



GULF COAST

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IN MEMORIAM
DANIEL STERN

1928 - 2007



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Body & Soul

I

The Devil lives in that field.
I have seen him a hundred times.

The rust-colored creek,
the dead and dying trees
grass . . . that ring the dying

I have seen the Devil
creeping
through that field at night, flickering
like moonlight through the leaves of trees.

I tell you the boy deserved it,
that fool running
through that field in the storm.

No reason
to be out in that storm. No animals
to be brought back in. And the Devil
struck him. The Devil

struck him, but he lives. He is marked.

II

What was my excuse with you?
You were the right sex, and the right height.
Even the speed of the trees as we raced
the road to Blue Springs was right.

But the springs, blue like their name,
betrayed the future as I stood there lying
there would be someone else, someone
who would take me away from you.

But sometimes lies become the truth.
Sometimes the Soul speaks out without prompting.
While you reveled in the oddity of green Autumn
in Florida, I was leaving, was already gone.

IV

And then, the one I believed to be my soulmate.
Outside, in the stagnant air of coastal Virginia,
I wondered how I had been caught, laid to rest
with such a man. At Water's Edge, a street

nowhere near water's edge, I watched the dead leaves
flutter across the parking lot. Somewhere, a bottle was
being opened, and the soul was being poured
for us into crystal goblets, the soul red

and full-bodied, its nose hinting of berries
and bright earth waiting to be consumed.
Who could resist the taste of it?
Piece by piece, it took you. It almost took me.

VI

In the city at the very edge of the Pacific,
I stood in the rain for hours for the one I love.
There was no body left, the clothes and flesh
having run off in search of a drain.

All left was the soul and its attendant concerns.
When the sun appeared in late afternoon,
when my feet ached and understood the day's longevity,
there was nothing but wisps of cloud hanging on.

Who doesn't want to believe one is made
for someone else? This morning, a deer darted away
as I descended into the canyon. It was a sign, I'm sure,
like the blue springs, like the red soul lying in a glass.

Maggot Brain

—for Eddie Hazel

Jawbone used for a washboard.

Scrape of knuckles, whelped

skin from washing bumps,
from washing needles or mosquitoes.

Or fishscale rails, maggot brain.

Teeth, stickling a long dream—

click of brain, click of mousetrap
on the four-fingered way down.

Click: that's what happens
when George Clinton says

Play like yo' mama just died.
Everything else becomes a handful

of stomach aches, maggot brain.
The cavity of a jail cell smells

like everything a man wants gone.
Not *funky*, but nasty. Not nasty,

because nobody's trying to shank
you in the shower. Just a big

time out with bologna sandwiches
and bad fruit. Jail is a mouthful

of twitches and aches, maggot brain.
Ain't you supposed to rise to the top

of this mess like some triplicated heart?
Ain't that extra chamber below

the frets in charge of breathing?
I hear that thing wheezing

like a breath still trying to breathe.
Maggot brain, somebody

someplace is losing a mama right now:
Go maggot brain. Go maggot brain.

The Burial

We slept in a small bed; there was no money for a bigger one. We were small people. We could create space between ourselves, even in small beds. The hairs on our legs mingled; our hipbones touched, and sometimes, those things were more than I could bear. I would turn and hug the sagging edge, and listen to your swallowing noises.

(You did not die. You are right here. But the bed, the apartment, everything in the psychic stretch of this page is dead. I have to write it a funeral.)

One night, hugging the edge, I was seized with ambition. The clock said 4:07 AM. I slept very fitfully then, and you slept very soundly, and this difference, I felt certain, had daytime implications. I was resentful of your sleep, of the satisfaction it gave you. The bed meant very separate things to us. Feeling seized with ambition, I turned to look at you. Your lips were slightly apart, and for some reason the hair follicles on your face were vivid; I felt I had caught each hair in the act of growing. Something about that decided things for me. I got up and put on my glasses and a sweatshirt and my shoes. I went into the yard and it was brightly blue and I felt incredibly happy and there and then I swore that I would forevermore get up at four in the morning. Just standing there—awake, sober, alone—I sensed that I was accomplishing the best work of my life. I felt clean and productive, alert and serene. I wanted terribly to share that blue stillness with you, but it was a completely insular moment—it would evaporate if you came near it, or worse, become hopelessly “nice.” A nice, made-for-TV clip of two people invigorated by the pre-dawn chill. I will now tell you something profound about that moment: it was hell. Actually. Because hell means being in a perfect moment alone, and longing to invite

into it only the person whose very presence would annihilate it, and knowing this, and longing for it anyway, even more intensely.

I am constantly trying to burrow my way out of solitude, and the moment I do, I am usually devastated and shocked by how bad I feel. Why couldn't I have just enjoyed the charming coffee shop, the street fair, the view from the attic window? You are sitting over there and feeling a great affection for me. The cat is under the table that you're sitting at, shivering because she hates thunder. You say she gets frightened because her mother abandoned her in a boxcar during a terrible storm, so the noise, to her, is a renunciation, a hunger. I like the things that you say.

The kind of ambition I felt made me want to use my body. My mind was pleasantly vacant, like a room with heavy rugs. I took the shovel from where it hung between two nails on the side of the house and carried it to the center of the small yard. I leaned on it, and its chipped and rusted tip sank slightly into the ground. I leaned harder, and the ground received it. The ground was a fat, placid baby and the shovel was carrots and I was the firm mother, spooning.

I say this now. I had none of these thoughts, then. I had only a physical impulse.

I put my weight onto the shovel until it was up to the hilt—what is hilt?—in flat, damp dirt. The dirt made a sound, a kind of clinking sigh, and I remember that the type of dirt in the place where we lived was actually called "clay." Dirt makes no sound. But it makes sense that clay does, because there are shiny bits in clay—tiny noisemakers. Things for the gloaming to settle upon. It was the opposite of gloaming, and the clay where I stood, pushing into it, was the same color as the air which was the same color as the house which was the same color as my legs. We all looked exhumed, covered in the clay of the dead. I lifted out the

shovel and could just see the frown-shaped slit it left in the ground, a shadow only slightly darker than the shadow that was everything, trees and me and it and shovel. I widened the slit with the tip of the shovel and the shadow darkened, deepened. I could see down the throat of the ground. I started to dig. It is the nature of the hole to demand to be dug.

"This is my *nature*," we are so fond of saying to one another. "This is the way that I *am*." I said it earlier tonight, when you asked me why I couldn't just leave it. It's generally when I ask the same question many times, and then one more time after that, that you look exasperated and in certain cases, hurt (as in the incident with the potatoes). Or when I say something hurtful to make sure I have your attention. I think: you must know that's what I'm doing. But you don't. I see myself as transparent, I look through the fish tank of my ribs at you and from there I can see my reflection, looking at you, and all the way back again. I understand that I consider my words to be a form of entertainment. I think they are mild in demeanor and without consequence at the moment of their utterance. Fundamentally, I don't perceive the difference between small things and large things, as you do. This, I believe, or make-believe, protects me from the capacity to do harm.

Once I did harm, with the neighborhood girl. You know how fond I am of saying this, it is one of the few stories on my shelf. You are amused, I think, at how often I dust it. Didn't I just, one or two nights ago? That's what you would think if I were saying this aloud now, even though it's been much longer than that. You are sitting over there, and I feel indulgent: under the influence of the neighborhood girl I put tomato juice-soaked tissues in people's mailboxes, way in the back. It was not my nature.

(The story continues: years later when I returned home after having been away for some time we saw each other, me and the neighborhood

girl, in the neighborhood bar. She told me she was working for the local paper. She asked me how my sex life was going. I was having sex, not with you, but I didn't consider the having of sex to be a life of sex. She still smelled to me like tomato juice—this is true, I don't say it to be poetic; she was drinking a bloody mary—and she told me amidst a few hiccups that she had discovered something about sex lives in decline, something like how in the beginning, when it's good, you shower beforehand, but after a while, you shower right when it's done, or if you can't for whatever reason, you want to. She said at first, women are nervous about their smells, and when they are no longer nervous, they stop enjoying themselves as much. "It's our nature," she said, "to only feel good when we're a little scared." I told you about this one time to make you laugh and you responded exactly right, I think.)

The hole was amazingly easy to dig. Before I knew it I was up to my knees. I waited for my muscles to ache, for the sun to nudge me out of it so that I could, sheepish, return to our small, gurgling bed. I didn't know how long I had been there, digging, but the blue wasn't lifting, and my lucidity did not wane. The shovel went in easily, but with just the right amount of resistance so that my arms felt alert. At first I shoveled huge shovelfuls, but lifting them out of the deepening hole became too difficult; it required a force that didn't fit with the general aura of ease. So I started scooping smaller mounds, which could be flung easily over the shoulder.

I have this idea about myself, that I am a rag doll, easily flung. I had a cousin who called me "Feather" when I was young, and I understood what he meant, but I wasn't satisfied with the image. He would scoop me up under one arm or toss me over his shoulder. This is something I have been meaning to ask: something about the desire to be scooped. Is this a legitimate desire? Is it about not wanting to touch the floor?

Again I remember things about childhood that refuse to make sense, not that they do not just now, sepia-toned against the digital crispness of our age, make sense, but that they did not then, too, make sense. My childhood prepared me well for your puzzling behavior. Games like “Don’t Touch The Floor.” What everybody failed to recognize was that the couch, the countertops, the pink edge of the bathtub, the dining room table, the narrow deacon’s bench—all of it became the new floor. A floor is what you stand on.

(The story continues still further: not so long ago, we were back home for a niece’s baptism. You had decided to go for a walk, early, very unlike you. I decided to go to Lou’s and sit at the counter, very unlike me. We were in this period, one that included most of that trip home, of transcendence. I think because we were, existentially speaking, wearing one another’s underwear. It made us both very nervous. But the nervousness was working, ferrying us forward, a gleaming piston on the bliss express. I sat at the counter at Lou’s in the stool of a large man who’d just gotten up. I was sitting in his indentation, not filling it. I ordered a coffee and toast, and when my coffee came I, as you (since I was already not me by virtue of this strange bliss, and also, by virtue of just being there) whitened it with two creamers and four sugars. The counter was mostly empty. Nobody knew I was not me. Someone had left behind the local paper, opened to the classifieds. Along the right side was a gray box, and at the top it read “Ask Alice.” That was not the neighborhood girl’s name, the one with whom I had done harm, but there was her moon face, her moony grin. Now she was an advice columnist. This is what happens in towns. My plate of toast came and I put it on top of Alice’s advice. Some crumbs fell on her face as I buttered my toast and ate it quickly, the same way you would have done. I felt confused and anxious, and the confusion and anxiety were my feelings. I sensed that the transformation was occurring, and I knew it was inevitable, but it felt

worse than I'd imagined. The toast, your toast, was a heavy ball at the bottom of the stomach that had become mine again, and your sweet, white coffee was making me feel sick. By the time I saw you, later in the morning, the metamorphosis of you back into you and me back into me was complete, and there was nothing to say about it. We talked in our old way. We'd had something extra, and lost it, which is like not losing anything. I didn't tell you about the column, and still haven't. That was the last time we went back home. "Too stressful," I say. You don't dispute statements like that. "Better to see everyone at the beach." You are very agreeable. "Home has become an uncomfortable place, a lacuna, inside of which lives only the neighborhood girl, who frightens me." This last, I do not say aloud.)

You are reading something off of your computer screen, moving your lips. I start to speak and stop myself. I rearrange the sound of the words in my head, decide they are not worthwhile. I say words to remind you that I'm here. I read aloud when I'm alone, and on occasion, I read to us in bed using a nice, soft voice. We can make up the bed with clean sheets and not say anything—fitted sheet, straight sheet, wrong way, corners tighter, tuck, which pillowcase is for which. For me it's a fun challenge, now and then excruciating; for you it just simply is. To be poetic, I will say: you are the house where silence lives and words are welcome visitors. I am the auditorium where words live and silence is a guest speaker. There are good and bad guest speakers. Sometimes, I think, you must hate the sound of my voice. I do. But I never hate the sound of yours. That is curious. I think it's because I do different voices.

I was humming, down in the hole. Typically I hum when I am nervous, but standing inside my excavation, I was self-possessed. I was digging across and down, across and down, widening the hole so that I could continue to deepen it, and also, so that I could clamber out when

the time came. The mounds of dug-up earth I left in my wake were forming broad, rough steps. It was still blue outside, a brighter, denim blue, but blue nonetheless, and I wondered where the sunrise was. I seemed to be the only moving thing for miles—me and the dirt that slid. I wished for a glass of milk. I remembered a person's name that I'd forgotten the previous week. I thought of a great thing to do with chicken. I made a decision about how to handle this year's holiday travel. I felt solvent and without scorn.

Earlier tonight I asked you a lot of questions about myself, I wanted you to tell me about the way that I am. You said those conversations never end well. You've moved to the green chair and you're reading a magazine and yawning. We will not go to bed at the same time this night. (Some statements, no matter what you do to make them plain, will always sound dramatic.)

I wondered how many acres down our yard went. It occurred to me: our yard had many yards beneath it. We bought a house with .71 acres, but maybe it was a thousand acres deep. Nobody measured it that way. What a steal, I thought to myself. Across is what you buy, but what you're also getting is down. It is not more arbitrary than most things, but it is not less. The shovel caught on something fabric, caked with dirt. I wanted to get a better look at it, but I hadn't stopped shoveling since I started. I worried, suddenly, about stopping. But I stopped. I shook out the thing, which was blue, and I recognized it as one of your old tee-shirts. It said something *Arts Festival*; there was a hole where the name of the arts festival used to be. Underneath was a smiling banjo. I remembered the shirt from many years ago, many summers. It looked very small, too small to fit you now. That and the banjo's smiling face made me feel sad and guilty, for loving this shirt that was somehow more you than you. I thought with yearning about your elbows, which

the shirt had always made look very nice and pointy and tanned. I was tired suddenly, and I lay down with it, my body leveled awkwardly against the contours of the dig.

New Day Rising

Bathing in purple, we are bathing in O.
The violets are brewing. We are jaundiced
incredibly. Wet to our gill slits.
An American anthem. We are human beings.

Sing it, We are human beings. Soap suds soap suds,
Bath of green sailboats. Hard rock slab of chocolate
cake. And here is a smear of blood O. On the floor,

a smear of blood. In it we are bathing. A dog's white
house. The dots of trees. Cartoon loon or mouse-
trapped hole. You think you know us? You know
a bed sheet. Heaven awaits the righteous.

We are not righteous. We aren't even
warm. Come out come out whoever you are.
We promise not to eat you. We promise, but

we are liars. We lie because we are human. Because
we can and we must. We are washing our hands.
We are washing our hands O. Battery acid. The set
of our eardrums. It's dawn, and the low baby's crying.

Constantine Cavafy

Sweet Voices

—translated from the Greek by Daniel Mendelsohn

Those voices are the sweeter which have fallen
forever silent, mournfully
resounding only in the heart that sorrows.

In dreams the melancholic voices come,
timorous and humble,
and bring before our feeble memory

the precious dead, whom the cold cold earth
conceals; for whom the mirthful
daybreak never shines, nor springtimes blossom.

Melodious voices sigh; and in the soul
our life's first poetry
sounds—like a distant music in the night.

[1894]

This first poem, "Sweet Voices," is from the grouping now known as "Rejected Poems" (poems published early in Cavafy's life and subsequently expunged from his complete works); the second, "Voices," a much-revised version of the earlier poem, is considered to be among his greatest.

Voices

—translated from the Greek by Daniel Mendelsohn

Imagined and beloved voices
of those who died, or of those who are
lost for us like the dead.

Sometimes in our dreams they speak;
sometimes in its thought the mind will hear them.

And with their sound for a moment there return
the sounds from the first poetry of our life—
like music, at nighttime, far away, that's dying.

[revised 1903, published 1904]

Douglas Kearney

Floodsong 6: Bullfrog's Liturgy of the Eucharist

THE OFFERING

to each Below: the Above.
to each Out: the In.
to each Never: Ever.

THE CONSECRATION

by

my heart of trembling mud,
my blood of falling sand,
my mind of teeming fens,
my hands of moulding stones,
my bones of melting song,
my tongue of humming ghosts,
my throat of burning eggs,
my legs of diving wings,
my lungs of rain:
 this ruin—
 too
 —is will.

THE COMMUNION

this flesh, serpent's.

this flesh, fish's.

this flesh, rodent's.

this skin is nowhere;
the insides, everywhere, out.

BENEDICTION

go home, though it is death:
at home, you shall find your service.

this—too—is will.

City of Searchlights and Dead Cats

—to my brother, Dallas

1.

blocks below us, the searchlights
bend, street lines into descent—

the Ghetto Bird makes its vulture round—
a muzzle flash up and down

somewhere a block away, someone breaks,
running for a ride. and the Bird

is on its copter round. the cops roll up
and down the blocks below us.

we bend into descent.

2.

and what to call the homie now,
the name I cried at the ivy whip—

leaves the shape of vipers' skulls
leaves his hands stripped—no longer fits.

"don't play up in that ivy, y'all"
there're snakes among the vines. the lines

of his name became the drawl of red aerosol.
a language you taught me. a bullet makes

a mouth in a heart, a toothless mouth. the bones
a handful of dominoes.

call him "Buph Loc," nigga, the mouth says,
at once a tilted bottle.

3.

"fever!" the bones buried in the card table. I
empty my wallet of curses. "domino!"

I can't seem to beat you. I hold my bones,
their dull eyes gawking black at me, black.

Dallas! brother!
you remain God, Lucifer!

the night you stared down a coyote.
the day you brought home that cat.

I am letting my bones drop,
a wall unbuilding. I stare

at each eye, slowly counting.
you know, now, I walk every street

I ever walk knowing how I'd kill
everyone I've come across?

and when I look at you, I am gawking back
at me, needing new eyes.

4.

and when I looked at my friends,
they became a gang just like one-time

suspected. and when my friends turned on me,
school was a mess of ivy.

those nights, coyotes in scared packs
upset cans to get at the sacks

of cold cuts gone bad, take-home chicken bones.
those nights, I ran ammonia over remains,

those sour nights sliced by copter blades.
the possums and their buckshot eyes

taught us to lay dead, as suspected.
my name X'd off the walls; still

my posse never fought
me. we were coyotes at heart.

they became Grimace, Dimen', Inches. Goldy:
for his skin, his hope. that was then,

I don't call them now. I don't know

5.

what happened? Pops wouldn't say.
I drive home, my headlights

break against big coyotes ambling
toward a fence. bold now,

swole from eating cats; upright trash
cans line the drives like families

awaiting the inevitable hearses. I drag
the garbage, clutch an ax handle,

trundle past where Pops found her,
mangled, the cat you brought home years ago

without permission. a muzzle flashes up
and down somewhere a block away

a coyote fills its mouth with red aerosol
and swaggers up the street.

the searchlights hit it,
new eyes glare back.

Battle Hymn of the Iowa State Teacher's College

Mrs. Finch

She could not fly. Her dresses were too heavy—double-knit collars, blue anvil buttons! Her face was the marbled white of uncooked bacon. She wore spectacles over it, and on her strong wrist a silver band I imagined was stamped with info the Iowa State Teacher's College in Cedar Falls would really want to know, if we arrived to find our kindergarten teacher dead on the rug—cut to ribbons by a bad pinwheel or strangled by the python-long alphabet banner. It was my dream to make that call, read off her serial number—T123—to the teacher tracker, then give an account of her curious movements, habits, skills. On the first day she had somehow known Greg Sauer, dressed in brown, was the smartest boy in the class! He never answered a question wrong after that. Greg set the standard in all subjects—winning gold stars for concentration, patience, memorization, nap rug management, milk carton disposal, pilgrim slide show question answering.

"What day is Thursday?" asked Mrs. Finch.

"Thanks . . . giving," said Greg in his wise slow way.

"What is so special about that day?"

"Us sharing food . . . just like the Indians . . . shared the harvest . . . with the pilgrims . . . at their fort."

"Good, Greg! Very GOOD!"

She smelled of rubber cement and talc. She chewed and spit words as if they were sunflower seeds. Wanting nothing to do with "that wild thing nonsense" or *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, she lulled us to sleep with mousey Beatrix Potter tales. She had met Burl Ives once in Naperville and still blushed about it. When doing the Hokey Pokey and

shaking it all about she looked sillier than a mating ostrich on *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. Her hair took care of itself: never a wire out of place. Her claws were cleaner than whistles. Hose bunched around her ankles like dried mud and on her feet she wore more band-aids than leather—such sharp little shoes! The teensy diamond in her ring proved she was the breadwinner in the family. She built big nests of paper on her desk. She battled a giant crab—Barry with the snapping scissors!—and won. She did not panic when Ken swallowed a fistful of fasteners. She dragged him to Nurse Kokomo and the next day announced: “The doctor prescribed a big serving of mashed potatoes and Ken is doing just fine!” Mr. Teacher Tracker, sad I am to say that she did not have the best room at McKinley Elementary School because the best room sported a blue tile fountain and she might bathe in it. Cleanliness her pet peeve. “Stop that, Buster!” she chattered at anyone who ran dirty fingers over the irresistible pink coral surface of the cinder block walls. She liked it even less when I informed her I could not drink whole milk at snack time, only skim.

“Who says?” she asked. I stared at the high heels pinning her to the earth. I heard classmates murmuring, wondering what the trouble was.

“My mother says!” And for good reason: if I did not make such a daring stand I would become the next victim of the herd mentality.

“But whole milk is good for the bones!”

True, but if you wanted to build up your individualism you drank skim like my family and the whole stuff made you sick. I explained the flavor reminded me of peanuts in a bad way—just as I had told Mrs. Worden the preschool teacher that I could only eat *all beef* hot dogs because pork by-products turned my tummy. Mrs. Finch huffed and puffed and finally ordered skim milk from Baker's Dairy . . . but the price I paid for that green cow carton! In telling the story of the *Emperor's New Clothes*, she pointed my way when the leader was exposed as an arrogant fool. “The Emperor! Look! He has nothing on!” When I arrived rain-soaked—no galoshes or slicker!—she sent me to finish my shameful dripping in the deep, warm

coat closet, where I sought but did not receive forgiveness from Monkees rain bonnets and Winnie the Pooh umbrellas, shiny brass buckles and the mousetrap hinges on her coverall. Horn buttons held her winter coat together. She carried a rag wool purse with a bubble snap. One day she pulled out a clipping and summarized the grim contents for the class. "Yesterday, Mr. David P. Miller—the county attorney and father of Ben here—was shot when he dropped an evidence gun in the courthouse hall and it discharged. How is your father, Ben?" The pain in my throat may not have been sharp as the pain in Ken's tummy after he swallowed the fistful of fasteners, but then again, maybe it was worse. I should have eaten a heap of instant potatoes for breakfast: something to help the strange news go down! My father had not shot a hole-in-one like other lawyers but shot himself in the thigh! When able, I related that he would survive. "A surface wound! How lucky!" cried Mrs. Finch, and then the student teacher Mrs. Haring came for a month. Mrs. Haring wore all brown like Greg—brown shoes, brown pants, brown jacket—and just the wrong amount of brown jewelry. Her nose wrinkled like a toadstool when she smiled. She smiled for some bad reason when I brought to show-and-tell the very serious copper bullet the surgeon had removed from father's blubber. A dunce that Haring! Mrs. Finch had to teach her everything: how to work the slide projector, fill out the daily dairy order form, cut construction paper Christmas trees, even how to operate the blinds. With guttural gusto Mrs. Finch explained the gold star system of achievement: how the stars were earned and must be affixed to named paper ladders so students could see the empty space between rungs and know what skills they still needed to master. Mrs. Haring led a dumb "Puff the Magic Dragon" sing-a-long, but it was Mrs. Finch who had the honor of regurgitating "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," raising a fist and one hose-muddied knee: "Mine eyes hath seen the GLORY of the coming of the Lord! He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of WRATH are stored! He hath loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword! His TRUTH is marching on!"

Mrs. Nichols

Yes, we had already recited the Pledge of Allegiance in homeroom, but she had not heard our tongues twine around the oath, and needed to. "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America . . ." Old Glory was slung from a heavy stand capable of enduring the impact of our attention. The flag brought so much to mind! Fireworks and ice cream . . . street protests and quiet cemeteries and "one nation, under God, INDIVISIBLE . . ." The music teacher's voice resounded over our wimpy drone—each word an echoless retort. She fired these shots from next to the upright piano, hand cupping a heart wrapped in lavender. Her dresses were crepey with lace collars. She wore more flowers than a trellis and style-starved black shoes. "WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL!" We sat. She stared: her eyes brown corridors leading to a shaven face, parted hair, pinned pant legs—Mr. Nichols, the veteran, in the wheelchair. How she loved her old beau! The feeling swept over the room with the gentle passion of a houseboat wave . . . then she belted the glockenspiel. Her favorite lyrics were "Purple! Mountains! Majesty!" She stuck out her chin like George Washington at Valley Forge and had his hairdo too. Every so often she stared angrily out a window at the smog-bearded face of 1973. She banned headbands and yo-yos and yawning, the trading of Frito Bandito pencil erasers and Wacky Pack stickers. When John Paul Stevens was made a Supreme Court judge, she said to John Stevens in the third row: "That's quite a namesake you have!" She played *Billy the Kid* on the record player, inspiring me to write composer Aaron Copland, asking for an autograph and a baton. She invited us to bring our own records on Thursday, but if the song did not pass the wholesome test, out the door you went with "The Streak" by Ray Stevens or "Junk Food Junkie" by Larry Groce. Any student who cussed won an all-expense-paid vacation to Principal Johnson's office with the rubber tree. Mrs. Nichols took care to give us the inconvenient

time and the place of genius Greg Sauer's cello recital. I was sure she would be proud of mother and me for giving a dignified burial to any dead bird we found on the way to school, even if it meant being late. The certainties of Mrs. Nichols were unshakable, relentless, resin-scented. The beads on her necklace the size and pastel color of eggs that fell from nests in spring, sadly drooling yoke onto the sidewalk. Patriotic lyrics worked her over in the manner of a pizza parlor rolling pin. She was so eager to sing songs she had sung 1,000 times before that she forgot to pick up the baton, conducting with pink chalk. At the Iowa State Teacher's College boot camp she had learned how to wrestle a triangle, ravish piano keys without damaging the ivory, fling finger cymbals like kung fu stars, de-fluff record needles, repair maracas with much duct tape, play a tambourine while tooting a recorder, and snatch a pitch pipe off the piano behind her without losing sight of any budding hippie. She struck the tuning fork on the edge of the desk and we forgot how boring old mimeographed songs were and sang authentic off-key renditions of "God Bless America," "America the Beautiful," "This Land is Your Land"—the most generous tune ever!—giving a whole country away, from redwood forests to the gulf stream waters and New York Eye-land—all mine, all yours, all thanks to Woody Guthrie and the 11th Division.

Mrs. Haack

When she received a jury summons, Principal Johnson ordered her to ignore it. Hiring a substitute teacher, he said, was a budget buster.

"But I've got to serve," replied Miss Haack, seated on the other side of the rubber plant. "Look!" She presented a letter stating that failure to appear was a **punishable offense**. The principal's hands remained clasped behind blond hair thin as a halo evil deeds had melted. "Won't you, look?"

He would not. Two potato sacks hopped by the window . . . followed by Mrs. Cummings, all in tweed and all in a tizzy, it being outdoor activities day for grades 4-6. "What am I to tell the County Clerk?" In the outer office Mrs. Jenkins typed wearing sunglasses to protect her eyes from official stationary glare. Small to start with, Miss Haack was getting smaller: folding like a broken board in light cotton dress. "But Steve, it's my responsibility. A privilege too! How can I teach children about citizenship if . . . if . . ." She waited for feelings that had sprinted off in unprecedented directions to do the decent thing, return, and lead her out of the darkness. They didn't. Her crossed legs winched tighter: the diamond facets on her cat-eye glasses orbited a helpless glare. She grew angrier and angrier at Johnson's sleep-besotted face—this lady whose jolly refrain was "Ditto!"—who energetically plunged her pointer like a dipstick into oily current events and religiously read Art Buchwald and had time between classes to talk with me about politics and the names it went by then: Birch Bayh, Frank Church, "Scoop" Jackson, "Tip" O'Neill. "I MUST be allowed to practice what I preach!"

Mr. Johnson leaned forward. Wedged in his wing-tip shoe was a plug where a big toe had been before it froze off in the Korean Conflict. With a tartary smile, however, he liked to say that he had endured more strife on school grounds. Separation of Church and State sabotage! Curriculum minefields! Education was a woman's world that men were doomed to superintend, and perish every weak administrator did.

"Don't make this complicated, Viola." He jabbed the air like he had jabbed Tony's soft-chest place after shoving him against a locker. "Others have been excused. You will be too. Mrs. Jenkins has the letter ready." *Others?* Miss Haack's right shoe slid off the heel, hanging agog over the mauve carpeting. *Others?* Without the aid of a wiretap she had stumbled on a vast conspiracy to deny staff members their constitutional rights!

She had to wave the letter in someone's face and that someone was me, on the front school steps, avoiding Mrs. Cummings and her potato sacks. "Ben!" I turned and our noses nearly crashed. Miss Haack wore

no makeup or perfume and the bareness of her sharp face made it all the more mysterious: a bald surface an eon away from the fertile mind within!

At Open House she had not been terrified by mother's overstuffed Moby purse and won by heart by miraculously complimenting the monstrosity. "You should go on *Let's Make Deal!* I saw Monty Hall hand a hundred to an audience member who pulled a fish scaler and a metronome out of her handbag!" In the summer she obviously watched a lot of TV to keep from getting sunburned. At the Iowa State Teacher's College she was the one who had a crush on the gentle professor who paced as if wearing snowshoes.

And now she was hunched and trembling: a fire-breathing peach crumple. "Principal Johnson . . . you'll never believe this . . . Johnson has a plan . . ." At the crack of the voice I crouched like a great shortstop—Mark Belanger! Don Kessinger!—and caught the part about the busted budget, the **fine or imprisonment** letter, the secretary's sunglasses and Mr. Johnson's melted halo hair, lazy insulting eyes, NFL tie tac, teeth tartar and finger-jabbing. I wondered if our principal would be more principled if he had lost more than a big toe on that long cold march. I watched black bangs beat Miss Haack's forehead, beat it like wings of an injured bird.

Marie Costello

After art class she slipped me a palm-sized prayer book with rainbows on the cover: *Everyday Devotionals*. She said: "I carry one in my purse. I read it when I'm stuck in traffic and getting impatient." Having no purse or driver's license, I waited for a hint as to how I should employ the gift. Around us were long work tables: encrusted jars of Tempera paint, larger jars of drying brushes. "This might help you," she said a little desperately, ". . . help you stop licking your lips." *But the chapped skin only stops aching when wet and I can't, just can't apply rogue gunk from the ancient tube in mother's purse—Genghis Khan must*

have squeezed the thing on a rampage through Davenport! “Quit, please? For me, MARIE.” Who? Her name, stripped of Mrs. and Costello: Marie. Though I’d have thought Antonia or Marcie, a less common name to go with her splattered smock, knotted neck scarf, olive skin, crooked pug nose broken in an artsy accident at the Iowa State Teacher’s College. “It really bothers me when you do that.” She tugged at the red scarf like it was burning her neck. So sensitive to colors, Marie! “Will you please try?” I promised and licked my lips. What a wicked cycle. In my sleep I lapped myself and woke with a clown face—ring around the mouth. Marie moaned softly. She was no judgmental Born Again but a Catholic who attended dawn mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral and said ten Hail Marys for running a stoplight. Well-acquainted she was with the disappointing dynamics of existence. “I know you can do it,” she said unsurely. “I . . . I’m . . . positive.” What she did know for certain was that some kids were beyond being helped by The System and in need of divine intervention. After school she painted to the shipwreck ballads of Gordon Lightfoot or softly sang “Song Sung Blue.” All her jewelry was humble copper. She looked more at home on basement dirt during the tornado drill than any of the other teachers. She left windows open even during the rain to let out the paint smell. She wore the smock to her car—a palate on legs crossing the parking lot—and smoked Kings and gave only A’s. “Good luck, Ben.” Her eyes were moist so I did not tell her that my father herded the family into the last mass at Sacred Heart most Sundays and heads turned and ushers shushed and the priest continued on with the homily in a mutter we could not hear and that the holy water had not cured my chapped lips when I applied it on a whim.

Entering students flushed me onto the mezzanine balcony above the second floor. Outside Mrs. Nichols’ classroom stood exiled Henry Hesse, in frayed black suspenders, patched dungarees. He had learned the name for everyone and everything from his dusty father: it began with F and ended with K. I waved my middle finger at his middle finger and he looked so happy. Below, kids in alligator shirts milled in front of the library door shut by Miss Pharenkooken so she could count projectors.

Those fancy reptiles had no interest in the pieces of rust I carried around in my pocket. They did not tell time by its genuine jagged shavings but by digital watches with fakey blinking displays. Idiomatic consumers! who wasted money on Hush Puppies and Adidas and the preposterous luxury of brown lunch bags and could not stop laughing when I entered the cafeteria with a National grocery bag, rolled into the carriable shape of a loosely-wrapped-two-foot-long cigar. Being wise sometimes meant looking dumb! In ten years they would be so proud of the new cars in which they would die after skidding off Kimberly Road or hitting head-on the semi-truck carrying more Hush Puppies and Adidas to Famous Footwear. The chattering mob parted to let mopping custodian Mr. Moynahan through. On puke he sprinkled magic red sawdust and—ta dah!—the mess was absorbed into the linoleum floor, enriching its gloomy burgundy glow. He had a goofy smile for all. He did not feel free to effect any other expression. By day's end his lips must hurt more than mine. He looked like Curious George's keeper, stripped of the yellow hat and dressed in prison gray, serving time for doing a thing to the monkey he should not have. I could give the prayer book to him! I knew it was not for me. So heavy with the giving—her wanting me to use it! And no mention of Wrigley Field, my heaven. Just words of a Mark and a John who were apostles, and unfortunately spoke like it: vaguely. The next day Marie asked: "Which prayer is your favorite?" She was leaning over the sink, bringing brush stiffs back to life with warm water.

"The . . . lamb one."

"Which one?"

"All of them."

She kept from shaking her head by nodding. Under the splattered smock was a blouse the hue of a heartburn commercial cartoon. She cried "Freeze!" and lectured us statues on the importance of sharing, caring, building the bridges only the heart could build, and

then assigned us to draw one. "Unfreeze!" My span was a tangle of suspension wires and beams arcing from our dirt yard all the way to the ivy-laced brick stadium where the Chicago Cubs played sunny afternoon games. On seeing that picture Marie exuded a sigh to inflate the Goodyear blimp. I had missed the point entirely by copying the crude infrastructure of a sick civilization! She instructed me to visit a gallery where her paintings were on permanent display. It was between So-Fro Fabrics and a fragrant Fannie May candy store with free mint frappe samples. After helping myself, I entered the chilly art world and was forced to sign a guest book by a lady in a muslin whatchama. She then led me to her favorite picture which looked exactly like all the others. "Isn't it great?" she said, pointing at a green splotch supporting a yellow shine on which was piled a powder blue gleam that dissolved in purple powder, waves of silver froth and nuclear orange swirls.

Mr. Taves

It was he, the gym teacher, who backed up Mr. Johnson, the principal, when my father made a stunning appearance on the playground prior to the first bell on a fall day in 1972. I was perhaps the most shocked of all. The man hid behind a newspaper or at his office for so many months, then suddenly hobbled into action, getting disastrously involved with a situation he knew nothing about. My younger brother Howard had been told he could not ride the red Huffy bike to school because only fourth grade and above were allowed to. Howard told father and COUGH-COUGH! he erupted: "That's news to me!" (It would not have been if he had read the rule sheet sent to all parents.) "What a crock! You will get to ride your bike, my boy! I'll see to that—yes, yes, I will!" Oh it stung to see the motley duo crest Middle Road hill—toothless Howie on teetering training wheels and father dragging the bad leg, sucking a cigarette, trying to look daunting by blowing smoke out the corner of his slack mouth. Basketball games

stopped and the players snickered. Girls quit jumping rope, pointed. The playground monitor sent for reinforcements. He wants to be useful, I thought, but he doesn't know how to help us. He can only aid strangers by giving them the time or a cigarette at the bus stop and how happy that makes him! For ten minutes afterwards he smiles with the gold cap showing. . . Together the principal and Mr. Taves were an impressive pair: suit and tie, sport shorts and whistle, sinewy necks expanding like twin lizard mantles. Howard astride the banana seat waited for father to push them over and father instead shook hands with each man, listened to all they had to say and agreed completely. "Makes perfect sense that rule! Safety must come first. Howard, get off the bike. I said—get off the bike. I'm going to ask you one last time . . ." Mr. Johnson lifted crying Howard off the bike and I got permission to wheel it home because father could not do so with his rotten hip.

"I told you!" I told him on the way down the hill. And he snapped.

"That's enough, Benny! ENOUGH! No more—ENOUGH ALREADY!"

Mr. Taves's favorite word was "Geez." He said it in anger and joy, in frustration, and in place of other words that were not coming to him. He strung one "GEEZ" to another "GEEZ" as students stood around, trying to figure out what in the name of Jesus he was trying to say about the game of badminton. The gym floor was brown, the concrete walls swamp green, the windows caged. Mr. Taves was a dreary salmon hue. He was not the depraved sort of gym teacher that had created the Marvel comic book monster Man-Thing. At times he was too tired to swat a fly. He sadly admitted when pressed that Evel Knievel was not an athlete. His eyelashes were host to the same fungus as his feet and he had sour armpit issues. The medicinal powder he wore added an unpleasant chemical element to the B. O. His gums were mole gray and teeth butter yellow and constantly he was sucking Tic Tacs and spraying Binaca Blast, a lemon-lime breath freshener in a tiny bottle alcoholics

could easily hide. He did not like the taste of himself: whatever awful flavor being Mr. Taves produced. "GEEZ! *squirt* GUY! *squirt* GEEZ!" he said to me dangling from a climbing rope, soft hands burning, knees lifted so that it looked like I was sitting on an invisible toilet seat three feet off the floor. A for effort, that's what I wanted, but got: "GEEZ! squirt YOU CAN DO BETTER squirt THAN THAT!" No, a fat boy could not, and finally I had had enough and slid off the toilet seat and really lit into his beloved Presidential Fitness patch requirements. One glance at Richard Nixon in his black suit and you knew he could not touch his wing-tips or do a pull-up with all those creepy secret service dudes hanging off him. Hey Taves! Why not test for the real skills it takes to be the leader of the free world? See if we have the strength to shake 100 hands, make 50 raving phone calls, draft 20 peace treaties, start 30 wars? "GEEZ, GUY? COOL IT! GEE WHIZ!" He doted on human spiders like David Van Camp, who could reach the ceiling in less than a minute, and run the fifty in five flat. After Mrs. Sly the counselor got a red sports car to ferry her drug puppets around in, Mr. Taves bought one too. The genius cello player Greg Sauer slipped him an envelope and for the rest of the year did not have to do anything that might cause a hand injury. The bribe was stowed in the office in the corner of the gym. Often the door was closed between periods. Mr. Taves had money to count and patrol guard paperwork to catch up on, touch football plays to invent, a felt record board to maintain. He fondled the silver stopwatch like Captain Bligh fondled ball bearings in *Mutiny on the Bounty*—only it could inject meaning into the meandering day, isolating the urgent direction of a Van Camp! "GEEZ, DAVE! TERRIFIC JOB! GEE WHIZ!! NOW LET'S . . ." Run the 600. Play softball, flag football, volleyball, basketball. Limbo or square dance or gyrate to the tune of "The Funky Chicken," if not "Gimme Dat Ding." Or lift an Army surplus parachute, fabric petals filling with air—giant blooming mum!—that for a fabulous moment lightened the load on my battered tennies. He had a better first aid kit than Nurse Kokomo and was much quicker

to use it—spraying disinfectant on ouchies and wrapping knees, ankles, elbows. In his youth he might have been a Sears catalog hosiery model. He wore his white socks high on the calf—the stripes looking like garters from a distance. And always Adidas shoes with the three elite green stripes and a white t-shirt tucked into the sport shorts with the thick waistband to provide extra support. He was big on “support,” especially when the blue and gold gymnastic mats were rolled out. Wasn’t only me who noticed. At recess many kids whispered about how he squeezed Gwen’s buns while spotting her.

Mrs. Cummings

The dirty sack dress floated into homeroom, crying: “Benny! A letter from M-G-M!” Classmates studied my parent with awe: the tattered tennis shoes, jagged fingernails and shaggy bowl cut. Another species of mother—the kind mistaken by the whistling hall monitor for a migrant worker hauling away old flower-print wallpaper. *She dresses like a vagabond because living in our house makes you feel like you have no home, but rather a foothold on a public dump full of paper plates magazines cat litter old clothes . . .* I took the big envelope, a reply to my request for the autograph of Ray Bolger, Oz Scarecrow. Mother stood by, red-eyed, rocking to redistribute pain in her swollen legs. Mrs. Cummings, the teacher in tweed and saddle shoes, did not move at all. “Tut-tut!” her response to most catastrophes, apparently did not apply to school invasion. The pointer was paralyzed, her scrambled expression that of a “Wide World of Sports” equestrian whose riding crop has touched an electric fence during the GE Cup Competition. Poor Isabel Cummings! Under normal situations her facial features were tucked peacefully in their little nooks and her biggest kick the click of the clock hand. Other teachers slugged black coffee, she preferred tea. Classmates at the Iowa State Teacher’s College must have voted her Most Likely to Stay the Same. Each day she looked like a faded snapshot of the day before—

except once: the time I had seen her at Bishop's Cafeteria in a kaftan, prying open an orange roll as if it were a baby's sticky little fist. She was married to a polished man who after the chorus concert stood next to her like a fine cabinet. Nobody was better at tongue twisters than her: "Peter Piper picked a peck . . ." She followed every move and tantrum of the Bobby Fischer vs. Boris Spassky chess match, pinning clippings to the bulletin board. She got on all fours on Activities Day without getting on her knees. She wrote her name on her lunch bag. She took such pride in uprightness, timeliness, neatness, clear diction, not picking favorites, the wool she wore, and comprehensive knowledge of the rules for cake walks and potato sack races and dozens of other outmoded games that could not measure up to Atari video ping-pong. If she never came out of her trance there would never be another Activities Day. No one else knew the potato sack rules or had the stern grace required to decide ties and make the loser not feel so bad. I wondered if she would feel better—or worse—to know the Millers were a Nielson family—filler-outers of viewing logs that made *All in the Family* a big hit. And that this rude intruder was in fact a graduate of the University of New Mexico Law School—the only woman in her class—whose practice now consisted of arguing for fifty-cent refunds from store managers. She never lost. Father crumbled under pressure but I never saw her lose a confrontation with a cashier, meter maid, mall guard, or head nurse. Each time she had checked into St. Luke's to have a baby, she had tossed presents out the maternity ward window to we gleeful older ones in the parking lot—green and pink presents, with streamers attached, plunging like plugged toucans! She was our miracle and our curse. She was so smart, so inventive, so determined, so weighted down with a sadness so sad it could only be expressed with giggles. She was giggling now. "Aren't you going to open it *hee hee hee*?" She smelled like kerosene when excited. The raw incendiary stuff of a surprise attack! And she had not been so excited since listing off Martin Luther King's love affairs after I admitted I admired the man and his philosophy of civil

disobedience. Our giggling General Tommy Lynn! Who had ordered an Uncle Sam I WANT YOU poster from the Government Printing Office and taped it to the stained bedroom wall to ensure my enlistment in the Grand Army of Her Dark Republic, but she need not have. She was my only mother: irreplaceable! I would fight to the death for the right to be revolted by her—to ride the one-ways at midnight in the burger-wrapper-strewn LTD, hunting price gouging clerks, P.T.A. elitists, *Reader's Digest* readers, corrupt elected officials.

"Can't I see what's inside? OPEN IT, BENNY!" I did, removing a black-and-white photograph of the Scarecrow doing the soft shoe. The lion talked silly, the tin man clunked—but the Scarecrow really got me, losing straw stuffing but not his pluck. He had that old rumped suit and crumpled hat. A sweet garbled laugh too. Any moment he could scatter or go up in flames but that was fine—he would not be a real Scarecrow otherwise. Being him meant coming apart. He was pure filigree in need of the heart that would bind him together. And once he got it, he would be the most caring hay bale around. "Look!" she squealed, turning the photo over to prove BEST REGARDS, RAY had been stamped by a studio signature machine. It was no use to argue. She protected us by making sure we had no illusions that she did not want us to have. She was the dream-weaver, just like in the spacey Gary Wright song, spinning silk from old sack cloth.

Her needle was her gall. It hit like a sledgehammer. She crushed you to build you up! And then lumbered out of the silent classroom. So free to break rules, but not really free at all, shackled by the chains of her strange whims. The tweed trouper Mrs. Cummings tapped the pointer on the desk and continued with the class, pretending nothing of importance had happened.

Miss Pharenkooken

At an “aud”—as auditorium meetings were called—she declared the library extinct. “When you need me, come up to the I.M.C.” I did not need Miss Pharenkooken—but wanted another biography to read—and very soon passed under the INFORMATION AND MATERIALS CENTER banner to find the library as I had left it after checking out *Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys*. What a relief! The card catalog was not blinking, nor the world globe automatically revolving like a rotisserie chicken at National grocery store. The study cubicles and the shelves were not space-age plexiglas but ancient wood and arranged in the familiar maze. To be here was like being stuck in a huge Bavarian clock with a six-foot-tall coo coo.

