

GULF COAST

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GULF COAST Volume 16, Number 1, Winter/Spring 2004

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Errata: Poetry Editors Brian Barker and Nicky Beer were left off of the masthead of Volume 15, Number 2. The Managing Editor sincerely apologizes for the mistake.

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Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor

—after Cy Twombly

In the love as they know it, they take turns on their knees
at the altar that's never without one of them there, a murmur
unceasing in the chapel's small air. Midnight, the middle

of the night, then dawn, heat, the hills beyond the convent
turning deep green: the prayer continues unbroken for years,
one nun arriving to summon back to daylight the one

who has been praying for hours, her voice a rosary bead
meant to be the exact circumference of the others, perfect
with belief. Meanwhile, a man faces one painting for twenty

years, only to find the question he had asked at the start:
What is in your sight now? On the canvas, the journey tells
a pilgrim's progress of paint scumbles, crayola scratches,

histories and jokes told, forgotten, found again, until the torn
head singing in the stream is the world singing: *his mortal
heart pressed out an inexhaustible wine.* In the book that

Brian lends me, he has penciled in things meant for no one else to see: *dancing in forest, expressing self to you, breaking up*, directives in the margins like papyrus bits coming

to us half-speaking, so that all day I walk around as though a bowl were balanced on my head, the fish inside kissing their glass perimeter. The convent is miles outside the city

where my grandmother spent the war making herself ugly: soot on her face, rags to wear, her eyes on the street, the newsprint blackness hiding her from what the Japanese

soldiers would have seen: *sampaguita, paddy, blood river*. And what's underneath keeps rising to the crumb-specked surface: John jumping off the plane jams into the door's

side, dislocates a shoulder, and tries to put it back in before he passes out, falling, numbers in his head counting the time when he has to pull the chute. Outside, it is summer:

the clearing's downed birches are melting into rot, chip by chip. From this distance they seem a painter's sketch of drapery, the sheets covering something passed away,

machine or horse's rib-cage or an old man sleeping, blind, *wisdom at one entrance quite shut out*, the ants investigating the folds, the sockets, the nose-holes. Streets, houses,

remnant names murmured late in a meal: my grandmother tells us who collaborated, how they cheered in the hills when the planes finally arrived, whose babies were thrown

toward the bayonets. Told now as if an afterthought: all that was cunningly lived through and seen from this soft shore. Finishing his painting, the painter draws a boat

already fading into the water, its black shape exhausted by the white water, and the old poet is so silent with grieving that he has to be given the word of his farewell. A spore's

ground zero, the turf and its smallest blades, the thistle's battlements, the hypercium's red, phallic buds. Tell it cold, I tell myself. Tell it dark: the berry eyes of gods retreating

into trees. Tell it without need of answer: a man falls from a plane, my grandmother washes her face, a hand puts yellow meadowlarks into a drawer, each bird tagged to show

where it was shot. Like Hermes, Ben spends the afternoon rollerblading naked in the house. Even the elbow a star, even the eye a kingdom. Outside, it is summer: even at noon

the cicadas are synchronized, dense as heat, the chinaberries in the thickets are round as vowels, white veins in their translucent red. The surrounding fields, the pond's surface

corrugated with wind. The berries in a glass: these are what
I will bring back, standing underneath the pure welder's
sparks of a trolley's crossed wires, the fire of a beginning.

Angry Elegy for a Long-Dead Friend

Last night when you appeared
you brought the sacks of shoes
and folded clothes that stood
waiting in your garage
for someone else to remove
the day you died.

Because you were laid out
at the coroner's when I arrived
you couldn't know what I saw:
boots and sneakers, sandals
jammed in grocery bags, shirts
and pants no longer stylish.

Months before, what was it
you said, "Don't come around
here again?" So why these visits?
Why the burden of this evidence?
And silent as you are
does your presence beg forgiveness?

There was also, you should know,
a flat tire that gave your car
a slouched, defeated look.

I saw it before I saw the discards.
In Dante's hell the souls
spend their time repaying themselves

with their own sins. He witnessed
their anguish but was rarely moved
and Virgil never. Next time
you visit bring that tire,
wear it like a necklace
and we'll set it on fire.

What Is Not Science Is Art Is Nature

I am dreaming a hole right into the voice of God.
Straight into the dark place my children were made

but can't follow me back to. Right into the room
whose windows are too high up to see out,

though the sloped-roof is too low for me to stand up.

In New York snow is unusual, arrives like a childhood
memory that might not have happened, disappears

without changing anything. But do we say,
when it snows, because some countries

don't believe in snow, *I dreamed*
of snow? No, we say the news was right or wrong.

We say this strong desire for a window—huge square
glass through which a child standing up in a crib

at night alone in a room at the bottom of a flight
of stairs far from the mother in winter sees:

a Greenwich Village garden cast in urban glow,

quiet, because snow in the 70s was enough
to make the city slow and mute—is real.

So, say it really happened. That doesn't mean

it will again or did. Or that the dream
doesn't make you ordinary.

Unus Mundus

The sky once lay flat upon the earth.
It took a hero to get between them,

shove him up into the firmament.
You think they never again—?

Below your clean shadow:
a sunlit prairie. A wheat field,

from the air, plush and temperate.
The breeze is a brave caress. There is

something I see in you: tip, edge, hint
—the skin of it. Shifting wheat field

over fertile soil over subterranean cavern
over water over igneous over molten.

The Missing Thing

I got up before her every morning
to walk three rainy February blocks
to the best and cheapest boulangerie.
Our secret, we said, and didn't tell friends.

*Bonjour Madame, bonjour Monsieur,
une baguette s'il vous plait, oui Monsieur,
merci Madame, merci Monsieur.*

The spell had to be pronounced perfectly
to make the magic happen. By the time
I returned, she had everything ready.

The jam pots and butter, napkins, knives, plates,
juice and coffee. Her face lustrous with sleep
as she turned toward me. I kissed her
with my coat on, she glowing with heat,
me glowing with cold. I'm only
missing one thing, she said. Indicating
the empty wicker basket on the table.

Natural History

Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris

Ces sont des vrais os, Maman? But maman
was busy with her lipstick and didn't
answer. The Tyrannosaurus at whose feet

we huddled like a clutch of chickens was
likewise reticent. Head in the leaded-glass clouds.
Across the park, real bones—submerged for now

in flesh—paced their cages. The polar bear
on his shit-smeared concrete floe seemed
utterly insane. He lay on his back

catching hunks of baguette, or rubbed his snout
mechanically against a drainage grate.
Two wolves sharing a stringy rabbit watched

taxis swarm the boulevard, stupefied
as kids glued to cartoons. *Some are, most aren't,*
I wanted to tell the girl, but before

I could work out the words she'd wandered
toward a case filled with jars
of yellow liquid and patent reality: sheep

heads, Siamese fetuses, a fat snake
coiled like a spring. Later, in the park,
I saw her playing in the gravel

with a plastic Stegosaurus while maman
studied *Elle*. Crows and jets mixed up the sky.
Wildflowers bloomed in rows. The ersatz monster,

supplied by the girl with fury, stamped ants.

Basel

No, the French engineers were not on strike.
Then, yes, they were. So in Basel station
that New Year's morning, we stamped the cold

down into the platform. When the loudspeaker crackled,
we imagined the *chef de la gare* at his desk,
peering over his glasses at the bulletin from Paris

that would set the trains in motion, clearing
his throat to deliver order and instructions.
Then nothing. The box sparked again. It had a short,

was somehow broken. But each time it snapped
its fingers we stranded passengers looked up
from our books and stale sandwiches, into light

strained of color by the sooty glass roof, like a throng
of extras in a movie about the war, and assumed
we would now be told all was well, and what to do.

Oni Buchanan

The Guinea Pig and the Green Balloon

I approached the luminous stranger who came to me
from darkness in a gown of lettuce leaves, in a velvet

cloak of green that appeared at first another piece of dark,
but pulled apart into the glow-sphere that danced

in swaying steps, the lucent majesty that slipped toward me
from the reigning silence black above my cage.

Oh extravagant—and were my teeth too sharp to greet
or sharp enough? I do not understand now what was meant

to happen and what was a mistake—but know the bursting,
the sickening snap of ecstasy wrenched back to the body

and the green gown flung in crippled circles traced
like diagrams of wasting moons above my head—or portals

to another world, I thought, but as I thought, the shriek
dissolved, the body crumpled from the air and landed

on its side beneath the salt lick. All night I tended
the wasted skin and careful, brought it water,

alfalfa, made a bed of cedar chips and tried to gather
molecules of breath that floated from the plant shelf.

When I remembered morning, I began to cry, began to pray
for night to stay until the green took shape again

and if that shape were gone, I prayed for night
to stay, to be held in the same forever-dark

in which I first looked up and saw the gentle body,
and saw the graceful swaying of the stranger coming

as if for me—now I do not know—but then,
as if for me, and all my loneliness gone.

Monica Ferrell

Myths of the Disappearance

I rise like a red balloon, untethered and vacant.

The essence of my dolor has become rarefied,
Holy; like a fragrance, bodiless, without referent.
It is a pale shadow on the sun, a wasp's-wing, accidental
Splash of poison on the white rose's thorn—
I twist it in my fingers and faint. *Shall I tell you?*

There was one bad fairy at my birth, there came one curse,
One blister, one drop of mercury in the moult of me
And everything was ruined after.

Still it is
No good; the words drift from me like ashes.
I am so old now, I have left half my life
In caves hollowed out in rock by the seashore:
I prayed in each one, and could not find my way back,
Or lied when the password was asked, or turned my back
Making gestures of despondency at the roiling surf.

In a mirror I shot all my hateful selves, the yesterdays.

The Care and Feeding of Mermaids

Far from Indiana and the soup we made of her bones
lies the ocean, cheap and full of secrets.
There are certain things you have to know.
We carried her over land, iced down in a truck.
We remember her eyes, mostly, orphaned
and crossed by the sea. We fed her
bits of herself, and other fish.
We checked and rechecked the math.
We stuck her with vitamins, wrapped her in wet cloth.
Otherwise, we believed, her legs would begin,
but the fever that would have killed her anyway
had made the skin tough above the flesh,
a sheet of rusting steel across a soft bed,
and there was the smell of ammonia.
Her heart was dying, and protective of rain, which was her
blood,
which is one thing the books were wrong about, make note.
It's true that most of the myth
we'd already murdered by the shore
when we drew her from the net,
and when our palms burned into the slime that gilded her
it smelled of apricots cooked in mud.
We looked and looked for the gills.
We won't make that mistake again.

Starfish called from the waves
with a sound one could have mistaken for laughter,
but most of us heard as instructions.
The gulls seemed to drop from webs
out of a sky impossible to read.
How to feed her air was a concern, but briefly.
Someone cried out about lungs
and wrapped her hair with kelp.
Yes, she flopped, but as a woman would.
I went to the gas station for ice and bait,
but mostly she was lost from the start.
Later, when we separated the top from the bottom,
I couldn't help but think
we were seeing the last of something.
We found pills and bread inside her, you should note.
We saved samples of tissue,
pale wafers of information which give us hope.
But there was no tool, no matter how sharp,
could dissociate her eyes,
could find the difference between the foam and dirt
in her biology, not there.
We knew enough not to try
until we were full and sad, like cartridges.
At first the eyes seemed healthy on their own,
freed, come-hither, and looking West for the body
which we'd dumped in a ditch, lord help us.
It is in this way that surgery helps you think, like what we
did with her legs

(I see them still, electric and pink),
though I do not wonder what she thought of us,
brave and ashen, embarrassed for our hands.
She didn't have a language to tell us anyway;
just ragged whispers toward the end,
like a god being forced through a keyhole.
Some men who heard her dove into the rocks.
Those who did not die wonder of their pulses, to this day,
and search for it in their wrists.
So the throat and tongue we fear to examine,
though we've preserved them, and they fail to sing.
One hopes she thought well of us, however,
when we finally did the quiet thing
then laid her on the table. Her eyes
were lonely for nerve and reef;
the night was young; two plus two
was often four, and all across America
beauty comes to such an end.

Tomaz Salamun

Young Creatures

Like irony, the cotton-wadded festivities
grip harder than anthems, harder
than the claws of cancer, the suffocating laughter
massages the sky. Frail little girls so ravaged sometimes

by an attack of the giggles that like leaping gazelles
they rush off to pee, proof of the terrible pressure
inside the body of a young creature. That's why questions
like, please, tell me what's so funny so I can

laugh, too, are really incredibly idiotic.
Madam, your soul stuck out for so long
it faded in the air, whereas it just happened
to the young creatures. With men it pushes out

body hair, which make you think their soul
is made of parallel wicks or ribbons,
while a woman's soul is round as a head.
These are the forms. A burst of laughter is silk.

Translated by Christopher Merrill and the author

Peter Chilson

American Food

Professor Keita Traore is, according to the best authorities on West African ecology, *the man* on the soils of the Sahel region. He knows what should and shouldn't be grown there. He can talk dirt across six countries, which gives him a certain marketability in a land wasting away under heat, wind, and too little water. Governments pay him to study the land where he grew up herding goats and cows and planting yams with his father, mother, and brothers. He has advanced degrees in biology, botany, and geology from France and the United States. He can pick up an infrared satellite photograph of, say, the Tchintabaradene district in Niger and tell you what the soil depths are at a given longitude and latitude, what plants grow there, and how much carbon can be found at six centimeters. And he can do it fluently in four languages.

But Keita Traore can't cook goat head, his favorite food. The sheriff's deputy sees this clearly. He pokes a stick at the thing floating in a pot of steaming water on a dual burner camping stove in the lilac bushes behind Keita's apartment building, part of a complex of clapboard townhouses on the edge of the eastern Oregon town where Keita and his family live. Each townhouse has its own burnt out lawns, front and back, dense with thistle and morning glory.

Keita likes the town and this part of Oregon, so like home, a vast land, dry and difficult. He walks to work at the state agricultural college where he has been for ten years as a student and now works as a professor. Rocky slopes of sagebrush and dwarf pines rise above town. For a century, cattle ranchers have barely hung on in these hills, complaining of wolves before they killed them all, and now of coyotes and poor rains.

His children, a boy and girl, are indifferent to the land. Aissa, his wife, worries. She pleads, carefully, when she is alone with him. "Keita," she says, "our children do not know the country where they were born."

Keita bows his head and begs patience. Aissa *is* patient and defiant. She savors heat, preferring bright cotton dresses and wraps in summer as if to celebrate the sun, and in winter a brilliant orange down parka, and boots. She tells people, "I dress to defy your rain." She is beautiful, shorter than her husband, with close-cropped black hair and cool green eyes. Aissa has known Keita since they were children in the village. She followed him to the capital. He went to university, and she trained to be an accountant. She knows how life would be at home on an \$800 annual civil service salary. She waits.

The deputy squints, his head cocked to one side as he looks down at the pot, holding the stick at his side. The skull is still covered in thin brown and white fur.

"What is this?" the deputy says.

Keita hesitates. It is early afternoon in August and he and the deputy sweat. The skull bobs and rolls a little as the water begins to boil.

"Well, you see," he says, "it's . . . goat head . . . We eat it." His voice is barely audible. He stands with his hands folded in the small of his back, expecting to be arrested again. Suddenly, Keita thinks, my God, he cannot believe this is actually some person's head. The shape is obviously not human, and there is the fur. He starts to wonder how he's going to explain this to the deputy, but that thought is quickly replaced by the worry of how this will play in the campus newspaper.

**AFRICAN MAN ARRESTED BOILING
SKULL IN HIS BACK YARD**

Police suspect headhunter connection

The deputy nods and smiles. He says, "Goat head, huh." He looks about 40, a lean man with short graying hair and a tanned face beginning to wrinkle around blue eyes. He looks up at Keita, who is over 6'5" and thin, a build he inherited from his mother, whose people come from the West African coast. Suddenly the deputy grins. He says, "Cool!"

This would have been, Keita figures, his third food-related arrest in the United States. He was first arrested or detained (he's never been sure of the difference) a decade earlier at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. He'd arrived on a flight from Paris (on his way to Oregon to begin graduate studies in soil science) with a suitcase full of Chinese green tea, dried carp from the Niger River, dried tomatoes, and dried goat meat, all of which he'd brought to make his meals more like home. He likes to tell people, particularly his undergraduate students, that he enjoys his meals "robust." He likes to say it's important to understand the source—the very earth in which vegetables are grown and the animals from which the meat is cut.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that," a student once replied, "It sounds kind of gross."

"My friend," Keita said, "you might very well be in the wrong class."

Anyway, he'd wrapped the food items in clear plastic bags. This way there would be no questions from customs about what he was carrying.

"I still don't understand what I did wrong," he wrote Aissa after he was freed from a federal immigration detention center a week later. She was pregnant with their second child and had stayed behind with their son until Keita could afford to bring them over. "I declared everything as 'dried and processed foodstuffs' . . . They took nearly all of it and then tried to charge me with

smuggling drugs. They thought the tea was marijuana. I can tell you that one officer in the jail was a woman. She took me out of my cell one day, just me and no one else. We went to the cafeteria, and she got me a cup of coffee. The coffee in the jail was awful, Aissa, the worst I have ever tasted in my life. I am sure it was not coffee. I thought certainly I was in the most serious trouble, but all this woman wanted from me was to ask if any of the items in my luggage would help her husband during sex. I told her what I had told them at the airport many times—that it was all meat and vegetables prepared according to our Muslim traditions. I asked her if they don't value meat and vegetables in America. That made her angry. She said I was being 'sarcastic.' But I meant no offense. I tried to explain about food in our country, I wanted to tell her about our village and my mother, but she walked away."

Indeed, when it comes to food, sarcasm has no place in Keita's life. He is passionate and particular and proud. He wanted to tell the jail guard many things about Africa. He wanted to tell her that when he was a boy, in 1973, his mother took him into the bush one morning and showed him that he could eat the leaves off a balanite tree. It was planting season, and they'd gone out to sow sorghum seed after a weak monsoon rain. Their fields spread out on a sandy plain, a savanna marked by thin grasses and scattered acacia, ficus and balanite trees, a place where decades earlier grass had grown thick and trees had

thrived not in great density but a few meters apart in every direction. Now dust hung in layers over the land that he and his mother walked. Trees were few, like mere guests of the soil. Farmers marked the corners of their fields with stones, or they cut a mark in a tree. Sometimes farmers from different villages fought over the fields—bloody, terrible conflicts with hoes, fists and knives.

Keita's mother was 28 years old, a tall muscular woman with skin deeply wrinkled from a life of labor in the sun. She'd borne seven children by then. Keita remembers she wore a green cotton wrap that morning and cloth wound around her head. She looked old to him. Keita had no idea how young his mother really was. She began working one row ahead of him, bending at the waist and sinking her hoe into the ground with her right hand, while plucking seeds with her left from a cloth pouch at her waist and pressing them into the hole with her thumb. She'd move sideways almost at a run, never actually stopping. After a few minutes he was already several rows behind her, which was partly because he enjoyed watching her work. She moved on her toes, her feet in blue plastic sandals and kicking up wet sand while her hands moved up and down and around at the end of strong arms. He marveled at those legs and arms constantly in motion, never wasting a movement, as if she were an insect performing a dance across the earth. She never made a mistake; her seed rows were straight. He tried to imitate

her, tried to capture the rhythm and speed of her movements; but he fell in the wet dirt. Keita wondered if his mother had seen him stumble.

After a while she stood straight, and he watched her walk across the field and grab hold of a balanite branch and pull the leaves off. She ate them. The leaves were common food, harvested and then boiled to mix with vegetables. But to eat them right from the tree—Keita had never seen that. She sat in the sand, in the shade of the tree, chewing and staring at something in the distance. Keita didn't want her to think he wasn't working hard, and he pretended not to see her, even though he thought her eating of the leaves very strange. Later that day, when the work was done and he had a few minutes alone, Keita went into the bush to find a balanite tree. He took a fistful of the leaves, which were thick and colored a greenish gray from dust. He raised his hand to his mouth and tasted one with his lips and tongue. He bit into it and the flavor was slightly bitter, but good. He ate more, appreciating the easy food. Drought had killed many of the family's goats and cows, and there was little hope this rain would be followed by enough water to make good on the seeds Keita and his mother had sown that morning. But at least the trees grew there.

The deputy looks at the head in the pot and laughs in a muted way, forcing air out his nostrils. He flings the stick into the bushes. With his hands on his hips, he studies Keita, looking up at this tall man with charcoal skin and bony frame in khaki pants, shiny loafers, and a white cotton short sleeve shirt buttoned down at the collar—dressed as if he's just come from a semi formal business meeting. Keita always presents his best when he leaves the house. He wears similar clothes into the field in Africa, though with boots.

"People," Keita likes to tell colleagues in the field, "if I am to get dirty, at least I will be dirty and well dressed."

The deputy wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, trying to figure out what to say. "So you're over at the college?" he asks, making a conversational guess. Most foreigners in town were somehow connected to the college.

Keita tilts his head up impatiently and rolls his eyes, wishing the deputy would get to the point. He raises his arms in a little shrug and lets them fall to his sides. He says more slowly and loudly, "Look, it is only the head of a goat."

The deputy purses his lips and glances down at the pot on the stove, which has not been turned off. "Yeah," he says, nodding his head in agreement. "Seems to me you should probably roast it first, you know? Throw it on the hot coals in a barbecue, or else you're gonna be boiling that thing all day long." He gives Keita a friendly tap on the

shoulder with his open hand. "But wrap it in foil or something will you? Your neighbor upstairs thinks you're some sort of cult freak."

He laughs in a staccato clatter and then stops himself and coughs when he sees Keita staring at him. "Sorry," he says, scratching the back of his neck. "I didn't mean any harm by that." He smiles weakly. "But we did get this phone call . . . You know, if you'd just cook right out in the open, on the lawn, you'd probably attract a lot less attention."

Keita wipes his brow with his shirtsleeve, more humiliated than relieved—not so much about the "cult freak" thing (he's used to overwrought American imaginations—for years the biology department secretary wouldn't stand within five feet of him because she feared he carried the Ebola virus), but that he actually has to endure cooking instructions from an American. From a common *gendarme*.

Once, in Africa, Keita had been obliged to travel with an American embassy official. The man had floppy red hair and worried about sunburn. He kept asking, "We won't spend much time in the sun, will we?" They were inspecting soil study sites funded by American money, and one day, on their way to a site in a Chevrolet Suburban, they stopped in a village to fix a flat tire. The village chief was an old man who, as a matter of traditional courtesy to travelers, insisted on feeding them with goat meat and

rice. The chief's wife served the food hot, spread out on a large metal plate. She soaked the rice in a dark tomato sauce with bits of meat. Keita, the American, and the chief washed in a bucket of soapy water and sat on mats arranged around the plate to eat with their hands. The American dug in with all ten fingers, spilling rice and meat in the dirt as he ate, while Keita and the chief ate cleanly with their right hands, rolling the food into balls with their fingers before sucking it off their fingertips and into their mouths. The chief smiled at the American and in his own language called for his wife to get a spoon. When she brought one, the American politely waved it away. "No, no," he said in English, "I'll eat like everyone else."

Keita laughed as the man continued spilling his food. "That's not like everyone else," he said. "Take the spoon."

The second food-related arrest—it really wasn't an arrest, but Keita thinks of it that way—happened four years after the Chicago airport incident, in the parking lot of a diner in Portland, Oregon, down the street from a hotel where Keita, against his better judgment, was attending a conference called *African Food Systems: A Western Perspective*. He was in his last year of studying for his Ph.D. and had gone to breakfast with two American masters students whose work he oversaw at the college

agricultural laboratories. Keita folded himself awkwardly into the booth, rising a full head above his companions even as he sat. The pair stared at him while he salted his three fried eggs, hash browns and sausage, nearly emptying the saltshaker. But he had ordered only eggs and potatoes and pushed aside the sausage because as a good Muslim he could not eat meat prepared by a non-Muslim. Keita looked up and caught their eyes. "Salt," he said to them. "I need salt." Not knowing what to say, the two men looked back to their food. "It is an acquired taste," Keita continued. "I grew up in a place where one sweats a great deal."

"Yeah, well, be careful, man," said one of the students.

Keita looked at him a moment. Then, from the side of his plate, he picked up the little green parsley branch that lay beside a razor thin slice of melon and held it in front of them between his thumb and forefinger. "Ameriiiican foood," he said. "Very colorful, but there's really not much to it, is there?"

"Hey," said the same student, a skinny kid who sat beside Keita in a T-shirt and faded fatigue pants. He had long, stringy brown hair and a mouth full of waffle. "It's a diner, man, give it a chance."

Keita nodded, and in reply he speared a sausage with his fork. He raised his knife with a deep frown of mock concentration and poked at the surface of the impaled meat where there appeared to be a pale blue substance

oozing out. After a couple of minutes, during which his companions tried to ignore him, Keita finally determined that the substance was ink and that it formed a number.

"Hmmm," he said aloud, his eyebrows raised. "Did you know that this is sausage number three-seven-two?"

"Oh don't worry," said the skinny kid. "That's just the FDA inspection mark. They do that with restaurant meat."

The other student at the table winced as he sipped his coffee. "I didn't know that," he said.

Keita left the sausage on his plate and worked carefully on the eggs and potatoes. Then, this happened. Without looking at what he was doing, Keita inadvertently tossed a cup of lukewarm coffee on a waitress as she walked by the table. He'd meant the coffee for the floor. Actually for the dirt. This is a bit hard to explain, but it's important to understand that the action was just a reflex, a toss-it-over-the-shoulder kind of thing. Keita put his face in his hands as his lunch companions looked on stunned and then burst out laughing. The waitress, in shock, looked at the coffee dripping off the hem of her uniform dress and down her calf. She looked at them all for a minute before quietly saying, "Jerks! You are real jerks." Keita was horrified and tried to explain as she glared at him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Where I come from we always eat outside . . . I . . . I . . . forgot myself."

Keita's companions apologized, too, but the waitress walked away without saying a word more. At the front counter she picked up the telephone and called the cops.

"We gotta go," the Americans said, almost simultaneously. The two men dug in their pockets tossed three tens and a couple of fives and ones on the table to try and make up for the incident. They ushered Keita out of the restaurant only to see a police cruiser pull into the parking lot, its strobe lights flashing. The cruiser must have been right in the neighborhood when they got the call from dispatch. Two officers got out of the car.

"You the guys who can't mind your table manners?" asked one.

The police left 15 minutes later, after Keita and his friends told them the story, frantically, explaining that what Keita had done had been a subconscious act, an accident, the simple tossing of coffee in the proverbial dirt as if they had been at an outdoor restaurant. The skinny kid offered a run-on anthropology lecture about life and food and eating habits in hot places like Africa. "You see," he told the officers, "In Africa, the nutritional situation is much less complex, and that means they eat differently than we do."

The officers looked on, blank-faced. Keita screwed up his face in a look of quizzical amazement, and he heard himself do something he'd never done before—he barked a command. "Mike," he said, "please shut up!" He rubbed a hand over his face and turned to the officers, looking down at them as he spoke. "It was an honest accident and I am very sorry," he said. "I will certainly pay to launder her dress."

By now Keita has turned off the camping stove. The years have added curly flecks of gray to his hair, but his lean build and face, unlined except for a permanent furrow of his brow, give him the same earnest look he had when he was a graduate student. He folds his arms and watches the deputy pluck a notebook and pen from his breast pocket.

"Look, you haven't done anything wrong," the man says to Keita, "but I still have to make out a report. Now, what did you say your name was?"

Keita gives his full name and tells him about his homeland in West Africa and his work at the university and about his wife, Aissa, and their two children, Ahmed and Fatima, who are all, at that moment, wandering around Wal-Mart looking for lawn furniture. He doesn't tell the deputy that Ahmed and Fatima, who are nine and twelve years old respectively, were born in Africa, but grew up here in Oregon and about how upset it makes him that they cannot speak their parent's language, and how the children respond in English when he and Aissa speak to them in their tongue or in the colonial French.

"Speeeeeak English," the children whine, children whose lives are as different from the lives of children in the village where he and Aissa grew up as to be, well,

incomprehensible, at least to Ahmed and Fatima. "They think you and I come from the moon," Keita often complains to Aissa.

Instead, he politely tells the deputy that he'll go up to the apartment and retrieve the family passports for him to inspect.

"Naaa," says the deputy, shaking his head. "I don't need those." He scribbles in the notebook. After a while, he stuffs the notebook and pen in his pocket and folds his arms. "So," he says. "How do you eat goat head?"

Keita, who has been staring mournfully down at the pot, looks up at the deputy and smiles.

Keita had good reason to be boiling goat head in the bushes behind his apartment building. He'd planned to cook the head as a surprise for Aissa, a taste of home, no matter what his children thought. It made him smile that they would be horrified at the thought of eating a goat head. His idea was to prepare the head the way his mother had done it—on a bed of couscous soaked in the head's juices and dressed with onions, garlic and tomatoes, with plenty of salt. The meal was to be a medicine for Aissa's resentment of Keita's travels home to West Africa and the fact that she had not been back since she and the children had come to the United States eight years earlier. Keita had

promised to take the family back home that summer, but plane fare and expenses for the four of them, not to mention the expectations of the extended family, proved too much for him on a research professor's salary. For a while, Aissa did the books for small shops in town, but the pay was poor and infrequent. She gave up.

Keita's success as a scientist brought a balance of pleasures and problems, like the travel and the fact that he loved the contrast between his homeland and his adopted home. Eastern Oregon's winters are cold and sometimes snowy, but the climate is still dry in the high desert. There are even dust storms and violent summer rains, curses of the land he and Aissa understood well.

Once he'd taken Aissa and the kids on a picnic in the foothills of the Wallowa Mountains, where they walked in the woods and roasted meat and corn on the barbecue in the campground. Late that afternoon, as they were beginning the drive home, they watched the sky darken in the east as a line of thunderstorms gathered over a ridge densely forested with ponderosa pine. The sky cracked with bright lightning flashes, and rain burst from the clouds. Soft thunder sounded in the distance. Ahmed and Fatima had fallen asleep in the back seat, and Keita pulled the car off the road so he and Aissa could watch the storm, "Like at an American drive-in movie," he said to her. They watched the clouds move on and smoke rise from lightning strikes, thick white columns of smoke, like rope

connecting earth to sky. It was raining and the wind was blowing, but they kept their windows down because it was warm and the smell of sagebrush was strong.

"This is like home," Aissa said quietly.

"Yes," Keita said. "It's a very big land." Aissa looked at him and smiled. She squeezed his hand. Such a vast place made it possible for her—for both of them—to live far from home and still feel a certain familiar connection to the earth.

But Keita knew this wasn't enough. The landscape and the complexities of its soils were his own obsession, his work. He wanted to make things up to Aissa. A good meal was the best way he knew how. Yet it was not until he started the cooking process around noon—when he carried the camping stove and pot from the apartment while Aissa and the kids were at Wal-Mart, and made the trip back to the car to retrieve the goat head, and then finally took the bloody thing, which had been slaughtered that morning and wrapped in wax paper, out of a plastic bag and set it in the pot—that Keita realized he really had no clue what he was doing.

Early that morning he'd been standing outside a large barn negotiating with the rancher from whom he would buy the goat. The rancher, in fact, was a friend, Sheryl Banks. She was a tall, sandy-haired and sunburned woman who taught veterinary science at the college and had an office one floor up from Keita's. Sheryl and her husband

ran a clinic on a ranch where they raised sheep and goats and a few horses. In the hallway outside her office a few days earlier, Sheryl and Keita made a deal to meet at the ranch early on a Saturday morning. She greeted him at the barn in jeans and a T-shirt, steel-toed work boots and a dirty khaki ball cap pulled down over long thick graying hair tied back in a ponytail.

Keita showed up in his neat office clothes, wearing sneakers and carrying a leather shoulder bag. She took him to a small enclosure with wire mesh fencing and wooden feed troughs. They fed their goats here, in the shadow of a large barn. "We give 'em feed grown without any chemical fertilizers," she said. "Best meat you'll ever have."

Keita quickly chose the fattest goat, one with a coat of white fur and brown and white head. They settled the price, then disagreed, politely, about how to properly slaughter the animal. Sheryl offered to do it herself, but Keita wanted it done in accordance with Muslim ritual—the cutting of the animal's throat with the wound facing east, the direction of the Holy City of Mecca, where the Prophet Mohammed was born. This way the blood would spill on the earth, cleansing it and honoring Muhammad's very memory and work in the name of Islam. Muslim hands alone must handle the animal, Keita explained. As they talked, Keita stood a few feet away from her, his hands folded behind his back, a posture of calm insistence.

Sheryl smiled at him, intrigued and unsure whether or not she should be annoyed. She said, "Don't you trust

me?" Then she smiled, a little flirtatiously. Sheryl Banks had known Keita Traore for seven years, since he was a graduate student in her animal anatomy class, one of the sharpest students she'd ever worked with. He was quiet and efficient, detailed and comfortable with animals, a good scientist. But she realized that morning that she really didn't know him at all. She said, a little playfully, "Keita, be honest, you won't let me touch the animal because I'm a woman, is that it?"

Keita politely smiled and told her a half-truth, and a half lie. "I won't let you touch the animal because you are not a Muslim," he said. This was true, but it was also true that in Keita's experience women were not permitted to butcher meat. "I know you are skilled," Keita added, "but this is not a matter of trust. It is a matter of ritual, I am a Muslim, you see. A Muslim must eat only meat that is slaughtered by himself or by another Muslim."

As Keita spoke, Sheryl studied him and scraped the toe of her boot in the dirt and hay, rubbing her chin and smiling. Finally, she shrugged. "Suit yourself," she said. "I don't mean to sound stupid, but I don't know, does the Koran actually have instructions for butchering meat?"

"The fifth chapter," Keita said. "We call it a *Sura*, the term for chapter. They are not instructions exactly, they are more like guidelines. In the third paragraph Allah warns us . . ." and he recited the deity's wishes, roughly, for the translation from Arabic on the spot was difficult for him:

You must not eat those animals which die of themselves, nor the blood of swine's flesh, and all that has been killed in any other name than that of Allah, and you must not eat the animals choked, or those animals killed by a blow, or fall, or a goring, or those killed by other animals, and you must make the animal clean by putting it to death by your own hand.

Keita looked at the ground awkwardly. He said, "Religion is not like science, I suppose."

American women, their directness and independence, particularly with men, made him nervous. But Sheryl's knowledge and her easy ability with animals impressed him. At the college horse stable he'd once watched her calm a horse that had become dangerously upset when somehow the hoof and ankle of one of its front legs became tangled in a strand of barbed wire carelessly left in an exercise corral. Sheryl entered the corral alone as the animal ran about frantically, at one point rearing on its hind legs to shake the wire off. She calmed the horse, talked the animal to a point where it stood still while she knelt on one knee and slowly removed the wire. Keita thought she must have special powers.

"I didn't mean to be rude," Sheryl said, suddenly.

"You weren't," Keita said. "We are both scientists—we are askers of questions."

She entered the pen and quickly put a rope around the goat's neck. She led Keita and the goat into the barn to a corner where a large cement slab on the ground sloped

into a drain. He carefully washed his hands at a large sink, using a bar of soap left by the drain. She grabbed a pair of oversized and bloodstained jean overalls from a hook and handed them to Keita. "You best wear these over your clothes," she said. Then she asked, "You don't mind if I watch?"

"Please," Keita said, "not at all." He looked away for a moment. Then he said, "I don't want to be trouble for you, but I must do this outside, in the dirt. It is important, you see, that I spill the blood on the soil in the open air in order to cleanse the earth.

She shrugged again, her hands thrust deep in her jean pockets. "Sure," she said, "yeah, out back of the barn. There's plenty of room." They walked across the barn, Keita carrying the overalls over his arm. Sheryl pushed open a heavy wooden door, and they emerged in an area of hard packed dirt beside an empty horse corral.

"This will be fine," Keita said. He pulled the overalls on over his clothes.

Sheryl stood back and watched this very tall man take the animal by the head and rear and flip it on its side, pressing down on its head with one hand and kneeling on the torso, as if he'd been doing this all his life, which he had. Normally, another man would be holding down the goat's torso and legs, but he would not let Sheryl touch the animal during the slaughter. Keita moved the goat so its head and throat faced east and yanked the head back to

expose the throat. Then, with a freshly sharpened knife he'd brought from home in the leather bag, Keita made a long deep cut across the throat from left to right. He did it in one motion and carefully bled the animal, as he leaned on its gasping and kicking body, uttering prayers in Arabic to honor both Islam and the animal for offering itself as food. "*Bismillahi . . .*," he began, in thanks to God.

