hookup spot, after she runs home to freshen up. To kill time, I eat my Quarter Pounder Extra Value Meal while driving curvy country roads. I take my eyes off the road for a second to squirt ketchup on my fries and clip a cyclist.

Or the cyclist clips me, right in the Super Duty's wheel well. I hit the brakes and back up to where he landed. He's a twisted heap on the side of the road and his spandex cyclist shirt rides up, exposing his pale belly.

"Hey buddy," I say. No response.

I have so much to do: meet Megan at the overlook, bone and then cuddle ten minutes minimum, drive home, sleep not enough, wake at 6 a.m., and make brownies for the bake sale Mom is throwing tomorrow. Plus, now I have this cyclist to deal with.

But the accident wasn't my fault; the cyclist rammed the Super Duty, not the other way around. Why should I be inconvenienced because of his mistake? Besides, I was rounding a curve and barely going twenty miles an hour when he hit me; he can't be hurt that bad.

I check the road for onlookers. Not a witness in sight.

I speed off and meet Megan at the overlook. When I pull off the road,

my headlights wash over her: she poses against the hood of her Saab wearing an almost flattering blue dress and her red hair covers her long face. She isn't hot like in high school, but now I have a beer gut and shave my head to hide that I'm going bald, so it's not like I can be choosy.

"You ready?" I ask out my window, feeling like I'm placing an order at the drive-thru.

"To bone? Sure," she says.

We climb into the back of the Super Duty, both of us totally ready to bone, but then she starts crying. She sobs something about her dad (a self-made and blind restaurateur) being mean and taking away her credit card. Her crying means no boning. I'm pissed that she led me on, but then I realize not having sex is a timesaver, which is good (see my aforementioned to-do list).

She asks for a rain-check on boning as she climbs out of the Super Duty. "Next time I'll totally bone your brains out," she says, but her eyes are red and she seems awkward.

"Cool," I say and wave. *See ya.*

I avoid seeing the cyclist by taking the long route to my apartment. He'll be fine, I bet, but why learn otherwise if I don't have to?

I oversleep in the morning and don't have time to make brownies for Mom's bake sale. I run to Kroger and buy four boxes of Zebra Cakes and cellophane. Driving to Whole Foods (site of the bake sale) I unwrap the Zebra Cakes and rewrap them in cellophane for a DIY look.

Mom is stationed at a folding table beside the entrance to Whole Foods. She scowls at the Zebra Cakes. "These appear to be Little Debbie's, Wayne."

"Yuppie Whole Foods shoppers won't know that," I say, and I'm right. A few customers even commend me on my "inventive brownie design."

We price the cakes at two bucks apiece and sell out quickly. I run back to Kroger and buy a second batch, and we sell out of those, too.

By day's end, we've earned two hundred bucks more than Mom expected to raise for Children with Cleft Palates Living Someplace Poor (or whatever the charity's called). Mom says the charity won't know if we

pocket the extra two hundred bucks. I'm like, *Bonus*, as I already blew my weekly allowance from Dad and the Super Duty needs gas.

I Google "hit biker, lexington ky, may 18" on my phone and find a local news site that tells the cyclist's name (David Marra), condition (critical), time police found him (12:30 a.m.), his current location (Lexington Regional Hospital), and number of suspects (none). Why would there be suspects? The cyclist hit me and only has himself to blame for the pain he's in.

But what if the cyclist wakes up, remembers the Super Duty, and describes it to the cops?

In need of an alibi, I call Megan.

"Hey girl, what are you doing?"

"Thinking about you," she says.

"Cool, so, last night we met at nine, right? And parted not until one a.m."

"Dude, honestly? Today I've been fighting with my blind-ass dad too much to think. See, I rearranged the living room and he tripped over the coffee table. He didn't see the table because he's blind."

"That's pretty funny. But last night. We were together from nine to one. I'm not asking you. I'm telling you."

"Okay."

"Say it."

"We were together from nine to one." She seems to believe this timeline, even though it's wrong. I have nothing else to say and fake like the connection is breaking up, saying, "Hello, Megan, hello," and hang up. My alibi is airtight, but I feel weird about my run in with the cyclist. But hey, I helped anonymous poor people by selling Zebra Cakes. Good deeds negate the bad. I even paid for the Zebra Cakes out of my own pocket.

Now that I think of it, Mom should've split the Zebra Cakes expenses with me.

I head to her house to demand she chip in half. She lives in a shotgun house on the industrial edge of town. I park in her brown yard and knock on the door. She doesn't answer; I let myself in with my key and find her hiding under her bed.



"You owe me eighteen bucks for expenses," I say.

She sticks her head out from under the bed and says, "Finder's fee. I arranged the location and yuppie customers. Besides, it's not like today's sale was our only shot at making money. I'm tied in to bake sales for muscular dystrophy, battered women, bowling for kids. We can sell those Zebra Cakes by the butt load."

I help her out from under the bed. Dad moved out a few years ago, but she keeps their wedding picture on the bedside table. He's an asshole investment banker who lives in New Jersey; the weekly checks he sends to us are sweeter than he is. Mom holds out hope that he'll come home. She's wrong, which bums me out. Feeling sorry for her, I say, "Don't worry about paying back the Zebra Cakes expenses."

"We'll split them going forward."

"Do you have a bake sale schedule?"

"Tuesday night we're at Trader Joe's. Then Kroger on Friday and Magic Bean Roasters on Saturday."

"We can sell Zebra Cakes at yuppie places only. That means no Kroger or anywhere else where the shoppers might recognize the Zebra Cakes and bust us."

She takes my hands and squeezes them, grinning. "Remember that fella at Whole Foods who had on the beret? He said your cakes were cute. And they are cute, but not as cute as you."

I bow my head and she kisses my bald head. It's a touching moment.

My concern that someone will bust us for selling Zebra Cakes comes to fruition at Trader Joe's. A hipster wearing a bowtie and geek glasses stops at our table and picks up a Zebra Cake. He's overweight, and I bet his junk food suburban childhood was a lot like mine.

"Are you just selling Zebra Cakes?" the hipster asks.

Mom's face flusters and she bolts upright, about to flee.

"They're in the *style* of Zebra Cakes," I say, forcing a shit-eating grin, "but they're homemade. And organic."

"Organic," the hipster says, his day made. He buys a dozen.

Mom shakes her head at me after we're alone. "You may have tricked

that asshole, but eventually somebody's going to figure out this is a scam."

"So what should I do?" I ask.

"You could actually bake the things."

I roll my eyes at how ridiculous she sounds.

Megan invites me to the overlook for "take two on our boning rendezvous." We sit in the cab of the Super Duty listening to a morbid playlist she made. She is in a bad mood, because: "My dumb blind daddy's pissed about my C-average at beauty school." I cheer her up by telling about my Zebra Cakes start-up. Apparently hot business ventures make her horny, because she rolls on top of me and licks my face.

"You should sell your cakes at Daddy's coffee shop," she says.

"What's your angle?" I ask.

"I'll pitch them to Daddy for a five percent commission."

Then we're boning and it's so hot that, in the throes of boning, I announce, "You can have a ten percent commission." But I like her less after I finish and wallow in post-boning letdown, regretting the boning-inspired commission bump I gave her.

"Give me a few of those cakes for Daddy to sample," she says.

"Won't he know we're just selling Zebra Cakes?"

"Nope. Blind. There's no way he'll recognize them."

"That's lucky."

I wonder, *Would the cyclist recognize me? Did he get a look at the Super Duty?* I've been too busy selling Zebra Cakes to think about him.

I visit him at the hospital the next morning. A sane dude would avoid the man he hit, but call me a thrill-seeker, a fate-tempter.

The cyclist has a private room in the ICU. He's asleep and has tubes hooked into his nose and wrists. A woman, the wife, who is pasty but cougar-pretty, sits at the bedside scrolling through email on her phone. She gives me a look that asks, *Who the hell are you?*

"I used to work with him," I lie and give a fake name. "And you must be—"

"Anna."

I stand at the bedside and look sympathetic, shaking my head. "Who hit

him?"

"He's in a coma."

"But has he said anything?"

"He's in a coma twenty-four hours a day."

Now I feel weird. While the cyclist has been lying in a hospital bed, I've been making tons of cash. Judging by Anna's stained gray hoodie and pajama pants, she's broke. Perhaps the cyclist was the breadwinner.

"Here," I say, handing her three ten dollar bills and a couple of fives. I expect her to ask why I'm giving money to her, or at least pretend-refuse it ("No, I couldn't possibly"), but she pockets it.

"Thanks," she says.

"No big deal."

"Must be nice to say that about money."

Her comment sounds tacky, but makes me feel weirder and I give her another five. I hurry out of the room before I go broke donating money to her.

I deliver a white box containing two Zebra Cakes to Megan for her sales pitch to her dad. We chat in her kitchen. Her dad's coffee shop must make crazy money for him to have afforded all these sweet chrome appliances. She tosses the box on the counter.

"Careful. They aren't just Zebra Cakes." I pick up the box and open it. "See, I added an icing bowtie, eyes, and a mouth to the Zebra Cakes. The originals are plain black and white hexagons, but my enhancements give us a character. I call him Mr. Zebra Man."

Megan pushes me against the fridge. "Daddy ain't home," she says, fondling me while making porn noises.

"I'm in a hurry," I say, but of course we bone. By the time we finish I'm running late for this morning's bake sale at Fresh Market. I sneak out of the house when Megan goes to "clean up."

Mom bitches at me for being late, but cheers up after I unveil Mr. Zebra Man. "How cute," she says, and makes me pose with one for a photo. She loves Mr. Zebra Man even more after I say we're jacking the price to five bucks apiece. Our yuppie customers love Mr. Zebra Man, too, and buy



him by the dozen.

"We have a mondo hit on our hands," Mom proclaims.

"Duh," I say, fanning my face with a stack of twenties.

I stay up each night making Mr. Zebra Men, sell them at morning bake sales, and sleep in the afternoon. Mom and I earn a few thousand bucks over the next few weeks; that's pure profit, counting expenses for Zebra Cakes and the show-money we donate to charities. Bonus: Megan's dad loves Mr. Zebra Man. He places an initial order for a hundred cakes and promises to buy more after he sells the first batch.

So, *chuh-ching*. I spread the cash on my bed and roll around in it, a total high, but something nags at me. I feel weird about that guy, the cyclist. I visit him in the hospital again. Now he's in recovery, sharing a room with an elderly man who mutters in his sleep about taxes. The cyclist is asleep, out cold. Anna is curled up in a chair in the corner, watching a movie on her laptop.

"He snapped out of his coma?" I ask.

She takes out one of her ear buds and stares at me. "Yeah, he woke a few days ago, but the nurses zonk him on horse tranquilizers."

The roommate laughs and coughs up something wet.

Anna shudders. "I need cash."

I fidget with my belt loops, thinking, *If you want money, go make some*, but then the cyclist clears his throat in his sleep as if to say, *Do you remember running me over? Giving money to my wife is the least you could do*. I whip out my money clip and hand over two hundred bucks.

"I couldn't possibly accept this," she says, but pockets it.

I feel like I'm being watched, and I am: the cyclist has opened one of his eyes. "Who's he?" he murmurs blearily, like his tongue weighs twenty pounds.

"You don't recognize me?" I ask, relieved.

"He works with you," Anna says.

"Oh yeah," I say, remembering the lie I told her. "Do you have amnesia?"

"Perhaps," the cyclist says. His eyelids flutter and then he passes out.

"The hospital is kicking us out," Anna says. "They say he's doing well enough to go home. Plus, we're broke."

Another plea for money. I'm so happy the cyclist didn't recognize me that I hand her a fifty.

"Thanks, doll," she says.

Doll? Does she want me to be her sugar daddy? No. She returns to the bedside, replaces the dangling ear bud, and resumes watching the movie on her laptop. I pose in the doorway, hoping she'll think I look sexy, but she ignores me. I slink out of the room.

Talking to cyclist got my adrenaline pumping; now I'm horny; I head to Megan's house. I stop at Kroger on the way and pick up some white roses. Megan answers the door wearing a rumpled hoodie and pink pajama pants. She rolls her eyes at the flowers and tosses them on the couch. I follow her to her bedroom. A suitcase is open on her bed.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I leave for Paris tomorrow."

"Wait. Did I know this?"

"Yeah, Wayne. I'm doing a semester abroad, remember?"

She never mentioned this to me. Besides, she's in beauty school. What good will a semester abroad do? I think she used me for sex and a ten percent commission on Mr. Zebra Men. My heart sinks.

She frowns at my reflection in the mirror above her purple vanity.

"You haven't visited me all week."

"I've been busy. It's time-consuming being a confection mogul."

She backs her ass against my thigh and grinds. "Better get used to the fact that I'll be a million miles away."

We have a sad goodbye bone standing up beside her bed. I feel like I should savor this boning, but how? The climax is rushing at me like a horror movie killer who I can't escape no matter how fast I run or how slow I bone. I'm making no sense. My world feels shaky. It's been nice having a boning companion. I wonder who I'll bone next.

We finish boning and hug goodbye and then Megan walks me out. "I'll send you a postcard," she says.

"Cool," I say. I'm going to stop paying her a commission on the Mr. Zebra Men I sell to her dad. I'm losing my bone buddy, but cutting her commission will put extra money in my pocket. It's best to look on the bright side.

This morning, I sit in my air-conditioned Super Duty, parked on the street next to the cyclist and Anna's house. I found their address online. Being close to them makes my heart race. Their house is small and vinyl-sided.

The cyclist must've been the mower, because the yard sucks.

Anna pulls into the driveway around noon. She gets out of her Tercel, wearing kinky knee boots, skinny jeans, and a low cut top. I bet she bought these nice clothes with the money I gave to her. She helps the cyclist out of the passenger seat. I guess the hospital evicted him. He's skeletal and wearing a summer scarf. Using a walker, he shuffles into the house.

Over the next week, bored, I sit outside their house. Each day the cyclist shuffles onto the porch with his walker and grabs the mail; Anna makes a fast food run at lunchtime; nothing else happens until, a week after I started spying on them, the cyclist confronts me.

The confrontation happens early in the morning. I've stopped by their house on my way to deliver Mr. Zebra Men to Megan's dad's coffee shop. "Goddamn it," I hear him yell. He has traded his walker for a cane, is wearing a drab robe, and scowls at me as he hobbles across the street.

"Are you having sex with my wife?" he shouts through my driver-side window. His eyes are sharp and angry.

"Who's your wife?" I ask.

"Don't play dumb. You park here every day and watch my house."

"Who died and made you President of Where I Can Park?"

He lifts his cane to crack my hood. "Okay, okay," I say, start the Super Duty and coast away. In the rearview I see him get into their Tercel.

Next, I deliver a tray of Mr. Zebra Men to the coffee shop. The barista pretends like he is happy to see me, but I can tell he resents that I'm a confection kingpin while he is merely a coffee pourer. The cyclist stumbles into the shop. He barely has the energy to walk to the counter.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.



"I followed you here," he says, shuffling toward me. "Didn't you hear me honking?"

No, I didn't, because I was focused on driving and stalking Megan's Instagram page on my phone. I can't believe how many selfies she has taken of herself making out with Parisian assholes.

The cyclist lifts his shaky hand and grabs a Mr. Zebra Man from the tray. He can't seem to control his grip and accidentally smashes its edges.

"The delectable treat you're fingering costs five dollars," the barista says.

"Who would pay five bucks for a Zebra Cake?" the cyclist asks.

Recognition creeps onto the barista's face. He lifts a Mr. Zebra Man from the tray and smears away the face and bowtie with his thumb.

I flash my warmest salesman smile. "These are organic versions."

The barista doesn't buy my story. His face is bright red and he's breathing madly through his nose. "I'm calling the copyright police."

"Is there such a thing?" I have no clue, but great businessmen know when to cut their losses. I bat the tray, spilling Mr. Zebra Men, and split.

I seek comfort at Mom's house. When I get there, she's watching a reality show in which orphanages compete for grant money. I flop beside her on the couch and announce, "Mr. Zebra Man is dead."

Mom mutes the TV. "Oh well. Bake sale season ends soon, anyway. Besides, the whole affair was becoming a bit like work."

"Did I tell you about this cyclist who hit the Super Duty?"

She stares blankly at me, visually admitting she never pays attention to my stories. "Um, yes?"

"Well, he rammed my truck like an idiot and wound up in the hospital. Then, to add insult to injury, he tattled on me for reselling Zebra Cakes."

She pats my shoulder, watching TV. "It seems like karma."

"How do you figure?"

"You ran over this bicycler and now he killed your business. I'd say you're even."

"The cyclist hit me, not the other way around."



"Shh." She unmutes the TV.

I'm too sleepy to argue. I dig my phone out of my pocket and stage a selfie in which my head rests on Mom's shoulder. In the picture my eyelids are heavy; I'm about to pass out. I post it to Instagram with the caption: "Goodnight, summer. I rocked you."

# HER PREGNANCY DREAMS

**CAROL BERG**

I am afraid of the lies  
in my belly. I search  
for the source inside of me:

pond lily roots and fallen trees,  
water beetles, water skippers, nymphs  
in their diabolical black bodies.

The Eastern Newt, in terrestrial form,  
is called the Eft. What am I called in my watery  
form? The spadefoot toads with their vertical

pupils and the courting woodcock male  
flying farther and farther with his twitterings of flight feathers.

I have lost the pink lady slipper blooming inside of me.  
I have lost the pine tree's ability to hold orioles and creepers.

I am the canoe's invention. I am the wind's breath.  
The currents change while I look at them

and the rocks are for someone else's rest.

# THE GIRL WITH THE BLACK CRAYON

CONOR BRACKEN

who stands at the edge of the playground,  
looking at the chipped brick  
of the factories pumping their gray exhaust,  
the wind-bent poplars  
and the small fishermen beyond them,  
mending their nets  
while they wait for the tide to come  
and lift the ice floes a bit more apart,

is my mother. She calls me  
on her new phone and tells me  
“I had a dream.  
I was telling you  
that having a kid is like watching  
a piece of your heart  
walk around outside you”

and I empathize. Through my ignorance  
I can see what she’s getting at,  
and I wonder what her mother thought  
while watching her color  
“perfectly inside the lines  
every duck and Jane and ball”

black and only black  
until everything was a silhouette  
she believed the world should throw.

Every weekday with the nuns then,  
Jesus agonizing above the windows  
through which starched light  
sifted in like a powder.

Then recess, alone by the fence  
because the other kids  
didn't care "what a great word  
wimple is." And her ears!

Like white shells  
from an innocent ocean,  
and her hair like a net  
in which the great cod  
of the wind is caught.



## TO HIDE

**CALLISTA  
BUCHEN**

She looks at me, face set, resisting the impulse to crumble. Already she knows which tears to hide, how to keep her eyes wide and press her lips together. *My daughter*, I think, kneeling before her as if she is an altar, whispering, *you are upset*. How she finally chokes against my shoulder, how she wants permission to feel. Or a place, a name for her pain and a body that pretends strength, which promises to keep her whole.

*My daughter*, I think later, as I sit on the lid of the toilet while her brother thrashes inside my belly, sobbing into a bath towel so they won't hear in the other room. All the broken bodies. The wet eyes of my mother, of her mother. I kneel, terrycloth in my mouth, but I don't know who is the prayer and who is the god. What am I supposed to promise? *My mother*, she is singing now, running at the door. *Where is my mother?* Illusion, for a while. I put on the body. The permission, while it lasts.

# **MAKING ARRANGEMENTS**

**JIMMIE CUMBIE**

That whole week I drove the old roads. I didn't really see anyone,  
but slowed for the familiar red Farmall  
stalled beside the sunken cattle truck  
in the shade of a blue corncrib. The night before the service  
I stopped at an unmanned stand  
near Old Settler's Park,  
thumbed dirt from knobby gourds,  
poked around the flatbed, chose a squash before  
stuffing three bucks in the honor-box.  
When I got back I handed the squash to my mom—  
I figured she could make something of it.  
In the kitchen they had pictures of him spread over the table.

After I cracked open in the driveway

I watched sparks climb a red ladder from a barrel of burning leaves.

## US AND THEM

**MARIA  
D'ALESSANDRO**

When we awoke our necks and shoulders were sore and it felt as though we had been sleeping for a lifetime. Years had come and gone, yet the same night played on repeat in our minds, like the lyrics of a song we were trying to recall. We knew Mary was gone before we opened our eyes. The rest of us lay in a heap of bedding on the floor.

Fog settled over the sleepy dorms, the forest and the bay. We braced ourselves on the concrete wall and the starlike vines, and skulked away from the dorms. We were covered in dust and hitchhikers. Our legs cramped and our feet blistered. Suddenly we felt old, tired. We wanted somebody to scoop us up, carry us home, and tuck us into our beds.

The pavement was wet and grainy under our feet, the street lamps still glowing and reflecting in the puddles. We walked on blacktop until we came to the woods and the path leading to the bay. We followed the muddy trail for some time, until we were walking alongside North Tivoli bay. The tide was out and the water chestnuts poked their thorny heads out of the mud, pressing hollow shells into the balls of our feet.

The water chestnuts were invasive; they multiplied by the thousands until they had formed a dense population over the water, no longer allowing the sun to penetrate beyond their fleshy, tangled masses. Without light or oxygen everything below the surface perished.

Markers in the form of neon ribbons were tied haphazardly around birch and maple saplings, leading the way along an overgrown dirt road toward



the party. Multi-flora rose snagged our blouses, and the phragmites made a sound like scratching as we passed. Our feet sunk into the mud, and the tall reeds closed behind us.

"Stay together, no matter what," Emily warned.

This had always been the plan.

The marshy forest opened into a flattened meadow, filled with warm bodies and smoke. A clown, balanced on stilts, waved his arms and danced in a halting box step. He wore a vintage, polka dotted dress that came to his thighs and bells hanging from his arms. We moved through the masses slowly. The wind blew smoke into our eyes and mouths. A goat elbowed past, dark eyes glaring out from behind her mask, which was covered in human hair. A cigarette dangled from the edge of her hairy gray mouth.

A lion jostled us and grunted. His mane was comprised of red toupees. His eyes were urgent, probing. He handed us raffle tickets, which read: *Beware the future.*

Our laughter sounded like choking. Drums beat through us, and we might have been dreaming. In this dream we were running so fast that our feet no longer touched the ground. We had the sensation of running, we were out of breath and giddy, though in reality we were barely moving forward at all. Others were pushing now, and the heat was drawing nearer and nearer. We were thirsty for the fire.

Finally, we could see flames. The crowd formed a circle around the blaze and began dancing. Our movements were languid. Others were chanting and we joined them. The multitude of voices sounded like the wind in the reeds and the lapping of water against rocks.

The drumbeat accelerated. Boys grasped us by the arms and hips and pulled us apart to dance. We twirled and leaped to the beating. The boys stamping their feet and lifting us higher, higher, to see above the heads of the others, and into the blaze and the smoke labored sky. They held us that way with our knees around their hips, rubbing against their chests. Then they let us glide, down along the length of their slippery bodies.

"Let me taste that," a boy said. The kissing tasted sour and smoky.

We closed our eyes and opened our mouths to accept deep wet kisses and frantic embraces. With closed eyes the sounds blended into

static. There was no more lovely singing; the drums were now too fast to keep up with. We couldn't reach out and touch one another. We shrieked into the boys' ears and scratched at their fleshy flesh until they let us go and we found each other once again.

There was an opening in the crowd and a red girl emerged. Bodies filled the gap from where she had appeared. Except for the red and gold feathers adorning her limbs and around her torso, Liza was naked. The tuft of hair between her legs painted neon red. We couldn't take our eyes away from her sex. She danced, long sweeping motions that felt like the song of sirens to watch. Her red hair was teased to stand up in plumes around her face. It was impossible to look away. Before we knew it we were swaying and moaning in a way that we couldn't control. She gave us her self-satisfied, all-knowing smile and we fell back into the stream we had become. We backed away from the fire, away from her.

We lounged, crisscrossed bodies on an abandoned sofa on a hill in the pine forest overlooking the bay. The moon was absent, but our eyes had adjusted to the darkness so we could see each other clearly. We had bushwhacked to get here; the only way to find it was to follow the creek past the sewage treatment plant and the marsh. When the stream began winding downhill towards the south bay, a deer path broke away from the stream and led to "the fort." The boys had brought us here and built a hobo fire to get high and make out. We had been more interested in each other and the fire than the boys, and too content to get up when they moved on.