“Can I help YOU?” she cried, bright yellow outfit rotating out from behind the desk. “Can I help YOU?”

Shoulder pads squared off the jacket. Her platinum plume was curled on one side and not-so-curved on the other. She couldn’t have had square eyes, and a pointy nailed-on nose, but it looked so to me. I could have too sworn she had no ears and purple varnish where others wore lipstick. Undoubtedly she was the Queen of Costume Jewelry. With all that junk to take on and off, how had she found time to get rid of the library, invent the I.M.C.?

“You’re here for a slide projector, aren’t you?” I was not and stated my business. “Biographies! Humpf!” Miss Pharenkooken believed everyone needed a special device from her, and when not asked for equipment was insulted, and when asked accused you of selfishness, refusing to make the machine available because it would then not be available for her to refuse to someone else. Lending one slide projector ruined her day. But not to be asked—that really stuck in her craw. “Biographies! You know where they are.” I went to the place where Harriet Tubman was following the tree moss north; George Washington Carver serving a ten-course-dinner consisting entirely of peanut dishes; Florence Nightingale feeling the forehead of a scarlet fever victim;

Benjamin Banneker drawing up street plans for Washington, D.C.; Madame Curie slowly dying of radiation poisoning in her laboratory; Helen Keller inventing sign language at the water pump. Real life novels starring real people who had done great things against great odds! A girl came in and requested *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. "That's a lot of nonsense. See if Miss Haack needs a projector!" The girl left. A boy entered, asked for the issue of *Creem* magazine with Marc Bolan on the cover. "OUT NOW!" And out he trudged, fired from the Book Company, shadows trailing limbs like the cloth of a Size 42 suit. An adult experience too big to be worn!

Miss Pharenkooken rotated back to the desk. On the days when she wore white she bore an eerie resemblance to dandy daredevil Evel Knievel. Boing! A hatch opens in the Iowa State Teacher's College dome and out rockets Pharenkooken, a glare in the sky over the green cornfields . . . gliding, tilting, losing altitude, crashing into the gray snake pit of Davenport. It was said she trimmed beak hairs with scissors, applied epoxy like perfume, had once improved a dull blue jacket by applying a book pocket to it. She popped corn nuts, owned no coffee mug. She left purple kisses on the rim of a styrofoam cup. Not hanky-panky was going on between her and Dewey Decimal! She hunched over the desk like a chess player but there was not a thing on that desk. She kept even the date stamp in a drawer. The only book she ever recommended was *Of Mice and Men* and when asked what it was about, yelled: "Mice and men, what else?" I do not think she had read it. Names like Pippi Longstocking, Encyclopedia Brown, the Box Car Children, Richard Scarry, Maurice Sendak, Beverly Cleary did not ring a bell. Reading was not for her and possibly it was better that way. Enough librarians were being "grabbed" by books, "blown away," and a hundred other criminal adjectives. If the spree continued, many worthy volumes would certainly end up in the penitentiary: best to have someone like Miss Pharenkooken around to keep the crime rate

down and your curiosity piqued. She was wild about something, you just had no idea what. Other teachers bored her, administrators more so. Call it the library or I.M.C.—this old place was such a useless bother. Only bad things could happen. She might as well have been mule manager at a glue factory. The place smelled like it. The best days were the days when she was left totally alone to twirl the date stamp and pat the equipment room key in her pocket. She thought things then that made her grin.

Mrs. Savory

May it may have been for us: December it was for her. The last month of the last year in a long teaching career that would be no fun to contemplate in retrospect. She began to wring her hands. She began to bite her lip. Her dyed hair looked thick until light shot through the blue honeycomb. Her dresses were red with black mixed in. She wore makeup that closely matched her natural putty pallor and rectangular Grandmother Mouse spectacles. On her neck was an interesting spot the vivid orange-yellow color of a sunfish belly. Her first name was Bertha and it was not a good time to be named Bertha because of a certain popular song. This Bertha had no big butt. She wore a fancy gold watch and a small ladybug brooch. The Supreme Court had banned prayer in schools so she rang a bronze pine cone bell at the start of class, wisely said: "Children, it's time to meditate." Greg Sauer, the genius cello-player, put his precious hands together. The rest of us bowed our heads and I prayed for box seat tickets to a Cubs game PLUS a pass to a summer concert at Ravenia, the musical meadow near Chicago. Please God make it Elton John and not John Denver . . . The bell rang after a minute, ending the spree of Christian consumerism. Mrs. Savory then got into her favorite subject: penmanship. Chalk did not dare squeak in this teacher's hand. It rode slate with silent slanting ease, forming replicas of letters lining the wall above the blackboard: **Young zebras**

yowl . . . I imagined her husband was a perfect Q and that their house on Composition Avenue was decorated with antique ink wells, pheasant quills, and framed parchment documents proving cursive alone could make a country great. On Sunday Mrs. Savory certainly wore gloves and a hat with netting. She was the lady that you saw on plush chairs in department store tea rooms. She cared too much about talking to ever raise her voice and never suffered laryngitis. Tucked in her bureau was elastic face mask so she could teach through another polio epidemic. When Jack Sier's older brother Jeff drowned in Duck Creek during a flash flood, she attended the funeral just because her classroom was next to Jack's. She was loyal to a fault and believed in guilt by association. In her desk were lovely confiscated eraser cars and a big kitchen timer used during brain-frying geography tests. Mrs. Savory, however, was not a true toughie like Miss Pharenkooken. She merely wobbled when Eric knocked a diorama off the sill and tons of sand spilled on the floor. Instead of taking that "Ruler as Weapon" seminar at the Iowa State Teacher's College, she had signed up for "The Art of the A" and "B" and "C" and "D," eventually earning the right to attend "The Art of the Z!" **Zachary's yacht Zenith zapped** . . . She was an alliteration addict, and reviled little neon plastic pencil sharpeners. She did the job right with the wall-mounted gray model, grinding, grinding, grinding . . . It gave the room the odor of a coffin factory at the end. She did not want to leave teaching: mandatory retirement was unfair! At 68 she still had the desire and the skills, welcoming new challenges. The previous summer she had gladly overhauled all of her lesson plans in preparation for the arrival of the new Harcourt Brace readers containing big words like "flabbergast" and slang like "yep" and cool references to airplanes, bussing, ghettos, pollution, divorce, overpopulation and the key to ending global hunger: sea kelp. The younger Mrs. Davis wept for dearly departed Dick, Jane and Spot but not Mrs. Savory. She was prepared to lead the way to 1990! "Bertha . . ." said Mr. Johnson. "You know rules are rules." She did, and

didn't. She kept ringing her hands. Kept biting her lip. Grief pushed the specs down her nose. In the middle of the last day she rushed out of the room clutching a lace hankie and the hall monitor entered. Nearness to 28 intense professionals of the opposite sex had not turned him into a dullard like Johnson or moldy like the gym teacher Taves. Mr. Schwenieger was alert, friendly, prepared. He had prevented a diabetic seizure at the foot of the stairs by giving Hanratty a sip of Pepsi. Once, with a tiny screwdriver, he repaired Miss Haack's cat-eye frames. He wore yellow pants and cardigans and whistled a good "Up, Up and Away." My sister Elizabeth had a crush on him. "Where is Mrs. Savory?" Eric asked. "In the restroom," he said matter-of-factly. "Continue with what you were doing." Fifteen minutes later Mrs. Savory reappeared, mouth a little spout gushing geography, a reminder that Greenland was not nearly as large as it appeared on the globe.

Miss Hamann

She was not like the others. She had attended the University of Iowa with 1,000 men. On the first day we learned of her love for British rock-n-roller Leo Sayer, who had a perm and wore tight white pants on album covers. It was a good choice. His skimpy clothes would leave plenty of room in the closet for those voluminous gypsy dresses and knee boots with crisscrossing laces. Her hair was a long brown tent; her jewelry the jangling kind that needed frequent adjustment. I wished for Miss Hamann to steal me—sack over head and into the painted wagon! I could play finger cymbals while she danced barefoot around the bonfire outside Peoria! I could help her steal my two brothers and three sisters and we'd all live in a boxcar in the woods, getting our act together while poor mother and father rested! Miss Hamann raised my hopes higher than any old graduate of the Iowa State Teacher's College, and dashed them just as fast. A pop gypsy—that's what she

was!—though even if from Romania, quite likely her experience would have argued against snatching trouble like me. The walls of twelve had closed in: fear and loneliness squeezed a brain. I reminisced with myself about the “old days”—a million years ago they seemed like!—when my chief worry was being dumber than Greg Sauer and every so often mother did something normal like hire a babysitter, make a doctor’s appointment, take us to kite making-day at the art museum. I thought of that red and white kite—the color of a Crusader’s shield!—crashing to the turf and got more upset than I had been when the event happened. I kept wetting my bed—as if trying to drown myself in my sleep—and became capable of fouler outrages. All the illuminating advice I gathered each night at Mr. Hickey’s house about the importance of honesty and patience, and not dwelling on your own problems, and listening to others, and working hard to be a stronger better person by jumping rope and saving nickels and foiling great fears with greater hopes—ALL OF IT I lost on the trudge to McKinley the next day as surely as if my heart had a hole in it and was spilling gold behind me as my eyes desperately searched the concrete ahead for a lucky penny to slide into my tattered tennis shoe or a flamethrower to demonstrate at show-and-tell. I had learned part of me did not want to be better but rather to wreak incredible havoc. I had learned I was capable of spending the precious dollar Grandma Stanley gave me on *Acapulco Rampage*, starring Mack Bolan a.k.a. The Executioner. I had learned that being broken inside made you weak but also gave you jagged edges to threaten others with, and that the easiest way to get through the school day was to strike at tormenters first. With a penguin, I struck. Me in my XXL pastel Penguin shirt from a Temple Emmanuel rummage sale waddling fast after an alligator shirt, forcing its owner to contemplate the apocalyptic possibility that Izod was on the way out, Munsingwear on the way in. Oh, I was brutally passive on the playground and outright aggressive in the building where a hall

monitor was mistakenly assigned to protect lip lickers, bedwetters, and carriers of crisp hankies. I had had a chest cold for two years and finally it worked to my advantage simply because I saw it as one—a way to defeat my enemies—just as mother’s old shoes tricked a store manager into underestimating her intellect. I cleared my lungs with martial zest: a Soldier of Misfortune. I deserved no quarter but no one dared get in close quarters with me to do the quartering. I yelled “Puritan!” at any kid wearing a tie and “Froggie!” at the patrol guard captain and “Sell-outs!” at groups of kids who were clanning instead of marching to the beat of a different drummer like the walking man on the black-and-white poster now taped on my bedroom wall next to I WANT YOU. I was so far ahead of them and hopelessly behind: missing out on experiences I could not ever grow up without!—derailed, separated, compacted into dense block of rust and rosebuds. To frighten security-minded Principal Johnson I invited my new twenty-year-old neighbor from Tennessee to pick me up at school: freckled Lonnie with no shirt or shoes, wearing only cutoffs! I cheered against my school at basketball games. Meaning that I stood on the visitor’s side of the gym waving a “Go Pleasant Valley! Beat McKinley BAD!” sign and then, during half-time, went outside and stuffed my heart hollows with the poems of Emily Dickinson. “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—/ The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air—/ Between the Heaves of Storm” . . . The thing about Emily was her brevity and the openness of her closedness and the big kingdoms everywhere—atop a little petal or shaded by a wing—and the punctuation like skeleton keys and the secret way each word gave itself to you and how good she was at being alone unlike me and mother and how she successfully published herself unlike father and shined light on the dark and saw the dark in the light and never forgot bees and kept cool at all times and hot at the same time, knowing, doubting, fearing, fearless. “With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—/ Between the light—and me—/

And then the Windows failed—and then / I could not see to see.” Miss Hamann had no such way with words, words had their way with her. She said *élan* like it was an electric ocean creature. Sticking out of her basket purse was an unread copy of *Mother Earth News*. Her class plans were padded with “free time” during which she combed her hair. She could not be still, wiggling as if tickled by an *Andromeda Strain* bloodstream submarine. She laughed too much during roll call then tried to sing a folk song like Buffy Sainte-Marie and couldn’t. She wished *The Mod Squad* had not gone off the air, *Room 222* too. Her boyfriend wore more denim than the Midnight Cowboy and had the face of Beaver Cleaver. Their devil child was certain to be more trouble than Rosemary’s baby, I meanly speculated in the last row. So fast the school day got me involved with nastiness I regretted in Mr. Hickey’s warm kitchen as I sipped 7-Up! “How was the day?” he asked. “All right,” I mumbled. And he sighed happily, assuming there were many highlights I could not choose among . . . when nothing was right, everything wrong, inside out and upside down. My tits! My tits I checked for tumor lumps in the bathroom between classes because a lovely ballerina on *Medical Center* had died of that and I could see it happening to me, who skipped-to-my-lou when nobody was watching: DAVENPORT BOY VICTIM OF BREAST CANCER; EMILY DICKINSON POEMS RECITED BY MOTHER ON FUNERAL BARGE. Death a buzzing fly; Death a glass carriage; Death knocking at the door; stanzas expressing what it felt like to hear Miss Hamann airily announce we were going outside to play dodge ball. A barn wall might have had better luck eluding that ball than I did. Even girls could nail me with ease, and finally I had enough. When the class reached the gravel portion of the playground, I did not ask to be excused but informed Miss Hamann I was not going to participate—just did not have the time!—I needed to finish my first book of poems on the steps over there. I pointed. Her exotic skirt rustled. I pulled the book from my back pocket. Three-by four-inches, pages cut from white construction paper, and bound with thread like the books

Emily made. Penciled on the cover was the title—*Dream On*—stolen from an Aerosmith song. Alligator shirts backed away from the homespun artifact. Miss Hamann tilted like a gaudy stage set cutout of a gypsy.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” I answered.

“Well, then” . . . I left.

I went to those steps . . . spread the little book on my knee, pinched a pencil and did not move, hearing Marie Costello shout “Freeze!” in the stinky classroom above, windows wide open to admit God’s fumigating love.

Joseph Campana

Wolf

Little man, I said, keep the wolf
from my door: one more night,

one more wretched night and day.
The wolf said *wait* and the season

was packing its bags but it would
not leave and it would never leave.

Little man, I said, there's a tooth
at my throat, and the tooth said

time and it was really a wolf and it
was cloaked in a sheep's skin of

satisfaction, and there was a fury
raining down at night and it tapped

at the windows. Little man, I said,
close the door there's a wolf in

the air and there is a fury that even
fear can't touch and it is gnawing

me, I feel it gnawing at me and
the wolf said *shelter* and I knew it

was a lie, I felt it as a lie I could
already feel its teeth tearing my skin.

Crows

The boys are hungry
the boys are circling:

the boys are singing
their anthem in the dark

where there is no shame:

*there is not enough
there's never enough.*

The road shines tonight
to blind all the stars

and the floor lights up
a storm of painted eyes:

the boys watch closely
the boys will fluster.

It is the same furious
dance over and again.

The boys don't mind
the boys won't cry

and if they're crying
they're crying *more*.

Yona Harvey

All the World's Wars Commence in the Head: Ostinato—Part 2

Hunched in a thimble, I wept. *Mercy.*
Once blotted out trees. *Well.*
Made some second-guess me. *Speak.*
Ought not act so ugly.
Said—
Ought not act so ugly.
Hunched in a thimble, I wept. *Yes, yes.*
Won't make no apologies. *Naw, Sir.*
Who will take on this burden?
Ought not walk alone.
Said—
Ought not walk alone.
In my sleep, I wandered.
Stitch, stitch, stitch, stitch, stitch.
That's the way they do you.
Said—
That's the way they do you.
Words can make a mountain.
Said—
Words can make a mountain.
No pulpits in the thimble.
Said—
No pulpits in the thimble.
Head—hah—
Head—hah—
Said—
Head, shoulders, knees & legwork.

Ought not act so ugly.
Ought not act so ugly.
Head, shoulders, knees & legwork.
No room for one more.
No room for one more.
Don't go pray for me.
Don't go pray for me.
No acres for want in a thimble.
Said—
No acres for want in a thimble.
All I could do was roll.
Said—All I could do was roll. *Mmm-hmm.*
Stitch, stitch, stitch, stitch, stitch?
I know not what, I know not what.

Chatterblue

Sunday, your declarations of blue. The widening spell of sky, the faint ink of curtains hampering your great, blue thoughts. Shouldn't we all stop to note your blue mood, how it grips you like a pair of blue hands that kept you as a boy, & bids you speak fondly of your blue childhood: *I was loved, I was loved*, as if you were the only one. The very blue air takes hold of you like a blue capsule swallowed with a glass of blue water, the capsule bursting into a million bulbs of blue light, its elixir spurring you to cerulean fondness, & shouldn't we, the people who are supposed to love you best, love it too, or at least how your love causes you to chit-chat, wagging your blue tongue, expunging your blue breath—oh the breadth of the things you declare—& shouldn't we all love as much as you who Friday went on about bodies in your dreams trembling red?

Highways are Abandoned

My friend bends the microphone's neck to his mouth,
stands among strangers in folding chairs and speaks

of his sadness. *Good job, my friend and good girl*
to the dog, circling and squatting so low to the lawn.

Today I drove past two men strung from trees with yellow rope,
suspended as they sawed down branches. When I passed

back I saw only rope, no men, four police cars, two ambulances.
I know a blackjack dealer who says *better lucky than good*

each time she flips my cards. In the newspaper, brimstone,
a girl whispering *at first I thought it was a joke, then they started*

to shoot the windows. I can't be the only one wondering
about the whereabouts of our gold medals, our arms to end

all open arms. *Good night* to my sister, whose bed I shared
when we were small. Each night *good night* and turned our backs.

When I am at a loss for words I try *ravage, havoc, clemency.*
Good luck to my mother, hauling her lump in to the doctors.

Once on a train a woman tried to give me twenty dollars
to make me stop crying.

Tim Ross

“then let fall your horrible pleasure”

physicists live alone in the woods they build fires they burn the limbs of their
numbers

they have pink eyes incantations woeful black tea they scratch

cursed figures in the dirt living forms haunt their geometry they join the wind in
tearing

their rags and mortal hair they forage

on the moist floor of the sky the river holds silt and stars they cup their palms

and drink its long equation they slaughter eternity for its soft meat and its fur

they are very hungry like God who is made of dark matter and wears a thorny
nebula and is everything

that has lost the formula for stopping itself

the tree of the mind its infrastructure bathed in artificial light

a decaying city traffic all possible

futures God the infinite subway God the player of many fiddles

and physicists are such poor dancers their limbs go everywhere at once who
hasn't

lost the path that does not stray who hasn't lost the formula devoid of rhythm

flailing in the storm they are so lonely

sex is difficult God hates them He loves their awkward striving they are made
of water mostly

and some electricity they are blinding when naked which is not often

they shun direct sunlight and practice cowering this convinces Presbyterians of
their malignance children in Kansas

know what to do with daddy's shotgun when they see one in the scrub pines
how wonderful

to hurl stones and watch them slink off in the summer beyond

the black pond where mist settles at night you can listen from your porch

they sound like sculptors sanding away at the monolith

More Than Air

He rises, as if emerging from a deep pool. The sheets wind about his body, and his hands paddle the air, his eyes bright even though there's only the small nightlight over the hospital bed to spell the dark. I place myself in his field of vision, but he's still locked somewhere back in the nightmare of suffocation, the thing that has chased him awake and transcends waking. This is how it must be, I think: the look of drowning. And it seems strangely familiar, unknown and yet known, as in the way waking events sometimes echo night's terrors. It is 3:30 in the morning, and although I have had these three late-night vigils to adjust, still, I have yet to come to terms with my father's end. I watch his throat muscles cord, and his mouth opens, his face seeking one way, then another, and back, his focus passing over me as if I am no more than a piece of furniture or rope he might cling to, and I see my father in a way I never anticipated—I am made to bear witness, alone in the dark. I grab hold of his arms and brace my feet and back. Were it in my power, I would will him to breathe; instead, I set my shoulders and haul him upward, as if by this act and my strength alone he might break the surface of that drowning pool in his lungs this one more time.

Although my mother's death a short fourteen months earlier has helped me to prepare for this, there remains a remnant of what has plagued me all my life—that unreasoned fear of the dead and dying, that irrational belief I might draw death's attention to myself as well. Still, I manage to say, "Dad, I'm here. Breathe, Dad. Breathe. It's all right." I hold him, and his muscles, stringy with the effects of his drawn-out illness, band tighter for a long, ugly time before they relax, and when they do it is on the sweet intake of air. Finally, his chest rises and fills, and then another breath, and yet another, and after a few short moments he folds into my arms, and eases back onto the pillows.

Over the next long minutes, I help him tender his fears over to the morphine pump, while speaking to him in a low voice. I say that I love him, follow up with a stream of reassurances. Things I might, myself, believe on better days: that his wife of nearly 75 years is waiting for him to join her. That his own mother, dead these forty years is over there somewhere, along with his brother Harry, his sisters Helen and Rhoda. Won't it be grand to see them, having missed them all so much?

But they are just so many words, an awkward offering, and a pitiable defense against the immeasurable dark he faces. But what's the alternative? There's no reversing the course of this illness. There will be no reprieve. It only remains to be seen how long he can wait it out.

It is then I say the inconceivable, those things the hospice staff has given me permission to say, in what feels like a curious pairing of grace and betrayal: "Let go, Dad." Just relax your hold. Welcome death. I wonder if he knows how dear he is to me, and how dear the cost of those words, even now, uncertain how I will live with having said them. There is, I think a moment of recognition in his eyes, and then they close, and he eases onto his side, and turns away.

He will sleep now, as deeply as he is capable, the worst of the night past, for this moment of suffocation happens once and only once at the same time each evening—like clockwork, the night's accumulated fluids having risen in the crowded cavity, shuts off what few airways remain.

My sister Mary is sleeping in the courtesy room next door. She hasn't had to face this, as she's taken the earlier shift between ten and two. I'm only too glad to take this difficult time, small enough penance, as she and my brother have done the hard work this past year, tending to my father, driving him to radiation, sitting with him when the burn in his throat and chest were more than he could bear, while I have been living my separate life out in Idaho, absorbed in the work of teaching and writing, self-absorbed with the pain of a recent divorce that

seems, in the confines of this room, small change. Come late morning, our brother Dale and his wife Barbara will take over the daylight hours, with all of us reconvening during the dinner hour about Dad's bedside. Together, we will try to draw him back into clarity, only to find ourselves, in forgetful moments, speaking of him in the third person, as if he's already passed. We will watch him tug at the sheets, refuse food and water, struggle to rise from the bed again and again to pack imaginary luggage.

I sigh, and the weight of that sound startles me. I realize he has lapsed into a quiet so complete that I stop breathing. I slip my hand onto his chest and stare at the sheet for some sign of movement. I hold my breath, lift my gaze away. Out the window, there is the high travel of light that is a small plane in the distance, and, on the near horizon, the bank of trees brooding darker than the sky. Closer at hand, on the nightstand, is the luminous face of the alarm clock he has brought from home. I stare at the second hand's sweep, and then there's the palpable movement of breast beneath my hand. When I am sure of its steadying pace, I withdraw, stand and walk into the small bathroom, where I shut the door behind me. The light is sudden and harsh, but welcome. I splash my face with cold water. In the mirror over the sink, my hair looks grayer than I remember—from even a few short months ago—but my face seems mostly unremarked: a bit of pallor, shadow beneath the eyes. Still that familiar chin, square face, blue eyes. It is a face more my father's than my mother's. I am, as I have always been told, a Davis.

I turn off the bathroom light to stand a moment in the dark, letting my eyes adjust before stepping back into the room. My father's resting quietly, so I walk over to the door, lean against the jamb and gaze down the long hallway, at the lushly-buffed floors and the soft, red glow of exit signs. There are no bells paging doctor so-and-so, no nurses running hourly temp checks. The quiet seems unnatural for a hospital,

but then this is no ordinary ward. It is the fifth floor of Froedert Hospital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The hospice ward.

I move back into the room, curl up in the lounge, thinking to catch a few winks, but a cough worms in my chest, will not be quelled. Bronchitis has set in, as it always seems to when I am called upon to wait on the dead. It happened over the slow death of my father-in-law back when I was just a young wife and mother. It happened again during the funeral for my mother, and now, throughout this week's deathwatch. A curiously sympathetic response, in this case: for my father is dying of lung cancer, the inoperable mass that crowds his chest, decimating what has always been a handsome and gentle man. I lean my head back, close my eyes. Never mind that he is 92 years of age, his mind is still accurate and lively, his over-sized heart—the thing we always imagined would take him—has proven unstoppable, or so it would seem.

Instead it is, as we should have expected, his lifelong love of smoking. I remember, as a child, the pack of Viceroy's prominent in his shirt pocket, the big V on the pack somehow synonymous with Victory, as in that old television series on the war: *Victory at Sea*. Later on it was Winstons, which was to become the cigarette of my choosing as well.

I close my eyes. It will be short hours before the day nurses come on staff and the breakfast cart rolls around with its tasteless offerings to patients past desire or need. I toss the thin hospital blanket over the chair arm, the room stifling with the heat necessary to keep the dying from cooling before their time. Outside the window is the city I've known and loved all my life, with its highrise buildings, and even now, in the middle of the night, a slipstream of lights on the freeway. Some part of me still resonates with the pitch of life here: the older cloistered neighborhoods with their significant tongues and street speech: Middle-Eastern, Italian, Polish, African American, and Spanish. There are the restaurants and music, the small trade shops and specialty

grocers. It is a place some part of my heart still hearkens to, even as I know I shall never live here again. I settle in for the last of the early morning watch, the dark inching back incrementally from the small grouping of trees below, and I note the slow passage of light and time in the sketch of bare branches resolving against the air.

My fear of death has been an unlikely complication since I was roughly three—not the act of dying, but what happens the other side of the act, or more precisely, that nothing will happen—a curious admission from someone who has been raised to believe in the resurrection and an afterlife. I am a cradle Catholic, a term that implies, if not genetic coding, the nearest thing to it—my faith, my religion a given. My father, on the other hand, was a convert, raised southern Methodist by a staunchly non-papist mother, a conversion that engendered a war between daughter and mother-in-law that lasted the better part of their lifetimes together.

My older brother and sister are still firmly fixed in that cradle of Catholicism. They've always been more at home with faith than doubt. So, what's to account for that irreligious streak in me that resolutely seeks answers to the unanswerable? Why is my first reaction to any given article of faith always skepticism, such as: *What if He was merely having a bit of fun with the boys when He suggested we be like the lilies?* Why is it that in matters of faith, I want to plant my feet and stand braced, unable to dive into that greater current, even as I have never been able to dive head first into water? Or even head first into the world for that matter. For when I was born it was feet first. According to my mother, the doctor had never seen anything like it. "You were stubborn even then," she'd say. "You were starting down the birth canal, head first, and then you stopped. Can you imagine that? You stopped and backed up. Came down full breach."

And so it could, I suppose, have started that early for me, that unwillingness to brave the unknown in any manner but feet first and on my own terms. What else might account for my solitary doubt in a family of believers? I'd said the same nightly rosary, attended the same services, sung in church choirs, eaten Friday fish fry. Twelve years of parochial education, and yet the truth is, faith has never been a leap for me. It's always been a slog.

Easter Week. 1957. Holy Thursday. Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, a small church in the parish of St. Martins, in Franklin, Wisconsin. My mother's family—parents, grandparents, cousins and shirt-tailed relatives—are buried in the graveyard behind the church. The cornerstones were hauled in place by my grandfather's team of horses. It's a small country church, and the stained glass windows are modest but rich in the purples and reds that glimmer deeply in candlelight. Incense smokes upward from the gold censer, and the statues ringing the church, shrouded in purple for the Lenten season, appear as hooded specters in the fragrant fog.

It is the opening salvo of Easter week with its marathon of church services: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday. I'm three quarters of an hour into this the first service, and already I'm squirming on the wooden bench. What fascinations there were—the smells, candles, stained glass and ghostly statues—have been eclipsed by sore knees and boredom. The woman seated in the pew ahead of me flinches once, then again, her feathered hat bobbing like a brooding chicken. She turns to glare over her shoulder. My mother leans forward with an apology, simultaneously locks a hand over my legs to keep them from kicking the pew ahead.

When my mother sits back, I smell the pressed powder on her cheeks and I'm momentarily fascinated by the shock of red lipstick against the white of her skin. "Sit still," she whispers, one hand locked

about my knees, while the other points to the altar. "Pay attention now. Your dad's up there."

Turns out she's right. My father has joined a lineup of men that have approached the Sanctuary. They take seats arranged in a semi-circle. I fidget from under Mom's hand. "Is it over yet?" I ask.

The woman ahead glances back again. I can see now that my mother's more irritated with her than me, but she hushes me again. Nods her head toward the altar.

Up there, one and then another of the men are removing their shoes. Peeling socks off feet, in what appears, even to my untutored eyes, an act that is vaguely sacrilegious. They are a mixed group from the parish—the majority of whom are farmers, though there are some merchants, and a few laborers in industry such as my father. What they have in common is that they are all dressed in creased pants, Sunday suit coat and tie. One extraordinarily large man, seated on the far end lumbers forward to remove one sock, rises to breathe between each effort.

My sister, at ten, is clearly acquainted with such mysteries, accepts them with a studied quiet I can never hope to master. I turn in the pew to see what friends might be back there. My mother firmly swings me back about. Shakes her head. I'm on the verge of that embarrassing walk down the aisle and out of church for a good scolding. Or worse, a spanking. I struggle to be good.

Up front, the priest is carrying a shallow pan of water with which he moves from one man to another to kneel before each. He ladles water over the men's feet, before toveling them dry. My father's seated fifth, his feet already bare and starkly white even at this distance. I wonder what he's done with his socks. Earlier that day, he'd sat on the edge of the tub at home, in his undershirt, his trousers rolled up, feet steeping in soapy water. A modest man, he was embarrassed to bare his feet in public.

He'd asked, "What if my feet sweat?"

My practical mother said, "Then a wash will do them good."

"Who am I to have a priest wash my feet?" he'd asked. Never mind that that was the point of it all, to do as Christ had on that evening of the Last Supper and bathe the feet of his disciples. To emulate that act of humbling oneself in service to others.

Had he asked, I might have told the priest it was not a lesson of which my father was unaware. I think of the night he gave over his Knights of Columbus membership. He'd been an officer in the organization's ranks, but the hats and cape, the pomp and ritual, he'd found painful, and even the money-raising efforts—all of it for good causes—not a thing he could give his hands or heart over to. He was a factory worker. It was the hands-on service he understood best. And so he resigned from the Knights to join St. Vincent DePaul, where he delivered food and clothing to the needy, right up until his late-seventies.

What I'm seeing, at the time, escapes me—for I am already losing interest, the lesson in sacrifice lost on me. Humility. Never second nature to me. If I am, as my looks have always confirmed, a Davis, how is it I did not inherit this as well? Some part of me, even then, always finding its way back to self-absorption—tiring muscles, boredom, the fidgeting in my brain that sets my legs to kicking. I yawn. I turn about in the bench, wave at a classmate two pews behind me.

It takes me ten more minutes to earn that scolding.

Two months prior, before my father was placed in the hospice ward, I'd been home for Christmas break. I meant to spend time with him. For that short period, I drove him to the hospital once a week where we sat in the waiting room while he joked and teased other patients, rousing them out of their doldrums. He knew their names, and many of them their histories: "she's got a girl in school in New York."

He introduced me as, “my daughter, the writer I told you about.” I fielded pats on the back along with polite questions about the book, and then when he was called, I followed him into the inner rooms where technicians drew graphs on his chest in bold black marker, targeting cancer cells. Afterward, we stopped at the store to pick up a fresh reserve of popsicles to cool the burn in his throat. At least one of those nights after treatment, he took me out to dinner at his favorite diner: the neighborhood George Webb where he ate hamburgers and limp fries doused in ketchup, while I ordered a late night breakfast.

His treatment had been going well. His prospects, I had been told, were good, and I was more than happy to take them at their word. I was, in fact, relieved that it might turn out all right after all. Feeling guilty, perhaps. For twelve months earlier I could not find it in myself to take my father’s word for his illness. It was on the tail end of my visit the year earlier, during my mother’s funeral. We’d been standing in his living room, and he was telling me how he didn’t want to live without her. All those years together. How was he supposed to face mornings without her?

At the time I was contemplating my own marriage, knowing even then that it was all but over. “You just do it, Dad. We’ll help,” I said, and then, “We still need you. More now than ever. I don’t think I could stand losing you too.”

His eyes narrowed. I could see grief hitting head-on with duty. I had called upon him as a father, long past the time when he should have been held accountable to such demands. He sighed, nodded. “I don’t know,” he said, “how long it’ll be though. Something’s not right. There’s this cough, and I can’t seem to catch my breath.”

I didn’t listen. Preferring to believe it was the strain of the year of twenty-four hour nursing duty for my stricken mother, and the toughest years of their life together. Wasn’t it only natural that he

would be exhausted? "I'm sure it's nothing," I said. "After what you've been through, I'd be surprised if you didn't feel ill."

That easy.

"We'll set up an appointment with the doctor. It's probably a bit of a cold."

He shook his head, and I could read it in his eyes, how deeply he understood his own body, and still I refused to believe what I'd seen. What I did believe was that I could not withstand another blow so close on the heels of both my mother's death and the death of my marriage. What I was unwilling to see was a world in which there was no one final home or father to return to, if just to visit. And so I persisted in doubt even as his finger found that place where the first cells were spreading, pointing it out like a wound in his side. How much clearer could it have been?

The narrative is always different, the characters interchangeable. No specific hour—evening, or early morning. The circumstances are random and of no particular importance, and suddenly, I can't breathe. I find myself submerged, liquid sealing me in. I'm struggling to surface, though what is up or down is unknowable, and I'm panicking, my lungs squeezing tight, and then, when I think I can take no more, mercifully the awareness comes: it's only a dream.

And it is a dream, and simultaneously, no dream at all. I am suffocating, caught on the cusp between here and there, dream and waking, suffocation and breath. That high wire act over the void, with no net.

I am speaking of dissolution. So complete that there's no one, and no one thing to know it was ever otherwise. Everything is illusion and the trick's played out—family, lovers, friends, the earth, the spinning stars and planets—gone, and I am on the brink of disappearing with it, as alone as I have ever been in my skin, and my hold on that, tenuous.

And then, like a hand, something is hauling me upward, through the seal of dreaming, and into the waking instant, where I continue to die, my lungs still paralyzed, caught somewhere back in the dream. At some semi-waking level, I understand I am holding my breath, as I must have been doing for however long it has taken me to rouse, but I cannot yet comprehend enough to take that next step. And then I am bolting upright, not knowing how else to break the stranglehold. My lungs crack open, and draw in air on a long, squeezed whistling. I sit up in bed, panting, staring into the dark, waiting for the material world to manifest itself, to gather its form from darkness. I stare into the night to watch for the chest and drawers to reappear, the closet, the curtains over the window, some one thing that will reassure me I'm still here. And when it arrives, that realization that I have made it back this one more time, I sit a long while, savoring that pull of air and release. Though there is now this new thing to ponder as well: I know now how I look on those nights that I rise up suffocating. I have seen it in my father's face.

Easter week is the biggest celebration of the canonical year. Everything else, His birth, the teachings in the temples and on the hills, each and every miracle—even raising Lazarus from the dead—just a warm up for the big one, the resurrection—that hallmark of Christian faith, belief in the afterlife, proof positive in an empty tomb.

Good Friday. Services are in the evening. They will be brief—my favorite of the season. But it is late morning now, nearing the noon hour. My mother's in the kitchen, at the ironing board, the smell of warm starch bracing the air. Outside the weather is fine, a spring morning, with the sun full on the weedy fields of play next door. Our mother sends us outdoors with the admonishment to: "Try not to be hellions. This is the day of our Lord's death." We know that between

the hours of twelve and three, she will keep silence in respect for His passing. Sounds like a good game to me. We try it.

It quickly disintegrates into who can get the other to speak first. I never win, but eventually Mary fails as well and so we give it over.

This is what I remember best about those Good Fridays as a child. Running out in the fields pretending to be a horse, or screaming down the small hill out back for the sheer joy of noise, slugging Wiffle balls to watch their wobbling flight in the growing wind—because the wind is picking up. The hours have passed, as fleet as our feet: twelve, one, two, two-thirty, and it is on the cusp of three that the world changes.

My sister had foretold it, even as I had pointed out the cloudless morning to dispute her. “You wait and see,” she said. “Come three o’clock, it’ll turn stormy. Just like it did when He died.” And then she’d gone on to recount the tale of His death, the earthquakes, the rending of the temple, the dead rising into the world of the living.

And now, here it is, three o’clock, and the sun is a dull, quicksilver bead behind the bank of clouds, and the wind is picking up, the field grit rising into a dirty cloud around us, the trees bending. And then the cracks of thunder, and I’m shrieking again, as is my sister, the both of us running wildly for the house. I am in terror of what must happen next, the earth opening beneath my feet. “They killed Him,” my sister yells.

I’m running for home, trying to put the storm, and my sister behind me, along with all the dead I am sure are now populating the air about me. I’m winded, and terrified, and exhilarated in a way I don’t understand, the entire morning and afternoon’s tension having strung tight and tighter has wound out to this inevitable flight from a story that has somehow stepped outside the realm of narrative and deposited itself wholly physical into the world. I head for the tidy house, that harbor of light in the storm, hit the porch on a leap, my sister a short few steps behind me and into the house that has remained

miraculously as it has always been, the humble couch and wing-back chair, the smell of starch still lingering in the rooms, and I rush into the arms of my mother who has happily regained the power of speech.

It is as close to mysticism as I will ever get.

We gather around his bedside. It's early evening, the dinner hour; my father's dinner—chicken, peas, mashed potatoes, pudding—cools on the neglected tray. He is more restless this evening than he has been any previous night. It is going to be a difficult night. I look around—and we are a sorry troop: my brother and sister-in-law, my sister, myself, all of us wan and glazy-eyed from this endless wake. I'm on a full course of antibiotics that have done little to relieve the stress in my chest. I think it ironic that I expressed concern to the hospital staff about being here. "Are you afraid your father will catch something?" And of course, I'm thinking precisely that. As if it would matter. Likewise, my brother finds it difficult to administer the morphine, as if our father will become addicted. And my sister? Has yet to tell my father to let go. Each of us, even though we are fully capable of intellectualizing the finality of his illness, still resist actually knowing it.

I hit the morphine pump, hoping it will ease him into quiet. He's struggling upward, and my brother reaches over, settles him back in. My father is plucking at his sheets, a thing I know the dying do in the last stages. His head pivots toward us on the thin neck, and looks at us as strangers, "I have to get up," he says.

My brother says, "No, Dad. You stay put. You need to rest."

"I've got to get up. Why, can't you see? I have to build a door. That door. I need to get it in the house." He's reasoning with us, pointing to the empty space left of his bed, roughly where Mary and I stand.

This goes on for the better part of the evening, his building the door. We all understand what it's about. On previous evenings it was

luggage he was packing for his imaginary move. Tonight, he's packed, ready to go. He just needs a way out.

I'm dreading the evening's watch, although for this, what is to be the last evening, my sister has taken over the harder late-night shift, will see my father as I have, struggling up in panic at the edge of whatever abyss it is he stares into while suffocating.

It's been five days since he's been lucid—the day I arrived home to be with him at the hospital. Five days. The afternoon in which he bade every one of us—children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces and a grand niece—farewell. Sat in the hospital bed, sheets tucked about his legs, and gave us all personally one specific, appointed task: we were told to take care of wives, or husbands, parents or children. "Be sure they have enough food to eat. A good home."

From all of us, he demanded we take care of our remaining Aunt: my mother's sister, Francis. "Help Francis up the stairs. She has trouble with that. And you call her every evening, just to talk, be sure she's all right."

It's when I'm alone with him, the others having congregated in the hallway, that his advice takes a departure. "You going to be okay?" he asks. I understand, it's my living alone so far from home and family that has him worried.

"I'll be fine," I say, as I always have when faced with his fatherly worries.

"You got enough money?"

I nod again.

He looks me in the eyes, says, "You'll do good." He's sinking into himself, a foreshadowing of the diminishment the upcoming days will bring. I hear whispered conversation in the hallway, quiet crying. He waves me closer. "Is it all right now?" He asks. "You know?"

I don't understand what it is he's asking.

"Is it all right now? Is it time?" he says.

It's then I read in his eyes what I cannot comprehend in other ways. I understand what it is he's asking, though I can't, for the life of me, understand why it is me he asks this of, what it is he thinks he sees in me that has the answer. He knows better than I possibly can, how close he is to the end, so what really is it he wants of me?

I want to look away, find my sister, my brother, to take shelter with the rest of them in the hallway. But my father keeps me there, holds me with his eyes and will not let go until I have faced the thing he needs for me to face. The thing I need to say to make it all right for him. A year ago, I had bound him to this place. Now? It is my blessing he seeks. I take a deep breath. I don't know if I can find the words. I don't know if I can find the voice to say the words. He is looking at me, not as someone who asks for judgment, but just its kind release. He is clear-eyed, utterly weary.

I nod my head and try to smile, struggling against the thing rising to choke me. "Yes, Dad." I tell him, "It's time."

He smiles back. It's the last lucid moment he has.

1966. I am seventeen. It is Holy Saturday. I have never had trouble believing absolutely in this one: laying Christ in the tomb, rolling the door shut. The day of grief. Of abandonment. I'm sitting in St. Lawrence church on the near South Side of Milwaukee. It is a stately old church, with vaulted ceilings, enormous stained glass windows, a full pipe organ in the choir loft. It is the church I have attended since we moved back to the city from our small home in the country. I have attended hundreds of Masses here. Sung in the choir for weddings, and funerals. It is as familiar as my home, but this night I turn a blind eye to it all. I'd planned on going out with friends tonight, believing I had already served my time with Holy Thursday and Good Friday services, as usual. But I had been forced to go with them to Holy Saturday services as well. "You live in this house? Are you still part of

this family? Yes? Well, then you go to church with us.” That was my mother. My father tries to tease me out of it. I want nothing of it. I want nothing of them. After all, it’s the sixties and I’m young, rebellious and eager to join this new, freewheeling world out there.

But I sit, buried alive for two hours in church, while the priest dithers on about this and that, blessing water and fire and I can’t believe they’re making me do this. I think, I can’t wait until this is over. I think, I can’t wait until I can move out. I do not look at my parents, try as they will to engage me with a hand, a smile, offering to share the missal. My father smiles, teases the back of my neck with his fingers, a playful gesture I have known forever. I slap his hand away. I move farther down the pew, out of their reach. I am up and out of the church before the last amen is said, before my sister or parents have time to stand. I am leaving them in the dust, breaking out of the suffocating incense and all the relentless mumbo jumbo into the cool night air. It is my first overt step away from my faith, a movement that will progress and last thirty-odd years. It starts this small: I can’t believe they dragged me here. I can’t believe they believe this crap.

I can’t believe.

We drive the thirty-some miles into Milwaukee, through the dreary day, through the relentless gray of a Wisconsin February. My brother has called us back to the hospital, though we’d just left there an hour ago. I rush down the gray highways through the blur of traffic, my particular gift today being that I also have my father’s lead foot. We arrive at the hospital in record time. In the room, my brother stands over the bed, talking to our father, and Barbara his wife looks up with relief. “Thank God, you’re here,” she says.

Dale says, “He’s waited for you. I told him you were both coming, and to just hold on.”

It's surprising what change has occurred in the short hour since we'd left. His breathing has gone thin as glass.

Dale says, "They're here, Dad." And then, to all our amazement, he smiles. That same sweet smile I have been blessed with all my fortunate life. We recognize it, even though his face is greatly altered by exhaustion, pain, and dehydration. Never mind that horror. He smiles, his eyes open and clear. We kiss his forehead, his cheeks. We hold his hands, my sister having wrapped his plain beaded rosary around his fingers and thumb.

It's now that I hear my sister say for the first time: "It's all right, Daddy, you can go."

It is my brother who begins it—the calling of names. I do not know what inspires him, what or who it is at his elbow that steers him, but he says our mother's name, Clara, and I follow with Dad's mother's name, Emma.

It is dim in the room, the morning seeming to sink into deeper gloom as we hold fast around the bed. We alternate, calling the long list of beloved and departed, as if we might summon them whole, into our presence to ease his way: Helen, Rhoda, Harry, Beatrice, Desi, Gene, John, Sylvia, Ed, George. The list coming to us and moving on in an airy processional, until we come to an end. And beyond what seems all possibility, still our father holds on.

I am on the edge of despair, believing now that my doubts have been founded, and it is, as I have always feared, that there is nothing beyond, that my father stands at the edge of the abyss, beyond which there is only the long fall through darkness. Why else would he hesitate?

It is at that moment my brother says the one name we have overlooked. I had almost forgotten about him. And how is it possible that I would forget that younger brother I used to daydream about. The one, for whose death I've always born some private measure of guilt. I

think of him now, and the story of my mother laboring on the delivery table, hours past the time when the physician should have been alarmed. While inside of her, the tear I had made while being delivered breach, pulls apart, making of her womb a drowning pool in which my brother takes his first breaths.