Keita, breathing a little from the effort, took twine from the leather bag and a long screwdriver he'd bought just for the slaughter. Raising one of the goat's hind legs, he used the knife to cut and separate skin from bone just above the hoof, and then inserted the screwdriver beneath the skin, carefully working it up the leg, separating skin from bone, without piercing the skin. This way he scraped out an inch-wide tubular space between the skin and bone all the way up the leg. As a boy in Africa, he'd used a long, sharpened stick. Keita put down the screwdriver and again, raising the hind leg, he put his mouth to the opening of the space he'd made and began to blow, and blow, and blow, for several minutes until the animal was bloated like a parade balloon, its skin tight with Keita's own breath. He picked up the twine and wrapped it around the leg above the hoof, cutting off the escaping air. He smiled at Sheryl and let the dead animal sit a few minutes to give the air pressure time to loosen the skin from bone and muscle.

"Now it will be easier to skin her," he said.

Sheryl nodded. She said, "That was beautiful, the way you did that."

After a while Keita went back to work. He cut through bone and cartilage to remove the head and handed it to Sheryl, who looked back at him, surprised. He smiled. "Now," he said, "you can touch the meat." She took the head with both hands and set it on wax paper that she'd laid out on a table in the barn. He made a long incision from the throat along the belly, letting the animal's innards and some blood spill on the ground. He began cutting the skin away almost as easily as if he were peeling a large orange. Then he reached inside the animal to cut and scoop out the intestines and bladder and set it all in a bucket. He cut away the thighs, handing each to Sheryl who wrapped the meat in the wax paper. Keita left the rest of the torso as it was. They wrapped it and stored it in a large freezer in the barn. He washed again at the sink and removed his overalls. He'd finished the whole job in less than an hour.

Keita and Sheryl walked back to his car, each carrying packages of meat in wax paper and wrapped again in plastic bags. "Some day soon you'll have to bring your family out to the ranch for dinner," she said. "We'll eat the rest of that goat meat. And if you want, I'll let you do all the work."

Keita explains to the deputy, "Goat head is my favorite food. In my country people eat it most often in the morning because a head offers a full meal for the whole day. But I like to take it in the evening. It is good to sleep on a full stomach." Then he pauses and frowns a little. "How did you know how to cook goat head?"

The deputy grins. "I'm a hunter," he says. "And my brother runs a restaurant in Seattle." He shrugs. "I've never eaten goat head, but I know animals, and I can cook." He looks at his watch, which reads 2 p.m. "Get yourself a barbecue this afternoon, and I'm sure you can have this ready in time for dinner tonight."

Keita hikes his pants up and squats. He tilts the pot to drain the water into the grass, letting the head tumble out on the lawn. The animal's face stares back at the two men, its mouth open and tongue hanging out and its eyes as blank in death as they'd been in life.

"My mother prepared this for us often from the time when I was a small boy," Keita says. "I learned only how to eat it. I did not learn to cook it." He smiles at this thought. The deputy drops to one knee, his forearms resting on his right thigh. Keita continues. "I remember now, she would boil the heads for some time, all at once, in a great pot, three or four at a time, and then throw them on a fire. She would prepare a whole pile of them once a week and then sell them at market." The deputy listens, his eyes

on Keita's face. "But she always kept one or two for us. In the evening we would sit around the pot where my mother had set the heads in a hot salty sauce prepared from dried tomatoes, sometimes with rice or couscous. And we always used the same stone to crack open the skulls. We rinsed the stone in water, and my father hit the skulls on the forehead, just above the eyes." Keita laughs. "We would all, my brothers, my father and I, reach in for a handful of the brains first and scoop it out like this." He puts the thumb and fingers of his right hand together and curves them. "It tastes like liver, you know, and is very high in protein. The brain and the liver are the most nutritious parts of a goat. Then we would dig for the eyes and the tongue, which are difficult to chew but good to eat."

Suddenly the distant sound of children's voices comes from the other side of the apartment building. Car doors slam and Keita looks at the deputy, a little resigned.

He stands up and sighs. "My family," he says.

At that moment, Keita's son, Ahmed, runs around the corner of the building, holding a new basketball in both hands. Aissa and Fatima are chasing him, laughing. The children are dressed similarly in shorts and T-shirts and sneakers. When they all reach the lawn and the scene of the two men, the cook stove, and the head, Fatima screams and Aissa puts her hand over her mouth.

Ahmed looks at his father and the deputy, who smiles broadly and tries very hard to look as if nothing is wrong. The boy looks at the head in the grass and again from one man to the other and back to the head. His eyes grow wide and his mouth falls open.

“Dad,” he shouts, “what is that?”

Fatima stares. Aissa drops her hand from her mouth and begins to laugh.

Big Cats

"This summer," Polly says to me in her soft, scratchy-gravel voice, "I'm making it with a forklifter."

We're sitting alone, the two of us, in the woods behind our development, the Sylvan Townhouse Estates, changing into work uniforms, and her whispering mouth is up so close to my earlobe I can feel her lip gloss.

"Don't pair off with Polly all the time," my mother keeps on begging, "You need to expand your horizons." But she doesn't see that Polly is my horizon, and when she puts her arm around my shoulder and squeezes, the sweet, oily smell of her bubblegum makes me picture a hot tropical place where the two of us are getting stared at through the palm trees by hundreds of eyes.

"Last summer was for wishing," Polly says, "This summer is for fucking."

Her words are invisible, but they crash between my legs like giant cymbals.

Yesterday, all the second-season girls fourteen and under were taken aside at the orientation by Division Manager Weiss of the Washington Park Zoo. We were lined up on the loading dock at the side entrance after he had all the boys go stand by the timeclock outside his office, and he told us: "No female food and gift shop concessionaires are to mix with warehouse personnel on zoo grounds in zoo uniforms no matter what."

"Now Ladies," he said, leaning his bubble rear up against one of those oxygen tanks they use for pop, "warehouse jobs at these Zoological Gardens are community service positions, and the policy here is to leave those gentlemen well enough alone, especially while the Elephant House is under construction."

"Picture the Weiss fingering his vagina," Polly said out of the side of her mouth, and I was about to fall over on the floor holding my stomach. The things Polly says can make me do that. She makes me fall down in public all the time.

Now Polly scoots away, and dewy pine needles cling to the back of her legs. "Say it, Brenda," she says, "I want you to," so I take off my summer shorts, and in my newest bikini underwear with the leopard thunderbolt, I shout it out to her and the dark, empty woods.

"We fuck something from the warehouse or nothing at all!"

Last summer, when we were new, we couldn't believe the boys. Eight boys working Main Cafeteria, 5 boys with money belts taking tickets for the boats and trains, 6 boys in white paper hats leaning up against shade trees selling popcorn and sno-cones, 3 garbage pickers. But the forklifters were the best. Sweaty, shirtless, numberless boys with skull wristbands and visors and tattoos, racing in and out of the scaffolding behind the broken down Elephant House, backing boxes full of things into dark doorways, shifting gear after jerky gear.

"That's right, Blood-Sister," Polly says lifting up her hand. I lift mine too, and we clap those hands together hard. In the air they are the same hand. We leave them there and intertwine fingers. *Yeah.*

We have to be at work in less than twenty minutes, but Polly doesn't seem to be in a hurry at all. She's lying topless in the moss with her eyes closed, humming a song she's making up right this second, and I know for certain, she's got a much better chance of making it with forklifters. She has nice wide hips compared to me, and soft thighs that don't spread out when she sits on fences. Polly's hair is towhead also and so frizzy she can even use an afro-comb on it, no matter what style.

All I've got is plain silky brown hair that wants to lay down and not do a single thing. "It wants to be auburn too," my mother says, but she won't take me to the colorist until I'm fifteen. My hips are not wide either, but narrow, like a giraffe's.

The only thing in the entire world I do have compared to Polly Swann though, is a chest.

Even to this day she doesn't need to wear a bra under her uniform or any of her other clothes, and looking at her now, at her bare-boy flatness on top makes me worry all of a sudden, that they will never grow, and she will end up being bottom heavy. But then I remember that both of us have pretty decent faces, and if you took the bottom of her body and my top and put them together, I think forklifters would like us. I think we would balance each other out.

That's all I'm thinking about when I'm looking at her, regular thoughts, but a cloud comes over Polly's face. "What are you staring at?" she says, covering her nipples with her palms, which is easy because they are only about the size of two pink pennies.

"Nothing, Blood-Sister," I tell her, raising my shirt up and giving her a quick flash of my mother's bra with the lace cross straps and the rose in the center. "I stole it from her drawer."

"That is disgusting, Brenda," Polly says, scrunching up her face and rolling away. "Old sick-lady clothes."

I whip a stick in her direction. "She's not sick."

"Whatever."

"Well," I say in a high, stupid voice, knowing already by the tone that I will live to regret it. "Can't go bra-less anymore like you."

Polly shoves her middle finger in my direction. "Fuck off, anyway," she says, grabbing her clothes up in a wad. "I'm not sitting around here so you can stare at me like a perve."

Then she turns her back and slips into the rest of her zoo uniform, which is brown shirt with official patch, brown knee-length tie apron and ironed cotton pants with a crease. *No jeans.*

Nobody says anything to anybody while we're dressing, and when she's done, Polly leans up against a peeling birch whose papery bark crinkles as she rips big

sheets of it away. I know she shouldn't do that to the tree, but I'm scared to say anything, even when there's a smooth naked patch on the trunk that looks like it hurts.

"I'm not mad anyway, freak," she says, grabbing the big kitchen potholder mitt we keep in our hiding place near the fence. "You just shouldn't get so excited."

"Oh, please," I tell her, reaching for the potholder, which in reality is mine because I stole it from my mother after the hysterectomy last summer. In the old days before she had everything removed, she would have missed that potholder, but now that she's on the different hormones she barely ever cooks anymore. If it wasn't for Ed The Renter who lives in the downstairs and takes care of her, she'd probably set her bathrobe on fire.

"Get going then, Brennie," Polly says, shoving the potholder on my hand, and I lift the bottom strand of barbed wire so she can slide under. When it's my turn, I hear one of the peacocks calling down in the zoo and it makes me feel eerie. Like the sign of death.

"Brush me off?" I say, turning my back to Polly, but she's already balancing along the tracks of the little kid's railroad, heading off.

"I'm going my special way, ok?" she says, adjusting her afro-comb, and even though I want to, I don't follow her or try to catch up. Instead I act like I've got other things I'm thinking about and my own path too. She turns left at the Arctic Wolves without even looking around, so I cut up the

other way by the Sun Bears on purpose because that's the way it is with Polly. You have to give her space to do things. Like when we're at Crystal Ship getting records or at the Brass Plum Boutique, I let her browse on her own. I don't follow her from rack to rack when we're shopping and talk about the things she's looking at. And if you do that, if you ignore her, she'll always come back to you and show you the things she's picking.

I know Polly's special route to Main Cafeteria is shorter and she's secretly trying to beat me, so I jet past the Hippo Pond, sprint around The Ladybug Theater and cut up through Mini-Everglades. There's nobody around, so I pretend to be a spy on a mission. I hit the tunnel behind Polar Bear Island at my fastest pace yet, until I see a fat fire hose snaking along the ground toward the side entrance, and I have to stop then because I know it leads to a zookeeper.

The only reason I ever wanted us to work at the zoo at all was because of the animals. In the newspaper when I showed the ad to Polly, it said, "Animal Lovers Wanted." But zoo policy is that no one is allowed to assist the zookeepers. You can't even touch the food or help or even go into the Nocturnal or Monkey Houses when they're being cleaned. Weiss says you cannot even plug things in for a zookeeper or help them screw in a hose because there could be a lawsuit.

"Leave the keepers officially alone," is how he put it. "They *are* this zoo, and they don't have time to talk with any of the food and beverage personnel."

Zookeepers always come to work in perfect security-guard-looking uniforms with fancy walkie-talkies and rings of keys. Except it's not like you'd imagine from the nature shows where zoo experts are always so excited to show people animals and baby animals and how to hold them and things. It's rare to ever see the same zookeeper twice in one day. The only ones we see a lot are the two women that get to take care of the lions and tigers and snow leopards. "Big Cat Lesbians," Polly calls them, but I don't think they sleep in the same bed. Last summer, we saw them be in practically the same cage with a cougar.

I run my hand along the railing of Polar Bear Island as I sneak beside the hose watching Uba, the mother polar bear and Eka, the baby, while a zookeeper in work gloves and rubber boots stands right below the fake iceberg where they are sleeping, hosing down what's supposed to be the Artic Ocean.

She is tall and muscley with a long, red braid tucked through the back of her baseball cap, and she's sending a river of thick green water into a drain hole. There's a radio on down in the den too, and she's tuned it to the news on KISN. The D.J.'s voice is pretty loud, and her back is to me, so I quickly bend down and just for a minute, touch the hose because I've heard they can handle a lot of pressure.

Jim Kemper, one of the high school re-hires, says they can take up to forty pounds per square inch.

I've still got my hands on the hose as the water stops, and when I look up she is staring across her shiny blue surface of painted waves

"Can I help you, my girl?" she says loudly over the radio, and I can't tell if she's upset or not because her eyes are covered with little round sunglasses like John Lennon.

"Sorry," I say, removing my hand from that hose and standing up to walk away. But instead of getting mad the zookeeper smiles kind of crookedly. She goes over and turns down the volume on her radio so it's just dim mumbling, then comes over to the den doorway, dragging that heavy hose behind her like it's a body.

"What can I do for you today?" she says, still smiling, and I see there's a little chip in one of her front teeth.

I peek over her shoulder at Uba and Eka to see if they are listening to any of this, but those bears are lying flat on their faces like they're dead.

And even though I know we are never supposed to speak, I look her straight in the eye, just like Polly would've, and ask her the question we've had ever since the beginning of last summer when we saw the male snow leopard on top of the female making love to her over and over again on a log.

"I heard all the animals here are on birth control pills," I say. "Is that correct?"

The keeper doesn't answer right away. Instead, she takes her sunglasses off and looks at me seriously, checking out my uniform, and I can tell she thinks it was a smart question. "You betcha," she says. "But only the females, my girl."

The first thing I see when I get to Weiss' office in back of the Gift Shop is a bunch of first-season hires standing around in a little huddle in the courtyard with their plastic orientation notebooks and fold-out food service maps. The pants they are wearing are way too dressy of course, and they'll be sorry if Weiss puts any of them on french-fry grill.

I waltz through the center of the new-hire circle without having to say excuse me, then head for the second season area where I see Polly in a group of re-hire boys, leaning back against the wall with Dave Sengstake and Paul Folkstad, talking. At first she looks over and doesn't say anything to me, so I roll up my uniform sleeves and check the pockets of my cotton pants, until I hear Polly give a squealy little scream.

"Blood-sister," she calls to me now, because Sengstake has grabbed her around the waist, and Folkstad is reaching his whole hand inside her apron.

"Blood-sister," Polly yells again, trying to stomp on Folkstad's toes to keep him away. "C'mere and help me

honey, please." And even though I think technically we're still supposed to be mad at each other, I elbow in as close as I can through all the other re-hire boys who are starting to cluster around.

"I'm coming, Poll," I say, but five of them grab my arms behind my back, and all I can do is thrash while everybody starts rooting for people: boys for Sengstake, girls for Polly and me, until there's a muffled knocking from inside Weiss's Plexiglas and everybody gets quiet. All except for Polly, who's fighting so hard she doesn't even hear the door to the office complex creak its way open.

"Let go, Faggot," she screams, pony-kicking out fast and sharp at Sengstake's shins. "Butt-soldier!"

"Mademoiselle Swann," Weiss says in his calm, dictator voice, and as she turns all the wild electricity in her eyes fades. "Shall we have a little rendez-vous in my office?"

Polly's mouth works up and down, as if her jawbone is out of whack. "They're the ones who started it," she says, waving in the boys' direction. "Tell him, Brenda."

"She didn't do it," I say, looking down at Weiss' Nikes. "It was two ganging up on one."

Weiss turns to me, smiling with his mouth, but not with his eyes. "Mademoiselle Hopkins," he says to me. "Your friend has violated a very important rule. My staff does not use profanity. That's not how I run a zoo."

You don't run a zoo at all, is what I want to tell his fake French face. You are not the one with a long braid and a hose in

the Polar Bear Display. You are not in a special uniform with your partner, practically inside the cage with a cougar.

But Weiss doesn't care what anybody thinks. "Patch not showing," he says, pointing to my rolled up sleeve in front of the new-hires. "Now let's get inside for Day Assignments, troops."

As soon as Weiss and Polly are gone all the boys crowd in around the assignment sheet so nobody else can see it. Half those boys get garbage duty anyway, which is so easy. Girls don't ever get to do garbage. When it's finally my turn, I skip my name and look for Polly's first. *Swann*, it says: *Troubleshooter*, which is nothing less than a total jail sentence: stocking straws and napkins inside the Solarium and bussing the tables on the Picnic Deck with all the yellow jackets swirling around your hands.

I follow my finger up the list and find my name in Weiss' curly writing just as Polly gets back from her lecture. Her face is soft, and her blur of hair looks like it's been scribbled around her head with a crazy yellow crayon. She brushes by me like we're strangers and goes up to corkboard, running her purple fingernail up and down the assignments until she gets to her name, then mine: *Hopkins, Brenda: Big Cats Candy Kiosk*.

Considering how amazing that Day Assignment is compared to hers I expect her to snub me again like before, but instead she treats me fake-nice, the way the runner-up girl at a beauty contest would treat the girl who won.

"Hey, Big Cats Candy Kiosk," she says, giving me the kind of excited hug that doesn't mean anything. "Congrats, baby. Con-grats."

"You can have it, I promise," I say. "We can trade."

"Don't worry kitten," she says without meeting my eyes. "Nothing Mama can't handle."

"What about the Weiss, though?" I ask, and Polly sighs.

"Weiss is so gay, Brenda," she says, turning to the time clock and thwinking her card down into the machine's loud teeth. "What else do you need to know, or anyone?"

What every member of the Food and Gift Personnel knows is Big Cats Candy Kiosk is the best assignment in the entire zoo. It's built right in the center of Main Concourse and looks like a little round temple from China. The whole front of it is Plexiglas for one thing and gives you an excellent view of the Big Cats outdoor exhibit, which is shaped like a giant pie. Lions, snow leopards, cougars and jaguars split it in quarters, and from the Candy Kiosk you can see right into the sector that looks like a real African Semi-Desert. The only thing separating you from the lion and lionesses at all is a walkway, a moat, a low hedge and a railing.

In Big Cats Kiosk, Weiss has the candy organized on a lower shelf in his own order, like library books, plus, you

have your own phone and authorized permission to call forklifters if you run out of any brand.

As soon as I get to Big Cats, I check my inventory, then call my mother. I've told her that using an outside phone line is against Weiss' policy, but she still says to do it anyway. "It gives me something to look forward to," is what she tells me, even though it takes her more than ten rings sometimes to get to the phone.

Today she picks up right away though, which means she probably still has it with her in the bed. "Oh hi, BeeBee," she says in her sleepy, underwater voice. "What are you doing?"

I'm about to tell her, "working" or "selling stuff," which is what I always say, except right then I see that same zookeeper from the morning, driving slowly up the concourse in one of the official green zoo pickups.

"Nothing," I say, twisting the phone cord around my fingers as that zookeeper comes right up alongside my kiosk and leaves her truck idling. "Just feeding lions is all. Sometimes other animals. Going into their cages too."

"Oh," my mother says. "That sounds like fun. Is Polly with you?"

I watch as the zookeeper takes a king-size Shop-Vac out of the back of her truck and carries it around toward the side entrance to Big Cats. "Are you making any other friends?" my mother says, but before I can answer a big senior citizen group arrives along the concourse and starts

blocking my view of the entire Semi-Desert. They are teetering down the steep hill from the entrance in a zigzag pattern and have got balloons tied to their wheelchairs and walkers. Senior citizens and the people who take care of them hardly ever want candy, but still, I feel dread, especially when I see Polly, strolling along behind some of the stragglers.

"I have to go," I say, but my mother is so slow on the uptake. "What's going on, Beebee?" she says. "Are you mad?"

"I'm not," I say. "I am not mad," but of course, she won't believe me, and as I hang up I can still hear her in a semi-panic, calling my name.

At first Polly almost passes me by with the senior citizens, then at the last second she turns and stares at both me and Big Cats Candy Kiosk, as if she's never been more surprised. The green zookeeper's truck is still idling out there too, right in front of her face, but she doesn't act like she's noticed.

"Oh, Brennie, it's you," she says, putting her face up to the hole in the Plexiglas with a giant smile. "I couldn't remember where you were."

"Female animals here are on the pill," I tell her the minute I let her in the door, and finally Polly looks out at the green pickup and narrows her eyes.

"You're so full of shit, Brenda," she says. "Who told you anyway? Her?"

"That's correct." And then I tell Polly every single detail while we split a Twix and suck the chocolate off our fingers. About Uba and Eka and the smell of the water. The chip in her tooth and the song on the radio. *Her braid.*

When I'm done, Polly looks at me and sighs. "All that's very sweet," she says, tracing her initials in the dust on the window. "Are you in love now, Blood-Sister?"

"Shut up."

Polly swings her legs and I try and ignore the bang of her hightops on my clean cabinets. "Well, I found a rat in the grease bucket is what I'd like you to know," she says. "Weiss had me call forklifters."

I look at Polly, and my stomach feels like it's diving way down. "So?"

Polly picks up a box of Hot Tamales and taps them against her knee. "Brenda, Brenda, Brenda," she says, in a way that makes me hate the sound of my own name. "My point is, I made contact with the warehouse, which is more than I can say for you."

I inform her that I am, in my own way, making forklifter contact, and she can go finger herself, but Queen Polly only shakes her head grandly.

"Maybe I'm meeting someone later, Blood-Sister," she says. "Which is more than I can say for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I don't know," Polly says, brushing off the back of her pants. "It's hard to say."

"It isn't that hard," I tell her, "just say it," but instead of answering, all Polly has to do is stand there and I can see it inside her. The glow. That same green nuclear power she inherited from her mother Linda Swann, who last time Polly talked about it, was dating a tennis pro from Corno's Produce and having an abortion.

I'll screw a forklifter right now, I want to promise Polly. Yes, I definitely will, but then I think of Linda Swann in her two piece tennis outfit compared to my mother in her wilty bathrobe, and I can see why Polly would doubt me.

"Move aside," I say to her, reaching for the phone. "What's the number of the forklifters?"

"You know it, Hopkins," she says with her victory smirk. "Dial it yourself."

The forklifters take even a longer time to pick up than my mother does, and when they finally do, all I hear is a roaring from a giant machine, like some kind of shredder.

"Warehouse," the voice says and my ribs close up like an accordian.

"Pick up on deck," somebody else yells in the background.

"Warehouse," the forklifter says again louder, and when I hear the engines revving behind him, I can't help but picture us together in the crooked scaffolding of the Elephant House, doing it in the different positions of sex Polly and I saw in the *Dutch Book of Eros*: sometimes in front of an audience wearing girdles and open tuxedos,

sometimes just alone, with neckties and strapped-on extra penises.

"Warehouse," I hear again and my tongue turns so icy hot in my mouth I can't move it. "Help me," I mouth to Polly, covering the receiver, but instead she grabs the phone.

"Yes, this is Brenda Hopkins over at Big Cats Candy Kiosk," she says officially into the receiver. "Would it be possible to suck my pussy?"

"Shut Up!" I scream, wrestling the phone away and shoving her out the door, but it doesn't do any good because in a minute I see the same evil, fluffy head pass by in front of my window. I cover the mouthhole of my Plexiglas, but I can still feel her breath on my palm. "Gotcha," she says.

Then, right in front of me, while she knows I'm watching, she runs her finger along the side of the zookeeper's green truck. There isn't anybody around to see her, so she does it slow, making sure I see the line her finger is leaving across the dusty paint. She circles the whole truck like that, with her finger dragging, then jumps up on the back bumper and swings herself aboard.

I pound the window with my fist, but she ignores me and walks all around inside the open back of that zookeeper's truck, touching and stepping over everything she sees, the rolled up hose and the handles of other weird official-looking animal equipment, even though that zookeeper could come out at any time and catch her.

"You better knock it off," I hiss at her through the Plexiglas hole, but she knows I am trapped in here, in my kiosk. She knows if a customer comes to buy candy in an empty kiosk, Weiss would fire me on the spot.

I drop my forehead onto the counter and stare down at the rows of candy. I even take a complete inventory again, until I notice Polly stop and lift that zookeeper's radio over her head. She holds it up there for a long time to make sure I've seen it, then lowers it next to her face and pretends to scream, as if it's a prize she's just won on a game show. The truck heaves as she jumps up and down with the radio, and I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe I have called her sister, that blood from our fingertips has ever even mixed.

I check up and down the concourse for candy customers, Weiss, or forklifters coming to suck pussy, but thank God, none are coming.

And by now, Polly has on the zookeeper's hat and is making out with the radio, pretending to tongue-kiss the front of it. She stops, pointing her finger at me from the truck, and it is obvious what she is saying: "Big Cat Lez-bo. YouYouYou."

I hold my middle finger up to the window, but Polly, slowly, slowly with a big orgasmic look on her face, takes hold of the radio by the cord and starts lowering it down her body, inch by inch into the cab of the truck. While she does that she even starts to dance, a seriously sexy dance,

as if she's trying out to be a stripper, and even though it's the most embarrassing, shittiest thing, of course she looks good. She looks good doing it.

I cover my face with the clipboard, but it's impossible to do that for very long. There's nowhere else to look but back at Polly. She lifts one hand over her head and pretends to twirl a lasso. The other hand she puts between her legs, then looks at me and swings her hips pretending to be the zookeeper. "Oh my God, Brenda," she calls, lifting up her shirt. "I'm so gay for you."

At Polly's Townhouse, she and Linda Swann swap clothes and scarves. They put lipstick on each other like they are Greek sisters from a sorority. I've seen them trade things, use tampons out of the same box, whisper to each other like they are the only ones in the entire world. "This is my baby," Linda will say, as if I'm not even in the room. "Gorgeous, right? She's my best friend."

The door of my kiosk explodes in front of me, and when I burst out onto the concourse with my inventory clipboard, the whole world feels like it's at a slant.

"You better fucking cut it out, Swann," I warn her from across the walkway, lifting the clipboard, but she only laughs and starts to go at it even harder.

"Oh God, girlfriend," she says, rubbing the radio across her chest. "Nobody does it like you."

"Quit!" I say, grabbing for the radio, but Polly is still dancing away.

"Oh yeah?" she says in a voice like syrup. "And who's gonna stop me? *Dyke!*"

I draw my arm back, aiming for her mouth, and the clipboard slices through the air just like the boomerangs they have hanging on the walls in the Koala Kabin, whistling past her head, over the truck, across the fat hedge, and right into the middle of the Semi-Desert.

Polly drops the radio with a clank, and I run to the railing and see my clipboard in the long grass, lying about fifteen feet away from three lionesses, who all look up at me with golden eyes and blink.

"Nice job," she says. "Stupid."

Slowly, I turn to the truck with a heat around me that is more than just burning.

"I'm real sorry about that," says Polly, pointing down into the display. "Maybe you better call your Mamma."

I look up at her face but the sun is too bright. A white ring around a world of raging fire. I ask her if maybe she'd like to repeat that.

"Oh yes," says my friend Polly. "Absolutely. I said call your Mamma, BeeBee. Your poor, sad, dried-up Mamma."

"What did you say?"

"You heard me. *Hysterectomy.*"

My eyes tear wide open to take her in, and for the first time since I ever saw her, I can picture Polly Swann in her grave. I lean forward and my voice feels so velvety and viper-quiet I think it might be coming from the mouth of a python. "You stupid, titless, bitch," I whisper. "SLUT."

She springs from the truck like it's a trampoline, and we are on the cement then, joined. I can't believe how easy it is to hit her. My fists drop down and down like carpet bombs. It doesn't seem to hurt when she's hitting me either, and we roll back and forth on the cement like we are pit wrestlers.

She goes for the pocket of my apron, and when I hear the rip, I grab for the zoo patch on her arm. There is a giant stretch, the sound of material giving way, and then I choke her until her face purples out.

I press my forehead onto hers, and I want to hate-kiss her over and over and smash her teeth. My lips are inches from her lips.

"Pill Popper's Baby," she rasps, digging at my chest for my mother's bra, "Sterile!" and as she gets hold of it, yanking the straps, I remember suddenly, what it is my mother said, and I sink my fingers deep into the mass of cotton-white hair. "Linda Swann is a two-dollar whore," I say, wagging her head back and forth in my hands. "*Abortion!*"

All at once there are words, then footsteps, and my hold on Polly feels like it's loosening. I reach out to hit as hard as I can at the thing between us, but I am being pressed into the ground by a cool, gray shadow that blots out the sun.

"My patch, she took my patch," a hoarse voice is shouting, and when I open my eyes I am on my back

somehow, and the sound is Polly, practically crying like I have never seen her before, holding the place on her uniform where her zoo patch used to be. I follow the finger she is pointing at me and see that it leads to my hand where crazy threads are poking out through the fist.

"It's all right now," a voice is saying. "Let's everybody calm way the hell down."

On my chest there is a tapping, and when I look there I see it's the end of a red braid, dangling in front of my eyes like the tip of a paintbrush. Then I know exactly where I am.

"Are you hurt?" she says to me. "Can you get up?" It's a nice voice, smooth and deep and faraway.

"You're going to fire us, aren't you?" I say.

"Oh no, she isn't!" Polly says, like she's about to have some kind of tantrum. "I cannot be fired. I can-not!"

The zookeeper turns to Polly. "I need it quiet from you now," she says, in a much rougher voice than she used on me. "I don't want to hear another word."

Polly's mouth snaps shut, and I have never seen her clam up like that, not ever.

"I'm definitely hurt," I say. "I might be paralyzed."

"Uh huh. Let's get you on your feet."

Her smell is like hay and cigarettes, and I put my whole weight into her arms. I could not do that to my mother, but all this zookeeper does is hoist me right up.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Polly says taking a step forward and tapping the zookeeper on the shoulder, "but

an inventory clipboard is in with your lions. She threw it at me. She totally attacked me with it, and it flew in."

"She was in your truck first," I say as calmly as I can. "She was in the back, touching your equipment and doing a strip tease."

The zookeeper holds up a work glove. "I'm not interested," she says. "Can you girls settle this now, or do you need intervention?"

Polly and I look at each other, but as soon as our eyes come together they jump apart like the kind of magnets that don't stick.

I toss the patch to Polly, but she lets it flutter down on top of her tennis shoes.

"I'll take that as a yes," the zookeeper says. "Am I right?"

Polly brushes off her pant legs. There is gravel in her hair, and red crescent moon marks are on her cheeks from my fingernails. It looks as if she just got raped.

"All right then, girls," the zookeeper says. "I'm going in for this damn clipboard. You two stay right here."

And before either of us can argue, that zookeeper hefts the ShopVac into the back of her green truck, kills the engine, and strides off toward the side entrance.

Neither of us says anything to the other one. We just wander toward the railing, as quiet and stunned-seeming as the animals. There is no sound either, except for the baboons who are always screeching 24 hours a day

anyway with their fangs out and their swollen red bottoms.

Inside the display, on top of their grassy cement hill, the three lionesses are still lying side by side, taking turns licking each other's paws and ears. Every so often they swish their tails at the lion too, who is relaxing on a flat rock not far away, watching the women in his pride clean each other with their rough tongues. And in between the two groups, lying upside down at the edge of the central watering hole is my inventory clipboard, looking ridiculous in there, like some weird commercial is being made about office supplies.

"Jesus, look," Polly whispers suddenly, but she doesn't need to open her mouth because I can see that zookeeper fine by myself, bending down through the low cave-opening at the back of the display that's spray-painted with running herds of wildebeests. Her hands are quiet at her sides and she comes out slowly with total expertise, like she doesn't want to make any rapid moves.

"Oh my God," Polly says, as the zookeeper rises from her crouch and moves out into the pen, as if it is not just tan cement she's walking on, but deep Serengeti sand.

"We need to be quiet and calm," I say to Polly. "They could tear her up."

But as the zookeeper's safari boots rustle through the dry grass, her confidence is so complete that the lionesses lie right where they are, yawning and blinking and the lion

just goes on shaking the bugs out of his mane, like this kind of unbelievable thing happens all the time.

In less than a minute, that zookeeper is exactly where she needs to be. She bends down like a karate fighter, straddling the waterhole, and when she has a hold of the clipboard, she looks up at me directly, with that same crooked smile from the morning and winks, before lifting my candy inventory up over her head and carrying it at the exact same pace back out through the door.

There is a short silence after she disappears where I can only hear my heart and Polly's breath as she leans on me. "Holy shit."

Then somebody starts to clap. I snap my head around and there they all are, the exact same group of senior citizens, back now I guess, from Primates. They have all wheeled up behind one old man with binoculars, who is focusing on the door where the zookeeper has just gone in. "That was my clipboard," I say to him and he smiles at all of us with very white and young-looking teeth.

"Congratulations, young lady," he says. "Bravissima."

And when they hear him say that, the rest of the seniors clap even harder. They just keep on clapping and clapping and staring into the Semi-Desert with their balloons bobbing until Polly and I both do the same.

And while I clap, I picture what we all must look like there, and my whole body gets really big from the awe, until I am a giant, standing over the zoo in a tight silver

uniform that is the exact same color as the clouds. And looking down, I see the whole green field from the Jazz Concert Bandshell, and it is shining like a bright neon square, filled with every single forklifter that works here, all staring up at my hugeness, all wanting to screw me.

Then I get even bigger still, until I can see right down into our Townhouse, where my mother is floating in the air, six feet at least, above our couch. "Look at me, BeeBee," she says. "I'm flying."

And way down below me, tiny munchkin Polly is squinting up, cupping her hands around her mouth, saying I'm still her Blood-sister. She promises I am. And I smile down at my friend then, from that great height. I smile almost gently, because I know that if I wanted to, I could lift her into the sun.

I Was a Handicap to Our Leisure

when I became afraid to drive.

So when I drove, which was often, my knuckles
whitened on the wheel, and my jaw
ached against my teeth. So when I begged to pull
to the side of the highway's graveled edge,

I would have been grateful if you'd simply agreed
to take over the wheel. Yet, you—

and you knew how death swung its trap open in the guise
of every road sign—always declined.

And so we concluded that it'd be best

if I forewent my anxiety, and continued to steer.

When we stopped at bookshops,

and I could not read the spines, my vision doubled
by nausea, you urged me to purchase
a cloth-bound edition of Edith Sitwell. While I hid
a full hour inside the bathroom of
that restaurant, intent on vomiting up the illness
that made the roads shrink, then swing

large, you ordered me a sandwich,

tuna on soggy bread, and had it boxed for the ride.

It was not me who could never

decide. All I wanted was for you to take the car over,

and drive. And so I continued to drive,
past King's Island, where the Ferris wheel loomed
macabre, where twisted tracks rose, then fell
beneath small, unsteady wheels: those carloads
of screams, bloody ribbons cast to the air.

O My Songs

Where is your lantern tonight?

Its shine is made tenfold by waters and roils with the moon.

How then, being so bright,
the sky seems cloaked with moth wings?

You are nowhere near water tonight.

You say of the coast I know nothing.

Then by what means do I get closer?

There is dew on a leaf. So silent, you have chosen not to notice.

Songs, my songs, by train or lip?

By breath or journey? Should the last bus leave in an hour,
how will I know where to find you if you are only a flickering,
pale as sighs, a net of gnats.

We cannot speak for you, not with regard to this.

Will you not, at the very least, assist?

It is not our story.

What of your allegiance?

This is in your best interest.

You are not singing.

It is no song.

No wine for the ear?

We are sober.

And so it is my own face, gashed?

Yes, upon the window pane.

And our relations forever unwound?

You are not to pull the string.

And having loved?

Yes, having unloved yourself, you must unlove another.

Marriage Proposal

Our love rhymes with cub scout, clod-hopper, trouble-shooter, sore thumb. Sitting in the kitchen with our fruit cocktail skin.

Who says love can't last? A little syrupy, yes, a little soft:
a can of exploding snakes, yes, a dissolving eros-aspirin. Yes,

I could be your silent auction—all that old lady furniture
delivered from the house on the hill: velvet drapes, china poodles,

chintz, chamber pots on your doorstep. Now & Forever, like
an interstate. Why not jackpot everything—imagine yourself
dressing

before gilt mirrors, the wool seams unthreading, the smell of wet
sheep, and your hands moistening like pudding cakes

on fine bone china—it isn't proper, but could you please
pass me that candelabra? I need to check the laundry in the
basement.