Not long after the boys left, Liza approached us. She was a mythical creature, with red and gold paint and feathers over her breasts, her neck and even her face. She was small and flexible and she squeezed in between our bodies. It was as if she had already died and was still lingering around, trying to be one of us.

"Do you really want to party?" she said, and produced a handful of colorfully wrapped chocolates.

"How much?" Emily said.

"What is it?" Mary asked.

Liza shook her head as if to say, *It's nothing.*

The chocolate tasted earthy and milky, melting warm and smooth over our tongues.

It was hot, and one by one we took off our shirts, until we were all topless, except Mary.

"Come on, don't be shy," Anaya said.

"I'm not wearing a bra," Mary said.

"I want to see." Anaya tried to lift Mary's shirt, but Mary held her arms down firmly.

"It's okay," Liza said. "We're all friends."

Mary and Liza locked eyes.

"What's the big deal anyway?" Mary asked. She stood up and folded her arms across her stomach.

We waited for something to happen.

"You're the one who's turning this into a big deal."

"Why are you so ashamed of your body?"

"You can be such a prude."

"You don't have anything to hide," Liza said. "Just take off your shirt."

Finally, Mary gave in and removed her t-shirt.

Liza tilted her head, examining Mary. "Magnificent," she said.

We wanted to laugh, but we knew exactly what she meant. Mary was backlit from the fire. Her skin was the color of honey, but translucent in the firelight, with shadows around her biceps and in the line between her breasts. Her breasts were fuller than we'd imagined, perfectly plump with nipples the color and texture of peeled grapes. She had round, upright shoulders and a long flat torso and an innie belly button, like a dark perfect wound at her center.

She held her arms stiffly at her sides. "There, are you happy now?"

"Lift your arms," Liza said.

"You're sick."

Liza smiled. "I want to see it again."

We rose to our knees.

"Don't you see what she's trying to do to us?" Mary asked, directing her attention toward us.

"What does Liza know about you that we don't?" Anaya asked.



"Show us."

Mary lifted her right arm stiffly. On the underside of her arm, reaching from her armpit to the side of her right breast, there was a scar.

Anaya sucked in her breath and it made a whistling sound.

"How'd you get that?" Emily asked.

Mary brought her arm back down. "It's just a cut."

"That looks like it really hurt," Arlo said, reaching out to touch Mary's side.

Mary swatted her arm away, hitting Arlo, not in an intentional way, but a slap nonetheless. "What do you want from me? *Everything?* You won't be happy until you have me inside out."

Something about the way she said, *have me inside out* made us double over laughing. "This is making me have to pee," Emily said. "I'm going to pee right here, I can't get up." Suddenly everything seemed so incredibly funny, we couldn't stand upright.

"We all have wounds. See," Liza said, turning her leg out. A series of cuts formed crosses in the flesh of her inner thigh. She placed her hand between her legs and pressed it there, and when she took it out it was deep red. Then she spread the red substance over her scars. "Now you see it, now you don't."

We stretched out like plants, spreading our roots every which way across the tired sofa with Liza's words looping, porous and toxic in our minds. We didn't notice for some time that Mary was gone.

"Don't panic," Emily said, easing herself up.

"Mary?" we called.

Liza led the way, then Anaya, Emily, and Arlo. We walked in each other's foot prints, so that if someone were to follow us it would seem as if we were only one girl. The ground was thick and sloppy with mud. The sound of rushing water became louder and louder. We descended quickly toward the stream.

In the dark, approaching the saddest hour of night, the stream sounded more like a river. Smaller streams opened up in our path, tributaries all rushing to the main flow. Eventually the streams all met at the bay, and then further along to the river called Mukennetahk.



Liza was treading quickly, surefooted, as though she were walking in her sleep. Soon, we reached the bank of the stream. It was steep and slippery and we stopped just short of the edge. Arlo stepped on the back of Emily's heel, tripping Emily, who landed in a heap of mud at Arlo's feet. The laughing started again, but Liza hushed us.

"There she is."

A fallen tree crossed the stream at its widest point and stood about three feet from the water. At its center Mary straddled the log. The water rushed below, dark and deep, over crooked stones and chasms.

"Mary!" we called. The current swallowed our voices.

Liza continued without us. She stepped out onto the log, staring ahead. Water swirled around a large boulder beneath her and slapped against moss-covered rocks. With every step the red body paint faded from our vision, revealing more of Liza. She proceeded, one foot in front of the other, until she reached Mary. She lowered her now blank, glowing body down beside Mary.

Mary was shaking and breathing in loud gasps. Liza reached out cautiously and wrapped her arms around Mary, enclosing her from behind.

We couldn't hear the things she said, the mumbled apologies, or secret oaths she may have taken. We were frozen at the bank of the stream, black and rushing fiercely, as the two girls embraced. After awhile the sobbing ceased, and there was nothing more to see. We retreated into the forest, away from them.

We were at a house party and the music was thumping. Manic. Everyone moving to keep up with it. We weaved in and out of rooms, out from behind furniture, and puzzled through masses of arms and legs. We searched for Mary but she was drifting, chatting with strangers, kissing boys, bubbling over with lies. She appeared at our sides in one instant and vanished the next. She could have been many girls.

A crowd had formed around the band playing in the basement. There we spotted Liza, glowing white skin with red and gold paint marking her joints, covering her breasts and her sex. She hovered beside Mary, touching her and smiling like she knew we were watching.

We met Gabe at the bar. Gabe was a guy we sometimes fucked, who lived next door to Mary. He liked to hang around us, lighting our cigarettes and telling us stories about places he'd travelled: Cuba, Morocco, Italy. Always laughing, laughing, shifting from foot to foot. Always in motion, with a cigarette between his fingers, gesturing loudly. At first we had been mad about him. We would hike up our skirts and let him in from behind, dancing while his long cock slipped in and out. But he wanted too much. Wanted to kiss our lips, light all our cigarettes, touch Mary's scar.

"What's with the red girl, is she a friend of yours?" he said.

"Why, do you like her?"

Liza and Mary were dancing now, Liza's mouth inches from Mary's ear, her neck. Their arms and hips flowed to the same beat, breathing, perspiring, wet lips sparkling in unison, so that we could barely tell where Liza ended and Mary began.

"She's kind of like Mary, isn't she?" Gabe said.

"Get rid of her."

We walked Mary back to her room. Heels clicking in the dark. Placed two mattresses on the floor and lay them horizontally, then we piled on top with our arms and legs collapsing into one another and fell asleep.

After we had been sleeping for awhile, we heard Mary crying out. Her voice was muffled, distant. We tried to get up, to open our eyes, but we couldn't. We couldn't move our legs. At first we panicked, struggled to rise, but it was like there was someone pressing us back down again and again. Finally we let go and our muscles relaxed. We nestled deeper into the covers, trying to find warmth in the layers of mismatched arms and legs tangled beneath the sheets, but the more we tried to get warm, the colder and damper we became.

When we opened our eyes, Liza appeared wrapped in Mary's plaid comforter and shivering. She was wet, dripping, covered in sea grasses, and so cold.

"That was a mean trick," she said. Her face was bloated and water trickled from the corners of her eyes, nostrils and even out of her mouth as she spoke.

"What are you doing here?"

"This is your memory, not mine." She picked a water chestnut out of her hair and set it between us.

"Where's Mary?"

"Every time we come to this point in the story, Mary thinks, I wish it were me. This time she got her wish."

"Her wish?"

"To be free of you. Cast out." Now Mary was shrieking.

"You can't change history."

"Maybe not, but memories change all the time," Liza said. The sound of Mary's voice was fading now, being swallowed up by the more immediate sound of water dripping.

Liza rung out her hair and then shook it free. The spray smelled of long lying sediment, and left flecks of dirt on our otherwise clean faces.

"What happened to your face?"

"I drowned, remember?" She laughed.

"I'm a fish now," she said. "Have been for awhile."

## CELEBRITY

### KWAME DAWES

*For Charles Harris*

Here go the Crawford Colored Giants. Take  
my picture, Mr. Teenie; you know I could  
make you a star, could make it that  
you don't have to run numbers no more;  
just catch my big smile and pass it  
along; make me look good, that's all.  
When I swing that tree trunk, I will  
always smile so people will know  
this man is playing with other men  
like they are boys. Here go Satchel  
Paige. Man's one ugly fellow, but, Lord,  
he learned to make everybody  
else laugh so hard they look  
ugly like him. Here go Josh Gibson.  
Ask him to tell you who everybody  
said was the hardest-hitting,  
cleanest-eyed nigger up there in  
Pittsburg. Ask him to tell you  
what he said to the devil down  
there by the Ohio River, under a bridge,  
drunk as a skunk, what he shouted



into the winter sky after he puked  
two days of barbecue and bourbon  
into that river—how he told Scratch  
to make a deal, give him Old Troy  
Moxon's quick eye and cold swing,  
how he will be glad to settle down  
in a duplex in hell. That is what  
he said, crying like that, and we all  
heard it, Mr. Teenie. So folks  
know that what you see ain't  
all there is. This fat rolling man,  
big hands, big head, a belly  
taut like I got seven months of child  
in me; this piece of everyday  
crap who can't get no respect  
from his own offspring, who's  
moving other people's crap  
for a living, this simple black man  
used to be somebody, Mr. Teenie.  
So take the damn picture. I could  
make you famous, brother, you know it.

# TRUMPET

## KWAME DAWES

Before the dance in the dusty yard,  
before old issue army boots that smell  
like France, worn to the flapping tongue,  
cracked sole and lace-less looseness,  
have stumped the ground, making  
the rhythm that reaches deep into  
the art, the throb of music for  
drunk ancestors; before his bone  
and muscle legs start the last  
shuffle and leap of a man who  
has collapsed unto his uncertain  
madness; before he arrives at this  
doorway at the end of a dream,  
this doorway leading to the absence  
of knowing, of answers; before  
he arrives here in the glaring  
silence of a Pittsburg July day,  
the screaming and concussion  
of the 4th now distant, the flies  
traveling in droves coloring the world  
black; before he understands  
the sadness of this fenceless  
house where the dead man's

body is laid out on the dining  
table, where the widow stands  
in elegant black, the bones of her  
cheeks sharp as stoic grace, her  
face dry, no tears, this shadowed  
woman waiting with tall glasses  
of cool lemonade; before the son's  
return, prodigal and broken, a soldier  
who has stared into redness  
of exploded bodies; before  
this play finds its truest music,  
the headlong rush to meaning,  
to redemption, for mercy, oh mercy;  
before all this, the man with  
a plate of metal stitched to his  
skull raises the coronet to his lips,  
blows, blows, blows, and only  
the importance of his breath  
whooshes out into the silence.

# A JAIL

HANNAH DOW

A man and a woman were out shopping for a jail.

I would like a dormitory-style jail, said the man. I want to sleep on bunk beds and when the feeling arises, pretend I am on a sinking ship.

I would prefer a panopticon-style jail, said the woman. I want to feel I am always the center of attention.

I think there is a way to accommodate both your wishes, said the realtor. Look here, this jail was once underwater. And looters visit so frequently, you will not forget you are being watched.

A once-submerged jail would make the sinking ship game more riveting, said the man.

And I do love being watched, said the woman. Even while I am getting undressed...

Will you take it? said the realtor, who began to lock them inside before they could respond.



# CAPE BRETON MANIFESTO

**JEFF EWING**

Begin by saying  
something wise, or,  
failing that, obscure.

Envision, if it helps,  
a grave with  
its chiseled epigram

or the stern of a boat  
sailing into a  
February storm.

Your hometown is  
his hometown, your  
choices commensurate—

continue on  
and surrender  
every loved thing;

turn back and be  
forever absent  
from their songs.

Wind, sleet,  
chipped cleats  
iced with tears.

Write yourself  
into the corner  
you were born in.

## SIC TRANSIT

**JEFF EWING**

My daughter's on her way to Roseville, the long way—  
train, walk, bus, walk, bus.

The machine eats her twenty at the station,  
she thinks about turning back.

On the blue line there's little risk of IEDs or RPGs,  
but still so many things to go wrong.

The boy climbs into the landing gear,  
the girl in the semi hears its engine stop in the desert.

A walk and a hit. A wild pitch.  
Coyotes are everywhere with promises.

The train rattles north.  
Any moment can be the one that sets the rest in motion.

From the stretch, he reaches back.  
The doors hiss open.

So hot for October. The yard's playing small.  
We listen bent to the call we'll remember forever.

# PATRIOTS

## BRAD FELVER

Here's a story what got passed around from some folks I gone to school with down in Hocking County. You got these two cousins called Harlow and Tuber who light out from Ohio thinking to deal with the Vietcong but end up pretty well dealt with instead. Harlow, he was a mouthy little balker, like some yappy bluejay. Tuber was the fighting type, looked an awful lot like a potato, which everyone was always telling him. Tuber was put together strange if you're asking me, squished up, like that kind of midget who's okay on thickness but not on length. He was regular size enough what the Army took him, but since he was so small, he ended up a tunnel rat, and Christ knows what awful shit he done and seen.

Both these boys go and enlist, and it's Harlow what decides he needs a tattoo. Harlow was like that, couldn't do good without making it a scene or bad without trying to convince you it was good. Always talking, Harlow. Tuber says he'll go along, thinking Harlow don't have the brass to go through with it. They borrow somebody's truck and drive way over to this tattoo parlor in Lancaster. They're looking at all the options plastered up on the wall, thousand of them, more maybe, Harlow talking all the way: *This one here might be right* and *You imagine the cooch a guy like me'd pull with this one?* and *Even you'd seem a tough son of a bitch with this one, Tube.*

Here, I imagine the old fella what owns the tattoo shop shaking his head at Harlow and Tuber, them being a big bucketful of stupid. Course a guy like that probably needs stupid teenagers to make his business work

out. Harlow finally settles on one, a bald eagle with an American flag hanging from its feet. Patriotic as all hell. That's what the story is, course he don't end up getting that one because right about then a couple old bikers walk in, leather vests, no shirts underneath, skin like old farmhouse floorboards, facial hair stained with chaw drip. What's wrong, though, what Harlow and Tuber and the old tattoo fella should have picked out, is that these two don't have no tattoos.

"How's things, friend?" the first one says. He strolls around, not really looking at anyone, more like sizing the place up to buy it. The other one, he's a big bruiser, stands in front of the door and don't say much. No way he's letting Harlow and Tuber get by, that much is easy to see.

The old fella what runs the place is looking a little nervous now. One of them times you can just tell shit's heading south quick, them two's not the kind you want to be alone with. Not the kind of thing he put in for. But he holds it together and says, "Just fine now. What might we be doing for you all today?"

The first biker, the leader, he keeps strolling around the edges of the shop same as Harlow and Tuber was a few minutes before. He's looking at all the tattoos. His boots strike on the laminate, and when they do, his wallet chain jangles. He stops when he notices Tuber. "The hell, son? Your folks run out of food or what?"

That's normally enough to get Tuber all up and bothered, but he just says, "No, sir. I eat okay."

The biker walks over toward him. "I'd make you for the king dick-sucker of this town," he says. "Don't even need to squat down." Then he laughs at his own joke and looks over to his partner, who grins but don't laugh.

"Well, we ain't even from this town," Harlow says.

The biker looks over to Harlow and studies on him a minute. "Oh, so you're the smart one, huh? I can always tell the smart one. Gift I got." He takes a step over toward him. "Okay, smart one, how smart do you feel now?" He pulls out a flick blade and it jumps open. Then his big partner does the same.

"Oh, now!" the old fella what runs the place says. "No need for that,



gentlemen. We don't want no trouble. Ain't got but a few dollars on hand, but you're welcome to those."

"You hear that, Hopper?" the first biker says. "Think we're here to rob them out."

"That's what they usually think," Hopper says. His voice is deeper but quieter than his friend's, like he can't be bothered to care about too much.

"No, sir," the main biker says. "Not here to rob you. Here for a tattoo."

"That we can do, sir. No need for that knife then."

"You're right, ain'tcha?" He closes the blade and stuffs it in his front pocket. "I'll just leave it right here, right in this front pocket, so we don't forget about it, huh? Now, back to this tattoo. I don't see it nowhere, not what I'm looking for," he says.

"I can do whatever you like. Just tell me, and I'll draw it up."

"Now that's the spirit!" The biker grabs a marker from next to the cash register. He goes over to the wall and finds the one empty spot in between all the other sample tattoos. Got his back to Harlow and Tuber and the old fella, so they can't see what he's drawing 'til after he's done, but it don't take him long, and when he moves away, it's a big black swastika he drew. No mistaking it. "Now, I ain't the artist I'm betting you are," he says, "but that's the rough cut of it."

"Sir," the old tattoo fella says, but Christ, what's he supposed to do? It's like he knows he's fucked deep, but he can't just go on and do it without complaining some. Folks have swastika tattoos, I guess, but it don't seem right what they make somebody else draw it on them. But the old fella says, "Okay, then, go ahead and set down in that chair and I'll get things ready."

"Oh, it ain't for me," the biker says. "I don't care for tattoos, myself. Ruin my complexion." He runs a hand through his beard. "No, I want it for this one here, the smart one." He points at Harlow.

"Sir—"

"Now, friend," he says, "Let's not get on repeating ourselves. We know what's in the front pocket, and we know what I want, so, let's just get on with it."

The old tattoo fella's all jammed up, no doubt about that. He looks over at Harlow, his face drooping like a hungry dog, probably trying to

apologize a thousand different ways without saying nothing out loud. But then Harlow, to that boy's credit, he rips his shirt off, his ribcage poking through his skin, and he walks over to the chair and sets on down.

"God damn, if I wasn't right!" the biker says. "You are smart."

The old tattoo man sets things up and goes to work, and it don't take him but half an hour to mark Harlow up with the swastika. It's thick and dark, and it covers up the whole left side of his chest. Harlow, he don't make a goddamned sound, that's the story I heard anyways. His whole life he's been the loudmouth, always telling folks how he'd do this or he'd do that, how he pulls so much cooch that don't even get the clap no more, how he's the toughest son of a bitch around, but right then he just takes it, quiet and almost dignified. "Damn, son," the biker says, "that can't feel good now." But Harlow don't say boo, and the old biker don't push it like he done before.

That's the end of the story as most people in town learned it, but there's more to it I heard years later when I came back to the States for a reunion and I run into Harlow's sister. I was always sweet on her but never had the stones to talk to until after I was safe and married. Turns out Harlow and Tuber head off to basic a couple months later and then over to Vietnam a couple months after that. They end up in different units, but they try to talk when they can. It's Tuber what makes a real show of himself as a tunnel rat. I guess he's just fearless, like he knows he was engineered just for it. Got a whole process. Every hole and bunker they come across, Tuber strips down to his skivvies and takes just a flashlight and a .45. Sometimes he's gone a long time, but he eventually comes back and calls it clear, meaning there wasn't nothing down there or there was but now there ain't. Then he packs the hole with explosives and they set off. Tuber earns medals and commendations and all that. Harlow's sister tells me all about it, like she remembers all the details all these years after, which seems strange, but I guess it ain't seeing as what Tuber done for her brother next.

It's Harlow what dies first, takes one from a sniper outside Kien Long. Here's the part what really sticks to me, though. Harlow gets shipped back stateside to get buried back in Ohio, and when Tuber hears about all this he loses it. His CO won't give him leave, not even after everything he done

in them tunnels, not even for his cousin being dead, his cousin who was Tuber's best friend. So Tuber goes AWOL. Somehow he manages to get back stateside, and the night before Harlow's funeral, he breaks into the funeral parlor, jamming that .45 into the mortician's temple. "I'm needing you to do this on the pronto," Tuber says to him, and the mortician don't do much for protest. He sets Harlow's body up on the table and helps Tuber strip him out of his new suit, all so Tuber can take a razor blade to his cousin's chest and carve out that swastika, seeing as I guess he couldn't stand the thought of him getting buried with that still there.

The cops show up, and he don't make no big scene out of it. He goes quiet, even gives the mortician his .45, like he knew it was coming. Turns out it weren't even loaded. He gets charged with carving up a corpse and burglary and assault, which sends him inside for a few years. Worst part? Army finds out he gone AWOL and broke into the funeral home, they discharge him, too, dishonorable after all he done. Harlow's sister says Tuber gets the final papers his first week inside. "Did you write him?" I ask, and she says, "Yeah, I wrote him most every week," which is what I was hoping for.

"That's good," I say. "You always was a good sister."

I lean in a little closer so we can whisper through the loud music. I set my drink next to hers, rims almost touching. That's when she looks at me pretty mean, and I know what's coming, I been waiting on it. "How long you lived in Windsor anyway?"

"Long time now," I say, and when she don't respond, I say, "You know how things was."

"Yeah," she says. "I guess I do."

We chat about the old days for a few more minutes and then she says she needs to go to the bathroom, and I don't see her after that. It's funny what you remember and what you tell people about. Always seems like you end up telling the wrong stories or telling the right stories the wrong way. Never can seem to get it right, and besides, nobody ever hears you all the way through anyhow.



## VACANT

**DYLAN  
HENDERSON**

I snaked my arm through the window and unlocked the back door, broken glass crunching under my boots. Inside, the floorboards were stacked in a corner, and I waded through the crawlspace until I reached the kitchen. My brother was sitting on the back porch, prying a nail out of his loafers.

"I wore the wrong shoes for this," he called.

I climbed out of the crawlspace onto the dining room floor. "There are pictures in here," I called, examining the paintings on the wall.

My brother materialized behind me. "I thought you meant there were photographs," he said. He began to brush the dust off his slacks.

"The wife painted this one," I said, tapping the glass with my finger. "Her husband hung it over the dining room table. He wouldn't have displayed his own work."

"Do you see a signature?" my brother asked.

I shook my head. The morning sun shone through the lace curtains, leaving a checkered shadow on the floor. An imaginary cat slept in its light. Its paws twitched as it dreamed.

My brother was exploring the living room. "I found a name," he called. I could hear him flipping through a magazine.

I turned back to the dining room where a man and woman were eating breakfast at the table. The cat hopped onto the man's lap, and he scratched it behind the ears as he turned the page of his newspaper. The woman laid her hand on the table, and the man took it without saying anything.

"What have you found?" I asked from the doorway. The sofa and two

armchairs were piled on top of one another in the corner. The wallpaper hung in strips.

"The Millers," he said, holding up a copy of *The Watchtower*, "were Jehovah's Witnesses." He tapped the cover of the magazine. "It's dated 1976."

I stepped over the books scattered on the hardwood floor. Two bookcases, built into the wall, flanked the door to the hallway. I replaced the shelves and, crouching down, began to flip through the pile of Bibles, commentaries, and paperback novels. In the corner, the antique television poured its white light on the braided rug. Mr. Miller was sitting in his armchair, reading. He adjusted his glasses and wrote something in the margins of his Bible. His son was stretched out on the floor in front of the television, his chin propped up on his palms.

"How's the baby?" my brother asked. I heard the click of his camera over my shoulder.

"It's fine," I said, dropping the book I held in my hand. I stood up. "It's smaller than the doctors would like, but they don't want to take it yet."

My brother snapped a picture of the fanlight over the door. "How's your wife?" he asked quietly, adjusting the shutter on his camera.

I shrugged and, pushing aside the paneled door, stepped into the bathroom. The toilet was gone, leaving behind a gaping hole in the tile floor, but the pedestal sink and cast iron bathtub remained. The floor, spongy with rot, sagged.

I sat down on the edge of the bathtub and watched the cows in the pasture through the window. On the far side of the field, hackberries and blackjack oaks clustered along a creek, the papery trunks of sycamores poking through the roof of the wood. I watched a flock of blackbirds rise from the treetops and, wheeling as they climbed, fly over the house.

"You have to see this," my brother said. He was standing in the doorway and wiping the sweat from his eyes.

I followed my brother to a small bedroom at the other end of the hall. Several hundred Mason jars, smashed to bits, coated the floor. A bed, a nightstand, and a desk overlooking the gravel drive were the only furnishings. My brother, smiling, pointed up, and I lifted my head and saw the



bluish-green swirl of the Milky Way arcing across the night sky.

"He loved stars," I said, touching the ceiling with the tip of my fingers.