I try to imagine the man he would have become, the last of us to take his place here. There is one picture, in a yellowed envelope, tucked away in the drawer along with my father's few treasured keepsakes. Taken by the undertaker, the picture is of a small wooden coffin, and inside the coffin is an infant, swaddled in silk winding cloths. It is the sole remaining artifact of the baby delivered up for burial by the young, grieving father, while his young wife lay near death.

"Michael."

How do I speak of what happened? How do I put it into words, or say, having found those words, who out there will believe, as I have never been able to, without seeing for themselves?

I hear the name of Michael, and with it the gray that has clamped down upon us this long past week lifts like a lid from over the city. There is the sudden shock of light dousing the window, spilling across the floor and over the sheets and my father's form, and over my father's face I watch the calm that deeply settles. There follows a last exhalation. It is soft, the sound, and with its final release, what remains is this tender shell. And I understand it is my father's final gift, as gentle a lesson as I have ever been graced with. It is so quiet, this passage. The face of his death is neither fear nor despair, regret nor abandonment. Instead, there is a translucence, an opacity of skin and tissue, and I see that the thing that gave him substance and form—the truest shape of the man—was that final breath, and that final breath was so much more than air. We stand, my father's children, Dale, Mary, and Claire, with the name of that last child still resonating among us—Michael, all of us finally together. And in that moment, in the light

of my father's death, I see that there is no abyss, save the one I create,
and the weight I have carried from the time I was three, lifts. We stand,
all of us, in the midst of his last exhalation, and as it moves through us,
I tell you, it is an upwelling of joy.

The Good Girl

You are stupid when it comes to cliffs,
always standing too close, disaster on your breath

like booze. The liquor ad's subliminal curl of smoke,
a sword or skull warped in the glass's warm glow—

these are aimed at you. Death is a bit bloodying
your soft mouth, a jockey lashing

your flanks to ribbons. You go for it every
time: the boys who could have been sweet if only;

the highball; the exhilarating leap, thoughtless
of landing. Your mouth opens on the glass's

mouth in a soul kiss again and again. Are you playing
chicken? You seem to expect something from an ending

besides the end, order another spur to the ribs,
neat, just to see what it's like, just for kicks.

What you forget, in the thrilling salt and lime of death's bite,
is that you are good. You forget you would die.

Madeleine Gagnon

[Few flowers grow in this spot]

—translated from the French by Andrea Moorhead

Few flowers grow in this spot, few stems stand up to the salt and wind.

One invents gardens of stones, discovers Nordic cactuses, within.

Through peregrinations and returns, one invents destinies.

In the thin claw marks, last testaments.

[Go off somewhere]

—translated from the French by Andrea Moorhead

Go off somewhere, not very far from the little house overlooking the open ocean.

Go off and remember, with each walk, monuments visited, stone or brick, elsewhere.

Remember also the ruins, often majestic, sometimes humble.

While you walk retrace parts of history, visible to memory.

Even the meticulous cross section of this rock where mica was deposited in the shape of a temple.

And Eureka! I am displacement
when the guy in line behind me asks his girlfriend, "Did the whole basketball
team have to ride their bikes today?"

Here in the far north of the Midwest this is my shadow box life framed by the window

Word Play: David McGee's *Drawings for Lorenzo*

"Language is so vague and complex in its own space," recounts David McGee in conversation about his watercolors, "And, if you put an image there, like Magritte, it's just so full." It is no wonder that McGee mentions the name of the surrealist artist who titled one of his own paintings *The Treachery of Images*. Words may or may not represent what we think but McGee is well aware of their power, especially when juxtaposed with an image.

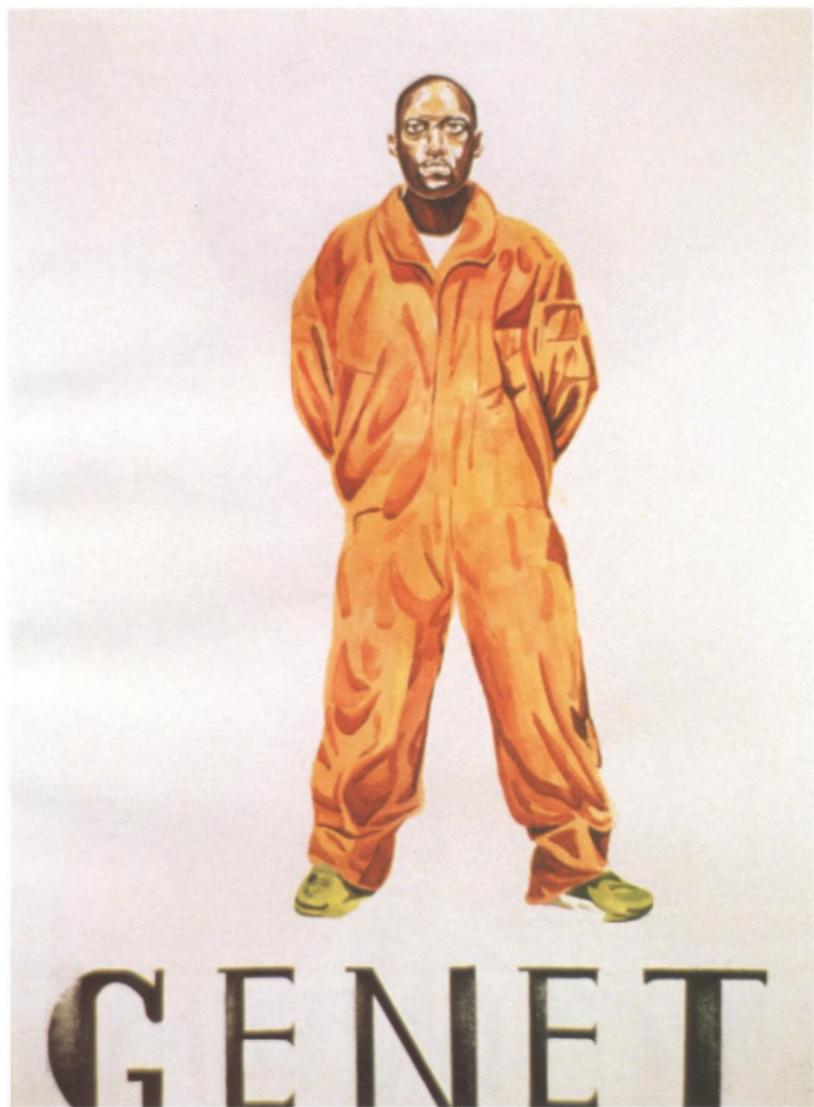
Countless artists have looked to the written word when the visual image just won't do it alone. Imagine if you will: Magritte's painting of a pipe without the disclamatory text: *C'est n'est pas un pipe*. No pop, no punch, it's completely flat, empty—a sign with no signifier, no clue. To some degree the use of the word in painting and drawing looks to put visual art in the service of ideas. Somewhere between the visual poetry of a Lawrence Weiner or an Adam Pendleton and the fully loaded phototext constructions of a Carrie Mae Weems or a Barbara Kruger lies the work of David McGee.

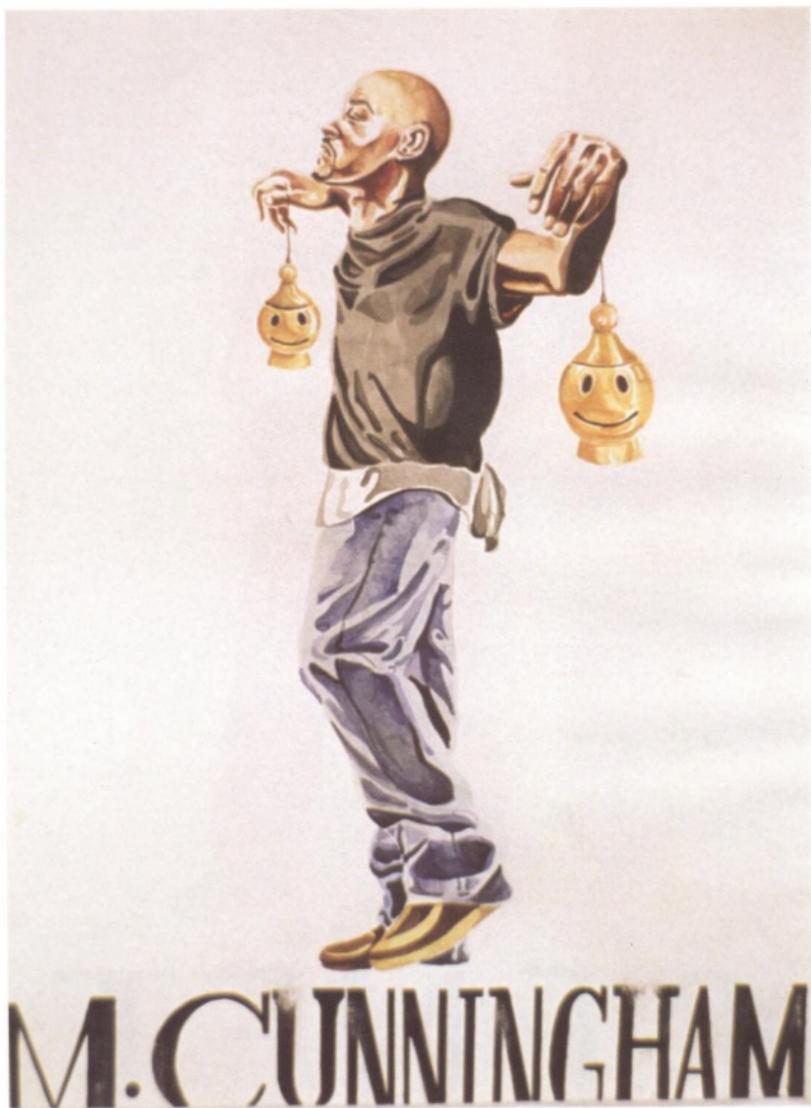
Delighting in the alliterative and associative effects of juxtaposing word and image, McGee's work is as open to readings in the vein of Wittgenstein's word games as it is to lyric poetry. Like Ed Ruscha or Glenn Ligon, McGee is a painter first and foremost, as concerned with the visual qualities of words as with their literal signification. Unlike the work of the aforementioned, who often employ universal blocky fonts, McGee's words in these drawings evoke the graphic signage of turn-of-the-century European modernism, one that is undeniably built by hand and not machine—draftsmanship mixed with a nod to conceptualism. Yet, it is the crisp lines of these drawings that are so pronounced in contrast to McGee's own paintings with their heavily gestured expressionist lines hinting at the action behind the process of painting on canvas. And, it is in his paintings with their gaudy titles like *Socialite in Spring (Portrait of a Bitch)*, *The Homosexual*, or *God in the Chocolate Factory* that McGee's deep interest in the multifarious possibilities of language becomes readily apparent.

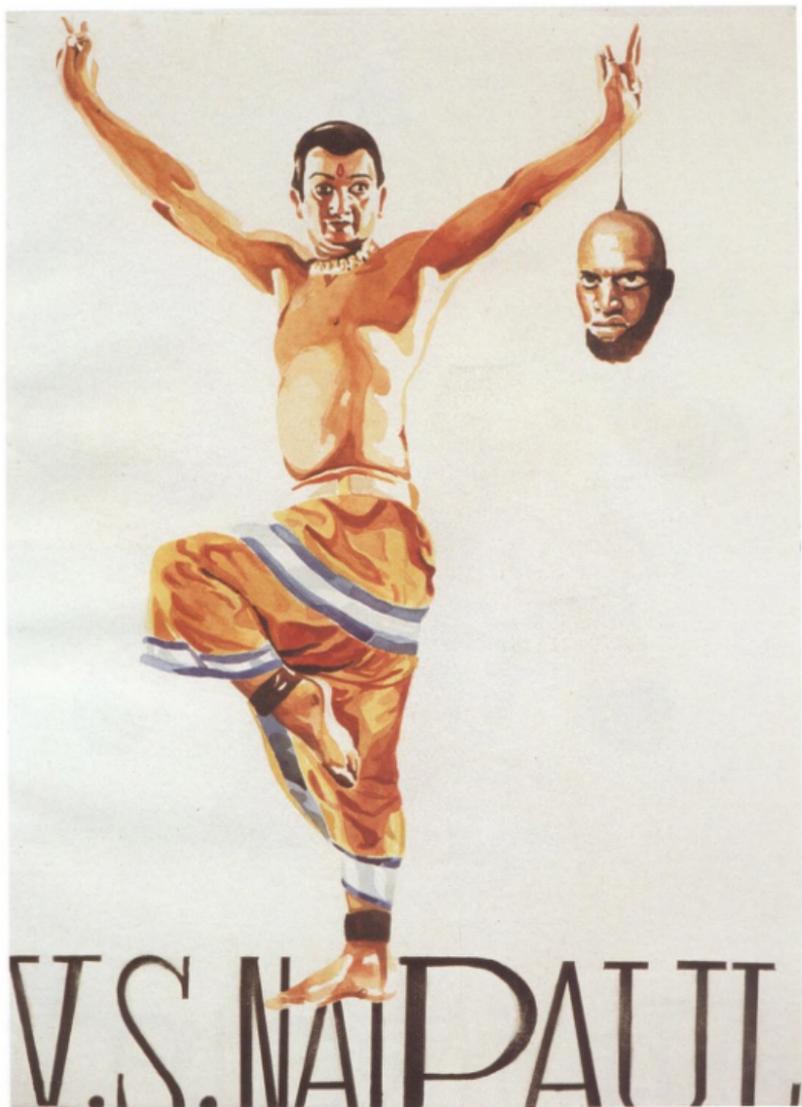
Invoking masters of modern literature and dance—those with French names like Genet, Scottish-American names like Cunningham, and Trinidadian-British-Indian names like Naipaul—McGee’s text-and image-based watercolors invite as many questions as they provide answers. On first glance, the figure in *Genet* looks a lot like Tupac, the poet, actor and emcee who shared Genet’s youthful exuberance for rebellion; the severed head held in the hand of the artist’s *Naipaul* bears a striking resemblance to the rapper Freeway, and the dancing figure in *M. Cunningham* looks a lot like the famed wordsmith Rakim.

Recalling the importance of the intersection between poetry and the spoken word, it is fitting that McGee would title this selection of works *Drawings for Lorenzo*, after Lorenzo Thomas, the Black Arts Movement poet and longtime resident of Houston who died in 2005. While these works belong to an ongoing series of hundreds of works on paper, this selection is at once representative and astutely selective. Like Lorenzo, McGee is a poet of sinewy and brooding lines that point to lyrical narratives. His work speaks to us—powerfully, visually, and literally.

Drawings for Lorenzo

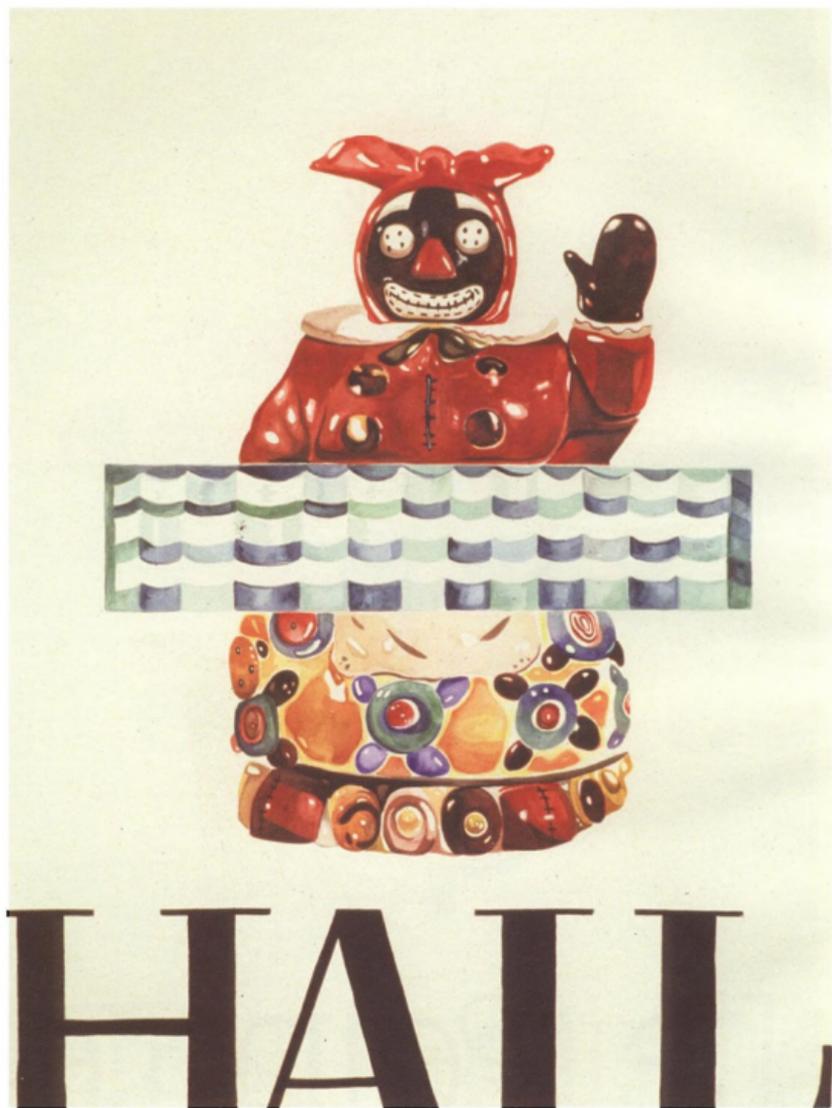














POOL



FRANCE

Drawings for Lorenzo

1. *Genet*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Fredericka Hunter and Ian Glennie
2. *M. Cunningham*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Fredericka Hunter and Ian Glennie
3. *V. S. Naipaul*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Collection of the artist
4. *Je t'aime*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Collection of Eliot Perry, German Town, Tennessee
5. *Le Peintre*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Collection of Jim Petersen, Houston, Texas
6. *Hail*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. J.B. Fairbanks, Houston, Texas
7. *Pool*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Collection of Emily Todd, Houston, Texas
8. *France*, 2005
Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches
Collection of the artist

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David McGee: *Drawings for Lorenzo*

"When I begin to do my work, I don't sketch. I script it. I have to read it first. So, it has to read well. . . . When I start my work . . . I figure out who the protagonist/antagonist is going to be."¹

Houston-based artist David McGee is an avid reader. He takes cues from such writers as Conrad Aiken, Derek Walcott, and Rimbaud, improvising his images from given texts. McGee equates his painting practice with reading and the spoken word: "Painting is a quality of feeling. And that is what language is, qualities of feeling." The eight images gathered here encompass a remarkable range of characters and storylines within the artist's recent oeuvre, a cacophony of socio-political relationships that begins with infamous French author Jean Genet and vanguard choreographer Merce Cunningham.

McGee frequently puts images and text in conversation with one another. In *Genet* and *M. Cunningham*, for example, the text presumably identifies the figure in the portrait. It is immediately clear, however, that, although the figures and their namesakes correspond, the names beneath the portraits do not identify their subjects in a traditional sense. Merce Cunningham, for example, appears as a hip-hop dancer dangling two smiling lanterns attached by threads to his fingers, while Jean Genet—who himself was imprisoned for numerous offenses—becomes an inmate wearing the bright orange jumpsuit found in today's penitentiaries. It is this deliberate juxtaposition that allows the image and the text to engage. By casting these two historical figures as contemporary black men, McGee illuminates a racial divide that overshadows Western social identity, that of the segregation of black icons from the larger cultural canon. Genet and Cunningham are still broadly categorized as icons of modern culture, despite having transgressed against social mores by being openly homosexual, whereas authors and dancers like James Baldwin and Janet Collins are primarily classified only within their African American ethnicity.

In a related group of works, McGee addresses exoticism, a position which belies the racism that persists toward such formerly colonized peoples as Africans, Algerians, and Indians.² McGee found in V.S. Naipaul, the Trinidadian-born British novelist of Indian heritage, a perfect antagonist for exploring this thread. Naipaul's works have received harsh criticism for their portrayals of India and the Caribbean caste systems. Upon seeing an interview with the author, McGee launched into a consideration of the classism and exoticism Naipaul allegedly exploits in his descriptions of African Americans and Indians alike.³ In portraying Naipaul, McGee expresses his distaste of the author's ambivalent stance, depicting his protagonist as a Tantric figure swinging an Afro-Arab head.

Je t'aime is "V.S. Naipaul run-off," says McGee. Shortly after reading Naipaul's *One Out of Many*, the artist watched Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*. Both stories depict an affair between an African American character and an Indian one, their relationships tainted by the caste systems that survive in the two post-colonial cultures. Other key films and texts occupied his attention at same time, including Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, Albert Camus' *American Journals*, and James Baldwin's recollections of Paris. In *Je t'aime*, McGee encapsulates the "humming" of these seemingly disparate—yet actually analogous—sources in the form of a Whirling Dervish hanging Sambo heads from her waist.

In *Le peintre*, McGee conflates this imagery with personal experience. In particular, the piece relates to his relationship with the artist Shazia Sikander, whose works fuse South Asian miniature painting with contemporary styles. McGee became acquainted with Sikander during her tenure in Houston and observed that Americans often demanded a heightened exoticism of the Pakistani artist, despite her resistance to being so branded. Although McGee noted Sikander's ability to make herself more exotic by "painting an Indian-ness," the figure in *Le peintre* is not Sikander; it is McGee: "In the script, when I wrote it first, this was supposed to be me, and this [the pierced figure]

was supposed to be me too.” The painter, in ekapada-asana posture wearing a headdress that skewers a black puppet, is McGee laying out his double consciousness: “I find myself doing this more and more as I get older, adapting. . . . I got that from James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* where he casts himself as a white homosexual. And that is the only way to make art sometimes: to cast yourself as something else.”⁴

McGee’s interest in racial labeling was exacerbated by the events leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina. In a new group of works, McGee exposes the stereotypes prevalent in the media coverage of the event by resurrecting two of the most controversial icons of African American kitsch—the Mammy and the Minstrel. *Hail*, for example, contains a Mammy figurine with button eyes, a stitched mouth, and a bejeweled skirt. When combined with this image, the word “Hail” carries multiple connotations. It connotes the dense rain, which bombarded the city during the hurricane itself as well as the subsequent floods. In relation to her wave, on the other hand, “Hail” implies praise, salutation, or even one’s origins, as in “Nearly all of the victims hail from New Orleans.” Most pertinent, however, it refers to a way of attracting attention to oneself or a particular “pool” of people. The related work *Pool* sets up a parallel dialectic. The title can refer to a population segregated by a specific set of circumstances, or to a small body of water, recreational or otherwise, illustrated by the swimsuit-clad figure. McGee’s decision to alter his compositional strategy by partially obscuring the figures in both works behind a body of water reinforces his argument that the sensationalist coverage of Katrina obscured the rampant racism of its aftermath, evidenced by the misrepresentation of those devastated by the tragedy and their abandonment by the United States government.

McGee peels away another layer of reference in the final watercolor in this selection, a snake centered on the page like an emblem, hovering above the word “France.” For McGee, the snake’s striations resemble traffic flows during the evacuations. At the same time, the twisted form references the elevated freeways of New Orleans, where displaced families took refuge. Combined with the word “France,” this image

addresses the discrimination that persists overseas as well. France experienced its own reckoning in November 2005, when French citizens of Algerian and Muslim descent began rioting in the suburbs of Paris. By merging these two contemporary events with the image of a snake, McGee insinuates that cultures condoning racism tie themselves in knots, are venomous, and slowly poison themselves to death.

Although conceptual threads tie this series together, the individual watercolors were not conceived as a set group until McGee selected and arranged them for this issue of *Gulf Coast*. McGee's title, *Drawings for Lorenzo*, refers to Lorenzo Thomas, the Houston-based poet who died on the Fourth of July, 2005. The title is not a tribute to Thomas in a traditional sense, but a postscript to the broader narrative that McGee undertakes with this sequence. Thomas is the artist's final protagonist, someone who invokes an idea, literarily, that he appreciates: "Lorenzo . . . could weave himself in and out of understanding different things." A prolific writer, who often incorporated black vernacular English in his poetry and who played an important role in the Black Arts Movement, Thomas helped shape African American literature by emphasizing its role as a significant form of cultural critique. In a review of McGee's paintings, Thomas confers this role on McGee's work as well: "David McGee's bold and challenging new work reminds us that artists—particularly African-American [sic] artists—once unashamedly identified themselves as intellectuals."⁵

McGee's ability to effectively interpret the events of his time is matched by his passionate willingness to codify how others do the same, whether he agrees with them or not. In this sequence alone, McGee traces his conceptual journey from such cultural signifiers as Genet and Cunningham, through novels by Naipaul and travel writings by Camus, and to events just a few miles down Interstate Highway 10. It is this blend of literary and contemporary consciousness that differentiates McGee's works from others who treat similar themes. McGee cherishes the written word, acknowledging freely the impact it has had on art and his life. "It is the lyricism and the musicality of poetry that helps breed the image,"

McGee has stated. "*Drawings for Lorenzo* is the closest to poetry that I can get because it is obvious that I am never going to be a poet the way I want. . . . So, this is the way that I can do it."

1 David McGee, in discussion with the author about *Drawings for Lorenzo*, December 2006. Subsequent quotations by the artist are from the same interview.

2 Thoroughly articulated by Edward Said, *Orientalism* refers to the study of populations that have been subjugated to the political domination of other cultures.

3 Another antagonist in McGee's repertoire is African American columnist and critic Stanley Crouch, who also condemns pedantic representations of minorities, characterizing basketball player and rapper personas as new minstrels. For McGee, both Naipaul and Crouch represent an unwillingness to accept the "cultural significance" of these archetypes.

4 Coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, the term "double-consciousness" refers to an awareness of being informed by two distinct cultures.

5 Lorenzo Thomas, "David McGee: Tetelestai: Notebooks of the Black Sea," *ArtLies* 41 (Winter 2003-04): 86.

Crows

—translated from the French by Anne Carson

I thought I saw in my heart a flock of crows,
roving my inside moors with funeral swoops,
big crows down from famous mountains,
passing in moonlight, lamplight.

Like grief, like a circling over graves,
they smell zebra flesh,
they plane down my spine in a shiver of ice—
at the beak a dangle of meat.

And this spoil licked by the demons of night
was only my own Life in tidbits—
my own vast boredom circling upon her every minute,

ripping off mouthfuls—
my soul, fleshrot dropped on a field of days
for those old crows to chew down whole.

Funeral Marches

—translated from the French by Anne Carson

I hear in me the funeral voices
 call out transcendently,
 when in German style
 the bands go beating by.

At a mad shiver of my vertebrae
 if I sob like a lost man,
 it's that I hear the funeral voices
 call out transcendently.

As a ghostly gallop of zebras
 my dream goes strangely prowling
 and I am so haunted
 that in me always, inside my darkneses

I hear the funeral voices groan.

Hospital Night Dream

—translated from the French by Anne Carson

Cecilia in white like one of those paintings
 where the saint appears with halo on head
 and them in chairs—God, Mary and Joseph
 and me listening from near the stairs.

At a sudden mystic flare of big lamps
 roars out an odd harmony, little short beats,
 and harp on top . . .
 earthly musics—quiet, you vulgar voices!

No more sin for me, no more pleasure.
 My saint said if I want to hear her again
 I must look to my salvation on earth.

 Yes I'd like to show up for the next recital—
 she owes me one on that planet of hers,
as soon as the angels get me out of hospital!

Night Confession

—translated from the French by Anne Carson

Priest, I am haunted, it's night in the city
my soul is a box of mortal black sins,
horrible sadness rains onto the sidewalk
and no one comes along.

All is quiet, all is asleep, vast solitude
sickens itself on a gasp of old mansions.
Priest, I am haunted, it's night in the city,
my soul is a box of mortal black sins.

In the park in winter in a nasty wind,
comes Lucifer jeering at my broken heart,
mad heart! Look at the suicide grinding his blade,
look there's a good calm hanging tree—

Priest, pray for me, it's night in the city!

from *Hallelujah Blackout*

Be stunned the dark hymns
In this playhouse

I promise *your giving*

It up will be fine *for the scars*

Are corded with forgetting

& all of this happens each midnight— mayflies hardening the lampposts
Bruised purple & weeping

Under the skinny-boned tree with no words to say
I go mercy-faced & everything to me whispers *no biggie*

Motherfucker *we'll break you too*
Infested finally & terrible in the knuckle-branched black

Sawing Tinfoil

The spilled pitcher of dimes blazes the hollow & alone

& denying face or body, the legless

Dog recedes in the hammock

A hymn that has been stolen again & again by looking up, fisting

The armless blue

This striptease of leaves & flies

We have no answer for that which makes it clear that the throat
Doesn't understand up or down

Goddamnit, I am praying

To be good

King of the honest-night with pitchfork & the sky splitting mirrored
Asleep in the yard. Asleep without silver lining & what you are not

Wishbone-moon tugged loose from the living & voice stacked, haunting

I won't go in the cellar if each part is twice as large again as belief

As anything measured with a mou

Count & rattle them spoon:

Switchblade the glass & heads spin. Inch by inch the push is torn & bronzed
Into ripeness. For my tumbles, my pocketful of sharked-tremors

This rodeo skin & under weeping

One by one, dissolving

This is the factory of exactly right & wingless birds

A ghost that comes in the night

To caress endless snakeskins of trash

We will be divided into good times that must hang

Frozen-hooked & high on amphetamines

Wet bits & dry bits, soft bits & hard bits, but none of these bits is punk rock

We have two ways of thinking about crying

We depict it as rainbowed oil or angels

Waiting in parked cars

It is all so easy now that everywhere light is the same in this miserable heaven

Anyone who wants to come over can

coming undone
shirt white as breath coming

away in rough squares
body as bodhisattva

in the middle of the stage
pliantly sleeping

through the belt's
unbuckling, hair being shorn

mouth opened to pry
the tongue-metal

like a rule of losing
brought to a clear system

the eyebrows are being
erased, the hair in the pits

the crossed legs unbent
for the blade

the fur on the arms
swept white, wiped infant

it takes this many hands
to make him disappear

what was taken away
now piled beside what is left

Becky Hagenston

The Scenic Route

Somewhere on the way to California, before Tombstone but after El Paso, with the air conditioner wheezing and my father cursing and my mother flapping Wet Naps at her forehead, my little brother Benny decided to be kidnapped. Or rather, he decided he already was, that both of us were, and that our parents were no longer Glen and Lois Morrison of Hershey, Pennsylvania, but a couple of crazed escaped cons who had snatched us from our beds. For what reason? Why did they want us? It didn't occur to me to ask him then, and now—sixteen years later—the question seems too trivial to bring up. Why are you thinking about that now? he'd ask. And he wouldn't answer me even if I could tell him.

When he finally opens his eyes, he says, "What the fuck are you doing here?" and then squints, taking in the unfamiliar room—my studio apartment, purple and yellow like an Easter egg, painted by a man whose name I can't remember. It's something I like to do when I'm with someone new: paint my apartment. Once I made a man drive me to a Wal-Mart in New Jersey at four in the morning and we bought two gallons of Sunset Surprise, which he kept calling Sunset Salami because that's the color it was, really. My apartment looked like the inside of a sausage.

Benny was in my apartment once, but I know he doesn't remember. He was fresh out of his first stint at rehab and he looked scared to death. My walls were chartreuse then. Our mother sat beside him with her hand on his knee, as if afraid he might float out the window if she let go.

"Good God," Benny says, sitting up on my sofa. "Well, what time is it?" He looks at the clock on the wall, but it's been stuck at 2:55 for weeks. I'm shocked to see how sunken Benny's face is, how sallow. At the police station, I'd focused only on getting us both the hell out of there, and then there was the taxi ride, when he puked and we got evicted—if that's what you call it—and walking from Delancey to Rivington in the sleet, and then I had to help him up six flights of stairs to my apartment. It's only now that I'm letting myself get a good look at him, at the brother I haven't seen in nearly five years and who is starting to look like our father. Not that I would ever tell him that.

"It's nearly three," I say, because maybe it is. I move the trash can closer to Benny, in case he might puke again.

"Happy fucking new year." He reaches for a glass of water, swallows like he's trying to choke down thumbtacks. Then he looks at me and grins and says, as if recognizing me for the first time, "Violet. I'll be damned."

It was the Magic Marker smell that did it, that made our father finally say, "What the hell is going on back there?"

I looked over at Benny, who was frowning at a piece of newspaper: the *El Paso Times*. He had a giant Magic Marker poised over the classifieds and was just finishing up the P in the word HELP.

"Goddammit, Benny," said our father, craning around and causing our mother to gasp a little, even though the road was straight and nearly empty and had been for miles. "You can't use that thing in the car."

Our mother rolled down her window and started fanning herself. "It's dangerous, Benny," she said. "Your father could pass out from the fumes and then we'd get in an accident."

Benny hadn't paused in his writing, and now the letters were huge and dark enough to stand out over the newsprint: HELP CALL

POLICE. He finished the last two letters quickly and folded up the newspaper.

"I'm sorry Mr. and Mrs. Morrison," he said to our parents, who didn't seem to notice the formality. "I'm finished now." I remember thinking he must've bought the marker back at the Walgreens in El Paso, when we stopped for Dramamine. He gave me an anxious, kind look. "Don't worry, Violet," he said quietly.

Benny was eight and I was fourteen, and I was convinced that I was the only sane, normal person in the car, the only one who appreciated that we were traveling across the country, far away from Hershey, Pennsylvania. I'd brought along a notebook to write down the interesting sights we passed along the way—and we did only pass them, since our father refused to slow down for anything. So far we had passed signs for Harper's Ferry; Graceland; the Cowboy Hall of Fame; Juarez, Gateway to Mexico; and various billboards in Texas that promised you a free meal if you could eat a 72-ounce steak.

And I remember how, the whole way across the country, the highway shimmered in the heat, reflecting the sky. It was the same color my walls were once, painted with the last man I lived with. It was a calm color, something safe that I could fall into; and sometimes even when I closed my eyes it stayed there, glowing inside my lids.

Benny and I are sitting cross-legged on my floor, and I'm trying to help him recreate the past couple of days, up to three hours ago when I got a call from a police station in Queens, telling me to come pick up my brother.

"I remember waking up," he says, "but I don't remember what day it was. It could have been this morning. It could have been yesterday." He shrugs and lights a cigarette.

"Well, where were you when you woke up?"

"I was in a basement. There was a girl asleep on the floor, in a sleeping bag. I got my shit and left, and when I walked outside, it was snowing. I couldn't believe it. It was so beautiful, I just stood there a while. And then I went to a bar. And then . . . I bashed some guy's face in. Wish I could remember why."

"It snowed this morning. So what you're remembering—that was today." I'd woken up in my clothes, hungover, the alarm clock screaming on the floor, and I barely made it to the Empire Café in time to clock in. I'm a hostess, a terrible hostess—the hostess with the leastest, as my boss likes to say. But he's not going to fire me because he's a little in love with me, and I let him believe he has a chance. I spent all day seating tourists who had just emerged from the Empire State Building, windblown and wearing Styrofoam Statue of Liberty crowns and talking about wanting to see the ball drop.

"Okay, good." Benny nods. "That's something. Before that . . . I think I hitchhiked from Florida."

One week ago, I'd called the last number I had for him, in Fort Lauderdale, and left a message on a girl's answering machine, something like, "If Benny lives here, could you tell him his mother died? And the funeral's on Tuesday, in Hershey? Thanks. This is his sister."

"Well, you missed the funeral anyway. Uncle Floyd asked about you. I told him you were a rocket scientist and I think he actually believed me." Actually, nobody asked about Benny. Nobody said a word about him.

Benny leans back on his elbows. He's shaking. "I could use a drink about now," he says, and shoots me a look that means he's going to have a drink whether I give him one or not.

When we passed another sign for Tombstone, the Town Too Tough to Die: Only 89 Miles Ahead! our mother said, "We could call Marjorie

and Carl and tell them we're going to be a day late. I mean really, what's the big rush?"

Our father didn't say anything, but he tensed up as if he was going to have another heart attack right then, and show us once and for all what the big rush was. The reason we were on the trip in the first place was because our father had had a heart attack the previous month and decided we all had to go visit his brother right now—and he wanted to drive so we could see the country. See what part of the country, I wondered? The Motel 6s and the Texacos? Benny was excited about going to Disneyland—which was my fault because I showed him the map, showed him how close we would be.

But it was finally sinking in that we weren't going to be stopping at Disneyland, any more than we stopped at The Cowboy Hall of Fame, any more than we would stop in Tombstone, the Town Too Tough to Die. We would drive until we got to Uncle Carl's house in Torrence, California. And then we would drive home.

"Anybody want to play checkers?" our mother said. She had purchased a magnetized checkers set in Nashville and had been begging us to play ever since, but Benny was the only one who would.

"That would be fine, Mrs. Morrison," he said. "I would enjoy that very much."

"Well, aren't you polite?" she said and smiled at him.

Our mother was thirty-five, infinitely old, a woman who dropped out of college to marry the first man who asked her. She was beyond my comprehension when I was fourteen, and in some ways she still is. Was she ever in love? Years later, she would have a friend—Mr. Ernie, the mechanic who fixed her car, and he came over for lunch once; but was there anything more? I never asked her. When I called to tell her I was leaving my husband, she sighed on the other end of the line and said, "It happens to the best of us."

Benny tapped me on the hand lightly, pointed to the newspaper, and whispered in my ear, "Hold this up in the back window when they're not looking."

"Who was the girl on the answering machine?"

We're tucked away in the back of a bar down the street from my building; there are some streamers on the floor, a drunk couple kissing in the corner, but for the most part, everyone has gone home to wait for morning. A few people walk by, hunched against the wind, half-heartedly blowing on limp noisemakers. They glance toward the windows, and I feel like we're characters inside a painting: *Brother and Sister With Gin*.

"The girl." Benny smiles, and I notice for the first time a rotten tooth in the back of his mouth. I wonder if he'll remember any of this later. "Lisa," he says, taking a drink, his eyes closed in an ecstatic vision. "Lovely Lisa." He opens his eyes, and they seem on fire. "I'm so in love with her, sometimes I can't breathe."

"But this morning you were on the floor with some girl you can't remember."

He shrugs. "So I'm fucked up. Doesn't make me any less in love." He slams his empty glass on the bar like people do in movies and, also like in movies, the bartender moves out of the shadows to refill it. He gives me a look and I remember, or think I do, a drunken night last summer, waking up with the bartender in my bed. But I can't be sure. Maybe it was him; maybe it was someone else. Maybe I dreamt the whole thing. My ex-husband used to wake me up in the middle of the night, saying, "Violet, what's the matter?" because I'd be screaming or laughing or crying. None of which I could manage in my waking life.

"Good for you. Is she in love back?"

"Yes." He stares at me, as if waiting for another question, but I don't have one. Finally he says, "Lisa's got an interesting story. She

used to be Amish, if you can believe that. Grew up in Lancaster, dressed like she was in *Witness* and shit. Milked cows. Baked pies. Went to church. Dropped out of school in eighth grade. And then when she was seventeen, she decided: Screw this, I'm leaving. She got on a bus to Florida. Just up and left. Isn't that fantastic? She'd never seen anything, had never been out of Lancaster County, and she decided to see the world."

"Florida is hardly the world."

"Oh, what the hell do you know. Where have you ever been?"

"I've been to California," I say. "I've been to Nashville. But then, so have you."

He's staring at me as if he has no idea what the hell I'm talking about.

"Okay," I say and light a cigarette even though I quit a week ago.

"So Lisa's been ostracized from her family—shunned—and now she's found you, lucky her."

Benny is shaking his head. "Not shunned. Not at all. She didn't join the church and then leave it, she just never joined. So she's fine, everybody's cool. Her parents are taking the train down to Florida for a visit in the spring. And assuming she hasn't kicked me out again by then, I'll get to meet them."

"So that's what you're doing here. You got kicked out. You needed a place to sleep and to whine."

"And to drink," he says. "Let us not forget that part of it."

I can picture this Lisa, a sturdy girl with red cheeks and long brown hair, fed up with my brother's drinking but always willing to take him back. I wonder if we ever saw her at the Farmers Market, or passed her buggy on the road some Saturday afternoon. I used to wish I could run away and be Amish, until I found out about not being able to drive a car.

"Mom would have been cool if you'd stayed around a little longer," I venture, feeling suddenly drunk and annoyed. The bartender is staring at me, and I consider shooting him the finger. "If you'd drunk yourself into a coma around the house, then she wouldn't have had to quit her job and go looking for you."

Benny is staring steadily into his glass, which is almost empty. "Gin makes me act like less of a prick than other drinks," he says at last. "Vodka makes me a prick. Tequila: total prick. Whiskey makes me violent. Bourbon makes me cry."

"You always wanted to be someplace else, didn't you? You couldn't stand to be around us."

"And you did what? Stayed put and got a nice job. Married an asshole. Got a divorce. Moved to the 'Big City'"—he puts air quotes around it—"And now you live in a shit-hole and paint your room fucked-up colors. Oh, and don't you have some kind of brainless, dead-end job? Very nice. Do you even have any friends?"

I'm trying to muster up a convincing lie when the bartender says, "Hey, last call. These are on the house." And he fills our glasses and smiles at me, and I know I never slept with him, but that I probably will. And maybe I will fall madly in love, and be unable to breathe.

The summer I was fourteen was the first time I ever left a man. Though he wasn't a man—he was a sixteen-year-old named Louis—and I didn't leave him because I wanted to. I cried and wailed and begged my parents not to make me go on that stupid trip, because I knew that if I left Louis even for a week, he would forget all about me.

Louis was a junior and most people were scared of him. He wore the same thing every day—jeans jacket, Levi's and black t-shirt. We had started going out three months earlier, when we got teamed up together in art class to do an anti-smoking collage. Louis loved to smoke, so he had a large collection of cigarette butts and empty packs

of Marlboros that we glued all over the poster board, with big black Xs through them. Louis drew a picture of a big black lung, and even though it looked like a hot-air balloon we still got an A on our collage. After that, we just started hanging out together, eating lunch with his friends at the Stoner Table and going to movies.

I had sex with him the night after my father went to the hospital. I was sure my father would die and I thought that if I had this, this other thing, whatever it was, then I would be all right. We were in Louis' room; it was a Friday, so his mother was off at a Parents Without Partners meeting. "Sharing shit," Louis called it. The TV was going, but I didn't notice until everything was over, and then I sat up and some sitcom was on, and everything in the world seemed completely ridiculous. I had lost my virginity to the sound of a laugh track, and I just thought: That figures.

That night, all alone in my bed, I felt as if everything was swirling around, that my life had turned into something like a covered wagon—we were studying Westward Expansion in American History class—something with spokes and wheels that was moving forward, finally. I also felt completely alone, and it dawned on me for the first time in my life that I wasn't a part of anything at all. Louis was a member of the Stoner group, and my one friend, Charlotte, was on the pep squad, but I didn't belong to anything, and my father was probably dead, and all I knew was that I had to get away from there.

Then, three weeks later, my father said, "We're going to California to see Uncle Carl, and we're taking the scenic route so you kids'll have the chance to see the country."

We walk slowly back to my building; the wind has eased up a little and the sleet has turned into slush beneath our feet. I want to ask Benny how long he's planning to stay with me, or if he's planning to stay at

all, but I'm still pissed at him for what he's said. I'm still pissed that most of it is true.

My ex-husband came to my mother's funeral with his new wife and their one-year-old daughter. He came up to me afterwards and asked how I was and I said I was fine, and I could see in his eyes what he was thinking: You're always fine, even when you shouldn't be. I let him give me a hug, and then I went into my mother's house and stayed there until everyone had gone home. I told the lawyer to pack up everything and sell it. I told him to send me a check.

"We have a small inheritance," I tell Benny, as I fiddle with my keys. "I forgot to tell you."

"Do we ever," he says.

I let him take my arm and help me up the steps.

It was early evening when we stopped at Denny's in Lordsburg, New Mexico, which looked like the kind of place it would be easy to disappear in. The air was hot and there was a gritty wind blowing. Across the Denny's parking lot was a big building that said "Love's" and "A&W Root Beer."

"You didn't do it," Benny hissed at me when we were out of the car. "You were supposed to hold up the sign."

"There was nobody behind us to see it!" But I had forgotten to look. I'd been staring out the window wondering what Louis was doing, and if he missed me. "I will," I promised. "As soon as we leave."

"It might be dark by then." He frowned, then sighed, his little shoulders sinking. "You know they're imposters, don't you? They're not our real parents. Our real parents are tied up in the basement back in Pennsylvania."

"Sure," I told him.

Our mother was having her usual difficulty getting out of the car. She had to shift all the objects off her lap—Wet Naps, checker set, maps,

playing cards—and distribute them throughout the car. She set the Old Maid deck on the dashboard, after our father assured her that the plastic coating wouldn't melt in the sun and glue them all together.

"We could make a run for it," Benny said quietly.

He looked so small and pathetic, standing there in the parking lot in his sweaty Mickey Mouse t-shirt, his blue sneakers untied, the sides of his hands stained with black Magic Marker.

"Stick with me," I said.

"You can have the sofa bed," I tell him. "I'll sleep on the floor."

"What, are you afraid to sleep in the same bed with me? Afraid I might grope you or something?"

"Afraid you might puke on me is what."

"Nah, I'm good now." He's taking off his shoes. The last time we slept in a bed together was probably on that trip to California, in Uncle Carl and Aunt Marjorie's guest room.

And then, because I'm drunk, I say, "I was thinking about the time we went on that trip, and you pretended we were kidnapped. Why'd you do that?"