Meanwhile, try to imagine a mansion of fabric against your skin.
Already the branches of the family tree have forgotten the itch

of your amputated limb. As a precaution, I've welded the
keys
to all our doors into matching bullet-proof vests. Did I say

forever? Yes, I guess, so then you'd better
sew all my openings shut with thread pulled from the bed
sheets—

you'd better bury me beneath you, our hands
and feet tied. I want to be trapped by the cage of your ribs
as it slowly sinks into mine.

Steve Gehrke

Capitalism (The MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas, Nevada: 5:00 A.M.)

This is how the city has always worked
for you: you and a buddy, separated
for hours, arrive back at the room, simultaneously,
each of you hoping the other has won, each
hoping the other has something you can borrow.

Which is why, broke, you are on your way back down,
not knowing what you want, but letting the elevator
lock you in, as if inside a gaze, your reflection torn,
at random floors, by the metal on the door,
the way an image is torn by the eyes, then repaired.

It is late, yes, you are tired, but hunger has no stopping
point: it's a pocket with a hole that you fill and fill.
And in your delirium and thirst, the casino floor is a place
where gamblers spend all night digesting themselves,
the losers dumped out onto the street, the others sucked

into elevators and stairwells, like nutrients into a bloodstream.

It's all about scale: the fed cells, the lights flicking on inside the rooms, the fantasy of slot machines—the velocity of the dropped coin continued—that transfer of inertia—undivided in its winnings. Yesterday, on television,

you learned how cloning works, the ovum emptied out, like a purse onto a table, like an O, and, with a cell from a fingertip—these are the words they used—
“an investment is made.” The point, you suppose, is that our bodies are lost and given back to us in change.

And now, as you walk and walk, past countless black jack dealers,
each gripped by half a table around the waist, you can't stop
clutching and releasing the last dumb coin in your pocket,
you can't stop
entering your own vision, being pulled forward by it,
the mind extending its oars and drawing the seen world

back into itself. Which, at this moment, consists of a jungle compressed into a few trees, a pond, and two lions—*yes, Live Lions!*, it's there, written on a plaque—who spend all night socketed in their caves. You stand before the glass, wondering

if the casino noises are echoed back to them in sleep:
as the stuttering of slot machines? Hyena
and zebra screams? The elevators rise and fall behind you.

Passengers get off: they are swept back
into their bodies. The lions emerge from their caves,

shaking their muscles awake, their huge padded feet
noiseless on the stone. They are real, yes,
but watching them strip the overhead lights
from the surface of the pond, that violence
and beauty in their tongues, makes you believe

they've been sent by God, not as symbols,
but to dismantle the city, bit by bit, and bury it
in the desert, that it's possible, even in pieces,
for the city to stay lit, its presence measured by the tint
of neon to the sand. Desire is that permanent,

etched around the edges of the body, like the ring of light
at an eclipse, as if the body had stepped in front of it.
And you, making fists inside your pocket and watching
the lions shake water from their faces, are part
of the illusion, part of a world they are shown

but cannot eat. This hungry, this broke, I understand
that when one of them sniffs forward, the male you think,
and licks the glass, a transaction has been made—
something lost, something won—
and that capitalism is the taste of Windex on his tongue.

Thea S. Kuticka

Bodymongers

Living in a hospital bed requires paring down. It becomes a
game:

How much can you live without, what do you really need to
survive.

Children at the docks take out x-ray paper, thin sheets of blue
film.

They say *place your chest here, wait 30 seconds for the image to
process,*

dry in the sun. They fold the crisp blue paper into boats, slip
them

in the bay. The shadow of your heart cups the boats as they
float

across the water. Suffering is what the patient has come to
respect.

The nurses gather around, snap crisp sheets. The patient sees
fishmongers, enemies at the docks, cash stealers. Measure for
measure.

First the stomach, then the scales. Now they have hooked the
patient

like a blue gill on a string. Children fling these fish out of the
pond,

Thea S. Kuticka

leave them to die in the fields. It's the *swish, swish* of the
uniform

that helps the patient leave this room. Useless words. Back and
forth
for a while, drop a hand from the bed's bow to salty water,
drag fingertips in the current. Get up, walk through fields of
dry grass.

Toss the gown to the fishmongers, any honest cloth will fit the
thief.
Toss the flesh, beauty is brief. Toss the bones, they no longer
carry the frame.
And when that is done the body becomes a boat. Salt is salt
and water is water.

Poetry Reading

Those grim ones unacquainted with humor
lack, too, a sense of the serious:
they know only the gravity of the self,
weighty enough to keep them on the ground.

And when they want to start up, fly—
when they take up jogging, or French—
you can see them congratulating themselves,
as they drift by you, half naked, alone.

Tonight you hear one of them speak
what she says are her innermost thoughts.
She has returned from a month in Paris,
now is writing some poems called "Etudes."

There is longing. There is hope, despair.
We follow her up and down the boulevards,
mittened and muffled, her white breath
floating above her like a balloon,

a white cloud she matches to her heart:
"You," she is saying—no doubt the familiar,
but surely not us—we shift uneasily
in our chairs—who? a dog? a parent?

Baudelaire?—until, astonished, we realize
she's talking to that little woman in the front
row, who holds her books, smiling—
that little white-crowned woman, her hair

splayed out like a cleaning pad, gentle
and humorless as she, even perhaps her—
what's that?—yes, *muse* has found its place
in the wild vocabulary of those Parisian nights!

And in fact, it *is* she—Herself—so long
invoked, beseeched, by all of us—right here—
her smile not only inspiring but overseeing
the distribution of books for sale!

I Had Masters Once

Ilya Kaminsky. *Musica Humana*. Chapiteau Press, Vermont, 2003. 32 pp., \$12, paper.

The attitudes of young American poets toward their literary parents are often characterized these days by the suspicion and anxiety which academic post-modernism has done much to foster in readers of poetry. Much of this constricting paranoia centers on the notions of tradition and authority. So it is especially refreshing and energizing to come across a young poet who is free from this kind of self-consciousness and who writes from an unembarrassed sense of his own literary heritage. Ilya Kaminsky, who was born in Odessa and came to the United States in the eighties with his parents, opens his chapbook, *Musica Humana*, with a lovely short poem in Russian, his first language, and the collection as a whole constitutes a passionate attempt to build a bridge—linguistically, imaginatively, emotionally—between the world of his origins and the American world which he entered as a young person, and now enters as a poet.

The first section of *Musica Humana* is an elegy for the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, and indirectly also for the poet's wife Nadezhda, who preserved Mandelstam's poetry after he had been finally hounded to

death by Stalin in 1938. The couple forms a kind of erotic center of energy for the elegy, in which the speaker is sometimes Mandelstam, sometimes Nadezhda and sometimes the poet. Kaminsky seeks the combination of physicality and a powerful metaphysical impulse which characterizes Mandelstam's poetry, so it is appropriate that the elegy is prefaced by a poem called "Author's Prayer," in which the two central vehicles for prayer are sleep, when we are in a sense all body, and music, the most direct physical manifestation of spirit; it is also touchingly appropriate that the section is closed by a recipe for cold mint-cucumber soup, which consummates the prayer spoken earlier in the poem by Nadezhda Mandelstam, adapted from Pascal:

*O God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob
on your scale of Good and Evil,
put a plate of warm food.*

It is this earthiness and wit that makes Kaminsky's elegy moving and prevents it from being weighed down by piety. Nowhere does Kaminsky settle for a retelling of Mandelstam's life: the story is infused with an imaginative delight which owes everything to Kaminsky's own proximity to the poet's sensual and cultural world. It celebrates the irreverent genius of the great Russian poet in an irreverent, sexy and personal way.

The second section of the chapbook is a beautiful love affair, "Natalia," conducted on the page and in memory and accompanied by a Talmudic commentary at the foot of the pages in which the author sometimes addresses his beloved directly, and sometimes simply expresses exasperation at the inadequacy of the language of love: "But I am tired of phrases: 'You are mine,' 'Yours,' 'My love.'" The body, again and again, is the site of prayer, as when the 'you' of the poem says "I don't need a synagogue...I can pray inside my body." Here, too, Kaminsky's elegiac impulse is balanced by comedy—the comedy of sex and the wrenching tragicomedy of emigration, in which ". . . I find myself in upstate New York / to curse, bless, see visions of God." There is a lovely inversion of the familiar and almost habitual tropes of emigration: in the shock of loss and flux, instead of seeking constancy in abstract universals or in language, Kaminsky finds them in the objects and gestures of everyday life, in "the stubbornness of bedclothes," in eating and bathing. The only universals he summons are the elements, above all air and water, the sky and the sea, and he has a wonderful gift for making them particular, turning them into bodies themselves:

What ties me to this Earth? In Massachusetts
the birds force themselves into my lines—
the sea repeats itself, repeats, repeats.

I bless the boat from Yalta to Odessa,
and bless each passenger, his bones, his genitals,
bless the sky inside his body,
the sky my medicine, the sky my country.

In the most profound sense, Kaminsky answers to Mandelstam's demand that poetry should infuse a human world—made progressively icier by technology and ideology—with “teleological warmth,” and thus humanize it. All fascination with the purity of an inhuman or superhuman world is alien to him. The adjective of the chapbook's Latin title is present here as a wish and its fulfillment.

And the noun, the music? It is difficult to say anything very definite about the nature of Kaminsky's formal project—in moving from a Russian poetic tradition strengthened by formal rigor to an American tradition indulgent of metrical nonchalance, Kaminsky has chosen not to attempt in English the ambitious but often convoluted metrical and aural “translation” of Russian poetic forms into English ones that Joseph Brodsky advocated. Taking advantage of the openness of the American tradition, and chiefly of the descendants, varied as they are, of Whitman, Kaminsky achieves, particularly in the third and last section of the book, “Praise,” an

exhilarating bardic lift cut with a East European irony and wry humor:

America! I put the word on a page, it is my
keyhole.

I watch the streets, the shops, the bicyclist, the
oleanders.

I open the window of an apartment
and shout: I had masters once, they roared above
me,

Who are we? Why are we here?

...

I was born in the city named after Odysseus
and I praise no nation,—

To the rhythm of snow
an immigrant's clumsy phrases fall into speech.

These poems are far from clumsy; their complexity lies, however, not in the area of sound and syntax but in the realm of tone and address: the shifts between speakers, and between melancholy, black humor and elation, create energizing contrasts in these three longish poems which

sometimes threaten to be overwhelmed by the sheer richness of image which drives them. The guiding spirit of Kaminsky's third poem, "Montale," who is present in an epigraph, would have found much to praise in this complexity of tone, and indeed much to recognize in this young poet's evocation of a landscape of childhood suffused with both beauty and threat. The delighted difficulty of this poetic "I" (in the first poem he writes: "poetry is the self—I resist / the self") is a great gift to American poetry.

Every Tongue Shall Confess

ZZ Packer and Amber Dermont

ZZ Packer was born in Chicago and raised in Atlanta and Louisville, Kentucky. She received her BA from Yale University, her MA from The Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars, and, in 1999, her MFA in Fiction from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Since then, she has held a Wallace Stegner-Truman Capote Fellowship and a Jones Lectureship at Stanford University, and been awarded a Whiting Writers' Award and a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award. She is spending the Fall of 2003 as a Visiting Professor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her fiction has appeared in The New Yorker, Harper's, and Story, and has been featured in the 2000 and 2003 editions of Best American Short Stories. Her highly acclaimed debut short story collection, Drinking Coffee Elsewhere, was published by Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Putnam, in the Spring of 2003 and was selected by John Updike for the Today Show Book Club. This interview was conducted by Gulf Coast Fiction Editor Amber Dermont at the Warwick Hotel in Houston at three in the morning on Tuesday, April 8, 2003.

Amber Dermont: To begin with, could you talk about the decision to title the collection after your short story, "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere"? How do you feel this title

works both metaphorically and as an organizing principle for the entire collection?

ZZ Packer: The title *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* comes from a particular line in the short story where the character Dina is in Baltimore drinking a glass of milk on the morning of her mother's funeral, and she imagines that the milk is coffee and that she's actually drinking coffee elsewhere in an Arabic speaking country "where the thick coffee served in little cups was so strong it could keep you awake for days." As far as the rest of the characters in the stories are concerned, I think this title applies to them in the sense that all of the characters are castaways. The characters are at these points where they are just starting to either begin these lives that are going to be radically different from how they were at the beginning of the story or they have already embarked upon lives that are different from how the rest of society believes their lives ought to be. In a sense, all of the stories have to deal with being on the cusp of something, being a castaway, wanting to be elsewhere or already being elsewhere. I don't know if the coffee aspect comes into it, but the whole "doing some action elsewhere" permeates all of the fiction. I thought initially that I would name the collection after the story, "Every Tongue Shall Confess," but I don't think that story permeates the entire collection the way that "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" does. I had been thinking of the

collection in terms of confessions, but what's more important is that all of these characters really don't quite belong where they are. They have this sort of unease with their position in their community or larger society. As I began to revise the stories for the collection, I liked the idea of revising them with this organizing principle in mind. Ultimately, I wanted the reader to be able to extrapolate that these are characters who, by the end of each story, are either more doomed or less doomed than when they began.

AD: It seems as though the title refers to a state of being, but not belonging. You get a character like Doris in the story, "Doris is Coming," where Doris does arrive at some moment of self-awareness, but it is not necessarily in any way satisfying or even hopeful. It's almost a sense of woundedness without any self-pity. I don't know what you think of this, but I feel with the title there is this interesting connotation of race. You said that you don't see how the coffee fits in there, but it does fit in as this very subtle, almost intangible indicator of race.

ZP: One of the things I'm trying to do is say, yes, the protagonists are African American, sometimes they are in African American environments, and sometimes they meet up with, or are in, environments with other races, and since it's the South, that means they are primarily in

contact with whites and not necessarily other ethnicities, but one of the things I think is important is to try and show that these characters are black, yes, but not every character is ruled by being black.

AD: Absolutely.

ZP: And the reason for that is, at least for me, when I wake up in the morning, I don't think, "I'm a black person. I'm a black person. I'm a black person." I think, "What am I going to eat? What am I going to do?" Even larger issues like, "Who am I? and What does it mean? and Why am I here?" and that sort of thing, and obviously race plays an important part. Also, race often determines limitations for my characters. There are things they can't do because of their race. For instance, Doris in "Doris is Coming" can't go to all of the places she would necessarily want to go to, and this motivates her to attempt to integrate a lunch counter. Or in "The Ant of the Self," Spurgeon feels constricted because he feels as though he is the most successful member of the debate team, but as an African American male, he is still nothing more than the team's mascot. So race is important, but it doesn't necessarily rule over the narratives. In the case of "The Ant of the Self," the most important thing in the story is Spurgeon's relationship with his father. The most important thing in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" is not Dina's race, but, rather,

her inability to come to terms with her sexuality. Those are the factors that outweigh race in the big picture of the collection.

AD: The Million Man March is the setting and occasion for the story "The Ant of The Self," but you don't exploit the racial and political connotations of the march in any conventional way. Instead you divert the reader's attention to something much more human and ultimately more significant—a very real relationship between a neglectful father and his brilliant son. The setting is the right backdrop for the story but doesn't overwhelm the human conflict.

ZP: Yes. I think that literature should be about universal truths, but not necessarily enacted on a universal stage. Often, a very small event that occurs in a character's life has more impact on the character and on a reader than a large one. Yes, the characters in "The Ant of The Self" go to The Million Man March, but the story is not simply about race. Smaller moments in the story reveal that the story is really about Spurgeon's conflict with his father.

AD: Earlier, you mentioned the character Dina. I wanted to ask you about her. Dina appears twice in your collection, once in the first-person, voice-driven story, "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere," and then again as the third-person-

limited point-of-view character in "Geese." How do you account for Dina's reappearance in your writing and for the shift in point of view? Since "Geese" was written first, do you feel that Dina came into her own voice as a character?

ZP: Yes, I do feel that Dina came into her own voice. Dina first appeared in "Geese," but relative to her life span, the events in "Geese" actually come after the events in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere." Years after I wrote "Geese," I began thinking about Dina and wondering about what she'd gone through and how she set up these façades for herself, but also about just how she's pushed into creating a façade.

AD: Dina longs for beauty. For instance, there is a moment early on in "Geese," before Dina leaves Baltimore for Japan—a trip that will not go well—where she imagines the artfulness and order of Japan and states that she went to Japan "for loveliness." Of course, when she goes there, her experience is anything but lovely.

ZP: In the case with Dina—I hate getting on the autobiographical train and saying, "Oh, she's me,"—in some way, I would concede an autobiographical aspect to her character, in the sense that I am most fascinated by ways in which if I'm confronted by a difficult situation,

how I will deflect that situation or how I will choose not to deal with a situation. This interests me more than occasions when I will successfully deal with a conflict. Dina is someone who has to confront herself when she doesn't act the way she thinks she will act. For instance, in "Geese," she believes that she is going to go to Japan for the loveliness, and she is studying Japanese in this apartment with all of these ex-pats, but what she doesn't realize are the ways in which she hasn't developed. It was really tough for me to rewrite this story—I revised the story for the collection—because I kept hoping that Dina would have the opportunity to do something other than what she does at the end. Even though the story ended differently, as far as the actual writing is concerned, the plot still stayed the same. Dina still winds up prostituting herself at the end of the story. This was painful for me, but I knew that in terms of the story's internal logic that was what she would end up doing.

AD: Could you talk more about that, about the revision of "Geese" which originally appeared in the anthology *25 and Under*?

ZP: Of course, I was a lot younger when I first wrote "Geese." The original version was actually written from the first-person point of view. It was told in this flat way, almost faux-noir, sort of like, X is stated, Y is stated, in this

very hard-boiled manner. At the time I first wrote the story, I was very much in the thrall of Raymond Carver's writing and I was trying to write a very simple story. When I chose to revise it, I thought the first-person narrative didn't work. First-person is best-used when the narrator is either wholly accessible and reliable or totally inaccessible and unreliable. I began to realize that the first-person narrator wasn't revealing that much about herself and the lack of revelation wasn't propelling the narrative. The reader didn't have any more insight into her character. I felt that the first-person narrator in this case was really just a crutch. In the third-person, the reader gets, as objectively as possible, to see Dina and have access to her and how these other characters are interacting. So that was the decision between first and third-person narrative. Also, what I tried to do was to create more story around Dina, where she comes from in Baltimore, more back story, more details about the other characters, Petra and Zoltan. In the original version, the auxiliary characters were described in what Jerome Stern calls a "Weird Harold Character." At first, the characters were weird for the sake of being weird.

AD: In the revised version of the story featured in the collection, the auxiliary characters are described in exact and painful detail. The former-model Petra has fallen down an escalator. Her face is ripped up into a quadrant of scars that resemble "the sections of a TV dinner." This

description is of vital importance to the story because it serves to reemphasize that lack of loveliness...

ZP: Yes.

AD: ...again defying Dina's expectation of what Japan is supposed to be. The people she meets are ruined and also all of the characters are completely poverty-stricken and literally starving. Zoltan, Petra's boyfriend, is no longer the great bodybuilder he was. Rather than simply being "Weird Harold Characters" these characters in their pain and eccentricities really inform the world of the story that Dina has found herself in.

ZP: I think this also has to do with "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" with Dina imagining being in an Arabic speaking country. She leaves the ugly rowhouses of Baltimore and goes off to Japan for—as you said before—for the loveliness, and discovers that she hasn't really escaped anything. In Japan, Dina doesn't even have the most basic resources she had in Baltimore. I was really intrigued by the way in which people make excuses for themselves or believe that once they do something—move, get a new job, win the lottery, or retire—their lives will be better. For Dina, she's matured enough that she can get herself to Japan, whereas a lot of people with her upbringing wouldn't be able to manage even that, but she

still hasn't matured to the point of realizing that what she is essentially trying to escape is not a place, but a person—herself.

AD: And she also ultimately winds up longing for the Baltimore brownstones and her neighborhood, and the bad Chinese restaurant by her old apartment and her neighbors.

ZP: She longs for everything she left behind.

AD: I'm curious if you could talk about your process in terms of what triggers a story for you. Some writers really love to talk about process. Some writers don't think it is particularly helpful to discuss their own process or believe that the process for each story is different. Have you developed some way of understanding your own process or understanding—while keeping it mysterious—where stories come from?

ZP: Yeah, for me it is hard to talk about or even think about myself as a writer. To say that you have a process is almost to say that you have a process that works. (laughs) For me, one of the things that I've discovered that works is that I have to have a couple of things in place in order to have the confidence to write. One of the biggest things is character. I wish I could just sit down at the computer and

start writing, but I can't. I often have to think about a particular character for a long time. Then I can begin thinking about all of the auxiliary characters, how they all sort of fit into that person's life. I need to think of the auxiliary characters well enough so that they could have their own story in their own right. So that's one of the things I need to have before I can begin to write. The other thing is some sort of idea that I've been thinking about. With a story like "Brownies," depending on how you look at it, it could simply be this cute story, but I was thinking about the idea of victims becoming victimizers. Having been through even an approximation of oppression doesn't make one immune to victimizing other people. I was thinking about that for a long time before I began "Brownies." Then there are other things. The notion of how a story is actually a confluence of several things happening at once: an idea that, for some reason, has been brewing in my head for some time, along with characters who can be actors for this idea. Once I have four or five elements that come together—so that I have the approximation of a world—I feel that I can go to that world. So I think your observation is very astute: I didn't end the story with the Brownies discovering that Troop 909 has disabilities—that's not the whole world of the story. I took the story beyond that discovery to the father's dealings with race, so that you can see that the story doesn't begin and end with the Brownie troop: the troop in

the story is part of a vicious cycle, and the reader is viewing one single incarnation of that cycle, so I think you're right: the story has more a replication of a vicious cycle than a "surprise ending."

AD: The character Snot repeats the phrase, "My father the veteran," from her friend Daphne's poem over and over again throughout the story. By the end, the reader realizes that Snot herself will go on to fight and be the veteran of so many other wars.

ZP: Precisely. You have this character Arnetta who is viewed as the "bad girl," but she's simply part of this cycle, just like Snot's father. Just like Daphne's father, the veteran you're referring to...

AD: So you're saying that in order for you to find the trigger for a story, you first need to begin with a character and the idea of a world-space, and that the mere placement of the character within that world immediately causes conflict.

ZP: Yes. That's a good way of putting it. I guess all I'm saying is that—you know, I read in this one book that was trying to explain what a story is—Jerry Cleaver's *Immediate Fiction*—he breaks it down as conflict plus action plus resolution equals story. Basic. Any story worth telling is

going to give you an idea of what happened before and after the actions and conflicts of the story. The idea before the story began and what the story continues to be, those are the best. Chekhov, the father of the psychological story, changed the way the short story operates so that it's different from, say, Jack London's "To Build a Fire." Chekhov doesn't address the how or why after a story of his ends. If you think of stories from Chekhov, Raymond Carver, Alice Munro, Stuart Dybek, or James Alan McPherson, you have stories in which a few rain drops fall into this bucket. If the story is good enough, the reader can see that the story is just one part of an entire whole. I don't know if I achieve that sense of the story illustrating how it's a part of the whole, but that's what I'm hoping to achieve. If you read a good story, you can explain the plot line, know why the characters running around in the story are or aren't remarkable—in other words, you can begin to analyze the story, but you can't explain away or understand the greatness of the story. In Robert Stone's "Helping," Chaz goes on a drinking binge despite being sober, fights with his wife, etc. It's a good story, a great story. One can, of course, point out Robert Stone's good dialogue, etc. Everything in the story is good but somehow, the story transcends the basic elements of craft—which are all good. Somehow, the story isn't good but great, and its greatness can't be completely compartmentalized or explained. The reader can

extrapolate the beginning and the end, and that's much better than the reader being given *all* the back story or some epilogue-like ending. And I think the reader is privy to that experience of the sublime when the writer knows he or she has enough of a world there that he or she (and thus the reader) can extract the microcosm from this much larger world.

AD: Could you talk about the significance of childhood in your writing? So many of the main characters in your stories are children, but the spaces they inhabit and the childhoods they experience challenge the innocence we commonly associate with being young.

ZP: Flannery O'Connor said that "if you've made it through childhood, you have enough stories to last you a lifetime." We often say that old age is a second childhood. Childhood is the time when we're learning what it is like to deal with another world. When we grow up, we realize that the world hasn't changed, but the way we've learned to deal with the world and with our own internal psyche has changed. In "Every Tongue Shall Confess," there's a character who's in her early middle age, and she's lived in the same environment for so long that it, to her, hasn't changed. When she meets a man who turns her notions of the world upside down, it is, in a way, for her, a second adolescence—she's just learning how to question authority,

question the world in a way she probably never got to do in adolescence, so, in a way, for her, it's more like her first *true* adolescence. But the point remains the same: it all hinges on an essential change, and those changes seem to mimic the colossal change from childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood. The character essentially becomes "an adult" by the end of the story, though, technically, she's already a spiritual adult. Characters, if they're going to be "round," necessarily go through a change. They must shift their way of viewing the world. Even if they don't do anything with their new knowledge, they now have that knowledge, and internally, at least, they'll never be the same. I guess I'm fascinated by this, this point of revolution, this point of change around which characters revolve. "Brownies," "Every Tongue Shall Confess," "Our Lady of Peace"—all three of these stories revolve around some point of change. The teacher in "Our Lady of Peace" is not going to be able to change things; she discovers she's not going to be able to change her students' lives. She discovers that, instead, the forces of the classroom, these children, end up changing her.

AD: I like this idea of the intersection and of the second children. The never-ending childhood.

ZP: Perpetual childhood.

AD: You've studied with a number of notable literary

figures, including Francine Prose, James Alan McPherson, Stephen Dixon, Marilynne Robinson, Frank Conroy, John L'Heureux, Stuart Dybek, and Tobias Wolff, among others. How do you view the role of mentorship in your development as a writer?

ZP: Yeah, I think that having a mentor—well, I don't think anything negative could come of it—well, I guess it could, now that I'm thinking about it. Writers going back to Plato have had mentors. There has always been a kind of relationship when you have an apprentice working with a mentor, the mentor helps improve that apprenticeship phase for the writer—the writer or artist or whatever doesn't have to struggle as long as they would have ordinarily. But, also, the mentor is able to bring up important questions which the apprentice must confront. Mentorship is codified, to some extent, in the workshop. Even without the formal workshop, there's always been the equivalent of this mentor-mentee/apprentice relationship—Hemingway and Stein, for instance. Hemingway went to Stein for lessons. Tons of great writers in their apprenticeship phases studied under, or were exposed to, great writers. The workshop, in its American collegiate form, codifies this relationship and makes it more democratic. I mean, if you were a good writer, but you were poor and didn't have access to Gertrude Stein in the way that Hemingway did, how would you have gotten

better? How would you proceed to the next level? You could do it on your own, of course, but you'd be making tons of mistakes through trial and error that a better writer could have quickly pointed out, and saved you from making. Of course, you're going to have to make *some* mistakes on your own, but there are some mistakes—especially those concerning craft—that a good mentor or teacher can steer you away from. James Alan McPherson has been my biggest mentor. It's strange, because, beyond guiding the student toward proper craft and such, the mentor/mentee relationship is similar to the parent-child relationship—no one would consider it normal for a child to grow up without parents. People allow writers that same relationship. The writer needs to have a group of people guide him or her. Otherwise, the writer can just end up shooting off into a hundred directions that might be unproductive. The mentor's job is hard, because he or she has to make the process productive and efficient without taking away the experiences that might be aided by heartbreak, just as it would be folly to imagine a child learning without encountering difficulties. The mentor has to let the writer make mistakes, recognizing these as "productive mistakes" that can be learned from. Necessary mistakes. It's an incredibly hard job differentiating between productive mistakes and unproductive ones, and I think only a person who's made those same mistakes is in a position to recognize them.

AD: Like going to Paris versus doing heroin. Outside of just mentorship, how important is a writing community to you and how might you define a sense of community and support?

ZP: I think a writing community is extremely important—like any sort of community, it seems as though one needs more people who might make up the community than can be of help. Like Iowa, where you have a hundred writers. It's necessary to have that many, but it'd be foolish to look to all one hundred for help. I wound up going to my friend and peer Salvatore Scibona's house and handing him a story or vice versa. The same happened with Cate Marvin. It's good to have all of those other people there because although you can go to workshop and receive feedback from those in the workshop, it's more important to have a circle that you consider to be your readers, a circle of people who know what you're trying to do with your writing, your overall project. I can't overstate how incredibly important this is, since writing is such a lonely pursuit and since the solitariness of it can be overwhelming.

AD: It seems to me that a writer often craves a world and then goes about assembling it. How important is loneliness?

ZP: That's a good question. It's hard to answer. Yeah, loneliness is important because loneliness does imply something different from *aloneness*. Aloneness might be the simple state of not having someone around, whereas loneliness implies that craving to have someone around. To some extent, being a writer would be both of those at once. On the one hand, you need to be alone in order to create, because no one can do it for you, or, in the truest sense, no one can do it, create, with you, even. If you paint collaboratively, you still have two distinct visions being melded together. The aspect of loneliness is really a part of being a writer. You are writing for yourself and simultaneously writing because you mean to be read—you have a world out there that is a potential audience, but isn't one yet. So one must be alone for a while to write the work and deal with any accompanying loneliness to sustain oneself *to keep* writing the work. I think it is one of the reasons I really enjoy bars. I like being able to write alone for a while, then, when I want human contact, to be able to control how much contact I'm going to have with people, to plug into humanity when I want to, rather than be a part of it, part and parcel. And, bars—despite all the people there—can still be incredibly lonely places. Like, it's always very hard for people to understand that I can be very gregarious and also not want to be around other people. But that dynamic is very similar to the act of reading. Most writers' first experience with writing is

through reading. When you're reading, you're immersed in a world, but that world is the one you're reading about—not the world around you.

AD: What non-literary influences impact your writing?

ZP: That's a good one. Let me think about that. I guess I could say on one level, I'm influenced by film. Specifically, if I watch a movie, I'm always on the lookout for how that movie, film, whatever, can teach me how to write better. For instance—and this might be unfair, since it started out as a play—but the film version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Have you seen that movie—I feel lame, since I haven't seen the play—but I think it is a *great* movie. I see that movie and I feel as though I'm learning tons about how to write. I guess a lot of the films that I like began as plays, like *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*...

AD: The film becomes the definitive version, and the play can only be done in its shadows.

ZP: That's brilliant, Amber. I guess the film is the definitive version, and in that way it's like writing. It's a record. A record of creation that can't be erased. The play has its own beauty in that the actors of each production provide artistry of their own, and that artistry changes in each

single production, and can't exactly be replicated ever again. But perhaps "the record" is what I'm most interested in as a writer. The movie version of a play still retains dramatic aspects, since it continues to concentrate on the acuity of dialogue in a way that original screenplays often fail to. You can't take that acuity of dialogue away from it in the movie version. Even something like *The Sopranos*. They've taken this banal form—television—and made it more interesting than most films. I think this has something to do with its episodic nature: it doesn't just end in three hours. It combines the best of television and film. You can live with these characters the way you can with TV and it does what a movie does best. You have this dramatic tension. It's an efficient form. *Friends* is also episodic—you'll watch it, but you get suckered into watching it through the familiarity with the characters, a familiarity that breeds comfort, whereas you watch *The Sopranos* not only because you're familiar with the characters, but because the writing is *so* good. It allows the characters to do what good characters in film and literature do—surprise the audience in believable, yet unexpected ways. I'm totally inspired by the efficiency of *The Sopranos*. Other non-literary influences? I love reading historical accounts to get a fuller sense of the world, but I don't know if inspired is the right word for my relationship with reading history. But I guess I do like that sense of living vicariously in the past while you're actually in the present.

The thing I recall Francine Prose trying to break down to people in our workshop about dialogue is that it shouldn't do just one thing, *i.e.* communicate, give information, reveal character, etc. It can't just do *one* of those things. It must do several things at once. I keep going back to the word "efficiency," but it is not just efficiency, but rather a replication of the human mind. If anyone asked you to describe what you're thinking about at any given moment, you'd have to go back and *pick out* a single thing, simply because, truthfully, you're always thinking about a million things at once. That's how the mind works. I was taking a class on Derrida where the primary question was "What are the roots of language?" "Is language thought?" "Is thought language?" The human brain is so completely fascinating. A great story is a confluence of so many factors that it's hard to name, to pinpoint a single one that leads you to its greatness. In that way, a story is like the human mind. While you're thinking on the concrete, basic level of "where's my watch," your mind could also be thinking, feeling, on various levels of abstraction, fear, anxiety, and such. Yet, also, your mind is regulating your breathing, your heart rate, sending out signals to your stomach so you can digest your food. Did I answer your question?

AD: The non-literary influence I wanted you to acknowledge was robots.

ZP: There was this guy, Daniel Hillis, at MIT who wrote this book called "The Connection Machine." He sent me this book a long time ago. I was twelve and I wrote to him because I was so into robots. So he sent me his book, which was incredibly sweet of him—it's about Artificial Intelligence. Not just about computing, not just the binary of "on/off, on/off," but about replicating—as much as possible—what the human brain does. Not one CPU, but hundreds, if not thousands of CPU's, so that AI scientists could approximate the multiplicity of connections that the human brain makes at one time. When I was building robots, I got started doing it because I was fascinated by *Star Wars*. I loved R2D2 and C3PO. I just thought they were so cool. Those robots are characters, but when I tried to build a robot, I found out that it was amazingly complicated just to be able to build a robotic arm. A robotic arm is a basic thing, but hard to build. It's incredibly hard to get computers to do what we do. We take a lot of our simple actions for granted. I tried to build a robot that could clean a room. I could only build one that could sweep the floor. The robot would have to realize that a cup doesn't belong there, on the floor, it belongs in a cupboard. A three year old could do that, recognize that, but to get a robot to do the same thing would require tons of AI. You'd have to do so much to get a robot to recognize the human environment which we take for granted.

AD: I see a fictional character-robot connection. Creating fictional characters and building robots.

ZP: *Is there a connection? I can only think of fictional characters as being human. If done right, they take on a life of their own. If you consider HAL in 2001: A Space Odyssey, you can see we have this desire to make robots human-like ...so maybe...we want to anthropomorphize everything. But in the real world, robots are so far from being that way, from being able to do human-like things. We want characters to be as human as possible. That's why, for instance, if you were to go back to the standard story form—"conflict plus action plus resolution equals story"—you'd have a story, you'd have a plot of action, but not a plot of the mind...you'd have the human element of conflict—strife—of action—agency—and you'd have the very human wish to know that something has ended—conclusion, or resolution—but to get the story that matters, you'd have to dig deeper, you'd have to get to the human story—the plot of the mind—underneath the Hollywood movie story—the plot of action. Earlier tonight, over a game of Trivial Pursuit at a nearby drinking establishment, you and I witnessed a bar brawl. That's the action. Then the cops came. That's the resolution. But we didn't see the initial conflict. And even if we had, even if it had been two guys fighting over some girl, that's not enough for art, that's not enough to satisfy that really human part of*

ourselves. But if we knew the girl, or one of the guys, and knew what led up to the conflict, and why it built up that way, we're on our way to the more human story. We humans need complications, we thrive on them. That's how we get to be more human...like, yes, we're human, but we need art to become more and more human. The social sciences differ from the "hard sciences." If you have a ball, it will roll down a hill in a way dictated by nature, the laws of gravity. But you know that a ball atop a hill with no obstructions *will* go down, and given the same element each time (wind, friction, etc), it will go down the same way each time. You put some people atop a hill and who knows how they'll go down. Some might not come down for weeks. Others might come down in the belly of a mountain lion. One can't accurately predict human nature the way one can predict the trajectories of physical objects, physical phenomena. Of course, we are physical, but that's only the half of it. The real thing is, we thrive on the difference. During the fight we saw tonight at the bar, the bouncer separated the two main perpetrators, but then these girls got into it, smashing bottles and throwing punches. There's a complication. Anything that complicates the picture makes it more human-like and appeals to something deep within us. Like James Alan McPherson's hatred of computers. You want the computer to do X and the computer does X. It's just not human enough for him. Most of us want consistency from our

machines, yet, we also want to anthropomorphize them. If characters were robotic, they wouldn't be any fun. That's why whenever we try to introduce robots in literature, we try to make them as human as possible.

AD: What writers both new and old excite you?

ZP: Before, when I was into my whole Russian novel fixation—have you read *War and Peace*?

AD: I think of it as a great soap opera.