The boy glanced at us before turning around in his chair and bending over his desk. I looked over his shoulder at the radio, now reduced to an assortment of wires, panels, and speakers, sprawled across his desk. The boy ran his hand through his short hair and, licking his lips, selected a pair of wire cutters from the toolbox beside him. Sketches of motorcycles and robots hung on the wall.

"It's just that she seemed upset," my brother said as we climbed the stairs. The walnut rang with our footsteps. "Do you usually fight like that?"

"She didn't want me to leave," I said over my shoulder. "She doesn't like being left alone."

"I didn't mean to upset her," he said.

We paused at the landing where a window looked out over the barn and tool shed. Beneath us, a cellar, overgrown with brambles, yawned at the base of the house. I could see its splintered door floating in the water below.

"I just don't see how it can last," he resumed, fiddling with his camera. "Truthfully, I think she should have stayed in the hospital. If you want my opinion, there it is."

I nodded, brushing away the cobwebs that spanned the window.

"Do you even love her?" he asked, trailing after me.

I paused at the top of the stairs. A single room filled the entire upstairs, its ceiling sloping with the pitch of the roof. Paneling ran along the walls, the yellow pine peppered with mouse holes. The closet doors hung open, and piles of clothes littered the bed and dresser. I stepped into the alcove, which overlooked the gravel drive and the cottonwood shading the front porch. Beneath my feet, the chains on the porch swing squeaked as it swung. Arm in arm, the Millers sipped lemonade and watched their son as he chased a butterfly through the tall grass, his net flapping in the warm breeze.

"I love having a family," I said, watching Henry, his face red with laughter, weave through the meadow, the butterfly appearing and disappearing in the weeds before him.

# SILVER & BLACK HOLE

JOSEPH HOLT

[Lester Hayes]

Separation is not knowing your father's number.  
It's postmarks from Tucson, Grand Cayman  
or Vermont. It shows in his old handprints—  
gummy and dark, permanent as tar.

[Fred Biletnikoff]

The lone smokestacks, isolated chimneys  
in overgrown, infertile fields—you'd think  
they were once part of some larger structure.  
And now the structure is what—silt? ash?

[Jay Schroeder]

My windows shattered and my lawn salted,  
my tires gouged and my name a trendy curse—  
why might I expect fanfare the next town over,  
tickertape, free dinner, a warm towel?

[Bo Jackson]

The comet's tail is an illusion,  
like fan blades tracing the air,  
wisps that signal an absence more  
memorable than the object itself.

[Ted Hendricks]

I lie awake hearing tragic  
old ballads on frequencies  
that no longer exist, fearing what  
my father was I'll become to you.

[Vince Evans]

For every scab  
there's a scar  
made worse  
for the picking.

**[Jack Tatum]**

Earthquakes are a fact. Just try debating  
a hundred-thousand tons of toppled concrete.  
We hardly know which way  
to point our ears for an absent apology.

**[Al Davis]**

A streetlight blinks out, bottles  
shatter against brick walls, an engine  
rings and the moon glows and in our hearts  
there's nothing so seductive as darkness.

**[Kenny Stabler]**

My fear is merely winding through your life  
like a snake, close to the ground and half-hidden  
in weeds, choking on dust, sleeping in pits,  
given only the notice deserving a twig.

**[Bill Pickel]**

The smoke should have reached us  
before the fire. We should have sweat  
through our shirts before the walls burned,  
taken alarm at the cinders hissing by our feet.

**[Dan Pastorini]**

The word I want is *senseless* or *selfish*,  
when it means mourning  
the war horse with a broken leg  
that now feeds a family of fifty.

**[JaMarcus Russell]**

In the worst droughts we find stones shaped  
like potatoes and roast them in a pit,  
scour the pond and grind fish bones  
until they're fine enough to swallow.

**[Marcus Allen]**

There's exile and there's *exile*. One you leave  
on your own. The other you fear what lurks  
in shadows, shiver at the slightest breeze,  
blink fiercely into a vacant mirror.

**[Howie Long]**

In one dream I strike a match and cast myself  
in darkness across an empty room.  
As the flame shrinks into my fingertips  
I vanish like sulfur carried on smoke.

**[Ray Guy]**

And I wish to be whisked into the stratosphere  
not by jet stream or current but by force alone—  
when I descend you'll know it's not helium  
that separates us, but my own goddamn will.

**[Gene Upshaw]**

Our histories ferment in attics, in boxes  
taped at the seams,  
spotted with mold, awaiting  
combustion from a merciful arsonist.

**[Sebastian Janikowski]**

I've seen monuments and mountains exposed  
to the wind, moldering into domes, fractured  
by ice and carved by rain, swelling  
with rivers washing mud to the sea.

**[Dave Casper]**

I'll disappear and you'll be left  
grappling the floor. I'll evaporate.  
You'll sense me drifting along  
the rafters as reachable as a ghost.

**[Todd Marinovich]**

I've learned too many words for regret,  
remorse, family fled and legacy busted—  
yet without loss there'd be no redemption.  
And what did we learn from our fathers?

**[Tim Brown]**

The years pile up like leaves, silver rain  
chipping at the windows, black mist  
blending day with night. I huff into my coupled fists  
only to conjure you in the chair beside me.



## GLUTTONY

**PATRICIA  
HORVATH**

The room smells of pig meat and grease. Crumpled McDonald's bags litter coffee table and windowsill. A couple has unpacked Styrofoam containers of Egg McMuffins, sausages, bacon, fries. Ketchup stains the man's pastel track suit. He's in the room's sole recliner; his companion has squeezed herself into a chair at his side. They pass containers back and forth; they grunt and groan with breakfast pleasure. Something drips onto the carpet. Unseemly Behavior with Food. There must, I think, be some place on Earth where this is at least a misdemeanor, on a par, say, with jaywalking or turnstile jumping. Thirty years since I've eaten meat, and the animal stench is overpowering. It's Day-I've-Lost-Count of accompanying Jeff to the hospital, and I'm past all charity.

We're in what I've come to think of as the holding pen for the chemo suite—a small, close room where patients wait to be assigned a nurse. It has a TV, this room, and the TV is set to Jerry Springer. Someone has stolen someone's man. Words fly, then chairs. The woman laughs, her mouth a mess of McMuffin. The man's phone rings and he begins to shout over the televised ruckus about motherfucker this and that.

I glare at them. Jeff glares at them. Useless, like flinging pebbles into the sea. Perhaps it's just as well. Emotions run high in this room; I've seen fights break out. People exhausted, sick, utterly powerless, and needing to assert control over something, even if it's just a TV show. I shut my eyes and silently chant the chant I've learned



in yoga class, trying to achieve a kind of psychic white space. Nothing feels easy.

The woman with the snack cart has apples and bananas. She has smoked turkey sandwiches that, she claims, she made herself, roasting the turkey at home. She makes this joke every time.

We're in a relatively quiet corner of the suite, at some distance from the McDonald's couple, who are still watching talk shows on their ceiling mounted TV. The snack cart bananas are mottled, the Red Delicious apples look waxy. Jeff takes a bottle of water.

"That's all?" the snack lady asks. "Sure you don't want a sandwich?"

Like everyone here—the doctors and nurses, the dietician and social worker and physician assistants—she wants the patients to eat. Protein, especially, which is difficult given Jeff's new aversion to fish. He's lost his appetite for all sorts of things, obvious things like food and sex and, perhaps less obviously, conversation, music, sleep. Though he sleeps more than ever, he does so fitfully, rising early, waking during the night. Whether

all of this will prove temporary is a thing we cannot know.

I've offered to cook meat for him. I don't exactly know how, having never bought meat before, but if he's willing to eat it, I'm willing to give it a try. The reasons I don't eat meat are the usual ones: climate, health, abattoir. But long before I'd thought about any of these, it was the bacon that made me quit.

My mother used to cook bacon on Sunday mornings. The strips sizzled in their own fat, which she'd pour into a Maxwell House coffee can that was kept under the kitchen sink with the Comet and ammonia and bleach. Whenever the can filled up, she'd toss it away. One morning, during my last year of high school, she asked me to get the can from under the sink. It was way in the back, behind those other containers with their warning labels: Keep Out of Reach of Children and Hazardous if Swallowed. I opened the lid. The can was nearly full, the congealed fat a dull white lump. It looked foreign, not like food. Yet we'd eaten this.

I did not decide in that moment to become a vegetarian,

but I didn't eat the bacon that morning nor the sausages we had for dinner that night. I told my mother I was going off meat, temporarily. I've yet to go back on.

Jeff doesn't want meat. He doesn't want cooked vegetables or beans and rice or soup. Salads are out of the question. Mostly he eats pasta, buttered in a bowl. Soft cooked eggs. Ice cream to keep the weight on. Children's food.

Because of this I'm eating less too, avoiding the things that make him nauseous. I love strong, pungent foods. Kimchee. Stinky cheeses. Mackerel, blue fish pate, mushrooms that hold the scent of their soil. For the six months of his treatment I've given them up. It's a minor sacrifice, a nothing thing, but I still feel the lack. Not so much for the food itself as for the way it shapes our lives.

Jeff and I are both thin and because of this people sometimes assume that we don't care about food. Yet food—its procurement and preparation and presentation, the way it delineates time—is crucial to our life together. On our first date, we had lunch at a sushi place, on our second we had Indian food.

For our third date Jeff offered to make dinner, a kind of crustless quiche he calls Watergate Pie because the recipe is scrawled on stationery from the Watergate Hotel. I was impressed, even more so when I saw that he had a roll of wax paper in his kitchen drawer. Only someone seriously devoted to the culinary arts, I reasoned, would have wax paper. *A cook!* I thought. *I've scored!* I wasn't wrong about this, but I wasn't exactly right either. The Watergate pie, the tuna melt, omelets and tomato sauce, these are the staples of Jeff's kitchen repertoire. Comfort food. He leaves the more adventurous cooking to me, is the willing taster for my experiments.

Every weekend, even in winter, we go to the farmers market at Lincoln Center. We mark spring by the first appearance of dandelion greens, which I bake in a pie with ricotta and onions. When asparagus is in season we eat it almost daily: roasted with garlic, steamed and drizzled with aioli, or raw in salads. Hadley Grass, they call it in western Massachusetts, where we used to live, and the shops put up signs warning customers when the

last batch came in. For two years Jeff lived in Ecuador, where he developed a taste for ceviche, so I learned to make that, too. Scallops in vodka; flounder with lemon, orange, and tomato juices; shrimp and octopus with red onions, limes and jalapeno. In August Jeff stuffs his backpack with ears of corn that we haul home on the subway then freeze for winter use, as if our little Harlem kitchen were some prairie outpost. Thanksgiving means curried squash and mushroom soup, Christmas a five fish stew. Twice a year, on our June anniversary and on the November weekend that falls between our birthdays, we splurge on a meal in a fancy restaurant.

We're lucky in this, I know. Lucky to afford the food we like and the time it takes to prepare. Not just the obvious kitchen time but all of the lead up—the riffling through cookbooks, the search for new ingredients, the small talk with farmers. There are people, my mother is one, for whom this is just so much fuss. A single woman with a high school education and two kids to raise, the last thing my mother wanted after coming home from work was to toil in the

kitchen. She was tired, we were hungry, there were dishes and baths and homework to get through. Dinner needed to be cheap and it needed to be quick. Hamburger Helper. Tuna casserole. Meatloaf with Tater Tots. And, of course, McDonald's.

For Jeff and me dinner is a curtain falling on our day. Work transitions to leisure, a time for conversation and catching up. No matter the meal, we have candles, music, wine. For a while we tried to keep doing this. Not the wine part, but the rest of it. I thought the rituals might be reassuring, might help fool us into believing that things hadn't really changed. But Jeff was too tired to sit at the table, too sick to eat. He'd try a mouthful of food. He'd watch me eat, which made me uncomfortable. There was nothing to talk about—nothing, that is, except for what we didn't want to talk about. So we moved to coffee table and couch. With the lights off and the TV on, we didn't feel so much pressure to eat.

In his essay "Coming Home Again," Chang Rae Lee writes of learning to cook by watching his mother in the kitchen instead of playing



outside with the other boys. He describes how his mother butterflied a butchered short rib, glazing it with sugar crystals, mincing garlic, ginger root, and scallions into a marinade of sesame oil and soy sauce. When, in the final stages of stomach cancer, his mother is barely able to eat, Lee's family still gathers for dinner each night. "The point was simply to sit together at the kitchen table and array ourselves like a family again." Food was the pretext for that, food let the family cohere.

On New Year's Eve 1990, a week before her death, Lee makes a feast of Korean finger dishes, hoping to coax his mother's appetite. She tries to eat a piece of salmon toast, then lets it fall from her mouth. "She attempted a bean cake, some cheese, a piece of fruit, but nothing was any use." Her inability to share in the meal he made leaves Lee feeling "lost."

Jeff does not have stomach cancer. He's not dying, not in any immediate sense. His leukemia is incurable, but it can be treated. It will go away then come back. Each time it returns his remission will be shorter. Two, three times at most before the treatments will stop

working. Ten years perhaps. That's all of the time in the world—and none.

Everyone is eating. Bananas, apples, muffins from Starbucks, chips from the snack cart. I ask Jeff if he'd like me to go to the Greek diner at the corner. I could bring back some hummus or souvlaki. I could get a chicken salad sandwich from Starbucks or some ice cream from the lobby cafe. How about it?

In fact, neither one of us is hungry. It's Wednesday, his long day, when he gets three chemo drugs instead of the usual two. The "extra" drug, Rituximab, causes fever and nausea; it has to be dripped in slowly. From start to finish it's a six hour day. By the end of it, I'm famished.

The treatments make Jeff carsick, a thing we found out early on in a stalled cab near Central Park West. Because of this we always take the subway home. It's two trains, the local at 59th then the express at 72nd. Today is unusually warm; the platforms will be hot. At Ninth Avenue we come to a pocket park, a small raised plaza with metal tables and chairs, a couple of locust trees. There's a

kind of kiosk, too, a big red cylinder that looks like a squashed soda can. "Pizza in the Park" its yellow awning says and, sure enough, inside the cylinder a man is heating up slices.

"You hungry?" Jeff asks.

He stakes out a table; I wait in line. The pizza slices are huge. I'm halfway through mine before I can taste it, before the hunger abates enough. The crust is crispy, the sauce just the right side of sweet. It's remarkably good.

This park we're in has a green space, a scabby patch of land wedged into the southeast corner of the block. It's bordered by a corrugated metal fence, neon green, with white lettering that reads "Balsey Park." Who knew this place existed? But that's the thing about living in New York. For better or worse, something new is always popping up. One learns to anticipate the unexpected.

On the lawn a dog is peeing against a tree. "No Dogs on Grass or in Garden," a sign on the tree says. "Do Not Feed the Pigeons."

Along the avenue a farmers market has been set up. Stalls heaped with carrots, scallions, beets. If they had peas I could make pea

bouillabaisse, something I know Jeff will eat. But the time for peas has passed. Already I'm thinking about the next meal. Focusing on the future, even if it's just dinner, is a way to take myself out of the present. In the chemo suite, that can be an advantage.

The locust leaves make lacy shadows on the ground. Every table is occupied. A group of old men plays dominoes; a woman with a stroller types something into her phone. Someone scatters sandwich remains to the hovering pigeons. To our surprise, and despite his oncologist's warnings, Jeff has not lost his hair. Looking at him you would not think "cancer patient." We are just two people eating pizza in a park in the neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen.

We eat slowly, we take our time. Jeff finishes his slice. "That was good," he says. When we get home he'll need to nap. He'll wake up feeling awful. In the morning we'll be back at the hospital. Right now though there is only this table in the shade, this park and food and water, the trees and sun. Everything else feels remote.

The farmers are packing up. It's our last chance to grab



something from the market  
before they cart it all off. What  
do we need? I think. Do we need  
anything? But in this moment, just  
this moment, sated at last and for  
the time being, I realize that we do  
not.

# A MOTHER GIVES BIRTH TO SOMEONE WHO WON'T LAST

LESLEY JENIKE

*With thanks to Fanny Howe*

Morning come the inevitable separation:  
a body from its sheet, finch from its perch  
on our car's side mirror. You're like the sun  
up from a crouch under Prospect Hill  
sliding the rick-rack curtains open  
and the sad lab past a stand of trees breaks  
from sleep to start his morning sob, a sigh  
to part the vapors. A mob of Harleys,  
in for their annual rally, crack  
the pavement and practically split the air  
in half. Time is a lake, upstate New York,  
and its personage on Earth that biker's girl  
at Lanzi's by the Dock, who said last night,  
loud enough so we all could hear, "I hate  
to even mention *him*, but it's so much  
smoother riding with *you*." Her current man,  
his face long and brown, turned to the water  
and took a drag off his cigarette, its smoke  
freeing itself, satisfied by her show of faith,  
it seemed. You put your hand on my belly  
to shield the baby who isn't here yet, but  
to the *now* man, the *smooth-riding* man,  
smoke is a good death. There's no running from it.

## FUNERAL GAMES

M. P. JONES IV

Imagine you were still  
here, that you never left  
your wife and your children  
in the night, to cross eight  
states for as many years.  
Your daughter gallops onward  
like a charioteer, but at the lake's  
edge, your sons are still building  
the fire, watching the bobber  
drift, suspended between  
the whiskey-dark surface and stiff  
autumn air. They are boxing  
your ears where you lie  
as still as an old photograph,  
scar visible on your forehead,  
bottle spilled beside  
the ring of rocks, draining  
the dregs for that contest  
already won. You told me  
you were happiest at sixteen,  
when the girls too good  
to speak to you at school  
would open their windows

slowly in the clean darkness.

This, too, will smolder  
until morning comes  
and I shake this miserable  
dream, borrowed like a leaky  
Jon boat from some silent  
semaphore, keys to a house  
long gone, locks changed,  
the stucco now a shade  
of robin's egg. The neighbors  
moved and left behind  
no forwarding address.

# A GENEALOGY OF SCIENCE

**M. P. JONES IV**

- 1917: An American boy and a German boy stare  
at one another in a French trench for a full minute  
behind a Colt New Service and a Luger.  
Each marvels at how close a likeness the other  
bears to his own visage, like a mirror image. One shoots.
- 1925: She watches the shadows swim under the door  
as her impatient husband paces the hospital corridor.
- 1936: A man films the last known Tasmanian tiger  
walking back and forth between the cage walls  
just before it disappears.
- 1952: A soldier's hat falls as he bends to avoid seeing  
his superior. Polished boots sound like hoof-clatter  
on cobblestones as he slams the brothel door.
- 1970: In a soybean field in middle Georgia, the crowd roars.  
Not far away, a pregnant girl at a roadside peach stand  
says to a Strychnine-panicked boy, "I cannot help you;  
the lines are down," as he stumbles into the darkness.



- 1976: A red telephone is ringing in the early light. She cannot hear it. She studies the light on the countertop, not wondering who waits at the other end of the line, for whom it rings.
- 1987: A girl waits in a hotel room purchased on her father's credit card for a boy who said, "I ache for you."
- 1993: A man holds his first-born by the legs out the window-frame of an incomplete second-story addition.
- 1997: A young man drives through the night, perhaps in Arizona, perhaps nowhere at all, until he comes upon a waterless sea of solid glass. Nobody believes him.
- 2000: The neighbor boy soaks toads in gasoline to watch them move through the dark like shooting stars.
- 2004: Christmas Eve, the tire of an overturned car spins in a ditch where two boys sit staring at a patch of morning sun shining through the pines.
- 2005: Midnight in the Mother's Day darkness:  
the telephone rings.
- 2012: A young man cuts his own right hand off with a chainsaw. After, he cannot explain.
- 2013: Forgotten candles in the bathroom resemble green moonlight where two lay naked in the dark.
- Five (A.M.): A boy and a girl watch the last Tasmanian tiger pace back and forth on a bright screen. No sound.

# DOMINION

**CHRISTOPHER  
KEMPF**

*"& God said unto them, 'Be fruitful & multiply, & replenish the earth, & subdue it. & have dominion over the fish of the sea, & over the fowl of the air, & over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.'"*

*—Genesis 1:28*

But to the trees we are,  
like metaphor, mostly

extraneous, our language,  
to them, the breath—

play of peasants. Picture  
this world without us,

you say, the sick  
planet picked

clean—as by a kind  
of divine wind—of ruin

& war. Of word. We turn  
west on the Redwood Trail late

on a Sunday. The endangered  
sequoias vanish above us

& there is nothing, you say,  
or no place the planet

is unaffected. Its feverish  
heaving. The breathing

trees turning  
over & over their old

air. We are  
all of us lung. What

Cabrillo breathed. What bands  
of Ohlone women walked

beside in silence. I  
would be for you

like the railroad the ravager  
of all of this. Would give

vast acreages to make you  
immortal. I am not

in the slightest sorry. Tonight  
I will tie you to the bed—bolted

pinewood—& we  
will make the frame whine. & when

the idea of people  
is over, as I hope

it is quickly, I hope  
the trees remain. The language—

less. The in-  
describable night

like a blindfold.



# GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

CHRISTOPHER  
KEMPF

Because I am a man, I make  
of every available object a bomb. A back-  
pack. A parked Glendale trailing  
from its gas tank a t-shirt. A shovel,  
the instructions suggest, is best  
employed in striking the head then,  
that finished, digging  
a hole for the body. I bring  
the sawed-off to my shoulder & open  
fire. I frame  
the double barrels of my fury first  
on Jizzy's Pleasure Shack & after  
on the patrons of the Cluckin' Nut. No one  
is safe. I solicit  
a hooker on the corner of Fillmore  
& Jackson. I pass  
the Gant Bridge, the gym  
where I can bench press now nearly  
my own weight. *Based*  
*on San Francisco, the city*  
*is fully explorable.* California  
was from the beginning—wasn't it—  
the end, already

in that century a burlesque  
of itself. Its cities  
of gold. Its lonesome  
men making  
it new. *Now*  
*the controls have been simplified.* I drive  
the hooker in the seat beside me beneath  
the Bridge, my glittering  
car rocking on its axles. The last  
light of the evening streaks  
the windshield & when  
it is finished I lift  
the woman from the car & because  
I can, in this edition, win  
my money back I beat her  
with a vase of flowers. We allowed,  
it's true, terrible  
things to happen here. We lived  
like animals in a landscape  
made, we imagined, for exactly  
that purpose. Circling  
above me in their helicopters the cops  
tell me it is over & to lower  
my weapon to the sidewalk. My weapon  
is myself. I strike  
the woman again & again, her wrecked  
body blooming cash. I cannot  
stop. I am  
a man, I say, I am  
a fucking man.

# WITHOUT MY BODY

**MICHAEL  
LAUCLAN**

If my glasses could tell where  
they've gone when I lose them  
and, without my loud body,  
what they've seen while stuck  
on my car's dash, pointed at a night  
of bats, skunks, possum, hawks,  
a rare, quick coyote; or left  
on a shelf where mice fleece us

of non-essential oats; or while  
dropped beside our kitchen sink  
—how the bright faces become  
blindingly true as kids wield tape  
and scissors, stick leaves just so  
onto thick paper, or climb chairs  
to reach a water glass when  
they're sure no one's watching.

# I IMPORE THE BAT

**MERCEDES  
LAWRY**

My dear bat, creature of sweet ferocity,  
unfolded threat in wing-stirred air, dark  
cloak, sip of night, how one dips and then another,  
you and I, as if fearful, senses taut.  
Oh little black thing, little horrid face,  
little shim of stealth, take my disappointments  
out beyond the trees, beyond hunger and grief  
and the stiff lies of the duplicitous moon.



# CACTUS

**RUTH  
MADIEVSKY**

I'm sitting beside a cactus in a stranger's backyard,  
trying to remember the last time  
I celebrated something that wasn't a holiday.  
I'd like to call last night a celebration,  
how the sheets drew around us like a prom dress,  
how my fingers were out partying all night  
in the disco of your mouth. Anyone who says  
they don't want to be celebrated  
is lying. We all want champagne corks to pop  
at each meeting of lips, each slip knot  
of the tongue the launch code  
for another bottle rocket to fire,  
streaking across the sky  
the way a dress peeled like an apple  
slices the dark.  
I'm stroking the cactus between its quills,  
wondering when was the last time  
the man whose house I am renting was celebrated,  
when someone last took him  
in her mouth like a swig of red wine.  
Years from now,  
when we've walked out of all our photos,  
this is what we will remember:

how we coaxed the doves from each other's throats,  
blood like sunlight, the neck an altar,  
how we took each other like barbiturates.