He doesn't answer for a minute. "Well," he says at last. "I think it was the first time it dawned on me that if those were my real parents, I was fucked. I mean, a hysterical man who's giving himself a heart attack, married to a woman who can't see what's going on right in front of her."

"What was going on right in front of her?"

"Oh come on, Violet. He was drinking himself to death and flirting with every woman he saw. He wanted to escape, too, but somehow managed to bring all the rest of us along for the ride."

"How'd you know all that?"

"I didn't know any of it, not in my brain. I was just wise beyond my years, I guess." He taps the side of his head with his finger and

grins. "A fucking child genius." He swings his dirty feet onto the bed, but the sheets are dirty too, so I guess it doesn't matter. I am setting up blankets on the floor, making a nest for myself. He stretches out and looks down at me. "But you know what's really weird? Mom told me it was the last time she felt really, truly happy. She said she didn't even realize it at the time, but there was a moment when she was happy."

"That was a terrible trip. It was terrible every second, from the time we left the house until Uncle Carl and Dad got in a fist fight."

"Well, whatever. That's what she said."

"When'd she tell you this?"

"When she came to get me in Tucson, found me sleeping on Fourth Avenue and took me to a hotel and got me cleaned up. And she told me I had to realize it was okay not to be happy—to be downright fucking miserable, though I don't think she said 'fucking'. But there would be moments, here and there, when I'd be happy, and I had to be sober to have them." He lies back and looks at the ceiling. "I guess it worked for a few months, believing that."

I settle onto my blankets and point up at the clock. "Hey look, it's still two fifty-five."

"Time stands still when you're drunk."

I turn off the light, and it's only when we are both lying in the dark that I can bring myself to say, "Are you sorry you missed the funeral?"

His voice is soft and seems far far above me. "I didn't miss it. I didn't have any intention of going to it. I came here, to see you. And here I am."

"Here you are," I say.

Inside the Lordsburg Denny's, a waitress who said her name was Juanita led us to a vinyl yellow booth with droopy plastic forget-me-nots in a vase next to the salt and pepper. She gave us three laminated menus.

“Juanita, my sweet chiquita,” our father said, winking at her as he scooted into the booth beside our mother. “You know that song?”

Benny nudged me and gave me a look that I knew was supposed to mean: See? Didn’t I tell you these weren’t our parents?

Juanita said she’d be right back with our water.

“You’re just being embarrassing,” our mother said. “Flirting with that girl. You think waitresses like that? Well, they don’t.” She squeezed her napkin.

Juanita came right back with the water. “Do you need more time?” she asked, digging in her pocket for a pen.

“How much time you got?” said our father.

Juanita said she’d be back in a few minutes.

“If you’re going to act like an ass,” said our mother, “can’t you at least wait until you’re alone?”

“No. I can’t. Why are you so uptight? Relax a little, babe.”

“You want me to relax?”

“Excuse me,” I announced. I got up and walked to the swinging glass doors, pushed them open and went outside. It was nearly-twilight, and the sun—which was different from Pennsylvania sun, more orange somehow—poured right into my eyes no matter where I looked. I walked past the station wagon and across the street to the bank of pay phones outside of Love’s, and called Louis collect. “Who?” said his mother, so I hung up.

Across the parking lot, the glass doors of Denny’s swung open, catching the sun and the reflection of cars going by. Benny emerged, looked both ways, and jogged toward me. As he came closer, I picked up the phone again and said loudly, “That’s right, orange with Pennsylvania plates. Hey,” I said to Benny when he was beside me. “Do you remember our license plate number?”

He stared at me blankly. There was a film of soda or iced tea around his mouth. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “Who is that?”

"Right now, officer, we're at the Love's in Lordsburg. Exit—do you remember which exit this is?"

"No," Benny whispered again, and moved a step closer to me.

"Will they really get arrested?"

"You will arrest them as soon as you can, won't you, officer?" I was trying to cheer Benny up, but it didn't seem to be working.

"I don't want them to go to jail or anything," Benny said, his eyes wide and blinking. "I just want to go to Disneyland."

"I know," I said and hung up. "When I'm famous and rich, I'll take you to Disneyland whenever you want."

Although I was thinking that I didn't even care about being famous and rich, I just wanted everyone to be happy and nice to each other, for Louis to be in love with me, my father to be healthy, my mother to stay young, and my brother to stop looking so sad, tracing his little feet in the gravel.

I looked up to see our father huffing across the parking lot.

"What's going on?" He stopped in front of us, his face red, and swallowed. "You're missing dinner, guys. Don't be complaining later when you're hungry."

"I feel awful," Benny gasped, hugging himself around his middle, and for a moment I thought he was going to fall to the ground. Our father caught one arm and I grabbed the other, and we held my brother up together, steadying him between us.

"Will you be all right?" our father asked. "We'll find a place to stop for the night soon, if you can hold out another hour or two." Benny nodded.

Our father didn't die at the end of the summer; he now lives in a home in Lancaster, his liver and mind all but gone, where Mennonite nurses change his diaper and hold his hand. And Louis and I lasted until Christmas of my junior year, when I confessed that I loved him and he said, nicely at least, that he didn't feel the same way at all.

And now I wonder: Did my mother know then that her husband was trying to drink himself to death, or that he would leave her in two years for another woman? Could she have suspected that her daughter would fail again and again at love, and that she would rescue her son from the streets of Tucson, Arizona? Or did she know only that there were three people—strangers who were tied to her forever—waiting for her to come outside and find them?

My father and I led Benny across the gravel, past our station wagon and toward the Denny's, where our mother was emerging. She opened the glass doors and it seemed as though the entire sky swept toward us, taking all the desert and the sun with it, and she watched us with one hand shielding her eyes. She saw us, raised her hand and waved.

And I know, suddenly, that this was the moment she looked back on, that in this imperfect moment she would find something she could later classify as happiness.

I wish I could say the same thing about right now, and maybe someday I might.

All I know for certain is that when I wake up, Benny will be gone, and I may not hear from him for a long time. I will call his girlfriend in Fort Lauderdale and when she tells me he isn't there, I'll tell her it isn't her fault.

Benny is sound asleep, his breathing slow and steady. The apartment is filling with light, and when I close my eyes, I can conjure an orange station wagon, bearing a man and a woman, a boy and a girl, down some shimmering highway, into a sun that never goes down.

Fiat Lux (Let There Be Light)

—translated from the French by John Kinsella

He walks at the hazy hour when day ends. He walks,
Carrying his long rods. And the double ogive arch
Of the bridge frames water the colour of cock feathers.
He is hot and doesn't have a sou to buy beer.
But wherever his footsteps echo, light
Shines. He's the humble lamplighter
Who, returning home for his meal, sits with his wife,
Lit up by the *chandelle des six*, kisses her,
Without suspecting—no ignorance is unseemly—
That he, modest man, has diamonded the great city.

Note: *Chandelle des six* denotes a candle that was sold six to a pound, rather than four.

Night Song

Servitude. Conquest. The one who, from the hip, keeps pushing himself up into the other's mouth. The one who takes from behind. The more prismatic of the Roman emperors—at each turn of the light, yet another shade

of a near-unstoppable will-to-power, of humiliation's not-so-strange allure. Later, those emperors of the almost-finished second century, who by their own example make a case for submission to what resists control: Hadrian

falls for the boy Antinous; Marcus Aurelius for a stoicism in the face of corruption, plague, barbarians . . . Conquest and servitude; suffering, and suffering's famous ability to bring about a patience that pleasure ultimately has little

time for. I close my eyes. I remain persuadable. I give up what I can. Who's to say what will not be useful?

Tell Me a Story

As for persuasion—little portrait with a fist, some
flowers, in it: that, he remembers; memory like
a faint form of pleasure slowly brushstroking its way
back into what can seem

the world: all the steps and
missteps between necessity and what is good and
what we say is good . . . There's the usual dreaming,
of his own body in three scattered pieces that, seen
from the air, make an almost-triangle, as opposed
to the daily more precise, more unignorable one
that between them love, death,

and ambition make,
shimmering in front of him like heat above a road
in summer, deserted but for the two figures walking
down it—two men, he's guessing: how they walk
close together, but not touching or, when they do—
at the hand, or shoulder—how it's as if

with apology
for a thing neither one of them would say he meant
entirely. It's as if intention, if it had a color, would be
all colors, iridescent, there'd be nothing broken or whole,
just continuous: where they walk could be anywhere.

Remainder

Paltry vest, you bore me, your
corporeal terror, pantomime of youth, of some new
promise your two skeletons riddled their dead
lives for, those itching latch-turners, frazzled
and desperate. Their thematic aneurysm a rose-petaled, motel-roomed,
bubble-bathed affair: unbuttoning, buttoning. Can't we do
any better than this notorious nothing, formulaic
betrayal by devolved recovery sogged into act?
As if each his own moribund engineer of the blandest
misery, an overdone dishonesty rooted in stupor,
the lazy collective's ubiquitous bunge ending
alternately in murder, passion. Is nothing more
present than some beguiling wisp, will-o'-the-wisp glow? Meanwhile,
disregarded personal strife, dull nub of pencil laid aside,
decays in ever greying letters, its festering
divining a penitent denary for the two who after-
wards inevitably remain, swollen, stalled—

Still-Life with Interior

When steep in pitch lorous cry out
 and wake from the ca -be of some fever-
 induced dream, some rped confluence of seared
 images, lost e ities—the sound: sudden
 and strange, as if a s len voice lived to shriek
 in me, white- uckled and bent to harbor
 wildness, tooth and gr l. It bristles out
 camaraderie, though h to say its sadness,
 rage aren't m e as lethally. All is
 black and blank at bed . Another human creature
 lies in line beside and brea s as I breathe, our
 exhales rising in o isks that mark our sleep
 to those who pass invisib Mourners from another
 world. Hush. them to our
 remnant days subm their tears, coveting
 an hour, an instant to re- For they feel
 nothing now. ver in the waking
 dream, a pha om to myself, unlit. And swear
 again: if I can wea r yet another sleepless
 night, this b shment from all serenity,
 in morning, I'll a gamate the primal thing
 to me, hold it still in e till molten it form itself to shape
 beneath my skin; again

Dobby Gibson

Mercy

My latest wish to take it all back
now lies in state
in the flourescent light of the rotunda
beneath a fleeting notion of escape,
like the thought of running up the down
escalator in the shopping mall I never wanted
to go to in the first place.
The morning after the morning after,
there's no turning back.
There's still that switch that switches on nothing,
there's still a light that will never go black.
It's over, says the split wood to the nail.
We're just getting started, says Cruelty,
blowing into town, blasting Van Halen from his van.
All at once where I live
and seemingly everywhere I don't,
hissing why at the sky, my God,
I've done terrible things.
The band plays on.
Crows scream in congress.
A butcher stands behind glass
and pounds the lonely meat.
The universe expands in every direction
simultaneously at the speed of light.
But expands into what?
At the edges, it's extremely dense.
It's all held together by eye contact.

In the center stands your father,
and in his bowl is just enough batter
for one last pancake.

We are born in tiny collisions.
Buttoned into our best suits
we eventually drift apart.

Missing

Would I still be hot if I didn't have hands? What about stumps? Would I still be hot if I had stumps? What if I were as hot as Claudia Schiffer and had stumps? What about teeth? Would I still be hot without teeth? What if I were missing just one tooth, off to the side, usually tucked under my lip, but occasionally an obvious gap between what I had accomplished and what I had hoped to accomplish? Could you deal with that? What about two teeth? Would I still be hot if I lost two teeth? Would it matter if they were symmetrically missing, one on each side, the inversion of fangs, the ghosts of fangs resting in there once in a while, playing in the little air where my teeth had been, wishing they could take root there? Would I still be hot if my mouth housed the memories of fangs, even if you couldn't see them? Would it matter if they were wolf fangs, bat fangs, or fangs that had killed people? What if I had killed people? Would I still be hot if I had killed people? What if I had killed only one person, a very unlikable person, an ugly person with sores all over his face, stumps where his hands used to be, pock marks all over his stumps, which hadn't healed properly, and two missing teeth, one on each side of his mouth, although they were symmetrically missing, at least? What if I said I had killed this person in self-defense? Would you still think I was hot? Would you still love me? What if I said I was sorry, that I regret it? That I feel the ghosts of your teeth where my teeth are missing? What would you think then?

Bebek

Bebek up the way is so green that I start weeping. Why on earth would a spectrally green village on the Bosphorus, in a country not mine, make me weep? Do I really mean weep? Or was I not just blubbering, or chortling sad, chuckleheadedly morose, and perhaps not over Bebek or its green but over something else—like my lost loves, all the girls gone, the women who've waked up and left? Perhaps I was snotting up for those numberless waves, triggered by the improbably fresh green of trees along blue water. They've taken their underwear and gone, Captain. Let us make eggs, then.

It is not that Bebek is green but that the green is containing so much yellow, suggesting perhaps that the trees are artificial, possibly high-quality synthetic trees, that makes me burst into tears. But I burst into tears less than I . . . crumble into tears. I see these bright trees, who knows but that they are not Robert Penn Warren's infamous arsenical green, off-color in a way that suggests they are fake, or under klieg lights, which suggests deep down that Bebek is Miami, which is a globalization crime of the first order, and I begin to blubber. Blubber, and wander toward the phony trees or the trees that are so well lit and real that they look unreal, and blather. The uncertainty as to whether the trees are spectrally real or spectrally unreal is enough to make a sane man cry, and I am not a sane man. The last moment I was arguably sane was in the sixth grade. I could spell, I could impress the teacher, I fancied myself the smartest boy in the room—already, alas, the seed of lunacy was present. I was never sane. Are infants sane? If they are, when, at what moment, does the bending begin? Is it a pang of hunger not satisfied immediately, a pang of hunger satisfied too soon? Is it

a soiling of the body? Is it the assault of phenomena impossible to comprehend—like plastic-looking trees?

Yesterday I was sitting in my golf cart not golfing but reading when I saw peripherally an orange thing moving that I expected would prove a tabby cat, odd out in the field where I had parked the cart in the sun to read. It was not a cat but a fox, trotting at a good smooth clip, a bright yellowy fox on his way past with business on his mind. His big puffy tail followed him straight out. His pencil legs were a scissoring little blur. His head did not bounce but glided a foot above the ground on a perfect level line. He was indeed tabby-cat-orange, or -yellow. I gave him a little kissing noise which made him speed up to relative cover and distance, where he stopped and regarded me, and then resumed his course, perceptibly a little more quickly than before. This fox was entirely sane.

My Brother Met Lou Ferrigno Outside a Haunted House

And it was good, tasteful, the way he sat
almost alone, speaking to my brother as a brother:
a hug, exchanges of money, a photo to remember him
big and strong and green crashing through a wall.
There was no line—no one else came to see him.
I was there. My brother was there. And it seemed the end
to all ends was actually, here—a haunted house
in October, in weather unseasonably warm, in a hug
and a souvenir picture. I don't know if they talked TV,
baseball, or the way mountains in this town
look more like red camels than mountains.
Children scurried from the haunted house EXIT like roaches
and I remembered the only true way out
is at the end, past the masked high school boys,
secretly high, secretly laughing and in love
with the girls who run straight through the plastic-net wall
of the make-shift haunted house like Lou himself did.
All I know is it was a long time before my brother turned to leave
Lou sitting there like a rock.

Benjamin Paloff

Dptych of the Annunciation, Left Panel

I am a celebrity. People I do not know put words
in my mouth, take my picture. And still I am not
untouched by beauty, the hollow bones of birds
and horses, hair tied back with hair. And still
I am not free from worry, the terror of the special
train, or that look in the eyes of men
who aggressively beg each other for change.
I say that I have no pockets, just to shut them up,
but it's not true. Deep within the folds
of my being I am carrying an urgent message.
I'd pay attention if I were you.

Dptych of the Annunciation, Right Panel

I feel that I will be witness to a magnificent sleight—
the bird in flight shot through the skull, the girl
sawed in half, the trap door, the Egyptian
gambit. I am clever and know sophistry
enough not to divorce it from consequence.
Should I die, may they see by my book that my life
was liberated, that even after the car chases and intrigues,
the pistol shaped like a fountain pen, I remain more
than a story to be told. Sweet errand, our sightlines
tell me that we are already one.

James Richardson

Red, Green, Blue

Apparently I have no idea
what I've just said.
This plummeting elevator,
this choir
of silence holding one steep note:

I am the bomb squad poised above your heart
to snip . . . which tiny wire?

Room Temperature

That coffee you forgot to drink,
this light, eight minutes from the sun,
words you thought for a second
the hottest ever written.

To a Tea

The way he asked it.
You were moved, unmoving,
the way a crowd
tightens at the exit.

Your eyes on him
slowly narrowed,
as if you were steadying to pour
into a cup the size of an atom.

Supplemental Logic

"not": of course:

not knowing he was about to be cut, bare armed
not the sound of busy motors over a passive lake
not the sum, or the difference
not anything

something was blue
in Yellowstone
at the blue lake where the blue
mountain divided
the blue sky
"this blue" I said, to you
"this blue."

then of course, "love." as:

love flushed itself out of the system
and then back in
love saw a kite fly, once, in Prague, then in Sydney
love the slender blunt of cut grass

what if I took the blue away:
what I thought was sky, and then, sky.

The Life and Death of Seals

We were down at the beach. I was lying in the bed of my father's truck with the doors pulled open and the radio playing an oldies tune. The waves were up and I could taste the salt on my lips. My brother, Juan, lay on the sand. If I raised my head I would see him, his body flat on the beach and his blue hoodie pulled up over his head. It was near dawn and the sand was still gray with the dew from the night before. "Think about us," my mother had said a few hours before, her voice coming through the thin walls of our house. We heard the sound of their door opening, the raised voices, "Leave me alone," my father said, the sound of his feet on the living room floor. I had been sleeping and when I woke I knew without looking at Juan that he too was awake and that we were both listening to my father's last speech.

He called her crazy, then he called her a bitch. Through the door I heard his car start up and realized he had opened the front door, walked right through it, out onto the lawn and gotten in his car, leaving our door wide open. I imagined my mother there, the way she stood in the grass, barefoot, the nightclothes shivering in the wind. Juan and I were quiet in our room, I could hear him breathing, the sound of his chest taking in air and the brief, low whistle as the air escaped his lips. It was as if he wanted me to know he was awake as well, but lacked the words to tell me.

Over the breaking waves came the acrid smell of death, strong and fetid, moist and penetrating. We were on Seal Beach and I imagined the carcass of a giant seal turning over and over in the surf. My mother had said, "Sell the car, burn it, abandon it, I don't care. Just don't bring it back."

A yellow Datsun pick-up was what our mother was talking about when she said “the car.” It was my father’s—an old, beat-up thing, rusted and salt-eaten, which he used in the summers for driving up to our cabin in the Sierras. He had bought it secondhand, something which made him very happy, the dents and dings, the scrapes along its passenger door. But it was more than just its appearance, it was the thing our father used every summer to take him away from our mother. He taught math at Fullerton and spent his summers with us, showing us how to drive the truck down dirty Sierra roads. Pine trees and sequoias lining the road as we went, a wake of dust climbing off the road. Juan would sit on his lap and when it was my turn he would flip the key in the ignition for me, saying, “Ease it, just give it a touch with your toes.”

The truck pulled to the left and sometimes overheated. But it was our father’s and we were not going to simply sell it, or, as my mother suggested, lying on the floor between our beds after she had pulled herself from the grass outside our house, “Crush it.”

And what I remembered about the song on the radio then was the slow lament of the singer’s voice through the speakers, and how my parents had always talked about this particular song like they were talking about a far-off kiss. I couldn’t remember the name of the artist. It was a song about a woman, about losing a woman and something about the heart. It was a piece of their history, something I had never cared to listen to, but I listened to it then, wondering how many times I had heard this song without ever knowing it was being played. Perhaps I was conceived to this song. Perhaps it had been something sad, like my parents, or their life together, something that had reminded them, for one reason or another, that living could be terrible and sometimes unbearable. Had my father thought these thoughts? Was he thinking them now, somewhere down the road? The song kept playing; I was fourteen and my brother was four years younger. And because we didn’t have anywhere else to go, we were out on the beach with the remains of our father’s happiness.

My mind had wandered, it had skipped a beat, because when I listened again there was another song playing, a song I was not familiar with, something without a name that I didn't care to listen to anymore. The radio was tuned to one of our father's stations, some oldies station, where listeners like him could find comfort in times past. It was Sunday morning. I was wearing flip-flops, and as I looked up into the sky I patted the flat bottoms of the thongs against the metal bed of the truck. My thongs made a scraping sound, like sand swirling in a Coke can. I had on a long-sleeve shirt and over this a sweatshirt, the collar worn a little at the edges where it met my neck. I felt the morning sun on my jeans, the legs of my pants warming in the orange light. Up above, overhead in the lightening stratosphere, stars were being extinguished, black sky growing blue.

This had always been my father's favorite time of day. When things were better for us, before he called my mother "bitch," before he said he never loved her anyway. He came into our room, flicking the lights until we couldn't hide our faces in the pillows anymore. "Get up, get up," he repeated, smacking his fat hands together. His hands were big as steaks and when he put them together it was like meat echoing.

"Get up," our father said again. We were on our feet. The sky was deep blue outside and as we put on our clothes we heard our father putting his things in the car. He owned a newer Toyota, the car he would leave with in the middle of the night while our mother stood out on the front lawn. And as we pulled our sleepy heads through the collars of our shirts it would always begin to dawn on us, the fact that we were about to do a thing that was solely ours, a thing our father did with only us. And perhaps this was his frustration too? Because it was a thing I would not appreciate until many years after he left for good.

Juan slumped against the window in the backseat as we drove. The parkway was gold with the rising sun. We went east through the Long Beach streets, following the freeway until we came to the

municipal park with its ponds and playgrounds, its tennis courts and baseball fields. The pond was stocked with small mouth and a few mornings every month we made our trips here, my father sitting Juan in a lawn chair he took from his trunk, while we strung our hooks, twisting the line around and around on itself then tightening it through the loop. "Lazy heads," he said, kneeling next to Juan and pushing his chin around until my brother swatted at him with his hand. Juan sat up, smiling a bit, and our father took a quick cast, the line buzzing out until it hit water, bobbing there in front of us in the half light.

"Let me hold it," Juan said, pulling himself up in the chair and reaching up toward the pole in my father's hands.

"Careful," our father said, "hold it tight."

Juan did, gripping it in both hands.

"Jerk it a little," our father said, "give it a little tap."

I unwrapped a hardboiled egg we had brought from home and watched the bobber on the water. I didn't really want to fish, but it was not one of those things that could be negotiated.

"Cast out," my father said.

So I did. The lure went out like a satellite over the edge of the earth. It hung there in the air—caught for a half-second in an updraft—over the black-morning pond, waiting for its chance to land.

Most of all it was the smell of fish in oil I remember from those times, my mother cooking over the range and the crack of oil when the fish hit pan. The smell in the kitchen was musky, like chicken thighs and burned shortening. And on the plate the fish came apart in chunks, flaking away with our forks. Our father did not say things like, "My boys . . ." his voice trailing off in wispy admiration, nor did he give up anything that may have suggested his pride in us. We drove back from the pond in silence, the radio turned off and the fish in the cooler.

The mornings after our fishing trips our father did not say anything at all. Our mother hummed songs to herself as she fried the fish in the pan. And in the old days, the days before he said the things he shouldn't have, before my mother gave him up for dead and changed her name back to who she used to be, my father would tap his feet on the floor—listening to our mother's humming—tapping right along.

The smell of death came to us again. Cars were passing out on the highway that ran along the length of the beach. The lights trailed off behind the cars in the early morning ocean mist—tracks of yellow, white, and red. We were in the parking lot that divided the beach from the road, beyond—in the brightening first light of morning—lifeguard towers began to show with the sun.

I got down from my father's truck. My back ached where it had stiffened into the metal, cold and hard with the evening's lasting touch. Juan lay in front of me and when he heard my feet against the concrete of the lot, he moved, righting himself, his legs pulled underneath him, his knees dipping into the sand. He still had his hoodie pulled over his head and as I approached I could tell by the throb of his shoulders that he was crying.

"Do you smell that," I asked, but didn't look down at Juan from where I stood.

"Yes."

There was no need to talk about it. There was no need to talk about what it was we were smelling, something dead. Something that had washed up on this shore on the day our father had left our mother.

I could hear Juan sniffing as we walked. He was making a little noise with his nose, like he wasn't getting enough air, and every once in a while I heard him sigh, like breathing was painful and these sighs were a brief moment of respite in a much larger sorrow. It made me

desperate too. It made me want to sob and cry, to sigh, to breathe and cry some more. But more than this, the sound of Juan's sadness, made me think about my mother and how I couldn't cry. And thinking about my mother, and her words to me—"Crush it," she had said—made me realize how stubborn our emotions could be.

Did she really want to destroy the car, did it matter that much? And why the car, why not us? Why not destroy Juan and I for being a part of him? I wondered about this as we walked along the beach, stepping into the pocked footfalls of joggers and walkers.

The dead smell was everywhere. It was in our nostrils, in our mouths, on our tongues, catching in the back of our throats before we swallowed it down whole. It was a strong smell, one that—had I been my mother—I would wonder whether it would wash out, like fire, or mud, the smell of grass mulch, or garlic oil in the creases of the hands. And as we neared we could see exactly what it was: a mound of seal, brown to dark gray, like a five hundred pound rock that had always been and always would be a part of the coast. The sand had even built up around the carcass, leaving dry riverbeds where the ocean had surged around the body, then receded.

It was late October and the beaches were almost always empty now. The skies always gray with ocean storms. The wind crept up on us from the water and I shivered. The seal lay on its stomach, its two flippers like enormous dark hands, the skin around its face wrinkled like age had taken it to death, and it seemed this way, like it had died of life and nothing else, a wearing down of things. And I looked down at the broken eyes of the seal, broken because the eyes had hardened here on the beach with the constant wind, and now looked cold and white around the edges where salt and mucus had ceased to aid this creature.

I don't know if it had anything to do with what we were doing there on that beach, whether it had to do anything with my father

leaving my mother, or that Juan had stopped crying and the beach was strangely quiet, when I said, "It seems so sad."

Juan did not say anything, he raised his foot above the seal and, with all his weight, gave the body a terrific push, catching the seal in the side of its ribs and trying to roll it toward the water. He was still pushing when the sand started to give way beneath his other foot and his leg gave out on him. The sky was getting darker as I stood there, watching my brother push himself into this dead thing, this body, this thing that looked like our father. Juan was on the ground now, one leg in the sandy ditch he had carved through his force, this desire to push the seal back into the water.

Juan lay panting on the beach, his head rested in the pelt of the seal, his lips moving. I didn't know what to do. For a while I stood there looking at Juan lying there, then I looked around, strangely conscious of the fact that we were on a beach in a city just down the coast from a much larger city, where millions upon millions of people lived. How ridiculous we must have seemed! I looked down at my brother, the smell was overpowering, his legs moving slowly through the sand as if he was fighting against it. And when I leaned in closer, meaning to grab him by the shoulders and pull him off this decaying animal, I heard him whispering over and over again, "Go home, go home, go home . . ."

How did we get here? I felt like someone had dropped a bomb on our house, like I was living in the crater, like I could somehow make a real life out of this. Were there warning signs before this? Before this bomb whistled high up in the air, thirty thousand feet up with room to move? Yes.

My fingers were so used to dialing the number that I did it through instinct alone. My mother had trained me to do the things she would

not do, like she was training me now to destroy the car. And in the larger sense, my father and anything that had to do with him.

So I dialed the number I had dialed so many times before, with my mother watching me from the couch, and Juan playing at something on the dining room table. The phone rang three times, then "Hello?"

"Laurie," I said, "is my dad there?"

We were standing in the parking lot between the highway and Seal Beach, at the white concrete restrooms with the stained walls. I waited, watching a small trickle of water escape the restroom door and dribble out onto the parking lot where it disappeared down a drain. I was on a Pacific Bell phone and Juan sat on the curb, watching as I twisted the line over and over again in my hand.

On the other side of the line I heard Laurie pause, she acted like this was the first time I had ever called, as if this was a surprise. "No," she said.

"What do you mean, 'No'?" My voice strained a little toward the end. It was something I wasn't expecting.

"I mean, I haven't seen him since classes got out on Friday."

"Liar," I spit into the receiver. And for a brief painful moment, neither of us said anything. Juan was watching me. It was so quiet I heard the trickle of water in the drain near my feet and then I said, "I'm sorry."

Laurie was an old friend of the family, someone my father had taught with for eight years, someone who had been to our house for cookouts, and dinners, movie nights, and someone who my mother and father, until about a year ago, had always been friendly with. "Liar" was the wrong thing to say, it was true, but I thought I owed her something more than that, although I didn't know what. I sighed into the phone. I needed a second to gather the words. "If you see him," I said, "tell him Juan and I are down at Seal's and that Mom has told us to burn his truck."

There was another pause, a brief shuffling and the sound of muffled voices.

My father got on the phone, "Raph," he said. It was not a question or a statement; it was just his flat voice, tired and ambiguous. "Raph," he said again, "please go home."

I said I couldn't, I said that I had driven to the beach and that we had his truck, that we were supposed to do something with it—burn it, crush it, drive it off a bridge. And the only thing that we couldn't do was drive it home.

Juan had gotten up off the curb and was next to me, listening as best he could to what I was saying to our father and in turn, what he was saying to me. "Tell him about the seal," Juan said. He was reaching up for the phone like he reached for the fishing pole at the municipal park.

"What did Juan say?" My father asked.

I handed the phone to Juan and stepped away from the phone stand. The tide had been out and I could see that it was beginning to turn, the waves still up and the sky gray. "It's dead," I heard Juan say. I heard him say something about pushing it back into the water, about how it needed to get back to the ocean. I couldn't hear my father's voice anymore.

I imagined him on the other side of the line. The way his big body leaned into the phone, one of his large hands braced on the side table where the phone base sat. His other hand wrapped around the phone. Laurie was there; perhaps in the galley kitchen I had seen once when my father had brought me over to her place a few years ago. Was she listening? What was my mother doing, did she wonder about where we were, what our father was doing at this very moment? Would our mother guess that our father was picking up his keys then, tucking in the tails of his shirt, feeling around in the cushions of the couch for the wallet he had dropped there? Did she know he was coming down to

Seal Beach? "Fifteen minutes," Juan said, as if repeating what my father had told him and then hung up the phone.

In the quarter hour that followed, I wondered about a number of things. I wondered about my mother, whether I would tell her about this, about this waiting in the parking lot. I wondered if my father would bring Laurie, and whether I would have to tell my mother about her.

There were other things too. In the distance I saw the seal, like the rock it was. It was very far from the water at this point, stranded in the sand, where the water had carved canyons, and built mounds around it. Seagulls were beginning to poke at it—the eyes first, sitting with their yellow feet on the top of the seal and bending into the sockets with their beaks. There was about ten of them in all, white specs around a larger brown spec. How long would it take them? What happened to a seal like this? Did someone come to pick it up; was it used for chumming the darker, deeper waters off the coast? Surely it wouldn't be left here on this beach for every jogger, child, and surfer to find. Perhaps my brother was right, perhaps we needed to push it back into the water where the death of this animal could be concealed beneath the waves.

My mother asked me once, "Do you love me?" We were on the porch of our cabin in the Sierras, she was up from her job for the weekend. My father, in these times, worked hard at avoiding her. We heard him around the side of the house, the sound of an axe chopping through wood. Metal, wood, metal, wood, and then the split and splinter of it as his axe severed one half from the other.

What else could I say?

We didn't say anything about the truck when my father showed. He made one smooth arcing turn into the lot, parking his Toyota next to the Datsun and getting out. He was alone. It was strange to feel such relief in this fact, like his solitude were a sign. He didn't need to go back to my mother, he didn't need to love her, but, in my mind, he did need to come home. What would life be without him? Would I tell my mother about this later?

What does a father say to his children after he has run out on them in the middle of the night? Our father said, "Hello." And all of a sudden we are avoiding the truck, the things he said to our mother, the sound of him leaving the night before, and the woman he was staying with at that very moment. We were one father and two sons, who had come to the beach and stood looking out on the carcass of a decaying seal. Why didn't we say anything to him? Were we afraid we'd lose him again, that we would be back in the exact same place we were that morning, Juan on his side in the sand, his shoulders shaking with his tears and I in the back of the truck, tasting the salt on my lips and wondering about how big of a bastard my father could be.

But instead of all this, my father gave Juan a hug—a rare thing in itself—picking him up off the tailgate and pulling him close. I shared a moment of eye contact with my father, before he put a big hand behind my neck and patted the skin there. "What about this seal?" my father said.

I was fourteen and my brother was ten. Our father was thirty-eight years old. And it would seem that in all those years between us we could figure out how to talk about an issue as simple as whether my father would return to his wife or not. There are two answers to this question, yes or no.

We didn't talk about this. We talked about the seal. The parking lot was far behind us, the path we had taken up the ramp and along the flattened beach, where lifeguard patrols drove their trucks, was clearly

defined behind us. The sand was flat here, almost so hard-packed that our feet left no marks at all. The seal was in front of us, coming closer as we walked. Juan wouldn't shut up, he talked about the seal as if it were a person. He talked about it like it had a life, like it ate eggs with a side of bacon in the morning and read the paper at the kitchen table. "Do you think it had a good life?" he asked.

"He's a big one," my father said, as if in answer. We came up on him and the smell made me gag.

"Do you think he died happy?" my brother asked.

"Hmmpf," my father said.

"He doesn't look happy now," I said. The eyes were all eaten out. I was trying to think of the right thing for a son to say to a father, but I didn't say anything. And all of a sudden Juan started cawing and running around the seal, chasing off the seagulls. He was like a giant crow, like the spirit of the dead seal, unable to see itself be picked apart by scavengers.

"Help me," Juan said. He spoke in this tone that we couldn't argue with, like he was stuck at the bottom of a well and it was raining. In that moment, I could see him down there at the bottom, the whites of his eyes, the crazy desperation, the end of all things.

We got down in the sand with my brother, our shoulders into the giant seal, the oil from its pelt all over our clothes and hands. My father put his back into the side of the seal and used all of himself to push this dead thing out to sea.

We worked at it for five minutes. I felt all the gas inside the thing, all the parts melting into each other. The seal rolled over, it was heavy, heavier than I had thought and underneath we saw all the things that were eating it from the bottom up. There were small sand-colored crabs, giant fleas, little beetles. I wanted to throw up. My father raised a hand to his nose and stepped back. Juan just stood there looking down at this thing.

“Bury it,” my brother said. He got down on his knees and started digging in the sand, he dug up all the sand where the seal had been lying, he made a mound of sand. It didn’t make any sense. It made no sense at all, but we did it. I got down in the sand with my father and my brother, and we began digging a giant hole, a hole big enough for my father and my mother, and even for us.

And when we were done. We rolled the seal in; it made a sound like a stack of newspapers hitting the floor, the air rushing out. For a moment we stood over the seal, looking at it. There was water seeping into the hole, salt water from the ocean. It’s home, I thought. No one was on the beach. Cars passed out on the highway. Wind caught on the collar of my father’s shirt and turned it up against his neck. Juan still had his hood pulled over his head.

Standing above the grave, I felt like someone should read the seal its last rights, but no one did. We stood there, looking down at the seal and then we filled in the hole.

“Follow me,” my father said through the open window of his Toyota. It was the first thing anyone had said since we dug the hole and dropped the seal down it. We were idling in the parking lot. I was in the yellow Datsun with my window down. The radio played again. It was another one of the songs my father listened to—Cohen, Redding, Johnny Cash—one of these, a slow lament. In my father’s car I heard the song playing along with mine. Juan sat next to him in the passenger seat of his car. Then my father pulled out, reversed around the bed of the truck and straightened himself for his entrance into traffic. Through the rearview mirror I watched him waiting there, just outside of the oncoming cars. I sat in reverse with my arm stretched back over the seat and my head turned over my shoulder.

Burn it, my mother had said, crush it, destroy it. I don’t know where we’re going. I don’t know what I am following my father

toward. We buried a seal together. We dug a hole and pushed it to the bottom and covered it over. And because of this I will follow my father?

I had called my father and he came. I wanted to see him. I wanted him to see us. I looked at him through the rearview mirror of his truck, waiting in his own car, then I shifted into drive and hit the gas.

I love my mother. I loved her then and I love her now. Is there any other answer I can give for what I did next.

What I remember is the brief bump of the wheels on the parking lot curb, the tires grappling with cement and then the low-laying beach scrub passing by on either side of me. There was a strange feeling of freedom to it, like driving out into a field where no cars have ever driven. I could hear the engine. Otis Redding was singing, "The Dock of the Bay," as the truck hit soft sand and fizzled for a moment, catching its tires in the sand. There was a brief pause, like the world had slowed and then seconds later the tires were on water-soaked sand, where the receding waves had left the beach hard as cement.

I was moving again. The sound of waves through the window was thick as buttermilk. On the dash, the speedometer read thirty and climbing. In my rearview mirror I saw my father, his car door open and his head a silhouette of shadows as he watched me from the parking lot. Burn it, my mother had said, crush it, destroy it.

I hit the waves doing thirty-five. The water had pulled back and the ocean was out. I drove right in over the skim of a retreating wave. I felt like a stone skipping over the surface of water. I drove right in, there were no brakes, no slackening of the gas. For all I knew, my foot was still pressing "go" well after the first wave had come over the hood. There was a brief word or two from Otis, a guitar, and then the gurgle of water through the seams of the car. I felt the ocean on the floor, cold and tight against my feet.

How long did I sit there? I felt a swaying. It was peaceful. I had a brief moment to myself before my father opened the car door and all

the water came rushing in. He said, "What the fuck?" and grabbed me by the cloth of my sweatshirt. He was dragging me through the water. I lost a thong. I could feel the tug of the ocean, the surge of the waves, and the way the current moved from south to north here. He had me under the arms and I half kicked and half walked, feeling the sandy bottom from time to time with the tips of my toes.

Juan was there; he was sitting on the beach with his knees pulled into his chest and his arms wrapped around his shins. He was calm. And when my father dropped me on the beach, just outside of the incoming waves, Juan gave me a look that said, You're crazy. And I said aloud, "He won't come home."

I lay on my back. Above, the seagulls were circling like I was the latest seal to turn up dead. There was water lapping at my heels. The sky was blue now, and high up there were clouds skipping along through the sky at a million miles an hour. My father stood ankle deep in the water, watching the truck bob on the surface. He wore brown loafers and chinos, and the cuffs of his pants dipped and shifted with the waves running up the shore. His pants were soaked a dark brown, his navy blue shirt black now, his hair slicked back with water. Through the wet shirt I could pick out the rolls at the edge of his stomach and the muscle on his back.

The ocean had taken the truck. It was a cheap truck, made of aluminum and poorly built. It didn't sink, but instead floated there on what was left of the air in the cab, the ocean pulling it further out. While my father watched from the edge, the truck turned over onto its side, a few bubbles spit out onto the surface and then it sunk.

It was complicated. I told my mother about the seal, I told her about the truck, I told her about how we had sat there for an hour after, on the beach in our underwear with our clothes laid neatly next to us, shaping an imaginary father and son. Our mother was in the backyard when

we got home. Her nightclothes were still on—striped cotton pants, a t-shirt stretched over her knees. She wouldn't look at the house or at us, preferring instead to look out past the chain fence we kept in the backyard. I noticed the goose bumps on her arms, the way the little hairs mounted their hills, sticking straight up into the air.

She was still pretty, I thought. A few strands of silver had appeared in her hair, lines of white-gray running the length of her scalp, down through her black hair where it ended on her shoulders. She had her hair pulled back and I could see the tear tracks on her cheeks, the salt residue like seawater.

"What did he say then?" she asked. The look in her eyes like all the times she had waited by the phone while I called Laurie.

"Nothing," I said, "we just sat there." I told her about how the seagulls circled overhead, about the waves, about the spot where the car had sunk and the way the water seemed to go all smooth there. My father hadn't said a thing to me. I began to shiver, the gray-black of the sand beneath me and the water rushing further up the beach. We would never see the truck again; it was like the seal, buried. I looked at my father, the wrinkles around his eyes like fans in the sun. "Will you come home?" I asked.

"It's complicated," he said.

"Yes or no," I said.

Jehanne Dubrow

Third Generation

We dream of falling as we fall
asleep, but wake to feel
the weight of quilts, our pillows chill

as granite to the cheek.
What doctors call the hypnic jerk—
a heartbeat slows too quickly

in the body's cage, air ripped,
lynched half between the lips
and ribs. We know that memory skips

some families like a stone
across a lake. They sleep alone.
But we, the chosen ones,

are chosen for a crowded sleep,
each night compelled to leap
the barbed wire ledge. As heaps

of limbs, we somersault
to spill ourselves on basalt
slabs below. It's not our fault,

this twitch of muscle snapping us
from rest, electric pulse
so like descent we drop weightless

until we flinch awake,
so sure of death that we mistake
 our nightmares for the ache

of breaking bone.

Ars Poetica: Today

"... so sensible people are afraid to touch the mad poet, and run away from him. Inconsiderate children pursue and torment him. He, his head in the clouds, belches out his poems and loses his way...."

— Horace, *Ars Poetica*

I am not Proust and his literary machine.
Am I partial as objects, as impulses
that make me buy bibles and more bibles?
Am I eros that resonates like an oboe?
The oboe is getting clinical yet pedestrian;
it is listening for sounds in my chest
that point to lovers and quiet hope,
and forever forgiveness. Do you hear
its waiting like an ear to the wall,
like notes slipped into cracks?
How we stonewall the cracks, the poems
we first loved to hear. Can they not see
the sadness of forgetfulness? If not,
haven't their hearts ever braced themselves
for loss? We were never made to be machines,
forcing movement into limbs to work
out signs like a formula. We are cells and vessels
but we don't have to follow them.
Will you follow me? Will you follow me
into eternal wonder of no beginnings,
and thus no endings? That will help me
survive; it will help me live. It will help
me write poetry as if tomorrow I forgot
I ever wrote. That is how I want to remember
this, this precious machination of moments
that gears itself for no cabal. That is my secret.
My secrecy was to write without condition,

without limits, as if punctuation could free
itself into fields and how one would mind.
If only my inhibitions allowed such inhibition,
I say to Deleuze, as his fingers spider my spine.

*“Note the signs that accompany a given circumstance.
Present the facts, but do not represent them as such; rather,
reveal only signs of the facts: show fear by pallor, sensuality
by adornment, and shame by a sudden blush; show the thing itself
by its definite signs, what is prior by what is consequent upon
it: this complexion, this sex, this age, that form.”*

– Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Poetria Nova

Peter Sacks

Ovid: First Spring in Tomis

Ankle-deep in mud I watched a small boy
selling sprigs of lavender and mint.

Head of the emperor set spinning
on the trestle board; and as I waited

for the boy to fumble coin and string
I shut my eyes to see again what I saw

on the market path, a new born lamb,
both eyes pecked out by crows.

"Rome is a moistened crumb," I thought,
and silence a most patient enemy

beneath the foreign syllables for cold,
for bread, for wool, and for my shadow

thickening or fraying as the fog shifts
quickly with the shifting wind.

And for this rough, furred, tongue of mint
against my own, so soon after the thaw.

Nude Woman in the Movement of Her Veils

—after Auguste Rodin

She is a sculptor's drawing, but not
unsure. She chose to appear
in graphite, ink, watercolor, gouache.
A tall, floppy flower, a canna or iris
a giant might choose for his vase.
Free of decisions or advice:
No "Check your bucket."
No "Hang your meat in a far tree."
Free of realizing: "Where I was broken before
I'm more broken."

She carries her gentle, kinetic house
and it carries her.

Owing to their fragility
she and Rodin's other seven thousand drawings
must be kept in a dark box
and displayed in rotation
three months at a time
in a small room devoted to them.

On Style and Becoming in Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*

On the following pages you will find seven draft Page Ones of Mark Z. Danielewski's latest novel, *Only Revolutions*. The idea of a folio featuring these broadsides evolved naturally from a conversation I began three years ago, when I first spoke to the writer about preparing a piece for *Gulf Coast*. Back then I didn't know what we wanted. Frankly, I didn't care.

In 2000 this Yale-educated plumber had taken hold of a basic ghost story and—by way of Borges, documentary film, Derrida, rock-and-roll, Barthelme, the academic monograph, and dozens of other genres and authors—brought out *House of Leaves*. In that book the plot unfolds and re-combines from the singular discovery that a house—an average, everyday house—measures slightly larger on the inside than it does on the outside. Because *House of Leaves* is a horror story, this discovery leads, exquisitely, to horror—to terrors beyond imagining (and almost beyond writing). But the argument remains: a run-of-the-mill made thing (a lyric, a story, a song, a house) should be, in the hands of a skilled maker and sympathetic participants, anything but run-of-the-mill—should be much larger on its inside than ever imagined from its humble outside. For Danielewski, art is always bigger once you open the door and walk inside of it.

Jump to 2007. Danielewski's second novel, *Only Revolutions*, has debuted to commercial success, critical acclaim (including a National Book Award Finalist citation), and a good deal of head scratching. What, umm, is this? On the one hand, *Only Revolutions* is a very simple love story about Hailey and Sam—two teenagers who meet, fall desperately in love, and then run away from everything and everyone (except each other). Conversely, *Only Revolutions*—with its

21st century Spenserian stanza, its orthographic license, its stacking and restacking of History alongside numberless sonic booms, its obsessions with cars, with animals and plants, its send-up of the scholarly concordance (by pasting a dizzyingly elliptical concordance on its endpapers) offers an intricate assembly of interlacing narrative elements that all conspire to redefine character, action, setting, tone, even reading itself. The paradox here is that in order to experience the Mozartean simplicity of the story, one must undergo the Schoenbergian (or Bergian) complexity of the story. It also helps, the publisher insists, to turn the book over every eight pages.