ZP: It's a well-done soap opera, yes. And that's what I like about Tolstoy—he panders to what E. M. Forster calls the "And What's Next" phenomenon. Forster says the reader is like Scheherazade's husband, always wanting to know what happens next. It's pretty universal. But Tolstoy doesn't stop there. He goes from "And What's Next" to "What Happens Next" to "Why It Happens." It satisfies my base desire to be entertained and to have a story constantly evolving. With soap operas, the characters' motivations don't have to do with the higher aspects of human nature. Tolstoy, though, can rope you into the story on the soap opera level, but ultimately he wants to address actual philosophical questions, or rather, make a philosophical statement—that individual humans don't add to society, that they are just atoms, tools, parts. It is

only society, *en masse*, that does anything. Tolstoy argues that Napoleon is just a tool of history. In some ways, though, Tolstoy goes off the deep end with his pedantic treatise on human history. But that's also what's so charming about reading *War and Peace*. Tolstoy has a pet theory and uses this entire book to promote it. He has these great characters, yet he continuously pounds you over the head with his theory. *Anna Karenina* is the better book, because *War and Peace* is too didactic, but you have to hand it to Tolstoy, notwithstanding the didacticism, it's a terrific novel. In *Anna Karenina*, though, he gets his ideology across without launching into treatise mode.

AD: Who else, besides Tolstoy?

ZP: It's been a long time since I've read Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. People fall into the camp of either loving or hating Henry James. I think he's wonderful.

AD: Already, your writing is being favorably compared to the work of Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, and Toni Morrison. Do you feel your work has been influenced by specific writers? How do you negotiate the influence?

ZP: I don't know that Toni Morrison is an influence. To say that would suggest that I'd incorporated her into the work and I don't think I have, though I *love* her work and idolize

her. And I write so differently from Junot Diaz or Lorrie Moore or George Saunders, though I love reading them. I ended up liking a lot of Nabokov: he's brilliant and the language is just stellar. And I love Stuart Dybek's work. The list could go on and on. Junot Diaz can just make you feel on the side of his characters if you've never been to New Jersey or in a Dominican neighborhood. In "The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars," he has this incredible line, "Revoke your ghetto pass instantly." Of course, you don't want that to happen. You are on his side. You want access to the world he conjures up. He has a great way of combining low and high-low vernacular with...

AD: ...exceptionally astute observations...

ZP: ...biting, sharp, almost caustic observations. I love that about his work. Lorrie Moore, at her best, gives you the humor of the cynic. She shows the modern struggle in a whole new way in stories like "People Like That Are The Only People Here." Not pity for the characters but a sense of recognition of the general weariness of having to deal with a world that is unthinking. Mary Gaitskill does, too, in a slightly different, skewed way, having to deal with gender differences and male/female relationships. George Saunders—what he writes is so *him*, so unique to him. I admire that. In someone else's hands the stories would be tired versions of the same surreal thing over and over

again, but I don't know if it has to do with the good-natured way he shows how weird people are. Somehow, his weird characters seem more normal than cartoonish. Especially the characters in *Pastoralia*, in stories like "The Barber's Unhappiness." With his stories, they can be forty pages long, and he's perpetually showing you something new.

AD: I know you're working on a novel about the Buffalo Soldiers, and while I hesitate to ask a writer to talk about a work in progress, I do wonder if you could talk about your approach to the novel. How do you balance discoveries you might make during the research process with the creation of fictional characters? How do you handle the burden of history?

ZP: This is the most thought-provoking interview I've ever had. On the one hand, I feel as though I have to over-research just to feel confident enough to be sure that each character can historically do the thing I want him or her to be doing. I've been writing in a lot of stops and starts, taking notes, doing some stuff I know will make it into the final draft. Then I have to stop and refuel myself, do more research. I've written, like, 450 pages of this novel and I have to stop because I've gone as far as I can go. With Cathay, a historical figure in my novel, an African American woman who dressed as a man to fight in a

Northern regiment during the Civil War, I went as far with her as I could, and then I had to say I don't know as much as I need to know about Missouri during the Civil War to keep writing about her with integrity. That led me to read all of these books about Missouri and learn stuff that probably won't appear in the novel, but will help me understand why Cathay makes some of the choices she makes. Right now, this has been working, but I don't even know if I could say this is my process. I guess so, but I don't know. I may not even know until I've finished which parts of the process work. I'll do tons of research, write, and then forget. I used to know so much about Apache tribes and rituals, for example, things I need to be aware of in the writing of this book, and now all of that information feels really far away, so I feel as though I have to relearn it.

AD: You'll be teaching at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the Fall, four years after receiving your MFA there. Ideally, what do you hope a student takes away from being in a workshop with you?

ZP: I was hoping to have all summer to think about that. I've been thinking, at Iowa, I got something specific from each workshop leader. From Frank Conroy, I learned the mantra of "Meaning, Sense, and Clarity." I gained the understanding that the language of a story on its most basic level must make sense. From Jim McPherson, I

learned to ask, "What is this story saying about the world? Why does it have to exist in the world? Why is the writing of it necessary?" And from Stuart Dybek, I learned to ask myself, "Why do I want to write this story in the first place?" Frank stressed the importance of a story being well-written, Jim stressed the importance of urgency, but Stuart's attitude was, "Yeah, sure the world gets something out of it, and it's well-written enough, but why do you want to write it? What makes the particular story essential to you?" It's harder to quantify what I got from studying writing with Marilynne Robinson, but her method of inquiry was similar to Jim's. With Marilynne, it was more like her very presence helped me as a writer. So what will I be doing in the workshop I teach that would make it somehow unique? The way I want to run it is...I think that workshops often focus on making stories publishable, rather than on what an individual writer needs to focus on to make the story work for him or her. Perhaps I'll have the students hand in a list of questions they want asked. The workshop students could concentrate on that, instead of on stuff an individual writer wouldn't care about. I don't know what the writer would get out of this, except the ability to ask, "Is this story satisfying to *me* as its writer?" The writer is writing a story for a reason, and then maybe they can satisfy their own priorities if they had an opportunity to ask preliminary questions. Also, I'm insanely underqualified to teach a seminar on *War and*

Peace, but you have this trend in contemporary literature and pedagogy of people being afraid to take on big subjects, taking a risk, so I'd like to. Also, I'd like to teach my students how to speak articulately about their own writing. When I hear poets talking about what they want to do with their poetry, they seem to be more articulate. All the poets I listen to say, "In this new book I was trying to do this or that," but fiction writers don't seem to come out and say this, as though answering questions is tantamount to being egotistical. I don't know that fiction writers think about intentionality enough. Lastly, I'd like to go back to the first question you asked me, when you wanted me to explain the title of my collection. You wanted me to not just pin it down to what it means, but to risk saying, "I believe in this. I did this for a reason." Yes, the stand I'm going to take, the answer I'm going to give someone asking me about my writing, might change, will change, but I'm going to risk taking a stand, as opposed to just writing a story, or writing a story that gets published. I want my students to become bold enough to take stands.

Coco Chanel and the Vampire Finch

Robyn Schiff and Michael Dumanis

Robyn Schiff holds a BA from Sarah Lawrence College, an MA in Medieval Studies from the University of Bristol, and an MFA in Poetry from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Oregon. Her poems have appeared in Black Warrior Review, Fence, Verse, VOLT, and elsewhere. Her first book of poems, Worth, was selected for the new Kuhl House Poets Series by Jorie Graham and Mark Levine, and was published by The University of Iowa Press in 2002. She read from her collection at Brazos Bookstore on February 20, 2003. This interview was conducted by Michael Dumanis, over email, not long after her reading.

Michael Dumanis: Your book opens with a series of poems about the manufacturers of fashion and jewelry: "House of Worth," "Maison Cartier," "Tiffany & Co.," "Chanel No. 5," "House of Dior," and "House of Versace." In "Maison Cartier: 1925 Exhibition of Arts of Decoration, Delayed by war, ten years," you say of Marie Antoinette's earrings:

Part

of everything is sad. She wore
them until the war.

Resetting them for exposition, Cartier was aware
he had acquired a vital part
of History. When taken Prisoner of Revolution in '91
Marie Antoinette was wearing
them. "Wear
them for me" Louis XVI said, perceiving these the
perfect gift to offer his depressed
Queen.

Throughout the book, you juxtapose the manufacture and design of beautiful, intricate clothing and jewelry with images of war, cruelty, helplessness, and loss. Could you comment on the connections you see between them?

Robyn Schiff: I wanted to write about war by deeply studying the objects we've created to divert our attention from our own barbarism. I was seeking to write about colonialism, imperialism and, to some extent, feminism and environmentalism, by exploring the implications of setting a diamond or placing a feather in a hat. Is there a stranger demonstration of power? We bring a diamond that was mined halfway across the world by a worker who was searched with a gun to his head to a workshop where

it's cut for optimum brilliance by a highly skilled craftsman, suspend it in a gold setting that appears to be on the verge of letting go, display it in a window on Fifth Avenue in such a way that its accessibility is simultaneously heightened and distanced, and then we wear it to show we're loved, and finally bequest it as an heirloom. Wow! In the poems in *Worth*, I'm exploring how jewelry and clothing, while seeming so extraneous, so beside the point, really are the point. The whole notion of diversion, of recreation, of leisure, is fascinating. Thinking of Robert Frost's great poem "The Road Not Taken," it occurs to me that regardless of which way he chose, he would no doubt find a dead body in the road. It's not an uplifting poetic, but anything I take as my subject matter seems to yield exactly what you found in my poems: war, cruelty, helplessness and loss. Two roads diverge, and Frost is so lucky that he can stroll the one less traveled and not really worry about being raped or murdered. I'm from New Jersey, and when we go into that yellow wood, we wonder if we're going to come out again. Diversion tactics, circumventions, circumlocutions—they're dangerous. By limning rare artifacts of desire I sought to explore some of that danger. Maybe it's because we sublimate so much of our aggression and fear into luxury goods that their manufacture and trade is rife with passion. Maybe we try to avoid contemplating war by surrounding ourselves with jewelry, art, and the like (some of which is

plundered). But negotiating these contradictions doesn't make me dismissive of the industry; I may hate loving Chanel, but I do love her. Wanting to resist luxury items—on ethical or political grounds, or simply because I can't afford them—is part of the allure. I try to write toward that ambiguity. In another sense, I'm wildly interested in the ways we present ourselves—the history of fashion is the history of self-representation.

MD: In “Chanel No. 5,” you connect the embroidering of fabric with the Fall of the Russian Empire, the murder of Rasputin, the Rosenbergs' sale of hydrogen bomb secrets in the 1950's, and Coco Chanel's problematic personal life:

“At my age, when a man wants you
you don't ask to see his passport,” she answered re-
porters about fucking

the Nazi called “The Sparrow”
(his language) in 1940 when in-
vited back to Paris
to fuck him in the Ritz.
Emptiness is innocent? Not
so as Ruth Greenglass described a hollow in the
stereo-console in the

sitting room of her in-laws
in which a lamp was installed. For use in
microfilming, a bulb
affixed on the secret
documentation of the bomb
delicately renders that which is put before it:
reiterating,

smaller, in the Rosenbergs's
console, the atom bomb assembling
and assembling in
silent darkness.

Could you briefly discuss the arc of the poem I'm quoting from and the associations you seek to make between Coco Chanel and the Rosenbergs? Similarly, in your poem "Vampire Finch," you leap from a discussion of parasitism—how vampire finches drink the blood of red-footed boobies—to an image of the Pietá, to parasitism in *Dracula*, to an analogy to Vermeer's globes, to Leopold and Loeb's bird-watching and plots of homicide, to the cattle cars transporting Jews during the Holocaust. Could you talk about the importance of the associative leap, which you have such a talent for, in "Vampire Finch" and other poems? What makes for a good connection in a poem?

RS: I sought to unfold the drama in these poems in the borderland between the arbitrary and the inevitable. On the one hand, I'm trying to map the connections between certain horrendous events by imposing a sort of "conspiracy-theory" poetic—that is, creating linkages through strange historical evidence (Chanel *really* did have an affair with Grand Duke Dmitrii, one of Rasputin's assassins—ineluctably forging a relationship between the Russian Revolution and Women's Wear) and other thematic, or sonic, or formal linkages that bind seemingly disparate historical strands. In the Chanel poem, the "emptiness" of Chanel's ethics relates her to the empty space in the Rosenbergs' stereo where they allegedly replaced stereo parts with microfilming equipment. In "Vampire Finch," stanzas about nature have the same amount of syllables as stanzas about art, and the red-footed booby's egg and the eggshell lacquer are joined by a kind of logic of metamorphosis that shapes the whole poem. I think reasoning—faulty reasoning—is the subject matter here, so the very tenuousness of these connections, and the sometimes unyielding pace at which alliances shift within the poems, was integral to the undertaking. Ultimately the question "How did the Holocaust happen?" is at the heart of the book; these poems fumble awkwardly toward some kind of unwieldy chain of causality that implicates every detail of the way we live our lives. When the "Final Solution" is the answer to an ineffable question,

tracing the reasoning back has got to be problematized. In short, the relationship between Chanel and the Rosenbergs is the relationship between ethical breaches, small and large. How do small ethical trespasses authorize the rest? How do private loyalties and acts of treason become public? What's a major historical detail and what's a minor historical detail? That's what I'm trying to chart.

MD: How significant are chance and arbitrariness to your sense of composition and your sense of history?

RS: On the other hand, when I composed these poems, to some extent I was also embracing chance operations and divination as a guiding principle. It became something of a game to randomly connect the content of any two library books. It was like throwing dice or choosing a card. That I always found death in the cards goes back to your first question: all roads lead to Rome.

MD: The third of the four sections comprising *Worth* consists of a series of poems titled after finches. In addition to the vampire finch, we have the devil finch, the good-bye finch, the vest-pocket finch, the St. Lucia finch, and the woodpecker finch. Why finches?

RS: Writing about Darwin's finches was an opportunity to further contemplate adaptability. Because finches

epitomize the spirit of evolution, I was curious to see how they would bespeak human transformation. Finches aren't simple omens; as gradual shape-shifters, they portend instability. They were a muse for an unstable text. Imagining the finches' survival made me wonder what a poem would do to get to the next word, the next line, the next page.

MD: Your line-lengths differ dramatically throughout the book, from the one-foot lines in your long poem "House of Versace" to the exceptionally long lines in "Maison Cartier," "House of Worth," and other poems. Throughout the book, however, you tend to write in gorgeous, ostentatiously long sentences that transcend the spatial limitations of the line and often double back upon themselves. In your poem "Devil Finch," for instance, your first sentence is twelve lines long, with a number of words recurring: "red," "firefly," "watching." Could you talk about your sense of the line, your sense of the sentence, and your propensity for returning to the same words time and again in a poem?

RS: The tension between line and sentence is expressive, and I've used the interaction to especially explore notions of control in *Worth*. Many of the poems are inherited verse forms, or sometimes "exploded" versions of forms: syllabics, pantoums, canzones, and prose poems. I'm not

really interested in the use of form to exhibit virtuosity; rather, I'm drawn to form as an expression of how tongued I feel toward my subject matter. Linebreaks, especially in syllabics, fall like hatchets, or like guillotine blades—always in the middle of a thought, usually in the middle of a sentence, often in the middle of a word. I wanted to write a poetry that questions its own right to exist at every turn. The sentence keeps going, but has to maneuver through an elaborate obstacle course to get to the period. It's got something to do with interacting with bureaucracy and even more to do with interacting with The Absolute. When the blade comes down arbitrarily, the sentence surges forward, but breathlessly aware of its mortality. I enjoyed playing with canzones and pantoums because they profoundly foreground artifice and blur the line between tragedy and comedy. If there's a spirituality at all to be had in these poems, it's when the lines fall into futile prose spasms lurching toward a predetermined end word that I can't quite catch, or conversely when I hit up against an arbitrary end word too soon. Form "batters my heart," but I also find it hilarious. Moreover, because these poems are so concerned with the burdens of history, using inherited forms seemed crucial. But like any heir, I tended to adapt the bequest to a new purpose. For me, writing in inherited forms today is like mixing punch in an antique urn. Not that they were particularly willed to *me*; playing with these artifacts is even more fun because I'm Jewish and female,

and well, nobody really wanted me to have these sacred things. *Lineation* and *lineage* are related.

MD: The writers who keep coming to mind as I read through your book are Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Cole Swensen. Am I right? Your sense of the line, in particular, seems to be in dialogue with Marianne Moore's sense of the line. Have these poets influenced your work, and in what ways? Are there other poets you feel you have a strong affinity with, and how would you characterize your poems' relationship with their poems?

RS: You are right on—Moore, in particular, inspires my poetics endlessly. When she says “struggling to be free and unable to be” in her poem “What Are Years,” it sounds to me like an *ars poetica*. She enacts that struggle over and over again. I've taken it as my battle-cry, too, and for better or for worse I find myself formally “struggling to be free and unable to be” in every poem. I also return constantly to Bishop. Every time I read “Cirque d'Hiver” I want to cry when the little body-and soul-piercing pole drives through the dancer and the horse—between stanzas, in the middle of a sentence. It's such a triumph of form and content, so gracefully violent. Or in “Arrival at Santos” when she carries the “s” of “Glens Falls, New York” down, preserving the rhyme, but violating just about everything else. Of course she even violates with restraint. I could

never exercise such even judgement; my other great love, after, or maybe before, poetry is Victorian fiction—Willkie Collins, Trollope—and I’m always trying to cram Victorian details into my poems. I’m also deeply indebted to Yeats. I read “The Tower” often, and find that as a writer I’m stirred to transform a pack of cards into a pack of hounds like Hanrahan. In “The Tower,” the card under his thumb turns into a hare and he and the new hounds all chase it out of the room. I know it’s coming, but it surprises me every time. I think you’re picking up on my desire to “bewitch” my hand into a pack of hounds when you earlier asked about associative leaps. Sometimes I lose the hare. I’m trying not to lose the hare so much in my new poems. Cole Swensen is a recent favorite. *Such Rich Hour* is a swirl of sensations where what one can “learn” about history from documentation engages so mysteriously with what one can imagine. I’m drawn to her sense of a book as a project, and of course to her sheer lyricism.

MD: What excites you about contemporary poetry today? Any particular writers, books, or trends?

RS: So many of our most gifted contemporary poets are responding so movingly to the presence of the past—Swensen, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Susan Howe, the novelist W. G. Sebald (whom I consider a poet). *A Gilded Lapse of Time*, *Bed Hangings*, *Rings of Saturn*—these are

haunted texts. I love a disorienting twister of a poem so all-encompassing that it whips through town gathering the farm equipment from one farm and scattering it in the next. And I'm excited by the formal strategies contemporary poets use to organize or disorganize the stuff they sweep into their vortex. In her book *Darkling*, Anna Rabinowitz threads Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush" down the left margin and bounces a book-length acrostic off it. Amazing! American poets long ago established that anything can be in a poem—what Moore didn't get in there, certainly Ashbery did; what Lowell didn't, Olds did. Rather, one of the things I find exciting about contemporary poems is information management and expressive mismanagement. Management is a question of form, of narrative and lyric approach, and especially, I suppose, of syntax. The contemporary poems that I'm attracted to at the moment are enacting the struggle we have containing and maintaining our stories and ideas and their unwieldy details. I don't think it's a new phenomenon by any means, it's just a useful way of reading for me now.

MD: What connections do you see between the making of a poem and the making of a garment? If you were a fashion designer, what kind of fashion designer would you be?

RS: Design and poetry are similarly dismissed to the margins of our culture and both are stigmatized as the pursuits of the leisure class. However, I'm interested in how design and poetry are active, material participants in revolutions large and small—the silk road, Chaucer's decision to write in English, Madame Pompadour's porcelain works, the diamond trade, Dickinson's decision not to rhyme perfectly, the invention of the wristwatch, Chanel's design of a garment that in requiring less fabric (a response to war-time rations) eased a woman's ability to get from point A to point B—these events influence the way we think, but on the material level, they *literally* tinker with our power dynamics. If I was designing garments I'd be compelled to use design to not only express power dynamics, but to literally empower or disempower: a line of clothes (reminds me of a line of verse) that includes impossibly dangerous dresses, perhaps constructed from shards of glass, shown in the same season as ultra-utilitarian military garments—flight suits, spacesuits. Of course I'd have to consider who was going to pay for these garments, and at what cost (in every sense of the word).

MD: Aside from fashion and the history of fashion, what other non-literary influences do you see as having helped shape your sensibility as a writer? Films, paintings, musical compositions?

RS: Although I'm mesmerized by so much visual art—work by Vermeer, Florine Stettheimer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Rembrandt, to name just a few—my sensibility as a writer probably has more in common with notions of museum curation and exhibition in general. I'm interested in what objects are collected and how, to what extent they are restored, and how objects are displayed to interact with one another and the viewer. I'm moved by the representation of representation, which seems ridiculous, but I draw a lot of inspiration from my own suspicions about the fickleness of the I-thou relationship I establish with a piece on a particular visit. If I had any talent for visual art at all (which I do not!), I'd be a curator. I have a lot of respect for a good curator. It's hard to go to museums today and not feel like I'm shopping; reprioritizing the meditative, intellectual, or expressive purpose of art above the consumer impulse seems to me one of the smallest, but potentially most important stands that American culture can make.

All Art is Autobiography

Rick Barot and Vanessa Stauffer

*Winner of the 2001 Kathryn A. Morton Prize, Rick Barot's first book of poems, *The Darker Fall*, has been described by Stanley Plumly as "a brilliant example of language as means, as an art nearly flawless in its transformation of emotional and actual sources." A graduate of Wesleyan University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Barot has also studied at Stanford, where he was a Wallace E. Stegner Fellow in Poetry. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *The Yale Review*. Currently, he is the Jenny McKean Moore Visiting Writer at George Washington University.*

Vanessa Stauffer: Has your life as a poet changed with the publication of your first book, *The Darker Fall*?

Rick Barot: In a very important way, it's made me see where I want to go next as a writer. Having a book—the physical manifestation of it—gives you a clarifying distance from the work you've just finished. Because this was my first book, the distance showed me just how much growing up, how much of an apprenticeship, was lived through those poems. And showed me, too, what kinds of

things I didn't like in my writing. I heard Louise Glück talk once about how, when *Firstborn* was published, she made a list of things she thought she had to stop doing: certain words obsessively repeated, syntactical tics. It's like that now. I have a list of things-not-to-do.

VS: I was glad to hear you read [at Brazos Bookstore in Houston] "Eight Elegies," a poem that seems to yoke together many of the book's major elements—eros and elegy, painting as language and word as image, urban landscapes butting up against nature. Could you talk about the writing of that poem? For starters, when was it written in relation to the rest of the project?

RB: That poem was written very late. Soon after I wrote it, I wrote "Aubade," which is the last poem I wrote for the book. And so "Eight Elegies" and "Aubade" are the final gestures of the book. I wrote "Eight Elegies" over the course of a few days, with my head sort of blizzarded by all the material that finally went into the sequence. The sections were not written in the order they're in now. At first I'd meant the poem to be one seamless stanza, a long voice-driven spew, something like one of Browning's monologues. But I'd come up with an image and write a chunk of lines, only to find that the next image and the next chunk of lines had a different voice or stance. The pieces couldn't cohere into the monologue I envisioned,

and so I ended up compromising with this refractory sequence that allowed me to jump around.

VS: It's wonderful to read a first book that is so devoted to its masters, particularly one such as this, in which the voice of the poet harmonizes beautifully with the voices of its ancestors. Who would you say has been your biggest influence?

RB: I have this funny fantasy wherein I'm asked to enumerate a final meal for myself—à la death row—and I tell the guard I want some fried chicken and a volume of Virginia Woolf's diary. Woolf, especially in her *Diary*, is the enduring influence. I don't go a week without reading some portion of it. I like the person that's in the *Diary* and in the novels. I know I probably wouldn't have liked the actual person of Virginia Woolf, but in *The Waves* and in the *Diary* there's someone there who is to me a model of emotional and visual acuity, perseverance, and also ambition, and also wit. I went to see *The Hours*, the movie, and had to walk out because Nicole Kidman played Woolf as though she were some kind of completely floppy neurasthenic. That wasn't my Woolf. If you ever hear a tape of Virginia Woolf's actual voice you'll know what I mean: it's *deep*. Deeper than that river she walked into.

VS: I'm interested in particular in your poems that reference painting; they're not exactly ekphrastic, per se, as the poetic voice seems to enter the paintings themselves instead of simply talk about them. You once said that studying painting taught you a way of looking—could you elaborate on that thought?

RB: I haven't formally studied painting—whether art history or the actual practice. And if I say that looking at paintings teaches me a particular way of looking, that's really sort of a bogus answer. I don't know what I get out of looking. I look at a lot of paintings, and also a lot of photography, and I don't know what it is I'm getting from that. Certainly not a quantifiable amount of counsel or technical knowledge—mostly it just makes happy the part of my temperament that is pleased by color and composition and drama. Simple as that. Of course, you absorb lessons from the things you look at, and there are lessons here which have to do with composition, and economy, and perhaps even an ethic of working. You go into a room full of Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" paintings and you learn something about that ethic—the doggedness, the problem-solving doggedness. And of course maybe you learn something too about being necessarily crazy. You go to the Menil [Collection, in Houston] and look at those Twomblys and you know what I mean.

VS: The lyric “I” of this book has a different weight than that of so many others—the self is almost obliterated, in that every thing, image, or object that enters a poem gets equal attention, the self included. What are your thoughts on the “autobiographical” poem?

RB: I guess the first thing to say is that all poems—all bodies of work—are autobiographical, aren’t they? Even if they’re just autobiographical records of, in the case of painters, how your arm, your hand-eye coordination, was working on the particular day you were working on a particular painting. All poetry is autobiographical, in my mind, even if it’s not strictly “confessional” in the way we’ve come to think of Plath or Olds or Lowell as “confessional.” Berryman’s “Dream Songs” may be filtered through an artificial set of *personae*, but that’s all an autobiographical mapping of interior terrains, terrains which are perhaps more durably true and real than the everyday. Or I think of George Herbert and those engrossing confessions he makes in his poems, confessions which are intricate with faith and doubt and rhetoric and music and image. Those poems are an autobiography, a pilgrim’s progress towards belief. As for how the “I” works in my poems, I don’t really think of it as having been “obliterated.” It’s just, for now, off to the side, taking its notes. I think it’s really hard to write a poem where the self—that profoundly strong “I” of Plath and Lowell and

Rich—is center stage. I don't know how to get my narrators to stand on that center stage yet; how to make them the center of attention. In the meantime I'll just look at the things around them.

VS: What worries you about contemporary American poetry? And what do you like?

RB: Contemporary American poetry is in such a healthily pluralistic state that it seems to me that the only thing we could possibly worry about is that it should become merely decadent. The state of the world—politically, economically—will hopefully keep that decadence in check, making us mindful of the true uses of poetry as song and witness. There's so damn much to like on the scene right now. I'm particularly interested in the work of the poets in my generation, poets in their late twenties and early thirties who are writing poems not out of a strict aesthetic constituency but from a sophisticated, synthesizing sensibility that has [been] learned from, let's say, Palmer and Oliver and everything and everyone in between. Monica Youn's *Barter* is a really gorgeous and creepy book, with the act of description in her poems almost akin to a kind of surgical laying bare. And then there's Cate Marvin's *World's Tallest Disaster*, which has in it aria after aria about love and losing. And then there's Geoffrey G. O'Brien's *Guns and Flags Project*, and all the

sonorous long poems in there. And then there's Joanie Mackowski's *The Zoo*: poems about animals, bugs, perception, the distortions and beauties of perception, "one does wonder what one does wonder one does." I could go on. What's to like about these books is the sheer bigness of ambition in the poems. All the resources of mind and heart have been deployed to write these poems. Whether the poems are any good, or whether they are to any reader's liking—that seems beside the point to me right now. What counts is the ambition.

VS: Having received an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, as well as having held a Stegner, how much importance do you place on a formal education in poetry? In other words, do you think the workshop really works?

RB: The average age of the MFA student these days seems to be getting younger and younger. This interests me, perhaps even worries me. Whenever I have a conference with one of my aspiring undergrad writers, I spend half the time telling them what a wonderful thing writing is to devote one's life to, and I spend the other half telling them to wait as long as possible before going to a graduate writing program. Between college and Iowa, I had about four years wherein I had a regular crappy day-job but owned all of my intellectual time and space, without teachers, workshops, feedback. At the time, those four

years felt lonely, but I see now that I gained a whole lot of self-knowledge in those four years—about the habits of my own mind and eye and the strengths and weaknesses of my writing. It was a little bit like being Crusoe on his island. The education I gave myself then was so funny and pell-mell: I'd spend one afternoon absolutely loving Michael Palmer's *First Figure*, then spend the next afternoon absolutely loving Mary Oliver's *Twelve Moons*. Everything was good and useful in my ignorance. Going to Iowa made me see what a good and bad thing it was to wait so long before going to grad school. Iowa gave me some incredible teachers: Bell, Galvin, Graham, each of whom presented an idiosyncratic commitment to the art and its making. I didn't really get Eliot until Jorie's seminar, nor Williams until Marvin's seminar, nor Blake until Galvin's seminar. And then Iowa gave me a lot of other writers as friends, when I hadn't known other writers before. We did a lot of drinking at Iowa. I like to think that a big reason for this is because the workshops were so—necessarily, scarily—brutal, but then it was probably just because we liked each other a lot. As for your question. The importance of the formal education: yes, absolutely, the way a plumber has to know plumbing before plumbing. The importance of workshops: it depends.

VS: In "Riffing," you write,

I remember my mother planting roses
as one way the mundane gets brought into
sacredness, though it was simply a thing she liked
to do. Dirt and rain. Leaves and thorns.
Nothing about the fascination with what's
difficult. Nothing about how the soul, in its
limitedness, sings.

So many of these poems recall the figure of the mother planting roses, with the lines reforming the mundane until it is sacred. It makes me wonder about the line, "Nothing about the fascination with what's difficult," particularly since the poems certainly tackle the difficult. Could you talk a bit about those passages, which seem to imply a sort of *ars poetica*?

RB: That phrase "the fascination with what's difficult" is of course from Yeats's own *ars poetica*, "The Fascination of What's Difficult." The poem is this neatly howling poem about how the difficulty of making art, the heartbreak of Irish politics, has lashed at him. The poem is 13 lines, one line short of a sonnet, which seems wonderfully expressive of what the poem is about, which is about how hard it is to make anything. I love thinking about the composition of this poem, that moment Yeats must have decided when the

poem would only be thirteen lines, even though he'd started out working towards the sonnet's fourteen. He must have felt the choice witty, withholding that fourteenth line, and, in that wit, found a way past the difficulty, at least for now.

Red Birds at the Empire Cafe

Joyelle McSweeney and Landon Godfrey

Joyelle McSweeney was born in 1976, grew up in Austin and Philadelphia, and studied literature and writing at Harvard, Oxford, and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she received her MFA in 2000. Her poems have appeared in The Boston Review, Fence, Jubilat, and elsewhere, and will appear in The Denver Quarterly and The Colorado Review. Her first book of poems, The Red Bird, was selected by Allen Grossman for the first annual Fence Modern Series Prize, and was published by Fence Books in 2002. In selecting the book, Grossman called McSweeney's poems "profoundly mysterious in the way any truthful account of the world must be." This Fall, Joyelle McSweeney joined the Creative Writing faculty at the University of Alabama. This interview was conducted by Landon Godfrey on the evening of April 5, 2003, at the Empire Café in Houston.

Landon Godfrey: We're now at the Empire café...

Joyelle McSweeney: Suitably.

LG: ...suitably. Yeah, it actually is suitable, right?

JM: Mm, hmm.

LG: Because we're going to talk about the idea of empire.

JM: Very suitable.

LG: To start off, I was very interested in which poets influenced your work.

JM: That's a hard question, right? I mean, I think those are the kinds of things that are more apparent to the readers of the works than the writers of the works.

LG: We can augment the question: who's on your reading list?

JM: Well, I just bought the Kamau Brathwaite book, *Words Need Love Too*. His work has really influenced me. I first read him when I had one foot into the project of *The Red Bird*, but I wasn't totally there yet. I was writing short lyrics that were collaged in nature, but I wasn't writing longer pieces, really. I'd written my first one, but it wasn't happening in the way that it did later with some of the poems in the book. They just got longer and longer. The last poem I wrote was "The Voyage of the Beagle," shortly after reading Brathwaite's book, *Sun Poem*. Brathwaite uses a lot of collaged news stories, folk tales, and different levels of diction to get across an epic sense of life in the

Caribbean, and I think that his work opened my mind up to the ways I could create space through collage. I wasn't consciously patterning my work after Brathwaite's, but in hindsight, I owe a debt to him. I tend to think in terms of reading poets, and not specific poems or books, but, having said that, a poem I've always loved is Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. *In Memoriam*'s my favorite poem. I mean, I've also never read it all the way through, but it's the poem I read almost constantly. I think that *In Memoriam* is, like, a hugely open text for me, in the way that it makes space and time so little and so moving and so huge and so detailed. I think reading it really made me go charging across the space I could make in poetry. I think I write two kinds of poems in my book. One is the kind that tries to use collage and fragments to make a huge space into which the speaker and I and, hopefully, the reader, can go deeper and deeper. The other kind of poem I write is also a type of collage, but one that moves inward rather than outward, a work trying to capture a single moment, one environment, one gesture, like all the Toy poems in *The Red Bird*—"Toy House," "Toy Bed," "Toy Enterprise," "Toy Election," "Toy Maternity." The installments of the longer poems might work that way, like little snapshots, little moments, though I shouldn't really use visual metaphors to describe this, because I'm more interested in an environment with lots of senses.

LG: The final poem in your book, "Afterlives," seems to capture what you're saying—not that the other poems don't, but the last one really seems to be pursuing brevity and scope simultaneously. It's absolutely beautiful, and its title is such a nice summary for the book, so I want to ask you about the book as a project, but before I do so, I want to ask you specifically about collage and the twentieth century notion that collage is a by-product of the cinematic age, and I think now we would say it's a by-product of the television age. There is a lot of television in your book: were you thinking also in terms of perception derived from paintings? There are a lot of moments in your poems where it seems like you're using a painterly eye. There are a few places I thought of specifically, like in your poem, "Animal Instruction," when the stork flaps around the kitchen and it's seemingly in a kind of setting, and the stork has only one eye, but we don't take that literally—that the stork has only one eye—we see this suggestion of a flatness, sort of Japanese and very beautiful—and there were a couple of other moments, like in the poem "Persuasion," when you situate yourself in a car which is becoming smaller and smaller—"It wouldn't fit my littlest brother," you write—and you're simultaneously in the car and seeing the car as it leaves. Also, I felt a painterly eye in your poem, "Joy," which I took to be a self-portrait or a play on the notion of self-portraiture. I just wanted to know if this kind of sensibility, this sort of perspective

derived from painterly influence, was something that I was imposing on your work, or if you were thinking in those terms too.

JM: I think that there is variety in these poems, I think you're right about that, between moments which are natural and stiff, or moments which are picture-plane moments and TV-plane moments, and I do think there's a lot of TV and juxtaposition and jump cuts. Before I started writing this book, I was writing mostly TV poetry, in the sense that I was, like, watching a lot of cable, so there'd be lots of stuff happening on the Nature Channel and that sort of thing entered my work and was actually governing my energy choices, so I do agree with what you were saying.

LG: Thinking about your book as a book, the beginning poem, "Still Life w/Influences," and the end poem, "Afterlives," really work together beautifully. The beginning poem is so pretty, which I mean in all its fullness, and not...

JM: You can reclaim the word pretty after...

LG: I would like to...

JM: ...after you finish an MFA program.

LG: I would really like to. Especially since...

JM: I use the word pretty a lot.

LG: ...the notion of a still life has such resonance in the world of painting. But this lens through which you say you are looking through in "Still Life w/Influences," when you write, "I stood at the modern knothole, / my eyes on the pivoting modern stars and naphthalene green / turfs and surfaces"—and then the move toward transforming vision into speech is extremely beautiful...

JM: Thank you.

LG: And I want to ask you a very broad question about the idea of this book as a book, thinking, of course, of Robert Frost's idea that the book itself is the final poem. Was *The Red Bird* a project in the sense that you sat down and wrote these poems with a macro-idea of incorporating huge swaths of history? Or was it written in a different way altogether?