# TINY SHOTGUN

**RUTH  
MADIEVSKY**

There is a tiny shotgun  
behind my eyes. If not my eyes, my lungs.  
If not my lungs, an ambulance  
must be going by, its siren a hole  
I climb into, wondering about the person inside  
and whether he is coming or going,  
whether she will be making  
any more egg white omelets. I've been thinking about disinfectants  
in urinals and how they're called cakes,  
which is like the time I told Alice  
her boyfriend was a gentleman for driving  
me home and left out the part  
where he put his hand on my ass and also  
the part where I didn't ask him to stop.  
There is something about dark beer  
and leather jackets I want  
nothing to do with. Let's play  
a game: you get to be anything  
you want and I get to be something that's not  
antifreeze. Let me be a slow dance  
or a dime in a fountain, something more  
than the air in a fist, something that doesn't leave you  
in a stairwell like a spit-laced cigarette, yelling

my name  
like it's a bloody sock. I don't know  
why my hands keep turning  
into asthma inhalers, why lately everything  
has been storm clouds  
and operating tables and I have locked myself  
in the pantry with three matches and  
a bag of ice. I guess  
this is August, the breakfast, lunch and dinner of it,  
a hinge I am oiling like a sun-ravaged body, my right hand  
shouting expletives at my left, I guess I feel  
like an earring  
in a hotel parking lot, like the blacked out windows  
of a community theater  
where, inside, one woman  
is telling another the difference between pain  
and the idea of pain, and the man  
selling tickets is sucking on a jawbreaker and trying not to think  
about crash sites and government cheese.

# AFTER RUNNING IN THE DARK

HUGH MARTIN

—*The Stow Armory*

You watch the men with brown towels  
tight on their waists walk

from the shower-room mist. O’Ryan steps  
from the steam, dog-tags stuck

to his shaved chest. On the smooth slick  
of his back: four deep scratches flare

from his lower spine  
like contrails on the Akron sky.

He says nothing except *I didn’t sleep*,  
pulls on his brown shirt

while you wonder how to make  
someone touch you like that.

By seven you’re dressed in the desert-  
camo shivering outside



the drill-floor garage  
before formation, holding the cups

of shit-coffee. Flecks of snow  
in the white dawn pelt your eyes

and you stand there waiting,  
like always. Waiting.

# LETTER TO LIEUTENANT OWEN FROM THE TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY

HUGH MARTIN

—9/3/13

Still children ardent for some desperate  
glory, aiming guns at Baghdad before  
we're twenty. Midwest in America (you haven't  
been): the reds and yellows of leaves swarm  
the streets' curbs as the State talks of bombs  
they'll send to send a message. Simple, sir,  
to drop them where you're not. Damascus—  
City of Jasmine—shelled with Sarin.  
What's changed since your World  
War, which still we call *The Great*? Today  
we name them Operations. Each speech ends  
with God bless America. Through the panes  
of your mask that man still drowns.  
And still, the soldiers, not dead, just—*Fallen*.

One morning they gassed us, only once,  
in northern Kentucky where America keeps  
its bullion behind barbed wire. We danced—  
we were made to—in a room where white steam  
crawled along the walls and then we slipped  
off our masks: it was like the needles of a pine  
brushing my iris. Burning skin. We yelled

our Socials with snot-strings on our chins.  
As you said, sir, it is sweet and right  
to huff gas for one's country, to shave  
for one's country because, otherwise,  
the mask won't seal. Can you believe,  
sir, a death from stubble? And isn't that  
something: City of Jasmine. Can you imagine?

## MY BROTHER IN THE FUTURE

DANIELLE  
MITCHELL

They call the drug Spice. When my brother inhales it, he is expecting a normal high—maybe the first of his life. His heart rate erupts in his chest, suddenly thirsty. He crawls to the toilet, attempts to drink from the bowl. His friends bring water. He drinks so fast he is both vomiting & swallowing at the same time. When they go for more, he rummages below the sink, opens a bottle of bleach. In the future, my brother will be the one who cuts the fingers off our gloves so that we look properly apocalyptic in our leather jackets & dirt faces. We will reassemble English through our '90s-era movie references. He will say *Cowabunga!* every time I somersault from harm. The doctors tell us he may never be the same, just before he breaks out of psychiatric & walks barefoot down the road to a church, attempting communion. He says the two video cameras in his room telecast his image to the devil & god. That the doctor's coat whispers distrust of its wearer. When in his mind, my brother dies, he is worried our family will visit. They strap him to the bed for another 24 hours. It is so much easier to show love in the future. You just put an ice pick in the skull of the nearest threat & that saves the one you run with & he knows how deep your feelings go. You don't have to say it. In the future, there's simply no time.

## SELF PORTRAIT AS A SMALL WORLD

DANIELLE  
MITCHELL

They say not to splash the water, not to drink. Just sit back & float through in your tiny craft, hands & legs inside at all times. I am little bodies singing for you in seventy different languages. This Haitian girl says *My stomach hurts*. This little Dutch boy is holding a tin can to his belly, listening close. Everything is research. The pancreas is paper mache & my body making paste. Did you know the lower intestines swim in milk?—not like a bath. Our internal organs move constantly. Benign tumors float through like raisins in oatmeal; tourists from Germany. Sometimes when you taste me I'm sweeter than agave syrup, or is that my succulent wilting in your mouth? But anyway, when they lock us in at night I drink from the fountain that flows near, just to keep my bloodied lips wet. To say that the trail leaking from my ears is just from too much music. Let's reset. Really, I'm sponging poison like the nest of asbestos I was raised in. Really, my animatronics are failing. My elbows click & eyelids fall like snapping fish. Let's say we unzip my belly & rummage through the wires, see the sad organs shoved against the circuitry; I rust, I spark against. The water barely helps my thirst or wets the throat. I'm so tired of this song. If I could break my concrete casings & hot glue-gunned breeches I'd jump gaily into this canal. I want to make you happy. I want to sizzle & combust. We all do, it's all we talk about.



## FROM THE CATHEDRAL OF DENNY'S

**JIMMY J. PACK JR.**

Following Route 66 west toward California in July of 2001, my cross-country travel partner, Kyle Borowski, and I are taking a trip back in time on the Mother Road. We stop in Kingman, Arizona, a typical large town along 66 that built itself up from the desert as the railroad was working its way to the Pacific Ocean. We gas up our van and spend very little energy finding a place to eat—the first place we see, Denny's, claims our appetite.

The sun is setting and sharpening the sweet light through the shaded windows of Denny's. All I order is a piece of pecan pie and some milk while Kyle wolfs down a cheeseburger and then opens our map. As he studies the roads, I notice the Denny's has the highest ceilings I've ever seen in a chain restaurant, in any restaurant.

It looks like a Tudor church—high sloping white cathedral ceilings with thick wood beams. The appearance must be responsible for the odd quiet in here—you can't hear the waitresses taking orders, the customers giving them, or the cooks preparing food. There isn't even the familiar clash of porcelain mugs or the jangle of silverware sloshing about in cold creamed coffee in the busboys' bins.

"Want to go to Vegas?" I ask.

Kyle scrunches his face.

"Seriously?"

"Why not? We ever going to be this close to it again?"

"What the hell are you looking at," Kyle asks me.

"Look at this place. Doesn't it look like a church?"

"Shit, it does. Weird."

"You shouldn't swear in here, Kyle. Have some reverence for the

Moons Over My-Hammy.”

“I should’ve prayed before I ate this cheeseburger.”

“You should’ve prayed *to* the cheeseburger.”

Kyle laughs and then finishes his drink. I walk to the register and wait fifteen minutes before someone comes to ring me up. A man takes my money and says, “Thank you, sir. Have a good night.”

“God bless you,” I say.

The Denny’s manager ignores my comment and goes back to cutting key lime pie. I hear my sandals scuffing along the carpet as I head toward the exit where Kyle holds the door open for me. As I walk by he says,

“Vegas, baby. Vegas.”

They’ve actually built a highway directly (or as direct as you can get) from Kingman, Arizona, to Las Vegas—Route 93. It’s a nowhere highway leading through the omnipresent mountains and beige desert of the Southwest. It’s nighttime and the horizon is a tight pink line like the last flicker of glowing white protons on an analogue TV screen just turned off. We’re in the Lake Mead area and

Kyle’s forced to slow down around the Hoover Dam. Traffic snakes its way around switchbacks at five miles-per-hour, partially because of the volume, and because there’s so much to rubber-neck. I’m afraid we’re either being lured into an alien spaceship or some type of anti-U. S. Government militia is forcing us to surrender our cars and become slave labor.

The traffic is eerie because it’s quiet—hundreds of headlights look like a tangled pile of Christmas lights thrown on a mountain, untangled by the hands of God and strewn as a trail from the dam to a land of light. As the cars move they seem like mechanical beings on a candlelight vigil, mourning the loss of something sacred. The Hoover Dam looks like a prison palace. Violent yellow lights illuminate Art Deco towers otherwise colored in by an ominous glowing midnight blue. The headlights of cars and tractor-trailers continue to slither along the roads, through the mountains topped with the black wire webs of power lines and electricity pylons stretching in random patterns over the trapped water. We stop for a few minutes to take some photographs. I shoot Kyle with the

reservoir behind him, and then we get back into the van.

We continue to climb around and up. I feel my nerves tangling inside, constricting like mean ropes, and once on the plateau of the mountain, there it is, a giant incandescent tumor taking over dark land. Unlike the balance between man's control over the Colorado River behind the Hoover Dam and the electricity harnessed from metal and concrete forged and poured by hand, the lights of Vegas lack any sign of humanity or of God. Sprawling across the desert like an army of insects banded together, a trillion lights crawl on the sand toward the west with the expectance of no daylight. It's almost as if the city preferred the artificial glow to real sunlight, the natural light showing you how everything actually is. The burning bulbs of Las Vegas stretch into oblivion—a massive General Electric, five-gazillion-watt light bulb blanket covering a cursed portion of American land. We're still twenty miles away.

As we get closer, the lights take on their own shapes and signs. The casinos air-condition the streets where people stagger with half-empty bottles of beer

and mostly-empty wallets.

Advertisements for whores and massages fill street corner honor boxes filled with newspapers boxes completely full of the week's papers.

Our hotel of choice is the cheapest for the price. We park the van in a parking garage and walk down to the casino. From the check-in area the sounds and smell of the casino are a vital tonic. All of a sudden I'm not tired anymore; Kyle's not tired anymore, either. We're given long-ass directions to our room—a roach-infested shack called the "Manor" in one of one of Vegas' oldest hotels, Circus Circus. I prefer to walk the streets like a whore. Isn't that what you're supposed to do here? Isn't this where whore is a genderless word more focused on the verb than the noun? Thank God I have the energy to spend a few hours on the casino floor. There's no way I am sleeping in that room without passing out, not with three roaches on the wall next to my bed watching me unpack, and I think one of them told me to go fuck myself.

Las Vegas is a city to visit, not to live in; and if you're ready to let



the worst come out of you, to see how far you can sink away from yourself, this is where you do it—in the air-conditioned halls where people get drunk, lose their money, families, cars and whatever bit of possessions they can possibly get a buck for. The lights, the free drinks imbibed while impregnating slot machines with metal the price of one, five, twenty-five or a hundred dollars, and the unlimited casino buffets full of the cheapest cuts of beef and leftover lobster are opium.

You don't know what you're doing here after a while. The streets smell of cooling sand and exhaust. Down the strip lined with small cities contained in warehouses covered in lights and decorated with replicas of the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower, cars sit in gridlock while people move in and out of casinos in packs like wolves waiting to bite into video poker machines that bleed silver dollars. Inside the casinos it sounds as if there are game shows warring with one another—beeps, bangs, buzzers, dings—a cacophony of things dying as coins tumble into the casinos' vaults harmonized with the stingers played by slot machines. Old women sit with their oxygen

tanks pressing hoses into their nostrils and Parliament cigarettes in their left hand—the right hand free to push the slot machine's SPIN button. Green felt tables hold cash, dice, chips and cards, glasses of booze where the ice never has time to melt. People sit at these tables for hours, maybe for the game, but sometimes for the company.

After a while, the bings, bloops, buzzes, and clangs become the theme song for hell. Twenty-something women giggle over the shoulders of men they don't like as middle-aged men sit at Texas Hold'Em tables hoping to make enough money to never work again, but leave with enough to buy a burger and pay for the room and the flight back on credit. This city's lights are powered by the people it eats. It makes you believe you can be a millionaire because as we all know money money money, you've got to have it. Please, have a few more comp drinks and stay in your room, just make sure you lose so you can keep that hope that you'll win *something* alive. One more dollar. One more hand. One more pull...maybe two more.

There's a reason Las Vegas sits alone in the desert—it makes no claim to being anything other than

what it is—a city of vice. There's no harm done to anyone but to the person who believes he can change his life with a few days in lost wages. Vegas is booze money, sex money, and money—no more and a lot less.

Kyle and I spend no time together here, except to meet up in a fake steak house for dinner where we talk about what we've done—Kyle walks the city, stays outside; I'm hermit in the hotel people-watching and occasionally playing the quarter video poker machines. Kyle and I meet up over a buffet at 3 a.m. to recap what we've taken in, and we find we're in complete agreement about this city. It's a whole lot of plastic nothing with the flash of Ronald McDonald's clown suit.

Even the Denny's, McDonald's, and the Arco gas station have the electric glow of the false hope of gaining more than food or gas exploding their logos against the black sky. Sigfried and Roy, Wayne Newton, Danny Gans, and Steve Wyrick all have their name in lights on various casinos, and all except the dynamic duo who play with big cats pray that one day Vegas will build them a monument in the desert as a testament to their

talent, just like the bulbous brown bronze monument of Siggy and Roy hovering angelic over a tiger, like a disturbing 3-D portrait of the new nuclear family.

I don't sleep more than three hours the nights we're here. Around the casino people morph from character to cliché, and sometimes back to character. The old guy with the toupee and the young woman he left his wife for; the waitress who breaks the arches of her feet ten hours a day to make lettuce at the poker table, the old person who can't breathe sitting by a slot machine waiting to die. Kyle and I are California dreaming. We're going to be at the end of our cross-country trip in a couple of days, and if we can see the sun set over the ocean, we'll know there was something more to the world than city after city, and town after town full of people living in quiet desperation with the world burning down around them into void. There have to be more places along and off the Mother Road like the Grand Canyon where reflection and thought are provoked. There's got to be something more waiting for us in California. I know there must be.



# **HE DID**

**BY**

**SARAH PAPE**

**THE HARPUR PALATE AWARD FOR  
CREATIVE NONFICTION**

I have been waiting for my father to die for fifteen years. When he called to tell me for the first time that he was very sick and didn't know how much longer he would live, we hadn't talked for over a year. It was fear that led me to pick up the receiver, to interrupt the message he was leaving on our machine and say hello. Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if I hadn't picked up that call. If I had just allowed the silence to continue until it was infinite.

My writing studio overlooks the downtown park plaza, where homeless and shoppers pass each other, often intersecting at the recycling bins. My desk butts up against a wall of windows, so I often find myself noticing the same folks. There is a man who walks with a slight drag in his steps, his graying brown hair shaggy and unkempt, Levis slouching low on his ass. There is a moment, each time he passes, that I recognize him as my father. He isn't. I know this man's name. I've given him money before. I should know better, but on some level, I am always mistaking him.

I Google my father's name, then add "AND obituary." His relative with the same name who

died a hundred years ago comes up. This happens every time I break down and look for him in the ether. I get hits on registered sex offender sites. I find a random article and picture in his local paper that shows him volunteering at his local library. Some day there will be a different outcome. I will find an announcement of his death or get a call from one of the few people in his life. I can't help myself from seeking—a yearning rises up through the delicate, primitive cords woven through my body, my blood. My relentless heart.

The years we lived in our first yellow house, Dad kept homing pigeons in a roost that he built along the aluminum siding of the garage. A man could stand up in it and at eye-level there were nesting boxes where the birds slept and hatched their chicks. They circled our half-acre, sweeping and tumbling the sky, and I would watch them until my neck ached.

When the chicks hatched, my dad would hold me up to see into their nest. The chicks were ugly at first: downy fluff over pink flesh, oversized beaks with a protruding bump, wings and legs akimbo,

blue and bulbous eyes. Then, pinfeathers emerged like scales, making them ancient and reptilian. I loved them and named them.

Pigeons, according to a new study by geophysicist Jon Hagstrum, are now believed to find their way home through infrasound, a way of imaging landscapes through low-level noise. This is what they called the pigeon's "mapping system," which is different from an internal compass. In the same way you would recognize your home upon seeing it, pigeons *hear* their home. This theory comforts me. To think that there are inaudible echoes pulling us back to place, that those threads within us never break, but stretch over greater distances until we are wound back.

As the flock circled and then broke into a line away from our patch of sky, I would ask my father again and again how they find their way home. I couldn't imagine yet the way it would feel to be my grown self, returning to these same roads, to stand apart from the home that was once ours, but now has a huge American flag stretched across it. The world is so small compared to my memory of it. The

topography of the lion-hide hills of my hometown ignites a familiar ache for a time before the worst happened.

In the coop, my father's muscled arms held me up without tremor, both of us enamored with the secret life of our birds. Our strange babies the cats wanted so badly to eat. We stayed in the cage like that for a long time, the door locked behind us.

The stories I remember are not the only ones I know. I recall them because they substantiate the truth of two words I fought to not say, the pair of syllables that would indict, would explode the only world I'd been given. The letters that mirror the church we spent so many years inside—a pronoun weighted on the tongues of disciples, followers pleading for the strong arms of another to hold them, to suffer on behalf: He.

The words I was asked to say: *He did.*

When confronted, his words echoed the oldest of accusations. Breathing hard, he paced, then unwound the indictment he had been keeping: *She seduced me.* Then he left through the back



door's gasp and hush, saying he was going to kill himself. A few moments later, my mother and our pastor heard the familiar crunch of his wheels pulling out of the drive and saw his small, white pick-up disappearing around the corner.

I see different versions of my father on the street. The last time, I was making a left turn that I make every day and he was taking the last three steps up to the crosswalk. My head turned right as the car veered opposite to take in every feature on the man's face, the pallor of his skin, his height, his pressed khakis and checked shirt buttoned to the throat. He was too short to be my father.

My father lives six hundred and eight miles away.

There are so many men. Each embody characteristics of another decade, different proximity, in relationship to a different me. The ones with long, chestnut brown hair and tanned shoulders; the ones with tinted glasses and one tooth that raises their lip in an unintentional sneer; he who had aging indigo script at the edge of his hand; another with yellowed skin, sweating and swollen at the

joints.

Once, it actually was him.

I was on the 405, driving from Los Angeles to a conference in San Diego. At the on-ramp from Carlsbad, I looked over to see his white truck with the off-color camper shell speeding up to the rest of traffic. There was the neat tuck of his shirtsleeve, and his forearm like no other forearm in the world. I was stuck three lanes over and watched as he wove through the slow lane and then out of sight. I could almost hear the plastic cup with ice and juice clasped between his legs. I imagined what he was listening to and whether I would know the words to sing along.

Did my father exist anywhere in the world, I wondered, holding the steering wheel hard, willing it not to turn and follow.

He and I planned to meet on the campus of a doctoral program I was considering. I met with the advisor and walked up and down the halls of the department, reading the flyers and names on office doors, trying to imagine myself there. I found the circular walking path where my dad was sitting on the

other side, on a bench, waiting for me. I stood watching him from a distance for a little while—his legs crossed at the ankles, palms pressed together like an upside down prayer.

In my bag, I had prepared a picnic for us. These were the years I attempted to know him, to allow him to know me. We would meet somewhere in the middle of where he lived and where I was coming from. Those were the first years he was dying.

He could've been anyone's father, sitting there peacefully, scanning the paths for the one he was expecting.

My father, with his thinning brown hair and bright white tennis shoes.

He, who might've been a little hungry and couldn't wait to see his daughter, who he'd been away from for a very long time. I imagined he was proud of her and that he didn't mind waiting.

When I was six, my father broke his L4/L5 vertebrae when he fell off of a twenty-foot ladder at the lumber mill. Before his back was broken, he would dance around the living room. He would skip,

side-to-side, one hop, double hop, heel skittering in front of the other foot, head tipping up and down in sync. The Soupie Shuffle. Then he'd hold my two hands in his as I stepped onto his feet, the laces along my bare arches. We danced this way, monster-like, slow.

His happiness changed every molecule in the house.

Before his back broke, he would lie facedown on the moss-green shag carpet after a long day working outside. His back smooth and dark as red clay. I would walk up and down either side of his spine, the muscles and skin slipping and shifting under my small feet. When he had enough, I would lay on him, my cheek resting between his scapulae, the full day of sun rising up through his skin. Every therapist who's asked me to find a safe place in my mind has brought me here. My small, child body cradled in the curve and heat of his.

After his injury, the subsequent surgeries quarantined his body from me, no longer mine to touch or be comforted by, a receptacle for pills and longing for relief from pain. Before he could get out of bed in the morning, he needed a yellow pill, which I would



sometimes bring him.

Our pigeons disappeared. He could no longer care for them.

The first time his hands turned wrong was in that bed. I was nine. I thought, *He thinks I'm Mom.* I thought, *You can never crawl into this bed again.*

There is one memory that exists before my own consciousness.

A story told to me that I have integrated as if I recall it myself.

I was a baby, one year-old, possibly a little more. I wasn't walking yet. I walked so late, my parents joked they were going to have to get a little baby wheelchair. Everyone loved to hold me. They claim that's why I didn't walk. No one ever let me touch the ground long enough to try.

Dad wanted to go fishing and Mom was working a long shift at Montgomery Wards. He took me, with his friends, on a small aluminum fishing boat. We stayed out all day. When she came home, he was drunk and I was bright red and inconsolably sun burnt. Mom tore him apart.

I strain to remember the zip of reels casting out and their hands pulling against the willowy poles.

The gulp and click of the beer can. The cold metal bucket of minnows and my pale hands seeking their narrow, slick bodies. The laughter of men. The slap of waves against the thin vessel.

Maybe I was a little princess in the belly of the boat, directing them with my fat fingers across the choppy lake. Maybe they held up the thrashing fish to delight me.

I was not the first child to catch fire under her father's preoccupied gaze.

We sat down in a room with a circle of chairs. My mother, brother, father and me. A soft-spoken, older man who was a professor and therapist had asked us to take part in his research in family therapy and forgiveness rituals. We were told our session would be recorded for educational purposes. Four students sat behind mirrored glass, overstuffed backpacks at their feet. I saw them through a cracked door coming in.

I was twenty-three and in college. My brother was in crisis, which was why we were there. His high school counselor had referred us with the hope that an intervention of epic proportions

would interrupt the destructive track he'd been on—vandalism, drinking, anxiety, truancy. While I had been placed into a variety of groups, individual therapy, and had gone for a short time to a psychiatric facility, my brother had declined those same kinds of support. He found his own ways to cope with the loss of our father and the confusion around what our dad had done.

The therapist told us that his intention was to reassemble the pieces, to bring the story of the abuse to the table, so that we would all leave with the same understanding of what had occurred.

He contended that part of the breakage in a family is that each individual clings to their own version of the event that finally broke the already ailing system.

He insisted that each member witness my father on his knees in front of me.

He asked my father to describe, in detail, what he had done.

To his credit, my father knelt before me, crying, and said aloud what, for so many years, had remained secret. Even after

everyone knew his crime, the details were ours only.

What my forgiveness looked like was arms, legs and hands shaking, like eyes shut tight against the teetering man cringing in pain before me. It looked like my mother's face crushed into a thousand shards of grief. It sounded like the swoosh of the heavy institutional door, as my brother swung it open and ran.

Really, the only person the experiment worked for was my father. After the session had concluded, he seemed lighter. He shook the therapists hand as if they were old friends. The session was after we'd found out that his liver was failing, so this might be our last chance for closure. He took my gesture of kindness and turned it into a mantra.

"I've done my time," he would say after that, whenever I got close to talking about the abuse or the ways my brother and I continued to suffer.

Salmon, too, have a compass that guides them back to the place of their birth. They have a magnetic map that directs them from the ocean to their river of origin's

waters. The magnetic field where they entered the sea is the same one they seek when returning.