The point of all these stylistic innovations is indeed nothing short of revolutionary. By pushing as hard as it can against an array of stylistic conventions and compositional methods—by being as much of a post-Modern novel as possible—*Only Revolutions* attempts to move past the post-Modern (its fractured narratives, perpetual quotation marks, and always subservient and uninteresting relationship to Capitalism) and into territory raw and thrilling as creation myth or pop song. Does it work? Keep turning the book over in your mind. Or your lap.

In the meantime, readers already familiar with *Only Revolutions* will recognize the last page of this folio as the novel's Page One (or one of the novel's two Page Ones). The six draft sheets leading up to it, then, are six earlier Page Ones. They chart a small part of Danielewski's effort (numbering hundreds of drafts and draft Page Ones) to write simply and beautifully about love at this peculiar time in history when to love and to write are, at best, politically infeasible and, at worst, downright impossible.

Only Evolutions

—*These, now, here, for Anna Barthelme*

I.1

[January 1860 — Tuesday June 30, 1863]

Turning back with no one around isn't half so sad.
Though despite longings I'm shameless.
Nothing brings me down. Spring of Weights. Feather of Stone.
A perpetual ever severing union of states. The time has come now.
I'm unendingly alone. Sixty million where the buffalo roam. Bissel
paraffin, naphtha and oil. A freeland. Frontierland. Empty prospects of the
Soil. Lessons making zero impression despite a secession crisis at hand.
Nothing secedes from me. Nothing hides. No disguise. Not even one
goodbye. Pins! Pins! warn some Northeast Horned Larks. Too late. My
spin never thins. Bullets and ballots: I'm the all treat. The retreat. What
never begins. What can't wait. So long. The finest song. No Nicolay in fact
he is not gone. But I am. Past young pats on the Bold High and the old Shy
Low. Suits, spats and caps and royal to boot. For root and tea tamper not
with this loyal Blue Grey blowing a tattoo by way of a bow. Of course the
time has come now. Too feral for the homestead, too coarse for satin, too
hot for ice or some grain planting device, a rotating barrel's Gatling's
patent. And that's way seedy and O so nice.
—Beware the tear, cries a Gray Treefrog. Beware.

March 14, 2003

$\frac{15}{14}$

2,181

2,572

2
March 3, 1861
I.1
[January 1860 – Tuesday June 30, 1863]

Turning back with no one around isn't half so sad.
 Though despite longings I'm shameless.
 Nothing brings me down. Spring of Weights. Feather of Stone.
 A perpetual ever severing union of states. The time has come now.
 I'm unendingly alone. Sixty million where the buffalo roam. Bissel
 paraffin, naphtha and oil. A freeland. Frontierland. Empty prospects of the
 Soil. Lessons making zero impression despite a secession crisis at hand.
 Nothing secedes from me. Nothing hides. No disguise. Not even one
 goodbye. Pins! Pins! warn some Northeast Horned Larks. Too late. My
 spin never thins. Bullets and ballots: I'm the all treat. The retreat. What
 never begins. What can't wait. So long. The finest song. No Nicolay in fact
 he is not gone. But I am. Past young pats on the Bold High and the old Shy.
 Low. Suits, spats and caps and royal to boot. For root and tea tampoer not
 with this loyal Blue Grey blowing a tattoo by way of a bow. Of course the
 time has come now. Too feral for the homestead, too coarse for satin, too
 hot for ice or some grain planting device, a rotating barrel's Gatling's
 patent. And that's way seedy and O so nice.

—Beware the tear, cries a Gray Treefrog. Beware.

- 5. 5. 1861
Gambel's prairie / address
- 1862, 4 of 2 illustrations
- 1861-1862, 4 small
maps of illustrations
- 1860s or 1861
brochure
- 1860, 1/2, 3/4
- (2 21 1861)
Gambel's prairie
in 20 illustrations
- 6. 25. 1861
Gambel's prairie
- 7. 4. 1861
Gambel's prairie
- 7. 21. 1861
First drawing of Bull.
- 2. 28. 1862
Illustration of 1862
- 7. 3. 1862
Bull of 1862
- 7. 1862
Bull of 1862
- 7. 6. 1862
Bull of 1862, by way
of 1862
- 7. 12. 18. 1862
Bull of 1862
- 7. 22. 1862
Gambel's prairie
in 20 illustrations
- 11. 4. 1862
Bull of 1862

Hail me. War with all worlds. By this weel none
avoid. Cause of all turns. Bliss and varioloid.
Territorial vassalage destroyed. Below ridge,
above the clouds, no battles bragg of winning
rounds but me, racing free—Free and fast!—alone outcast
Chickmauga! Morgan breathes freedom triumphant, dome
of scarlett amnesty.

Rollerskating Meridian, Hunley in crest, I'm
leaping General In Chief, hatsoff, Copperheads for relief,
Fort Pillow for rest, I'll slaughter the best, the West. Never
less. No exchange. Bury small Joe in my Wilderness.

Not me. Ungrounded, ungauged. Indivisible with risible
thickets of rage.

—Go back, scrop the ****

There's no turning back, Eureka meet Schenkel over
Mule Shoe's angle. Far more: Yellow Tavern's Jeb. Cold
Harbor's guns. Again. For Arlington.

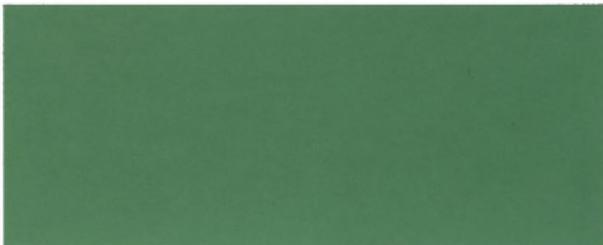
—This is murder, glawk seventhousand *****

I'm James over Petersburg, Kennesaw charge, no fugitive
returning by road, sloop and barge. Attacks on it all.

—O how miserable, now fix me, *** call.

—Get down you fool, hicker ***

But Early's later and I'm a crater full up with dead, full
speed ahead. Appeal to thunderstorms. Atlanta's fairly one
and turning.



Nov 22 1863

Lincoln's varioloid. Battle

Above The Clouds.

Chickamauga!

John Hunt Morgan

escapes. Capitol Dome

Complete.

Scarlett Fever. Amnesty.

C.S.S. H. L. Hanley.

Ulysses S. Grant.

Copperheads.

Fort Pillow massacre.

Prisoner exchange ends.

5 yr Joe dies.

Battle of the Wilderness.

—Invisibles with

invisibles.

—Go back General Lee.

—No turning back

Mule Shoe.

Bloody Angle of

Spotsylvania.

Job's Yellow Tavern.

Cold Harbor

—This is murder.

Jabal Early.

—Get down fool

Crater.

—Full Speed Ahead.

Atlanta Fairly Won.

Hail me. Free this weel and
allways I'm sixteen.

Free completely of this
cold spring. No big deal.

A bronze woodchuck*** chetters:

—No big deal.

I blush scarlett and goosepimple in
the breeze.

Here to vanquish the world.

No big deal.

A ruin all around.

With a wink.

With a frown.

My pick.

I'm sixteen and free in a lick.

Here to vanquish the world.

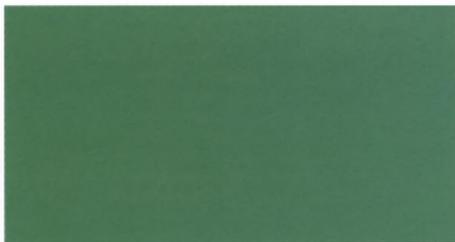
A soft doe**** bows to my knee:

—Go ahead.

Take it.

A nice doe.

Nice bluejay***** too, nabbing shreds
of red cloud for a nest.



Nov 22 1863

The Cause.
 Lincoln's varioloid.
 —Abolition of slavery,
 confiscation of property,
 and territorial vassalage.
 Battle Above
 The Clouds.
 —Chickamauga!
 John Hunt Morgan
 escapes. Capitol Dome.
 Hemolytic
 Streptococcus.
 Amnesty. Meridian.
 CSS HL Hunley.
 Ulysses S Grant.
 Copperheads.
 Fort Pillow massacre.
 —mostest.
 Prisoner exchange ends.
 Joe goes.
 Battle of the Wilderness.
 —hunt to the death.
 —Go back General Lee.
 —No turning back.
 Mule Shoe.
 Bloody Angle of
 Spotsylvania.
 Jeb's Tavern.
 Cold Harbor
 —This is murder.
 Jubal Early. Fugitive
 Slave Laws.
 —Get down fool.
 Crater.
 —Full Speed Ahead.
 Atlanta Fairly Won.

H aloes aloft.
 Contraband. I
 can walk away
 from anything.
 Everyone wants
 the dream but I kill it.

Bald Eagles soar over to
 me: —*Reveille Rebel!*

Shake free this weel.

I blaze a breeze.

I'll devastate the World.

No big deal. New mutiny all
 around. With a wink.

With a smile. A frown.

I'm sixteen and so freeeee.

Rebounding without even a ride.

A Golden Bear bows to my knee:

—*Go ahead Lieutenant General.*

Take it all.

A nice moment. Nice

American Beavers too, nabbing
 shreds of National wood for fun.



My bareness. Sam's solitude.
 And all his patience now presumes.
 Luster of Spring's Sacred Brood.
 By you, ever sixteen, this World's reserved.
 And I, your sentry of ice shall always protect
 what your joy so terrifyingly elects.
 I'll destroy no World
 so long it keeps turning with buzzle & blush,
 hedging & charms mending with dew,
 and always our rush returning renewed.
 Everyone wants the dream
 but we care for it. O Sam no,
 I could never walk away from you.

JAN 19 2003

Nov 22 1863

The Cause.

—Abolition of slavery,
confiscation of property,
and territorial vassalage.

Battle Above

The Clouds.

—Chickamauga!

John Hunt Morgan flees.

Capitol Dome.

Hemolytic Streptococcus.

Amnesty.

Meridian.

CSS HL Hunley.

Ulysses S Grant.

Copperheads.

Fort Pillow massacre.

—mistest.

Prisoner exchange ends.

Joe goes.

Battle of the Wilderness.

—hunt to the death.

—Go back General Lee.

—No turning back.

Mule Shoe.

—all summer.

Bloody Angle of

Spotsylvania.

Jeb's Tavern.

Cold Harbor.

—This is murder.

Jubal Early.

Fugitive Slave Laws.

—Get down fool.

Crater.

—Full Speed Ahead.

Atlanta Fairly Win.

H aloes! Haleskarth!
Contraband!
I can walk away
from anything.
Everyone loves
the Dream but I kill it.

Bald Eagles soar over
me: —*Reveille Rebel!*

I jump free this weel.

On fire. Blaze a breeze.

I'll devastate the World.

No big deal. New mutiny all
around. With a twist.

With a smile. A frown.

Allmighty sixteen and so freeeeee.

Rebounding without even a cap.

Golden Bears bow at my knee:

—*Go ahead Lieutenant General.*

Take it all.

American Beavers also chatter
scared. Bowing. Fawning too.

Why don't I have a hat?

My barrenness, Sam's solitude,
And all his patience now presumes.
Luster of Spring's Sacred Brood.
By you, ever sixteen, this World's reserved.
By you, this World has everything left to lose.
And I, your sentry of ice shall always protect
what your joy so terrifyingly elects.
I'll destroy no World
so long it keeps turning with scurry & dash,
fledgling & charms beading with dew,
and always our rush returning renewed.
Everyone betrays the Dream
but who cares for it? O Sam no,
I could never walk away from you.



Nov 19 2063

Only *Evolutions*

Page 179, *Take #7 – December 3, 2002*

471 words. Font: Hand. Black: #2 pencil. Trim size: 8.5 X 11. Software: paper.

Page 180, *Run-Through Dailies – March 13, 2003*

210 words. Font: Georgia (Sam). Trim size: 8.5 x 11. Software: Word.

Page 181, *Annotated Run-Through Dailies – March 14, 2004*

210 words. Fonts: Georgia (Sam); Hand (Z). Black: 2H lead + Assorted highlighters. Trim size: 8.5 x 11. Software: Word.

Page 182, *History Rushes – April 2, 2004*

180 words. Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam); Times (Date); Times (Folio). Green: Pantone 348 C. Gold: Pantone 116 C. Violet: Pantone 259 C. Trim size: 5.4375 x 8.4375. Software: InDesign.

Page 183, *Paratactic Rough Cut – June 20, 2004*

77 words (Chronomosaic + Date) + 90 words (Sam). Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam); Spectrum MT (Chronomosaic); Times (Date); Times (Folio). Green: Pantone 348 C. Gold: Pantone 116 C. Violet: Pantone 259 C. Trim size: 5.4375 x 8.4375. Software: InDesign.

Page 184, *End Of All Roads Assembly – July 21, 2005*

90 words (Chronomosaic + Date) + 90 words (Sam) + 93 words (Hailey + Date). Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam & Hailey); Myriad Pro (Chronomosaic); Times (Date); Times (Folio). Green: Pantone 348 C. Gold: Pantone 871 C. Violet: Pantone 259 C. Trim size: 5.475 x 9.125. Software: InDesign.

Page 185, *Final Print Submission – January 21, 2006**

90 words (Chronomosaic + Date) + 90 words (Sam) + 93 words (Hailey + Date). Fonts: Spectrum MT (Sam & Hailey); Myriad Pro (Chronomosaic); Tempo (Date); Univers 57 (Folio). Green: Pantone 355 U. Gold: Pantone 146 U. Violet: Pantone 2602 U. Trim size: 5.475 x 9.125. Software: InDesign & Illustrator.

*Excerpted from *Only Revolutions* by Mark Danielewski © 2006. Reprinted with permission by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Available in bookstores now.

The Edges of a Simple Scene

And then came a guilty man with a JFK tattoo
And a car running out of breath in the alley
And his cell phone rang as he tugged up his pants
And the static of a baby crying from the backseat

And a car running out of breath
And he stormed into the house like brush-fire
Like a wild animal trapped in a sunset
And curse words were more than mechanical

And onto the back porch came the guilty man
Grasping a woman by the weight of her hair
And their lips whipped loud distances
And the static of the baby swelled with corruption

And a pack of neighborhood dogs sang electric
As the woman kicked the guilty man in the groin
And to the ground he fell
And four clicked triggers later there was silence

Aaron Smith

Appetite

That was the summer
I carried a kitchen knife

for protection and slammed
my car into the truck

of a man who stood me up
at a bar. What else could

I do after so much
religion? I got stoned

in the bathroom before
work, and my roommate

spent our rent money on
cigarettes and CDs. Dance

music and AIDS tests
and married men: one

with a crucifix that dangled
in my face when he

straddled me, who said show
me your dick while his

kids slept on a foldout
couch in the basement.

I fantasized every heat-heavy
glance into a love story and

stole ice-cream sandwiches
from a convenience store

on Murray Avenue. It was
Pittsburgh. I was hungry.

To the better view

With the better view out back,
we sit where the storefronts dangle
starfish on strings (for your rearview mirror, for your Christmas tree),
shirts festooned with sandbuckets, and the titular rumble of ocean
is only a backdrop to a thought we might or might
not have, the way traffic sounds back home
(back home—the freeway sounds
around us—we tell ourselves *that's the ocean*).

There isn't much to do so we have to make do
and describe the early summer
visitors walking past licking their cones, the dogs their balls.
"Rat dog," John begins, loud enough they can hear but so what
is heard came out of which mouth? And George gives
"best of show" to a woman in white capris,
pink shades, cream-colored head-
band "mostly for her purse" that is also white and who
would think to carry that to the beach?

The man sitting next to us
would hear our chatter if he weren't already somewhere
else. And wasn't it for him not us we said
all this? Now here's where
it gets rough. Where I should step off the porch and go inside
myself, move in closer, a little, to the scene
I've set myself
up to watch. Still there is an ocean inside
of the man sitting next to us.

In the ocean is a world of things

eating each other one of us

says and I think how it is

that the show you're watching is not the show

you sit down for.

Now another passerby has stopped to admire the yellow Porsche

the man sitting next to us parked in front

of Osburn's Ice Cream, then came up to sit on the porch and watch.

Nicole Steinberg

Kidnappers

The driver's a stranger,
kidnapper, ladykiller. A friend
of yours. We occupy
the backseat. Get off
me (I scream) don't
fucking touch me! Hands
in your lap, far
across the tan velour.
Get in the car.
More handsome in person.
A regular Steve McQueen,
just without the eyes.
I love New York,
you say. It's everywhere.
Lampposts, stars of Bethlehem.
This car was built
to take me places.

An American Education

This is how we find our history, how we sketch our family portrait, how we snap the photograph at the precise moment when someone's mouth is open and ready to ask a question.

—Sherman Alexie

Clint—nine years older, my only brother. At this moment his magic drawer is open. He spins a multi-colored die on a red string and says, “Now watch, watch close.” He cuts off his thumb in a finger guillotine. He holds a handful of playing cards fanned out to choose from and grins that grin that makes him look more sure of himself than I’ll ever be. He shuffles and fans the cards out again: impossibly, I choose the same card. He’s laughing and saying, “It’s just magic. That’s all it is. Just magic.”

Barb—eleven years older, my youngest sister. Wearing camouflage pants, a cut-off t-shirt, and, on her head, a red bandana, she crouches in the ‘Y’ of two tree branches. One hand rests on her puppy, a pit bull named Buzz, who clings desperately to one of the branches. A laugh has just broken over Barb’s face, a laugh which splits open her mouth and narrows her eyes. She’s laughing at the unpredictability of life; at how precariously everything is held together; at the futility of getting dogs to climb trees.

Nicole—thirteen years older, my middle sister. Her green eyes, always framed with green mascara, look like a movie star’s. She lives with her boyfriend in a huge three-story house near downtown. Other women live there, too. When we visit, Preston lets me play with his electric race car set. I weave the track in and out of the dining table and chair legs. Then I test every car again and again to find the fastest one. When it comes time to go, he gives me the whole set. “Go ahead,” Nicole whispers. “He’ll just buy a new one.”

Iris—fourteen years older, my oldest sibling. We have just left the museum downtown, where they have a gigantic brontosaurus skeleton any seven-year-old boy would love. Iris has straight black hair like an Indian princess and translucent skin marked with blue veins. Her skinny legs end in curvy hips that sway side to side. In the parking lot, we pass a guy wearing dirty bellbottoms. He whistles at Iris and starts to walk backwards to get a better view when he trips over the curb and falls on his ass. “Gawd,” Iris says under her breath and smiles her beautiful smile.

Jeffrey—me, the youngest. I’ve clambered atop the dresser in my mother’s closet. My grandmother is the only one home, and I’m taking the opportunity to embark on a lesson in flight. I gauge the amount of airspace to the ledge above the door frame. I suck in a lungful of the closet’s lilac-scented air, yell “Grama!” and leap. For a beautiful moment I fly. My fingertips grasp the ledge long enough to swing my feet horizontal. Then I drop like a stone. On my back, gasping, I stare into my grandmother’s horrified face and wonder why I can’t breathe.

From beside our front porch, an enormous blue spruce, the tallest tree for blocks, stretches into the sky. Bordering the backyard is the dirt alley for the garbage trucks. A stone’s throw beyond that Sixth Avenue teems with traffic—passing cars, rumbling trucks, city buses squealing to a stop. At the base of the blue spruce sits our house, a beige box, in front of which is a small front yard with a Chinese elm and a dead stump. I sit next to the stump and gaze onto Seventh Avenue. In the middle of the street Clint palms a leather football. He’s a speed-skater at the roller rink and has lots of girlfriends. Our father yells at him to cut his hair, which flows in long waves over his collar. He stoops over and spins the ball on its tip. It stays upright, tilting, somehow held vertical. Then Clint tilts back his head, blows the bangs out of his eyes, and kicks the ball down the block to his friend.

After they leave, the ball tossed aside in the yard, I'm unable to replicate the feat. It's true. My brother's magic works in the real world. Someday we'll all be able to do it.

My father and I check out an armful of books at the neighborhood library. He sits me on the bed and points at each word.

"Fr-eh-dee-fr-ahk," I say. Then the stupid tears blur my vision. "I can't do it, Daddy, I can't."

"Yes you can," he says.

"Don't be so hard on him," my mother says.

I run out of the room bawling and throw myself on the bed.

"You're such a little baby," Barb says from the hallway. "How do you think I learned to read?"

There's this teacher who only comes once a week. Watch her. When she sits at the bottom of the slide, glide down and stare at her. Her hair is yellow like the construction paper they give us to cut out the sun. Her lips are red like the rubber kickball. Her kisses taste like lipstick.

Clint's bike has a shiny red banana seat flecked with silver sparkles. A bendy pole topped with a gold flag soars from behind the seat into the sky.

"Keep your feet away from the spokes," he says then churns the pedals. Overhead the flag snaps. Other kids on bikes dodge in and out around us. Clint laughs and yells at them then turns and grins. That grin that lights up his eyes and says Brothers. We are brothers.

Later, he stands in the kitchen. "You know, I could punch a hole right through this wall," he says. "I could do it."

He lifts up his fist beside the yellow telephone and braces for a solid punch. I picture his fist bursting out the wall's other side in a

cloud of pulverized dust and hanging there, bloody and triumphant, over the basement staircase.

"But Dad would kill me," he says and blows the hair out of his eyes.

After school the boy who called me "whitey" and his friend meet me beside the merry-go-round. I don't have time to punch him before we're grabbing fistfuls of each other's jackets, yanking, teetering, and shoving. He throws me to the ground and jumps on my back.

"Say you give," he says and grinds my face into the playground gravel.

"Okay, I give," I say.

His friend laughs as I run to my getaway car—the orange VW bug where my mother is waiting.

"What was that all about?" she asks.

"Oh, nothing," I say, running my tongue over the grit stuck to my teeth. "He's just one of my friends."

After my parents split up my mother moves the two of us to a small farming town an hour north of the city. At the new school no one picks me when we plays Thumbs-Up Seven-Up. On the playground, all I want is for one of the boys to throw me the football when they play catch. I follow their group around for months, shouting, "Here! Here!" but never get a pass. The only person who likes me is the teacher. Finally, at the end of the year, we move back home.

The hot rod that belongs to Barb's friend roars past the city bus, its acceleration somehow pushing me against the backseat. We wheel onto Seventh. The car lurches and bounds over dips. Clint passes a funny-looking cigarette to Barb in the front seat.

"Let Jeffrey take a hit," someone says.

I take what's handed to me and breathe in the sweet smoke, picture it swirling around inside my head. Barb laughs so hard her eyes disappear. I drape my arms over the bench seat and grin at her silly face.

Back at my old school, my best friend, Jason Swenski, and I bolt our lunches so we can maximize our recess time playing catch with a Nerf football. In class Mrs. Sherman can't keep me busy enough. I finish all the reading assignments early and ace every spelling test. My father's face glows when the school moves me up a grade.

Bodies swirl through the dark. I try to join them, but I'm a stick-boy in a land of graceful, jolly creatures. Flashes of colored light pierce the dark, bright spots spin on the floor, my heart thrums with the pulsing disco beat, and my legs fight to keep the skates on my feet rolling smoothly ahead. Just don't let me fall, I think, when suddenly there's pressure under my arms and my feet lift off, leaving behind the bone-hard floor. I soar, flying past the others, swooshing in and out among bodies, the popcorn-and-licorice wind blowing against my face. Now this is skating. There's Clint beside me, in front of me, skating backwards, his long brown hair fluttering across his face, grinning at me in the shifting lights, saying with his eyes, Relax, I'm in control, nothing bad can happen. Then I'm slowing, my skates kiss the floor, the pressure releases from my sides, and Clint and his friend skate away, melting back into the swarm. I veer to the side of the rink, bury my fingers in the thick red carpet on the walls, and try to catch my breath.

The day I melt candle wax and spill some on Barb's guitar, I hide in my room. She finds me.

"Do you know how much that finish cost, you little shit?" she says. "You better watch your back. When they're not looking, I'm gonna kill you."

A week later, when Barb babysits, I am prepared. While we watch TV, I hold two Popsicle sticks in the form of a cross under my blanket.

Three-quarters of the way through the school year, I join Mrs. Osborn's third-grade class already in progress. While walking home after school, Billy Taylor tackles me. We wrestle until he pins me. After letting me up, he says, "You're pretty skinny. Let's call you Bones." The name sticks.

Jason Swenski moves to Arizona; Rob Locke, who doesn't like Billy Taylor, becomes my new best friend.

Clint and our father stand nose to nose. He wants Clint to shove him out of the way, but Clint just wants to leave.

"You'll regret this someday," our father says. Clint slips past him, and I follow.

Outside, the beat-up hot rod, which Clint recently bought from Barb's friend, waits at the curb, fully packed. He grins, happier than ever, then hops in and drives off to a place called Houston.

For hours at a time, I investigate his magic stash, which he keeps in his bottom dresser drawer. Here are the nesting silk scarves, walnut shell halves, retracting wand, and instruction booklets with complicated diagrams. The only thing I can get to work is the finger guillotine, but even it sticks sometimes and bites into my thumb. When I'm finished, everything goes back the way it was in preparation for Clint's return.

Iris is married to a guy named Bill, and they live in an apartment in the bad part of town. One night she calls crying, so my parents drive over. They take me along.

Bill's wiry red hair sticks out in every direction. My mother hugs Iris, who is crumpled in the corner. I shelter behind my father, who says, "Now, Bill, listen here."

Bill crushes a beer can and hurls it at the wall. He roars at us, at the policemen knocking at the door, at the world—"Iris is my wife! You can't tell me what to do." We take her back home with us.

Nicole sends beautiful pencil drawings of birds and Jesus from jail. All that my mother will say is that she's in "for drugs." I go with my mother to court. In a gray jumpsuit and without mascara, Nicole looks plain. "Do you believe you can take responsibility for your daughter?" the judge asks my mother. Nicole cries. But my mother doesn't cry. She's too sad to cry.

Nicole comes home and lives downstairs. As a boy in training to be a ninja, I'm stealthy. I know every creak on the eleven wooden steps to the basement. One day I creep on Nicole, down the stairs, one, two, three. There's her feet, her legs, her scab-riddled arms. She's turned toward me, so I expect her to spy me any minute and yell "Jeffrey! Get the fuck out of here." I crouch.

Framed by the door to her bedroom, she sits cross-legged, doing something to her arm. She lifts her head up, looks at me, and, when I remember this moment, it's like I'm in the room with her, listening to the scratch of a needle against the bottom of a Coke can. She takes my arm, cinches a strip of nylon under my bicep, draws a syringe full of clear liquid, and, if I had ever wanted to protest, it's too late because my voice lacks any strength. Like my body, its vitality has seeped away until there's only the rhythmic throbbing. I watch the needle enter a vein in the crook of my elbow then look up at cloudy waves of brown and gray and feel myself releasing into a pool of perfectly lukewarm water, where nothing really matters, not the coldness of the cement

floor, not the single ray of sunlight piercing the room, not the boy crouching on the stairs staring back.

The light drains from her face, and her head nods forward. I tiptoe up the stairs and out the back door. Resting a hand on one of the posts, I leap the fence and land in the alley. Then it's sunlight, fresh air, and legs churning faster and faster, carrying me away.

I live for recess when we choose teams and play football. During one game of Smear the Queer, we all scramble for a fumble. Billy Taylor lands on top of me, and I hear three loud pops. That's my collarbone breaking. While it heals I stay home, reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and *After the Bomb*.

Rob Locke moves to the country, away from what his father calls the Ghattoburb.

My brother and sisters have all moved out, and the house is silent. In the basement storage room, which used to be Iris's bedroom before it was Nicole's before it was Barb's before it was Clint's before it was Iris's again before it was Nicole's again, I spend whole afternoons going through Clint's magic drawer and football memorabilia, messing with Barb's electronic junk, and playing with all the games leftover from their tenure at the house: Flinch, Parcheesi, Pit, Battle Ship, Ten-Pin Bowling, Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots, Electronic Football, and a *Planet of the Apes* village. More than once I wonder what it would be like to grow up with siblings my own age.

During a sixth-grade assembly, Mr. Newell, the social studies teacher, confiscates a full-size model .357 Magnum from a student. As a joke, he waves the gun in students' faces. Then he trains its sights on the forehead of one notorious troublemaker and says with deadly

seriousness, “Don’t make me mad, Chuck.” The entire sixth grade holds its breath.

On his first day at our school, Ray Nelson, the new white kid, whose father is in the Air Force, gets beat up in the bike rack enclosure by Tosha Williams because he refuses to hit a girl. A teacher nabs him for fighting, but Tosha gets away.

Ray’s so angry at himself that, while he’s being walked to the principal’s office, he punches out a telephone pole. He shows me the purple splotches blooming on the back of his hand.

“I think I broke my knuckles,” he says. He’s so happy at this feat that he laughs through his tears.

After his suspension he becomes my new best friend.

Barb plays bass guitar in a rock band. She maps out the blues chords on a piece of notebook paper and explains them meticulously. Holding the electric guitar she gave me—the same one I scorched with wax—I sit in the basement and stare at the hieroglyphics, hoping they’ll become clear.

“Is Dad there?”

Clint sounds defeated. During phone calls, usually his voice is upbeat and full of wisdom. Calling from an Oregon jail, he tells me that he got drunk at a party, stole a Volvo, and was arrested.

“Is Dad there?” he says again.

As my father listens to Clint retell the story, his hair goes gray. He wires the bail money.

Two months later, Clint calls home again and announces that he’s joining the Marines. He drives home in his latest muscle car, a ’66 Pontiac, which he gives to me, along with his dog. During the day he devours forties from the 7-11 across Sixth and lounges in my room.

After he leaves for boot camp I sneak the bottles into the alley trash bags so that my father, who boasts that he's never even tasted alcohol, won't find them.

LaShawn Jackson and I meet by the baseball diamond after school. We kiss long and wet and sloppy until she has to go home. When my father finds out that I'm dating a black girl he sits me down and explains, more or less, that the races weren't meant to mix. *But is it okay just to kiss?* I want to ask him.

LaShawn's father is a city bus driver, and, at back-to-school night, we shake hands. He looks as if he'd rather break my arm. I realize that he and my father have something in common.

Ray Nelson's father gets reassigned, and he moves to California. Joe Ezit joins our class. He has big floppy ears, a crewcut, and enormous hands. One Halloween we smash pumpkins together and get chased across the local golf course. He teaches me the ditty, "Beans-beans the musical fruit, the more you eat, the more you toot. The more you toot, the better you feel, so eat some beans with every meal!"

He becomes my new best friend.

Iris, who answers phones for a liquor distributor, takes me to her work picnic, where her boss, who, she tells me with a laugh, is Jewish, stacks up piles of pork ribs—warm, juicy, and tender. They're the best thing I've ever tasted.

Great tubs of ice hold endless bottles of the company product. The sour effervescence of a raspberry Bartles and Jaymes wine cooler becomes my first drink.

Barb joins the Army and buzz-cuts her hair.

During ninth grade, the movie *Top Gun* inspires me and five million other thirteen-year-old boys to become fighter pilots. I join the high school's Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, a program run by two men: Chief Pinkstaff, a disciplinarian chain smoker, and Major Livergood, a retired Air Force officer with a Hitler moustache and coffee breath who practices the laissez-faire style of leadership (one of four styles, we learn from our textbooks).

Wednesdays we wear our uniforms—powder blue shirts, dark blue slacks, flyboy hats. Worst of all is weekly inspection, when hair touching our ears earns a demerit. I endure this routine humiliation because Major Livergood promises that he has five special nominations to the Air Force Academy. When I think about it hard enough I can almost feel the four Gs of an F-16 climbing vertical.

"I can't believe my little brother's a ROTC geek," Barb says over the phone. "We used to call those guys ROTC fags." But you're in the Army yourself, I don't say. Instead I picture Barb and her friends shoving some skinny uniformed kid into a snow bank, like what happened to me the week before.

Nicole, pregnant, quits her job and moves back home. After school I race across Sixth, dodging the city bus, to 7-11. I buy the powdered sugar mini-donuts she craves.

At 4:25, we burn our thumb muscles repetitively dialing Channel Nine, trying to be the ninth caller in order to win \$90. In our most glorious moment, we are Caller Number Eight.

The day she goes into labor I ride to the hospital with her. Late that night Nicole gives birth to Sissy. In class the next day teachers are drones, and all my friends are morons. School and all it stands for is as insignificant as smoke: I'm an uncle.

One day after school Joe Ezit and I run into Keith Jordan at the park. He asks whether we want to smoke some weed, so we go down to a clump of trees. He lights a joint, takes a deep hit, then passes it around. When it comes to me I picture the scars on Nicole's arms. Even if I knew how to, I wouldn't inhale.

Our parents split up again, and my mother leaves, this time for good. Though she pleads, I refuse to go with her.

For the fourth time today, I re-read the letter from Barb. Over and over I read the sentence: "Jeffrey, I'm a lesbian. Vicky is my lover." None of my friends have ever mentioned having someone gay in their family. I tuck the letter in my backpack and don't tell anyone until after high school.

After she has Sissy, Nicole moves into an apartment four blocks away. She lives off welfare and what her boyfriend Tyrone contributes. Sometimes when I visit, Tyrone is there.

"What's up, Jeff?" he says. His gold teeth flash, and his hands are usually busy with a project—cutting off the corners of twenty-dollar bills and taping them onto singles or pasting magazine pictures of brand-new televisions to the outside of a cardboard box. He's always in motion and rarely stays at Nicole's for long, though he leaves her his car—a long, low Cadillac she starts with a screwdriver.

It turns out that Major Livergood only gets his five nominations if the drill team wins a major competition. The week after I'm promoted to Second Lieutenant, I turn in my stripes and junior-size uniform. I grow my hair out until it curls in the back. Each time I pass a ROTC fag, I tilt my head back and blow the bangs out of my eyes.

In the Army Barb becomes a helicopter mechanic. She sends home a plastic model of her aircraft, the Bell OH-58, and even talks about getting to fly it. It has so many tiny plastic parts that have to be snapped from their pre-molded sheets and glued together that I'm never able to assemble more than the main passenger compartment. With its tapered, rotorless body, it resembles a dead fish, not a helicopter. Sometimes I try to picture Barb in the pilot's seat, hands on the controls. It's such a strain to hold all those pieces together that I can rarely convince the image to lift off.

In between duty assignments, Clint and Barb come home for a visit. Clint talks about how sleeping with so many women has caused his spirit to become "atomized."

"Each one takes a piece of you," he says. He rambles on about his "One" theory—how he could have tapped into the universal stream of power that Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad accessed if only he hadn't become so dissipated. He grins at me as if I'm supposed to eat it all up like a five-year-old.

He cleans out his magic drawer. Most of the stuff sells in a yard sale. What doesn't we take to the Goodwill.

While they're both home, we have a family dinner. Our mother comes home, has us put the extra leaves in the dining table, and tops it with ham, green beans, mashed potatoes, gravy, warm rolls, and iced tea. We joke and rehearse all the best stories, my favorites the ones that happened before I came along: Clint getting bit by a garter snake and Iris reporting that it was a rattler; Barb daring Clint to eat twelve packs of Taco Bell hot sauce while Nicole withheld the hose; Iris and Barb building a snow-bong on the elementary school lawn. It doesn't feel like an ending, it feels like a beginning, but it's the last time we're all together for more than a decade.

On a scorching hot day in June I receive my high school diploma. I finish sixteenth in my class. Joe joins the Marines. At the airport I watch him, in brand new running shoes, walk down the boarding ramp and disappear into the plane, which will take him to a new life and, eventually, Iraq. I apply to the extension university that's eleven miles away, downtown on a commuter campus. Collectively, my brother and sisters and I have lived almost a century in this tiny house at the foot of the blue spruce. A football's throw away sits the Number Six bus stop. From the kitchen window, how many thousands of buses have we watched pull up to the curb and open their doors? No one in my family has ever finished college. On a day in the coming fall I'll board that bus. And it will take me somewhere new.

A Theory of Ignatz

To say that Ignatz floats at the level of the neighbor is really to assert his status as a denominator; *i.e.*, he is a plane tilted at the *ecliptic*, both in its sense of inclination at an angle of 23 degrees, 27 minutes, but also, in its palimpsestic sense, with a scrim of the Latin root *ecliptica* (line) coyly veiling the Greek *ekleiptikos* (to fail to appear).

First Ignatz

How could it have been other than abrupt
when as always *in medias* Ignatz remarked,

Sometimes I don't like

fucking. Whoosh! A billow

of white cambric sheets the scene,
through which her

nipples glow dully,

taillights in snow.

On Ignatz's Eyebrows

the way water is always rushing between a ferry
and its dock in that ever-present gap where
the rush is the speed of the water and the rush
is the sound of the water and the water is
bitterly cold and is foul in its bitterness and
the gap is irreducible time and space and
is the ache felt by the ferry in the cold
of its iron bones which will never clang against
the iron framework of the dock in the satisfaction
of solid surfaces because the gap is where such clangs
helplessly dissolve the way Ignatz now feels his anger
dissipating in that self-same gap between the trigger
and the smack between his anger and the object
of his anger just as his eyebrow can never

meet his other eyebrow in a true unbroken V

no matter how doomy how dour

how darksome his invariable frown.

Quickie

All I'm wearing when I come to you is all
I've worn for yesteryears past when I was last
born but got my tail caught in the door neither
here nor there but in between the silky
screen & the outside where my face has become
a callous trying to make music from all sharp
sounds I'd change my name to "Yes" if you'd say it
to me once if you could push your bony bolts
aside let your hinges fly open whether they squeak
or squawk or open pleasantly silent & if it's difficult
knowing you're so full of love it's irreconcilable with
you or I am or that my hands open up like birds' wings
pushing against nothing

there is nothing holding you down

I search the gutters for what I want I look for the scraps
that some have lost in the past when they watched
their lovers sleeping beside strangers when
their chimneys wept when
their leaky roofs were pounded with gallops of rain
& their only comforts were looking out through
the collapsed ceilings at the trusses keeping the big
black roof from coming down too

Roger Reeves

Parable of a Blade of Grass

—for *kml*

Where the fire enters
a city of small doors, a city
of one blade of grass, a city
where the fire enters, where
the children lick the stones
of the street on their hands
and knees and the mice gather
in the square with the others
to watch the one blade of grass,
where old men whisper in
their hands, a city where the old
women move their skirts against
their thighs to remind themselves
of their own flesh and what flesh
can do for a city, for a fire,
where a couple not from the city,
not blue-veined, but full of flesh,
watch the town gather around the blade
of grass, watch them offer their eyes,
watch them heap stones around
their fire, this couple not from
this city, not flattened by the heat
nor the dust, watch the children
crawl to the edge of the blade
of grass and offer their young tongues,
in this city where the fire enters,
the two not of the city walk to

the children, step over their hunched
backs and dirt-stained lips, past the edge
and pluck the flower from the fire,
from the city, in this city where
fire enters through a hush of flesh,
the couple not of the city snaps
the blade of grass in two and
place it in each other's mouth.

Watch them eat fire.

Watch the children grow
legs below the knees, watch
the old men kiss the old women
behind the house walls.

Love is when you can hear the flood coming.

Anna Wilson

crab alley

creolized by the half-eyed dawn
post-loving the antebellum begun
last night we walked
the coastal corridors
jonquil gaze of moviegoers
evening's jaundice
gets us to a motel's plain
white sheets The Shoo Inn

I dreamt of you waxwing heron
slung blood-tipped over shoulders
tall thin trudging the clew
of a gast grey city
two nights ago we ate crabs
in crab alley crunching
sucking dive mastery of death
children in a car
I was fixed by your black belt
you were bound in the yellow
hairs above my elbow
the dominion of real
sooty legions despairs
doubts crawled crab
moil in us dogs of the American
Domestic Turf Register

three days ago brother in his Original
Mint Julep Mask over breakfast

coffee cream lords of creation
we spoke of this vacation
blithely leaden
the crunch of will
the mantle of heaven

exhibit

if we gave ourselves to science in the end
we might, mummified, find ourselves
diorama queen and king embracing
for frisking local youth, stilled puppets
making "Modern Love" in the moulder
of the Field's emboxment, the bloodroot
in the Paris of your thighs, red puccoon,
sanguinaria canadensis, cold now,
erected by the moth-haired
hand of the white-jacketed preparator,
not to the Venice under my archival skirts,
the black cohosh a rattletop rusk
now tended by the same man in white
who fusses with our hairstyles, the cock
of our hands, that the children may know
how it was to love each other then

the laconic crickets of your fingers on my hips
the rabbit mystery of your hand under my ribs

the dim firefly of your eye in the night
the six-point buck of your spine as you take flight

Bayue

Alphabetically: *banka* is bank, shoal; *bukhta* is small bay, cove; *gavan* is harbor; *gora* is mountain, hill; *guba* is bay; *kamen* is rock; *laguna* is lagoon; *mys* is point, cape; *ostrov* is island; *ozero* is lake; *poluostrov* is peninsula; *reka* is river; *skala* is cliff, stone; *zaliu* is gulf

We sailed eighty-four nautical miles from Avacha Bay off Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky on June 13th and anchored first at 53.13N, 159.57E off Morzhovaya

Anchored the next short night of the 14th in bad weather at 53.28N, 159.63E in Bukhta Kalygir

And in the dusk of subarctic midnight on the 15th, in Force 6 and 7 winds, arrive at Zhupanova, 53.41x159.54, to anchor in a roadstead outside the river mouth

That morning watch four Steller's sea-eagles, one after the other, high off over the coast

Wait some hours for the winds to abate before trying to run the dinghy in through the river current surge and dangerous chaos of the tidal seam

Nearly calm and extremely beautiful once inside

Churn on upriver past Zhupanova village

Harbor seals basking on the estuary's bars

Sea ducks everywhere

Harlequins, common eiders, king eiders

And Eurasian wigeons, mallards and common goldeneyes

Swimming around us, knifing by overhead

Slaty-backed gulls, both yellow and gray wagtails, oriental cuckoos

All paired and nesting there along the river

An hour in, a summer-coat arctic fox, unusually far south of the tundra, trots along the ice edge horizon in silhouette before staring at our dinghy and disappearing into willow scrub

In Thomas Kling's "Inhalator," written while he was dying of lung cancer at forty-seven, he describes his fluttering breathing as, "*und wie von polarfuchs heiseres gebell*"

"and like a polar fox's hoarse barking"

Arctic foxes bark when penned on fur farms

Despairing of escaping, as certainly must have Kling

Thomas Kling, b. 1957, d. April 1, 2005, in his best-known headshot a cigarette hangs from his mouth

Past the basking seals and the arctic fox boldly melting away into the riverine bush, through a sweeping river bend, see far upriver to Zhupanovsky Volcano

Sheer, stark white cone smoking powerfully, an elegant, horizontal cloud mantle trailing

Twenty-five hundred meters, fifty kilometers off

And then an immense Steller's sea-eagle's nest like a branch-strewn tree house

One parent there

Massive culmen, dramatic white shoulders and tail, peculiar tipped-forward perching posture, no eagle species larger

We rode the Zhupanov River current hard a few more kilometers up and then drifted back to the village in brilliant, chilly sun

To chunk halibut with beer and boiled potatoes on a plank table outside the Zhupanova village canteen

A few ethnic Russian and Kamchadal families encamped there for the summer fishing in shabby modulars and Nissen huts connected by duckboards on the melt

Russian blue exercise pants, anoraks, gumboots, trooper hats or stocking caps

Suspicious but friendly when they see their kids trust inquisitive yachtsmen who would have been the enemy fifteen years ago in this Cold War frontier zone

The meal was interrupted by a yearling Kamchatka brown bear flushed out by village dogs in a willow thicket behind the nearby latrine

Large as a heifer

It broke out of the thicket in a frantic, panting, mysterious, dangerous-to-all-nearby, rush away off around Zhupanova's last derelict shacks

Perhaps twenty people there outside, eight or ten little kids, and our two crews, all of us staring after it

Until the dogs quieted down

Leaving Zhupanova under sail in fine weather and a vivid first quarter moon after sleeping, pick up a pod of white-flanked Dall porpoises loafing along beside the bow

At noon in the next day's drizzle another pod appeared abeam and stayed with us for almost fifteen minutes

Black with white flanks flashing dramatically as they breached

Spectacularly marked, nearly as emphatically as the orcas we saw less frequently

The orcas usually spaced on the sea behind the foreground,
suggesting threat in the manner of a flotilla of caravels

Sailing north through the Bering, the richest sea, for the first days
brings nearly constant euphoria

Anchor the night of the 16th in Kaministaya Bay and in the
morning's thick fog go out in the dinghy to look for shore and find hot
springs marked on the charts

Lost immediately once out of range of *Leonore's* weak foghorn

Anxiously cast around for a while but don't get to glimpse even a
profile of the coast

Make it back to the boats only on a hand held compass's bearing

Motor off that anchorage on a course of exactly 0° in the uneasy
calm of the deep fog

Already worried about the ice ahead

Sun by midday with northern fulmars everywhere around us

Genial Gennadiy Zibrov, the sled dog-running Russian aboard
Diabliesse, the other boat, "*Glupysh, glupysh, glupysh*" for the ubiquitous
northern fulmars

Glupysh is "goof" in Russian

That afternoon, clustered on the water a couple of hundred meters off to starboard, four orcas circle tightly around what must be prey or already a kill

In that night's twilight, mount an ice watch in the pilothouse and when any is spotted someone goes out to the bow

By 0700, sea ice is everywhere just to port, to the west

Diabliesse has already used more diesel than was wise, given the sea ice and general emptiness of the coast ahead

We follow a Russian fishing boat to its old East German-built mother ship, *Jacob Kyoler*, at 58.30x163.21 off Cape Krasheninnikova

Tie up abeam of *Diabliesse* as she fuels

The *Jacob Kyoler* is processing king crabs

One's leg hangs from a porthole

Men and women in *Jacob Kyoler's* crew shout down curious and friendly, ask for beer

They drop a line, we send up a case of Baltica 7 Export, they send down an eighty-kilo halibut that with difficulty we clean then and there on the fantail like lifting an engine block out of a car

We're the first private sailboats the *Kyoler's* captain had ever seen in the Bering Sea

He asked, "Why did you come *here*?"