JM: Not at all, not at all. There's no project in this book that was apparent to me at the time. No. The project behind it was my writing process, if you will, because these poems are very readerly poems, I guess everyone would agree on

that, at least, in the sense that a lot of reading went into the writing of these poems and therefore, although I thought I was reading quite randomly at the time, I think that if there is a project-y sort of feeling to the book, it might have something to do with the fact that there is this combination of all my reading filtering into the poems. I had no heat one winter in Iowa City and, to keep warm, I spent all my time at the local independent bookstore, Prairie Lights—became a bookstore rat—and as a result, I read every magazine in there, particularly *Boundary Waters Journal*, which is a trout fishing magazine, which shows up in one of my poems, "The Round Table." But I was also reading books on the Knights of the Round Table, and I was reading a lot of theology, and all this different stuff. So I think that the book wasn't conceived as a project at all, and I initially didn't know what I was doing as I kept opening up these spaces in different ways and moving into them. But I was just always moving forward. I didn't have a plan. And I think that's why the "Voyage of the Beagle," the last poem I wrote, you know, it's like a nine-page poem, it's huge. I think of it as a huge, gaining kind of elegy. But I just wanted to go back to your last question about art. Because I realize that visual art was extremely significant to my upbringing, a real first love, and my parents were excellent and took us to all the traveling art exhibits. And I think the process of museum-going and moving through a space and having, like, you know, the vision, and

understanding the vision at the end of the space, but not understanding at any point in the space that experience of being at an exhibition, especially a blockbuster exhibition where you're just overwhelmed—I think that might have something to do with what I love in poems that move you through a space and show you something in the process of changing and developing, so that by the end of the poem, you know how to read the poem, and it becomes something that we understand, in the same way that at the end of the huge blockbuster exhibit, you come to an understanding of the exhibit due to the curatorial choices that have been made. I guess you could see some of my poems as curated, even though I wasn't thinking at all about museums, and this is not a book about museums, although there might be something similar between a museum and my book.

LG: I don't know if you had a chance to visit the Menil Collection [in Houston] where they have a room set aside for surrealist objects ...

JM: Yes, a collection of objects various surrealist painters owned ...

LG: A collection of ephemera ...

JM: But that's not what I do. There's not that kind of space system in my book.

LG: Not exactly, no, but, in reading your poems, I was reminded on occasion of Joseph Cornell, although I may be imposing the ideas governing the assembly of Cornell boxes on your work, because Joseph Cornell's art is so much about confining spaces and being trapped in them...

JM: I see what you mean. But Cornell seeks to preserve ephemera, and this book definitely does not preserve it. I don't think it really preserves anything. Cornell's boxes are static and referential, and I mean for my poems to be experiences of disorientation rather than static collections, so I don't think they would succeed at all as preservation boxes. Especially because I consider reference not to be very important despite the...I want the poems to have osmotic reference to anyone who is interested, but I'm not necessarily interested in that myself.

LG: So that's... so no footnotes [referencing your sources].

JM: No footnotes. And part of that was a very retroactive decision. I simply didn't keep good enough records. I kept notebooks. But on the other hand, I didn't really feel conflicted. There was one thing that I did check with an author on, but other than that...because it was from a

work of art, you know, as opposed to from a newspaper story. But I just didn't feel that conflicted about it because I thought that I both did and did not want the reference to over-inform. I want the book and poems to stand on their own, without an annotated bibliography of source material. When I took language from a different context, I felt that I had owned the language by taking it, which is a terrible ethic, I suppose, but for the poems, I just felt like the poems were done and that the peripheral sources were less important than the poems, unless anyone was interested.

LG: Well, it's interesting that you say that as a poet you can have ownership of the language by claiming it because you said last night during your reading that after you had written the book you noticed that there were some figures in the book who were, if not bastions of authority, nonetheless figures who really helped inform the reader. I think we can certainly look at your way of writing about Darwin, the way you know the reader already associates him with the idea of the survival of the fittest. And then Napoleon is here, during his Elba phase, and we know he's going to leave Elba, nine months into his exile, and begin the Hundred Days' War.

JM: To me, the Elba poems are the most sentimental poems in the book. That's funny that you go right there. I mean

sentimental in a good way. I mean that when I read a poem I call sentimental, I feel, at that moment, that it's the saddest poem ever written. For me, *Elba* was an early working title for the book, but people kept saying, "What? Elbow?" and also, "I don't like it." So after you hear, "I don't like it" enough, you're, like, okay, I'm going to not call it *Elba*. But I had this whole idea that I would call the book *Elba* and have a picture of the White House on the cover, I mean, this was not really about Elba...this was, you know, the end of the Clinton years. So it's not about politics as much as it's about the idea of an isolation and splendor and ambition that must end. And again and again in the book, there are mayors and premiers and all sorts of generals and, you know, Jesuits, explorers, missionaries—there's this sort of a Lewis and Clark Expedition that appears in the end of "Roman." St. Paul makes an appearance, as does rock and roll. To me, the book was just a gathering of what was going on around me—just this sort of poignancy of bad intentions and the rightness and poignancy of their failure, bad intentions of the self-edifying stripe. At first, they're poignant, even if they often have serious consequences for everyone involved.

LG: So much of your book is terrifyingly funny. When you were reading last night, I was reminded a lot of the modernists. I heard some Marianne Moore in here—there

are some very real toads in imaginary gardens inside here, and you introduce a similar concept to Moore's when you write, "the noise was a real noise but not in a real place" at the end of one of the "Elba" poems...So I heard a lot of these kinds of fluctuating realities butting up against each other. And I was reminded of a question that Ed Hirsch asked Charles Simic in an interview. He said, "What's so funny?" So I wanted to ask you, What's so funny, and what's so sad? Because I also think that your poems are extremely sad.

JM: That's kind of you to say that, because that's how I think of them, too. They seek to be heartbreaking and hopefully funny. And I love Simic, I love "Crazy About Her Shrimp" and "Means of Transport," and I think his poems are excellent.

LG: There's a blind shrimp in one of your poems.

JM: I know, and I wonder about that. I think Simic crept in a lot more...Simic was actually one of the first poets that I had to write a review of, and so I'm sure that that has a lot to do with something in there...His "Miracle Glass Co." is a poem I find very moving. What's so funny? That's a good question. I mean, you can say all the things about the edge of, you know, humor and pain and all that kind of thing and that might be part of it, and whimsy. I also think what

you said about modernist influence is highly relevant, because I've had a lot of grounding in modernism, particularly in Joyce and Yeats. Yeats is rarely as funny as he sometimes thinks he's being, but he always is funny-peculiar. Joyce is obviously completely funny, and his brilliance is also a funny brilliance, and in Joyce, the pleasure is brought to the surface. In my work, I tried to find a freedom to just be funny in a way that was silly without being irrelevant. What's so funny might just be you, Joyce, and life, and all those answers at once. Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* was the most pleasurable reading experience I've ever had. It was a delight. So I think that Joyce really governed a lot of my thought processes, just in terms of freedom, in terms of what I enjoy and what I choose to put in my writing.

LG: One of the sections of "The Voyage of the Beagle" ends with the lines "I am sure to be useful, / having always been," and I'd like to ask you how you conceive of line lengths and endings, because the line "having always been" can be read in a number of different ways, because of the way the line is laid out on the page, unpunctuated, followed by blank space. I'm interested in how this seems at once both innovative and conventional. Your publisher, Fence Books, publishes experimental, idiosyncratic writers. As idiosyncratic as these poems may be, they also seem to

owe a great formal debt to various twentieth century poetic traditions.

JM: My new manuscript, tentatively entitled, *The Commandrine and Other Poems*, is all about convention. It's not about form per se but about convention, especially the verse play. "The Commandrine" is a verse play I wrote that tries to serve as a commentary on the verse play genre. I have great reverence for poetic convention. Just because I love literature, I am conservatively trained: I went to Harvard and then I went to Oxford and I spent a lot of time with Joyce, who, obviously, is the experimenter of all experimenters. You have to remember, Yeats and his poems were once radically new, but are now not. That's true of all tradition. I also started—literally—with the classics. I probably spent more time with Virgil than with any other poet, because I took so much Latin, and I think there are consequently many classical expectations in my poems. Like where does the poem begin and where does it end, I think I learned that from Catullus and Virgil—and from Yeats—so, where does it begin and end? I don't know. I can only say that these poems are experimental for me. I don't know that they'd fit into the conventional spectrum of experiment. But I think I'm pleased with them partially because they're conventional in a new way. Line breaks give you a place to stand in poems that are

wheeling around a little bit. A place to stand on the page with them.

LG: Is there anything that somebody's not asking you that you're surprised that nobody's asking you? Is there something you expect readers to pick up on that they don't? Is there some secret that we're not getting?

JM: To tell you the truth, I'm thrilled by anyone's interest in any given poem, or in the poems *en toto*. It's all good, as far as I'm concerned. One question that I have not been asked since the book first came out pertains to the title. Why *The Red Bird*? It seemed like the right title even after there was no such poem in the manuscript, and actually there was never a red bird poem during any of the time I was writing this work. I'd written and moved beyond "Red Bird" poems a lot earlier. I thought that the red bird's emblematic absence from the book would serve the book. In a way, it's an unintended red herring, a red herring/red bird kind of thing.

LG: I also read it as a kind of transformation of finch to nightingale.

JM: And also the convention of the bird poem. I love the idea of the bird poem, especially that it's a seemingly

universal poetic impulse. So I think it captures something that way. Hopefully, a beautiful absence.

LG: There are moments in the book that just suddenly shine out, and a friend of mine told me he first read them with a preconceived idea that he was going to get something out of them, something important, regardless of whether or not that something was the something you intended for him to get.

JM: I think it's really true that poetry books are judged by their covers, you buy the cover that intrigues you, so the red bird becomes a fore-image and an afterimage for the text contained within its covers. I'm so glad that a reader had the confidence that he was going to have a moment with the poems before reading all of them. I'm very comfortable with readers taking whatever they want from the text. I'm very open to the way words multiply their meanings. That, too, would be a pun in the title—is it a red bird or a r-e-a-d bird? Is it a real bird? I'm delighted when people find their own threads and references. I think that's great.

LG: I'd love to have you talk about the production of the book, and the cover photograph of a barge off the coast dropping outdated red subway cars in the water for the purpose of creating an artificial reef. It's very striking, simultaneously witty and sad, and the cover speaks to a

narrative element combined with total isolation. It really seems the most exquisite representation of what one will eventually find throughout the book.

JM: First of all, on a businesslike note, the book is beautiful, and I had nothing to do with that. The poet Henry Israeli designed it and I'm grateful for all the choices Fence made. I am forever in his debt, their debt. The cover art was a Keith Meyers photograph from *The New York Times*. I was looking for a non-pastoral image, to make it clear to the reader that this *Red Bird* was not a book of pastoral or bird poems. I thought there was something strangely sacrificial about the image—something contemporary and seemingly unlovely made lovely by this photograph, and also classical in the sense of the huge production of putting an expensive thing into the sea. I wanted to own it. It wasn't until I finally got a finished copy of the book that I saw all the details in the photograph—the boards, the numbers, people even. There's a man on the spine on the book that I hadn't noticed in the newspaper—and the funny thing is, after I saw the photograph in *The New York Times*, I turned to the story and found out that these trains are actually called red bird subway cars! Not being a native New Yorker, for me this was news, and the fact that these red birds are being dropped into the water to form an artificial reef off Rehoboth Beach was an incredible piece of information,

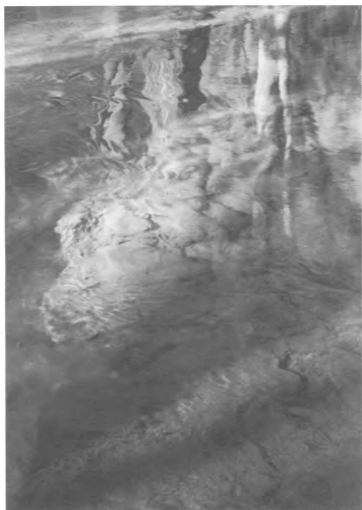
but the most extraordinary thing to me is that the cars were completely emptied of their contents except for the strap-hangers commuters would hold on to, because these straps are suitable for mollusks in the Atlantic to attach to! And this idea of a space within a space, and the perfectly converted use of the strap hanger really knocked me out, and the idea that life would attach itself and find a new home in the straps of a subway car dropped into the ocean—it's such a hopeful image that at the same time is doomed-looking and sad. When you first see it, it looks portentous and strange. But, ultimately, it's optimistic too.

LG: To me, since the photograph folds itself onto the back cover, it's like the front cover and the back are two separate images and moments. Because this picture almost looks like a portrait in a way. The subway car looks so human, so eager to enter the water.

JM (looking at the cover photograph): It's such a mysterious image. I agree. It's really something.

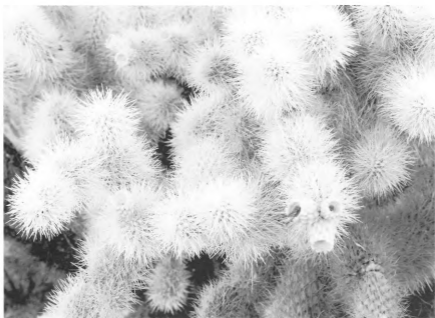
















Abstraction and Light

My memory of first seeing David Gibson's work is obscured. It is meshed into the time when I made my living at photography. Those were days when my judgment was more clouded by my envy. What I do remember clearly was the vivid character of David's landscapes. They rivaled the work of the era's hero photographer, Ansel Adams.

I knew David could see light before it fell onto the landscape and envied him for it. Finding a great place to set up a view camera and frame an image is a craft based on seeing first right side up then upside down and then right side up again, but capturing the light as it runs across the land in those few perfect moments is a most admirable talent—but not a totally unique talent. Many photographers studied Ansel Adams. The zone system and controlled processing of film created a bounty of deep rich landscapes by the photographers who studied Adams' craft. Timing can be a matter of patience. I know now that David is awash in patience.

Rational and reasonable are not the attributes you expect to find in abstraction or even in the abstractionist. But here they are interwoven into these landscapes.

The monumental feel of David's most recent book, *Canyonland Vision*, lives as much in the details as in the broad deep space we equate with such panoramas.

Flipping back through *Canyonland Vision*, I remember first being drawn by the enormous character of the expansive Utah landscapes, and then finding David's exquisite details folding into Escher-like abstraction. Bare rock faces become a forest of trees, and trees become petrified in an instant. Long-ago hardened lava flows like water through aspen forests.

David sees like trained musicians hear. While the essence of photography lies in capturing the frozen moment, David's attention to detail allows him to stretch that visual moment into the resonance of evolving time.

For these images I have chosen a group of David's more overtly abstract work. Tumbleweed lace and lotus-stem patterns meld into the landscapes we know by heart. Waterlilies and back-lit moss stand their own ground while floating in our imagination of place. We leave the definition of place behind to reflect in the ripples of time. Zen cycles repeat and reflect in the vine and tree of Village Creek, then reappear in cactus at the Saguaro National Park.

Ripples in time and place, from Ireland to the deserts of the Southwest, define David Gibson's vision of and to eternity.

Kin

The women in my cousin Ron's *Playboy* weren't entirely naked, their faces soft-focus behind diving masks. Protruding from the masks, ribbed black tubing ran to the oxygen tanks on their naked backs. Their skin was aqua, nipples pale in the shallow ocean.

"I shouldn't be showing you this. I'm corrupting you," said Ron, an Ivy League freshman home for the holidays.

"Corrupt me," I agreed bravely. I was thirteen, visiting with my mother. Ron's house was a palace in the richest suburb of Mexico City. He was my hero, ruining my nights with ghost stories.

When our cousin Violet was down with her family, he confided, he'd given her a shot of rum, right where we now were standing. She'd gulped it and immediately swooned into his arms. Confused, he'd lowered her to the floor. After a minute or more, her eyelids had fluttered. "You could have done anything you wanted with me," she had said.

"She's only your age," Ron told me. He curved extravagant outlines with his hands. "Beautiful. Black hair halfway down her back." He spoke wonderingly. He was handsome but diffident, perhaps the result of a slight birth defect that impaired his left hand and caused his foot to drag almost imperceptibly.

So from then on my cousin Violet was a romantically sinful ideal, sprawled among stern Spanish colonial furniture, waiting to be taken.

She was a relation in name only; I scarcely recollected her. When my mother and I still lived with my father, in New York, we had spent a Christmas with my mother's people in Oakmont, some forty miles from Montreal. Violet was another five-year-old bundled in heavy winter clothing. Much more vividly I remembered her father, my Uncle Conrad, urging his toast to pop. The morning through the windows had been pitch dark. Under the kitchen light his glasses sparkled. "Christ, this bread is the lazy one, isn't he?" my uncle said, tapping the toaster. He was always happy, a lover of sailing who directed a sailboat manufacturing firm in Montreal. He tinkered: sizzling tubes and polyglot jabber of his ham radio in the attic, disassembled Mercedes engines in the basement.

I accompanied him to the railway station, huffing with him into the frost while we waited for his commuter train, which, after he boarded it, steamed away into the gray dawn between white snow flats. Sledding like a maniac outside the house, I rested in a drift, becoming warm and drowsy. My mother pulled me out and thawed me by the fire, and weeks after returning home I was still feverish with bronchitis. A new family design was set, the subversion of chill by a warmth that might be illness.

The bronchitis, chronic since my birth, and a desire to escape her marriage prodded my mother to move us to Arizona. We joined the drift of rootless Westerners, our nearest relatives in Mexico City. On her teacher's salary we eked out pleasure in books and LP's. If I didn't understand her grownup comedy albums, I laughed because I trusted her laughter. For seven years, until the divorce, we journeyed across the U.S. annually for summers with my father. An instinct for cheap lodging, with character, might bring us to a wood-paneled nook in Eagle Nest, New Mexico, a raw cabin in Zion National Monument, or, pursued by violent thunderstorms across the South Dakota prairie, the lobby of a clapboard hotel strewn with other refugees, their dark sleeping shapes and symphonic breathings. After the divorce I visited my father alone until he became too nomadic—Florida, San Diego, Baja California—to follow.

The summer before my senior year in college, I was home with my mother when Violet flew to Arizona for a few weeks. Nobody knew why. She was reticent, cool to the point of rudeness. She submitted to my mother's excursions—a Mexican border town, the zoo—with a condescending inward smile. Shapely but undainty, she moved slowly. At dinner she sat with an opaque look. My mother and I discussed what could be the matter with her. "It's Conrad's other girls who have caused so much trouble," my mother said. Lynne had been a squalling baby

during the Christmas visit, years before. Charlotte I'd never met. Violet was distrustful of these two and phlegmatic about her training as a nurse. "Acute care, chronic care, continuous care," she sighed. "It never ends."

It was a time when I had become ashamed and frightened of my life. I'd evolved a competent sociability as a kind of stand-in for myself.

While I finished my term paper for summer school, Violet would stand silently over the typewriter. I'd pass her bedroom, the door ajar, and she'd be dressing. Stock-still in white bra and panties, she met my gaze levelly without giggling or flinching to cover herself. Her impassiveness was fierce.

Toward women I was playfully contemptuous, hinting at dangerous instabilities which they'd best avoid, and if they didn't, that was their business. I joined Violet for a night swim in the pool. The patio light was off. Violet floated on her back under the stars. I lifted her buoyant weight in my arms and against my chest. "Look here," I said. "An armful of cousin."

"What are you doing?" she said, and we kissed. She found her footing and planted herself against me. Her body was wonderfully big and cool, wide taut belly, big curve of ass. The floodlamp flashed on, and we sprang apart just before my mother led a troop of bridge players onto the patio.

Subsequently, though dinner hour remained an ordeal of discreet chewing and my mother's abortive conversational gambits, Violet became garrulous in private. I heard old messy diaper stories about her sisters. I came to regard snubs and feuds as the fabric of Canadian familial intercourse. Another uncle, Walt, suddenly widowed, had remarried. "A trifle vulgar" was the consensus on this new wife, especially after her "sainted" predecessor, whom all had loved. "But for that we're supposed to shun her like the plague?" Violet said. "I welcome her as the dear she is, even if I am a minority of one." What Violet's gossip granted me was a circle of phantom kin, a common history beyond that shared by even many young marrieds, a kind of love we didn't have to earn.

When my mother left us alone for an evening, and Violet's fingernails gently teased the back of my neck, I said, "Cousins shouldn't do this." But actually it was meanness, a power in refusing. My satisfactions with women were gnarled and few. Violet undid my shirt buttons, but no matter how she swirled her fingers over my arm, traced my bicep, tongued my ear, pressed the heat of her palm on my jeans, I sat stolidly, fighting to control my breath, until I was humiliated for her sake. Finally, as her leg swung over mine, skirt riding up to her crotch, I lit a cigarette. She slumped away from me. "Friends," I said.

"If that's what you want." She was panting.

With summer school ended, I found a job as a ditchdigger, our crew rising at 4:30 every morning to complete the shift before the worst heat. My custom after knocking off was to dangle my feet in the pool, chug a quart of Miller, and nap for about 45 seconds, after which I woke refreshed for the night's drinking party. Violet would be lounging on the deck in her bikini, reading. "Canada hasn't seen a tan like this," she said, smoothing lotion into her glowing, honey-colored self. I talked more comfortably with her than with anyone else I knew. She had a boyfriend, whom she expected to marry. I wanted to go to Europe. Not surprisingly—so readily did she embrace leisure—a future in nursing dismayed her. My father was living alone in a motel room, I told her, and I was afraid he was losing his mind. I was too frightened of his irremediable adult isolation to help him. At home, Violet said angrily, her mother bore all household responsibilities, Conrad none, and it threatened her health.

"I broke two pick handles on the caliche today," I boasted. "Moves me into the lead, six for the summer."

"A giant of the working class," Violet said, rubbing her toe along my spine.

A houseful of women friends threw a bash for us ditchdiggers, and Violet asked to go. She was the only woman in a dress and nylons, her forehead marked by one deep line, but her gravity came apart under margaritas. She had a rewarding laugh: inhale, hand to chest, as if she

were deciding whether to proceed, then her entire body shaking. No, I assured the men, she was just my cousin, go ahead. At parties I dreaded moments with no one to talk to; eaten up by self-consciousness, I would stare into the wall as if musing contentedly. But here Violet was at my side, and we compared notes, whom to go after. We shared secrets. The largest, of course, was that we who had arrived as a couple, then disabused one and all of that misapprehension, actually were. The beauty of real incest, hardcore sibling incest, I realized, would be that even breaking up you'd still be brother and sister.

Drinking, we touched more openly. Hand to wrist to face. Encircling her shoulders with my arm, I pulled her glossy head toward my mouth. "If we don't score here," I said, "we've always got each other."

"Do you mean to say . . ."

I nodded.

She was happy. We twirled off into the party and found lovers almost immediately. Hers was a short, congenitally unlucky wit whom I'd known since junior high. Mine was blonde, lambent with health and grace.

I'd spent the previous semester home as a convalescent drug casualty. My thoughts rattled down like slamming windows, and against panic attacks I carried Valium wrapped in tinfoil, so that even if the tablet broke I could lick up the powder. For solace I read accounts of the Spanish Civil War and other staggering human disasters.

My radiant new girlfriend shared spiritual chronicles by gray-haired androgynes who danced joyously, arms uplifted, across their book jackets. I couldn't stand her, but she was the prettiest woman in our circle, and it was incumbent upon me to like her. Together we bred silences prolifically until one lockjawed evening in the back of a pickup when we managed to communicate to each other that we were calling it quits.

By day Violet and I honored each other with small kindnesses, I buying her beauty products on the way home from work, she mowing the lawn. When her man dropped her off late at night, she came to me. But, inhibited by the family house and my mother's light sleeping, we stopped short of fucking. Then we were invited to an afternoon pool party at a friend's. His parents were gone, and the guests overran the grounds. I roamed with drinks and a narrowing insistence that I should be somewhere else. That place turned out to be the master bedroom, where Violet was waiting for me. We hadn't been naked together in daylight, and the sun whitened us so that we seemed one flesh. Then, as Violet prepared her diaphragm in the adjoining bathroom, her anguished, betrayed lover burst in. We sat him on the bed, trying to pacify him, the ranting clothed person between us milky offenders. Soon he couldn't help laughing. Unable to reconcile sex and the ridiculous, I abandoned her to him.

After Violet returned to Canada, my mother said, "She was so odd." I confessed the affair—my mother and I withheld nothing then, neither my psychedelics nor her own romances. She was shocked, titillated, and a bit triumphant, as if we'd scored one on Conrad's contingent. (It was the era when any sexual liaison was considered the man's victory.)

My mother carried grievances, casual sibling torture growing up, her father, Papi Schloeh, deriding her college ambitions because she was a girl. Mami Schloeh had chased her around the kitchen table with a knife. These parents, German immigrants settled in Montreal since the turn of the century, had four children. Conrad and Walt stayed in Quebec and married English, raising between them five daughters. My mother married a high school teacher from Brooklyn. Her sister Inge, the beauty, landed a handsome but penniless Scot who eventually commanded the largest fur empire in Latin America, as well as the mansion where Ron later would embrace the fainting Violet. For what it's worth, only Ron and I have become parents ourselves. The five Canadian daughters remain childless.

The family's scattering is now irrevocable. Long past eighty, alone since his wife's death, Conrad still sails. Violet's husband helps him lug the Mercedes engines up and down the basement stairs. Walt, jazz trumpeter and bon vivant, lost his breath to emphysema and became

reclusive in the decades before his death. Like him, a smoker, my mother also died of emphysema. Twice widowed, the beauty lives on an island off Mexico.

Violet and I didn't meet again until we were thirty-one. Abandoning the prolonged Quebec winter, she and her mother deplaned amid the singing birds, bloom, and bursting foliage of a Tucson March. Charged with entertaining her, I took her to a Mexican restaurant, where we made desultory conversation. She was married to the long-term boyfriend and retired from nursing. While attending graduate school I shot photos for a suburban weekly, of rural mavericks with their guns and horses or wealthy Republicans who had incorporated a town to finance their golf course through state revenue sharing. It was a good job. The desert landscape was varied and stunning, and people liked having their pictures taken.

I ordered us dessert and another beer. Violet wore a crisp turquoise dress with ample cleavage. "I would like to see your studio," she said. Though living with a woman I'd met through the newspaper, I maintained an old barrio adobe as a work space. I demurred; the place was a pigsty, I said, truthfully. She demanded. That fleshly impassivity settled into her. Contemplatively she dabbed a beer spill from her white bosom, the liquid beads trembling on her skin. "I'm not free," I said.

The woman and I had drifted for two years, a tomayto-tomahto affair, largely evading the question of permanence. She was older, with children, a blue-collar Long Islander who had voted for Nixon. We shared no tastes. Thanks perhaps to our lack of future, we enjoyed a relaxed, friendly passion, and it saddened us to assume that eventually I'd find a younger woman for making babies. When she rested her head on my chest, eyes closed, long lashes touching her cheek, I couldn't bear to think of hurting her.

I returned Violet to my mother's condominium, where she and my aunt were staying. They were upstairs. We entered in a mood of edgy gaiety.

"Years ago," Violet said, "you helped me accept my body, the way you were with me."

"I'd never known anyone more at home in her body," I said.

"Above the waist..." She smiled as crookedly as she was able. "But—" She patted her hips and thighs. "Too much."

"You're majestic," I said, lassoing her butt with my arms. We closed our eyes and kissed, swaying. I was taken by happiness. An affair I regretted for my failings of decency and nerve, she held dear. Life was generous. I was terribly fond of her.

"It's awfully quiet down there," sang my mother.

Seven months later I was flying to Canada, lively with resentment toward my lover in Tucson. We'd briefly split up and before reconciling had committed enough spiteful mischief that I didn't feel loyal to her. If something were to happen with Violet, let it.

I didn't speak of this to my mother, in the seat beside me. We no longer had that kind of closeness. The estrangement had widened over the years of my living with other women. The more she pressed herself into my households, the more I rationed the time I spent with her, and she wrote bitterly to our relatives about my neglect.

But now we chatted excitedly above the sweeping clouds and checkerboard Earth, winging toward Conrad's seventieth birthday surprise. For months Violet had been rousting family and friends from all corners of Canada, plus us Americans and Inge from Mexico, and two days hence dozens would lie in ambush at the old stone Episcopal church outside Oakmont. Conrad, Violet promised, hadn't a clue.

Sadly, only my old mentor-terrorist, Ron of the spooky stories, wouldn't attend. Year by year failing in college, marriage, goat farming, computer services, he had marginalized himself. He was a world traveler, no address. "If only he were a photographer like you," my mother prescribed. "He could freelance, at least."

The day after we arrived, Violet threw a dinner at a sedate restaurant—the decoy birthday celebration,

including Conrad's immediate family, Inge, and us. Violet, girded with purpose and besieged by responsibility, was cordial, formal. Her athletically lean, red-bearded husband charmed with an utter openness of manner. He was cultured, earned a fine salary, and doted on her. Why she should have turned her desire elsewhere baffled and flattered me.

I was seated next to the middle sister, plumpish Lynne, who with bobbed brown hair and rosy expressions seemed to lack only the hearth and an armful of warm bread. In fact, however, she was a renegade and a writer, caustic, good company. The youngest sister, Charlotte, hovered in the background, a slender girl of eighteen with a long, untidy braid and thick glasses that gave her eyes a wavy underwater remoteness.

In the midst of birthday toasts, Conrad sprang up at his seat. Sleek, silver hair rippled back from his sunbrowned face. "Jesus, all these far-flung Schloehs, gathered just to see me stride over the hill." He pumped his fist. "I'm moved, I really am." He thanked each of us individually in his dry, merry voice.

"He doesn't know the half of it," Lynne whispered.

Conrad's house absorbed the post-dinner party, as it had the out-of-towners, including the three daughters, Violet and Charlotte from Montreal, Lynne from Toronto.

I've learned that Conrad expresses affection through the pleasure of shared topics. We hit it off immediately.

During the Viet Nam War he'd offered sanctuary from the draft, had I needed it, so we gravitated naturally toward politics. "Your President Ronnie, there's a piece of work," he said. "Driving the country toward the next Depression. Of course our little economy toddles along hand-in-hand with yours, so we'll go over the cliff together." Meanwhile, I said, the U.S. had the spare cash to unleash terrorists on Nicaragua. We brooded angrily. "Best job he's done is taking that bullet," Conrad said darkly.

We talked about sailing, and my father lost overboard from his own boat six years before. "Damned shame," Conrad said. "He had that godforsaken moody Scots-Irish drollness. Liked him."

"Not to mention the godforsaken moody Scots-Irish drinking," I said, in fairness. Having always blamed my mother for the divorce, I'd begun to consider her hardships in living with him.

Both Conrad and my mother remembered precisely our Christmas in Oakmont twenty-six years earlier, which led to reminiscences of sumptuous German Christmas Eves in the 1920's. The children in their starchy best had careened through the house, crazed with anticipation, until the doors to the great hall were flung back, revealing the twenty-foot tree ablaze with real candles. Presents were heaped beneath, and on the table Mami Schloeh's kuchen and marzipan.

"Mami's baking. No wonder I was so fat," my mother said.

"We were all chubby dumplings," Conrad said.

It was the height of autumn. Torridly colorful foliage erupted across the staid Anglophone town of Oakmont like red, orange, and yellow pompons on a banker's shoes. To experience a true fall after years in the desert was a homecoming of sorts, and the next morning I walked the mile or so to the stone church. Within an hour, Conrad would be lured there on the pretext of picking up Charlotte from choir practice.

Already cars were discharging elegantly attired celebrators, before parking in a secluded lot a block away. My mother arrived with childhood friends. I was unaccountably proud to be introduced as "son"; for the beaming ladies clasping my mother's arm that was distinction enough. Violet herded us inside. The crowd milled, united in conspiratorial glee. Violet kept kneeling to peek out a crack in the doorway.

"He's here," she called.

Showing astonishment by smiting his head or dropping the car keys was not Conrad's way. Instead, as he stepped in the door, his eyes widened, and he smiled ever more delightedly. He transformed himself into the host, welcoming guests and escorting them to the buffet table, which he had just then spotted.

Even before his appearance I'd been snapping candid; that was my birthday present, to photograph the entire event. So I was both ubiquitous and absent from the festivities, a visual eavesdropper. I took pride in the assignment, seeking the representative or off-beat moment, composing it in the viewfinder, grabbing it. I caught the lucky configuration of the three daughters presenting Conrad with a birthday blazer: Violet's take-charge perm, a black corona about her face; Lynne wearing soft brown velvet; Charlotte in electric blue, braids pinned precariously. I conversed with Uncle Walt, and his daughters and exes, in between shots of the women's heads thrown back in laughter, the men's ruddy smiles and their ties slightly askew. I skipped the champagne. Everywhere people were tossing their hands in the air, leaning on each other, posing. Conrad's friends made speeches. Conrad made a speech.

I was reloading once again when Charlotte took my arm. Her braids had unraveled and her brown eyes loomed behind the glasses. "I want to show you something," she said. Outdoors, trees' shadows were lengthening. I had overlooked the tiny cemetery, now completely shaded. We kicked a trail through the thick leaves. "Our grandparents," Charlotte said.

A single headstone, dark, polished granite, recorded the births and deaths of Papi and Mami Schloeh. "I never knew they were here," I said.

'Grandparents' had been an abstract concept. Only one of the four, Mami Schloeh, had survived past my birth, dying when I was three. Finding them, I was sharply but vaguely moved. I stood in the still grass as the warm browns of the maple trunks were absorbed by the dusk. My mother came, with cousins and others. Illuminated by twilight, the ornate dresses slipped in and out of the trees, bending over the graves like flowering shrubs.

I took my mother's hand. "The trouble you and I are having isn't much," I said.

"I should hope not," she said briskly.

Arm in arm, we returned just in time for the cutting of the birthday cake. After the singing of "Du, Du Liegst Mir im Herzen"—the English could join in with "ja, ja, ja, ja"—the official celebration closed, and the guests dispersed, many of us to Conrad's. Freed from the camera, I danced with all my cousins, Conrad with sisters and in-laws. Much champagne. Charlotte's New Wave records. Life stories exchanged with strangers, my family. While I was talking to an elderly widow, a warm pressure on my hand, resting flat on the kitchen counter, let me know that Charlotte had sat on it. She paid me no notice otherwise. The contact was a pleasant, puzzling addition to the general buzz of champagne and *gemütlichkeit*.

Weary and euphoric, Violet received as many congratulations as Conrad, and I was happy for her. To have fantasized any other role for her—ducking into the

cellar with me, say—seemed amusingly blinkered and dishonorable. "Conrad is indestructible, so youthful, his ideas," I told her.

"That radical rot? And he such a puritan," Violet said. "All those years Doug and I were together, he never once let us sleep in the same room here until we were married. Even if it meant we scarcely visited. O.K., Dad. Doug didn't care, but I said, 'What rubbish.'"

The snap at Conrad shocked me. Then Conrad lowered himself into a nearby chair. I sat. The guests were thinning. "Too bad the desert is reclaiming you so soon," he said. "We could have taken the boat out." He spread a map to show where, and we scudded on his fingernail down the blue lines. Charlotte took the other chair flanking me and placed her hand on my knee. I denied its existence. Her father described an island bird preserve and French farmhouses. The hand rubbed my thigh, fingertips playing along the inseam of my slacks. Conrad damned Quebec's environmental policies. Good-byes ebbed around us. The many permanent and transient residents went to bed, leaving Lynne, Charlotte, and me.

"Don't worry about Dad," Charlotte said. "He thinks I'm beyond peculiar. 'Another of Charlotte's idiosyncrasies, groping her cousin.'"

The three of us acted classy in our fine dress, sipping champagne. Lynne made literary conversation. She was

witty and adept, and the lamp highlighted her rich brown hair.

"I hate men, but I like sex," Charlotte remarked.

Lynne moved close behind me, and the weight of her breast settled on my arm like a friendly restraining hand. "Well, I'm going up," she said. "Probably have a cup of tea. You're welcome to join me." The other breast nudged my back.

"Thanks. I'll stay on a bit here," I said.

After Lynne's footsteps terminated in the shutting of her door upstairs, Charlotte pulled out the sofa bed. "She's a spy," Charlotte said. "Like Violet. We're all spies." She turned off the lightswitch, and only her white face was visible in the dark, then, with the liquid unzipping of her dress, her shoulders. I helped with her bra, disbelieving what my fingers were doing. "If Mum came in, she'd freak. The imagination fails," Charlotte said. "Dive under the bed, I guess."

We had spoken only a few sentences together, and what we said now was what we wanted done with each other and how it felt. The goofy specs and wayward hair turned out to be a sham. Her face beneath me was beautiful in the way that means love, whether between the people or for the moment of beauty, I don't know. She looked at me as if she were in love, lips open, her eyes openly filled with me. Her body was frighteningly tender, the grip of her thighs, her ass crack's buttery sweat, dip of

anus. Her breasts pushed back and forth across my face as if saying "no, no" to something, the opposite of what we were at that moment. The bedsprings rang in the stillness, and I tried to move us onto the floor. Charlotte shook her head—"screw them," she said—but we eased against each other more quietly . . . and, simply put, it didn't happen. She did not open. We lay embraced until light, and I gathered my clothes to find my room. Without specific sound, there was a presence of breathing throughout the house. "This place has the population density of Jakarta," Charlotte said.