Recently, I visited the fish hatchery in my hometown. My father and I would go there together each year during the salmon run and watch the water, exclaiming as the enormous fish launched themselves against the spray where the river had been dammed. Their shining fins glimmering across the wide, shallow water. Deep crimson scales rose to the surface, then disappeared.

Thirty-six-years-old, standing at the edge of this same water and I miss my father.

I go down the stairs that lead to the observation windows. There is a family with two small children, a boy and a girl, who are running from one window the next, their voices echoing in the small concrete room. Four algae-green Plexiglas squares with metal frames and bolts separate us from the fish.

This is still a place I return to in dreams. The luminous squares. The hooked jaws of the fish, opening and closing as their bodies flex against the unyielding force.

I watch them cross over one

another, sweep backward into the momentary relief of the current, circle back against it newly. They never stop moving. A small breeze picks up and carries the scent of the dead ones that litter the river's banks. I yearn for my father, but no longer know why. Past the greatest harm, I still wish for and dread his physical presence.

I welcome this grief again, staring into the bubbling water, this rare sacred place we shared. A Chinook salmon rises to the observation window and holds close to my face. I put my hand to the dirty surface and can imagine the slick, freckled scales against my skin.

He says I am dead to him. I hold the corded receiver loosely against my face, letting it hang away from me. He says it again, *You're dead to me, hear that?*

My mother asked for me to call him and tell him not to drive up from Carlsbad to visit my brother and I. My brother is missing, strung out, and she can't bear for him to drive up into the middle of our chaos. She can't speak to him. She goes mad with rage when he begins to say almost anything.



It takes him a week to pack up his truck when he comes to visit us. Meticulous and obsessive, he brings everything he imagines he might need—tools, bedding, clothing, small collections of things he wants to give us, fishing gear, coolers of yogurt and juice, his medications. He is almost out the door when I call.

He is irate that she would ask him not to come. *I could help*, he says. *I know what it means to nip that shit in the bud*, referring to his sobriety, which we question, knowing that he can never truly be clean with the steady stream of pain pills he takes to get through his days. Often, he calls and his words are slurred, disintegrated, or repeated depending on the day, and my brother or I sit and listen for what meaning we can glean.

He is always asking to come visit. Between his wavering health and our hesitance, he comes once a year. When we visit family in southern California, we find ways to meet him halfway between where he is and where we are. We have never seen his apartment.

*But why*, he asks, again, when I tell him to come another time, to wait until we find my brother, when

things settle down, that he won't have a place to stay if he comes. *Why can't I stay with you*, he finally asks.

You know why. *But why?*

My daughter. I remind him. I have a daughter and he can't stay here. I realize that he is going to make me say it, tell him what it is that he did that makes this an impossibility. I wonder sometimes if he has forgotten. I say, *You sexually abused me, Dad.*

Unforgiving. A bitch just like your mother. And then, *Dead. You're dead to me.*

That was four years ago. I could say that I am free now from all the years of secrets. From the years that followed as I tried hard to leave some thread between us intact, but I do not feel free. I feel like one of our pigeons from all those years ago, circling and circling above the golden half-acre we once lived on, listening for home, searching in silence for some familiar geography to land.

In prison, he let his hair and his beard grow long. There, they called him "Pops." He created an alter ego—ancient and apart from the racial categories that rule the

hierarchy and power dynamics of incarceration. He hid. He grew a thick waist and the flowing gray tresses of a god. He wasn't harmed there, but for the constant fear of being found out and hurt.

When he was released, he shaved the shaggy beard from his face and cut his hair short. He left one piece long, which flowed from the base of his neck to the middle of his back. He kept it banded.

The last time we saw each other, before I was dead to him, that tail he kept was loose. He asked me to braid it for him. I sat behind him and gathered the thin hank of hair in my hands, almost like an animal, soft and slack over my fingers. I wove the three parts, bringing one over, then the other side, until I reached the frayed end. For one moment before rising, I held the rope of him in my palm, felt its weight. This dead living thing. Finally, I rested it upon his shoulder, got up, and walked away.



# LIKE QUILLS UPON THE FRETFUL

**MICHAEL  
PONTACOLONI**

The dog won't learn,  
and the porcupine  
has found the acre where  
he'd like to remain.

Next day it wiggles  
into the narrow plastic  
drainage pipe beneath  
the gravel driveway.

What else to do but point  
a shotgun in the dark  
and spray the poor thing  
full of stars while

beech and cedar prick  
the mountainside and raindrops  
dart the soil and oh  
the needles and spines of god—

even the gravel shivers.

# DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN

**RICHARD PRINS**

December 31, 2013—2:00 AM

Venus wakes me up to look for her phone underneath the mattress. "I knew it was somewhere. How did the screen crack?"

"You were very drunk that night," I remind her. She texted me saying she wanted to die. When I got home she was passed out with all her money on the bed.

"I was flying. I'm going to be a bat in my next life."

I go back to sleep. She wakes me up again, shouting, "Where's my damn charger? Someone I love is dying because I'm a witch."

"Use my phone instead." Since we broke up, I'm not supposed to ask questions about the people she's fallen in love with, unless she wants to tell me about them. She's pacing in the room between

the bedroom and the kitchen, leaving voicemails for friends and coworkers, begging them to call her back so she knows they're safe. It's dark out, so it must be somewhere between three and six in the morning. Now she's wailing because her mother is dying in Zambia and won't pick up the phone.

"What's going on?" I wrap myself in a blanket as I climb out of the covers, even though she typically only objects to my naked body if it touches her naked body in bed. I lay a firm grip on her shoulder.

"Don't touch me. Mommy, mommy, are you okay!" Tears are spurting out of her eyes; her mother is wishing her a happy new year. "Is my sister okay, is the baby okay?"

Everyone's safe and nobody's dying. I convince her to lie down. She takes off her clothes and asks me to hold her.

"Of course."

"And make love to me."

"Of course." It was only ten days ago we screwed all afternoon, exploding with repressed bitter passion, gasping how much we fucking loved each other the entire time. Since then, she won't let me kiss her cheek without a scolding. Her body pours into mine like a waterfall.

"Hold me first."

I plunge my hands into the muscles of her back; massages are the only physical contact I've been allowed all week.

"That's how I know you love me. You know my sore spots." As my grip travels and remembers the glossy touch of her bum, a hungering charge shoots through my spine and drives my mouth onto hers. "I can't trust you," she pushes me off and leaps out of bed. "I'm sending my boss a message."

"Not a good idea," I warn her, my ribs still quaking with anticipation.

"You don't know anything." She fires off a text and jumps back

into bed. "I'm terrified; death comes in threes."

"Who else died?"

"Couple friends of Mary."

Mary is Venus's step-sister, thirty-five years older than her, who also lives in Brooklyn. "I don't know who's next, but it's all my fault. I've been putting spells on people. My cards said it's the eagle. Help me. Who is the eagle?"

I ask if she remembers the time she had eagle eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember early on, when your eyes looked so sharp at night in my room? I said you had eagle eyes. Then the first time you told me you were in love with me, you said, 'Guess what my eagle eyes are telling you?'"

She nods; I can't tell whether she remembers. We were drinking a lot back then. I collect my thoughts and speak with calm force. "Don't you get it? You're the eagle. Which means you should focus on taking care of yourself right now."

"You're the eagle," she snaps. "You're always watching me. I don't want to be an eagle, I want to be a bat."

"I thought you're going to be a bat in your *next* life? Right now you're the eagle."

"You're so smart," her eyes gleam in the dark, pleased with my augury. "I'm glad you agreed to be my shaman."

December 31, 2013—8:00 AM

Venus still hasn't slept.

She swings open the door to the bedroom, naked and wet from the shower. She asks me for help with a cab; her cafe shift just started. I give her twenty dollars and decide not to point out that's already half her day's wages. I notice she has slid one of the drawers out of her dresser, emptied its contents on the couch, and left it upside-down on the coffee table. All her clothes are strewn across the floor. Her orange bicycle is blocking the doorway, collapsed on its side. The apartment looks like its enclosed spaces just held a projectile-vomiting contest.

December 31, 2013—2:00 PM

I sleep in. I find my laptop on the ironing board, which is on top of the stove in the kitchen. Venus is still logged into her Facebook account so I read her messages. At four in the morning, she sent

about twenty in a row to someone I don't know, asking if he's safe and apologizing for freaking out at his house; she loves him and will he be her kiss at midnight? She'd also like him to meet a dear new friend whose name begins with a K and ends with an O. She doesn't mean to be cryptic, but she has to be careful, because her mother or father is dying. He responded hours later with a single, perplexed question mark. I want to send her a message demanding to know when she's moving out. I found her a room in a rent-stabilized apartment for \$400/month, a miracle in this city, and it's walking distance from the Senegalese cafe where she's a barista. I already paid her January rent and since she won't fuck me anymore, I need to move on with my life. But as I start typing, I find myself becoming less angry; my message only begs her to get some rest and offers to help her move.

December 31, 2013—6:00 PM

Venus is home from work; I wasn't expecting her. "Do you have six dollars? I need to pay the beautiful driver."

My eyeballs bulge pure stress



at her. I dig a five and a single out of my wallet. She pays the cabbie and paces through the apartment. "How was work?" I try following her frenetic circles.

She explains that the cafe is a secret and exclusive cult, but they have finally decided to let her join it if she stops smoking marijuana and becomes a Muslim.

I agree she should stop smoking so much.

"And I need to stop getting down with ladies and go to church."

"Did they actually tell you any of this?"

"They were leaving me signs. Even Mary!" she claps her hands and howls with laughter. "Mary passed by in the afternoon and waved at me. I was like, Mary, you're in on this too! Maybe she and Khalid are getting married." Khalid is the floor manager; as far as I know, he has no relationship with Venus's half-sister. I suspect Mary was simply making sure Venus was safe after receiving one of her panicked 4AM voicemails. "He made me leave when my shift was over. He was just throwing his hands in the air and yelling, Venus, get some sleep and eat something, for God's sake!"

"You haven't eaten?" I feel my eyes dilating and my forehead wrinkling with concern. "Jesus, don't you work at a restaurant?"

"So I ran out the door and left my phone and tips. I was like, peace out!" She drops herself on the couch and her chest heaves with hilarity.

"Will you calm down for a second?" I still want her to tell me when she's moving out, but I sense that conversation won't happen tonight.

"I need to tell you something. No, wait, I don't."

"You can tell me anything."

"You won't put voodoo on me?"

"Never."

She darts a glance into the kitchen, then the bedroom. "Somebody's been putting voodoo on me."

"Not me."

"The whole day was a set-up! They were leaving signs so I would realize Pascal is my true love." Pascal is one of the other waiters, who asked if I was her new fuck-toy the last time I visited the cafe. "I've been in love with him all along because he's solid, he takes care of me. The New Year's party at the



cafe isn't a party, it's my wedding!"

"I thought you were going to take it easy tonight, sleep maybe?"

"I can't miss my wedding. But I'm terrified, Richard."

I tell her I'm terrified, too, because she hasn't slept or eaten and she thinks people are conspiring against her.

"Not *against* me," she sighs impatiently. "They're doing it *for* me, because it's love."

"You need to sleep. Would a massage help you nap?"

"Yes please." She moans softly, her nerves pliant in my hands. Within seconds, her moans are snores. I watch her breathing and hope she'll sleep through midnight.

January 1, 2014—10:30 AM

My phone vibrates on the windowsill. Three new messages.

*Plz come and get me from Mary's we need to go brooklyn tabernacle plz*

*Sorry I'm ok*

*Happy new year*

I text back that I'm happy she's okay and can we please talk later? Anger is throbbing in my temples as I stare at the next room and remember I can't walk to the

bathroom without stepping on her clothes. I grind my teeth back to sleep, but the phone redoubles its vibrating.

*I souled my soul to devil*

*I need to talk to Jesus*

*Plz help me I need you to shave my head ASAP I need to be at church for 11:30*

*Plz!*

The last thing I want to do this morning is get out of bed. The other last thing I want to do is walk forty minutes in the cold to Mary's house. I call. She doesn't pick up.

*You read the bible what should I do*

*Can't speak on phone because bad company*

*I feel Mary might be the beast and I the antichrist but I sold my soul! I'm so serious!*

I hopscotch across Venus' scattered wardrobe, now serving as my living room carpet, and sit on the frigid toilet seat. I compose a long message contending that the Bible doesn't treat a soul as something simple enough to be bought or sold and that the Brooklyn Tabernacle wouldn't be open on New Years morning anyway. My phone rings before I can hit send. Venus is screaming

that the apocalypse will happen, dammit, if I don't get her to church by 11:30. She hangs up. She calls again, but it's Mary's voice this time, stern but urgent. "Richard, I need you to come here immediately."

"I'm on my way." I flush the toilet and hope it isn't audible. "Just please tell Venus there's no apocalypse."

"This is not a time for reasoning. I'll see you in ten minutes."

I only have a weakling hangover, but my hands are shaking as I Google car services.

January 1, 2014—11:30 AM

When I get to Mary's apartment in Crown Heights, she wishes me a happy new year and tells me Venus just ran out the door. "I didn't realize how bad this had gotten." Her hair is more silver than I remember and she has a trace of tears on her right cheek.

"It wasn't this bad until yesterday," I suggest, hoping she doesn't think this is my fault.

"I was waiting for you to get here to call 911."

I bite my lip and nod solemnly, finally comprehending

that the woman I love doesn't need advice; she needs an ambulance.

"We should report her missing," Mary decides. "It's never safe having a crazy black woman loose in the streets."

Venus will certainly look crazy. She recently had the back of her head shaved in the shape of a heart, dyed golden. It was alarmingly stylish and sexy and made me want to hump her from behind with my hands on her fuzzy golden heart. Before running out of the apartment, Mary tells me, she was jabbing at the back of her head with a razor, convinced the heart was a satanic symbol. She was doing this without shaving cream, a mirror, or water. She was only wearing pajamas, a light coat, and a scarf. She had no money, no bicycle, and the Brooklyn Tabernacle is at least three miles away. Also, she collapsed this morning and banged her head on the refrigerator.

"Her boss called me to pick her up last night. Customers were complaining about her behavior. When I got there, she kept saying *I killed Richard, I killed Richard*." Mary's eyes blink twice, reabsorbing the shock. "And I

believed her, I really believed you had argued and she stabbed you and left you in a pool of blood and now she was realizing, holy shit, I killed this white man whose parents have more money than God and they're going to lock me up forever."

I commit an awkward laugh, because that's what I do when I'm horrified. "She thought she killed a lot of people yesterday," I try to sound comforting, but only sound dismissive.

The doorbell buzzes. Venus staggers in with the skittish, disoriented glare of a drugged rabbit.

"Can I have a hug?" I spread my arms. The sight of her shoots me full of something like bereavement, a wound that only her touch can seal. "I'm glad you came back. You scared me."

She lifts her palms defensively. "I need to rest."

"We'll get you rest," Mary guides her into the living room, its tall windows inhaling winter sunlight. She seats Venus on the couch, which is where her daughter, who is Venus's age, usually sleeps. I glimpse her serrated golden heart, still clinging

like a flimsy orchid to the back of her head. It looks like her hair is falling out, discolored. Mary brings her socks, a sweater and sweatpants. "Your feet are freezing."

"I can dress myself, Mary." Venus musters an exasperated sigh. "I have a mother already. Won't this country stop trying to mother me." But she doesn't put on the clothes; we haven't told her what she will be dressing up for.

January 1, 2014—12:30 PM

My eyes leap toward the buzzing doorbell. Venus' eyes swirl with alarm. "Am I being put in a home?" Two police officers stroll in, their walkie-talkies gurgling. "Am I going to jail?"

"Welcome, officers." Mary projects her voice, calm and rhetorical. "Is my sister going to jail?"

"You do anything to go to jail for?"

Venus stares at them in fragile panic. Mary breaks the silence. "We think she needs to stay in a hospital for a little while."

Venus wraps her arms around her shoulders in squeamish resignation. Soon a pair of EMTs



ring the doorbell and ask for ID. Mary removes Venus's Green Card from her pyjama pocket and asks where her phone is.

"In the garbage."

Mary slides open the kitchen pantry.

"No," Venus points out the window, curling her finger with an imaginary splash. "A garbage can on Bedford Avenue."

In the elevator, descending towards the ambulance, Venus keeps changing her mind. First she wants me to ride with her, then she doesn't. "Just let Richard stay," Mary decides. "If he leaves and you want him again later, you won't be able to have him."

The woman who is not driving the ambulance holds up Venus' Green Card. "Is this you?"

"No, that's the devil."

"But your name is Vanessa?"

Venus scowls as if she's been smacked, then nods slowly, accepting the name she was born with. Who would believe her, now, that people actually call her Venus? On the consent form, she signs *The Devil*, then crosses it out and prints a shaky, deliberate *Vanessa*.

January 1, 2014—1:30 PM

"Possible suicidal ideations but no action plan," the EMT announces our arrival at Kings County Psychiatric Emergency Center. "She thinks she's the devil, but I think she'll be ok."

The dreadlocked security guard asks me to state my relationship to the patient while he collects my ID. "Ex-boyfriend; we still live together."

"I'll just say friend," trills a nurse with long blonde braided extensions and a surgical mask over her mouth. "And you're her mother?"

"Half-sister," Mary clarifies.

The nurse welcomes Venus to a seat and towers over her, tapping her pen on a clipboard. "You have insurance?"

"No."

"You allergic to anything?"

"Eggplant, once."

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Too much," she waves her head in a bewildered pattern, like an owl charting its flight. "I need sleep."

"You been here before?"

"I've seen her," the security guard barks from his desk.



"No, she's never been here before," I snap at him.

"Drug use?"

"I was smoking a lot of marijuana."

"How much?"

"Too much."

"Once, twice a day?"

"More."

"See a psychiatrist?"

"I was."

"How often?"

Venus looks at me for help.

"First it was twice a week, then it was once a week, then it was every other week." I like talking; I can explain everything.

"He was a therapist, not a psychiatrist, and she stopped almost a year ago."

"You have his number, friend?" She pronounces 'friend' not as a term of endearment so much as a substitute for learning my name.

"It's in my phone," I point back at the lockers, where they made us store our possessions while they dressed Venus in a thin blue papery gown.

The nurse asks Venus if she has a diagnosis.

"My mother has high blood pressure, and I've been drinking

a ton of coffee at work, so I bet I have high blood pressure."

"I mean, did the psychiatrist say you had any disorder?"

"He thought I was depressed." I nearly laugh at the understatement; she hardly left the apartment for months after we returned from visiting her mother in Zambia. I remember the night I got her out to a party. She drank too much and told a stranger, in tears, that she no longer loved me. She broke up with me as I shepherd her out the door, and took it back the next morning; that happened several more times until I broke up with her.

"You take medication?"

"No."

"Scars from surgery?"

She points at three childhood stitches on her right cheek. "I had an abortion. They didn't cut me."

"Are you sleeping, eating?"

"Not enough."

"Sexual abuse?"

"Yes."

"When were you abused? Was it a family member?"

"I only abused myself." Venus looks into my anguished, glassy eyes. "Richard, I think you should leave now."

"Wait in the next room, friend," the nurse waves me towards the waiting room.

I sit directly beneath the television so I don't have to watch an episode of CSI. I feel self-pity welling in my eyelids. My last ex was murdered. The one before that attempted to overdose on sleeping pills a month after we broke up. *Why is my love a curse?* I want to ask the rangy man who walks in with corn rows and a twitchy basketballer's strut, taking the seat across from me. He speaks first, "You in detox?"

"Nah," I raise my wrist as if the pink visitor's bracelet is a badge of honor. "My ex had a breakdown."

"Breakdown?" He lifts a skeptical eyebrow; *white people problems*, I can feel him thinking.

"Yeah, like a nervous breakdown. Happy new year, right?"

"Amen." He falls asleep and continues sleeping through a shrieky fire alarm that none of the staff seem to notice.

January 1, 2014—2:30 PM

The nurse wakes me from my nap and leads me to Venus, who is seated at a table, surrounded by

mattresses with sliding curtains. "Look who I brought you!" she croons in a voice that's sticky with patronizing sweetness.

"But I'm not nice," Venus is mumbling, tugging on her translucent wristband, which reads *Vanisa*. "And my birthday is evil."

"Why don't you like birthdays?" I use my two-year-old voice, playful and dumbstruck that anyone wouldn't like a birthday party.

She unleashes a riotous, intoxicating giggle and plants her cheek on the table. "Oh, I love you."

My cheek lands on the table a moment after hers, laughing through a fresh film of tears as our eyes pour helplessly into each other. "I love you, too."

"You're such a joker. I have to ask you."

"Ask me what?"

"No. I can't."

I take her hands in mine and assure her, "You can ask me anything."

Her smile carves open her cheeks with brightness. "Will you marry me?"

I let go of her hands and my eyes flash their wounds. She sees my pain and pounds the table with

both fists, shouting, "Fuck, you're the only one who's there for me in the craziness! Like motherfucking ghostbusters, who am I gonna call! And you're the one I'm leaving, it makes no sense!"

She stands up and walks to the next table, taking long strides as if stepping over lava. Fortunately, Mary is returning with the nurse, who wants to take Venus' blood. They disappear behind one of the sliding curtains.

Mary sits across from me with a penetrative intensity in her eyes. "Tell me, Richard, how does it feel to be so good-looking?"

I commit one of my awkward laughs, tug on my beard and consider her question. "I can't remember the last time I felt good-looking."

"Oh really?" she challenges me with arched eyebrows.

I worry I've sounded arrogant, blasé. "Not that I go around feeling ugly all day. Just that I'm more aware of looking eccentric than anything else, and I think that's how most people relate to me."

"How interesting. We'll have to talk about where Venus goes when she's out of here. I don't think it should be with you."

"Agreed. That was stressful."

I quickly add, "I mean, for her, too," so it doesn't seem I'm simply washing my hands of a loony ex.

"Let's not be martyrs. There's no space in my apartment. But the apartment you found her, it has strangers and cockroaches and she said it's a mess."

"Plus she'd have to make rent. I don't think she can go back to work."

"What about Zambia? All I know about her mother is she's my age. Oh, and she's a nurse, that helps."

I suck whistly air through the gap in my front teeth.

"Zambia's complicated. Going back was disturbing for her, because she realized how severed those relationships were, but didn't have time to rebuild them." I pause to imagine Venus living on another continent. The thought of never seeing her again is unspeakably painful, yet it would make everything so simple. "If she went back for longer, maybe it could be different. She lost her passport, though."

The nurse brings Venus back to us. "I weigh 144 pounds," she announces, staring at her



flat stomach and rapidly-deflating breasts as if they aren't her own. "Where did I go?" She weighed 190 before we broke up. I knew she had become skinny, but didn't realize she'd been shedding fifteen pounds a month. I speak with a doctor and describe her recent mania, her previous depression, our prolonged breakup, and my opinion that coming to America at the age of twelve was the experience in her life which could most clinically be described as traumatic. Behind me, nurses are screaming at the only other patient in the observation room, demanding that he stop hitting them. I feel relieved that Venus is here; when she doesn't come home I won't have to wonder whose bed she's sleeping in. We can both rest.

January, 2014

An obese adolescent, androgynous with baby fat, is jogging in slow-motion down the hallway, arms pumping, chanting, "Chugga-chugga-chugga-chugga!"

"I know who you want!" a young female patient chirps when she sees me; yesterday she was staring at us through the window of the visitors' lounge. "She's in

group. I'll get her."

I entertain the pleasant idea that the other patients are jealous of Venus for my visits. The nurse taps her manicured thumb beside each box on the sign-in sheet. "Your name. Patient's name. The date. The time. Your relationship." My hand is shaky; I skid the pen across her thumbnail and leave a slim blue dash. She jerks her hand away, peeved. "I can't read that. What did you write?"

"Roommate. We were living together."

I've brought Venus a spinach and egg-white wrap, plus a couple changes of clothes. The nurse places each item on the table and makes sure they don't have drawstrings. Venus inspects them, too. "I need fresh clothes. Take these home and wash them."

I want to snap that her clothes would be fresher if they hadn't spent the last few days on my living room floor. The nurse speaks first. "There's a washing machine here. Wash it yourself." She opens the spinach wrap and confiscates the wrapping. "Tin foil isn't allowed."