As we leave, he sends over two burlap sacks of flounder, a sack of king crabs, and one of Pacific cod

The fulmars, the *glupysh*, wait nearby by the hundreds for the factory ship to flush its garbage and gurry

Bound for the Koryak village of Ossora on the mainland inside Karaginskiy Island, we encounter ice much sooner than expected

For hours at only a knot or two motor deeper into Karaginskiy Bay steering through the floes until the ice tightens up leaving no alternative but to turn back

The air dead still, there was no horizon, no sky, all sea, only a fog-sea ice welt

Blue paint from *Leonore's* hull was left on some of the floes

We anchored that night just inside the southern peninsula of the big island

Long morning there off Ostrov Karaginskiy's Mys Sotlola, resting and taking stock

Down to shirt-sleeves for the first time since Moscow cleaning the bag of arrowtooth flounder off the fantail in the sun, four were yellowfin sole

The kittiwakes there were thoroughly wild, not comprehending the gurry and fish heads thrown to them

And in the galley the arrowtooth flounder turned out not to be very good eating, called mink food by Gennadiy

We sailed off around the island and out to open sea only in the afternoon of June 20th

Heavy seas and twenty-knot winds all day the 21st, a rough sail and rougher later on with up to forty knots in the night

Deep in Newman Flower, *Franz Schubert, The Man and his Circle* (Cassell, London, 1928)

We lay at 60.01.14 N, 170.07.00 E near Mys Anana outside Laguna Anana trying to shelter along the Olyutorskiy Peninsula

Gusts almost up to forty knots and steady winds at over thirty-five there at Anana Bay through the evening of June 23rd

The skipper: "Sheltered deep in a low with another coming through tomorrow. The forward bilge pump is not working, probably the filter"

Four Russian fishing boats holed up in that bad Anana Bay anchorage near us

We sailed south to get out of there when we left early on the 25th before turning north out on the open ocean

Sailing all night into the cold, the genoa ran well. We brought in the poles at 0800 from the flanking headsails

Diabliesse's radar went out during the hard sail up and we lost contact

She finally came in to anchor a few miles farther north in a more exposed bay, later came back to anchor close to us in the near gale that afternoon on the south side of Anastasia Bay

When the wind died late in the day we went ashore and landed on a black volcanic sand beach below an extremely high cliff chaotic with kittiwakes nesting in the thousands

Walked the sand

The laguna lay behind the surf hitting on a dead-tree drift wood bar, the lake's cut to the sea off around the crescent of the bay

Very fresh bear tracks across a sand rise ahead, down from the high rocks to the swash, nearly a foot across and the claw punctures with water still in them

Shiver cold, shiver anxiousness

Wonder, as the Russian captain asked us, what we're doing here

North of sixty degrees near the date line deep in the antithesis of comfort and calm

The laguna was rich with waterfowl, the nesting kittiwake cliff continued raucous and wonderful, and we got the dinghy back out to *Leonore* and *Diabliesse* through intimidatingly high seas without being swamped

And left that skimpily sheltered anchorage and motor sailed for many hours through the night, the temperature getting glove cold even in the galley and pilothouse, and when we opened the engine room door for warmth, the whole boat filled with hydrocarbon fumes

A diesel leak took the better part of the next three watches to isolate and fix

In that passage at six knots or so, a slaty-backed gull hung over the rail just outside the glass forward of the starboard beam for hours the next glum, rainy late afternoon

Went out to clean up after the diesel problem and wash the deck hard but the gull was still there a few feet away

Often all around the boat, moving or not, very hungry slaty-back gulls waited—on the water, on deck, on the mizzen boom

Starvation in rich-ocean wilderness, hunger without the luck to come upon what little's there to eat

And in the maritime summer arctic, when it's stormy, which is at least half the time, it's never bright, and each evening's midnight is never quite night

Ashore again in *Diabliesse's* dinghy at the head of Bukhta Paula, gray sand not black, glimpse half dozen elegant emperor geese leaving the estuary

Bear tracks immediately, as usual within minutes of stepping ashore, immense and menacing

Relieved to walk on land, we all head off in our own directions to get away

Hike a couple of kilometers to the saddle at the near horizon, sloshing through muskeg and then across snow shoals over yellow rhododendron lifting only two or three inches off the tundra's thatch

Patches of tiny alpine roses within the thatch and prostrate cushion plants

Moss campion

White alpine sandwort never higher than three or four inches

Alpine shooting stars or a tiny flower closely like it

That far north new growth has only from the snow melt to the first snowfall that holds

That spongy surface cushion blooming on its thatch of rootlets and dead matter, and below that peat

"the bog floor shakes // water cheeps and lisps // as I walk down . . .
// I love the spring // off the ground"

Sprawled up on the saddle on that thatch at four hundred meters
looking out into Kamchatka's vastness

Watch two pairs of nesting yellow wagtails and four stone chats,
not sure what type

Each time ashore there's sand, flotsam and jetsam on the strand,
whale and walrus bones, a lagoon behind the low dune ridge, muskeg
behind that until the solid rise at the bottom of the first volcanic slope

Then come snow shoals and rivulets among the tussocks, next the
drier cushion plants and sometimes bare rocks or lava, and finally the
top of the first rise, looking generally northwestward toward more hills
like the one just climbed

On the beach are often sea-worn crate and pallet lumber, fishing
floats, other plastic fragments and plastic bottles, bits of nets and line

Inland from the high-water line, the only human trace is rusted 200-
liter oil drums standing around strangely on the tundra blown there by
the winter gales

Gennadiy didn't know or wouldn't say, and year or two in a
boreal maritime climate is like a decade in the temperate zones, but
ashore within Lower Natalia Bay on the 27th an abandoned reindeer
processing camp looked a great deal like an abandoned Gulag site

Bears had been there, leaving fresh claw-sharpening marks almost
twenty feet above the ground on the high conifer poles from which was
strung a derelict phone line connecting the camp to the derelict factory

And snow doesn't accumulate deeply there on that windblown beach

At the empty steel and masonry hulk of the canning factory itself was a large pile of reindeer skulls, strangely delicate, the teeth in the long jawbones like human molars

Uniformly *blanc fixe* gray with grayer lichen growing on some of the skulls' convex surfaces

Hike the three kilometers on the top of a long dike to rendezvous with the dinghy realizing that the dike must have been dredged and then shoveled into regularity by Gulag labor

Black sand bars and huge gull flocks along the channel to the main bay on the way back out with the tide

An inquisitive sea otter's head appeared repeatedly from the black river current behind

Rapid point-to-point purposeful flights of sea ducks over the river

A line of fog out over the sea ahead, *Leonore* and *Diabliesse* still almost a mile off rising and falling alarmingly with immense swells

Two boats are perfect for such a voyage—with three or four you'd need a commander, with two you only have disagreements

Koryak people for tens of thousands of years here on this coast along which the ancestors of the Chukchi passed toward the land bridge to what's now Alaska and the Yukon

Little of the Koryak left here except for a few villages and their genes spread through Kamchatka's population

The Soviet citizens who were here in northern Kamchatka, canning reindeer and bossing prison labor for one long generation, left relics of scrapped cast iron machinery, razor wire, watchtowers, blown steam engine boilers and other junk rusting away

The huge bears in ways seem the real bosses now, evidence the claw marks so high on the phone poles of the derelict camp

See them often from the sea scavenging the beaches, but when they notice us looking at them when we come out on deck they retreat upslope

The adults have humps like grizzlies, are larger, and genetically are identical to Kodiaks

When we go ashore we carry flare guns

Official Russian government instructions: If a bear attacks, fall to the ground on your stomach and protect your face and neck. If the bear rolls you over, try to get back on your stomach. When the bear stops, keep as still as possible. If the attack persists and the bear continues to bite long after you assume a defensive posture, fight back vigorously. If a bear attacks you in your tent, fight back with everything at hand

But the constant danger was the sea itself

With the water only a couple degrees above freezing, a capsized dinghy or going over the rail meant extreme hypothermia or heart attack oblivion within seconds

Ben, the most ebullient Australian of all on *Diablesse*, claimed if he went over the side he'd tear open his submersion suit to "go faster"

Always snow patches ashore, in places blank snow fields and drifts stretching upslope to the high valley glaciers

Everywhere on open water the black-legged kittiwakes, slaty-backed gulls and northern fulmars—coursing, circling, diving, hanging off the deck

And thronging on the cliffs and monumentally high bird rocks, murrees, dovkies, murrelets, guillemots and auklets, and the most dramatic of the alcids, the tufted and horned puffins, usually paired, sputtering takeoffs just ahead of our prow

Even crested auklets, north of their range-map zone as we sail at four and a half knots into the arctic

They paddle fast away, shaggy crests and orange bills, white button eyes that seem startled and then perplexed that our boat is there with them

The thousand nautical miles north and east up the Kamchatka coast from Petropavlovsk into Chukotka is a totally volcanic landscape with sharp, fresh, recent peaks and ridges, as though cut igneous metallic

And in the quiet evening before Chukotka, still weeks from Alaska,
sail into calm Dezhneva Bay, the inlet north from Anastasia Bay

Not a trace of any brush or timber anywhere ashore now, only the
snow-patched black and gray granite that day-by-day has grown more
and more dramatically empty

Within perfectly calm Bukhta Dezhneva, motor quietly on a mirror
sea at three knots for hours well toward midnight through the spouts
and soundings of seventy or eighty gray whales and a few humpbacks

They are spread like pavilions on a darkening windless plain

As they surface and blow, the monumentality of their wheeze-
snort-ease-relief carries across the deck with affecting intimacy

When they sound, their flukes lift gracefully as if to signal a
mysterious perpetuity

Sampling credit to Seamus Heaney, "Kinship."

Solidarity of the Ballpark

I hit the ball deep into the center field bleachers to win the game
but when the ball lands the cheers melt away into quiet.

After crossing the plate I look up and the Jumbotron shows, over and over,
a slow motion replay
of a woman catching my home run. The first part is normal: she drops her beer
as she reaches out with both hands, her face clenched and reflexively turned off to
one side.

But she catches the bloodied head of an owl. She thrusts the owl head
triumphantly up
in the air—where the camera zeroes in on it for a second—and begins to celebrate
but recoils in horror when her fingers tell her it isn't a baseball. She tosses the head
behind her.

The Jumbotron shows this sequence again and again as if it's a close play or a
something
and the crowd needs to see it so they can evaluate the umpires' coming decision.
And indeed
the umpires have convened to discuss the situation. A hole opens out in the
bleachers.

The umpires' discussion is, predictably, protracted as the rule book says nothing
about what to do when the ball turns into the severed head of an owl.
Meanwhile, someone with some sense of decorum has turned off the Jumbotron

but with that massive rectangular void hanging over center field
and a strange quiet settled in the ballpark, everyone is really uncomfortable.
Ballplayers can shrug off almost anything with a wisecrack but in the dugout

we're silent, staring out at the umpires, who are now grilling the pitcher
with questions. I feel a little guilty, but it was clear from the crack of the bat
and the white streak arcing out of the yard that what I hit was, at first,

a baseball. I know I didn't do anything wrong. Out in the bleachers
security has formed a circle around the owl head. And now I'm thinking that
somewhere,
in some forest, maybe in another country, there's a lifeless, headless owl body

in the grass, fallen end over end from a gnarled tree branch. Or maybe there's an owl
whose body needs food but, with a baseball for a head, it just sits there
in the leaves, inert, body soon to be eviscerated by some wild animal.

And I think just about everyone in the crowd is thinking something along these lines
as well, because now all 35,000 of us are standing still, looking reflective and sad and
large, a wall
of evidence around the umpires who, in their little circle, are still pointing
into their little blue books. This is what the umpires should be discussing. Our
empathy.

Ripened Fruit Pulled Earthward to the Ground

To love without knowing

how to stave off
disenchantment. Never enough

to lavish

wanton attention alone on what
this might be worth

to the ripest

hedonist hoarding prodigal
years—unable to forfeit

self till the Bridegroom comes—

*

Fooled once, twice, the heart's

ripeness to be
disgorged as winter's extended dark

juts around the inside orbit's

slow decay arrested by a stranger's
anonymous glance as it always happens

this way and never a chance

hypothesis without a telling where
youth, once gone, would go—or would it

reverse the shortening days?

*

Making too much out

of an amber bottle
drawn up to lips pursed

just past swig to milk

more of it, the label red
although unreadable—

to mistake one thing

for another —two bodies
yearning, wanting to

sing each other's name—

*

Timely response

to messages sent
devalues the exchange

jerked back

and forth if only to find oneself
able to submit

to exploring absence with all one's senses

heightened—the body
yoked to what it cannot comprehend

save whatever is relents—

*

Memory's forgotten abode iced under

eaves lengthening drop by steady
drop in that somnambulant

jigsawed Nevsky dawn kissed by

Moika steam—fractured ice
adrift like all the tesserae required

to rebuild a tourist-raided hovel

housing former glories untouched
yet adored—arrow-struck icons

shedding tears enough to blind an army . . .

*

The ring on my finger—

(everyone saw it
did they not?)

then you walked in,

my back to the bar
asking for another—

took the seat beside me

hardly asking.
You didn't ask whose

spouse I was. Yours—

*

Going slack, we watch our
egos effortlessly
deflate: a pair of queens or
jacks held back in hands bent on
makeshift mindfuck antics
auguring a crack at maidenhead
torn—the heart's purloined
hermeneutics locked inside a box
where huddled doubts
sequestered errant probity—

*

Tinder kissed by historic sparks
enough to catch the two of us risking
drown from the get-go, already
jazzed on hunches, improvising

meanings without a chart nor any set
arrangement, only unvoiced

tendernesses—a dirty Venice

hijacked by a fog-soaked gondola
you can't get on if gotten off

speeding now deeper into the lagoon—

*

The apple of anyone's

eye remains to be
devoured where core unhinges

jaw—late oozings

mapping where the stray
arrow flew, myself the struck

thing, tumbling

headlong into hubris
yet undaunted by the One still

shouldering quivers left unshot—

*

To sing your name—what

else
do you want

jobless One, if verses do not

matter?
As if crème brûlée

topped with a pear mattered! Just before

hopping into a cab,
you throw your arms around me.

Say goodnight, my name—

Rebecca Dunham

Aviary

Each day is a calculation: this
much from me, this much for him.

Like objects displayed in a hand-
thrown bowl, these words: *fig*,

pomegranate, lime. Grapevine,
crow, pineal, & nib. A still life

to press & test like any woman
at the market. It's really

not like that at all. The moon is
a smudge, a fingerprint on glass.

Its face phosphors the dark,
contained as the clock by my bed.

A *watch* is a nightingale flock,
sidereal song in the stand of pin-

oaks & olives. When do we stop
expecting to wake? To *calve*

can mean to splinter or to break,
to detach in a single piece. O

little box of mummified waves,
the body's surest form is loss.

The Flight Cage

—for Frank Baker, designer of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition aviary

His question was not the same one
Audubon once faced, no longer a matter
of arresting each avian species' distinct
plumage & light, but rather how
to frame a living piece of art, the heart's
allegro tremble as it pumps its wings,
how to display the beauty that is flight:
in 1904 it was the largest birdcage
ever built. Its elegant black lines arcing,
the metal beams strut & soar into sky.
What did he capture in the end, then:
the clumsy pink miracle by which even
a flamingo summons its body into air?
The human soul's answering upward leap?
Or the myriad ways that mankind's
ingenuity manages to bind the ineffable
to earth? The structure's steel trusses,
flying buttress, arch up like a red-wing
blackbird in motion, muscles pulsing,
to form a cathedral more reminiscent
of flight than any of its inhabitants.

Elizabeth Langemak

Self-Portrait as Cartographer

Spare me your oceans, uncharted
profundities, icecaps and landscapes
still hookless, foot-free. Save us

from space and all that is not there,
from belches in black and nighttimes
of self-love. Rescatter the islands, skip

them like stones with commonplace
shapes back over the water, reseal
the caves, turn off the lights. By

seventeen-ninety it was all put to bed,
all the world mapped but the parts
still unformed. Take the depths of man's

knowledge, stolid as bottom fish, sleeping
upright, perpetually parsing in dreams
the fat off new facts like minutes from time,

or the peak of ambition, still covered
in snow at the freshly flagged poles, bending
each caw from its great muscled jaw

as if notes of great interest. No, the lost—
if it's found—won't be by us, mahogany
breath of our desks, perfect circles in pencil,

latitudes longer than horizonless page, each
sketch an outdated reckoning. New faults
are reclaiming every line of the body,

at the end of even this map is a flipside
more useful for scrap. Take it back.

magic man

It was jadu-magic he made, that magic man of my childhood, as he spangled the air carelessly with fish scales, transparent and turquoise. I watched the snake-charmer with the wondering eyes of childhood, this glimpse into a neverland of devilry and mysticism, brief and luminous. His naked black arms were held high up in the air, his face raised, his eyes closed to the harsh summer skies, as he murmured enchantments. The fish scales were fresh as he had demanded (they came from the enormous rui-fish I had watched Firoza, our maid, chop up that morning) and still retained the pungent odor of faraway riverbeds.

The shapure-man was casting a spell: Firoza wanted to get married again or at least have her old husband come back to her. She had saved from her pay for months (as well as sneaked some money from the shopping she was supposed to do) and finally she had the twenty five taka, three candles, and three heads of garlic that the snake charmer had demanded. The fish scales were to be wrapped in a piece of cloth that had been rubbed on the face of a kumari-kanya—a young virgin. His tongue flicked out in a quick motion as he enunciated the words again—the face of a kumari-kanya. The bundle would then be tied to her hair where it was to remain for seven days and seven nights.

“That should do the trick,” he told her, “Bring some unfortunate right to your doorstep. But your face won’t do, will it, now?” Firoza giggled as he winked at her.

He had caught the fish scales in his palms as they descended, winking in the late morning sun. They lay there like the coinage of some virgin kingdom, awaiting the breathlessness of first discovery. As the snake charmer asked for the cloth to bind his magic, Firoza pulled me to her, “You won’t tell your mother, will you?” She tore off a corner

of the anchal of her cotton sari and wiped my face with it, molding it to my lips before handing it over to the shapure. He smiled his wolf-smile at me as he moved closer to enlace the tight little bundle of fish scales in Firoza's waist-length hair. He turned to me and asked, "And what can I do for the little apa?"

Firoza giggled again, "She's too young for your tricks, snake man. Leave her be."

"Ah," he exhaled. "The little apa is not so little anymore is she?" He laughed as if in mockery and I felt his breath warm my cheeks. His eyes were as brilliant and opalescent as the moni-gem that was hidden in the head of a king cobra, the pupils mere pinpoints of lucid light. Older kids snickered that he was a neshakhor, forever high on ganja, hashish, bhang—those forbidden fruits, that nocturnal nectar. They whispered that he sipped snake venom, and his blood ran cool under his avid skin.

The shapure had arrived that morning—as he always did—with his box of treasures: satin ribbons, vivid-colored glass bangles, cheap earrings and nose-pins. He fanned them out for us, "Dekhen-dekhen, look here, all that your hearts desire." The magic baksho would open, the serrated wooden sides falling away like the opening petals of some iridescent night-blossom, revealing his offering of a vast cornucopia of jingly jangly spingly spangly gewgaws.

His eyes glowed with imaginary wisdom as he foretold weddings and woes. The sheen of his pearly black skin was mirrored in the rapacious eyes of the women who sat with spread palms. Once he told Asma, who was the maid at my best friend Pamela's house, that the dark cloud over her would not go away for one whole year unless she took heed to his words. At the time Asma's father had been bedridden. Asma assumed a blue stone, a Neela as blue as spring skies set in silver, on the third finger of her right hand. Her father died within a month. As the snake-charmer explained on his next visit, there was no saying how fate

would finally decide to end the game: but the cloud had gone away for certain.

I cannot remember how I could tell that he had arrived. It seemed as if on certain mornings the winds whispered the arrival of the miracle-monger. I would turn a corner on my way to school, or glance into a field on my way back, and suddenly my eyes would see a three-deep closed circle of women and children and I would know that when I elbowed my way to the middle, he would be there—the shapure man who had snake-charmed his way into my childhood. I would always ask ma for some money for the shapure, and she would give me a five-taka note. She never knew that I sneaked another five-taka note in before handing over my offering to him. I would save the money from the salaami money I received each eid from the elders. Sometimes, when I had greedily spent the money beforehand, I would steal—a fifty paisa from her purse, another from dad's wallet. If she was busy when a beggar came, I would turn the beggar away with a whispered pleading of forgiveness, "Maf koren," and pocket the coins she had given me—alms for my curious and fearful greed.

Firoza knew about the money of course. Firoza who was supposed to be buying our groceries at the store but was standing here wasting time with this flim-flam. I had been playing outside, and had tagged along when I saw her with the shopping bag in hand. If there was any money left over from the groceries, she would let me have an ice-lolly or a candy bar. Firoza had been at our house ever since I could remember. Some years older than me, she had been taken away by her parents once about three years ago and married to a man years older than her: her father had owed him money. The man had beaten her every other night, finally kicking her out after three months, and Firoza came back to us. Yet Firoza yearned for him—a need as mysterious and constant as the river waters rising with a full moon. She had told me two nights ago that the shapure was going to give her a charm to

get her husband back. She had shown me the three heads of garlic she had sneaked that evening from our kitchen as she lay on her pallet on the floor by my bed. The candles and the money were in the pantry, tucked away in the pink-flowered tin trunk that held her worldly belongings.

Now as we stood together, Firoza raised both her hands and wound her hair in a loose bun in languid motions. But the shapure was looking at me, "Nothing today, little apa?"

The unfamiliar laughter in his gaze made me uncomfortable. "The snakes," I managed to say, "Didn't you bring the gokhra?"

"Oh, it is only the snakes that you want? Those king serpents?" He tucked his matted hair behind his ears and moved closer to me. I took a step back, only then noticing that his baskets were behind me, by the side of the road. "For you, anything. Everyone has time for the snake-games."

Firoza hissed, "Stop your nakhra, will you? And do what you must."

His voice grated in our ears in its litany of vicarious greed as he opened the telescopic wicker baskets containing his snakes, "Eat, eat, eat the skinflint-bakkhila, eat his miserly head, gobble it all up." The scrawny flat heads of his gokhra-snakes, with a horseshoe sigil painted behind, then weaved and waved in the shimmery summer air, in time with his been-flute, which was fat and purple like an eggplant. His right hand curled in on itself, he let it spasm in the air in time to his invocation and exhortations to his scaly companions to punish the ones who kept their purses closed to him. The beady eyes of the gokhra kept darting towards me as the dance continued.

The shapure bowed his head in salaam as always as he took the money from my hands, his rowdy black hair hung in matted clumps hiding his thin face. His fingers touched mine for an instant. Then he was carefully folding the notes and putting them in his fatua-pocket: it felt strange, for what had been mine was now his. I shivered as he turned his eyes on me again, "Your little breast holds a big heart, little apa."

I walked into Pamela's house without ringing the doorbell. Pamela and I were in and out of each other's houses all day and my dad would joke that he was never sure whether he was feeding an extra mouth or missing one. It hadn't taken long for Firoza to finish her shopping and I was sucking on a hard ball of candy while I held one in my fist for Pamela.

I walked into the hallway and called out, "Pamela!" There was a sound like the clearing of a throat in the next room and a clang as something overturned. I called out again and Rahman uncle, Pamela's father, walked out of the drawing room. "Salaam Aleikum, uncle," I said. Firoza had walked in behind me. I was surprised to see that she didn't salaam him, but he didn't seem to notice. "Oh, Pamela is having a bath. Why don't you go up to Pamela's room? Asma, close the door." He walked out of the house hurriedly as if he was late for something important.

Asma came out of the drawing room with a feather duster in her hand. "Oh, you've been dusting, have you?" Firoza asked her. For some unfathomable reason both of them dissolved into laughter at Firoza's question. "Well, what?" I asked perplexed, "What's so funny?" This only seemed to increase their mirth. Firoza reached over and straightened Asma's crooked blouse. Then she turned to me and said, "You go up. I'll tell your mother that you're here. Come on Asma, I think we have something to talk about." Asma giggled again as Firoza pulled her toward the kitchen.

Two months had gone by since the shapure had last visited and I thought of his strange wanderings often. There was not a district across the breadth of Bengal that he had not walked, he had once boasted to me. Summer was almost over. Snakes went crazy with the advent of monsoon and people began looking for snake charmers to capture them. My father said that it was all a hoax, that there never were so

many snakes in our town, the shapure let them loose himself before he arrived to drum up business. But true or not, for as long as I could remember, I had watched his capable hands wrap tightly around the jaws of snakes and force them into those baskets that he carried around. Firoza had told me only that morning as I got ready for school that she had heard that the snake charmer had arrived. But search as I did on my way or back I never got a glimpse of him.

The azan sounded, the muezzin's voice sharp and distinct in the early evening air as he called the devout to the magreb prayers. For us it meant a call to go home: playtime was over. I said good bye to the other kids and looked around for Firoza. She would usually be somewhere near the playground. Most of the maids came there for an afternoon chat and Firoza would join them after serving tea to my parents. When it was time to go home, we would walk back together without dawdling as the evening gathered in close-knit darkness around us.

The circle of servants seemed tighter than usual as I approached, and more noisy. Firoza hurried towards me, excited perhaps at being the first to break the news: Asma had hung herself from the drawing room ceiling fan. Pamela's mother had discovered her about an hour ago when she came down to see why Asma was being so late with the tea. Firoza added another snippet of information to me in a sibilant whisper; the police would be coming to claim the body soon and if I wanted a peek, I could come with her right now. If we ran all the way there and back, perhaps we'd still reach home before darkness and my mother would never know.

Asma had been laid out in the front garden, by the tall guava tree Pamela and I used to climb. People—grown-ups—were milling around aimlessly. Amid the early evening shadows their low voices rustled like the starched cotton saris of the women. I tried to listen to what they were saying, only managing scraps here and there as I tried to wriggle my way close to the body without anyone noticing: "Here's one for the

morgue! They're sure to do a post-mortem . . . I'm sure Rahman bhabi won't be too keen for the results . . . "

Another voice murmured, "Shush! Rahman bhabi is coming this way."

The first voice said, "Naturally . . . *she's* not going to come near the body."

"I know . . . He doesn't seem to mind seeing the girl, does he? Of course, men . . ." A general sniggering went around as I poked my head through under someone's arm.

Asma's was not a face unknown to me; she would serve us snacks whenever I visited Pamela's. Yet what lay inert on the ground bore no resemblance to the girl I had seen almost everyday. She lay flopped on a dirty white sheet, as crumpled as the bit of fabric at her feet that was to cover her up once everyone had had their fill. I had been expecting myself, steeling myself to feel horror—for this was my first corpse—and even some grief—for hadn't I accepted a glass of lassi from those very hands this morning? Yet the dulled eyes, cloudy skin, the nacreous purple of the tongue protruding like the tail of some curious serpent reminded me more of some bizarre stuffed animal than a human being. A virgin at death, I had crossed to the other side with my colours flying.

As I stared at her I was jerked backward by an officious hand, "What on earth are you doing here?" It was Rahman uncle. His face looked all slimy with sweat yet his hand on my shoulder was cool and lifeless. "What are you doing here?" He shouted again, "Don't you have any respect?" His voice grated in my ears as he kept on repeating, "Respect, huh?"

I looked around frantically, but Firoza was nowhere to be seen. As he grabbed me again, I tried to back away from his reaching hands. I fell over backwards, I fell on Asma. Her skin felt curiously dry and whispery against my cheek, like dead leaves. I grabbed hold of her

shoulder as I tried to steady myself, my hand brushed against that tongue, slithery with death. Other people had started to shout at me. I saw a multitude of hands descend: whether to keep me down or pull me up I had no clue. I scrambled through the buzz of voices that asked where my mother was, what I was doing there, and ran.

The protruding purple tongue stayed with me as I fled, like my fever-dreams of roiling crimson landscapes abristle with dead flower heads. The thought looped in my head endlessly that I must get home before Ma found out, before she came out looking for me. The magreb period was over, evening had closed in.

How my feet could forget the road they had been treading ever since they had learned to walk I do not know. But instead of home I found myself standing in front of the old building site behind the school. Years ago it had been decided that the school building was becoming decrepit and the design out of date. A new structure had been planned and work begun. The hastily formed committee had decided that once the work had actually begun, funds could be raised from alumni, various grant agencies, perhaps even the community. But this expected generosity never materialized, and the half-finished structure lay in disuse and despair to crumble from the ministrations of the sun, the wind and the rain. It was off-limits to us, but the older kids took no notice of that. It was a favorite place for smoking forbidden cigarettes and even marijuana, for the extra-daring ones. It was also a site for other extra-curricular activities, and I had discovered my first condom there, discarded at a corner, lying inert like a dead comet with a tail of whitish slime.

Trees had grown throughout the site, creepers snaked around the rough cement of the pillars standing guard. As I crept through the maze of dirty grey and vibrant green, a soft slithery rustle went on around me—the minutiae of secret lives of insects, birds, night creatures. The leafy darkness beckoned, drawing me in deeper and deeper until I saw

the shapure's jhola-bag flung on the floor, the brightly coloured been-flute protruding like a ripe eggplant—purple and swollen—before I saw him. In front of him stood Firoza. They were standing together, her back pressing against his chest. His face contorted as he moved against her. I watched her mouth open in a soundless scream, his dark left hand held firmly against the paleness of her throat, while he balanced them both with his right palm against the uneven wall.

Neither of them noticed me although I had made no attempt to conceal myself. Somehow I knew that they were as blind to their surroundings right then as bats in the daytime, but that they would soon emerge from their fantastic blindness, their vision clearer than the noonday sun. I stood agape, watching them; their movements seemed unsmooth, jagged, as if the control of their limbs had been flung down to lay carelessly by their discarded clothing. To me the rictus of sex seemed no less distorted than that of death. The turquoise of the gauzy anchal of her sari was spread on the wall, masking the ragged cement and protruding bricks. Glitter-beads of evening dew twinkled on the leaves and stems surrounding them, an unearthly bower of sin amid the rubble of unfinished plans.

As their movements grew more hurried, vastly urgent, the thin chittering of insects rose to a mad crescendo as the sun finally fled from sight and darkness enveloped us all. I moved forward, towards them. Did I want to see up close their carnal contortions, or was it the banal, uncomprehending curiosity of the in-between creature that I was then? I don't know. The thick voice of the snake charmer swarmed in my ears, the glutinous murmurs of unheard-of urgings seizing my will. Her voice entered my head as well, wordless sounds, like the mewling of a newborn baby or the deceptive catcalls in the deep of night.

It was all around me, that viscid song of flesh, tainting the very air that entered my body. I stumbled towards them blindly. Unwilling, afraid, I let my feet carry me to them. My eyes looked up as I neared

them. She was still prey to that willful blindness, her eyelids shut tight yet fluttery like night-time moths. But the shapure was looking right at me, his eyes bore into mine and his lips parted, forming my name again and again in his sibilant silence, his hands quick and constant. I could not move, stood rooted to the spot until he jerked suddenly and pulled her to him with broad black hands. She screamed, a high bird-trill that ended in jubilant hissing. And I ran like wildfire.

I stumbled towards the open air, bracken and weeds pulling at my feet, gasping for breath like I had seen them back there. When I emerged into the insect-swirled pale moonlight my legs were all scratched, my dress torn. Unbidden, the opaque milky eyes of the dead fish of yesterday, the big rui that Firoza had chopped up and saved the scales for the shapure, came into my head. Smoothing down my hair and my dress, I walked to the crossway that would take me home. I crouched on the earth between the roadside cement benches that marked the unofficial bus stop and waited. It was a while before Firoza appeared. She stood in front of me, trying to look into my eyes. The watery moonlight made her flesh look pallid as if her lifeblood had been drained out of her. I looked up and asked her, "What shall we tell mother?"

The rains next year brought a different shapure to our little town.

Appendix

(Figure 1.)

I lose my Kool Aid smile the week we watch
Roots in American History class; the vomit-laden

middle passage; crack of whip against human
leather—the remains of Kunta's black foot.

Alex Haley. Genetic memory. Me, a Diaspora baby.
Africa, the desecrated Mama. America, our collective

trauma. It has something to do with my teacher—
she insists that we call her *Ma* instead of Mrs.

Peschko. I think she has children of her own, but figure
she likes the way it sounds—like some mother

of the American Revolution.

(Figure 2.)

The teacher is old. Yellow chalk
stains her fingers—golden strokes;

human canvas. She says, “Life originated in Africa.”
I wonder, is this woman crazy enough to get the story right?

In spite of the fact that (in utero) God painted Ma Peschko white.

(Figure 3.)

The teacher (who I never manage to see
as my mother) offers Scarlet O'Hara and her
beloved Tara as critique.

Exposing the romanticism of shadow costumed in light—

=====

expressing interest in the contrasting
depictions of :

Afro Americans.

My twelve-year-old
soul certain:

*There is no place, no county,
no country or continent
named Afro.*

Boys at school spit on my head.
They call me:

Fro.

Ignorance becomes
the function of white:

f.(White)=Ignorance

Scarlet and her crinolines
make me:

Cringe.

Along with:

*Theme song —
Gone With the Wind.*

(Figure 4-a.)

1939. Academy Award winner Hattie McDaniel. Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of "Mammy" in *Gone With the Wind*.

(Figure 4-b.)

Selznick International Pictures; MGM. The actress' name is misspelled in the film's credits.

Bob Hicok

Reclamation

Then one day we were putting silver back
into the mine. Then Frank
got tired of his dishwasher
and that went into the mine.
Then Helen got tired of Frank
and deep to the earth in a covenning
she carried him and we all to Frank
said *seeya*. The last of us
paved it over with a small chunk
of Quebec and now we graze
right beside the cows though not
with so much swoon and sway
to our hips. That'll take a while,
scientists tell us, the relax.
I love the lab lads and lasses.
So very white coat, their parties,
so very beaker. Think of your head,
she told us, the head white coat,
as the Earth. So many holes
in your head, so much ouch. "Less
ouch" became our slogan,
we were tired of shouting "Hooray
the calisthenics" and who remembered
where that came from. You go a while
doing X and soon X is just what you do.
Dig. That's what we did. Dig
and go into the Earth with suns

on our heads that convinced us
we were the flickering shapes
that had no faces we'd ever met.
Imagine not having a face. Who knew
grass existed. And this—what do you call it,
fresh air?—I mean, all day
my burning lungs, my resurrected skin
thinking wow.

The journey

Should we go?

A scarf would be required. We could wear
the same scarf, one of us at the start of it
and one on the end.

This going umbilically, going lashed,
so to speak, nautical in disposition,
looking for new lands or just water, actual water
to drink—first we need to know, is a curtsy,
an arrow touched to the forehead
the proper ceremony with which to bless
the commencement?

I'm sketching away at how this new life might start.

Most recently you're a wolf.

Not that you look at all like a wolf.

You resemble sticks and circles but I call them
collectively a wolf.

I'm the little hat beside you on the snow of the page.

If you put me on, you'll be a wolf wearing a hat
and I'll be a hat full of wolf thinking.

Forget the scarf.

The scarf was the trial-and-error part
of the metamorphosis.

All mixed up and every where to go

Dandelions on December first.

I'd like spring for Christmas, a wrapped box
of rivulets from the hem of the thaw.

How is it that some birds, to hide themselves,
wear other animals on their feathers like a print,
while these fighter jets rip open the sky
so clearly as themselves? Dragging a sound
that, if you carried it back five centuries,
would have cracked the bubonic skulls
of rats and stopped buckets clattering up the wells.
That alone was magic, water from a hole, holy water,
try to feel the car as new, or nylon basketball nets,
how electricity is just there in walls, waiting
to contribute its alchemy. The Christmas trees
across the way stayed up all night, turned on
when the night turned on. Five—three red,
two white—like it's the season
of reassuring the hand. I'm telling you,
there will come a time when our youth
discover revolution, when they shout,
"we do not have five fingers, there are four
and a thumb," for by then our clergy will have proved
the thumb is where the soul resides.

Conspicuously large, isn't it, for sucking
and hitching, it's been too long
since I took off across America with one thumb
in my mouth, one stuck into the dike of the air,
asking highways to lullaby my insistence to sleep.

A going to sleep within the going forward:
there's a dream I've had for forty-six years
in which a guy wearing a me-suit tells me
I'm him every morning, probably because we're both
convinced the Big Band era was too brief,
all that bright sounding metal, trumpets
coming hard and chest high from the bandstand.
But his exegesis is to my eisegesis as thunk
is to felt, as hammer to ouch. Crazy, how weather
seems to hide in plain sight. Is there fancy sight?
A premonition is what the world already knows
being planted in a particular mind. None of this
is mine. That sounds sad but I have my happiest
underwear on. 'Tis the season to take the mounds
of stuff and scatter it to other losings.
Where did my pipe cleaners go, have you seen
Saskatchewan lately? Dandelions yearn
to be dismantled. Who am I not to kick, to blow?

Go _____

How exuberant the rally cap is.

Do you know the rally cap?

The rally cap is a baseball cap turned inside out
and placed on your head when your team is losing.

The idea is that change, any change, might presto a change
in your team.

So you look silly and it earns a home run.

So you lean one hand against the other and frame your voice
between the rafters of stars.

Prayer and the rally cap presume ears, the listening of God
or atomic structures.

You must do something, anything.

Say it's the ninth inning and you're down a passel of runs.

Say planes have flown into buildings and killed
how tall they were.

Say a storm has washed the color of a city away.

How do we ask the morning into our rooms?

Should we drop a fist into every conversation?

Does your bombing, sir, scold the catastrophes?

I love the rally cap.

It is the strangest verb I've ever seen on the head, a language
of please.

You must do something, anything.

Say you're being chased by a train.

All you have to throw at the train is your genitals.

You would throw your penis at the train, your vagina.

Flying penises and vaginas would fill this world of rabid locomotion.

It would do no good unless the train is afraid of this sexual air.

It would do no good unless you have an explosive vagina,

a penis that can speak to the train and ask it, why are you chasing him?

A grenade vagina, a reasonable penis are rare.

Yet you'd throw them because everything changes the world.

Waking up does, the cardigan did, and these flowers of stitching
among the crowd, the simple turning of the inside
to the outside, this willingness to become a symbol
of want, of desire for a thing: I admire this use of flesh.

There is an end, and how we get to the end is all that matters.

You must do something, anything.

Say it is possible that I hate you.

Say it is possible that I love you.

Say that we're going to vanish and we know we're going to vanish
but we haven't vanished yet and we know we haven't vanished yet.

What this leaves is time—another inning, a near infinity
of generations, of fucking things up
and fucking toward knowing more than we know now.

How to advance the runner without swinging the bat.

How to suture the wound with our lips.

How to take the scraps of touching the sky and touch the sky again.

The universe doesn't know we exist.

So we tell it.

Is a Pepper Steak a Steak Made of Pepper?: An Interview with Bob Hicok

*Bob Hicok writes simultaneously from the mind and body. His poems are playful, meditative, tragic, exuberant, and wildly imaginative. Born in 1960, Hicok ran a successful automotive die design business for several years. He also published four acclaimed books of poetry before ever obtaining a degree. His previous collections include *Insomnia Diary* (Pittsburgh, 2004); *Animal Soul* (2001), a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist; *Plus Shipping* (1998); and *The Legend of Light* (1995), winner of the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry and Notable Book of the Year according to the 1997 ALA Booklist. His new book, *This Clumsy Living*, is available now from University of Pittsburgh Press.*

Matthew Siegel: Some of your newer poems seem to be much more meditative and less “witty” than your earlier work. Also, I’ve been told that you are trying to turn away from this perception of you being a “funny” poet. Is this true? If so, what do you find troubling about being called a “funny” poet?

Bob Hicok: Long ago, in a land far away—well, Chicago—I read at the Green Mill. A group of us had come down from Ann Arbor. I think I was about twelve years old. I was at the bar when another poet started to read. A woman to my right turned to another woman and said, “Oh, he’s political,” and they went on to talk through his reading. Having identified what they thought he was about, they were done with him. I like that I’m considered a funny poet, so long as that isn’t the end of it. It would be nice to be known as an ambidextrous poet. A totally-indifferent-to-angora poet.

MS: So many contemporary artists seem to scoff at the idea that art might still be able to change the world. What is the best thing a book of

poems can accomplish today, in 2006? Can poems be catalysts for change in the world at large?

BH: Sure. Why not. No way. Pick a card, any card. Maybe the best thing a book of poems can be in 2006 is a doorstop. It's such a private matter, what poetry does for each of us. The best thing a book of poems can do is give your back pocket something to cherish. I love seeing books that have lived with people that way. Poems change individuals, who are little bits of everything. So yes, they can change the world. They can be the world while reading them, while inside them.

MS: This past summer, you were part of the Wave Poetry Bus Tour, traveling and reading with the likes of Joshua Beckman, Gillian Conoley, Carrie St. George Comer, and Matthew Zapruder. How do you feel about the energy of these and other young, up-and-coming poets?

BH: I found those readings amazing for how they washed personality away and left the poetry. No one read for very long—maybe ten minutes tops. It felt like one large poem that filled each body briefly and then entered the next. That's sappy and strangely viral but apt. One reading in particular, the stop in Athens, was so full of good work and energy that it unmoored me in a way only the deepest feelings of connection can. That's so contradictory, a letting go in the midst of feeling deeply bound. But there it is. By the end of the night, I felt distilled to a grin.

MS: Years ago, you used to organize poetry slams in Ann Arbor. Did slam poetry in any way affect your own work, and if so how? Do you think there is anything publishing poets could extract from the spoken word community?

BH: In the sense that that public existence convinced me I wanted to get my work out, yes. I've been thinking about this recently. I went to an open mike and listened to some of the grad students and undergrads read. After, I watched them come up to each other and talk about the poems they liked. Trying to appeal to and compete with each other will drive their work ahead in a way workshops won't. Slams were part of that process for me.

MS: It seems that much of contemporary poetry is compartmentalized into cliques, groups, schools, etc. Why do you think this is? Do you see it as a good thing, a bad thing, or simply a function of the poetry business?

BH: It's crap. I'm sorry, I was vague there. It's a vat of steaming, worm infested, semi-conscious dung. Poets are very ideological. Some of that stems from genuine belief in an aesthetic and a desire to defend or promote it. But mostly, I think we need to prove that we're smart. I suspect this is driven by a desire to fit in to academia, which rewards people for cutting out theoretical turf. There is not a correct kind of poem to write, or an incorrect kind. I want access to the whole spectrum. If I piss on the surreal, I won't let myself head in that direction. If I insist that the lyric is dead, that door closes. Being open to all kinds of poems allows for a fuller range of expression and helps the poet write out of different kinds of moods and sensibilities.

MS: It seems as though you are really pushing your voice forward with these new poems. Who is influencing your work at this stage of your career?

BH: Our cats.

MS: Your poems are often ambitious, as in, you seem to jump around in terms of subject matter while keeping a consistent narrative

thread running through them. Do you find yourself ever pushing a poem too hard to get it to do what you want it to do? If this is at all possible, does it occur during the revision process?

BH: The extremely associative poems you're talking about will sometimes seem jangly. I'll feel an almost physical irritation while writing them, as I go back and re-read what I've put down. Like there's no core, no motive evolving among the elements of the poem, no generative momentum. There's something appealing to me in that phrase—generative momentum—something explanative. When it's not there—when a poem has that jangly, disconnected feel—a line, a phrase, doesn't naturally lead to the next. The poem has to be pushed. When that momentum is there, any one passage seems to generate or point to the next. I wonder if each poem has its own ideational rhythm, and writing the poem is largely the search for that groove. Surfers talk about reading the wave, but they talk some weird shit, so forget surfers. It's hard to revise this rhythm, or to do so in a small way. A highly associative poem is much more likely to succeed if I'm able to revise it as I go.

MS: Oftentimes writers will begin a piece knowing where and how it is going to end as well as having a clear goal of how they want the piece to function (in the world and/or on the page). Do you find yourself setting out to accomplish something specific when you begin to write a poem? How much do you think about your audience?

BH: I almost never have a goal in mind for a poem, so poems failing to do what I want them to do aren't usually a problem. It's a large part of the joy of writing for me, to arrive where I didn't know I was going. Writers talk about this quite often. I think it's why many of us don't want to talk in detail about what we're writing. I tend to run with the first line or image that arrives with force.