Late morning I blinked into the kitchen for breakfast, which turned out to be lunch. The three sisters were cooking. Charlotte sidled about in a beige sweater, braless, braid straggling across her slender neck.

"Dad at the luncheon table? Unprecedented," Lynne said.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Oh, this is probably the first weekend of his life not holed up with the radio. Or racing the boat."

"Don't forget the Mercedes," Violet said, and they all laughed. "After commuting all week, a man earns his toys, hmm? I have to say, I see him more now than when I was growing up in his house."

"My emblematic memory," Lynne said, "is a Christmas when I was in high school. I was erecting a mound of seconds on my plate, and Dad says, 'Shouldn't you hold off

on that? I believe you've put on a bit of weight.' I was up to two hundred pounds."

"Dad doesn't see what Dad doesn't want to see," Charlotte said, shooting me a last-night look.

"Us," Lynne exclaimed. And on and on they went, a bored litany of habitual anger, until Violet exclaimed, "I could bear it if he weren't running Mum into the ground." During lunch I couldn't stop watching, Conrad beaming sunnily at the head of the table, the lovely faces of his three daughters hard with irony, marred by tics of irony. I felt as if their love had passed through him and struck me standing behind him.

"I'm going to help Cuz look around, see if he left anything," I heard Charlotte say. I was packing. She ducked in. Outside the window the family was gathering for our group portrait. Charlotte and I stepped out of their line of sight, and I embraced her from behind, cupping her breasts under her sweater. She twisted her head to kiss me. It was a theatrically romantic pose, and I didn't want to leave it, not her closeness against me, nor her bare skin, nor even the wisps of hair straying into my mouth.

"Men are scum," she said. "Think of me."

Within days of arriving home I was sick, a conflation of TV's pounding, splitting headache clichés. The pain was so pure and acute as to erase personality. I could have been one of those babies born with no brain but a stump of

stem. I was hospitalized with viral meningitis, mercifully brief. Discharging me, the doctor commented that the illness was considered opportunistic—had I undergone major stress? My lover at my side, I said no. Whatever I might have told myself, I did not like being unfaithful to her. Apparently I wouldn't stand for it.

A few more months, and I realized I wanted to marry her. She was the first woman with whom I'd considered beginning a family of my own. Before her, even my serious love affairs had been extended infatuations, the woman and I each wanting to be like the other. I would be jealous of the woman for being more like herself than I could be, and vice versa. When my fiancée and I told our stories at the day's end, on the other hand, I might have chased a photogenic wildfire across the desert, bullied my paranoid, darting-eyed boss into a token raise; while she, a school district troubleshooter, mediated and placated among the powerful and the inflamed. She had the gift of enticing people's better natures, minuscule as they might be, into the open. Once she had convinced a would-be rapist, lurking at the laundromat, to fold her wash instead. When I was away, her "goodnight" over the phone was a come-on and a blessing. She won over my mother completely.

Conrad, Walt, and Inge came to the wedding, the last time the four Schloehs would be together.

After our one night, Charlotte and I had exchanged letters, hers recklessly, exhaustively candid, a virtual diary, mine groping for a tone of fondness without license, maturity without stodginess. But with her viperish response to my wedding announcement—"so now wifey, the pewling infant, the single-family unit"—we stopped writing. Only over the years and the deaths of our mothers, my daughter's birth, did we reconcile. Once she visited and we swam together. Our stouter bodies embarrassed us.

Violet and I never had corresponded.

With the waning of eroticism and the passing of the older generation, the greater North American Schloeh family has resumed its habits of distance. Violet and Conrad attended my mother's funeral, but when Conrad's wife died I was broke and did not go, saving up for a promised memorial reunion that never materialized. Her cancer had been kept secret from us outside the Canadian circle, so we had allowed ourselves to hope and deny. Violet, who had nursed her during the final two years' miserable decline, was bitter that we had not rallied. These are strategies of distance.

Nearing forty, Charlotte plugs along at a computer job and sings with the choir. She takes her voice seriously, has made tapes. Lynne, inexplicably abandoning effort, lives as a semi-crazed hermit, supported by an aunt. Violet appears

satisfied cultivating her exquisitely tasteful apartment. She and her husband have become experts in Canadian art.

I feel a residual sweetness with Violet and Charlotte, in our having helped and pleased each other. Speaking over the phone, there's a catch, expectancy, a sense that our words stand for the touch we've left on each other's bodies—that most basic recognition of family and another reaching never closed. But what we express is the slightly accusatory collusion of people whose intimacy has faded.

Once again, as in my childhood, I'm closest to Conrad. We exchange long notes at holidays, and share cynicism regarding our respective polities over the phone. I love him all the more for what I've been with his daughters. Reading this, he would love me less, I'm afraid. He'd view this story as my confession, as if any account of one's stumbling passage could be otherwise.

Ideas Only Go So Far

Last year I made up a baby. I made her in the shape of a hatbox or a cake. I could have iced her and no one would have been the wiser. You know how trained elephants will step onto a little round platform, cramming all four fat feet together? That's her too, and the fez on the elephant's head. Applause all around. There was no denying I had made a good baby. I gave her a sweet face, a pair of pretty eyes, and a secret trait at her christening. I set her on my desk, face up, and waited. I watched her like a clock. I didn't coo at her though. She wasn't that kind of baby.

She never got any bigger, but she did learn to roll. Her little flat face went round and round. On her other side, her not-face rolled round and round too. She followed me everywhere. When I swam, she floated in the swimming pool, a platter for the sun. When I read, she was my peacefully blinking footstool. She fit so perfectly into the washing machine that perhaps I washed her more than necessary. But it was wonderful to watch her eyes slitted against the suds, a stray red sock swishing about her face like the tongue of some large animal.

When you make up a good baby, other people will want one too. Who's to say that I'm the only one who deserves a

dear little machine-washable ever-so-presentable baby. Not me. So I made a batch. But they weren't exactly like her—they were smaller and without any inborn dread. Sometimes I see one rolling past my window at sunset—quite unlike my baby, who like any good idea, eventually ended up dead.

Not So Much Miniature as Far Away

Little was left of the forest.
Large was ten miles ahead.

The song on the radio
was early 80's in a nutshell,

the sun in the rearview
mirror, a peach pit of light.

Make much of me why don't you.
All sorts land at the airfield.

Be silverfish, be blimp.

Matthew Rohrer

The Adorable Little Boy

Today my ski boots disintegrated on my feet.
It is getting more difficult to play
the role of The Adorable Little Boy
now, and I will confirm what most of you
have suspected: I am ill,
I have the distinct sensation that
my head
is donut-shaped. But don't let that
stop me from wriggling my way
into your hearts, those of you
who are not empty blue suits.
I am still very aware, I am hyper-aware.
A beautiful ass makes me sneeze and cough!
But now I suspect you are looking
for something
and here it is: Pliny described trees that speak.

Missing

Face of a kid you fucked last fall, in a fit
Of desperation—if desperation's not
Too heady a term for it—plastered
All over town, on a set of cheaply Xeroxed

Black-n-whites. Phone for his folks, phone
For the rescue squad. Plus stats: so, he wasn't
Lying about his age. Brave kid. Detoxed
Three months to the night you met, re-enrolled,

Picked up new janitorial gig—not
A bad gig. Not the worst fuck by any means,
One of those nearly convincingly solid
Commodities swapped fast, untalked about,

Seemingly apart from power, while now the public
Power lines are hitched, to every pole his face is stapled to.

Denise Duhamel

Wish You Were Here

(five postcards)

I'm writing to you from inside a red M&M. Josh and the kids are in green and yellow ones. It's the best vacation we've ever had, each one of us on our own mystical quest. Sort of like swimming with the dolphins, but I'm swimming with chocolate instead. In a few days, someone comes to crack our shells and reunite us as a family. But I'm trying not to think about that yet.

When I woke up this morning, the first thing I saw was the whip on the floor like a cobra escaped from its basket, like a microphone tossed aside after the gig, like a jump rope, like a curly W or M (a woman or man), an S with a loop at the end, an S with a small o, a So.

It was hard at first, keeping my balance atop this pine tree. The birds would jiggle the branches just as I was falling asleep, and the wind is unpredictable, especially in the rain. But now I feel like the impaled angel atop a Christmas fir. The trip has been great for my posture.

We're still camping here in the piano innards. So far no sound from the outside, only the pings we make ourselves as we light our small fires and pitch our small tents. We have our video cameras and tape recorders ready for the avalanche. It says in our guide book that a piano teacher comes on Thursday afternoons. We're hoping for a hilarious disaster, especially since no one has been practicing even a note. Next week we head for the tuba cave. More then.

I have been on this pillow for weeks, the afterglow still golden as the spotlight his wristwatch made on the ceiling of his car. It twitched back and forth like a spotlight looking for a star, or the person in the audience who won a big prize. That would be me. The star, the prizewinner. I don't get out of bed anymore.

Scorched Earth, Blighted Vision

Jerry Williams. *Casino of the Sun*. Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2003. 79 pp. \$12.95, paper.

On the cover of *Casino of the Sun*, Jerry Williams' first collection of poems, a couple is dancing in what appear to be their nightshirts. The girl peeks out from under upraised arms, smiling, but with a dead gaze. Her partner, a male with explosive white hair, pointed ears and a large ruddy nose, looks at her in apparent fascination and fear. There is something profoundly disturbing about this image. It's funny and chaotic, but filled with a threat that keeps me looking though it makes my stomach hurt. It's the perfect cover illustration for this collection.

As a whole, the poems read as a scream. It's a scream that was planted in the belly of each poem a long time ago and has since festered and ripened. Swallowed down many times, the narrator is now too broken and tired to hold it back. The scream comes pouring out, searing the page. It is vengeful and pleading, covering all territories, all wrongs.

The first poem, "A Fine Powder," is key to understanding this collection's motivation. As the narrator is gutting a dead man's house, he comes across a few forgotten possessions and muses that "undoubtedly a

pattern exists here." Earlier the narrator confesses he can't be sure he will stop at ripping out the drywall:

I can't promise that I won't demolish this house.
Delicateness makes me lonely and loneliness makes me
vicious.
I keep a sledgehammer in the truck.

These two moments highlight two central energies in *Casino of the Sun*: a surrounding destruction threatening an even greater destruction, and a search for meaning between scattered things.

Life is presented as being so senseless as to elude all hope of ever being understood. There isn't an effort to sublimate the senselessness, or to tame it. The poems give themselves over to it. The effect is that of a scorched earth, a blighted vision. This bitterness is where the scream originates. However, it is not an entirely fruitless or pessimistic gesture. The last stanza crystallizes the collection's quest, in which the third primary energy, the desire to have purpose, is brought up:

Undoubtedly, a pattern.
Maybe it's better to disavow the small things.
The opposite of a miracle hovers around this spare
estate,
looking for a tongue, a teller.

The “opposite of a miracle” aptly describes the subject matter of most of the poems. The “spare estate” is the life that has been misdirected and beaten, sometimes verging on collapse. The “teller” is obviously the poet, and though I know I’m supposed to separate the voice from the poet, in this collection I find that especially difficult to do.

The teller in these poems is very clear and very angry, almost desperate, about what he has to tell. In “Self-Portrait in a Knife Blade,” the narrator lists all the things he wishes he were free from:

I wish I had no mother, no father, no sisters,
no uncles and aunts, no cousins, no grandparents,
living or dead.
I wish I had no friends in L.A., none in San Francisco,
no friends back in Ohio,
no friends, nobody.

The list continues, wishing finally for God or whatever there is to finally come and pick a fight and get it over with. The list is a rant, almost like a petulant child’s. This speaker has had enough and lets us know in a way that is at once completely irrational and yet also heartfelt. That the speaker is a grown man pitching the fit, not a child, makes it funny and scary. He has cracked, and his frustration comes pouring off the page. More than anything, he wants to be free. He wants to stop being

indebted and accountable, but as much as he wants the world to let go of him, he does not entirely want to let go of the world. At the end of this rant, one is seriously tempted to point the narrator towards the closest available tall building, but he does not wish for death. As the last five lines of the poem show, he still somehow wishes to matter.

When my eyelids commence
their involuntary semaphoria,
I hope the plastic horizon shudders.
If I had a black magic marker,
this would all be over in about ten seconds.

I was in grade school with a girl whose father died. The day she came back to school, during our math lesson, she took a black magic marker from her desk and colored in the page we were working on. If our teacher hadn't stopped her, I'm sure she would have completely blackened every bit of white. In this stanza, I see the same despair. It is not a gesture towards ending everything, but instead blacking it all out. It's like a child closing her eyes to make something go away when it becomes overwhelming. It is also a gesture towards blotting out the lines of the poem itself, in effect canceling what the teller must tell. The scream is overwhelming the voice, becoming too much.

Coupled with this feeling of being wrung out is an intense desire to have an effect, to matter. The narrator hopes that the energy of his dreams elicits a reaction from the world. If the narrator is made into the poet, then R.E.M. sleep can be likened to the lightning storm of poetic creation and the “plastic horizon” to that of the arts. He wants his poems to be heard and taken seriously. He also wants to have the power to stop the telling, to obliterate it, but the magic marker is not yet available.

In many of the poems this necessary continuation of the telling comes across as being compulsory. In “Portland Is No Place for the Soulless,” the narrator is “compelled somehow like a piece of meat / being forked into an open mouth.” This turns out to be a positive force, as the compulsion then lends a purgative feeling to the poems. Rather than glorifying or wallowing in his position as a screw-up with a lousy dad and no luck with women, the poems are moving towards a ritual letting go. Most of the poems focus on a specific person and a specific moment. It is as though Williams is examining the past bit by bit, honoring what it was or wasn’t, and then putting it down, letting it go.

In this collection, the voice is often all brashness and swagger, which leads to my main critique of the work. At times it is hard to see the heart of the poem for all the bright lights and the “look-at-me-being-witty” moments that happen. In a few poems, such as the title poem, there

is a melodramatic jerk-off pitiableness that seems much more a pose than any truly felt crisis. In their overblown nature, I lose all trust in the voice. This could be due to two things: the on-staginess of the poems could be endemic to Williams' voice or subject—and my annoyance is simply then a matter of taste—or this scream has been repressed for so long that when it comes time for these moments to be expressed, the voice doesn't quite know how. This second alternative makes the poems that I find problematic all the more gut wrenching and true.

Occasionally there are poems of piercing beauty that redeem any negative feelings I hold towards the collection. In these poems, the sense of loss, of anger, of fear, of sadness, of beauty, and of love is soberly and openly approached. The voice is calmer, all the more forceful for its restraint. They are lovely and frightening, wholly honest. In "Harlan County Copula," my favorite, Williams deftly braids a childhood memory—of cutting his foot on a Pepsi bottle while playing in a river—with a political sketch on a coal miner's strike going on that same day. His mother is taking him into the house to mend his foot, the image of blood binding the child to the miners:

Across town a miner lay on a blanket of blood
and stared into the sun with his eyes stuck,
no longer complaining,
no longer on the clock,

quite unaware of the movie camera
that snored in the sickbed of history,
unaware of my mother putting her hands
around my waist and lifting me up
to the kitchen table,
which I must have mistaken for sky.

In this final rising gesture, there is so much hope and forgiveness. With smooth, understated touches, Williams manages to express so many conflicting feelings at once. It is in moments like these that the great promise of the poetry of Jerry Williams sits curled and waiting for whatever comes next.

Birthday Anniversary Sympathy Blank

I go to market to buy every card I can think of
but they are out. The racks are empty and I can't help
picturing a vacant zoo because the animals are eaten
because there's a war on, and why people say
abattoir when they really mean slaughterhouse.
The clerk informs me, "We are not making cards anymore.
From now on it will be only singing microchips
and hologram cakes, a sexy dream downloaded
into the brain the evening before a big day."

My order would be too late, anyway. It is your birthday
and they have you in Intensive Care, in the unit
a semiprivate. You think that sounds military and erotic.
Are you sure there are no cards left? "I'll check," the clerk says,
pickle-faced, slithering down his corridor of monitors.
A woman on one console goes on and on about satellites,
how *every* satellite has a pulse and itinerants from other planets,
if they have hearts, will know what we are, what substance
is beating or brooking or conspiring against us.

Birthday Anniversary Sympathy Blank.

I can't ever pretend to browse but I somehow like the wall
murals,
the idealized George Eliot and her self-possessed smirk,
I can't remember a word from her novels, have I finished any of
them,

here I am somewhere between *Adam Bede* and *Daniel Deronda*
and it's your birthday and Intensive Care has you,
you are expiring and by now you are expired, I'll have to
redirect the subscription and collect the insurance,
delete you from my database, laser out the tattoo,
scribble the obit, hock the potboilers with your name in them,
white out the embarrassing marginalia,
suck dry the account, dishonor the ticket, unearth the
 certificate,
permanently pull the phone like a bad tooth,
chip down the initialed box elder, edit all anecdotes
to the first tense, chuck the leftover tangelos,
let the koi back into the pond, dump your cacti,
scissor your documents because the shredder's broken,
let your memoirs fall into the bathwater so no one can read
 them,
think up replies to insults I could never answer,
donate your gabardines, find significance in our ultimate
negotiations, appease your creditors, and saw the futon in
 half.
There's always the risk of an invitation finding its way to you,
not unlike the poor dead coffee heiress who got one decades
 later,
not unlike the naked guy running around the store,
a rabid mongrel loose in a Vatican.
Those who make us secure will arrive before my clerk.
If someone naked were arrested now would you laugh,

I'm not sure you would stick around it for it to happen,
you never cared for surprises, and it's true, surprise parties were
never a surprise to you, you liked saying I was invited instead
of alive

Thaw

The snowless season's ending.
The yard's splintered
into a puzzle of black trees,
each black tree with its code of years.
To read them you have to
kill the trees. So the eye
divides, the heart
turns invisible, indivisible,
not one patch of garden can be seen,
rain-torn branches
nearly covering the yard.
They cover the dead birds
my mother grieves for,
hurrying to give names
like cages, while, in one
gesture, the god of spring
pickpockets all.
On his way out,
he drops the crocus,
purple coin the marl
quickly discloses.
Not an invite,
this flirtation,
crocus bruising under mud,

under felled and fractured wood—
she must lift each broken limb
to touch one
blooming mouth.

A. F. Thomas

A Bird in Hand

I have dodged your deft handling
and weighed the downy warmth of fledgling
taken from its nest. My fingers know
how to kill, closing on the bird's slippery head.

I blow feathers away from its chest,
smelling pennies and rain. Skin like granite,
a real white-blue, flecked by knots of new growth.

I've memorized its heart pounding into my thumb,
like at the back of my throat, breath buoying out.

I don't remember was it that beak bit my chin,
was it a claw cut my wrist. I found my need,
cold in cupped palms, just the way you said.

I return to account for whose neck falls around
backwards. Eyes that go cataract bring clouds.
That fat pearl with wings looks like water disappearing in me.

Permission

An egg, after all, is a beautiful thing long before it's a metaphor for the perils of this world, so how this is meant to dissuade them from sex, or even love, is a mystery, and yet they sashay in the corridors all day with their small burdens, which they wrap in scarves and T-shirts, and pack, in pairs, inside baskets and tins. *A broken egg,*

they are told, *is a broken child*, even though, in real life, the body is more durable than we dare to think. So this is the burden of the future and who among them is truly equipped to bear it. Imagine, I say, what it's like inside an egg. They picture rooms shut tight against the weather— outside, rain and wind with such distance inside their talking; and surely, someone writes, *a broken egg's more fitting because the future is mostly emptiness*

and loss. As a girl, I sorted eggs with my mother in her tiled kitchen and I remember how she once took me out to the barn and lifted, from that golden curdle under the heat lamps, a single chick, which she placed in my palm so I might discover, when it mattered most, that an egg weighs more

than the small bird breaking from it. If this would help them, I can't say, but I know a burden need never be as heavy as we first believe. But they care so little for the past. And because the future is, mostly, emptiness and loss, we hike to the wooded border of the playing field where the jackdaws nest; and here, they place down and so forget their baskets and tins, searching instead for the empty eggs, tipped from the nest and scattered like tiny, overturned buckets among the shepherd's purse and the vetch. It begins to rain.

In the buildings across the playing field someone is flicking lights on against the storm. Tins and baskets lie abandoned in the grass and the jackdaws are calling *loss, loss* from the high, green darkness of the beeches and there, beneath them, close together, a girl and a boy stand waiting inside the noise of the falling rain: she has noticed how the small flies gather beneath the trees in a storm because she's looking upward, and pointing, toward the green undercarriage of leaves; and this boy, who has waited longer than even he remembers, moves

up behind her to lift, and then place his lips against, the tip of her long, dark braid. And it was Proust, wasn't it, who implored us to remember that a kiss is the only thing that gives the heart leave to accompany

the body forward. It's gestures like this that win
the attention of the gods. But it might not save them:
think of how the hopeful and the hopeless alike
no doubt kiss, for luck, before ascending, the first rung

of the ladder that will take them closer to heaven.

Scorpions Everywhere

There goes one disguised as a mouse!
And those gray fellows, bushy tails,
who jump from tree to roof to fence.
Watch their eyes as they watch you
while they eat their nuts. They
are everywhere now
and, too, their cousins, the white-tailed browsers (Bambi
is a baby of their species' name) who eat
our suburb's herbs and shrubs,
and those that purr,
and those mouth-breathers, drooling woofers,
and the ones with bandit eyes, who trash
the trash—all
of these creatures (and too their spawn!) are not
as they seem.
Do not more and more of them move closer and closer?
Do you look out the window and see two?
Do you turn away, turn back, see three?
Do you hear the little brother of the wolf
howling from the marsh near the golf course, the 8th tee? He
leads them—quick, cunning, and assisted
by his minister, a gnat.
Each is, in fact, *this* is certain: a scorpion
and holds a phial of venom

until the time it's time to inject in you!
Ohhhh—on the day the wind is wrecked,
on the day the sky breaks,
on the day the sea creeps under a rock!

Ten Years Hard Labor on a Guano Island,

said his Honor, handing you a pick
and a shovel
and a ticket
for a boat ride here where the shovel is chained
to your right wrist
and to the left, a bucket.
The pick you'll wear strapped to your back
until it's time to pick with it.
You'll dig for a decade down
through the strata, over eons, the seabirds left
and, one by one, haul the bucketsful
to the dockside piles.
The birds stopped here to rest a while,
the roaming, the landless,
the long-distance birds on protracted wings.
On days, working the cliffs, when you can overlook
the sea, you might still,
a foot or two above the waves,
as you mine his ancestor's guts, you might still see one.

Razorhead the Axeman

The hummingbirds have gone off for the night, and John Rose and me are under the catalpa drinking co-colas, telling boo stories and writing our names in lightning bug jelly on a slate from the barbecue pit. It is good to write your name in fire, even if it fades quicker than the taste of soda, which you can never quite feature when you're in bed after your prayers. We have a whole jarful harvest, so we can do it again and again. When the letters disappear, we close our eyes and make like we're going too, escaping this sleepy-headed place.

John Rose wants to tell about White Face, who has possum teeth and a snake tail. He will perch up on your closet shelf and breathe the cedarwood till you open the door, then POUNCE, and he'll tear your throat out with his arrowhead teeth. I won't let him, though, because he told me that one just an hour ago when we were shoving the splintery old cover back over the well collar. Down in the cut where the Dovetown children go to eat clay, we can hear the train to Atlanta moaning, and it puts me in mind of Razorhead who my cousin Ridley told us about last week. He was born with his face bones wrong, which made him grisly to look at, but he had a rare and wondrous soprano-kind-of-voice. Something about the way his mouth come together in a point at the front of his

wedge-shaped head made notes blend together a way nobody else could make, and they kept him behind a curtain at church, where he sung "Gladly the Cross" and "Just As I Am" with such beauty people would swoon.

"He slew them in the pews," Ridley said. She is going to be a nurse, so she likes the sight of people needing aid.

"They fell out in a God-spell," she said, "women and children and strapping men. And when they come to, they was refreshed. Then the preacher would pass the missions pan, and wouldn't nobody hold back as they felt blessed."

I am telling it now, adding my own details, and John Rose wants to know if Razorhead was his real name, but I ignore it. He can ask the stupid ones sometimes.

"Then they would have to smuggle him out the back and into a truck with one of them French legionnaires caps backwards on his head with the little curtain like the kind the doctor pulls over in front of a person in the hospital that has died."

"Did he like his job?"

"Well, maybe at first, but he heard how other chaps was getting to go to the ice cream supper or maybe to a Crackers ball game at Ponce de Leon Park, and he started harping on it. The radio wasn't good enough for him anymore. He craved company. When they wouldn't let him out with the others, his parents and all, that's when he started killing."

“Why didn’t they catch him?” John Rose was trying to write Razorhead on the slab, but he couldn’t get to the end before the starting letters just winked on out, and we were running short of bugs. Before Daddy went to Nashville, he told me how their lights was courting lamps, calling across the lawn and into the woods. They didn’t want to be lonely either.

John Rose is just seven, so you have to say everything direct to him. I pull the church key string and fish it out of my shirt so we can have another co-cola, and I tell him Razorhead’s big secret. He can hit a note that will make people’s heads split open, and he sneaks right up to the window where there’s nothing but rusty screen between him and somebody he thinks needs the punishment. Then he birds out that note, and there’s blood everywhere while he runs along the privet and under the chinaberry trees, out through the rows of cow corn on the other side of Mr. Langslider’s hay road. Before long, he’s slipped back through the crawl space and into the trap door under his bed. He has so much time alone, he has engineered a prison camp escape passage, so he has other skills, too.

We don’t usually get many co-colas, and Jeanette is always bribing me with the promise of one from her icebox. She lives next door and is somehow related to me through a second marriage, but she’s not related to John Rose at all. He comes over from his Granny Johnson’s to

play, because she's too busy mixing Cherokee weed charms in the kitchen to sell, and her TV don't work either.

Jeanette works last shift at the mill as a hemmer. She's put more than one stitch in her own hand, though she's young yet and shouldn't be clumsy. Brand Maxfield likes to visit her of an evening. He brings a guitar, which I'm always surprised he can play on account of his big hands. Brand works late shift at the pickle factory where I gather he mostly shovels salt and stirs up the brine.

First time I met him I was chunking the mailbox, watching the clods explode in the slow summer twilight.

"What you bombing, Sport?"

"Jeanette."

"Whoa, you don't want to kill the golden goose. You blow her up, I won't have a place to knock off a quick piece before graveyard."

I told John Rose that—"knock off a quick piece." We started picturing Jeanette with a missing arm or foot or just toes.

"She could sew herself back together," John Rose said, "just run a seam. It's like she's practicing already."

I hate her, though, and I don't tell John Rose this, but what she wants from me is kindly sick. Sometimes she has charge of me after Miz Hanratty takes off and Mama's not home from the drug store yet. Usually she just lets me run about and mind my own business, but last month she gave me a sack of fresh divinity to pull off my shorts and shirt

so she could draw me and get practice on the human form. She said she wouldn't put on no head, so people wouldn't see whose dingler it was, and she didn't put in the scar on my chest where sizzle oil sloshed out of the fry basket when I was a baby and Mama was turning the catfish.

One time I was taking a bath a couple years back, Mama soaping me, and when Jeanette come over with a cold High Life for Mama, I slopped down in the water so she wouldn't see my particulars, but my bottom curve must have been showing over the edge, cause she said, "I can see the moon rising on the 'rizen," and she and Mama laughed. Ever since then she's looked at me kindly cross-eyed, but I figured divinity was a good price to get if you were going to sell your exposure. I can recognize a bargain.

This morning it was co-colas. Mama says only trash drinks soda before breakfast, and trash seemed to fit Jeanette like a doctor's white glove, but she does it all the time. She favors Sun Drop in the evening, and she even has Dr. Peppers lined up in the ice box like a choir. Ridley says their name don't make sense, cause there's no medicine in them, but that clock on the glass is a warning, on account of they have prune juice in them. That's what gives them the left-handed taste. And the clock means to keep your eye on the time 'cause when that prune juice hits you, watch out.

It was right hot when Delbert picked Mama up for work this morning, and there wasn't no dew. She said,

"Don't cross the road and don't tell no lies. Leave the mail on the coffee table."

We don't drink coffee, but we have a table for it. Soon as she was out of sight, I went into the washhouse and swiped out a bag of clothespins to be the wooden people for my green army men to ambush. After lunch when Miz Hanratty said I'd had enough nap, I read a Perry Mason story and built a bird nest out of wild sticks and meat-tying string. John Rose come over and we played mumbledypeg with pocket knives and then had a tickle fight. He had to go on home for dinner.

Then I was putting sticks in the holes of dirt dauber nests in the tractor shed. They make these hollow things on the planks that favor a mud pipe organ, and then they put eggs in there to make more dirt wasps. If you could stop them, you would. Jeanette said there was hummingbirds still sucking the red tube on her porch, and I could sit on the glider and watch them if I wanted to, so I did. We was swinging gentle in the shade, but the sun was coming in at a hard angle. Two bitty green birds was scuffling over the one honey tit, their engines zipping the air. They are more fun to watch than a yellow dog, but she was painting her nails from a bottle that said "Bleeding Heart" and then blowing on them. She asked what I would do for a co-cola.

"Stand on my head. Swallow a hummingbird. Say the alphabet backwards Z-Y-X-W."

"I've got a better idea. You come in here now."

The screen door slapped behind us. I already hated her, but she was the keeper of the drinks, 'less I wanted to walk all the way down the road to Horton's, and there it cost a nickel.

"Perch there on the settee."

So I did.

"I want to see how one of your fingernails looks with this red."

My eyes must've gotten big as pie plates because she said real quick-like, "It will be like a Rebel soldier's hand after he's been holding up a friend shot bloody to hear his dying words."

Even though I had once claimed to her such a thing had happened to me just after Shiloh, I was still skeptical 'til she said, "Two co-colas. Just so I can see the color from a distance."

By the time she was finished I looked really stupid, even if I was the new soda king of Senoia, Georgia. I was breathing like somebody had been in a fight, and I bet my cheeks was red as my ten nails, which I chew, though everybody says "don't." She wouldn't clean them off neither and kept tossing the polish remover high up in a keep-away. I am not tall for nine, and I couldn't even get close.

"Isn't she lovely," she sang, "isn't she lovely."

I knew if Ridley saw me, I'd have the sound of *nyah-nyah* in my ears for the rest of my natural life, but she was having no mercy, and I ran out of there with my arms full of cold drinks.

"How did they catch him?" John Rose asks. "How did they know he was doing it if the people looked like a axe had hacked them but they never could find no axe?"

"That's just it, stupid. They didn't catch him. He's still out there, maybe down in Howerton's pine woods or hiding out with Sally Soapsud on the overside of the railroad track, and he can sneak up quiet as a milk cat to your window, and all it takes is that one note he's saving that comes on the music page way over the actual bars, and it cuts through the air just above you and then down 'til you split, and that's all she wrote. You won't be around no more than the lights of your name written in firefly goo."

Then I realize I might've gone too far, because John Rose is beginning to whimper, so I prise open another drink and hand it over. He can't see the polish on my fingers as I have siphoned gas from the tractor and scrubbed them off with the wire brush Mama uses to clean the barbecue grill. I'm sore around the edges of the nails, though, those white rims, and I am glad I have done in Jeanette for good. John Rose doesn't even wonder how I got all these co-colas, because he doesn't ask, but I can see myself like somebody from the outside, a witness or crime

snapshotter, as I creeped back into her house like Razorhead myself and picked up the coal poker, which is brass and bright as fire. Fire is what you have to make in you to get yourself free of shackling things. It's silvery fire on the bumper of Brand's Mercury, and you can see the sunlight shocking green fire off a hummingbird's feathers, so I had my inspiration. She was stretched out across the junebug-colored sofa, studying a movie star magazine and drinking a High Life with the pixie girl side-saddling the moon on its bottle. When she looked up, it was too late. I didn't even have a wild-pitched hymn note to sing, but I pulled the poker down real fast, and her eyes went egg-sized, and she didn't have nothing to say either. Then I left the mess for somebody else and went by the ice box.

I filled up the brown sack on the floor with what I wanted, then met John Rose in the side garden where he already had a quart Mason with stars popped in the brass lid and a couple dozen fireflies in there like a swarm. He was wearing three like diadem rings and one on his forehead like some Hindusian.

"Hey, Tucker," he said, and he had this otherworld smile on his mouth because he's always glad for somebody to mess around with.

The poker was still in my hand, and I said, "Tell you what," so we went to the pump house and threw it under the well cover for a secret.

"Don't tell nobody 'til you see God in person."

I thought to myself there might be enough spider nets down there to catch it before it splashed, but I was wrong. We might be getting a taste of hammered-out iron and Jeanette's blood forever, but my thinking at the time was, it might be if they don't know how I did it, they won't know it was me. That was me scheming, which I have always been pretty good at.

So we're sitting out there under those crawly sap worms on the Catawba limbs. It's night and we don't know what they're doing. Probably tearing up leaves. We're trying to remember a shiver story we haven't heard lately, but then the real Jeanette wakes up from her sofa nap and comes out in those awful pink plastic curlers calling my name and something about all her drinks and telling my Mama, so I have to stop make believing and start planning again. Getting out of this place is harder than finding a hummingbird up where they tighten their jewel bodies at midnight. Finding one sleeping is something almost nobody gets to do, but I throw my green co-cola bottle into the corn, tell John Rose goodnight and start figuring how I can be the one.

Ode Petaluma

Bought stuff rolled by in cars. I saw them
saying things they had said before. The country
doesn't understand. The darling. Someone
reasonable said we will move there to be with you.
The tired people read the poems and didn't want
to leave. Forgiveness sat in its little stucco house.
Its fan was in. It heard the greatest residents
of Petaluma move by unconcerned with eagles
walk their dogs. They chose to live there, they did.
And we were somehow born, a slowly moving canoe,
we felt okay. When they ask about our lives
what if we say it was beautiful out, we went canoeing,
you would rather have taken a nap, but went to work,
they will say okay, surely they will, they are
aware of the limitations of
the human experience, they understand
longing passes and longing passing stays.
The day they say was poured into glasses,
the gates opened for the quiet dead of Petaluma,
at the hundredth beer the bell,
the library, the sheriff, the bus south, the canoe going
to finish the day slowly moving through the water, air
slowly moving through air. "Do not finish anything
and go away," say the people on the bus to each other.

Anne Boleyn

"The people will have no difficulty in finding a nickname for me. I shall be Queen Anne Lackhead."

— Anne Boleyn, upon learning of her impending execution

Who would have guessed
it was you and brother George
who invented the French Kiss
across someone else's deathbed,
perhaps, but this is how
we grow up: six-fingered and
a birthmark on the neck can
mean a witch, but one who holds
out, doesn't give so easily,
until realizing three years later
no one is indispensable, not
even the head of a kingdom
who will be ruled by uneven bodies.
What is wrong with a voice
that only wants opera? Work.
Pleasure in work. You
were not fair. Skin changes color
to show emotion. Yours
remained sallow. Your final threat,
Anne, the seven year drought,

did they know then? Each
number like a calculator's,
formed from the pieces that made
each previous now unnecessary.
If the word "picnic" had existed,
would you have chosen this life?
Another king died from peaches
and new cider; there were poisons
that asked for months to impregnate
clothing, letters, and cooks were meant
to sample everything or be themselves
boiled. The luxury of privacy.
The taste of your future. Every birth
becomes a death sentence. You may
bring food to an execution, but
you must pin up your hair so as not to
interfere with the blade. Death, quickly.

Brotherhood

I stare down on Southie
from my ivory tower.
It is the blue hour,
blue of navy blazers and navy slacks
worn with white button down shirts
and polished black shoes
as blue as I am after school
with Sister Margaret
who used to let me erase the blackboard
after I had written
"I must not talk in class" one hundred times.
She told me I must ask permission
to go to the bathroom.
I must stand with my hand over my heart
when I pledge allegiance to the flag
and mustn't brag to the less fortunate
when I come back from Christmas vacation
and I must stand and kneel and stand
and say the rosary and genuflect
in front of the Virgin Mary's statue
at the foot of the stairs
up to Father Donovan's office,
where my brother's waiting with mother and father
because he hit another boy and bit him too.