I wonder why; are they afraid Venus will make herself a hat out



of it?

"We were building the solar system in group therapy. Ms. Betty was in charge and Ciara was my partner." Her eyes have come alive. She seems to be having fun in this place. I find that disconcerting but it makes me want to kiss her. "I slept well last night, without the meds."

"They didn't give you meds?" my eyes dilate with concern.

"I refused them. Not unless they show me exactly what I'm taking and why and what the side effects are. I mean damn, how can I heal if I'm just drugging myself?"

"Drugging yourself is smoking weed all day and binge-drinking. This is different."

"You're going to lecture me about drinking, with that liquor on your breath?"

I decide telling her it's just a couple beers isn't much of a comeback.

"Deactivate my Facebook, please," she swats the back of her head. "This damn heart is my profile picture."

"What's wrong with your heart?"

"It's the mark of the beast and they won't give me a razor. If

I can't get it off my head, I need to get it off the internet."

"If you give me your password."

"Change your password, too; I know it."

I chuckle forgivingly. "You've been reading my messages, haven't you?"

"And I need to get rid of my bike."

"Why?"

"She's my slut marker.

Everyone in Crown Heights sees the orange and knows a loose woman is riding through."

"Don't say that." I wince. "All you did was sleep around after a breakup. Come to think of it, that was probably the most normal thing you did all month."

She looks out the window. "Is the world ending out there?"

"Nope. Just a blizzard." My socks are damp, my jacket slick with melted snow.

"Is anyone dead?"

"We're all safe."

"And Beyoncé's alive?"

"Still kicking."

"Bloomberg?"

"Him, too, but we have a new mayor, thank god."

She sighs and explains that

when she was young in Zambia, her greatest fear was going to hell. She used to stare at the mirror and convince herself that 666 was inscribed on her forehead. "And now I know I was right, because New Year's Eve I signed my name on a free ticket to the party at the cafe. A customer showed me the *Married To Jesus* sticker on her dress and asked if I knew what it meant. I told her yes, but really I didn't. Then one of my favorite customers, the happy old man who hates cigarettes, he was walking out with tears in his eyes because he saw me selling my soul. So my first night here with all the people suffering behind the curtains? I knew it was me who put them there. And you and Mary were suffering too, plus maybe my mother, and the only way I could save you all was running out naked and screaming. But when I saw my face in the mirror I didn't have any eyes, because I'm Medusa and I keep killing people. Anyway, now I'm sad that when the world ends I won't get to be with my grandmother. You're all going to see me on Judgment Day lined up with Jezebel and the other whores, and Jesus will dump us in the

fucking flames." She bites her lip and shakes her head, disappointed by her fate. "Dammit, I need to stop cursing."

"This is why you need to take the meds." I'm squeezing at my forehead, trying to unwrinkle the strain I feel there. "You have to realize your mind was totally severed from reality when all this happened, or you'll never get out of here." As soon as the words escape my mouth, it strikes me, *She could be trapped here forever.*

"You know me better than anyone else in the world, Richard, so I need you to believe me. I really, really sold my soul. I mean, why would the old man have tears in his eyes unless I sold my soul?"

"Old men cry for lots of reasons. Thinking their waitress sold her soul usually isn't one of them."

"Bring me a Bible next time. I need to learn more about this."

Typical Venus. For three years she treats my withering faith with a blend of disinterest and amusement, but as soon as we break up, she up and finds Jesus. She's never made any sense. *She's like a poem*, my heart reminds me, *she doesn't have to make sense. A*

piece of floss has been stuck in my teeth since last night. I need pliers to remove it, but I couldn't find them in the epic mess we've made of the apartment. I resisted the urge to call Venus in the hospital to ask where they might be. I don't know how to live alone. The persistent tickle of the frayed strand brushing my gums makes me want to nag her one more time. "The Book of Revelation is the last thing you should be reading if you're off the meds."

"But they don't even have a diagnosis for me, so how are they medicating me, right?"

"You had a psychotic episode. They diagnosed that much in a second. But they can't decide what to do about it if they can't stabilize you."

"Stop talking about this." A sudden smile blooms in her face, a plea for tenderness. "Aren't you here to cheer me up?"

"No, I'm coming here in the middle of a goddamn blizzard because I want you to get better." My voice is stern, cracking with the effort of sounding earnest. "I want you to have all the happiness I could never give you." I'm tearing up again, too easily. "You really

scared me, and I think you scared yourself, too."

Now Venus is laughing at me, her body convulsing as she fans herself theatrically with the sandwich bag I brought her. "I'm sorry, but it's just too funny when you get sad. You wanna crack the whip now that I'm in the hospital? Where the hell were you when I needed it?"

I want to shout that I'm definitely not here to reenact our foulest moments together. I want to insist that I tried, dammit, I tried so hard to help her. As usual, I check myself. "We failed. Let's face it. This isn't the time or place to reminisce about our relationship."

"Our relationship?" She claps her hands like a hyperventilating seal. "Our relationship is why I'm here in the first place, so fuck you."

My jaw is a bear trap that's been stepped on, triggered, but won't snap shut. The nurses stop talking and stare at us. Silence engulfs the room so they return to chatting in Haitian Creole.

"And fuck this city, too. Does my mom know I'm here?"

"Mary called her."

"I need to go home again."

"You can't go home again."



You need a passport.”

“I could commit a crime and they’ll deport me.”

“You’re a permanent resident. They’ll put you in jail.”

“So then I’ll kill myself.”

“Don’t say that.” I whirl my chair ninety degrees and bury my forehead in my palm. “You know how much it hurts me when you say that. I’ve told you too many times not to say that.”

“And you never listened. I told you I wanna drink bleach and you just read your blogs and sighed and slurped your beer.”

“No, you never listened. I told you I wasn’t a doctor and you needed real help. So here you are. Let them help you.”

Our jaws tense and grind as we glare at each other; the glare grips us and welds our irises together. We’re both right and we fucking hate it. Venus breaks the gaze and slaps her thighs, suddenly businesslike and dismissive. “I think we’re done here.”

We stand up and walk in opposite directions, the burn still snapping in our eyes.

January, 2014

Venus spends two weeks in

the hospital. On her last day, she is given a single-ride MetroCard and told her preliminary diagnosis is schizophreniform disorder. She rides the bus halfway to my house, but finds the experience intense and decides to walk the rest of the way. She arrives soaked in rain and excited that the streets smell of pine. Five mornings later, she is wearing my pink kneelength dashiki. I’m naked and my hands are shaking. “Why are you still here?”

“Are you blind? I’m packing.” She slashes her hand toward the couch I slept on, strewn with the multicolored zippers she uses to make necklaces.

One of my legs is in my pants. “You’ve been packing all week.” As far as I can tell she’s been moving her possessions from room to room, composing messes and cleaning them up, mocking the Sisyphean task of separating our lives.

“Don’t come at me with attitude!” Her shoulders are tensed, quivering like mine with defensive rage. “I just wanted to sleep next to you. I feel safe when I sleep next to you.”

“You promised you’d be



gone." She promised to go to her new apartment before I got home, which came after the promise to leave before I left home, which came after the promise to leave by 2 p.m., which was immediately after I asked her to leave by 1 p.m., but shortly before we made love twice and napped, a pattern that kept us precariously entangled all week. I came home drunk and found her asleep, cradling one of my dashikis in her arms like a stuffed animal. I took off my clothes and crawled on her, all my skin thirsting for song. Now I have one dirty sock on, which feels like a position for negotiating. "Can you be gone in thirty minutes?"

"I'm not dressed or showered."

"You have your own fucking apartment to shower in," I snap, suddenly enraged by the sight of this woman who thinks my shower is hers. I tie my shoelaces in a furious knot. "And your own room to sleep in. You know, the one I paid your fucking rent on?"

"You're only saying that because I wouldn't let you screw me last night."

Our faces are blazing with truth. We are both hyperventilating

and we could pounce on each other at any second. I pick up the glass of water she's poured for herself. It squirms like a frog in my palm so I snap my wrist and hurl it, hitting one of the empty cardboard boxes stacked by the front door. The glass doesn't break, but Venus gawks at me like I just smashed it in her face.

"I was thirsty." I shrug, and stomp my foot on the unbroken glass. My lungs burst open as the shards crackle. "Don't waste time sweeping that up. Just don't be here when I get back."

"But where are you going?"

"How the hell would I know?"

Outside, no longer wrapped in her presence, my body feels wildly exposed to the unfamiliar gusts of morning. I flash a disheveled smile at the crossing guard so she won't think I'm trying to abduct her charges. I'll ride the subway to Coney Island, and there I will be free. But it's fucking freezing and I'm not wearing underwear so maybe I won't stroll on the beach. The F train comes right away and there's a seat, orange and cold as a creamsicle on my butt. The woman sitting across from me laughs at the book she's reading

with her head tossed back. She catches me looking at her but I have no idea what my eyes convey; are they coy, curious, or bloodshot and pulsing with a residual fury? She throws herself back into the book, tipping the cover so I can see it's *Americanah*, the new Adichie novel. I lent my copy to Venus a month ago and she has no idea what happened to it. I have no idea what happened to us, no idea how she'll survive on her own or how I'll survive without her. The train rises above ground at Ditmas Ave, causing me to reach automatically for my phone. But my pocket is empty. No phone, no keys. I forgot to pocket the damn things, rushing out of the house. I've locked myself out. That means I have to get off the train, ride it backwards and ring my own doorbell. I have to take a deep breath and hope Venus is still home.

# HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DEAD MOTHER

NICOLE  
ROLLENDER

At first, it's like old times, old bones: she puts her hand on the inside of your lower arm's trusting skin, a cat's belly turned up. She wants to know about what she's missed – but things that don't matter as much to you – the swans on the lake, did their five cygnets survive, or did a snapping turtle drag them under the water, all except one? Her white dress rustles, the tinkle of tiny finger bones in a pocket. She remembers the hummingbird's ruby throat shimmering still at the feeder. You tell her how your body failed, so the baby was born nine weeks early. Her hands make the shape of wings. No, no, you say, he lived. *Can you tell me again what it's like to be hungry?* That's really what she wants to know. *What does the body release in sleep?* You say the hummingbird's too frantic to watch. To keep the baby alive, you hold him over your heart, skin on skin. Pray for mercy, for how the body hollows, your mother intones, and that's how you remember her – if you don't pray against everything, the roof will fall in, the trees will pierce the windows, the quilts go up in flames. You don't tell her how your whole life has gone brittle, as if one shake will break every word you try to substitute. She's your mother, yet one who

returns trailing celestial afterbirth, a sort of innocence:

*Tell me what it feels like to put your foot in water. What does it mean when you can't make any more milk for the child?* You

don't ask her to bless your house or the baby whose bones rise against skin. Her hands have been in the earth.

Well, they are there now, folded in this quiet sacrament

of how what has been useful sleeps. You, the living

mother, shake salt from the tablecloth, teach your

child to nest where it's warm, tell your dead to walk

toward whatever window is full of light.



# **THERE IS NO CHILD HERE**

**MIKE SALISBURY**

Kathryn Hull turns into the school parking lot and is sucked into a vortex of SUVs and minivans, parents trying to retrieve their children. The line of cars stretches down McCormack Street.

A flood of children pours out, racing toward yellow buses and loving parents parked along the road leading to the school. Not one of those children climbs into her car because Kathryn Hull's son, Mason, was run over when his dad was backing out of the driveway fifteen days ago.

It's chaos as the children race past the attendees with their orange vests and their pleas not to run. "Use your walking feet!" A little girl in pigtails goes screaming past Kathryn's car, dragging her backpack as it bounces off the pavement. Kathryn watches in her side mirror as the little girl boards the bus. The only thing she can see in front of her is the backside of a huge white Lincoln. The stick-family car decals line the back window like paper dolls. There's even one of the family dog.

The driver of the Lincoln pops her perfect blonde head out to greet another mom walking up to the school. They begin chatting through their white-strip smiles, all ponytails and yoga pants, oblivious to the line of cars waiting behind them. No one honks. It's an unspoken rule on school grounds. No one wants to be that mom who honks. Kathryn considers honking, just a polite tap. She wants to be that impatient mom, the one who occasionally cusses without apology, the one who acts like a human being in front of her child. Her hand hovers above the horn.

"Gimme a break," Kathryn says, as the line begins lurching forward again. The blonde ducks back inside while the other mom scampers off. Kathryn was never one of those moms. She'd always preferred blue jeans to yoga pants and the only club she belongs to is Sam's.

The line moves slowly today, perhaps the slowest it's ever moved, Kathryn thinks. She drums the steering wheel with her fingers. She's waited in the pick-up line patiently, through good and bad moods, through rain and snow. The daily routine. She and Mark had decided once they had kids she would stay home. Daycare seemed irresponsible. The thought of sending a baby off with strangers was unthinkable. Not after the miscarriages and all it took to finally have one. "We're better parents than that," she'd said to him.

He's probably a better dad than a husband, she thinks, as she adjusts the volume on the radio. He'd walk through the door asking, "Where's my partner?" and Mason, all giggles and bounce, would race into his arms. Mark's not a bad man, but she has trouble understanding how a good man runs over his son. It's tragic—that's what people say. And time—they tell her to give it time—as if the tragedy will decrease in size given a certain amount of waiting. She doesn't think so.

Their marriage has been the biggest tragedy up until now: an eight year battle as they fought to get to some golden anniversary destination, hallmarked by the kind of home other people drive by and wish was their own, proof to the world that Mark and Kathryn could make it work. All they had to show for it was sacrifices and debt. Seemed romantic when other people did it.

Now all Kathryn can think of is the emergency fund envelope tucked in her underwear drawer. The one she stashes loose cash in case of a car or appliance repair. The one she now thinks of as an escape fund. There's enough there to get started, sign a lease and buy enough time to find a job. A few calls and she could get back into the swing of things. Who could blame the mother of the dead boy for wanting a fresh start?

But the thought of Mark Hull alone frightens her. How would he continue to live if both his son and wife left him? There are commitments between them, ones she notices every time she writes her last name or

glimpses her wedding ring. The word “vows,” cringe-worthy now, had only felt like a childhood pact, something meant to be stepped through to move on into adulthood. There was no mention in these vows of “until death” when referring to children.

Kathryn understands the harsh reality that Mark probably can't go on without her. She also understands that she probably can't go on living like this, either.

A woman trying to herd twin boys to their car walks by Kathryn and gives a quick glance. Kathryn has been getting a lot of these lately. It's been two weeks of enduring *looks* from neighbors, but she's already tired of their stares, as if they are waiting to see how the dead boy's family crumbles. Like a grand experiment. She considers getting out of the car and walking across the parking lot, stepping between the twin boys and asking, “What am I supposed to do? My husband killed the only reason I have to get out of bed.”

Kathryn doesn't get out of the car to ask that mom questions no one could possibly answer. She lets her drive away and sits there alone in the pick-up line, slowly lurching forward.

The sympathy lilies haven't begun to wilt yet. Mason's room, untouched. She can't bring herself to even open the door. She wonders if it would be easier to carve out a place in her body, perhaps the soft spot below her ribs, empty the flesh and remove all the things she no longer wishes to carry with her.

Kathryn hasn't been paying attention. She slams on the brakes and barely avoids rear-ending the Lincoln, who has stopped to gab again. Collisions happen in the pick-up line. Crumpled minivan bumpers and soccer moms circling each other in cockfight strut, flapping their arms and circling around the damage.

Kathryn taps the horn. Everyone stops and looks as if by command. The code of silence broken. She sees the woman in the Lincoln's hand-raising expression of annoyance. Kathryn is quick to apologize. But there's no one in the car to witness this, no child in the backseat to reassure that everything's okay.

Mark was driving his truck when it happened. He'd backed out without even



looking, hardly noticing the tiny bump beneath the back wheel and then again as the front tire rolled over Mason's body. Halfway down the driveway he looked back up and saw Mason there motionless, his arms at his side and head twisted looking away from Mark.

When Mark carried him through the front door, Kathryn could only stare at Mason. Her eyes fixed on the dark smudge right on the apple of Mason's cheek.

They held him together, sprawled out across the kitchen floor, waiting for help to arrive. She half-dreamed in those moments that it was her who'd been run over by the impossible weight of those tires, the braille-like tread pressing down on her skin. The only sounds they made huddled together were the weary, tortured sounds of grief.

The hardest thing to get used to has been the silence: Mason, the creator of noise and laughter, the tiny voice speaking her name into being.

What she wouldn't give to hear Mason ask her for a juice box or pull him into her arms and smell his hair, that sunshine scent lifting her slightly off the ground. He was a small boy, below average for his age, but so was she. She told him he wouldn't always be so small. These unfulfilled promises a mother makes to her son, cracked her wide open.

Long after they'd wrenched the boy from his mother's arms, Kathryn Hull lay awake wondering who was supposed to be watching Mason that day. Mark thought Mason was inside with her; she thought Mason was going for a ride with daddy. It became a shared blame that left both speculating how the other could have been so irresponsible.

Kathryn wished it had been her, but that was easy and it would always be Mark behind the wheel looking back up to see Mason there in the driveway. All she really knew was some things are harder to live through than die from. Losing a child is one of these things.

There is no escape for Kathryn Hull. The line of cars is too long and it would be impossible to try and do a u-turn, not with the steady traffic of parents leaving with their kids.

Kathryn is almost to the front of the line when she notices the woman in the orange vest and clipboard walking up to her window. She's



never gotten this far down the line without having Mason fastened in the backseat.

At first Kathryn tries not to make eye contact, avoiding the glow of the vest. The woman stares at Kathryn trying to get her attention, and then mouths something she cannot hear. She hopes the lady will leave her alone. Don't they know she's been through enough?

They do not.

The attendee approaches her and goes as far as to knuckle tap the car window like a traffic cop asking for license and registration. Kathryn rolls the window down halfway.

"Name and class."

Kathryn considers this for a moment. Mason Hull. Mrs. Applegate's kindergarten class. Is his name still on the attendance sheet? Has Mrs. Applegate removed his name from her roster already, the same Mrs. Applegate who sobbed loudly at the funeral even though it had only been the third week of school? In the short time Mason has been in her class, how could she possibly have learned anything sob worthy about her son? Did she know how he sang the "Five Little Monkeys" song when riding in the car or the way he cocked his head to the side when searching for things to pray to God about before bed? The whole time she'd listened to this woman mourn her son as if he were her own. It made Kathryn want to strangle her. Anything to make the weeping stop.

Kathryn stares blankly at the pickup attendee's silver whistle dangling from her neck. She wonders what the worst thing that's ever happened to her was. Has she heard about Mason, the boy who was run over by his dad? She thinks about asking the woman her advice while she's got her attention—what would you do if you were me?

Mark is probably on his way home right now. They already replaced his truck. A man called them after he'd heard about the accident and offered to buy it. Acted like he was doing them a favor. *This actually happens*, she thought at the time. Vultures disguised as people, offering cash.

Kathryn pretends to be confused as she glances at her watch. She thinks about Mark. He's pulling in right now and pressing the button for the automatic garage door. He's somewhere above the place her son died,

and then he's in the garage, climbing out of the car and sliding his dress shoes off and putting them on the shoe rack alongside Mason's sneakers. He'll pull up a chair at the kitchen table and wait there, face planted in his hands like he's spent every evening since that day. The funeral, that's all the time he took off. They offered more and he turned them down. He said he needed to work and she marveled at the luxury of such distractions.

Kathryn doesn't ask the attendee to check the list on her clipboard, to flip through the pages of names before going to the classroom where her son won't be, the confused look on Mrs. Applegate's face when the woman in the orange vest asks where Mason is, and the simple response: He's gone.

"Oh gosh, it's Tuesday, isn't it? It's my husband's day to pick him up. He must've..." Kathryn trails off, that reassuring shrug like *I'm one of those moms, the one with too much on her mind, the kind who forgets her kid*. But she hasn't and won't forget her son.

The attendee gives her a glance, the one she reserves for flighty, irresponsible parents. The feeling begins to sink in and Kathryn knows she doesn't belong in this line.

# MARY'S OTHER SONG

WENDY SCOTT

*"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth."  
—Song of Songs 1:2*

When Joseph and I first lay together,  
blessed fountains:

his, mine.

Jesus was sleeping,  
beside our bed.

Sweet burn of Joseph's tongue  
circling my nipple  
while my tongue found his ear.  
sliding across my breast

His palm, a fire, sliding slowly  
along my thigh.

Splendor of this life:  
running water from our own well  
like a sea

rising, cresting, parting.

A million flowers rushing to open.

A star exploding where the Son had opened me.

# THE PATRON SAINT OF COMMUTERS

NOEL SLOBODA

Forever coming or returning—  
too intent on miles ahead to settle

for any single destination  
let alone pause for conversation—

he keeps one bleary eye trained  
on jagged yellow lines

just visible through trees  
dangling from his mirror—

sun-bleached pines that never grow;  
his other eye glued to needles

that tell him absolutely nothing is  
wrong. He frets about

every little squeak and rattle  
heard over the sweet hum of asphalt.

He fears the gradual loss  
of pressure in his Goodyears

and worries about the taint  
of ethanol in his cylinders.

Usually hidden behind  
a bug-speckled screen

halfway between today and tomorrow,  
I once saw him up close



leaning against a pump,  
sclerotic legs bowed, one dark

hand on a gunmetal nozzle,  
the other pale and throbbing

as it choked the life  
out of an invisible wheel.

# PSA FOR WHITE AMERICAN MEN WHO LISTEN TO HIP HOP

CHRIS SPECKMAN

Maybe deep down we're still afraid of our tongues making love to the wrong fountain. How race reverts our mouths to cotton. We respect poetic justice, even though it's a sorry knock-off for the real Holyfield. The truth is when we fuck with black culture, we don't go back. We co-opted blues, the duality of Hughes, bebop, hip hop. *Can't stop? Won't stop.* If only royalties doubled as reparations. Of course, we'd have to turn blind eyes to our finest Rineharts, men who are, at best, both *slim* and *shady*, *mackle* and *moor*. We can slam the Grammy's for advancing our tribe called white, yet we never mind the gap between suburban urban album sales and empathy. *What's cooler than ice cold?* The mysterious case of our inherited headphones, which for some reason weren't engineered for lows so low. When we're told to *throw our hands in the air and wave them like we just don't care*, we miss the simile. Chuck D got it twisted. Hip hop should be every American's CNN. Our ears should burn like the South Bronx in '77 when Biggie Smalls says *the streets is a short stop, either you slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot*, when Nas says *judges hanging niggas, incorrect bails for direct sales*, when Vince Staples, a toddler the day Pac got popped, says *as a kid, all I wanted was to kill a man, be like my daddy's friends*. We can't forget rap is a call and response. We as white men should be hype men, twirling our towels like the blades on Obama's chopper, reinforcing the rhymes like line breaks, without remixing the sentiment, fronting and grunting, *my family had it rough or race is a social construct or why can Nas drop n-bombs but not me?* No letting our skin be thin as our women.

All this off-color obfuscating is masturbating  
into a megaphone. Ask Weezy, *real Gs move in silence*  
*like lasagna*. Don't be Pino and stress the *I* in Italian.  
Knowledge of self is equal parts knowledge of not-self.  
If you want to do the right thing, just say word. Bond.

# STAMINA

## CHRIS SPECKMAN

Rainy, frigid Phoenix. The uncomfortable cuffs  
of your red jacket eclipsing my wrists, thanks

Dad, I guess. At some chic hotel taquería  
a block from your apartment, you insist

on ordering for both of us. Our fit, pierced  
waitress, a shared wish, young enough

for me, old enough for you. More likely, vice  
versa. You smile, jaundiced, sly. We look too much

alike. You've aged well enough  
to tell me all about it, how you ran

another marathon, spent Christmas Day fucking.  
Tequila, please. I've been waiting

twenty-eight years for a father.



# OMA

## TY STUMPF

In her last hours, Oma reverted to German.  
Her fierce consonants clattered. Her bones  
ground against each other.  
The shine of her Aryan blue eyes  
eroded gray.

She met her first Jew at 85, standing  
outside a high school play. As Oma reached  
to shake hands with Mrs. Rothstein, I whispered,  
“She’s Jewish.”  
Oma blinked, her limp hand fading.  
As we drove back to her apartment,  
she stared at her dirtied hand. Surprised  
the Jew didn’t have a hook nose and seemed so  
*schön*.