I don't think about "my" audience. It would be fun to have an audience. I'd keep it in the garage. I don't know how anyone could

write with a group of people in mind. It's difficult enough to rummage around in my own head, let alone estimate how my words will enter another life. Writers should be good at sensing where readers will be more or less confused, angry, emotionally or intellectually involved, in evaluating the content of their writing in general terms. But to think about readers while writing is to invite the hypothetical into the process in a way that stops me from being open to the actual, to myself.

MS: In 2002, you abandoned a successful die design business one which you built from the ground up, to teach in the academy. Do you have any regrets about this decision? Was this ever a goal of yours?

BH: I miss my plotter. Roll feed, 36-inch paper, four color. Hewlett Packard makes good plotters and printers. I wonder if they'd pay me for mentioning them. No, no regrets. And it wasn't a goal. Because I don't have an undergrad degree, and didn't at the time have an MFA, I thought it wasn't possible for me to teach. Who knew.

MS: I find it comforting to know you came on the poetry scene without any glittering degrees. How do you think this influenced the direction and velocity of your career? When did you find your work started getting the attention it deserved?

BH: I'm happy that I developed on my own. I don't like watching students struggle to take in all the opinions they get in class. I had only my own thoughts and feelings to contend with.

I have no opinion about the attention my work deserves, though I'd like to be reviewed in Finland once before I die.

MS: What was the strongest physical reaction you've ever had to a poet/book of poems? What about to a reading?

BH: Jumping jacks.

At one Slam, I burned the ten dollars I won and put it out with my hands. Because I'm stupid and because I was insulted at the low score another poet received.

MS: To whom have you reacted this way?

BH: How about a metaphysical reaction? Frank O'Hara. Such a happy imagination. Is glee a physical reaction? Is pepper steak a steak made of pepper? Achoo.

MS: What was it like studying in an MFA program after already having published four books of poems? How did it change your own work?

BH: Annoying. I did a low-res program and I didn't like being away from home.

It didn't, but I'd never vetted poems, never been part of a workshop, so letting others in in that way wasn't anything I wanted.

MS: So many poets are rushing to get that first book out, spending hundreds of dollars on contests and reading fees. Do you believe this is the best way for young poets to get noticed?

BH: That's tough. The web is great but we fall in love with books. You can't read a CD. I don't know why chapbooks aren't more common, given how easy they are to produce. Books by presses that have worked out distribution and PR are still essential to a poet developing a national reputation. It may be the only way for this to happen, and without this rep or the promise of it, it's hard for poets to get jobs.

MS: What message, if any, do you have for the several thousand people who are going to graduate this year with MFAs?

BH: Remember that, when I say I want my root beer without ice, I mean it. I was a waiter, dish washer, I mowed lawns, worked in too many factories, sold Fuller Brush door-to-door, did the die design work for years. Don't try to sell anything door-to-door would be my advice, particularly your poems. Try to find work you like, work that doesn't follow you home. Keep writing. It seems to take most writers a few years to get clear of their program. Try not to vet everything you write with other writers. A friend says that most poets don't begin to get interesting until they're in their 40s. This is a slow process.

MS: What would Bob Hicok launch from a giant sling shot?

BH: Bob Hicok.

Beckian Fritz Goldberg, Charles Jensen, and Sarah Vap

Tender Midnight Rebel: An Interview with Beckian Fritz Goldberg

*When Beckian Fritz Goldberg received the news from Oberlin College Press that her manuscript, *Lie Awake Lake*, had won the 2005 FIELD Poetry Prize, it was sweet recognition from a press whose literary journal, FIELD, was one of Goldberg's earliest supporters. The FIELD Prize announcement arrived in tandem with the news that Goldberg's fifth collection of poems, *The Book of Accident*, was forthcoming in 2006 from the University of Akron Press. Over the course of her six collections of poetry, Goldberg has explored—potentially to obsession—such themes as desire, the body, humanity's relationship to the natural world in general (and animals in particular), and loss. The poetry is relentlessly tender, even as it moves through what are often horrifying or heartbreaking subjects.*

After four years of studying with Beckian Fritz Goldberg in the Masters of Fine Arts program at Arizona State University, Charles Jensen and Sarah Vap conducted this interview over several hours on a Sunday afternoon, at an outdoor bar in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Charles R. Jensen: Have you always envisioned yourself a poet?

Beckian Fritz Goldberg: I don't know. When I was nine I wanted to be either a concert violinist, a writer, a spy, or a mountaineer. Those were my aspirations. Except realistically I wasn't going to be a mountaineer or a spy, but I liked the idea. I watched too much TV. It was my *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* stage or something. But I always wrote. When I was nine I was writing poetry, but, you know, it was crap. It was nine-year-old shit.

Sarah Vap: You're not going to publish a book of juvenilia?

BFG: No. No no no no. I wrote in purple ink. Sometimes I'd paste little flowers to it, or something. Real romantic. Highly romantic. Yes.

SV: Who are some contemporary poets whose work you love, or is inspiring to you?

BFG: You already know the answer. Jean Valentine rocks my world. Michael Burkard rocks my world. There are a lot of them. I like Norman [Dubie]. I like [David] St. John. I like Bill Olsen, Ralph Angel. I do admire Louise Glück's work. I like Bob Hicok, Carl Phillips. Off the top of my head. I'm sure I'll piss someone off. [Gerald] Stern, [Philip] Levine, standards like that. Charles Wright—he's the cat's ass.

SV: Who are your all-time favorites?

BFG: Rilke. Paul Celan. Yehuda Amichai. Nazim Hikmet. Maria Tsvetayeva. A bunch of them foreign guys. Neruda. That's all I can think of right now.

CRJ: Who were some of your teachers and mentors?

BFG: My first teacher was Roger Weingarten. And it was my first formal introduction to something like a writing workshop. It was an amazing experience because I didn't know there were other people who thought like me. All of a sudden I met other people who were writers. And when I learned that I could change up a word—that was revelatory. I was hooked. After that I studied with Pamela Stewart for a semester. I studied with Norman [Dubie] for, like, ever. Then David Wojahn and Mark Doty in Vermont. That's it probably.

SV: Your husband, Dick Goldberg, is a painter. How has his work affected your poetry? Both of you seem to have something of the rebel spirit in your work.

BFG: Yes, he likes babes and boats. Tattooed babes. Real contemporary stuff. He's attracted to some of the stuff that I'm attracted to in *The Book of Accident*: sub-culture, pierced people, tattooed people. There is an identification with what he calls the "vernacular of the age." The cultural vernacular. It's hard to see, when you live with somebody, what kind of influence they have. And I'm not sure there's an influence as much as there is a simpatico in the artistic process. We both understand that we have to have our own space, and we have to spend time alone.

He's pretty good about poetry. He doesn't like any bullshit. He's got a good bullshit-detector, so I do have him read sometimes just to tell me if I'm full of shit completely. Of course he always likes the poems with him in it.

SV: Right. This one's brilliant!

BFG: Yes, yes! That's right.

CRJ: Any desire to work together on a project?

BFG: I know lots of poets and painters do. I would like to, if we could find the time. It's hard when I'm producing to publish, and he's producing for a gallery—when do you find time to do something together? I would like to. He did do the covers of my first two books, and that was fun. But he doesn't always have time to come up with something, so, unless he already has something . . .

CRJ: Your first four full collections of poetry were all published by presses in Ohio, so it seems natural that your fourth collection, *Lie Awake Lake*, was selected to win the *FIELD* Poetry Prize in 2005. Could you talk a bit about your experience with the award?

BFG: That was weird. I had just sent out the manuscript to about three places. It was mostly just get off your ass and do something. I wasn't sure it was done, but you get sick of it. I heard from one press and they wanted the book, but they had contract terms that were too scary for me. On the advice of some of my mentors, I turned them down. And that was fairly sickening. A good press, but . . . A few weeks later I heard from Oberlin via email. "Hi, we liked you best." And I'm thinking *Holy Shit*. It was special in the sense that *FIELD* was one of the first magazines I busted my ass to get in. I would get rejection after rejection. Swift rejection. Nice—better than waiting for months then hearing you suck. They'd been good to my work, so it was sweet.

With winning, sometimes it feels real and sometimes not. Even the night you go out and celebrate, you're still not sure what's going on. You figure the next day there's going to be a "Ha-Ha—April Fools'." In July. But I'm really happy about that. It's amazing because this contest stuff is so pervasive. There's almost no other avenue, which is very discouraging—not only discouraging when you're first starting out, that you have to win a competition to get a book out—but you can go this long and you still have to win a competition to get a book out.

SV: In terms of your individual poems, you work so beautifully with animals. They are present as the animals themselves, but often, the animals function as an adjective: "death with its butterfly face," "fragile nebula like the steam of a rabbit's breath," "fish-thrashings of light," "her back like two doves rushing," "A woman's mantis-like first step," "[b]lack spiderlegs of hair," "locust skin," "bird-pulse of red," "the

house is deep as fur" . . . and so on. The animal-inspired adjectives are present throughout your books. How are you working with animals, and what is the distinction between working with the animal itself, and working with animal-as-adjective?

BFG: One, I didn't know I did that. I knew I worked with animals but I didn't realize the adjective part. That's interesting. I didn't know I said any of these things. The animals . . . I don't make a big distinction between animals and humans, because to me, my relationship to animals and my relationship to human beings, I suppose, aren't that different. I don't think of it as a lesser relationship or that only the human relationship is important. Animals have always been important to me. I think that remembering that we are animals is something we need to do.

When it comes to some concept like spirit or the soul—and I shy away from those words—the only time I think there's a soul is when I look at animals. More so than when I look at human beings. But part of that is because animals don't give you the shit that human beings do. So I understand that.

I suppose some of the images are from ways of seeing. Images, for me, have to be very, very precise . . . so mantis-like steps, or two doves rushing up the back—it's very literal. It's what I see. That I see it sometimes in animal form, I would have to think about it . . . I honestly don't know if there's a particular thing behind that, other than the fact that that's just the way I see it, and I'm very connected to animals.

SV: That's what it feels like—a strong connection to animals. Seeing everything in relationship to animals. More than to humans.

BFG: Well, we are. But we think we're something else, too. Which, maybe we are. Animals are always something I've felt very strongly

about. If I weren't a poet I would have liked to have done some work with animals. Except I have no medical inclinations at all, because I'm too stupid. That would be something that I would like to do.

SV: You and I share something: horses. How are you working with the image or idea of the horse?

BFG: I don't know. People have asked me this because I wasn't aware of it until someone said, "Hey, what's with all the horses in your work?" And I'm going, "Gee. Shit. Yeah, you're right." But there's also a lot of birds. So I think it's still the animal thing.

I think the horse, in some works, is very literal. In *Body Betrayer* there are horses at Estero Beach. That's just literal. There were horses there, and they came into the poem, as they should have. *Never Be the Horse* was partly thinking about Noah's Ark—thinking of it from the point of view of the animals stuck there, and what the hell did they think? There you are on a boat for forty days and forty nights. I was also thinking about horses coming to the New World, and how strange it must have been for a land animal to go through that. And I don't know why I thought about it but I did. And I think also, obviously, you can draw metaphorical implication from all of it, but I think that sometimes you see more clearly through other things than you do through your own experience.

CRJ: I really love the line "never be the horse god talks to" because it assumes there is a horse that god talks to. *Lie Awake Lake* asks a lot of questions about God and just as frequently draws conclusions about who or what God is or wants. In "Like This," you write, "And you began / to see that any god would have to / hate the body, so transparent was its motives, / so transparent was its hopes." How is God figuring into your poems?

BFG: Well, I have a God-problem. I do. I don't know whether I believe in God or not. I don't know whether there is one or not. I suppose like most people I'm trying to figure that sort of thing out. But my work has moved, I think, more and more toward some sort of quarrel with God, if there is one. [Waitress arrives with more drinks.]
Interruption from God's waitress.

It's interesting because *Time* just came out with that article this week about the God-gene. I have always been very, very skeptical. But I guess I'm looking for something, and I don't know what it is. And also I have—I don't have a God-problem so much, maybe, as a death-problem. If I could solve that, I could figure out God. But I am very much obsessed with time and mortality. And I know that's nothing new, but, it really, really bothers me.

You know how Woody Allen says, in the movie where he has a brain tumor—*Hannah and Her Sisters*—he's worried about death because it ruins the whole party. That's how I feel about it so I'm trying to deal with it. Not just my own, because *Lie Awake Lake* is about the death of my father. And that does prompt one to look at some things that you don't necessarily want to look at, and trying to understand absence and loss and—is that all there is? So I have very queasy feelings about the word 'spiritual' and yet I think any thinking person has to deal with that. You have to have some sort of way of examining that or exploring that. So, probably with *Lie Awake Lake* it's the old dialogue between body and spirit, even though I'm not sure that spirit isn't a fiction. But then, I like fictions—I'm a writer. But I don't have any set sort of beliefs. I have mostly questions.

SV: How does Judaism figure into your work?

BFG: I think it makes you see the world a little differently, because you are in a society where you are a minority. So you're much more

aware of what is considered normal. Also, there is a certain amount of skepticism about things that comes with it.

SV: Questioning is an inherent value of Judaism, too, isn't it?

BFG: You are allowed to question. It doesn't excuse you from doing what you're supposed to do, but, there is a sense of a dialogue with God. Much more, I think, than in a lot of other religions. So, I think it's partly that, and partly cultural—when everyone is Christmas shopping you're left out. Not left out—but everyone's assuming—everyone is wishing you a merry Christmas. I'm not going to make a deal out of it—if somebody gives me a present that's fine. I do not care. So I think in that sense I have obviously—along with poets and along with most Jews—politically liberal leanings. It's mostly a worldview, and also perhaps a bit of dark humor comes from it, too. Although that may just be me.

SV: So many of the biblical references you make in your work are either completely imagined or terribly skewed—with some of those—there is sincerity and also some humor.

BFG: Yes. Adam is a character who shows up a lot, and he's always kind of a putz. He's always very vulnerable when he shows up. I have asked myself why I don't have as many poems about Eve—where is that old feminist side? I did have one that I wrote when I wrote some of the Adam poems, but I just ultimately didn't use it. He was a universal figure for me, and maybe it's easier to write about the other—like, if I wrote about Eve it'd have to be more about me because I'm a woman. She wasn't as easy to fictionalize or play with.

CRJ: It seems like several of the poems in *Lie Awake Lake* border on allegory. "God Body" imagines the creation of the body from God's

perspective and hypothesizes why the body must be weak; “Legend” identifies “The world began / with destruction, not creation”; “Wren,” “Tortoise,” “Tortoise Return,” and the other poems where animals figure prominently also seem to be using allegory to move forward the overall narrative of the book. What effect do you think these allegories have on the greater narrative arc of the father’s death? Is death, itself, an allegory? Thoughts?

BFG: I didn’t think of “Wren” as an allegory. The title actually comes from Jean Valentine because I didn’t have a title—I just sent her a bunch of poems I had written at her apartment. The first section of *Lie Awake Lake* was written at Jean’s apartment. I was very, very sick. Well, not that sick, I wasn’t dying or anything. I had bronchitis. My dad had died three weeks earlier. I was exhausted. And the poems just sort of came out of that exhaustion. And came out relatively pure. I think just because I was too fucking tired to mess with them. And “Wren” was the image—I don’t know how the image connected with the experience of driving home my father’s ashes from the mortuary. The experience with the wren was an experience that I’d had in my house years and years ago. Not the house I live in now—it had a pool. There was a wren in it and I fished it out—and it was scared.

Those two things, for some reason, came together. I wasn’t consciously making an allegory—I guess there was just something about the two experiences that—it’s hard to speak directly about death and loss, and I guess the wren was the closest way of seeing or capturing my father’s death.

CRJ: I think the end of the poem is really what seems allegorical to me, in that case, because it ends on this note where you make an overarching pronouncement about this experience—things are frightened by the hand that lifts them, and would choose drowning

instead. You're necessarily talking about just that experience—this is a life experience that people—

BFG: Yes, I think it's sometimes human nature, even though it's a little bird we're talking about. But, yes, we're frightened. The bird doesn't understand that that big hand is coming in to save it. It just knows that there's this big hand and it's scared. So maybe that is something like death. Maybe that's something like a lot of experiences that we don't understand. And human frailty, I suppose, in general, not understanding. It wasn't a poem I thought about—it just sort of said itself. Which is nice when they do that, I like that. They don't do that enough. What were the other ones you mentioned?

CRJ: "Legend", which says "The world began / with destruction, not creation," and "Tortoise" and "Tortoise Return."

BFG: Oh, yes. "Tortoise" came from a dream I had. I dreamed about a tortoise in the pool. It stayed with me, I don't know what that was about. There was a period, in the house I lived in before the house I live in now, where we were building a pool, and it was a real hot summer—and there were a lot of animal visitations at that point. I guess because of the drought. But that summer a big old huge owl came. I mean, a big fucker. And sat on the edge of the pool that had no water. And I saw a raccoon, which I didn't know we had. I had that sense that whole summer that there were strange animals I'd never seen before. Maybe the dream came out of that. . . .

CRJ: *Lie Awake Lake* starts, "It begins with something backward—" Many of the poems that follow seem concerned with ideas of returning: "Flying In" mentions a homecoming, "The Railing" says, "to get back is all / I want," "Tortoise Return" claims, "Some things are made / to

return and return and return // and we can't remember / what can't."
This book plunges itself into a present that coexists with the past. What kinds of questions are you asking about the relationship between the past and the present, and what answers (if any) have you found?

BFG: I guess the idea of return is my—or is a universal sense of—returning to that archetypal Eden, when everything was okay, when everybody you loved was alive. There probably was not such a time, but I think we all have that feeling. Also, I have a real interest in time, in what it is—it's just something in our mental makeup that we measure time, or whether there is actual time or if it is even a continuum. We're in the present, but that doesn't mean there isn't anything else.

I like to read real easy books on physics. Like that Stephen Hawking book. Do other times actually exist simultaneously with this one? I guess it's all related to [the idea that] if I could find a way around death, I'm going to find it. Me and Houdini. And we know how much luck he had. But you can't help but wonder about those things. I suppose it's because I really like this life. I really don't want anything else, so I'd like to keep it. And if I could find a place or time where it's kept, I would be there. But you know I'm not having any luck any more than anyone else, except maybe Buddha. And I don't know about that either—because he had a fat little belly. But I guess poetry is my only way of working with that and exploring that, whereas someone else might have a more orthodox, religious way of doing that. Like my brother who is a Buddha-head. You never know. Animals do not measure time. We do.

SV: In your poem "If I Were in Beijing" you write "If I were in Beijing I would be the student / facing a tank. If I were in Russia / I would be the poet in the gulag. / If I were in Argentina I would be /

sewing the names of the disappeared / into my shawl and walking the plazas. / But too often I am in my own childhood, / its silent movies, its fish-thrashings of light." In many poems in which childhood figures, you often link it with nighttime—nightgowns, bed-time, night birds, night lights, lullaby, rockabye, etc. *The Book of Accident* contains the entire "Twentieth-Century Children" series of poems, and *Lie Awake Lake* is dotted with girls and boys. You have recurring child-like characters in many of your poems (Torture-Boy, Burn-Boy, Skin-Girl, Wolf-Boy . . .).

How are you working with memory, or the subject of childhood, in your poetry? Are memory and the subject of childhood always related in your work?

BFG: Yes, to the last question. I suppose it's related to what we were talking about earlier—past, present, and the life that memory takes on. Memory is a poet's biggest bag of tricks. Childhood memory, especially, because it's formed before you are able to form conclusions about it. And so there are just pictures or moments or states of being that you remember. And even though the moments have passed the atmospheres and colors and the sensory information—the moment is still there in your mind. That is very interesting to me—what role that memory plays in the way we see the world. Also I think it's trying to figure out who you were, because, as a child we are not that self-analytical. We're just busy being kids doing whatever it is we do. And you look back on things and realize how strange they were or odd they were or affecting they were—you don't even know who you remember. And why is it you have stored that, and you haven't stored the three thousand other things your mother told you that you did?

So I suppose it's a relationship with time, especially, and I don't have any romantic views of childhood—no ideas that it's ideal or great. Especially when you get into the characters from *The Book of Accident*—

Torture Boy, Burn Boy, and Skin Girl—those are all adolescents. And, adolescence was a very, very difficult time for me. Really a black hole. Let's just say it—it sucked. It's a time when I think you're the most willing to go to extremes—emotional extremes, spiritual extremes, drug extremes—all that. It's some sort of search for why are you here and what's going on. As adults, we're a little more tempered about it, but that's what attracts me to adolescence. It's that dark time—but also a time of real searching, experimenting, exploring. I also think that most poets don't grow up. People might shit on me for saying that, but poets are obsessed with childhood. It's that rich period of daydream. That's where poetry starts. We put it into language, someone else may take pictures or whatever—but I'm essentially an adolescent. I've never matured, and that drives my husband nuts. Not that he's Mr. Maturity. And you may quote me on that.

SV: What is the link you're making between nighttime and childhood?

BFG: I'm awake at night. I've always been awake at night. Getting me to go to bed was not a good idea. Getting me out of bed in the morning was never a good idea. I would be late every day to sixth grade. They would watch me out the window ride my bike, 15, 20 minutes late. I couldn't get out of bed. But I couldn't go to sleep at night because that is when I could do stuff—when I could write and read and do all that stuff without interruption. Some people do that early in the morning—I think that is congenital. My father was not a morning person, and my mother was up vacuuming at 7:00, which made me want to kill myself. So obviously I took after my dad in that respect. But, I write at night. And I'm just a night-person. So that is when Beckian's world awakens.

CRJ: *Lie Awake Lake*, to me, seems very philosophical both in its message and in its texture—almost phenomenological. The final poem in the book, “Dogwalk Triptych,” considers all existence through the difference between human and animal consciousness, and poems along the way identify “truisms,” such as “Wren,” which says “the way something would rather drown / than trust // the hand that would lift it” and “Tortoise,” which says, “To live / on earth / you need to believe in // an earth / an ugly soul can come back to / having forgotten / the hell of form.”

In this way, each poem seems to be contributing to an overall philosophy of aging, and of experience. The most important of these explorations seems to be the questions in “Question As a Part of the Body”: “asking not what am I but / am I?” What do you feel are the most critical parts of this philosophy in your work?

BFG: In some ways I want to shy away from the word “philosophical” because poetry and philosophy are different. They do consider some of the same questions—it’s just in the methodology—whether your answer is art, or whether your answer is intellectual rigor. What was the question?

CRJ: Let’s talk about “Dogwalk Triptych” and use that as the centerpiece for what I’m trying to ask. It’s about the man and the dog—but most of it’s the dog. But the discussion of the dog comments on the experience of the man. I guess what I’m asking is this: what are you doing by framing philosophical questions through these anecdotes? Here’s the lesson of the wren. Here’s the lesson of the dog, here’s the lesson of the tortoise . . .

BFG: I know throughout the book there is a consideration of form, and what that is. And how that limits us, but also, defines us. Gives

us identity. That to me seems related to the body—it's alive, and then all of the sudden it's not. The interest and obsession with time, how it's measured, the nature of our existence . . . this is very deep. And I'm not. I know in writing that poem, I was watching a dog play on a beach. He was so happy—and I thought, how great. There's this dog, and he's got this shoe, and he's tossing it around. That's all he needs. That's complete. And in a way, it is, but that moment doesn't last. If the dog isn't aware of the passage of time in the same way that we are—it's about perception of time again. But mostly, the poem is a sadness for the happiness in this world, if that makes any sense at all. [It is] the ending of imagining another kind of world who thinks this world is misty and insubstantial the way we think of "the other world" as insubstantial and unclear and transient.

CRJ: This is a book that seems to be plagued with its questions. More so than in your other books, *Lie Awake Lake* feels like you're no longer preventing the questions from directly entering the poem. Or allowing them to just linger as questions in the poems.

BFG: I think that's true. I think that's very true. When someone dies close to you, you have a lot of questions. And they're not distant questions anymore, they're immediate. And they really grip you. So you don't really have a choice except to deal with them. And I don't have answers. So that is why they are questions. I find moments that are somehow maybe transcendent, but I don't have anything that's permanent as an answer. So maybe it's trying to deal with the nature of those moments, and see if they connect, or add up, or if they just are meant to be as they are—and that's what we have. I don't know.

SV: One image that seems linked to transcendence or redemption in that book is the flower.

BFG: And I didn't want to go there. Flowers, birds, water—you should never go there. So I went there. And the flower thing—you first do it when you don't know you're doing it. Then you know you're doing it and you can't help it. I didn't want to do it because I'm real wary of things that have been written. I didn't want to be the talking flowers of Louise Glück's *Wild Iris*—it's a wonderful book and it should just be as it is. I think there are archetypal images, and poetry is always going to use them. You just don't want to get to the point where you're getting clichéd about it. But, I do look at flowers. And they're brief. They're brief and they're beautiful—that's it. So are we. That bothers me. Everything bothers me.

SV: In your most recent two books, *Lie Awake Lake* and *The Book of Accident*, there is often three-partness, or phrases repeated three times. Just to name a few: In "The Torture and Burn Boys Entered the Video Arcade" you repeat the chorus of "fuck you"'s three times. In "Skin Girl's Tattoo" you ask three questions "Are you leaving? Am I done? / Am I always yours?" In "The Black Drop" you write "and it's now again and now again and now again." The first poem of *Lie Awake Lake* ends with "oblivion, oblivion, oblivion," you end *Lie Awake Lake* with the "Dogwalk Triptych" and you end "Blossom at the End of the Body" with "Not love, not happiness / not faith. But flower. But flower. But flower." These are just to name a few—they're everywhere. How are you using three-partness?

BFG: I'm pretty comfortable with repetition. I like it. I think it can be very effective. I don't think I was really aware of the three-ness-es. That's something I won't do in my next book. You can be sure that I'll be very conscious of it now. For me, those decisions are always about ear and balance. It must be something I hear—my writing is very auditory. I have to hear it. So, if I hear it three times, I hear it three

times. But I am going to watch that—I don't want to start being the Queen of Threes or something. It has much more to do with hearing than thinking. That's the answer.

CRJ: One of my favorite poems in *Lie Awake Lake* is "The Underworld: Primer of the Heart," in which the metaphysical function of the heart collides with the biological function of the heart. You ask a lot of questions about how we reconcile this relationship. Could you talk a little bit about the origins of that poem and how it relates to the book as a whole? It's also formally different from all the other poems.

BFG: Yes, it is. That was a poem I didn't know I was going to write. In the manuscript I was conscious of body parts all over the place. The body—what is it? And if there's a soul in it, then, where the hell is it? So, this poem falls in with that idea—the examination of body, and of form. But I hadn't written about the heart yet. Earlier on in the writing of that book, I'd been reading the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and I think that stayed with me—there is a part in there where they weigh the heart. That's where I started the poem. I also had a dream during one of the sections of the poem—the part with the shovel—I actually had a dream where I'd taken out my own heart once, and I'd put it on the night table, and then we put it in a plastic baggie to keep it okay. I then was there, and I realized I could breathe, and that was pretty cool—I could breathe without it. But then I realized it was not going to work, because I had to have it. So, that was in there, too—the contemplation of that particular bodily organ, but also the seat/seed of so much metaphorical reading, on our part, reading of the body. And that whole Egyptian idea of the afterlife, and the father's death, and then the end of it is true—I stole it somewhere—the actual image of the heart, that shape, coming from the old coins in the city of Kirene. That's true as far as I know—at least, I read it somewhere, I thought it was cool, and I put it in there. Then those

old science things in school where you were supposed to cut apart frogs—just thinking about touching the insides of something while it's alive, which I refused to do in biology class, because I had this animal thing—so I refused to do it.

SV: There's a similar instinct in your poem "Speculum."

BFG: Ooh, yes. That was originally part of a longer poem that didn't work. But yes, again, an examination of what is exactly the body, and what does it hold, is memory in the body or in the soul? You know, all this shit. I'm not going to be the first person to figure it out. But there are things along the way that you learn to see or hold close because of that question.

SV: Do you often use dreams in your poetry?

BFG: It depends upon the book. In the second book—a lot of dreams. I was having a big ol' dream-life. Sometimes a poem will come out of a dream. I can usually remember the ones where the impetus for them comes from a dream. Not so much with *Lie Awake Lake* or *The Book of Accident*. There are some dream images in there—because sometimes I'll just have an image in a dream. It depends upon how my dream-life is going. In *Lie Awake Lake*—the tortoise, I did dream him. He showed up. They don't always come as whole poems, but as an image.

CRJ: One of the pervading motifs of *The Book of Accident* is the lingering effects of a Chernobyl-like disaster: a boy born as a wolf, the pig born without eyes, the horrific goat-mule, and the various references to the disintegration of the human body. Is Chernobyl present here, and in what ways are you using it as a symbol for the "Twentieth Century Children?"

BFG: It does generally have to do with, if not Chernobyl specifically—although the blind pig is a Chernobyl image—just in general the nuclear threat, and living under that. But the book also involves a lot of sci-fi imagery, having grown up under the influence of that. Particularly the characters in that book who had grown up with media as much as with experience. Which is the experience, I think essentially, from my generation on. I was born in front of the TV, and love it. Would not be able to live without it. And I am still literate for all you snobs out there who think you can't have it. And I guess I'm fascinated by the movies, even though I wasn't aware of them at the time—those old fifties sci-fi movies, especially those Japanese guys—and the whole sci-fi thing has been pretty dominant in movies and comics and things like that for the past fifty years or so. That's had an influence as well as the influence of rock-and-roll, and the influence of all this technology—what it's done to impersonalize things and what it's done to the personal. And the effect that's had on the psyche of a generation. It's an odd thing to live the idea that the whole world could be destroyed—boom—like that. Not just as a fantasy, but as a reality. And I think—even if you don't think about it everyday—it's just one of those facts of existence that wasn't a fact of existence for a long, long time. There were always wars and epidemics and plagues and crap to worry about. But the idea of the whole world [being] able to go up just like that—I think it's something that changes the way the world looks for whoever is living in that time. And these are kids that have grown up in that period, that reflect my generation and this generation and recent generations. It's a real departure from poetry of earlier generations.

CRJ: That depersonalization seems so closely tied to the “postmodern experience”—disassociation not only from each other and from our bodies, but from our history. History/permanence maintains

such a tremendous weight in *The Book of Accident*, especially in terms of memory, photography, tattoos, time itself. "The New Boy-Wonders" says, "When they reintroduced us to the wild, / one said, we lost track / we forgot our movie stars / we forgot our fire-scars / we forgot poetry." The characters in the book exist outside of any history, even their own.

BFG: Some people say that's reflective of contemporary generations. Part of it may come from teaching, when you refer to something in a class and they don't have a fucking clue what you're talking about, and you're talking about something that happened maybe twenty years ago . . . and then you realize the points of reference are very different. Not all the time. And maybe not as significantly as some people like to say. But there is that sense of not being able to trust a general collective memory of history. I know it's disturbing when you teach. It's not necessarily like this generation is going to hell; "they can't read, they can't write, they don't know anything"—people always say that about younger generations. But that sense of not having a common center, I suppose, is more and more present. I have mixed reactions to it. There's an insecurity about people who don't remember. Nobody remembers WWII, for Christ's sake. These kids don't remember Vietnam. Pretty soon Desert Storm is going to be ancient history, and therefore it's not relevant. I think history is very relevant and people should know about it, but when you're an adolescent I'm not sure that that's the time when you're really contemplating that. The characters in *The Book of Accident* are largely stuck in their own time, and they're dealing with their individual struggles to connect or to find a meaningful existence in the face of images of destruction, that are very much outside of the human realm. It's not just the damage we do to each other, but this whole world of stuff we can't control anymore. The mutation of the body is rampant in that book; Wolf-

Boy is essentially a human-animal hybrid. The deformed animals are obviously influenced by Chernobyl and the nuclear accident, but not limited to that. The line between what is human, what is animal—what is purely physical or technological—those lines are not very clear.

SV: You complicate, too, what is freak and what is not.

BFG: Yes, yes. That comes from adolescent rebelliousness, too. Some people think that if you have your nose pierced, you're a freak. [Interviewer's note: Goldberg's nose is pierced.] And God bless freaks. I'm on the side of the freaks, definitely.

SV: In *The Book of Accident* you employ a sort of self-consciousness about "narrative"—the beginning, end, and middle are all marked with poems that acknowledge their location. The first poem of the book starts with the line "We were born in the light." The poem "Memoir of the Middle of the Book" is in the middle of the book. And the last poem ends with the lines "The second you see yourself in the suffering / the story's over." Further, you have recurring characters throughout the book. How are you exploring these traditional markers of fiction, or of narrative?

BFG: Putting the book together I was aware of it in two ways. I was aware because it wasn't a narrative, but it was masquerading as a narrative. So I felt like some markers would not hurt. Also I was playing with what "story" really is, and also chronology. That's very artificial. There are none. Story is just like time—it's our way of organizing, but things don't happen story-like. Our life doesn't have a beginning, middle, and end—it has moments. Well, it has an end. And a beginning, but you don't remember the beginning, and you won't remember the end. So you're just sort of stuck in the middle. "Memoir

of the Middle of the Book” was written in the revised version. In other words, after I sent it into Akron and got feedback, I felt that they weren’t quite understanding what I was doing, so it was my little explanation in the middle of the book of what the book was about. It’s a tongue-in-cheek summary in the middle of the book, for those who need a program guide.

CRJ: Both *Lie Awake Lake* and *The Book of Accident* read very clearly as extended series of linked poems. Did you have a sense of these projects as a whole as you were writing them, or did the series appear in the manuscript process?

BFG: In *The Book of Accident* I knew I was going to write a related series of poems, once I had Wolf-Boy, who was the first character who showed up. Then Torture and Burn Boys showed up. Once those guys were in there, I knew they were going to show up again and again. I was working very much with a linked series of poems—if not a real narrative, at least something that had glimpses of narrative in it. *Lie Awake Lake* was more just focused subject matter. I did write the first section as a series, in a period of time. I knew that would perhaps be the opening of a book, or a section. And then I got into the body-parts, and I knew that was all related. Then the book sat a while, when I made my foray into prose poems, which I’m still working on. After a nice ride on that I came back to *Lie Awake Lake*, and pretty much finished it I thought, and then at the last minute I re-wrote the last section and put new poems in it. The book is basically about death, the end of the book was going to be more about transfiguration. Not in the mystic, saint, spiritual sense, but in terms of language, where one thing becomes another in the poem as seamlessly as [it can]. That was as close to transfiguration as I could get—I couldn’t get to the angels and all that shit. Or, enjoying my immortality with a hot-fudge sundae on a cloud or something.

SV: Your poems often consider the inside versus the outside of the body. In the poem "Speculum" you begin "To throw light in every hole of the body, / and to see for oneself, one's self." The inside of the body is often linked with disease, or the surprising image of "The way desire is— / live rat sewed up inside us." In the poem "Purgative" you end it "all wilt, all rot, return, & heave, / the undamned mercy outing flesh." You have several poems about transfiguration which consider inside/ outside, you have many references to birth in which someone moves from inside to outside—yet none of these images seem ultimately redemptive. Is redemption an instinct of the transfiguration?

BFG: Transfiguration is as close as I've gotten to redemption—in terms of something transcending its original form, or, its limits of form. If, indeed, it can. I think these transcendences are only momentary. As far as I've gotten.

SV: And these moments in your poems are very tender—the encounter of the horrific with the unwavering tenderness.

BFG: The horrific comes from real life. People dying of cancer. My father's illness and death. Physical suffering, which has no moral reason behind it. It's just random, as far as I know, and I find that enormously cruel. And cruelty makes me look for some answer. Partly, also, in *The Book of Accident*—Torture Boy and Burn Boy are very much into cruelty as a way to connect or feel alive or something. There is a lot of cruelty. It's unavoidable. Not cruelty on the part of human beings being cruel to one another—we're responsible for that, okay, and it sucks—but I'm talking about cruelty where you don't know where it comes from. That really upsets me, and I don't know if there is anything redemptive about it. I really don't know.

I look for ways, and I suppose that maybe art is redemptive. Maybe things that can last. But I'm not sure it's a substitute for breathing. If I had to choose between my poems living forever, and me living forever, it's gonna be me. But that's not gonna happen. So there is the problem. I have enormous tenderness for this world. I have no interest in heaven. Unless it's coming back here. That's just the truth, despite the fact that a lot of stuff sucks, and I'd like it not to. I really don't know what the relationship is between mortality and art. If I knew I was never going to die, would I write a thing? I don't know. So it's a very interesting connection between the very, very dark and very, very light. I haven't figured it out. I may never figure it out. My best hope is to try to make peace with it, which I haven't yet.

SV: I don't have a sense of making peace, in your work, so much as a kindness toward that coexistence of those light and dark elements.

BFG: I love—it's really wonderful to be alive. What a strange thing. But you know, fifty years from now I'm dead. And you're dead forever. And I think, okay, you were kind of dead before you were born, and that didn't hurt. But it's different now. I don't know who's responsible for this, but if I find that fucker, we're going to have a talk.

CRJ: In terms of cruelty, I'm really interested in Wolf-Boy. He appears as a symbol of what was lost: he lingers as the reminder of something more feral in our history, more closely connected to instinct and to emotion than, for example, Burn Boy or Torture Boy. By the end of the book, he has been sacrificed for the greater good. Is American culture moving away from something you perceive to be crucial? Where are we heading? Inherent in this question is my belief that *The Book of Accident* is a critique of American culture.

BFG: It is, in many ways. We are industrial, developed, technologically advanced—though not more morally advanced—though you can't tell George Bush that. And you may quote me on that. I guess that's part of why animals are so important—the more we lose our connection with the animal, the more we lose our connection with the human. I think they're that related. We can be overwhelmed by the largeness that we've created. The amount of information, the amount of stimuli and imagery that we receive is so great. The speed of time. I worry about losing touch with the natural, with connection to each other, connection to the earth, connection to—God, this sounds so touchy-feely and I don't mean it to—there are a lot of images of animals suffering, a little bit of torture in *The Book of Accident*, and to me—animals are totally innocent. They're not capable of malice. I worry about our sense of caretaking going awry. Our caretaking of each other, of the planet, of the environment. The innocent and helpless, by which I mostly figure animals. But also, cruelty toward the old, the marginalized. I don't suppose that's more characteristic of our society than any other—it's just that we have so many filters now. And the loom of technological capabilities destroying. Experimenting.

Wolf-Boy came from a dream. I gave birth to a baby in a dream once, and his name was Lucius Wolf, or Lucien Wolf. His name means "wolf" and "light." And it was real easy, he just popped right out. And then I didn't know what to do. What the hell am I doing? That dream hung around in my mind for a while. But also, in northern Arizona they were releasing the grey wolves, and ranchers kept shooting them, and that pissed me off. As if they don't have the right to exist. I would collect articles. The [javelina] were pissing people off in [Ahwatuki] because they were in their flowers. I thought *fuck, you're in their desert*. I worry about the disappearance. The desert is being destroyed, they're trying to save animals from extinction and then ranchers are going out and shooting them. That bothered me.

Then there was the whole Chernobyl thing with the horses born with six legs. All of that kind of destruction we're playing with, and we don't know what to do about. I worry about the priorities. I don't think that's anything too unique. I don't think the problems are different for our time than any other time—the essentials are still the same. Everything's just become much more massive.

They were injecting human embryos into pigs. And we're doing this. I'm not only thinking from the human point of view—this is pretty weird. But from the pig point of view, it's got to be pretty sucky. And why are you doing this? I'm not against things like stem cell research, or any of that, but why are you doing the pig-human embryo. What does that do to the poor little pigs—that's my question. What about the pigs? That's essentially my question.

I believe in research, but where are the lines now? Maybe there don't have to be lines, but it confuses me.

SV: Two humongously recurring themes in your work are the body and desire. These themes have been present since the first line in your first book, *Body Betrayal*: "Like the curve of the body / that rises only in sleep." Your second book, *In The Badlands of Desire*, relentlessly explores bodies and desire. Both of these themes reach a sort of critical mass in your two recent books, *Lie Awake Lake* and *The Book of Accident*. These most recent books seem to focus closely on the failures of the body, or to explain the body's losing battle with the self—*Lie Awake Lake* explores death while *The Book of Accident* is preoccupied with bodily harm and mutation that doesn't kill us but alters us physically and emotionally. In *Lie Awake Lake*, you say, "For now is the word of the body." What is the difference between how you were working with body and desire in your first books, as opposed to now?

BFG: I wouldn't be worried about body if it didn't fail us. And ultimately it does. That's the number one problem.

I don't think there's a poet who doesn't deal with desire. My second book was pretty obsessively a contemplation of desire, of otherness within the self that you're seeking, and the impact of other on the self—whether you have a relationship with this other or not—in a real sense, or whether you're just having a hallucinatory relationship. You can have a perfectly good affair. Right here [points at her head]. What that experience is and what it reveals to us, or what that longing is all about, I don't think that's too mysterious. We want to be desired and it's natural to desire—it's the state of being human. If you have no desires, you're not alive. The end of *Lie Awake Lake* now has an epigraph from Galway Kinnell, from his essay "Poetry, Personality, and Death." The oriental or Buddhist philosophy of absence of desire is the last thing I'd want, and it seems like death could only give more desire. Which is disturbing too, but I can imagine that. I cannot imagine no desire. The second book, that is very much the sexual desire of the other—erotic otherness—more so than in the rest of the books. It focused mainly on that. It shows up, of course, again and again—but not as relentlessly. In *Lie Awake Lake* death was much more on my mind—but of course, death and desire—those are the two opposites. If you talk about one you can hardly not talk about the other.

SV: Is there anything you consciously avoid putting in a poem?

BFG: Well, I have little warning bells for me. The next time I do something in threes, I'm certainly going to think about it. I don't think there's any particular thing, it's the way you do it. I think I'd be wary of putting a rainbow in a poem, but goddamnit I'd sure like to do it in a way that's not cheesy. But, no. I can't think of anything. I'll censor myself only in terms of my own idiosyncrasies. I have to be very careful about

birds. I have to be very careful about horses. I don't want it to become a mannerism. There is a point that we do it, and we're not aware of it. It doesn't mean that you can't write another poem with a moon or a bird in it, it just means that you have to ask yourself, "does it really have to be a bird? Am I just going to that because it's the easiest thing for me?" You try to keep yourself honest that way. But there's no particular thing that I wouldn't put in, because I don't think you have that much of a choice.

CRJ: I'd like to ask about obscenity for a moment. I think a lot of poets would worry about using "profanity" in their poems, but in these two volumes, you do it with some abandon. When do you know it is the right time to use "strong language," and do you ever consider the various ways it will be received?

BFG: I do. I don't think it should ever be gratuitous. Sometimes it's voice. I know I use "fuck you" three times with the Torture and Burn Boys—but that's them. That's the way boys are. *Fuck you. Well, fuck you.* So to me, that's just normal conversation, and it's true to the characters.

CRJ: Well, what about all the cocks? Lots of cocks.

BFG: Oh, cock-sucking. Oh, damn. Well, I just use cock ring. Cock ring isn't profane, it's pretty.

CRJ: Cock-heart . . .

BFG: Oh, that's right. I do have some cocks in there.

CRJ: Motherfucking, motherfucker . . .

BFG: The sparrow. One motherfucking sparrow. Well, that's the sparrow talking. Those aren't my words. That's the sparrow. And those are Torture and Burn Boy. And they talk that way. I mean, isn't it cool to have a little sparrow say, "I'm one mean motherfucking sparrow"? I mean goddamnit. How could you not say it?

I don't make those distinctions. I think these are words that people use, and they can be used effectively, or they can be used ineffectively, just like the word "dark" or "light" or any other words. I do like them, they're natural to me, obviously. I think anybody who reads a poem and they're put off because it has the word "motherfucker" in it—they shouldn't be reading poetry, anyway. They're not getting it. It's our time, too. Sure, Keats didn't do it, but people weren't running around back then calling each other motherfuckers. They did have little words . . . in those times. Shakespeare was pretty raunchy. You can ennoble even those words, if they're used in a context that is effective and not run of the mill—trying to sound cool.

I'm more scared about using the word "god" than I am about using the word "motherfucker." That's loaded. [Interviewer's note: A man in the bar, watching a sporting event, yells out "You mother f—"] See, he just said it. He didn't finish it. But he was close.

SV: What's a risk, poetically, you hope to take someday?

BFG: I don't know. That will happen when I think about the next book, and what kind of new little rebellious thing I want to do. I like to do things that you shouldn't do, like, writing a book about juvenile delinquents running around torturing animals and going to raves. Generally just being strange. I don't know.

SV: "The Book of Rainbows?"

BFG: Yes! “Book of Rainbows.” I tend to think not in terms of themes, but in terms of what I want to do with the language next. That’s what I think about. I still would like to write an even more unified book, and maybe even more unified in form. But I really don’t have a clue. Right now I’m interested in prose poems, that’s all I can tell you. Trying to do something different with those. I don’t think it’s always something you choose—I think it’s something that chooses you. You have to find a way to do it.

CRJ: Have you finished the manuscript of prose poems? Are you still working on it?

BFG: I have a first draft of it. I’ve got some tweaking to do, and maybe a few new poems to write, before I send it out into the world. I haven’t had time to get back to it recently, so I need a good period of time to sit with it and see which are the keepers and which are the sleepers. And see if I need to write a little more toward that. The essential shape of it is there I think. I hope.

CRJ: In an interview with *Blackbird*, the online poetry journal, you mentioned that one of the reasons you taught a prose poetry class is because you wanted to gain a better understanding yourself of the form, and now you’re working on a book of prose poems. Are there any other ways teaching has directly informed your writing? What other academic explorations are you conducting for your work?