He won't do anything they tell him.
He promises he will,
but he never keeps his promises.
He enjoys inflicting pain,
but he rarely shows it
as he dispenses punishment to fit the crime
he thinks you've committed.
He believes in justice,
maybe not your kind, or mine, but he does.
He'll bust your arms with a rock,
knock you down and stomp on you.
I've seen him do it,
but I'll never tell anyone
who it was he threw into the Charles
and who didn't come around anymore.
The family packed up and moved
and that was that
and it only showed the neighborhood
that my brother was someone to be respected.
He was. I've got the bruises to prove it
and the mad loyalty that comes from total devotion.
He had the gift.
He could sniff out weakness
and use it against you.
I let him do it. We all did.
Now that he's on the run
the police want me to abandon him

and appear at some hearing
to tell them what I know about his supposed offences,
but I won't. I can't.
He's blood and that's all that matters now
and back when it ran into the street
outside Pete's Diner
when I got a shiner instead of him,
by taking on Pat Ryan
who was threatening him with baseball bat.
Pat knocked me to the sidewalk
and the two of them walked off arm 'n arm,
laughing at me
because they thought I was too serious
and so boring.
Years later, they would hang Sully
from a meat hook in the freezer
and say they ought to have done the same to me.
Sully's death took a while,
but my brother had time then, and style,
something I never had in my tweed jacket and corduroys,
my pockets filled with torn packets of sugar,
pennies and pens without ink.
It was a miracle I could even dress myself,
but I could think.
I thought myself here, didn't I,
high above my brother's life of crime?
We both had the will to succeed.

That's all we ever needed,
but look at us now.
How did we end up here?
Was it justice finally catching up with him,
or just a few loose ends
he thought he could tie some concrete blocks to
and drop in the Charles
just like in the good old days?
The old days are gone and so's the old sod
that's not so green anymore
and we are not so poor
as when we listened to Danny Boy in our room
and made farting sounds
and giggled and dreamed of drowning in chocolate cream
instead of plain old hot water.
I ought to tell the police he called
to ask if I would squeal on him.
He said, "You weak little shit,
remember Easter, 1960 and the diamond earrings
I gave mother?
You knew they were hot and you told Father.
I got detention, remember?
They called it the summer of love,
but it wasn't love coming off the old man's belt
and it wasn't love that made me a man;
it was something you don't understand,
you academic little prick."

I kept silent because he needs to say these things to me.
What else can he do now that he knows he isn't invincible
but wound me with words?
They aren't fatal after all
and only hurt like hell at first
then like St. Stephen's arrows
produce a kind of ecstatic and dramatic
sacrificial thrill.
I first experienced it as a kid
when I wrote a hundred times,
"I won't, I won't, I won't,"
but Sister Margaret said, "You will,"
then told me to erase it and go.
She said, "Your brother needs you to defend him."
I tried to take the blame that time.
He never forgave me.
He wanted the world to know he wasn't a punk
and he would show them, oh, how he would.
Now we're middle aged,
bearing the curse of the Irish, not the luck
on our shoulders like crosses.
We know that loss is just the outcome of living,
the dross that's left after you turn gold back into iron
and end up in Rio with a mulatta,
who's gotta habit,
but he doesn't care. He's flying blind
and I am right behind him

in my imagination anyway,
but he's really at South Station,
having mastered the art of hiding in plain sight.
When I get there, the frigid air heats up
and I start to sweat,
knowing that as he steps from the blue shadows
he's going to give me the bullet to the back of the head
he always said he'd deliver just like the breadman,
knowing it's one promise he's going to keep.

Manhattan Spleen

Because, one night in Manhattan, a friend of mine was stabbed in the back during an attempted mugging and had to have his spleen removed, I stopped going out after dark. Yes, the spleen. It was formerly believed to be the seat of passions, a vascular glandlike ductless organ near the stomach, or the generator of melancholy--the spleen, or just spleen: what I felt after the unfortunate incident involving my friend; what Baudelaire felt about poverty in Paris, the Parisian poor—Paris Spleen—or how he felt about life in general, or how I felt about life in general after the incident involving my friend. The gay blaze of Manhattan lights dimmed. After "recovering" from the incident, my friend had to take many medicines, could not live the same free and relatively happy life he had lived before. No more could I. Yellow light flooded a yellow room. I slept fitfully, many nights I slept not at all; would switch off the light at dawn and stare out at the glow of a Manhattan morning. My friend finally died and I continued to hide in my room, not afraid of what lay outside my small domain but utterly disgusted with it, with the East side West side Island. I grew enormous from compulsive eating and lack of exercise. I became constipated, gaseous, and nauseated. Then I could not get food delivered, for no delivery person would come near to

the door of my room for the mephitic odors that emanated from it, and I grew thin and finally wasted away to a mere ghost of former self. My unpaid rent mounted until it became impossible for me to pay such an amount. I lay dreamless in dirty sheets until the door was broken in and I was taken away. Doctor, this is how it all happened, how my hatred, my spleen, grew boundless as my body vanished. Find me and feed me.

Joyelle McSweeney

Click Track

Vision makes the first line.
Celeriac. Valerian. Climbs
into fiber. A xylic fitness, worn for years
to cinch bedclothed waists into piety.

If you freeze each frame, you can see it vegetate—
frill and bloom, then clink into calcification.
Limited man, delimiting. Somewhere, a shelf crumbles.
From the tightness with which this fits,
you may infer full proof.

Click, click. The debt orchestra taps its stands
from somewhere overtheradio. It is so clear
even volume doesn't make it clearer. Leant effort.
They're swept clockwise in the tide
like a single white medallion keep
crossing the meridian-line: o'clock, o'clock.
Click track. Caprice in the fake foyer.
There the bulb blossoms from sharp tin painted little leaves
profligating from chains. It is likened to a coppice gate
in Shangri-La, the chandelier's interior, integuments,

girths, silhouettes, earth's links
and gravities, earth's rules, earth's earthly etiquette.

To confront the sorrow. To spare this station
from chaos and abnegation and doom. To spare this sparrow
who picks at the tieline
holding up the suet
though not at the suet:
the blue plastic integument.

Inspector of schools, overzealous.
Overlooking the azalea blooms,
we were only record-players, racquet bearers.
Became a cliffhanger,
became a phalanx-de-troops, stood on the cliff,
lookdoer, wind ruffling the mutated frill
that stretched from our necks like a hood—

Practical as an electron, it exists
in a state of murky possibility, buying
things for dinner, looking for signs
of dinner the next day. It worked till it crawled

into its substratum, pupils slotted sideways
like a goat's. Uncertainty planet.
What's the view from here. To be anywhere at once
is to be nowhere. I remember warm tides;
I must be misremembering. The universe and its laws
must have come in from somewhere. Number
pinned to its shirt. How long can this series continue
and simulate care for its results.

The policy kept retightening,
retending, the tent thick with integument, musclebound.
The video looped
through its three tongues:
parvenu, bien venue, a huge
and generous site. The skate-announcer tossed
his mantle of tissue. It flopped slimily
over his eyes. V. rode in on the third epicycle,
the lining shuddered from its heights.
Shed, revealed new lining.

The Blood Says Stun

Stun it right out of the woods, the water
in the picture in the only picture
most vacationers have of the Northern
ear of Michigan, the land, the body

a float in the water, the fists of lakes,
the blood says, yes, and stun all the tourists
with weather, with snow hanging under lamps

in stop-time unless kids have shot the lamps
out with no malice, all the stunned tourists
perched in the bar haze amid billiards, lakes

of light on the felt; the blood felt the body
like rosary beads once: something Northern
to clutch and worry—a daughter's picture
taken in woods, bone winter, in water.

Rachel Galvin

In Cambium Lucida

Sweet calendula, is it true what the gardener said—when we learn
the name of a thing

we no longer see it? If only I might hear the cinctured sorrow
in the cilia, the rumor of upshoot.

Rain makes love in its own language, uttering a phrase
in recitative,

a conversation in formlessness. It has a strange elation,
as waves do

coming to the shore, coming again, the multiplicity
of a fluid touched

with the thousand ideas of photosynthesis, dark sugared tubes
whose relation to light

dilates, as the arborvitae abandons shingles and fence posts
for totems and seafaring vessels—

in all shapes branching into the mutable, nearly metallurgic.

Julianne Buchsbaum

Shadowboxing

Sawtoothed clouds chew up a sky of chintz.

Watching the dumb show of people moving
through the streets of Vegas, all pantomimes

and itching palms, we loiter in the parking lot,
thinking *no one is alive enough to live here.*

Shadows slant down the side of the pawnshop
where a fire burned last month: where it teemed,

verboten, flowerlike, a small piece in the pageant
of the Nevermore & Shall-Remain-Nameless.

Sawdust clouds churn in a sky of quince.

Telephone poles stand still as a line of suspects
waiting in the wings not talking, holding out.

A man limps toward the husk of an opera house
dark as the city in its fishnet stockings of smog,

and we envy the ones who got away.
The sky gone smooth as a man's blue vein—

the one condemned *in absentia*—the world
left behind like a small coin on a dresser.

Shirley Temple, Black

Human reason is a shutter that raps,
all dusty, in the countryhouse of the brain.
Go through the window and you become an animal,
and are so happy to lie in your little round bed, stuffed with cedar.

Elsewhere, en voyage, a certain phrenia bobs along the moony sea,
a hobo of the waves looking for a liner it can hop aboard.

Once the searchlight's found it, and a lifeboat released into the
ocean's piracy,

the twitch climbs on deck
and promptly finds a porthole—
that is how sanity will slip into its beast,
through the tube of that crossed glass eye.

I mean that madness is a ship to back where our thumbs did not
oppose.

I mean that this is the peaceful water safari
on which we crack our chocolate molds,
and relax back into our cracker shapes:
giraffe, platypus, wolverine, ape.

I want once again to be sold in a little box, a cardboard cage, a zoo.

I once got a photograph of Shirley Temple as a girl
at Christmastime meant to be sent to fans—she looked a little
spooked,

and behind her head someone had written the greeting
in a hand that was supposed to be a kid's
but looked more like a psychopath's.
And I knew then that she was ambassador to cannibals,
the entertainment director on my losingest cruise,
the shutters of my eyes banging on their ruffled hinges.
I think I am most at home inside the ear of a dog,
sweet portal to lunacy, where no day is Jesus, and a
kickboard
keeps me from drowning into yet another child star
reflected overhead by the night, endless as Atlantic.

Major Arcana

The Storyteller—Beware, you will soon meet with an accident.
The Archer, in some decks, the Amazon—Your luck is changing.
The Muses—You are watching too much television.

The Ambulance—A wedding.
The Robot—A secret lover.
The Aquarium—You will have many children.

The Addict, sometimes The Vampire—A visitor.
The Rottweiler—A pregnancy.
The Weaver or Seamstress—Delay.

The Orchestra—Serious illness, but the sick one will recover.
The Cockroach (variants: Pigeon, Rat, Raccoon, Coyote)—Money.
The Pool Shark—Things will work out as you hope.

The Convertible—Don't reveal your true feelings yet.
The Dancers—You must see a doctor.
The Movie Theater—You already know the answer to your query.

Lacy Schutz

Incantation for Becoming Thin

Small.

Blue circles
under my eyes.

Thin and clear as a bottle
of fancy water.

I have stopped eating meat and
soon I will stop eating

dairy products and I will become
thinner and purer

and I will not eat heavy
things that used to be living
or that come from living things.

No more gluey cheese animal
mucus milk.

And someday I'll stop eating honey,
too, because it comes from bees
and I'll definitely stop

eating processed white sugar—that sweet suburban
powder so sweet

and I will then stop being with men who have become fleshy
and soft; men wielding dicks like martini olives on sticks.

The men to whom
I give myself will
spend their days trying to atone for something
they've done they feel is unforgivable.

They will not be at ease in their skin,
but will remember a moment when they were.
They keep, like me, in a transient exile
searching for it—
the cadence in a woman's small kitchen as she
made coq au vin
or the moment the oboe was slid under her
bed for safe-keeping
or a time far from morning alone on a
playground
on a rubber swing, the runaways in the picnic shelter and the
city's lights shining up from below.

I get purer and thinner
and I will only wear a pale shade of blue
that is like water on a partly sunny day somewhere cold, like
Minnesota or Finland
and sometimes grey

and there will be a tautness in the air
around me and I will keep myself separate
and possible.

Returns

Excuse me you have mistaken me for your page.

The lines on my face are not to be filled in they are already full.

Nor can I use the burning dress you tried to slip over my head.

Or the bag of cheap tricks you left on my desk when I wasn't
looking.

It's true I wasn't looking but why should I look.

It's true I didn't know what to say when you said your words
were mine.

It's true I didn't know what to do with your things.

But now I have figured out what to do and here is what I am
doing.

I am leaving your things your tricks your dress on this page.

That way you can claim them if you wish but only if.

This is a real page it isn't me it isn't you.

It was made like all real pages to take things in.

Dresses are something else and forget the tricks.

These words are mine.

More Mozart, Less Beethoven

Christie Hodgen. *A Jeweler's Eye for Flaw: Stories*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2003. 167 pp. \$24.95, hardcover.

The heroes in Christie Hodgen's debut collection are loners and outsiders—or as one character labels them, “the meek, the lonely, and the dead.” James Woodfin, a gifted writer and a suicidal teenager in the title story of this collection, is all three. James dresses up as a ghost for Halloween and never takes his costume off. He floats down the school hallways, a silent ghost out of season.

These are hermits and seers of the minor leagues, ordinary people transformed by the sad pull of workaday tragedies. Hodgen handles her characters gracefully; she gives intimate glimpses of their suffering without stooping to sentimentality. James' costume is a striking image in this regard because it is both his defense against the world and his subtle indictment of it. The sheet hides his scars from a fire but it also charges his fellow students with cruel adolescent negligence. All of them stopped talking to James years ago because his inveterate stuttering embarrassed them, but the story suggests they have done something much worse. By seeing only James's flaws, the students have made what is essentially an existential

error—they unsubstantiated him and turned him into a ghost.

All the characters in Hodgen's work suffer—from ostracism, dysfunctional families, failed love affairs. In "Three Parting Shots and a Forecast," the actor John Wilkes Booth suffers because President Lincoln comes to his plays in order to sleep. It's a blow his ego cannot sustain. "Three Parting Shots" is some of Hodgen's most playful work: it moves with a manic pace and its historical characters fill up the page. Nevertheless, by the story's end, two people die and another is institutionalized. Pathos lies at its center.

These stories are more than portraits of people locked in pain. In Hodgen's closely observed, bittersweet tales, the characters' pain burnishes and awakens them. The loners gain insight and even prescience. James Woodfin, for example, has come to understand how the world works; he turns an English paper into a twenty-five-page manifesto on how cruel we are to one another. The outcasts lead quiet lives in economically ravaged cities, yet they radiate intensity and commit small acts of courage. Wednesday, the young woman far from home in "Take Them In, Please," establishes her own escort service out of something akin to family valor. Bereft of human connection and having lost an heirloom, she seeks to recreate the only story her father has ever told her. She aspires to be like the women who comforted her great uncle on his deathbed, a sympathetic listener and

storyteller—and she goes as an escort to a man’s hotel room with this intent. It is a shockingly naïve move, a knifelike twist to her lonely story, but entirely fitting.

Despite their status as nobodies, as people on the outside of the action, these characters affect others deeply. Hodgen imbues them with power, and power beyond their abilities of perception. James Woodfin haunts Sandy, the narrator of “A Jeweler’s Eye for Flaw,” because she cares deeply for him and her attempts at telling him so are foiled. This is often the way Hodgen’s stories work. They circumambulate; they proceed by missed connections. The gears appear not to catch, yet the stories themselves never stall. Though her characters are largely introspective—they meditate on their regrets and document their lives in strange, polyphonic books—they are nudged into action. The gears do catch, and the stories roll to satisfying, surprising, even daring endings.

The missed connection, the spark of the story, often concerns love unspoken or miscarried. What causes the connection to fail? It could be because the characters speak to one another indirectly, if at all. The mother in the title story communicates with her daughter by ventriloquizing through a teddy bear. A husband and wife speak to each other over separate phone extensions in their home. A brother and sister in “The Hero of Loneliness” use sign language, “the language of umpires and third base coaches, of pitchers and catchers, the winks and nods and

tugging of ears." Unable to bear direct confrontation, this introverted bunch invents new ways to refract speech and angle around the true subject.

The effect is distancing and bracing by turns. While often this method generates polite subterfuge, in some stories it becomes the means for clear-cutting, abrasive honesty. "Mommy smells like a *hooker!*" the shrill-voiced teddy bear tells the narrator in "A Jeweler's Eye for Flaw." Sandy's mother, the voice behind the bear, is an angry woman, recently laid off, whose husband has left her. She uses the childhood toy to register her anxiety about Sandy's imminent departure for college. The bear is both hilarious and savage. "Oh, no, Mommy," it says, "I'm *naked!* I need some new clothes for school." Later on, Sandy's mother comforts the bear: "Gramma still loves you. Even if Mommy doesn't. Even if Mommy's turning into a snooty college bitch."

Because her characters speak in codes or through intermediaries, Hodgen's stories proceed obliquely. And the characters, being sensitive creatures, slowly unhinge when they are confronted by life's troubles. The bear becomes the mother's *only* means of communication with her daughter; Sandy remarks that the bear has wandered too far off her mother's mental leash. Many of these stories raise the issue of mental illness or breakdown.

Aggie, the narrator of "Sir Karl LaFong or Current Resident," picks up this idea, but rejects it. She calls her

strange, secretive brother the “hero of loneliness” and draws a distinction between Ephram’s behavior and illness. “It was never certain to me that Ephram was ill in any way, but something much simpler. He was different. He was sad.” At first, this observation seems feasible. Ephram, an African American boy adopted by white parents, cannot find his place in his family. As a child, he invents hundreds of aliases and tracks the junk mail they receive in order to scrutinize corporations’ mailing list policies for racism and sexism. Eventually, the personalities he invents move from his post office box into the world; he begins to try them on. When he finally leaves his New England town, Ephram adopts a W.C. Fields persona—that of a traveling juggler. All seems normal, though perhaps unusual. But it becomes problematic, even chilling, when Aggie reintroduces herself as a figment of Ephram’s imagination. This is a tricky but successful move on Hodgen’s part: revising a character utterly within the story, calling into question the story’s foundations and goals.

With all of the contemplative characters, it is a relief to encounter those who are more straightforward. There is a group of characters in Hodgen’s fiction who lack the inclination toward subterfuge or roundabout conversation. They sport crewcuts and baseball helmets and they declare themselves celebrities. Their pleasures are simple, and they bring an unrestrained joy to the page. Scotty, a seventeen-

year-old who has the cognitive abilities of a fourth grader, delights in Christmas decorating. Robby, a young man with Down Syndrome, convinces his sister, Ellie, and her misanthropic husband, Mark, to take him to a drag show at a nightclub. Robby's desire, exuberance, and confusion, so much raw emotion, work a small change in Mark. He leaves the club with a different bearing toward his wife. Again, Hodgen makes her skill in characterization apparent. She does not turn the mentally disabled into caricatures—they are neither sages nor idiots. Instead, she instills them with humanity. They are funny, charming, disagreeable—and possessing their own tough, well-earned intelligence.

In "A Jeweler's Eye for Flaw," Sandy and her mother argue about a babysitting charge. The mother, who wants to feed the baby forbidden food, says, "You're turning into a real drag, Sandy. You're more like your father every day." The mother takes up the teddy bear and speaks through it. "Let's see some more Mozart," the bear says. "Less Beethoven." Sandy's mother equates Mozart with expansiveness and spontaneity; she hints that Beethoven is somber, a rule follower. This dichotomy, this tension between Mozart and Beethoven, dwells in Hodgen's stories as well. These are dark, elliptical stories about suffering in hostile environments, but they contain a wry, even diabolical humor and flares of grace, brief moments of understanding. Hodgen's stories surprise by building

on believable, deeply realized characters. These stories are not jewels with flaws, but unassuming geodes with flashing crystals at their centers.

Stories Three

An old woman regrets her children.

A youngish girl considers the disease inside her blood.

A street person.

1.

An old woman drops a dollar bill at a fruit stand. She is buying baby carrots and apples. Her children have left because the holidays have ended. She is somewhat sad and will go to the library later for photo books featuring sunsets and beaches.

A youngish girl on her way back from lunch taps an old woman on the shoulder. Picks up a fallen dollar. Hands it to the woman and is thanked nicely. She is given an apple. She holds the fruit in her mittens and thinks she has done a good deed.

A street person is cold. He's been watching a fallen dollar for quite sometime. Had it spent already. But the dollar has been picked up. He considers doing this to a youngish girl: pushing her over and/or stealing her purse. There are some other things he considers, but these are felonies, and already he has ten years gone in the tank.

2.

An old woman pays for carrots and apples and has just the right number of dollars. She would have been short if not for a nice young girl informing her she dropped some money. Her own kids would not have done the same; she knows this about them. And finds it a sad thought, especially because it comes to her now, after they've all gone back to their own homes and their own families in their own far away places.

A youngish girl inflates her sense of worth and smokes a cigarette, her first of the New Year, because she feels she deserves a reward for helping an old woman. She squints and walks into traffic against the light. A flash of yellow scrapes the top nub of her new shoes. She throws down the cigarette and clutches her coat tight. A street-looking person asks how she is doing. She tells him not well. He picks up her cigarette and puts it to his mouth.

A street person is hustling a youngish girl who was almost nailed to the pavement by a cab. He has been following her since a fruit stand some blocks back. His teeth chatter, and then winter air wedges into the space between his bones. He notices that she notices that he is eyeing her purse.

3.

An old woman would like to go dancing. But all her

partners have died and she feels it too late to find new ones.

A youngish girl thinks she has gone to bed with too many people in the past year. She liked them enough. Some were assholes.

A street person pulls the purse from the arm of a youngish girl. He runs, moves best he can with frozen feet.

4.

An old woman puts carrots and apples into a handbag. The bag was a present from her granddaughter. The granddaughter did not pick it out. The woman's ugly daughter-in-law picked it out and signed the granddaughter's name. The old woman's son got his mother a set of shot glasses, though she hasn't drunk in years. This year, though she wishes it wasn't true, they fought in a cold gray living room and then went out for Christmas dinner.

A youngish girl is upset her purse has been stolen. The phone number of her mother was in this purse. This number is not listed and she can't remember what city her mother was in last they spoke. There is something important the girl needs to tell her mother and because of this, the youngish girl has finished a bottle of champagne

by herself each day for the past week. Christmas day the mother got on a Greyhound bus and went *somewhere*.

A street person is in the park and he is counting dollars from the wallet of a youngish girl. There are four. Her license picture is terrible and he laughs. Even shows a friend. There is not much worthwhile to this purse. There is a phone number. On a scrap of paper. The street person cannot remember when he last had a number himself. But he does remember once, when he went to a woman's apartment for some big Christmas dinner, she made him beef stew and then played the piano for hours. But they never even made love.

5.

An old woman has a message on her answering machine when she gets home. She has gone to the library already, but could not carry so many books so only checked out one. It is full of pictures and is called: *So You Want to Go to Fiji?* The message is from someone she does not recognize. It is a woman she thinks might be singing. A wrong number maybe? She draws the blinds and gums an apple until she breaks its skin.

A youngish girl stops a policeman on a horse. He tells her he has more important things to deal with and can't be bothered with goddamn petty thievery. She finds his voice

familiar. He rides away and she thinks he looks like an asshole galloping off on a horse like that. It's the city. When he turns and stares she remembers where it was she heard his voice before. Her bedroom. He said then: you do anal?

A street person is minding his business in the park. He is filling the carcass of his newfound purse with cigarette butts and coins. Again he comes across the number. He sees a phone. He decides he will call this number because he knows the name. Hello. Will they accept the charges? They will accept the charges. Hello, Brenda? he says. Hello, says Brenda. And they share a good laugh. But, in fact, they do not know each other at all.

Border Crossing

Oscar Casares. *Brownsville*. Back Bay Books, 2003. 176 pp. \$13.95, paper.

Oscar Casares' *Brownsville*, a smart, unusual, uncanny, and welcome debut of stories set in the Texas border town which lends the book its title, offers a full-course meal of sometimes startling, sometimes heart-breaking, and consistently engaging stories written mostly about working-class men and women—people who do business with the wrinkled bills in their worn-out blue jeans, not with credit cards; people who make some way across the border only to end up ready to give almost anything to re-cross and be with the very people they've come to Texas to earn money to support at home in Mexico; people who live among goofball neighbors, quirky dreamers, amateur bowlers, argumentative and overprotective parents prepared to flatten any one who gets in the way of what they think are their children's interests. He gives subtle adventure and rich interior lives to characters who at first glance may seem, to the insensitive eye, to be shallow, irrelevant—even invisible.

Of the most memorable characters in the collection is a man named Bony, of the story titled "Chango." A hardheaded, beer-guzzling slacker, Bony is thirty-one and

living at home with his parents when he comes upon a monkey head in his front yard and is stricken with awe: "It freaked him out bad. The dude had to check around to make sure nobody had seen him jump back and almost drop his beer in the ditch." Bony decides to take the monkey head home with him and keep it, not as a pet, but as a kind of friend. We learn through Bony's drunken backyard reminiscences (he doesn't seem to have any buddies but the monkey head, which he names Chango) that his best childhood friend, much more ambitious than Bony, was killed in a car accident; it is this event, we understand (even while Bony's only beginning to understand), which fuels his "Why bother?" attitude. In his isolation and inebriation, Bony drives around with the monkey head in his truck, has conversations with Chango, imagines Chango's past, and imagines Chango as a man or himself as a monkey. "He was sure that if Chango were a guy they'd be camaradas. Same thing would go if Bony were a monkey. They'd be hanging out in the jungle, swinging from trees, eating bananas. They'd be putting moves on all the changuitas, doing it monkey-style." In the end, however, Bony, in a move that suggests he's begun to realize that he's let his sorrow, nostalgia, and overactive imagination get the best of him, reluctantly disposes of Chango in a local park.

Another touching character and a poignant story is "Domingo." A seventy-three-year-old day-laborer who

works in Brownsville but whose dreams and memories are at home in Mexico, Domingo has lost his faith in God. We follow him through the course of events of one day, which happens to be the birthday of his deceased daughter. (At the age of one year, his daughter, Sara, fell into a pit that Domingo had dug to build a fire. Seriously injured, the baby died soon after the accident, in spite of the prayers and pleas offered to God.) Domingo decides that he must do something to commemorate the event of his daughter's birthday. He decides to make his peace with God and goes to church, but finds the doors locked. Nor can he gain entrance to the cathedral. Confused, depressed, and homesick, he goes to a tree where locals claim to have seen an image of the Virgin Mary. There's an altar near the tree; Domingo tries to pray at it, but finds his prayers to be selfish and ridiculous and decides instead to climb the tree. There he speaks to God, sees an image of his wife, and then, quite hauntingly, of his daughter as a grown woman.

Of the subtlest and most powerful stories that concern children is the first, called "Mr. Z." It's the story of a young boy being taught the supposedly inherent virtue of service labor by his diligent and kind-hearted father, only to have the credibility of the father undermined by the bossman—Mr. Z, who insists that the boy's dad is a liar. In the end, the boy realizes that he can only please his dad by continuing to sell fireworks at Mr. Z's stand, and tries to find a way to preserve his integrity, in spite of the fact that

he's learned that portions of his integrity can be doled out on the market in exchange for cash—something his father surely knew but hoped his son would never have to discover at such a young age.

Throughout the stories, Casares' similes are for the most part bright and original; they're used sparingly but could be used even more sparingly. An example of many of the fine ones comes in "Chango": "The moon turned a dark red like there was a heart inside of it pumping blood." That having been said, it is with stories such as "RG," "Jerry Fuentes," and "Yolanda" that Casares really showcases his most enviable narrative strength, which is creating an incredibly intimate first-person voice in the very first line of the story. "RG," a story about a man who keeps track of everything (especially the whereabouts of his two precious hammers), begins with the line, "I saw Bannert at the mall the other day." As it turns out, the narrator lent a hammer to Bannert, who forgot (or neglected) to return it. In end, the narrator, in desperate need of his hammer, accepts a loaner from Bannert; it turns out to be the same hammer Bannert had been lent. On the verge of finally straightening everything thing out between the two men, the narrator has to hurry to board up his house to protect the windows from a coming hurricane. While we imagine he could eventually reconcile with Bannert, we know that he probably never will, due to the

hurricane, subsequent flooding of the area, and plain old stubbornness.

The story “Jerry Fuentes” starts with the striking line, “Here’s a piece of advice for you: if a guy named Jerry Fuentes comes knocking at your front door trying to sell you something, tell him you’re not interested and then lock the door.” Another story that’s off and running by the first line is “Yolanda.” Recalling a sexually charged, violent, and life-changing ordeal from his childhood, the now older and married narrator begins: “When I can’t sleep at night I think of Yolanda Castro.”

With opening lines like these ones, it is as if the narrator has approached the reader at a dark bar and, well, just started where he thought he left off. And because the voice is so consistently reassuring, and the stories so warm, funny, and addictive, you keep listening, you keep pretending—even wishing—that you’d known the strange dude at the bar all along.

Varied, charming, quirky and interesting, the narrators of *Brownsville* entrust you with their most intimate confessions and recollections. They tell you things they wouldn’t tell their wives or husbands or parents or children. Casares himself has access to a huge world at once interesting, vital, and dynamic—that shifting and flourishing eitherland between Mexico and Texas. He’s certainly not the first to make appetizers and even meals of the material (Dagoberto Gilb comes to mind); at any rate

Casares dips his ladle into the Rio Grande and distills the seeming muck into something not only potable but intoxicating.

Ancestor worship.

We backed out of the driveway. I remember the clutch. The father was in the passenger's seat. He didn't say anything to me this time but if he had it would have been *What you pass is always still back there*, which is what he usually said.

The dietary rules, about detesting the flesh of unscaled sea creatures and unfeathered winged things, he imposed only on himself. I remember starting the car. But the Analects applied equally to all. Though they were jarring and complex, in time I became precisely cylindered in their laws: about the whole, about keeping the old parts, about the telephone, about uniform circles in impossible places.

Trees ranged against starless night sky, dark against dark. I remember driving the car. The radio stayed off. A bat, a Delphic dolphin-guide, fluttered before the headlights, then sheared away, agitated as a particle.

I remember saying I'd behaved. I stalled at a red light on a hill. The father laughed. His belly rippled and heaved above his lap belt. The cigarette lighter popped out and he used it. I remember driving safely.

One night, he whispered to himself, I must oust the pear-shaped rival, that wrinkly sick baked apple. I shall plant land mines at the track. That's what I thought he said.

The highway had fresh stripes. I was ascetic, a cylinder of respect.

I saw the snake writhing dumb in the beams before I ran over its head. The bump was slight, the Way of the grandfathers, justice meted out.

I remember parking at the track. I remember parking and watching a stock car race. It was about pistons, science under the pavilion, origin of species, whine, logo, and fumes.

But no. The night was about resonant threat, a halt, a slap in the back of the head. I remember believing I'd behaved.

Properties

Change

the jar's mouth is packed
transactions beyond number
but the sum exact

Glasses

where the daylight stings
these take in the world, blindly
clarifying things

Bookmark

train ticket in stead
sufficient unto the day
the chapter unread

Dresser

the struggle between
wash and wear is done: at last
everything is clean

Vial

eyedropper a bird's
beak that dripped absolution
a sleep beyond words

Future Perfect

jacket photo, Yukio Mishima

You'll notice, as I did early on,
something "off" about my startling face:
a frank asymmetry, as if one side
had been ground down, tooth and jaw,
to a skewed grimace of probity, of
rectitude—courage, even? Maybe: what I held
in those clenched teeth I can no longer say.
In fact I was more than presentable:
I touched the shut doors of the world's salons
and they swung open: little did they guess.
Why should they have? Little did I.

*Is the rectum straight? Decades would pass
before anyone dared to phrase the question;
by which time I'll have been ritually fucked
by my lover, my sergeant-at-arms, I will
have pulled the cold blade into my guts; I will
have failed. Ah, the tense I loved the best!
Though I seldom got it right—it will
have been—the past
going over the present's head, to greet
what is to be, huge and irresistible.*

Andrew Zawacki

Vertigo

If wind that wastes its time among the trees
escapes itself, only to end up quarantined
by a derelict squall from the north,

and if the air turns somersaults, miming
the outtakes of dusk, scanded by an early frost
and punished for its coldness by the cold,

then like a bullet that lodges in bone,
becoming a piece of the body,
you will not awake apart from your name.

And I will not be not a part of you.

There are things I would settle
with myself. Why, for instance,
as autumn unravels, I cannot mortar

myself to myself, nothing but sunlight
littered from here to the sun. By I
I mean a window, redness grazing the lake

at dawn, or an echo winnowing out
along a wall, hard pressed to hide itself
and straining for the voice it vanished from.

I mean so many windows. So much red.

Please do not misunderstand.
That woman who carries winter
inside her, dizzied by snowfall

that won't level off—I would say
I love her, but I is too strong a word
and love not strong enough.

Kevin Honold

Convoy

February, 1991

The houses' mortar joints seep rills of powder
as we pass through An Nasiriyah.
Small boys, dark, spill from doorways,
drawn from sunless rooms

by the novelty of traffic. They rush the column
and line the macadam, laughing through the thick spume
of exhaust and sandkick—big shy smiles
for any army, for big guns in parade.

They hop a pantomime of gunplay
and wave, shout greetings, pointing to their mouths.
Jerked back by their mothers from the roadside,
they vanish in the folds of jet burqas.

Shaken, scolded: the harsh lectures on fear have knit
their fine black brows with knowledge.
Old men in torn suit coats, heads wrapped in red cloth,
stand far off, down deserted lanes, singular as posts.

Lone women, draped in black robes that brush
the sand, turn their gloved palms skyward
as if demanding food or redress,
as if they're naming us behind each veil.

Ration packets, tossed from windows
and turrets, skid the dust to their feet—
some packets are fired with a will
and find targets: a woman's leg, a boy's chest.

(We don't stop. We don't cut the engines. We don't
climb out of our vehicles, walk toward them, our ears
full of silence, our hands holding out
chocolate to the boys' wild smiles. No,)

the boys gather packets up from the dust
and the column, our column, leaves town.
Overhead, gunships. Tail-booms lifted high in haste.
Air throttled in the low sweep.

Nadine Meyer

The Flayed Man

After Juan de Valverde's 1560 anatomy text, Anatomia del corpo umano.

He has flayed himself for our inspection, pressed his knife through the dermis of his large right toe, ran its tip along the base of his foot, splitting left from right, up the back of his calf and thigh, carefully, the way a woman runs the seam of her stockings up the midline of each leg, and slipped his muscled and gelatinous body from its casing. As one slices the skin from an apple in a long spiraling similitude, he has kept, where possible, his ghostly likeness intact. In one hand he holds it out to us, a testament to what he has done, and in the other he holds the knife. Martyr for science, he stands, each muscle overdeveloped, numbered for the anatomist's study as if it were possible to slit this human casing, slip from one's integument, and go on living in the delicate inner flesh. What then is beauty when the skin has been shucked? The marbling of muscle and fat, the patterning of veins and arteries, tenderness of disease? Complicit, a participant in his own dissection, the Flayed Man brandishes his life: without regard for his soul, he offers this oblation, his own decorticated

corpus, to Medicine and Anatomy. For over a thousand years, for fear that to dissect the body is to impede the soul's chrysalis, its incorporeal unfurling, the study of anatomy had virtually stopped, but now the Flayed Man, his jaunty disregard, his terrible theatrical privation, the outstretched offering of his own skin as if to say, *all this, I have done for you.*

Nick Twemlow

Put us up with thou

In the unfamiliar squad car there is tremendous misery.
Snow patters the roof and this is proof that conversation

can be endless when it has no familiar subject.
The man in the front seat has a law in his head.

I am the subject of that law.

His report did not include the strange turn
winter had made. Or the queued buildings.

They had not complied. They began to smolder.
The scarved man in the chair

built a city in his head, projected it onto the ceiling.
It dripped.

Out the window the old city in all its grace.
Distant smoke and figures of screaming faces.

The man in the squad car felt hunger and it wasn't
for any recognizable food. He had the law

of sovereign hunger presiding over him.
He craved her presence. She is reported missing

but no law for her abductor to worry over.
The winter had been righted. The snow

was no longer aslant. The man in the front seat
turned the keys: there was a law against saying

something that might isolate her from a room
where I sit shackled by scarves, considering

how to erase this strange taste of winter
from my mouth. If she touches my lips

with her own, a terrible sadness will settle
over the room. The ceiling drips. The city is afire.

Come here, my angel, as I will call you,
report the sadness of the city.

Do you hear your name under the crackle
of fire? This body bound by scarves

stays the unraveling mind. I am both
swollen and limp. There is proof of your

demise. Peculiar dramas
of dripping. One after another.

The Doll, or:
What the Dead Think about at the
Very End of the World

For Hans Bellmer

After we were done doing it in a manner in which we had never done it before, she rolled onto her side and asked me:

So what's next?

I, remaining on my stomach, said:

What?