When her mother died forty years earlier,  
Oma sent her into the next world  
whispering, “*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer.*”  
Her mother’s heart quickened and quieted.

Oma married an American GI,  
an Okie who took orders well, whose rations  
tasted like something more than Munich’s ashes.

She kept German men on the side,  
and he tasted Asian girls in two more wars.  
They came back to the same apartment,  
Oma reading banned papers where broken  
crosses danced. He browsed *The Farmer's Almanac*,  
imagining what grows  
when the land isn't all dust.

Her father was a pharmacist  
who flew a Nazi flag.  
He hung pictures of Oma smiling  
between soldiers perched on anti-aircraft guns.  
They stare at her chest while she flirts with the camera.  
She would hand them other pictures her father took  
of her posing in swimsuits. Stiff boys  
ready to goose-step with her in their pockets.

And there she is, at two years old  
on our wall in black and white.  
A hairbow as big as her head.  
Ninety years ago, she held tightly to a chair,  
steadying her wobbly legs.  
The flashbulb exploded once,  
the *Vaterland* bright as her cotton hair.

# THE WORK I DO

**BOB WATTS**

will never have the heft  
of the unplanned red oak boards  
my father nailed in place  
for tandem loads of logs  
to cross the narrow creek,  
the empty trucks return,  
and back and forth, repeat,  
until the woods were gone,  
the job moved somewhere else,  
the makeshift bridge still there  
through all the fallow years  
it takes for underbrush  
to grow to poplar, pine,  
and oak trees large enough  
to be worth cutting down.  
The creek runs and remains,  
and trees, late afternoons,  
throw shadows past the bridge  
but cannot get away.

## WARTHOG PODIATRY

CHARLES  
HARPER WEBB

After years of studying how to relieve  
    world hobbling, Warthog stands  
in a white coat, gnashing his tusks  
    under a blood-red sign: *Warthog Podiatry*.

Will the four wart-like protrusions  
    on his head upset patients? Will he need  
constantly to explain, "They're great  
    for storing fat, and useful when males

fight over females—which happens a lot."  
    No need, if his patients are warthogs.  
That sign, though, muddles things.  
    His name is Warthog, that's for sure:

Warthog A. Warthog. But is he  
    the animal, or the jiggly butt of a parental  
joke about his cloven feet? (*Clover feet*,  
    he used to say, and thought them lucky

until children jeered.) Did he "go in for"  
    podiatry, as wackos do psychiatry,  
to heal himself? What if he's not the doc,  
    but came to *see* a doc who may or may not



be a warthog and fix warthog feet?

“One way to find out,” he grunts,  
backing through the office door  
the way, in Transvaal, he’d back

into an abandoned aardvark burrow,  
ready to burst out in a devastating  
charge, if needed—which, bad feet and all,  
it often was.

## CHARLES HARPER WEBB

as Black Hills gold—showering down.  
his bloody boots, his hair—yellow  
his hands into brown earth, and raised  
“Watch this!” he roared, thrust

knives, the Sioux braves rampaged in.  
as, swinging tomahawks and scalping  
twitching at his feet. “Look!” he cried  
alone and laughed, his horse death-

heard his soldiers' shrieks. He stood  
cracking, sword flailing, he barely  
notes, he never flinched. Colt pistol  
When Little Big Horn blew its sourest

Ulysses Grant grabbed General Lee's.  
with both hands, the way that drunk  
between his feet, not snatching it  
a conquered general's sword

like savages. He dreamed of gripping  
screeched war-cries, and pranced  
bronze faces breaking into grins,  
over his head while Indian scouts,

feet dangling like a scorpion's tail  
He walked on his hands, too,

at full gallop, as his soldiers cheered.

He held this posture on horseback,

inverto!—his boots were in the air.

to scrutinize a track; then—presto-

the West Point rear, he would stoop

Sent to Indian Territory after bringing up

## CUSTER'S LAST HAND-STAND

## KEYHOLE

### LARRY WORMINGTON

Tracer rounds whiz by, their light reflected in the Concertina wire just inches from my face. Flat on my back, I dig in my heels and inch forward. My body tenses and I jerk sideways as the ground erupts to my right, covering me with chunks of dirt and debris. Deafened and tingling, I push on. It can't be much farther. God, please don't let it be much farther. I slide along, trying to stay as flat as possible, my Kevlar helmet pushing a line through the sand as I go. All I can focus on is my forward progress and the vice-grip I have on my M16.

My helmet hits something solid. Someone is up ahead, but isn't moving. The ringing in my ears and the strobe effect of artillery make it hard to focus, like watching fireworks from the deep end of a swimming pool. I manage to pull myself up to the man's side. His voice is a broken record of panic.

"Can't do this. Can't do this. Can't do this."

It's Wallace, a small freckled recruit from St. Louis they'd just dropped back to our platoon. His legs are moving, but the rest of him isn't. Tears slide down the sides of his camo-streaked face as he mutters and continues to squirm. The muzzle of his weapon is wrapped in razor wire, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"Wallace, your weapon's stuck."

He continues to struggle.

"Wallace."

He flinches, and then looks at me through coke-bottle lenses.



"What? I'm okay. I'm okay."

"The wire, Wallace. Here, let me help."

Bad idea. I wait for the next tracer flash and try to grab his rifle barrel as it and the nest of Concertina swing back and forth. Just as I think I've got it, Wallace jerks the weapon downward, ripping my fingers open on the wire's many teeth.

"Damn, man, watch it."

"I'm s-sorry,"

The artillery stops and the field we're crossing lights up from a line of surrounding flood lamps. I shut my eyes and put my hand to my mouth, tasting the coppery sting of blood. Deep laughter and clapping make me forget about my shredded fingers. A few feet away, to the right of the live-fire training course, is the man I wish death upon several times a day, Staff Sergeant Pena. He stands in a pressed camouflage uniform, his chest puffed out and his tan arms crossed. He has a weasel grin and his drill instructor cover is cocked back like a halo on his balding head. The rest of Kilo Company is at a position of attention behind him.

"Recruits, take a good look at these two," Pena says. "They're the ones that'll get you killed in real combat. Cole, you and your lover get your asses out of there. The shitters need cleaning." Still lying on my back, I crane my neck and glance behind me. Another few feet and I'd have made it.

"Fucking Wallace," I whisper.

Pena and the other D.I.s have my number now. Up until this point, I'd kept a low profile. My dad told me, "Keep your head down and don't volunteer for anything." That was the formula for surviving Marine Corps boot camp. It was working, too. Now I'm a shit-bird, and everything I do will be mocked and scrutinized.

To make matters worse, my little act of chivalry turns Wallace into my shadow. They put him in first squad, right behind me in platoon formations. He's also on my fire team in training exercises and made my bunkmate, in the cot above me. I can't get away from him. I'm one-twenty soaking wet, a little slow, and somewhat uncoordinated, not the best candidate to carry another—mentally or physically. Staff Sergeant Pena and the other drill instructors even have a name for us, the Turtledoves.

"Where are my love birds? Turtledoves, get up to my classroom now," Pena says.

The classroom's an open space, about thirty by thirty, outside the drill instructor's duty hut in each training barracks at MCRD, San Diego. In theory, it's a place of instruction, thus the name. In practice, it's a torture chamber, a place where D.I.s punish the guilty and innocent. On any given day, a drill instructor can be heard yelling: "You wanna fuckin' play boys, we'll play. I got more games than Milton Bradley." Before I met Wallace, I managed to skip class. Now, I was setting attendance records.

"Push-ups boys, drop," Pena said. "Too fucking slow, get up. Now drop, on your backs. Sit-ups. Sit-ups. Too slow. Up. Bends and thrusts. Faster, faster. Too fucking slow. Stop. Drop. Push-ups, stop in the up position. Stay there. Wallace, I better not see your chest touch the deck. Down. Mountain climbers, get those knees up. Faster dammit. I got all-fucking-day, boys."

I piston my legs, push, jump, then do it all again. Sweat burns the cuts on my hand, and they sprout fresh blood spots through my bandages. I don't have time to care. I just make sure I do everything a little better, a little faster, than Wallace. It isn't that difficult. He just thrashes on the floor like a dying bug, trying to get his bony body into the right position for whatever Pena calls next. Each time he gets into a rhythm, Pena calls out a change. The wiry D.I. smiles the whole time, putting his head down when I look up, hiding his enjoyment beneath the brim of his Smokey Bear.

"Stop," Pena says. "Stand at attention. Lock your damn body, Wallace."

My heart thuds as I catch my breath with a closed mouth and a rigid body. Seconds tick by and Pena stands there, flipping through a folder spread out on his training pulpit. I watch without appearing to, my peripheral vision skills vastly improved after the last two months of training. I see Wallace's name in bold type on the top of the folder.

"So, Timothy Wallace, how is it you've been dropped from training by three platoons and you still look like a skeleton?"

"Sir?" Wallace says.

"Did I tell you to fucking speak?" Pena asks. "Shut the hell up. It says here you've failed to qualify three times at the rifle range. Is that right? You can answer now."

"Yes, sir."

Pena approaches him, turning his back to me and leaning in close, as if he's about to tell Wallace a secret. Wallace swallows hard, lips trembling. The rest of the platoon sits at the end of their bunks, polishing boots while feigning inattention.

"Know what happens when you go UNK your fourth time?" Pena says.

Wallace opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

"You go home," Pena says.

Wallace closes his eyes. Pena leans in even closer.

"That's why you're such a fuck-up, isn't it? You found yourself a way out. Well, there's nothing that says you have to go home in one piece."

Wallace's eyes are wide. Pena slaps him hard on the back and executes a perfect about-face. He's facing me now, and looks surprised, like he forgot I was behind him. I'm a statue, my eyes locked on the far wall. He studies me, moving closer and closer, stopping only when he's pushed up against my right shoulder. His breath is hot on my ear.

"You didn't hear shit. Understand?"

I nod.

"If you give a fuck about him, Cole, you'll help him," he says.

I stare back at him.

"Get your fucking eyes off me, recruit," Pena says.

He snatches the folder off the podium. "Taps" warbles from the loud-speaker, and he dismisses us.

"Guide and squad leaders, square away this platoon. We leave for the rifle range at o-six-hundred tomorrow. All your shit better be ready."

The rifle range, known to west coast Marines as Edson Range, is located inside the largest Marine base in the United States, Camp Pendleton, California. To get there from MCRD San Diego, we take a half hour bus ride in silence. Although Pena and our junior D.I.s patrol the aisles frequently, I feel alive for the first time in months.

Each day in boot camp is like a week trapped in a cramped box with no food and no light. We see no one but our D.I.s and our fellow recruits, day in and day out. There are no phones, no television, and no news, the only contact with the outside world comes via letters from friends and



family, delivered twice a week. If no one writes, you never get out of the box. But here, today, speeding down I-5, I remember the world. We pass Burger King and flame-broiled aroma fills my nostrils. Girls with wavy hair drive by in gleaming sports cars, windows down and blouses aflutter. They smile and wave, driving me to arousal. Rows of empty phone booths outside a 7-11 beckon. I hear my girlfriend's voice and her laugh. I see her stretched out on a blanket, waiting for me. The ocean sparkles in the California sun and I remember coconut-tan legs and long, blonde hair.

Pena yells the moment we go through Pendleton's main gate, reminding us what world we belong to.

"Recruits, welcome to Camp Pendleton. You are now surrounded by the largest population of Marines on the planet. In honor of this occasion, we're throwing you all a little party, in the gas chamber," Pena says.

Wallace, my seatmate, groans.

"Fourth time," he says.

I give a small nod, keeping my eyes on our handlers up front. I'm not looking forward to it, but anything Wallace could survive three times can't be all that bad.

A stump of a Marine takes us through the basics of bio-hazard protection. He speaks too loud and too fast, just like all the others. Without asking if we have questions, he hands us each a gas mask before dividing the platoon into pairs. Pena makes certain I stay with Wallace. After a short march across a parched field, we reach a cinderblock building. Yellow buckets filled with water and sponges are lined up by a huge metal door. With only a few small windows, the place looks like an above-ground bunker.

"Recruits, this exercise will teach you to trust your gas mask if you're ever exposed to a biological or chemical attack," the instructor says. "Put your gas mask on, then don and clear. You should have a tight seal and be breathing clean, filtered air. Once you've done this, turn to your buddy and make sure his mask is secure. When everyone is ready, we will enter the chamber in teams of two. It is important for each team to work together throughout the exercise. Stay with your partner at all times, he's your ticket out of my little house of horrors."

My mask gives me trouble right away. The straps are cinched too tight



in the back, making it almost impossible to get over my head. Others are already entering the building and I see that we might be the last group. I yank the straps.

"Relax," Wallace says. "Turn around and I'll loosen the straps in the back. We'll get it."

His voice is muffled by his mask, yet calm. I look back, making sure it's really him. His mask is secure and he's ready to go.

"Come on, face forward," he says. "I have to get it seated. There, all good."

He spins me back around.

"Now you have to clear it, like this," he says.

He does the move twice, pinching down the nose of the mask while exhaling, then inhaling while covering the circular filters on either side with his hands, to make the seal. I follow his lead and the mask tightens around my face. I nod and we walk inside.

Canisters of CS gas are already popped, fogging the inside of the dark chamber as we enter. Something is wrong. My hands and neck sting, and my eyes tear up.

"Recruits, jumping-jacks, counts of four, exercise," Pena says from a loudspeaker.

We start counting off, and I hack phlegm. Others around me are coughing as well. My eyes sting so bad I can't open them. All my exposed skin is on fire.

"Stop, recruits. That's good. Now, I want you all to remove your masks," Pena says.

The words make me laugh aloud. Remove our masks? Are you kidding?

"Now, recruits."

I shake my head then rip off the mask. The burning is everywhere now. I can't stop coughing, which makes me inhale even more CS gas.

"Don and clear your mask now," Pena says. "If you don't clear it, it won't work."

The coughing and oozing snot render me helpless. I fight with the mask and end up falling backward on the floor, kicking empty CS canisters

as I go down. I fold into a ball and rip at my eyes, my mask forgotten.

"Cole, come on," Wallace says. "You gotta get that mask on."

I can't speak. Everything hurts.

"Give me your hand, Cole," Wallace says.

I can't think. Wallace grabs me and pulls hard, bringing me to my feet. There's an opening and he drags me toward it. We reach the door and someone closes it. I can't see anything now.

"Please, Staff Sergeant, I need to get him out," Wallace says.

"Nope. He can't leave without a mask on," Pena says. I can just make him out, his big arms crossed, his stance wide.

If I had a weapon, I'd empty it into him.

"Here, Cole. Take mine. I'll go back and get yours," Wallace says.

He slips the mask over my head as I sit on the floor, useless.

"Breathe in, now blow out," Wallace says. He then starts to cough.

Pena is laughing.

"Look at my little turtledoves, looking out for each other. Aww."

I sense the difference right away. I can breathe without going into a coughing fit. I squint and see a small blur coming toward me.

"Cole, it's me," Wallace says. "Your mask is fucked, but I got it on.

Let's get out of here."

Pena finally opens the door and we stumble out, snot, saliva, and tears pouring out of us both. The sky never looked so blue.

We're given the afternoon to clean up, square away our temporary barracks, and recover from the gas exposure. With our drill instructors in a large Quonset hut next door, we're able to talk at a low whisper for the first time in weeks.

"Thanks for today."

"I owed you," Wallace says.

As I apply a fresh coat of polish to my mucus-covered boots, I finally ask what has been on my mind for weeks.

"Is what Pena said true? Are you trying to get out?"

"Fuck no. Getting out's the last thing I want."

"Really? No offense, but you don't exactly seem to be cut out for this stuff."

Wallace doesn't answer right away. He just pulls something from his footlocker and hands it to me.

"Maybe I'm not, but he was," Wallace says.

It's a weathered photo of a Marine in dress blues. The man in the picture resembles Wallace, but is older and much larger. The inscription on the back reads: *Semper Fi, brother.—Tom*

"Your dad?"

"My brother. He died in Beirut, when the barracks were bombed in eighty-three. I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry. So, is that why you joined, you're following in his footsteps or something?"

"Or something," Wallace says.

He takes back the photo and removes his thick glasses.

"Those things keeping you from qualifying at the range?"

"No, I can see well enough. I get up there and I just get so nervous. I can't control my breathing. Rounds go all over the place. Once I even shot the wrong target."

He smiles as he says this and I realize I like him. Maybe I had all along. I picture him up there on the firing line, his brother's face bouncing through his head.

"Well, you'll get it this time, right?"

He just nods and wipes his spectacles with a green T-shirt.

It's ten a.m., day one, and I already hate marksmanship training. My legs are stiff from sitting in one place for two hours, aiming my empty M16 at a barrel as a shooting coach talks about site alignment, site picture, trigger squeeze, and breath control. Half the platoon wears eye patches on their non-shooting eyes. The result of being told they possess poor eye control in relation to target focus, a fancy way of saying they can't keep their off-eye closed when they shoot. Evidently, sight alignment is hard to achieve when both eyes are trying to achieve it simultaneously.

I sit for hours in a fixed position, dry-firing as my arms, legs, and ass fall asleep. I pull the trigger about a thousand times, looking forward to doing it for real.

\*



The first shooting day arrives. I load my first clip and tap it on my helmet to settle the rounds evenly in the clip, just like I'd seen on TV. It's goofy, but it excites me, too. I'm about to fire an M16.

"Groups one through four, you're up first," Pena says. "Follow your shooting coaches to your assigned boxes at the two hundred-meter line. All other groups get down below the berm line to pull targets."

I'm in group three, with Wallace and several others, so I head to the firing line. Since I'm the next-to-last shooter in my group, I sit back at the spotter box and watch. It's ugly at first, shooters not getting set before they fire, or firing before the targets appear. Just a bunch of crazy eighteen-year-olds, stressed to the max, and outfitted with loaded assault rifles.

My time comes and I feel good. Everything comes back to me—the training, the breathing. It all feels natural. I finish at the two hundred-meter line, hitting twenty-three out of a possible twenty-five bull's eyes. I'm rolling. On the three hundred-meter line it's the same story, only this time I put all fifteen shots in the center. At the five hundred-meter line, Staff Sergeant Pena and several shooting coaches start paying attention. I take ten shots from the prone position at five hundred meters, registering nine bulls out of ten. I finish my first full course and run three points shy of perfect, something I'm sure few recruits have ever done.

For each good shot I made, Wallace makes an equally bad one. I watch him all afternoon, hands covering my face as he jerks, lurches, twitches, and coughs while squeezing off shots. I talk to him, saying whatever I can think of to calm him. At the five hundred-meter line, he seems a little more relaxed, but the damage is done. Out of a possible two hundred and fifty points, Wallace scores one hundred and twenty-five. A recruit needs a minimum of one hundred ninety to qualify.

"That's why they call it a practice round, Wally," I say. "Don't sweat it. You have four more cracks at this."

The week changes everything for me. Pena stops his constant harassment and ridicule. He even asks me to help other recruits having range difficulties. Instead of spending hours down in the pits dragging targets, I stay up on the line and watch other shooters, offering advice. The man I wished dead is acting like a human being for a change, but I don't buy it. I'm just a



big feather in his cap now and I know it. Graduating a recruit that aces the rifle range, a feat only a handful of Marines have ever accomplished, would probably mean promotion. Still, gratitude and respect trump bullying and condescension every time.

Wallace continues to shoot abysmally—low scores, once even dipping below one hundred. Pena lets me help him more and more, even allowing me up at the firing line, something range officials aren't happy about. The more I try to help though, the worse Wallace shoots. Tomorrow is Friday, qualification day, his last chance. I'm not feeling too good about it.

"Cole, go see Staff Sergeant Pena," a junior D.I. says. I stop collecting spent casings on the firing line and head back to the squad bay.

Pena sits in the Quonset hut, his feet up on a desk.

"From Cole to diamonds, right, recruit?" Pena says.

"Yes, sir."

"You shot a two-forty-nine today. You going to get that last point for me tomorrow?"

"I'll get it, sir."

"Good man. I'm counting on it."

"Sir, about Wallace."

"Don't worry, Cole. It wasn't a real threat. I was just trying to motivate him. If he blows it tomorrow, he'll be home by Monday, in one piece, where he belongs."

"Thank you, sir."

"Of course, now get back to the platoon."

For the big day, they pair the platoon up again, saying they want no more than two shooters per target for qualification. Wallace and I are together, as usual. We get an early morning run as well, so the sun will be behind us the entire time. Wallace goes first. He's all nerves, but seems to be keeping it together. I squeeze his shoulders and push him forward.

"Your brother's with you, man. I feel him. Go finish this."

He nods and approaches the line.

"Stop thinking, stop hesitating, and stop adjusting your glasses," I say.

"Just aim and squeeze. Shut everything else out."

At the two hundred-meter line, he looks calm and determined. He fires

without hesitation, the difference in him is immediate. Shots that had been misses all week turn into twos and threes. He finishes the first leg with a score north of one hundred for the first time all week.

I follow suit with a perfect score and we head to the three hundred-meter line.

More of the same there. Wallace is dialed in. Maybe it wasn't just hollow talk, maybe there is a ghost on his shoulder.

"You got a little edgy there at the end, Wall, but you're still good to go," I say. "You only need thirty-one points at five-hundred meters and you have ten shots to get it. That's nothing."

I take his spot and feel a familiar calm. Everything slows down until Wallace and the other shooters melt away. A light breeze blows on my forearms and the sunlight warms my back. Then there's nothing, just me, my weapon, and the target. I don't miss.

Wallace walks beside me, kicking empty brass and smiling as we approach our last firing position.

"Regardless of how this turns out, Cole, I want to thank you. You're the first friend I've had in four platoons worth of recruits."

I pat him on the back and nod, trying to remain focused. After all, I have a perfect game going.

"You know the drill," the range officer says. "Five hundred-meter line: ten shots from the prone position at a body silhouette target, ten minute time limit. Anything in the black gets you five points. This is where you earn your first Marine Corps badge. Shooters down and ready."

Wallace is all over the place from the start.

"Slow down," I say. "You're rushing your shots."

Six shots in and he has two fours, a three, and three misses. Eleven points. He needs twenty more, which means four straight bulls. I cringe as he pulls the trigger on his seventh shot. When they raise the red lollipop indicating a bull's eye from down in the berm, I can't believe it. Wallace doesn't respond. He just waits for the marker to drop and fires again. The red marker rises again. When it drops, Wallace fires. The marker comes up a third time. To say I'm shocked would be an understatement. This guy hasn't hit more than two bulls all week, now he's popped three in a row. I

hold my breath as Wallace squeezes off the last shot.

Nothing happens for almost a minute. The shooting coach at the line goes over to the range officer and asks him what's going on. He radios down to the berm and I hear a crackling response.

"No hole on the last shot. Shooter missed."

I watch as a white marker appears and is swung in a half-moon in front of the target, waving Wallace a miss for the last shot. He stands and stares down range, then looks back at me, his eyes full of tears.

"Next shooters, take your places," the range officer says.

Wallace walks past me to the spotter box then stumbles to his knees. I have no words for him and no time.

I get to the line needing to forget and dial it in. Nothing feels right, though. I squirm around my mark, trying to find a comfortable shooting position. Four minutes pass before I take my first shot. Bull. Okay, just breathe. I take another shot. Bull. I stay in position and take five more shots, all bulls. Wallace's face fills my head. Try as I may, I can't push it away. Bull. My breathing hitches a little, but I still have enough rhythm to squeeze off another shot. Bull. Now I not only can see Wallace's face, but that of his brother. What will he tell his family when he goes back home?

Last shot, I pull the trigger.

I wait, but nothing happens. Rolling over on my back, I look up at the group gathered behind me, four range officers, several of my junior D.I.s, and Staff Sergeant Pena. They look down at me then back down range, confusion evident in their faces. The range C.O. is among the onlookers and he calls down to the berm.

"Stop fucking around," he says into the walkie. "This isn't funny. What? Are you serious? No way," he says.

I get up and walk over, but I already know before the white marker appears down the line, waving from left to right. I missed my last shot. I walk over to Wallace and sit down. He doesn't even look up.

Ten minutes later, Pena pulls me aside, grinning.

"They just called up," he says. "The range officers pulled the target to verify your score. They found a keyhole shot. A fucking keyhole, can you believe it?"



"Sir, I don't understand," I say. "What's that?"

"A shot so close to a prior shot that it basically passes through the same hole. You did it, Cole. You scored a perfect two-fifty. All you have to do is go down to the range office and sign off your card," he says.

With each dusty step, realization hits me. Wallace and I shot on the same target. The keyhole shot could just as easily be his. How the hell am I supposed to confirm it's mine? I turn around and head back to the line to find Wallace. I see him sitting on a bench, staring at his feet. Before I reach him, Pena stops me.

"What are you doing? I ordered you to go down and confirm your score."

"Sir, Wallace shot on that target too. He only needs one bull to qualify."

"You must be kidding. Look at him, Cole. He doesn't belong here. Plus, what are the chances that's his keyhole shot and not yours? Come on."

As he says this, another image of Wallace appears to me, one of caged terror that night in the razor wire. Countless others follow, ones of him stumbling, flailing, and falling, a stamp of fear ever-present.

I look over at Wallace, who's watching us. Can he hear what we're saying? He waves, and then drops his head. A question occurs to me just then. Was his brother a good shot?

"Wallace," I call out. He doesn't move. "Wallace?"

He shifts, turning his back to me.

I do an about face and head back down to the range office to sign off on my perfect score.



## A SPELL FOR RECONSTRUCTION

LAUREN  
YARNALL

For the few weeks when you were  
a photographer, I let you  
capture parts of me and print them  
out in black and white. And even though  
you changed your mind, you hung them  
around the house. I said nothing could be uglier  
than my lower lip, bitten and  
inconsequential, but *you are breathing*  
*art*. Then the papers said God was  
dead, art a lie. You retitled it *places*  
*where my mouth has been*, and kept them  
up until it didn't turn your stomach to see the inner  
crook of my elbow whenever you opened up  
the fridge. And then, after a few glasses  
of wine, you sent them to  
me in a box, unmarked. I spent the night  
on the floor, sifting through my kneecaps  
and eyelids, trying, body, to rebuild.

## **"SOMETHING DEEP AND RESONATING LURKED THERE"**

**AN INTERVIEW WITH**

**VANESSA BLAKESLEE**

**BY**

**MELANIE J. CORDOVA**

We are privileged to interview author Vanessa Blakeslee about her short story collection *Train Shots*, published by Burrow Press in 2014. The title story was first published in *Harpur Palate* 9.2, and below are Blakeslee's thoughts on writing this collection, her work as an author, and future projects.

**MJC:** You begin this collection with a very energetic story, "Clock-In." How did you decide on the narrative perspective for this story as opposed to, for example, "The Lung"? What narrative considerations do you make before you begin writing? How do you keep that energy moving?

**VB:** The question of energy and narrative considerations is crucial, one that is probably not discussed enough. In both of these cases, the restrictions placed on these stories at their impetus very much molded the conflicts. I often feel like whenever I'm writing an opening, the story's inevitable conclusion is already embedded in those lines, even if I can't clearly see what that is yet. What do I mean by restrictions? "Clock-In" and "The Lung" emerged from two very different writing exercises—"Clock-In" from a second-person exercise, where the narrator is instructing someone on a task, and discovering what kind of story emerges from there. "The Lung" is from the short story exercise in Douglas Glover's excellent craft book, *Attack of the Copula Spiders*, which I highly recommend (both the exercise and the essays). The latter exercise advises you to pick a point-of-view and

an odd situation between two people, push the conflict forward with scenes, and not go back in time. So, as you can tell, these exercises, albeit written years apart, resulted in two very different outcomes, in tone, pace, length, etc. In both, the choices of present tense and direct address bring a theatrical bent to the stories—a few readers have pointed out how they could work as monologues. And that contributes to the stories' brevity, because I can't imagine either of those conflicts playing out for longer than they do. Interesting, though, to note the commonalities these very different exercises generated—the earnest, confessional voice, the serious and unusual yet comic subject matter. How the narrative is forced deeper, to meditate on the present ongoing situations rather than get mired down in backstory. I couldn't imagine either story going longer; if anything, I can think of how to snip here and there and make each one even leaner.

When I sit down to approach a conflict situation that I'm curious about exploring, I often try out several different opening lines in different tenses, points-of-view, and genders. That way I figure out which one is the "hottest" in terms of energy—which "container" is sound enough to carry the conflict, and lively enough to relay interest and surprise. I focus on keeping the action moving forward; backstory, when necessary, I can always fill in later. Keeping a short story moving, for me, involves pushing the protagonist into another corner. That "corner" can be any number of encounters: a new area of the setting, a character or group of characters, a weird object, or some peculiar assemblage of all three. Then I just see what they do, how their actions make them feel. Sometimes, depending on how high-stakes the conflict situation is, you can use novelistic devices, weave in subplots and image patterns, and end up with a longer, deeper story. Not so with "Clock-In" and "The Lung," which are more the slice-of-life variety of conflict, and aren't so much concerned with the consequence of events playing out over time.

MJC: *Train Shots* has a connection to a wide variety of locations. Each story is grounded in place without disrupting the narrative. What sort of research do you do about these places to do this so successfully? How is it that in a piece like "The Sponge Diver" the location manifests itself so well in Melissa and Jono, for instance, even though it's not a huge part of the story itself?



VB: In this collection, I've spent time in most of the locations with the exception of the "Princess of Pop"—I've never been to L.A. unless you include the airport. New Orleans I've only visited briefly, as a weekend tourist, but gleaned enough to bring "Beignets" to life. As for Costa Rica, I lived there for a good part of 2008 and have never been to Nicaragua, but it didn't take very long for my imagination to start popping with images and anecdotes that ignited into fiction. And when you haven't been to a place, I'm a firm believer that the fiction writer is granted the passport, if you will, to invent. For instance, I've never been to Nicaragua, but since it neighbors Costa Rica, and there are many Nicaraguans in that country, often working manual labor jobs, I felt like I knew enough and could borrow enough sensory details of that part of Central America to invent. Our neighbors, American expats, had a horse farm in Nicaragua that's mentioned in "Welcome, Lost Dogs," and the scenario with the poor farmers chopping down the good trees was a true story the wife told. So there are numerous ways to authentically incorporate places you haven't been, by way of Internet research and/or conversations with those who have been there. The only contract you've got to maintain with the reader when writing about a place you haven't been, I think, is to invent with due diligence. If you can pull that off, you can have fun writing about anywhere.

This is what I ended up doing with my novel, *Juventud*, which will be released in September 2015 by Curbside Splendor. Most of that novel takes place in locations I haven't visited—I simply couldn't afford to spend a couple of weeks in Colombia on a research trip, never mind Israel, where the protagonist ends up in a later chapter. This meant a lot of time on the Internet, studying the popular tourist sites in Jerusalem, what different neighborhoods of that city looked like, and the bombings that were going on in the early 2000s. Later on I made friends with an Israeli fiction writer at Ledig House, and he was kind enough to read the chapter and give feedback. With the exception of a few very minor details, I'd done a solid job of rendering Israel on the page. So that's something you can always do, too—seek out someone, a friend of a friend if you don't know anyone directly, who does know that particular place you're writing about, and have them proof your draft.



As for a story like “The Sponge Diver” or “Ask Jesus,” where the setting doesn’t play such a large role in the conflict as compared to others—those stories could almost be set anywhere—I think it just depends on the nature of the conflict. Playing up the setting in those cases might have felt forced, I suspect. Going back to the subject of energy: you work with what arises organically from the initial elements, rather than impose upon the narrative. In “The Sponge Diver,” it’s enough that Melissa has a fascination with France, frequents French restaurants, and listens to Edith Piaf. We don’t have to follow her to France. If a story’s not setting-driven, no need to force it. Since I’ve lived for so long in Orlando, the setting’s elements wove their way into the backdrop naturally and subtly, which creates an altogether different effect that I quite like—one that allows the characters’ bizarre behaviors and interactions with strange objects to take center stage and really pop.

MJC: A recurring premise I saw was women in these stories suffering various forms of abuse—“Barbeque Rabbit” and “Uninvited Guests” come to mind regarding physical abuse, and “Hospice of the Au Pair” and “Don’t Forget the Beignets” for women who seem more emotionally abused by the people around them. Why did you find it important to depict this reality in this collection and what spurs stories like this for you?

VB: Some readers have remarked on the physical violence in the collection, not necessarily in a negative way, but that such subject matter challenged them—especially the stories where animals meet a violent end. How we treat animals says a lot about how we treat one another, so I suppose that’s a variation on exploring the human condition. I have no interest in gratuitous violence, but in literary storytelling, plots are propelled forward by characters doing something. Even backstory, in order to carry significant weight, has got to contain trouble; hence, Nancy is a recovering victim of recent abuse, which explains her delicate emotional state at the beginning of “Uninvited Guests.” I suppose I have found that when characters are as emotionally troubled as they are in *Train Shots*, the most discernible way to show that emotion is through the physical. They are messy people, and

violence is messy. But in storytelling, the meaning and power lies in subtlety, so I've done my best to shade my characters' lashing out in unusual and unexpected ways. For instance, we don't know for sure what happens at the very end of "Barbecue Rabbit"—he rushes her with the knife, but in the next moment perhaps she jumps aside and wrestles it from him. Or perhaps firefighters break down the door. Who knows? What's important is his choice to attack, not so much whether he succeeds or is stopped. Hitchcock understood this so well—how so much imaginative power resides in what isn't shown, what happens off-screen.

But I digress. I guess the unfortunate, more obvious and less interesting answer is that abuse runs rampant and has no bounds, which makes for fertile ground to explore in literary fiction. Those who abuse, whether verbally, physically, or some insidious combination of the two, exist in every walk of life, social class, racial and ethnic group, political persuasion, gender, etc., etc., and we fool ourselves if we believe otherwise. What's more bothersome and harder to nail in fiction as well as real life is psychological abuse. I myself have been on the receiving end of such behavior at different times in my life and with different men, and the lengths to which they can verbally and emotionally manipulate is unreal, and the damage is often far deeper and more lasting than many people are aware. I think Elizabeth Strout does that so well in *Olive Kitteridge*, depicting a harsh, narcissistic wife and mother and the ramifications of her behavior for herself and those surrounding her later on. Narcissists and borderline personality disordered individuals are the types that have you doubting your sanity and not merely bending over backwards, but twisting yourself into a pretzel to appease them.

So, are the doctor in "Hospice" and Alan in "Beignets" narcissists? I'm not sure, but I suspect they might fall somewhere on the spectrum. My novel, *Juventud*, explores such difficult personalities in a greater light. But any foray into abusive subject matter is accidental on my part—simply my subconscious unearthing the skeletons it needs to explore.

MJC: The title story "Train Shots" brings us into the life of a railroad engineer, P. T., and becomes fascinating because of how his unique professional

concerns intersect with everyday problems, like ending a romantic relationship. Why did you decide “Train Shots” should be your flagship story for this collection? How do you see it as the connecting thread that holds the rest together?

VB: “Train Shots” was first published by *Harpur Palate* a few years ago, under the editorship of Barrett Bowlin, and is one of my most memorable and unusual stories. So we knew we’d include that one from the beginning. The tone and theme made it a ready contender for the final spot, and usually the placement of the title story bears weight, so that factored into our deliberation and eventually deciding on the book’s title—*Train Shots*. But also there’s a double-meaning to the phrase “train shots.” In one sense, the collection is a journey, the reader peering in on different characters in various settings, glimpsing a “shot” of these individuals’ lives before the train zooms on. Then in the title story itself, P.T. eats dinner at a dive bar alongside the tracks in Winter Park, where the bartenders offer “train shot” drink specials when the trains go by. One might surmise it’s the same Tex-Mex joint where the reader “enters” the book via “Clock-In.” But I’ll leave that for readers to decide.

MJC: Limits on space and freedom to travel emerge as a larger concern for a majority of characters in this collection. In “Princess of Pop,” for example, the Princess can hardly go to the store without being surrounded by paparazzi, and in “Uninvited Guests” Nancy has restrictions placed on her living situation by her religious landlords. What struck me was that in your title story “Train Shots,” P. T.’s very profession necessitates travel, but doing so has dangerous consequences. Can you talk a bit about this flip at the end of the collection? Did you feel compelled to question these spatial limits and boundaries, and even trap your characters within them? How do you see that played out in reality?

VB: That’s an interesting observation, one that hasn’t been mentioned before. I suppose that the confines of space have to do with the inherent limits of stories themselves—in a sense, you’ve got your characters “trapped”



in whatever setting and situation you've placed them. Then you trap them further by pushing them into corners, seeing what they'll do under stress: rise to the occasion or trip? The Princess of Pop's very conflict is that by permitting the commercialization of herself, she has lost the privacy that the rest of us can find in public space—the anonymity of walking down a city street. I'm intrigued by that aspect of celebrity, what it means to not be able to venture into a pharmacy for some shampoo without harassment. And yet she willingly participated in setting this trap for herself. How might she possibly escape? She realizes that even "reinvention," as she's daydreamed it, won't give her the absolution she craves; that's why she ultimately turns to death. But death isn't the answer. The story ends on the precipice of her survival, and should she live, we can surmise that she'll have to go deeper, find a greater spirituality and peace that can only come from within herself.

So entrapment is dangerous, but so is a "life in motion," as you point out, for P.T. the engineer. Danger lurks in one's own backyard as much as in the great unknown. What does that mean for us and how we go about our lives? I suppose that we must go on. We can't shirk or hide, nor must we blame or abuse ourselves for the mysterious injustice of the cosmos. Each person has got to come to terms with that truth, in his or her own way, and face the consequences in making mistakes. In *Train Shots*, we often see what happens when they don't. But there are moments of hope, too. You mention Nancy, the Reverend's tenant in "Uninvited Guests." The Reverend's controlling "rules," we learn, stem from several fears, perhaps exaggerated but not entirely unfounded. So Nancy's got to navigate them for now, but clearly she's not going to live in his carriage house forever. That story ends on the hope that she gains a stronger sense of self, focuses on creating a solid foundation for her and her daughter, and moves on to a better place.

So I wouldn't say I've done any of this consciously, other than deal with space in a very practical sense in fiction—asking myself, while drafting, what are the rooms or workspaces where I can push my characters, where they'll have to face their demons? How will they try to escape? Will they succeed, or fail? P.T. corners himself by unknowingly going out for a meal at the one restaurant in town that celebrates the train with shot specials—this



arises naturally out of the story, but is exactly what I mean by painting your characters into a corner. He's fled there to find solace, but solace in drinking and drunken bar talk is a false solace, an unhealthy avoidance tactic. But he gets a reprieve in his rescue by the cop, and learns something new—how someone else in a harrowing profession deals with emotional hardships on a regular basis.

MJC: Who are your literary influences and in what tradition do you see yourself working? What are you working on now that we can look forward to?

VB: For short stories, my go-to authors include Poe, Chekhov, Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson, O'Connor, Alice Munro, and Lorrie Moore, to name a few. My foreign writer friends claim that no one can match the North Americans for mastery of the short form, so I'm afraid I've stuck rather close to home in that realm. For novels, Tolstoy and Atwood. For craft, John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* and Douglas Glover's *Attack of the Copula Spiders* I find myself returning to again and again. I harbor a geeky desire to complete all the exercises at the back of the Gardner book.

I've sort of worked my way into a regular book-reviewer spot at the *Kenyon Review*, which has led me to discover some terrific foreign titles. International writers often inspire me to approach language and form in new and surprising ways. Irish writer Kevin Barry's novel, *City of Bohane*, which won the IMPAC award, completely blew my mind in its mastery of lyricism, suspenseful storytelling, and fresh, compelling characters; also delightful and engaging was *Lovestar* by Iceland's Andri Snær Magnason, for different reasons. Recently I read *The Ninth* by Hungarian novelist Ferenc Barnas, which reminded me how the European writers conceive and approach the long form in astoundingly different ways than we do.

Over the past several summers I've been slowly churning out a novel-in-stories tentatively titled *West End Girl*, and I've almost completed an entire first draft. Set in the West End of Monroe County in northeastern Pennsylvania circa 1980, the storyline centers on Jane Hinton as she enters high school in the wake of her father's sudden death, and continues into her

young adulthood. The project grew from one of my short stories, "Shadow Boxes," which was shortlisted for numerous prizes and winner of the inaugural Bosque Fiction Award. I had not paid the story much attention, but the acclaim it garnered as finalist at numerous contests eventually caused me to step back and take note. I wondered if there was more to mine in that subject matter, if I had been shying away from exploring the rural landscape of my roots when something deep and resonating lurked there, begging to be captured in fiction. Thus far, the chapters function as stand-alone yet closely linked stories, in which seemingly small moments contain great emotional power—and often the dark side of small-town American life. Upon completion, I envision the book to capture characters and themes akin to Richard Russo's fictional explorations of upstate New York and New England, and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*.

Aside from that project, my interest in the dark side has lured me to Poe and speculative fiction, rather than the gritty social realism, quirkiness and black humor that runs through *Train Shots*. I expect my next short stories and second novel will be quite different. Not fantastical in the vein of Karen Russell, *per se*, but more imaginative and strange in the tradition of the tale and speculative fiction. There's a lot of downright lousy and mediocre dystopic fiction flooding the market right now, not enough that meets the bar set by Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy or David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. But when I sit down I intend to write something lasting and great.

We'd like to extend our thanks to Vanessa Blakeslee for taking time to share her work with us. We found her words on the writing process as insightful and compelling as her short story collection *Train Shots*. We are honored to have published the title story and can't wait to read her new work.











## CONTRIBUTORS

REBECCA BAGGETT is the author of four chapbooks, including *Thalassa* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) and *God Puts on the Body of a Deer* (Main Street Rag, 2010).

Her poems appear in numerous journals and anthologies, with recent work in *Atlanta Review*, *Miramar*, *New Letters*, *Nimrod*, and *Switched-On Gutenberg*. She lives in Athens, GA.

HARRY BAULD is from Medford, Massachusetts. He was included by Matthew Dickman in *Best New Poets 2012* and his poems have appeared many publications, including *Nimrod*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *Verse Daily*, *Ruminate*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Whiskey Island*, and *The Adirondack Review*. He won the 2008 *New Millenium Writings* poetry prize. He has taught and coached baseball, basketball and boxing at high schools in Vermont and New York.

BRANDON BELL lives in Louisville, Kentucky. His stories

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CAROL BERG's poems are forthcoming or in *Sou'wester*, *The Journal*, *Spillway*, *Redactions*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Verse Wisconsin*, and elsewhere. Her most recent chapbook, *Her Vena Amoris* (Red Bird Chapbooks), is available and her chapbook, *Ophelia Unraveling* is available from Dancing Girl Press. Another chapbook, *The Ornithologist Poems* (Dancing Girl Press), is forthcoming.

CONOR BRACKEN's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bodega*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Lungfull*, *Mudfish*, and elsewhere. He has received fellowships from the Squaw Valley writer's conference and Inprint and was a finalist in the 2013 *Mudfish Poetry Contest*. Originally from Virginia, he's taught English in France, tested software in Argentina,

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KWAME DAWES is the author of nineteen books of poetry and numerous other books of fiction, criticism, and essays. He has edited over a dozen anthologies. His latest collection, *Duppy Conqueror: New and Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon) appeared in 2013. He is Glenna Luschei Editor of *Prairie Schooner* and teaches at the University of Nebraska and the Pacific MFA Program. He is Director of the African Poetry Book Fund and Artistic Director of the Calabash International Literary Festival.

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BRAD FELVER's fiction has



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Born in a trailer parked on a former gravel quarry, DYLAN HENDERSON has lived his whole life in the Cherokee Nation. After earning degrees in literature and history, he now spends his time building wooden toys—mostly castles and elaborate fortifications—and working on his own home, a turn-of-the-century farmhouse outside of Radium Town. He can see the remains of the old bath house through his upstairs window.

JOSEPH HOLT has taught at the American College of Norway, the University of Minnesota and the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. He's currently pursuing his PhD in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. His writing has appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Colorado Review*.

PATRICIA HORVATH's stories and essays have appeared in numerous journals, among them *New Ohio Review*, *Confrontation*,

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LESLEY JENIKE's newest collection of poems is *Holy Island* (Gold Wake Press, 2014). Even newer work is forthcoming in *Passages North*, *Natural Bridge*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, and *Waxwing*. She teaches at the Columbus College of Art and Design in Columbus, Ohio where she lives with her husband and new daughter.

M.P JONES IV recently received a master's in literature from Auburn University. He is founder and editor-in-chief of *Kudzu House Quarterly*, a southern journal of literature and environment. His recent work includes poetry in *The Painted Bride*, *Harpur Palate*, *Portland Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Canary Magazine*, *Cumberland River*

*Review*, and others; awards such as the Robert Hughes Mount, Jr. Poetry Prize and others; book reviews in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and others, and a collection of poetry, *Live at Lethe* (Sweatshoppe Publications, 2013). He teaches first-year and creative writing courses at Point University in West Point, GA. Visit his author's page at [ecopoiesis.com](http://ecopoiesis.com).

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MATT KISH is a self-taught artist who has also enjoyed stints as a groundskeeper, a DJ in a strip club, a bookseller, and a high school English teacher. He is currently a librarian in Ohio where he lives with his wife, their two frogs, and entirely too many books.

MICHAEL LAUCLAN's poems have appeared in many publications

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MERCEDES LAWRY has published poetry in such journals as *Poetry*, *Nimrod*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry East*, *The Saint Ann's Review*, and others. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize, she's published two chapbooks, most recently *Happy Darkness*. She's also published short fiction, essays and stories and poems for children. She lives in Seattle.

Originally from Moldova, RUTH MADIEVSKY lives in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *ZYZZYVA*, *The Journal*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She is working on her first poetry collection, as well as a collection of linked stories. She is a doctoral student at USC's School of Pharmacy.

HUGH MARTIN is a veteran of the Iraq war and the author of *The Stick Soldiers* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 2013) and *So, How Was the War?* (Kent State UP, 2010). He is currently the 2014-15 Emerging Writer Lecturer at Gettysburg College.

DANIELLE MITCHELL directs The Poetry Lab in Long Beach, California. Her prose poems have appeared in *decomp*, *Union Station Magazine*, *Freeze Ray*, *Connotation Press*, and others. She is an alumna of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers and recipient of the Editor's Choice Award from *The Mas Tequila Review*. She guest writes for *DIY MFA* and blogs at poetryofdanielle.com.

JIMMY J. PACK JR. is a part-time lecturer in writing at Penn State-Abington and is a graduate of the Creative Writing MFA program at Temple University where he worked on his first creative nonfiction "novel" that he is currently shopping around, titled *Dispatches to America: A Route 66 Memoir*, of which From "The Cathedral Of Denny's" is a part. He has been published in *Rosebud*, *Lost on Route 66: Tales from the Mother Road*, *Taproot*, *Steam Ticket*, *The Rockford Review*, *Bluestem*, *The Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Palo Alto Review*, *The Evansville Review*, *Cooweescoowee*, *The Vermont Literary Review*, *Bull*, and *American Road Magazine*.

SARAH PAPE teaches English and

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RICHARD PRINS is a New Yorker who sometimes lives in Dar es Salaam. He received his MFA degree in poetry from New York University and currently serves as poetry editor for the literary series *Ink.ed MFA*. His poems and nonfiction narratives appear in publications like *Barrow Street*, *Cimarron Review*, *Portland Review*, *Rattle*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and *Transition Magazine*.

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A Michigan native, MIKE

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NOEL SLOBODA's work has recently appeared in *Bayou*, *Fourteen Hills*, and *PANK*. He is the author of the poetry collections *Shell Games* (sunnyoutside, 2008) and *Our Rarer Monsters* (sunnyoutside, 2013) as well as several chapbooks. Sloboda has also published a book about Edith Wharton and Gertrude Stein.

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CHARLES HARPER WEBB's latest book, *What Things Are Made Of*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2013. *Brain Camp*, his next book, will be published by Pitt in 2015. Recipient of grants from the Whiting and Guggenheim foundations, Webb teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at California State University, Long Beach.

LARRY JAMES WORMINGTON is 46 years old and a former Marine. He has an MFA from the University of New Orleans and a BA from the University of North Texas. Professionally, he works in instructional design, where he has published several local articles on the process. When he's not spending time with his wife and four incredible children, he writes military short stories and fights procrastination in all relevant matters.

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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](http://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.

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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](http://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

OPENS: February 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](http://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.

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