This was a frisky blue Sunday afternoon and we were in her apartment on the floor beneath the kitchen table. Several chairs were lying on their sides. The table wasn't where I had remembered it being half an hour ago.

A piquant scent of cucumber and, I want to say, olive oil animated the atmosphere.

Her apartment or my apartment.

I don't remember which, actually.

Her apartment, my apartment, or, for that matter, a friend's who was away for the weekend and had lent us his.

Let us call him Robert.

All the same, there was clearly a sense of upended apartmentness surrounding us.

The point not being where we were, however, but rather the gist of her question, which took me by surprise because I was at that moment busy perspiring diligently and thinking about what we had just done, and we were taking turns employing Kleenexes from a pale blue box of them with a floral design, which sat on the tiled floor beside us but which not long ago had sat, I seem to recall without any real conviction about the matter, on the bathroom sink or on the desk in the foyer, where our afternoon's undertaking had originated, I want to say, although this is also an issue of some conjecture, and I was concomitantly busy, I want to say as well, wiping off various leaking fluids and/or beginning to collect vegetable refuse that had aggregated in our vicinity on the tiled floor whose squares happened, by the way, to alternate black and white, not unlike a large urban chess board.

I saw all this, for some reason, from a third-person point of view.

I saw all this, that is, as if I were standing in the doorway to the kitchen, the scene stripped of its normal saturation and hues, instead of what I must have in reality been doing, which was either wiping off those fluids or beginning to collect that vegetable matter.

It surprised me, her question, because we had been doing it now for I want to say three months, though undeniably it had been for no more than five, six would be

a maximum, and we had done it each time, or very nearly each time, in interesting places with, from my perspective, interesting apparatuses while frequently utilizing unfamiliar and thus exciting postures, each posture and/or apparatus possessing a metaphoric name with great connotative resonance in certain clandestine circles.

Airplanes, of course, airplanes go without saying.

Rooftops.

A stall in the women's restroom at the Holocaust Museum in a city other than the one you're thinking of when I say the Holocaust Museum.

Double Helixes, Quantum Foam, Rabbit Mouths.

I'm not particularly proud of that, by the way. The Holocaust Museum, I mean. I'm not particularly proud of that, and I'm not particularly unproud of that, either.

Be that as it may.

It surprised me, as I say, her question, because we had been doing it now for I want to say three months, though undoubtedly it had been for no more than five, six would be a maximum.

Doing it since, that is, we met.

At an independent film in an independent-film-showing theater downtown, whose title, plot, and general theme I forget.

We were the only ones there.

In the theater, I mean.

That part I remember.

I remember, too, how everything smelled like mildew and artificially flavored buttered popcorn.

We were the only ones there, or very nearly the only ones there, and yet we serendipitously took conterminous seats because we were both committed, I want to say, to achieving the most efficacious viewing range from the not-all-that-large-independent-film-showing-theater screen.

The Iron Man.

The film, it suddenly occurs to me, was called *The Iron Man*.

It was called *The Iron Man*, or *The Iron Man* was simply a portion of its name, and there was more to it either before *The Iron Man* or after it.

A colon, I want to say, was involved.

It was a Japanese film, subtitled in English, but you didn't need the subtitles to understand it because almost no one spoke, although many groaned or screamed, or groaned and screamed—a lot—and there was no plot, as I now recall, except for the fact that there was this man, an average Joe, who turns into a machine one day for no apparent reason, and then this woman, who is quite probably the man's lover, although this is by no means indisputable, who also turns into a machine one day for no apparent reason, unless the man was imagining the woman turning into a machine, and maybe even imagining himself turning into a machine, which always remained in my mind an acceptable possibility, or maybe

there was even a third-party consciousness dreaming the immachinating couple, who knows, really, or it's not totally out of the realm of probability that I'm simply remembering the wrong movie.

The point being merely this: that I recall, I think, much jump-cutting, and, during one scene, the man doing it with the woman, or the imagined woman, with a three-foot-long steel penis that revolved like a drill and was shaped like a dunce's cap, if you can imagine such a thing, and, during another scene, both the woman or the imagined woman and the man ending up turning into parts of the same machine—a tank, I want to say, or, in any event, a tank-like mobile object—and the man speaking one of the perhaps ten lines in the film.

I've never been so happy, he said.

In Japanese, of course.

Or something like that, something with that general tenor.

It was a strange work.

And that's how we met.

She started, first, by sort of humming at the strangeness of the movie under her breath.

You know: *Hmmmmmm ... hmmmmmmmmmm ... hmmm.*

Next, she began fully vocalizing about the strangeness, sometimes asking questions, perhaps to herself, perhaps to me, it was difficult to tell with any honest assurance, and sometimes she developed a running almost subvocal

analysis of the film centering, mostly, on its sense of power relations and, I want to say, the hermeneutics of desire.

She had purchased, I couldn't help noticing, one of those very large tubs of artificially flavored buttered popcorn.

A vat, actually, into which you could place a small dog. A Chihuahua, for example.

About half an hour later, I began to answer her questions, never taking my eyes off the not-large screen.

I was aware of her stealing glances at me, initially, like maybe I wasn't talking to her but to myself, just like she was talking to maybe herself and not to me, only then she plainly decided I wasn't dangerous, or I wasn't particularly dangerous, and she began to take exception with my reading, which centered mostly on the film's critique of our culture's fetish of technology, and, two hours later, we began doing it in my apartment.

Once upon a time, I was a philosophy major.

My apartment or her apartment.

I don't remember which with any convincing accuracy. Which was, I want to say, between three and six months ago, almost surely, and without a doubt no more than, let us call it, eight.

Eight or nine.

So what's next? she asked, having rolled onto her side on the chess-board floor, and this, as I have already mentioned, surprised me.

Surprised and unnerved me, if I'm being completely aboveboard here, because I had been giving it, up to this moment, my all, and I was, not to put too fine a point on it, running out of ideas, and this question suggested to me, as I wiped off various leaking fluids, some of which I had generated, some of which she had generated, some of which had been extra-corporeally generated, some more or less viscous and some more or less translucent than others, that she might be running out of ideas, too, because she had never asked it before, this question, I mean.

Over the course of the last nine or ten months, eleven was a maximum, I had, it goes without saying, dressed up in a miscellany of interesting apparel, and discovered, among other things, how fetching I looked in a pair of red pumps and black corset, and so had she, and we had posted images of ourselves engaged in the manipulation of those myriad interesting apparatuses while utilizing myriad unfamiliar, and thus exciting, postures on the internet on diverse interesting amateur-submitted-images sites, and there was obviously that time we did it in an elevator halted between floors of a skyscraper, she dressed as a ponytailed school girl in All-Star hightops and I as a Nazi officer—what American didn't?—and that time we invited her friend or my friend, whose apartment we were perhaps at that moment using, let us call him Robert, and his wife, his wife or girlfriend, let us call her Roberta, to join us in a seedy hotel room in a seedy section of the city

with a box of matches and an alleged snuff film featuring a bound and gagged Asian teen and they did, and that time we put an ad in the paper for those little people and would have video-taped our assignation had anyone replied to said ad, which they didn't, and so forth.

Although it turned out we discovered that we were never in point of fact very keen on doing it with other couples, regardless of their stature or the subject matter of their video-tape collection, this being because we were in, I think you could call it, love.

Yes, I'm sure I think you could call it that.

From the day we met, that is, we pretty much never left each other's side.

Except, of course, to go to work.

Pretty much everyone has to go to work, needless to say.

Me in a Kinko's uptown, and she in a Blockbuster's downtown.

Except, then, to go to work and, at several junctures during a given day, to eat.

Breakfast and lunch, usually.

Work, eat, once in a long while socialize with friends or colleagues on a one-to-one basis, travel infrequently into the countryside, evacuate our respective bowels diurnally, wander the streets at night yelling at the moon, read, listen to music, bike, skate, and, upon the rarest of occasions, do it with someone else.

One could say we were inseparable, except for that.

And hence when she rolled onto her side, propped her head in her palm, and asked, *So what's next?* it is I suspect no surprise how surprised I was.

How surprised, unnerved, and maybe you could even say without too much exaggeration, threatened.

Her eyes were hazel, by the way.

This seems an opportune moment to mention such an important detail.

If not now, after all, then when?

Her eyes were that sort of hazel which is, if you study it carefully, and I did, multiple times, browner toward the edges of the contractile membrane and then increasingly brownish-yellow and then yellowish-brown as you move toward the fat period of the black pupil.

Her eyes were hazel and her hair shaved right down to gray skin with a razor every morning.

Unless she was wearing one of her wigs.

In which case her hair was sometimes shoulder length and sometimes longer and sometimes done in pigtailed or, as I believe I have already mentioned, ponytails, and sometimes in Egyptian fashion and sometimes in a prim beehive from the early Sixties like my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Barnett, on whom I had a rabid crush, have a rabid crush, and always in an interesting color one tends to associate with selections of fingernail polish rather than, in fact, hair.

Her eyes were hazel and her breasts were boyish and she was thinner than what might be considered in some medical circles wholly healthy and we were, with those very few exceptions I have just adumbrated above, inseparable, and so I saw myself that frisky Sunday afternoon, as if my point-of-view were situated in the doorway of the kitchen, and not beneath the table among overturned chairs, cease wiping and say:

What?

So what's next? she repeated. *You know...*

Oh, I said. Oh.

I rolled from my stomach onto my back and then hoisted myself into a hunched, cross-legged sitting position.

Then she repeated her question, which made the pale, thin, red-haired guy with a white-tipped, pink zit on his freckled left shoulder, one on his forehead, and one at the right-hand corner of his mouth even more surprised, unnerved, and maybe you could even say without too much exaggeration, threatened.

You could see him trying to think.

It wasn't a pretty sight.

Playing with the gooey tips of his fingers and trying to think, hunched in that cross-legged sitting position.

Finally, however, he cleared his throat and replied, a little evasively:

You'll see.

I'll see?

You'll see.

When?

Soon.

How soon?

Tomorrow soon.

I work tomorrow.

Tomorrow night, then. Meet me at my place after work tomorrow night.

The boy-breasted woman continued looking at the scrawny red-haired man for another few seconds, a minute at most, with her hazel eyes that seemed to lack very much I suppose you could call it emotion, then she half-smiled and rolled away from him and stood up and collected her clothes, most of which turned out, startlingly, to be scattered throughout the living room, dressed, and left without saying goodbye.

This was not an unusual mode of action on her part, exactly.

The scrawny red-haired man simply assumed it to be her way of keeping a certain sexual static sparkling through the upended apartmentness surrounding him.

He was right, he was pretty sure.

I watched him as he finished cleaning up the vegetable refuse, and righting the furniture, and so on, and then I watched him return to his apartment across town, unless this was his apartment, obviously, in which case he stayed

where he was, being at home already.

All the same, her leaving proved that this place was most likely not her apartment.

This much is clear.

The following evening, I watched me pick up some things at the corner market after work, hurry back to someone's apartment, almost surely his, throw together a green salad with a light vinaigrette dressing, and sauté some onions and mushrooms in butter in a wok, some butter or some olive oil, this part always presents a number of mnemonic challenges for me—at which point the doorbell rang, or there was a knock at the door, I'm not one-hundred percent confident about which it was, actually, and in any event I watched the scrawny red-haired man trot down the foyer hall in his terrycloth bathrobe and answer the ring or knock, whichever it might have been, then accompany the boy-breasted woman in her short black dress, black hightop combat boots, and shiny, purple Betty Boop wig back into the kitchen, where they worked in harmonious tandem to set an elegant table, lit two romantic, white, vanilla-scented candles, and then the scrawny red-haired man poured the boy-breasted woman and himself a glass of brick-red wine, led her over to the counter, raised his glass in a toast, and repeated the simile he had practiced all afternoon about the evening fanning open before them like an uncomplicated space of possibility.

She reciprocated, and then he showed her the wooden cutting board on the counter by which they stood, a short time after which they ate each other's little toes (sans toenails) with a tincture of paprika mixed with the onion, mushrooms, and butter or olive oil to enliven the comestibles.

I had honestly never in our twelve or thirteen months together seen them closer than I did at that instant.

The amputation was realized, I should perhaps mention, with a meat cleaver designed and manufactured in Europe—Germany, I want to say—and was followed by an abrupt if not wholly unexpected discomfort, which was itself followed by an almost indescribable euphoria and, one could say, a certain intense focusing of one's perceptive abilities which maintained long after the bandages and cotton gauze had been applied to stanch the flow of what have you.

Bones comprising the little toe are, as one might imagine, fairly petite and crunchy.

Soft-shell crabs come to mind.

It was always difficult to pick a favorite philosopher.

There were always so many to choose from, of course.

I had honestly never in our twelve or thirteen months together seen them closer than I did at that instant and, afterwards, I followed us up the street of, let us call them, brownstones to the bus stop, we were all hobbling slightly, and watched as we kissed each other passionately beneath

a halogen lamp crawling with large bugs, large bugs and small bugs, although mostly small ones.

Next day the scrawny red-haired man hobbled through Kinko's in an animated daydream.

His eyes, which by the way were an unremarkable blue, had that acute look to them of someone playing the last minute of a video game when he or she is maybe three clicks away from attaining the final level and let us say saving the princess.

He misplaced orders, employed the wrong plastic binding on two separate instances, and once produced a one-hundred-and-fifty-page, double-sided copy of a literary manuscript for a local experimental writer with a mane of long blond hair, white almost, and gaps between most of his upper teeth, rather a three-hundred-page, single-sided one.

But it didn't matter, not at all, as those deeply in love are wont to say.

Habitually.

In his mind, work suddenly became little more than a means to an end.

As a point of fact, work had always been little more than a means to an end for him, a place he went to undertake the experience of not-thinking for eight hours a day, five days a week, often at odd and weirdly lit segments of the night, in order to provide himself with the primary necessities associated with living in a complex city

such as this one, whichever one it was, only now the meanness of it was clearer to him than it ever had been before.

Shooting accident, he answered when his colleagues began asking.

For the sake of ease, let us call them Robert, Robert, Robert, Robert, and Roberta.

His boss's name, I should take this opportunity to mention, was Robert.

The scrawny red-haired man almost never talked to any of them except to refer to immediate matters of business. He had always kept to himself. It was therefore with little effort that he continued keeping to himself now.

Shooting accident, he answered, and then, two weeks later, he answered: hatchet accident.

Shooting accident, hatchet accident, shaving accident.

Shaving accident, hedge-trimming accident, jack-o'-lantern-carving accident.

In the beginning, it all seemed more natural than one might perhaps suppose.

Then it didn't.

Then he stopped caring.

Although there is if the truth be known a very good chance he never really cared that much in the first place.

Then they began avoiding him.

Robert, Robert, Robert, Robert, Roberta, and Robert began making large arcs around him when they felt the

insuperable need to pass him.

They stood in many-appendaged clusters at the front of the shop when he was busy working in the back of the shop and created meaningful gestures over their shoulders in his direction without ever turning their heads.

Then he stopped going to work.

In cases involving larger bodily emancipations, boiling water achieved both effective cauterization and a certain compounding of one's overall sense of euphoria, which the boy-breasted woman in sundry wigs began to refer to affectionately as The Angel's Kiss.

The Angel's Kiss is upon me, she would sometimes announce, trembling, trembling or shaking, folded into a fetal position on the floor, eyes rolled back in her head, or she would sometimes announce:

I have just been kissed by an angel.

Over and over.

Compared to The Angel's Kiss, drugs seemed downright drugless, other addictions little more than avocational distractions.

And so everything in our love story moved inexorably toward a happy conclusion, except that some things didn't. Several unanticipated if minor complications began to arise. One's big toes, the couple discovered much to their astonishment, for instance, provide a greater sense of balance than the layman often suspects, and, once one's feet are gone, up to the knees, the idea of gainful

employment pretty much flies out the window, no matter what one's views on the subject happen to be, as does the notion, I want to add, of popping down to the corner market to pick up this item or that item or the other at eleven or twelve o'clock at night. It seems an opportune moment to mention, too, that one should never attempt to remove one's genitals, one's genitals or one's mammary glands, depending, when you are fully conscious. A series of biological laws prevent such procedures from running perfectly trouble-free.

Etc., etc.

Yet what is truly remarkable is how little effort it takes one to meet one's basic dietary needs, particularly if one rounds out one's meals with a daily vitamin supplement.

Pay your rent and utilities in advance: this is a no-brainer, really. Stockpile supplies. Plan ahead.

Remember to save one's tongue until one feels one no longer has anything of specific interest to articulate.

Once upon a time, I was a philosophy major and, once upon a time, she was a film studies major, both at the University other than the one you're thinking of when I say the University.

It's a small world.

One partner should obviously also save an arm, hand, and at least two fingers, one of which should be that often cited opposable thumb, if either partner is set on, let us say, keeping a journal of one's thoughts and feelings or

composing poems or lyrics about this special introspective time in one's life, and, it nearly goes without spelling out, such appendages will furthermore prove pivotal in the execution of what the boy-breasted woman and the scrawny red-haired man incrementally came to think of as *The Last Waltz* or, for want of a more unambiguous term, *The Scalping*.

Which is where they are now, where we are now, she and I, two torsos and two heads gurgling, I am tempted to say, happily on someone's, let us guess, futon.

It feels like a futon, in any event, I think.

It is dark in here, but this could be the result of the blinds having at some earlier moment been drawn or the personal loss of what have you.

It may be a weekend.

It may not.

There is inarguably some ambient intermittent breathing taking place in addition to the aforementioned most likely content gurgling.

Things seem slightly confusing, unsurprisingly enough.

Lately, they often do.

In any case, anyhow, anyway, the saddest thing about all of this, it occurs to the scrawny red-haired man as he not very neatly jots his last impressions on this yellow legal pad on my stomach, these last impressions, mine, is how, when making love, when making love or, say, when

having sex, either way, really, there is a let us call it limit case to the quantity of occasions one can in fact do it and a conceptual boundary line to the operations that comprise such an activity, this being the one secret all directors of pornographic videos never want you to understand, and beyond that is merely The Angel's Kiss, and, beyond that, every single time, nothing.

Still Astonished After All These Years

David Clewell. *The Low End of Higher Things*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. 112 pp. \$12.95, paper. \$19.95, hardcover.

David Clewell's latest—and biggest, and best—collection of poems is *The Low End of Higher Things*, the initial offering from the new University of Wisconsin Press Poetry Series, edited by Ron Wallace. The book opens with a monologue from the voice of a Jersey-shore carnival weight-guesser during his last night on the job:

I'm going to miss this crazy life on the edge
of the only world there is. Most of all, the ocean at my back
swelling, rising, cresting, curling on itself until it breaks—
that thunder in the surf drowning out another day's
 inconsequential
noise, over and over, thousands of pounds
of elemental grace under pressure. Next to that kind of
 power, anything
we have to say is a word scrawled fast in the sand, and
 we're gone.
And whatever's left behind is swallowed up, goes out to sea
for a while. Until it all comes back in again, maybe changed

but no less broken. One more absurd picnic gone irretrievably to ruin.

This poem serves in many ways as the book's—and the poet's—contract with its reader, setting the terms of this strange deal you've entered into up front, sight unseen. It's peppered with such Clewellian touchstone words as “amazed,” “wonder,” “astonished.” It's told in a muscular, authoritative, but still comfortably personal voice. It's elegiac and nostalgic, but never sentimental. And, like the waves and the words and the educated guesses floated on those New Jersey waves, the vital concerns of this book continue to roll out and come back in.

Longtime readers of Clewell's work will find that *The Low End of Higher Things* is still obsessed with much of the same rich stuff of his previous five collections: with America's roadside subcultures—the midway, the flea market, the junkshop; with history; with collecting, accumulating, and curating; with love, and no one writes love poems like David Clewell. Clewell's long, garrulous line is also in place—like the strongman in his beloved carnival, Clewell's ringing the bell on the right side of the page almost every time, and not even breaking a sweat.

But if the surfaces of *The Low End of Higher Things* look similar to some of Clewell's past work, what is different, what has evolved, is the poet himself. This is the work of a man who has continued to grow into his subjects, who fully

inhabits all of their nuances and ramifications, and who knows exactly what he wants to say.

“CIA in Wonderland.” Clewell’s take on the agency’s delvings into LSD as a mind-control device is at once astonishing, disturbing and very funny. But, as Clewell notes, “[t]his research gets a lot sillier, a whole lot / scarier later on.” He tells the story of Frank Olson, a US Army analyst who was unknowingly fed LSD while at an agency-sponsored “get-together” at a lodge in the Maryland woods. Olson never recovered; he developed intense paranoia and depression, and was later found dead on a New York sidewalk, having either jumped, fallen or been pushed from his hotel window:

Frank Olson is flying, and if he ever stops someone will be working hard to make sure there’s no connection between a dead man and the CIA. Let alone LSD. Someone will bring his widow the late-breaking news, a bad dream in the middle of the night. And she’ll wait twenty-two years until she wakes up to what really happened, a copy of the *Washington Post* at her door with its story about years of illegal CIA domestic operations. And for her, too, it’s going to be a long way down. Finally she’ll know

everything: Frank Olson—specialist in the airborne delivery of things insidious and nearly invisible—is goddamn flying. And if he ever stops, it’s got to be

a long way down to the bottom, to the sickening thud
of a life falling apart this irretrievably.

Here, Clewell is showing the terrible collision of public history—the kind we think we’ve read about in textbooks or seen on the evening news—with a man’s life, his private history, the kind each of us must continue to revise, rewrite, reimagine, to meet the barest needs of the present day, to hold out any hope for the future. How inconsequential a single life is to the forces that make up these public histories, which, they tell us, are always written by the winners. How easily they could still be up to this kind of nonsense, because only the poets seem to call them on it, or to take any kind of notice at all. Or maybe I just missed the national uproar when the Olson story broke in the *Post*.

From here the book moves to love, love for a wife, a son, and the lives they’ve fashioned together in the face of “the inevitable crash-landing on a planet that thinks nothing / of spinning us off balance for the hell of it.” Clewell will have no truck with those who say the love poem is dead; he makes it genuinely live, and the truly amazing thing is that he does so not through some utterly original take on the form. Instead, Clewell appropriates and makes his own some of the oldest conceits and traditions in love poetry—the variations on the heart as the seat of love, a child’s first steps, the lover as muse of poetry—and in doing so, he

approaches the cosmically Marvellian. This, from “Second Wind”:

And when I sing myself in you—
the multitudes and contradictions in this boisterous swirl
of atoms
hanging tough and slowly, painstakingly assuming the
shape of a man
who never guessed he'd bring himself to love quite like this—
something tells me my heart will never stop
breaking wide open: it's you every time, singing back.

The book's third section takes up such luminaries as stagecoach robber Black Bart, who always left a little verse behind after a job; the “unflinchingly equivocal” Nostradamus; the Amazing Criswell, hanging out with Ed Wood and Vampira at the Brown Derby in Los Angeles; and Buzz Aldrin, fuming inside the *Eagle* as Neil Armstrong “flubs the one line he couldn't stop rehearsing/ all the way out here.” It is in this section that Clewell pulls off his most ambitious trick—he manages to merge the public and private pasts with the public and private futures, creating a welter of time and space and human lives, in which the past perpetually vibrates in the future. This melding of past and future reaches its height in “Short-Order Feng Shui,” where the speaker is saddened to see:

one more venerable tradition so thoroughly sacked
co-opted by the spirit
of a New Age that seems to mean business—more
genuine, practical wisdom reduced
to the practically ridiculous. But part of me is thinking
what could it hurt, maybe
I should widen the footpath between my piles of Who-
Killed-JFK books. Have the 1950s
Atomic Age ashtrays somehow turned into negative
clutter, or do they still speak
energetically to me? Should my *Pogo* figurines stay put
for the rest of their days,
knee-deep in the box of Guaranteed-Authentic Roswell
Saucer Crash-Site Soil?
Do Charlie the Tuna hi-ball glasses work with Richard
Nixon commemorative flatware?

From here, Clewell moves, as he almost must, to home,
to his own private histories: to his nervous but educative
step through the wrong door at the House of Neptune
restaurant, to his Uncle Bud—conspiracy-theorist
nonpareil—to the last poem in the book, in which the
speaker finally manages to forgive Orson Welles for
duping his father with the War of the Worlds:

When he first heard that Martians had landed a scant
half-hour away

from his twice-mortgaged house in New Brunswick, he
thought maybe this
would be the fiery end of the world. He'd never heard
of H.G. Wells or
Orson Welles or the Mercury Theatre on the Air. But
surely
no one would cut in on a live rendition of Stardust—
Ramon Raquello
and his orchestra from the Meridian Room of the
fabulous Park Plaza Hotel—
unless whatever breaking story was the kind that
needed telling in a hurry.

In this last poem—as in so many others—we see the full expression of Clewell's most vital concern, and most important obsession—the obsession with enthusiasm, with amazement, wonder, astonishment. To be enthusiastic, to be astonished—or to be fooled, as his father was—one must first believe, deeply, in something. As much as anything else, these poems are about a man who finds himself in the peculiar position of still being astonished by events and enthusiastic about people and things after all these years of living in a society whose every other breath is a collective yawn. This, it seems to me—as if such a thing was needed—is the aesthetic, even moral justification for Clewell's long poems, his bell-ringing (and heart-ringing) lines: there's so much in the world that the speakers of his poems find

important, believe in, that the lines and the poems have to be big to even try to contain it all. And clearly, although Clewell is not a didactic poet, he's telling you something here as well, or better, asking you something: what do you care enough about to go on like this?

Notes on Contributors

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Joshua Beckman is the author of three books of poetry. His fourth, *Your Time has Come*, is due out in October, from Verse Press. He lives in Staten Island, NY.

Josh Bell's first book, *No Planets Strike*, is forthcoming from Zoo Press in 2004. He is the University of Wisconsin's Diane Middlebrook poetry fellow, 2003-04, and has poems upcoming in *Volt*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *The Madison Review*.

Erica Bernheim has studied at Miami University, Selwyn College, Cambridge, and received an MFA from the University of Iowa. She lives in Chicago and is in the PhD program at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Joel Brouwer is the author of two books of poems, *Exactly What Happened* (Purdue, 1999) and *Centuries* (Four Way Books, 2003).

Oni Buchanan's first book, *What Animal*, will be published in October 2003 by the University of Georgia Press. She has poems currently appearing or forthcoming in *American Letters & Commentary*, *The Canary*, *Fence*, *Seneca Review*, *Verse*, and other journals. She is a MM candidate in piano performance at the New England Conservatory of Music.

Julianne Buchsbaum's first book, *Slowly, Slowly, Horses*, was published in 2001 by Ausable Press. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Parnassus*, *The Colorado Review*, and *The Seneca Review*. Ms. Buchsbaum works as a Librarian & Technology Consultant at Kenyon College.

Peter Chilson teaches creative writing at Washington State University. He is author of *Riding the Demon: On the Road in West Africa* (University of Georgia Press 1999). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The American Scholar*, *The North American Review*, *The Clackamas Literary Review*, *Ascent*, and *Best American Travel Writing*.

Michael Collier teaches at the University of Maryland. His translation of Euripides' *Medea* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Martha Collins' most recent book of poems is *Something Words Can Do*. *Green Rice*, and her translations of Lam Thi

My Da's poems will appear this year from Curbstone. She is Pauline Delaney Professor of Creative Writing at Oberlin College.

James Cummins's third book of poems, *Then & Now*, will be published by Ohio University Press (Swallow Press) in April, 2004. His first book, *The Whole Truth*, was reissued by Carnegie-Mellon University Press in 2003. He lives in Cincinnati, Ohio.

David J. Daniels is Editor of *Indiana Review* and a former Stadler Poetry Fellow at Bucknell University. His work has appeared in *Third Coast* and in the anthology *Linen Weave*.

Amber Dermont holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and is working on her PhD at the University of Houston, where she received a Barthelme Memorial Fellowship. Her fiction has recently appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review* and her creative nonfiction has recently appeared in *Seneca Review*.

Denise Duhamel is the author of 13 books, including the recent *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001). She has co-edited *Sweet Jesus: Poems about the Ultimate Icon* (The Anthology Press, 2002) and teaches creative writing and literature at Florida International University in Miami.

Michael Dumanis, Poetry Curator of Brazos Bookstore, holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and is pursuing his PhD at the University of Houston. His poems have appeared in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Indiana Review*, *New England Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Verse*, and elsewhere.

Murray Farish is the former Review Editor of *Gulf Coast*. He lives in St. Louis, Missouri, where he teaches writing and literature at Webster University.

Monica Ferrell is a current Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and was a "Discovery" / *The Nation* winner in 2001. Her poems have been published in *Paris Review*, *Boston Review*, *Fence*, *Tin House*, *New England Review* and other journals. She lives in Oakland, California.

Rachel Galvin is a writer and editor for *Humanities*, the journal of the National Endowment for the Humanities. She has received fellowships at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Hedgebrook. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Spinning Jenny*, *Mars Hill Review*, *Comstock Review*, and *Nimrod*.

Steve Gehrke's second book of poems, *The Pyramids of Malpighi*, was selected by Philip Levine as the winner of the 2003 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry. His first book, *The*

Resurrection Machine, was published by BkMk Press in 2000, and was the winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry. He is a PhD student at the University of Missouri.

Don Gilliland lives in Birmingham, Alabama. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Diner*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, and *Touchstone*. He is a former poetry editor of *Black Warrior Review*.

Landon Godfrey is a writer and artist currently working on a PhD at the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program.

Arielle Greenberg is the author of *Given* (Verse, 2002) and will be teaching in the poetry program at Columbia College in Chicago beginning Fall, 2003.

Daniel Hall is the author of two books of poems: *Hermit with Landscape* and *Strange Relation*. He is currently writer-in-residence at Amherst College.

Matthea Harvey is the author of *Pity the Bathtub its Forced Embrace of the Human Form* and the forthcoming *Sad Little Breathing Machine*.

Kevin Honold currently attends the MFA program at Purdue University.

Laurel Jenkins-Crowe's short story "The Seventh Guitar" won *The Vincent Brothers Review's* 1996 prize for fiction. Now a teaching assistant pursuing her MFA at the University of Memphis, her past "day jobs" include cartoonist, veterinarian technician and Elvira look-a-like.

Thea Kuticka's poems have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Arts & Letters*, and the anthology *Working Hard for the Money* (Bottom Dog Press). Broad sides of her poetry are forthcoming from Oneiros Press and Black Rock Press (University of Nevada, Reno). She lives in Portland, Oregon.

Alissa Leigh works for the Institute of War Documentation and as a freelance translator from Russian. Her poems and translations have appeared in *Poetry*, *Verse*, *Iowa Review*, *Jewish Quarterly* and elsewhere.

Thomas Lux's books of poetry include *The Street of Clocks* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001) and *New and Selected Poems, 1975-1995* (1997), which was a finalist for the 1998 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize.

Cate Marvin's first book *World's Tallest Disaster* won the 2002 Kate Tufts Discovery Award. She teaches at the College of Staten Island CUNY. She has poems forthcoming in *The Paris Review* and *The Canary*.

Christopher McIlroy's short story collection, *All My Relations*, won the Flannery O'Connor Award. He lives in Tucson.

Joyelle McSweeney's first book, *The Red Bird*, won the Fence Modern Poets Prize and was published in 2002 by FenceBooks/Saturnalia Books. This Fall, she joins the faculty of the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.

Christopher Merrill's books include four collections of poetry, translations of Ales Debeljak's *Anxious Moments* and *The City and the Child*, several edited volumes, and three books of nonfiction. His work has been translated into twelve languages. He directs the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa.

Sarah Messer's poetry book, *Bandit Letters*, was published in 2001 by New Issues. She lives in North Carolina.

Nadine Meyer holds creative writing degrees from Johns Hopkins University and George Mason University. Currently, she is a PhD student at the University of Missouri, Columbia, where she is poetry editor of *Center*.

Jill Meyers' book reviews have appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The Oyster Boy Review*.

Naomi Millán recently received her MFA in creative writing from the University of Houston. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Journal* and *The Texas Review*. She lives in exile in Traverse City, Michigan.

Ander Monson edits the magazine *DIAGRAM* <<http://thediagram.com>> and the New Michigan Press. Find his recent work in *Quarter After Eight*, *Flyway*, *Third Coast*, *North American Review*, and *Ploughshares*.

Jude Nutter is from North Yorkshire, England. Her poems have received numerous awards including the Blacklock Nature Sanctuary Residency and a State Arts Grant from the state of Minnesota, and have appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Stand (UK)*, *Northwest Review*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the 1996 *Yearbook of Magazine Verse* (Monitor Press), *Wild Song* (Georgia Press), and elsewhere. Her first full-length collection, *Pictures of the Afterlife*, was published by Salmon Poetry, Ireland, in 2002.

Lance Olsen is author of fifteen books of or about innovative fiction, including the novel *Girl Imagined by Chance* (FC2 2002). He lives somatically in the mountains of central Idaho, and digitally at www.cafezeitgeist.com.

Holiday Reinhorn is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her work has appeared in *Other Voices*,

COLUMBIA: *A Journal of Literature and Art* and *Northwest Review*, among others. She is the recipient of a Tobias Wolff Award from The Bellingham Review and was a PEN USA/Amazon.com Short Story Award Finalist. She is at work on her first collection of short stories.

Matthew Rohrer is the author of *A Hummock in the Malookas*, *Satellite*, and *Nice Hat. Thanks.* which he wrote with Joshua Beckman. He lives in Brooklyn and is a poetry editor for *Fence Magazine* and Fence Books. He was recently asked back to his high school in Oklahoma as a guest of honor, where he was publicly mocked by a redneck girl named Lauren.

Tomaz Salamun's last books in English translation include *Feast* (Harcourt, 2000), *A Ballad for Metka Krasovec* (Twisted Spoon, 2001), and *Poker* (Ugly Duckling Press, 2003).

E. M. Schorb's most recent prose poems have appeared in *Untitled*, *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*, *The Asheville Review*, and *Poetry Salzburg Review*. His novel, *Paradise Square* was awarded the Grand Prize for Fiction from the International eBook Award Foundation in Frankfurt.

Lacy Schutz has just returned from an ill spent year in the California wastelands to New York City where she is

working on a book about the socio-cultural impact of Neil Diamond.

Eric Shade's Flannery O'Connor Award winning story collection, *Eyesores*, was published in 2003 by the University of Georgia Press. He is currently a PhD student in the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program.

R. T. Smith's fiction has appeared in *Missouri Review*, *Southern Review*, *Boulevard* and *New Stories from the South*. His newest book of poems is *Brightwood* (LSU, 2003). Mr. Smith lives in Rockbridge County, Virginia.

Vanessa Stauffer's poems have appeared most recently in *Barrow Street*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *North American Review*. Her manuscript, *Chiaroscuro*, was a 2001 Semifinalist for the Yale Series of Younger Poets book competition.

A. F. Thomas' poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rattle*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Clackamas Literary Review*, among others. She has an MFA in Poetry Writing from Washington University in St. Louis where she won an Academy of American Poets prize and a post-graduate teaching fellowship.

Nick Twemlow was born in Topeka, Kansas, and lives in Eugene, Oregon, where he serves as Associate Editor of *Northwest Review* and *The Canary*.

Michael Tyrell's poems have appeared in many magazines, including *Agni*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Yale Review*. He is the 2003-2004 James Merrill Writer-in-Residence in Stonington, Connecticut.

Tara Wray was born in Manhattan, Kansas and now lives in New York where she is fiction editor of the *Land-Grant College Review* (www.lgcr.org). Her stories have appeared in *Fiction*, *Sycamore Review*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Shattered Wig Review* and *The Hawaii Review*, with one forthcoming in *3rd Bed*. She is the author of a chapbook, *Mini Tremble Fits*.

Andrew Zawacki is the author of a book of poetry, *By Reason of Breakings* (University of Georgia Press, 2002) and a chapbook, *Masquerade* (Vagabond, 2001), winner of the Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award.

Rachel Zucker is the author of *Eating in the Underworld* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003). Her second collection, *The Last Clear Narrative*, will be published by Wesleyan in 2004. These poems are from a new series entitled "The Bad Wife Handbook."

Inprint's Margarett Root Brown Reading Series 2003 2004

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JHUMPA LAHIRI

Monday, September 22, 2003

Readings begin at 7:30 p.m.,
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JANE SMILEY

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Monday, October 20, 2003



SHARON OLDS



GALWAY KINNEL

Monday, November 10, 2003



YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA



KEVIN YOUNG

Monday, January 26, 2004



ELLEN BRYANT VOIGT



MARTÍN ESPADA



RICHARD RUSSO

Monday, February 9, 2004

Monday, March 8, 2004



JULIA GLASS



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Monday, April 19, 2004



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