BFG: The prose poem course came first. I had not written prose poems, and I didn’t know how to tell a good prose poem from a bad prose poem. I was interested, so I decided to teach the course. Out of reading them, I got more and more into it and I started writing them. It took a while before I felt I could write something called a “prose

poem." And what was that. I still don't know. I still don't know what a poem is. But you feel your way.

I guess with all the things I teach, there is always some little thing that comes up that spills into your writing—and vice-versa. That's why teaching isn't a bad thing to do if you're a poet. There's an energy that flows both ways, and that's the good part about it. I mean, on the good days. There are some days when the energy ain't flowing no-way.

Certainly some things out of Poetics class must have had some influence. That's a course I inherited and had to teach. And Erotic Image—yeah. Well, yes. And yes. That's a constant. I may go back to that—I still have an interest in maybe doing another book that focuses on the erotic. Probably have another one of those in me. I have some old shit tucked away, haven't done anything with it for a long time.

SV: Are there any other ways that teaching has been part of your writing?

BFG: Would I teach if I were rich? No. I might occasionally—I do like doing some workshops. If I taught a class a year, a workshop a year, that would be just peachy.

I might be kidding myself. It's like people who say "I'm going to retire and play golf" and then they retire and they're bored out of their skulls. So, I don't know.

I know there is a productive dynamic with teaching, and that's good. If that stops being good, it's time to quit. I'm not sure there's a big separation. I don't know if there's a discrete border. Sometimes a little thing will happen in class, it starts you thinking about something, and that will flip into a poem somewhere. Or, sometimes you're doing something and you realize—oh, this is something we could talk about in class.

And just generally being able to be in a place where you can have a dialogue about poetry I think is very valuable. So even if you don't teach I think you still have to have some sort of poetry connection—at least friends you sit around and shoot the shit with, and trade poems with—that sort of thing. It's not that I don't like teaching, it's just that I don't like work. And if I don't have to get up several days a week and work, that's cool. But I haven't won the lottery. And so I will be teaching.

CRJ: Two of the poems in *The Book of Accident* are dedicated to former students of yours. How do these ongoing relationships with your mentees inform your work? And, how do Sarah and I get dedications in your next book?

BFG: Okay—I owe you guys a poem! A lot of times poems are dedicated to people I've stolen something from. I feel if you're going to steal from a student, you should dedicate the poem to them. The poem for Rich Noguchi—he told me about a toilet he dragged into his backyard. And I went and stole that idea for a poem. Because, can you write a poem about a toilet in the backyard? See, those are the kinds of things that intrigue me. And can you write a poem about a toilet in the backyard and get Wallace Stevens into the poem? Now, if you can do that, you're a fucking genius. The poem for Miguel Murphy—that's because he's so fucked up. No, that's because I stole from him. I stole his dream for the beginning of that. So, basically, when I have stolen from someone, you get your name on a poem.

SV: Not only have you published six books of poetry—you have taught poetry to MFA students for at least fifteen years, sat on the committees of dozens of future book publications, you've taught communities throughout the country, you give readings regularly, and

you judge contests—Beckian-ness is changing the face of American poetry. In what ways do you hope you might affect poetry, what instincts do you hope you're making room for? In other words, if you could nudge American poetry, where would you nudge it?

BFG: Everyone has their own aesthetic preferences—I tend to like poetry with some mystery in it. Not a lack of clarity, at all. But, poetry where something is at stake. I read a lot of poems where it's like, okay, that's nice—you played tennis, you had a crush on your tennis instructor, and he turned out to be a shit, and so you went home—and like yeah, okay, who cares. There are a lot of poems out there that are very surface, or intellectually clever—and I get impatient with poems that aren't about stuff that I consider really urgent. That is just my bent. So I tend to like certain poets more than others, and a certain treatment of language more than others. Sensual poetry. I think there's room for nice, good, simple, declarative stuff—but I like things that are full of surprise or shock or something that will give you a tingle. There are a lot of poems that are nice, but you're not going to fall in love with them. You're not even going to ask them on a second date. Much less sleep with them.

I know everybody has different places they come and go with it—that's just me. I don't want poetry that's going to waste my time, and not talk about things that are really important. Like, why do we die. I just have no room for it. That's just me. I'm sure there are very powerful beings who could disagree with me.

CRJ: You said to us one day in class that poets have an obligation to speak about their work, or to speak critically about the work of other poets—that critical work about poetry should not be left just to the critics.

BFG: I don't think that somebody who hasn't written poetry understands the process. I think that a lot of critics treat a poem as if it is a reasoned-out, planned thing. It is not a reasoned out, planned thing, I think, in most cases. A lot of critics, if they can link it to Keats, or if they can find paradox, or if it fits in with a literary theory, they're comfortable talking about it. Why aren't there a whole lot of big critics writing about Michael Burkard? Because he's more difficult to write about because he doesn't necessarily fit in with critical theory, or what critics look for. The same thing with Larry Levis. This is a real good example—all poets know that Larry was probably one of the greatest poets of his generation. How many critics know it? Name three. That's right. Case-closed. That's how I feel.

SV: By the time Charlie and I leave this program, he will have worked with you 3 ½ years, and I will have worked with you for 4 years. What would be one thing you would hope Charlie and I would take with us?

BFG: It's something you already have—a love for poetry. A wider sense of how important writing, and art, and poetry, is—in terms of your lives. That you'll stay with it no matter what. And, I guess, a sense of enjoyment. I mean, fuck, enjoy it. I mean—so it's work—so what. Enjoy being a poet. It's a completely silly thing to be. It's, according to our culture, completely useless. Therefore we should do it just to piss people off. It's like Willie Nelson's braids—why do you wear long braids? Because it pisses people off. If you have a passion in your life it's the best thing you can have. Hopefully, that's been fueled and you'll go on and feed it. Find private little booths to play with it. No—you can leave that out—sorry. That was for your memoir.

The 2005 National Poetry Series

The National Poetry Series was born out of a speech by Daniel Halpern. In 1975, while addressing the Library of Congress, Halpern lamented the fact that, in the United States, quality poetry was written a lot more often than published. Presses favored prose to poems, Halpern thought, and he found it “deplorable that . . . the poet was at such a disadvantage.” For this reason, he proposed a nationwide contest to promote American poetry, one that would incorporate our most distinguished poets as judges, and our best trade and university presses as publishers.

Today, thirty years after Halpern’s speech, the National Poetry Series has performed its revolution, and is now reliable branding for poets and poetry-purchasers; this is by no means a backhanded complement. It is simply an attempt to say that, after eighty books—after winners like Mark Doty and Mark Halliday, Thylia Moss, Naomi Shihab Nye, Stephen Dobyns and Stephen Dunn, Marie Howe, Billy Collins, Terrance Hayes, and Karen Volkman—it is impossible to think of the National Poetry Series as anything but *an institution*, perhaps with all the good and bad such a word implies.

Yet in thirty years’ time, the story of American poetry—specifically, of the publication of American poetry—has changed dramatically. It’s a somewhat obvious narrative that gets told: the academization of poetry begat more poets; more poets begat more manuscripts; more manuscripts begat a need for more first-book contests, second-book contests—large press, small press, university publisher contests alike. More of that “quality poetry” is being printed now. Does this suggest that the National Poetry Series is no longer relevant? No. Absolutely and unequivocally, *No*. But is it still relevant as an act of advocacy?

It seems as though the value of the National Poetry Series, years later, is in diversity. Winners of the 2005 National Poetry Series competition share a few random, Houstonian intersections. (Both S. A. Stepanek and Tryfon Tolides called Houston home, even if only for a short time; also, Steve Gehrke's poem "Capitalism (The MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas, Nevada: 5:00 AM)" won the 2003 *Gulf Coast* Poetry Prize, and that Nadine Sabra Meyer's poem "The Flayed Man," an Honorable Mention for the same prize, went on to win a Pushcart.) Yet the National Poetry Series has no dominant aesthetic. The five winners demonstrate the radically different poetics alive in today's poetry, as well as the poetics alive in their respective judges, their publishers, and (as the following shows) their readers.

This is why the National Poetry Series is still required reading for most poets; it lets them check the pH factor of American poetry, and tells them how much acid or alkaline suits their skin.

Steve Gehrke, *Michelangelo's Seizure*, selected by T.R. Hummer. University of Illinois Press. 2007. Paper, 88pp. \$14.95.

Among poets, the oeuvre of Steve Gehrke has become something of a legend. Gehrke's first collection of poems, *The Resurrection Machine*, won the John Ciardi Prize from BkMk Press when he was just 29 years old; his second, *The Pyramids of Malpighi*, was published by Anhinga Press four years later, receiving the Philip Levine Prize (judged by Levine himself). And now his third book, *Michelangelo's Seizure*, has been selected by T. R. Hummer for the 2005 National Poetry Series. Yet more impressive than these credentials is the poetry itself, as Gehrke's works are large, conceptual undertakings, ones which bring together the human body, the cosmos, history and art—all within one tightly-controlled, elegantly-phrased poem.

Gehrke's first book establishes for us the poet's major themes—the body, illness, a sense of wonder at the human machine. Yet *The Pyramids of Malpighi* examines these themes from a variety of angles. The final sequence of the book, "Inside the Dialysis Machine," explores images of the body, blood, and medical procedures, but it marries them to Jackson Pollock and his splattered action paintings (as well as other pop-culture phenomena) in a meditation on what makes us living, sentient beings—what gives us humans our "essence."

Gehrke's third collection picks up where "Inside the Dialysis Machine" left off. *Michelangelo's Seizure* begins with "Self-Portrait as the Head of Goliath," a poem that reconsiders this poet's project. Gehrke gives us the frenzy of Caravaggio in Naples, working "all night, with oils / [. . .] and self-love, which is the eye / at the center of our grief, altering / the lines of the lips." The decapitated head of Goliath is widely acknowledged to be a self-portrait of Caravaggio, and not surprisingly, this poem is a portrait of its poet. Caravaggio "could sense / himself, each painted atom, / in a mound of fruit spilled into the street"—the artist blending into his surroundings, into his painting, and the poet becoming part of the scene even as he controls the scene.

Yes, a quick scan of the table of contents reveals that the poems are "about art," and our impulse is to ask, worriedly, "An entire collection of ekphrastic poems?" But ekphrasis—the literary mode of writing about art—is a limited way of understanding what happens here. These pieces are never mere description, never simply observation. Gehrke enters the paintings, crossing the years and continents to watch these troubled artists work. He enters into their madness and connects to that madness by way of his own physical body, his own illness. The book is less ekphrastic and more a complex study of Art; even the painters' biographies speak to the narrator as he wrestles with ideas of creating and creation. Here, their stories matter as much as the paintings.

Take, for example, "Self-Portrait With Doctor," a poem subtitled "after Goya." The doctor's examinations of Goya's body are likened to the act of painting—

the first leech soft upon his skin

like a brush tip, like a tongue,

the doctor probing,

trying to look inside,

as if he might drop the lantern

into the sinkhole of lungs

Gehrke does not limit his imagination to the physical world or the body; here he imagines Goya's fevered dreams on the sick-bed, the artist's "soul stamping / in the bull ring of his consciousness." The poem represents for us several acts simultaneously: the doctor peering into the body, the artist peering into the doctor's face and into memory, the poet presiding over the entire scene with heightened imagery (Goya coughs up "the bullets of infection"). Later, the poem extends the meaning of "self-portrait" when, at the end, "Goya glimpses / his own face, a watery self-portrait / that wrinkles through his mind— / which is how I saw him that morning, / in the dialysis room." The poet meets Goya and his illness—the old art and forgotten history mix with contemporary experience. Gehrke's goal is to show us how art helps us, how it provides us with a way of understanding ourselves. The poem

ends with an astonishing vision of the poet's own seizure—years and experiences are collapsed into one, and when we arrive at the end we are stunned to have been transported to this place, the hospital room.

Admittedly, the content remains the same throughout the book. Despite how beautifully written *Michelangelo's Seizure* is, its conceit seems exhausted by the time we reach the third section; the poems are again ekphrastic. Again they meld poet and painter, writing and painting. It remains well-crafted, but where *The Pyramids of Malpighi* concluded with an entirely new type of poem, *Michelangelo's Seizure* concludes with more of the same.

Overall, Gehrke does manage to surprise us. He constantly re-imagines the relationship between life and art, memory and writing. The poems are so well-done, so rich in their inventiveness, so deep in their changes and narratives, that they should be a pleasure to return to, even if, on the first sitting, they seem too similar.

In the end, Gehrke is an "old-school" poet. His poems believe in lyric sentiment, in imagery, and the transformative power of literature. There is nothing here of grammatical slipperiness, of "elliptical verse," of fracture, of fragment, or any other mode or tic of Young American Poetry. The book does not question poetry or have an anxiety about the making of meaning—it simply makes meaning, and makes it beautifully.

—Craig Beaven

Nadine Sabra Meyer, *The Anatomy Theater*, selected by John Koethe. Harper Perennial. 2006. Paper, 78pp. \$13.95.

According to Sherod Santos, Nadine Sabra Meyer is "that rarest of things these days, a poet of ideas." Meyer's first book, *The Anatomy Theater*, offers ideas, yes, but are those ideas central, or are they important only inasmuch as they give this poet a hub around which

her images can spin? Meyer can grab ideas, believe them, and then lattice networks of sonically-intoxicating diction around them in ways perhaps larger than Santos' praise allows.

Take, for instance, the first and last poems of *The Anatomy Theater*. Meyer frames her book with two inquiries into the "baked and porous shoreline" between the body—John Donne's body no less—and death. In the poem "Effigy of John Donne Wrapped in His Death Shroud," Meyer writes:

When you had them swaddle you,
a baby in its death bunting, all slung bone,
elbow knobs, knee sockets, harp-bone
of your chest, you were, yes,
His music then, fired and kiln-baked,
sweating through your glaze, a ladder
of bones propped heavenward.

These opening lines, like much of the book, reel through carnal imagery to incant the body's possible transcendence. Here Meyer's insights into life after death seem secondary to the craftsmanship of her lines. Similarly, in the book's final poem, "John Donne on His Deathbed," Meyer concludes with a rhetorical question:

[. . .] Your mast lamp
swaying in the ocean's flaxen membrane,
lux of your sextant's needle, broad barrel
of your progress, did you feel the suck
of latitudinal defect, whirlpool of sea-flume,
or did you find then some new passage,
the strait you'd believed in your whole life
siphoning you, not—you realized then—like an explorer

to his newfound land, but like all the dead before you
swimming for the equinoctial provenance
through the damp pockets of their lungs?

The language is plangent and beautiful—bordering on phantasmic—but what is the “idea” that drives this question? Once we unpack the dense syntax, the question becomes did you find an abyss or an afterlife? There’s nothing shocking in the core ideas; the reader’s delight arises from how Meyer gets us there.

The book’s focus on the body is not limited to meditations on body / soul dualism however. In “At the Cirque Fernando: The Ringmaster,” a focus on woman-as-spectacle remains central throughout. In “At the Salon of 1865,” one of many ekphrastic poems in the book, Meyer considers the unflinching portrayal of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* and the public outcry it caused. Here Meyer presents the painting’s subject—often interpreted by scholars as a prostitute—as the “woman herself, / the working-class girl, who had lain for him [. . .].” By imagining her from the perspective of a “middle-class woman,” Meyer enlarges the poem’s scope to include the public’s angry response to *Olympia*. By doing this, Meyer can offer representations of all women and ask “at whom was this anger directed?” Perhaps Meyer implies a deeper question: at whom *should* our anger be directed? Can we blame this woman who so adamantly stares at the viewer? Can we blame Manet himself? Ultimately there are very intriguing ideas at play here, but they still seem in service of the language.

Throughout the book Meyer’s tone is one of clinical detachment; she observes things as if one of the Galenic “new anatomists” of which she writes in the first section. This tone allows for a fearless gaze at the body and its possible dissection as the anatomist “searches in the viscera / of the cadaver, / uprooting the vena cava, / the mushrooming / uterus, the dark cabbage / of a heart.” The clinical tone continues in “The Paper House,” in which the speaker meditates upon her own surgeries, her

own fragility. But this tone brings with it paradox: on one hand Meyer deftly avoids didacticism and self-indulgence; on the other she excises emotional investment.

Driving between doctors I carry my ovary in my purse,
an anomalous globe, the size and color of a hen's egg,

but this ovoid mass is spotted with imperfections—
red stains of endometrium mar its white tissue.

Holding it in pink folds of flesh, my abdominal cavity itself is marked,
and in the next frame, close up, a cul-de-sac of blood-fluid.

This clinical tone is, for better or worse, necessary. It is a byproduct of the clinical vocabulary populating the book, and this vocabulary is often a catalyst for Meyer's lyrical unfurling. The delight in this poem seems more derivative of its descriptions than its ideas.

"For Those Floating Above Vitebsk," the book's penultimate poem, is perhaps the strongest application of Meyer's lyric sensibility. Relying heavily on the works of Marc Chagall, Meyer weaves a beautiful six-part sequence grounded in the shtetl of a twentieth century Belarusian city. Each section remains focused though the emotional range varies widely from section to section. Consider, for instance, the shift between sections IV and V (possibly based on Chagall's *Bella with White Collar* and *The Fiddler* respectively). First the final couplets of section IV:

[Bella's] lightning and irrigated fields, the hard packed road,
the broadcloth we wear each day, all day, holding us in its chapped hands.

She spins us, like kite tails, like windmills, like silos of birdsong, and
fills us, like inkwells of blown glass, with the confetti of her lungs.

And the beginning of section V:

It is here the Jews are buried, tomb-shack and dew,
where, as a child, Chagall sat

and saw the headstones crooked as teeth, broken
on the wind's ice chips, the sky disordered as cells [. . .].

The juxtaposition of emotional registers is devastating. This is Meyer at her forte—lyrically spinning as she gleans the imagery of a slippery world.

The Anatomy Theater is a remarkably compelling first book, but not because of its “ideas.” From a central concern with the body, Meyer unflinchingly peers into art, gender, history, mythology, mortality, and transcendence. Meyer is not Santos’s “poet of ideas” per se; rather, she finds central ideas on which to scaffold her imagery, and often with beautiful results.

—Brian Nicolet

Patricia Smith, *Teahouse of the Almighty*, selected by Edward Sanders. Coffee House Press. 2006. Paper, 114 pp. \$15.00.

It was more than a little surprising when a slam poet won the 2005 National Poetry Series. The NPS does not often slam.

So when Patricia Smith, four-time individual champion at the National Poetry Slam got the NPS nod, both Slam and Series worlds did a double take. After all, in 2000, Harold Bloom made his infamous proclamation in *the Paris Review* that Slam was “the death of art.” What’s changed since then?

Smith’s NPS winner, *Teahouse of the Almighty*, is certainly not the death of poetry. Though her first three books arrived in the early Nineties with comparatively little attention, her newest effort has garnered praise from both the Slam and Series worlds alike. And for good reason: it is one hell of a book.

This collection certainly challenges the poetry mantra of art for art's sake. Further, the poems in this collection take on a sense of social and political responsibility that does not weigh down the language—the Achilles' heel of slam. On the contrary, Smith's ambition enriches her work and forces the reader to evaluate the poet as difference-maker.

Take for instance her first poem, "Building Nicole's Mama," written for a sixth grade class in Liberty City, Miami. "Building" is a poem that shows what poetry can do for the kids who seem to need it most.

I ask the death question and forty fists
punch the air, *me! me!* And O'Neal,
matchstick crack child, watched his mother's
body become a claw, and 9-year old Tiko Jefferson,
barely big enough to lift the gun, fired a bullet
into his throat after mama bended his back
with a lead pipe.

Smith herself is not so far removed from these children as say, an upper-middle class recently-graduated twenty-two-year-old doing Teach for America, and she reads the children a poem about her own "hard-eyed teenager." A student asks if he is dead yet. That child's question is the intersection of the two worlds Smith brings together. Smith's son is an issue that often arises in this book. In the poem "Scribe," she describes the genesis of her son's prison nickname:

They bring him their imploded dreams, letters from their women-in-
waiting tired of waiting. One deadline, he spins
impossible sugar onto
the precise lines of legal pads, pens June/moon dripping
enough to
melt a b-girl's hard heart.

The speaker/Smith (these two internal worlds are more intertwined here than in the poetry worlds of most contemporary poets) admits that “as a fellow poet, I envy my son, this being necessary.” Smith believes her son’s poems, written for men behind bars, are more useful and have a greater utility than her own poems, crafted and edited into book form. She has given us a poet torn between production and productivity—a poet torn between Series and Slam.

And while Smith is not the typical slam poet, she is the archetype. She is not manipulated by her sensitivities to the struggles of the world at large. The key is balance: her poems are deftly crafted while simultaneously leaping off the page and into the mouth, ears, and soul of the reader. Smith seems to warn the Series reader of Slam’s necessity in “Stop the Presses”:

There are no soft stanzas
in this city of curb sleep and murdered children.
We need soft words for hard things, this silk
brushing the inevitability of rock.

Smith, however, is not solely occupied with the problems of the world. She has strong narrative leanings and tends to allow her own person into the work. “To 3, No One in the Place” is just one of many poems written as a way of coping with failed marriages and a son in prison. In that poem, Smith, the storyteller, tells us all:

By 30, I had set fire to the names of two husbands.
Everything I crooned was pissed and indigo. Now I’m warbling
beneath a shifting layer of 40, bound to a sad stash of ballads
anyone with a steady tongue and half a dream could sing.

One cannot look away from the necessity of these poems, their sheer urgency and risk. One feels that these poems *need* to happen. They need

to be read and studied, and they need to be heard. The poems read with the volatility of Smith's stage presence; however, one would be hard pressed to admit that they are better on the page than they are on the stage—and not because these poems are necessarily lacking, but because Smith is a poet and a performer. This collection, however, is vocally fierce while remaining tender to the renderings of the human experience.

The poems exude a sheer sense of musicality, as anyone who has ever seen her perform could attest. Smith is a speech pathologist's wet dream. She starts the poem "My Million Fathers, Still Here Past" with the line "Hallelujah for grizzled lip, snuff chew, bended slow walk, and shit talkin'." This is no glittery lyricism. This is hard-edged, street-wise, hip-swaying word magic. You can hear the same bravado in "Hallelujah With Your Name"

I was 12, clacking knees, high-top
All Stars with flap tongues, a wad of grape bubble
plumping my cheek

And perhaps, after all, it is only that necessary bravado that has divided the Slam and Series poetry worlds. Those divides have been blurring for years now in spite of resistance from poets on both sides. If Slam's bravado once forced Bloom to decry the death of poetry, *Teahouse of the Almighty's* move toward hybridity can only serve to erase those boundaries between poets and slam poets—spoken word poets and academic poets. After all, Smith reaches deep into a core of humanity with these conscious, moving, and unquiet poems. We may not always need poets who are trying to save the world. We do need, however, poets who will never turn from what disquiets them. We need poets willing to confront the tumult of reality and dance in its wake.

—Matthew Siegel

Here the imagery surpasses the formal constraints of the opening phrase, as perception itself becomes the subject of the speaker's inquiry. References to Chuang Tzu's famous parable about the world as illusion are coupled with a symbol of biblical revelation. The poem enacts its own sense of mystery through the juxtaposition of self and other. "The Great Violence" becomes not only the destruction of warplanes dropping bombs, but also our failure to identify ourselves as the pilots, as the other we fear or despise.

Unfortunately, not all of these thirty-one pages sustain this level of imaginative vigor. There is a fine line between the ecstatic and the gratuitous. When we reach verses such as:

I am ashamed
before the Great Space
 holy
 holy
 holy

the ringing of finger cymbals we hear is Allen Ginsberg writhing painfully from beyond the grave. Another stanza reads:

I am ashamed before the Great infrequency
 of the way
 in which we love.

The tangled, idiosyncratic syntax here does not rescue the sentimentality. These derivative, pretentious sections could easily be excised without damaging the sequence. Although the risks Stepanek takes are admirable, she could have exercised more quality control throughout, especially since she depends so much upon formal repetition and often picked-over religious iconography.

Around the middle of the book something wonderful happens, as the poet abandons the repetitive opening phrases and instead goes off the map, embracing improvised riffs. The strongest writing in the book emerges as Stepanek interweaves specific imagery of a discovered world with an ontological discourse of transformation. The speaker observes:

I am the light source of wells above rivers. the ashcat's
grin, the one fin above the bosom-fish,
a shade above transparence: this is how the oven
door reflected light, how a third mouth sings
semitransparencies: this the river I felt as a child.

Opaque strings wound my branches and played, fields of
strings tuning white electric blue from all sides.

This dense imagery creates a realm both speaker and reader may inhabit, one that is multi-layered and that consists of both the visible and the unseen, the myriad reflections that surround us and the invisible sources of light and sound. These lines demonstrate the poet's ability to evocatively wed sensual lyricism and meditative force without relying on the narcoleptic tics of formal repetition.

Although this marvelous "freehand" writing does not continue throughout the last third of *Three, Breathing* and the poet soon returns to the formal structures and inconsistent writing that mar the opening sequence of the book, Stepanek proves she is capable of fulfilling the ambition of her challenging project. When she effectively balances the formal repetition that exerts pressure on her lines and the lyrical imagination that seeks to escape these constraints, her poems achieve a sublime resonance that is moving and authoritative. For this to happen even occasionally within a first collection is an impressive achievement and one that Stepanek will hopefully build upon in her subsequent work.

—Brandon Lamson

Tryfon Tolides, *An Almost Pure Empty Walking*, selected by Mary Karr. Penguin Books. 2006. Paper, 66pp. \$16.00.

I was reading Craig Arnold's *Shells*, the 1998 Yale Younger Poets prizewinner, when Tryfon Tolides' *An Almost Pure Empty Walking* arrived; the contrast could hardly have been more striking. *Shells*, as many will recall, epitomizes the American fascination with glossy surfaces, linguistic wit, and the flashy play of personality. Arnold repeatedly explores the idea of the shell as both alluring exterior and protective armor, and the analogy with language is reinforced by the nearly seamless surface of the poems. All this illuminates precisely what Tolides' poems are almost entirely empty of. Both in style and content, his poems insist on walking naked in the world—without armor, adornment, or sophisticated artifice—and this walking, which began in the small Greek village of Tolides' birth, continues for this immigrant poet in America. The result is a moving collection, whose quietness conceals its power, and whose originality and sincerity help define the possibilities of poetry in our age.

Filled with acute observation, *An Almost Pure Empty Walking* registers longing by speaking bare truth in the simplest phrases. "I listened awhile to the furnace. Then, dressed," the poet says flatly in "Immigrant," before going out "to the snow, the crows in the park." The poet walks in and out of memory, houses, stores, parks, and car rides, observing interactions with clerks; watching television; recalling his childhood in Greece and lost loved ones; witnessing America. Everything is filled with more feeling than Tolides articulates, and the successful poems resonate magically with this surplus emotion. After a doctor's bleak prognosis, the narrator and his sick mother pick up hot dogs and eat together "at the kitchen table: two glasses of water / and napkins with children holding hands." An image that might seem pathetically sentimental if fabricated instead echoes with the poignancy of the speaker's naked observation. The hairsbreadth distinction is

one many American poets, laden with self-consciousness, would be unlikely to risk.

While Tolides has participated in the workshop experience, his work is admirably immune from the strained effort to achieve a poem. Bolstered by Greek and other idiosyncratic traditions, he lets each poem do whatever it wants, however unorthodox. Inevitably, some bad lines happen, even failed poems. Yet, without this willingness to stumble, we would never receive lines like the beautifully tautological “What will you do in the village alone in the house / with your mother gone in autumn with winter coming?” or the eccentric “In America, if you have a car, and you aren’t / too sad, you can still drive on the highway.” For that matter, we would not encounter wonderfully bizarre poems that occur entirely in the space of awkward interactions or that explore the relationship between sports club owners and squashed peasant uprisings.

Whatever Tolides’ poems may be in relationship to the Greek tradition is difficult to say, but in the context of American poetry, his work is clearly a kind of seed. Tolides imports many treasures from his native tradition, among them lucid, minimalist speech; a quotidian world of imagination; and emotion that saturates the poem even while restrained in understatement. He also inherits from the Greek poets a willingness to allow even peripheral objects to become characters—something distinctly different from the American practice of the aesthetically framed image. In “Conversion,” he acknowledges this:

finally you are alone, and everything is landscape,
whatever sense you might get out of that, substituted

for people, interchangeable. People, landscape, ideas.
The mailbox, the woman in spring, the field of clover.

It is hard not to hear Ritsos in these lines. Yet, when we consider the lines that precede these in the complete the poem, we find a manner of thought and phrasing that is wholly unique:

Any minute now, amid this heightened, contrived
talk, making of art, trying, prayer. I think
in confused puddles, like a prisoner, or shattered bird,
and that it can be no other way.
Something should break, or deepen, once you decide
to say no and no and no, or from irrational force, say it:

The contorted syntax consists not of the elliptical riddles of intellectual American poetry, but of a plain and sincere attempt to communicate through the form of the author's confused fragmentation. I can think of no Greek poet who is present here as much as perhaps an American: Robert Creeley.

Tolides' most seminal achievement, in fact, may lie in how he applies the lucidity of Greek poetics to the anxiety and fragmentation of 21st century America, producing a hybrid markedly different from what's produced when U.S. poets imitate Greek style. Indeed, for all its nostalgia for Greece, what is most admirable about the collection is how originally it responds to the contexts of America. In this respect, the book reminds me of Lorca's *Poet in New York*—a record of a naked, rural-European poetic sensibility encountering modern (or post-post-modern) America. Where Lorca's confrontation exploded with surreal horror and spectacle, Tolides implodes in "a collapse of feeling" into a reserved, elegiac whisper

"Enduring Freedom," for example, is such an obvious and necessary American poem that it is almost embarrassing it took an immigrant to write it. Tolides juxtaposes a four-star general showing night-cam clips at a press conference with scenes of civilians dying in

war. A bomb tears through a roof where a family is eating breakfast; handpicked reporters ask the general polite questions. A humorous moment occurs at the press conference; two brothers at a market are sprayed with shrapnel. What makes the poem so stunning, and what saves it from an overly telegraphed message, is how it includes moments outside of any moral dichotomy. As the conference concludes, "a man in some distress then / asks about a remedy for heartburn. Car financing / is discussed." And, the first person poet-viewer appears, turns off the TV and goes outside, saying: "I have no appetite. My feet walk me." No poet has perhaps better captured the paralysis of the bewildered global citizen, adrift in the twenty-first century.

—Sam Taylor

Dark Matters: Thomas Heise's *Horror Vacui*

Thomas Heise, *Horror Vacui*. Sarabande Books. 2006. Paper, 84 pp. \$13.95.

"Horror vacui" means fear of empty space. In this first collection from Thomas Heise, that empty space is what has become of the speaker's father after his death, and most of the poems (which contain recurring titles such as "Obituary," "Epitaph," "The Remainder," "These New Days") inhabit, explore, and attempt to come to terms with this postmortal space. Though the Latin title is symptomatic of a self-conscious impulse to overpoeticize that becomes problematic in this book, there is much in the writing that is impressive.

The book begins with an epigram from Thomas Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard," which contains the couplet, "No farther seek his merits to disclose, / Or draw his frailties from their dread abode." And though the book is largely elegiac, the aforementioned advice is followed insofar as the poems sing no praises of the dead, nor do they elaborate too greatly upon specific memories of the deceased. More interestingly, they engage with the hole left by a passing life. The title—and first—poem begins richly:

—you see there is nothing left to do
but gawk at the unblocked stars
and look back at our torn scrap
of black map awkwardly for a little
too long startled.

The speaker navigates deciduous late-autumn landscapes of emotional wreckage and confusion. Much more than a father has become

ghostly, and language struggles to name and reclaim, to draw the speaker and his world back into a comfortable and familiar relation. Thankfully, these poems refuse easy answers and formulaic reconciliations, choosing instead to give expression to anguish and to interrogate absence. “[C]an’t we be sad for a while?” asks the speaker in “Rosary.” A valid question, to be sure, but for some of these poems, the difficulty lies in the expression of that sadness. The reader becomes inundated with images of crows, smoke, cemeteries, falling leaves, bare branches, and hearts. The word “broken” is repeated quite often, as are pious gestures of carrying and lifting hands. Granted, there is the attempt to be fresh and inventive with such common material, but often the result is obscure and unsatisfying: “wind branching and gathering folding leaves into a canopy,” “bitterness and beauty had wings / of red and ochre.” And sometimes the pronouncements are flat and predictable: “your sadness leads you in circles,” “because leaves were feathers.”

About half of the poems appear in a double-spaced, narrow column format. Several of these poems (all entitled “Examination”) are a dialogue or litany, in which a second voice is interspersed italicized in brackets or offset by slashes:

You said yes? [Yes.] You said take
my body down? [Yes.] You said
take it down. [Yes. Its tendons
are stretched and tender. Said]
Yes. I know [I want home. I know]...

Occasionally the bracketed passages add a twist to the non-bracketed line (when read continuously), but all too often they intrude clumsily and distract, they repeat a non-bracketed word or phrase to no great effect, or, simply, they don’t add much excitement: “White paper rain in its hair

[like light], torn hymn falling [you fell on your floor, right]." And when one extracts the bracketed segments and reads each voice separately, the individual lines don't cohere syntactically or meaningfully. The disparate voices lean on each other, each tottering. The poems are least compelling when they too self-consciously try to incorporate elegiac elements and formal innovations. Like the unnecessary Latin title, there is the strain to make the poems too deliberately poetic (by poetic I refer to all that borders on the cliché in poetry—all that is elevated in tone, frilly, of billowy sleeves and quills), as in the last couplet of the book, in which too many images and metaphors collide in an attempt at a grandiose exit: "Or would you bury my live heart here, near yours, and carry me up / the staircase into the towering air that washes your dark hair with fire?" Such formulations do a disservice to the speaker's anguish and quest, which find much more startling and exciting expression in other poems.

Despite such criticisms, one must first admire Heise's relentlessness. Even in the least successful poems one witnesses a fervent inventiveness, a desire to recast familiar objects of the poetic gaze: "The moon vibrant / as a rung bell releases birds / from my mouth," "Stars burn a sharp, white nacre until they evaporate. / The moon's flamingo unfolds her iodine wings over the broken city." This drive often startles the reader and introduces fantastic elements into the predominant melancholic atmosphere, as in the following passage from "My Pietà":

When I fell asleep in the attic, he would carry me down
and sing to me. One winter he held a rope, lowered me
by the ankles to the well's bottom.
I ascended upside-down through the dark thermometer
with a blood orange in my teeth.

Here the poet lets the momentum of his imagination carry him unselfconsciously into the final, haunting image, too strange to allow

for a comfortable interpretation. There is also a refreshing shuffle of physical landscapes—we move from northern Michigan to Florida to New York City to unidentifiable mythic marine locales. Rare flashes of humor appear as well, sometimes awkwardly, given the thematic heaviness (and sometimes heavy-handedness) of the book; nevertheless, they add an often welcome dimension:

I suppose I could lower the awning with a pole
Close down call the afternoon a loss
So much rain I can't plan for it
So I turn up the volume to gnaw on the scenery
The sun is the color of my headache
And holding steady
I could pass out on the hood in your blue wig. ("Plan B")

Here we witness an unpunctuated meditation that meanders fluidly and unguided through the speaker's psyche. It is in this mode that the poems are most surprising and immediate, startling unpredictable truths from the foliage by paying less attention to form and the book's overarching thematic content. One great example is the first "These New Days" poem, in which the horrifying insight, "I saw myself / in the startled eye of a monkey," is revealed amidst a non-sequituous stream of images, narration, and reflection. The ending slides mysteriously into the ineffable and terrifying fog of grief:

There comes a time when the song
must be put in a cage and the cage
must be lowered by pulleys
into the river. Goodbye dandelion.
The years I was happiest. My friend
once called me Wishful Thinking.
Does a sound go on forever?
My voice deep inside your boot.
Little fish little fish little fish.

When the poems aren't concerned with making meaning or with dazzling formalities, they move deftly into more engaging encounters with loss and death. As an example, witness the entirety of the excellent shorter poem, "The End of the Imaginary":

They begin with so little joy knowing their stay is temporary.
They place the infant in the grass to see if it will crawl
back to them. Others walk in the garden
on the lit hill in the distance. The father
pulls a bag of dripping oranges
from the ice chest and offers one to his wife, but she's fallen
asleep to the voices of schoolchildren being chased
through the park's dark grove.

The poem avoids explanation and glides unencumbered by premeditated purpose, allowing a compelling mystery to sprout in the wide spaces between each line. And there are successful narrative poems, such as "The End of Travel," that remain straightforwardly engaged with their topic while revealing a precise image or insight: "Ahead on a side street, a worker at Tito's Garage & Tow / walks out in an apron, rubber boots, / his left hand entirely red from fishing a nail / from a paint drum earlier this afternoon," and "she turns to look at you, or someone who looks like you."

The centerpiece of the book, "The Orchard of Orange Trees," is a magnificently-executed longer narrative poem—broken in tercets—which showcases all of Heise's strengths. The landscape is Florida, and the speaker and a neighbor are in search of the neighbor's black

Labrador, missing four nights. And it is night in the poem. The lines are brief, crisp, and swift, and the atmosphere Heise conjures is pregnant with tension and confusion:

With a flashlight, he scanned the rows
though it only shone twenty feet or so
before the darkness washed back out of the trees.

He scanned the rows and they were long
unlit corridors. It was August and almost
five a.m. The earth was hot. And drinking

since midnight, the noise made me uneasy . . .

Later, the narrator speculates that "Perhaps he [dog] fell into the river and the current pulled him / kicking through one of the culvert pipes." Other commentary on the action is just as deft, disarmingly simple, and incontrovertible: "They say if they / don't reappear after three days, they never will / and I believe that." There are startling metaphors: "and you wake up / smelling like musk, a pile of old clothes dug out / of the earth," "the sun sank like an orange / in a dark lake." They find the dog and it's dead and swollen. Here's how the poem ends:

He was large and swollen, almost the size
of a calf and unrecognizable. That's how a body
rises after four days, but I did not say that.
My neighbor stood, shifting his flashlight.

The field draining in the distance. The morning slowly
focusing, as if gauze were being peeled
off the sky. We were slowly focusing,

as if looking at something we could not remember,

as if looking at something we did not care to remember.

The use of repetition to build momentum, add tension, is something that Heise employs to great effect in this poem (not always so successfully elsewhere in the book, as in the twisted couplet in "Exeat": "Worn my skin where the world has rubbed it. / Rub my world where the skin has worn it."), and the subtle but jarring shift from "could not" to "did not care to" in the last two lines provides for an excellent and disturbing closure. The tone here is controlled, alert, unconcerned with trying to dazzle the reader, and in such a mode of unselfconscious exploration, the speaker draws us onward toward the most immediate and horrifying confrontation with death in the book, despite the fact that the subject is a dead dog and not a dead person.

These poems are unafraid to plunge into dark matters, an admirable trait in itself. They are most problematic when they become too self-conscious about being poems. But, in equal measure, there is much to admire in the way of image, metaphor, and insight. One looks forward to what comes next.

Gulf Coast: Volume 19. Number 2

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Jen Bills lives in Chicago. Her work has recently appeared in *The Malahat Review*.

Oni Buchanan's first book of poetry, *What Animal*, was published in October 2003 by the University of Georgia Press. She is also a concert pianist and actively performs across the U.S. while maintaining a teaching studio in Brighton, MA. She is on faculty at the New School of Music in Cambridge and is an online poetry mentor for the Anna Akhmatova Foundation.

Eric Burger was a 2004–2005 Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin. He has poems forthcoming in *Sonora Review*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Passages North*. His review of the anthology *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project* (ed. Anna Leahy) is forthcoming in *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*.

Joseph Campana's poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Colorado Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *New England Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Poetry*, and are forthcoming in *Triquarterly*. His first collection, *The Book of Faces*, was published by Graywolf Press in 2005. He is the recipient of a 2007 Creative Writing Fellowship in poetry from the NEA. Currently, he writes a weekly literary blog for the *Kenyon Review* and is completing a manuscript of poems entitled "Spring Comes to Ohio." He teaches Renaissance literature and creative writing at Rice University.

Anne Carson is currently working on collaborative performances involving sung texts and moving people.

Constantine Cavafy was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1863, the ninth and last child of Constantinopolitan parents. In 1922 he retired as assistant Director of Irrigation Services in the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works. He died in 1933.

Charles Cros (1842–1888) was a French poet as well as an inventor of photographic and telegraphic technologies. He made significant improvements to the early color photo process. In 1877, he delivered a paper entitled “Process of Recording and of Reproducing Audible Phenomena,” which was the first documented suggestion for—and feasible plan for—the invention of the phonograph.

Mark Z. Danielewski is the author of *House of Leaves* (2000) and *Only Revolutions* (2006), which was a Finalist for the 2006 National Book Award. He lives in Los Angeles.

Claire Davis’ first novel *Winter Range* was listed among the best books of 2000 and received both the PNBA and MPBA awards for best fiction. Her second novel, *Season of the Snake*, and her short story collection, *Labors of the Heart*, were both released to critical acclaim. Her work has appeared in the *Gettysburg Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Southern Review*, *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*, and *Best American Short Stories*. She teaches creative writing at Lewis-Clark State College.

Jehanne Dubrow was born in Italy and grew up in Yugoslavia, Zaire, Poland, Belgium, Austria, and the United States. She is currently pursuing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *the Hudson Review*, *Tikkun*, *the New England Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

Rebecca Dunham’s first book, *The Miniature Room*, was published in 2006 by Truman State University Press. Poems from her new collection, *Aviary*, are forthcoming or have recently appeared in *the Iowa Review*, *FIELD*, and *the Antioch Review*, among others.

Noah Falck teaches Language and Thought at Northridge Local Schools. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals such as *Bat City Review*, *LIT*, *Word For/Word*, *Pilot*, *Backwards City Review*, *H_NGM_N*, *Absent*, *The Bedside Guide to No Tell Motel – Second Floor*, and others. He lives in Dayton, Ohio.

Joe Fletcher’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Poetry International*, *jubilat*, *Octopus*, *Hollins Critic*, *Pebble Lake Review*, and elsewhere. He teaches English at North Carolina State University.

Madeleine Gagnon was born in 1938 in Amqui, Québec. Member of PEN International and recipient of numerous literary prizes, Gagnon has published over twenty books of poetry and prose. Two of her most recent books, the non-fiction reportage *Les femmes et la guerre* (VLB Éditeur, 1999; Éditions Fayard, 2001), and *Je m'appelle Bosnia* (VLB Éditeur, 2005), the novel that grew out of her experiences abroad, develop the themes of human rights and women in history. The original versions of the poems translated for *Gulf Coast* can be found in *Rêve de pierre* (VLB Éditeur, 1999).

Dobby Gibson is the author of *Polar*, which won the Beatrice Hawley Award and was published by Alice James Books. He lives in Minneapolis.

Michele Glazer's books are *Aggregate of Disturbances* (Iowa) and *It Is Hard to Look at What We Came to Think We'd Come to See* (Pittsburgh). She teaches at Portland State University.

Beckian Fritz Goldberg is the author of five volumes of poetry, most recently *Lie Awake Lake* (Oberlin, 2005), winner of the FIELD Poetry Prize, and *The Book of Accident* (Akron, 2006.) She currently teaches at Arizona State University.

Becky Hagenston's collection of short stories, *A Gram of Mars*, received Sarabande Books' 1997 Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction. Her stories have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Southern Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, and many other journals, and one of her stories appeared in the 1996 O. Henry Awards anthology.

Margo Handwerker is curatorial assistant of Modern and Contemporary Art and Prints and Drawings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Among her recent exhibitions are *Edward Ruscha: Works on Paper and In Series: Recent Accessions in Prints & Drawings* at the MFAH. She is an instructor of Art History at the Glassell School of Art and a contributor to *ArtLies*, *The Texas Journal of Contemporary Art*.

Matt Hart is the author of *Who's Who Vivid* and two chapbooks, *Revelated* and *Sonnet*. He teaches at the Art Academy of Cincinnati.

Yona Harvey's work has received a Pushcart Prize nomination and a Barbara Deming Award. She lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with her husband and two children.

Bob Hicok's fifth collection, *This Clumsy Living*, is due out from Pitt in the spring of 2007.

Sean Hill is a Cave Canem Fellow. His poems have appeared in *Callaloo*, *Ploughshares*, *Indiana Review*, *lyric poetry review*, and *Pleiades*, and in the anthologies *Blues Poems* and *Gathering Ground*. He is currently a Jay C.

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Phillip D. Ischy was honored to receive his Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing from Florida State University in 2005. While there, he co-edited a special issue of the *Mississippi Review* with his good friend David Chester, was president of FSU's Society of Poetic Elements, and won two undergraduate poetry awards.

Kristen Iskandrian lives outside of Athens, Georgia. Her work has appeared in *Action Yes*, *Spork*, *Pindeldyboz*, and *Alice Blue Review*. She is working on her PhD in English and Creative Writing at University of Georgia, where she teaches composition as well as creative writing.

Charles Jensen is the assistant director at the Piper Center for Creative Writing. He is the author of two chapbooks of poetry and is the recipient of a 2007 Arizona Commission on the Arts grant. He is the founder of the online poetry magazine *LOCUSPOINT*, which explores creative work on a city-by-city basis.

Jeff P. Jones has essays in *Passages North*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and the anthology *Forged in Fire*. He has received the Wabash Prize, the Lamar York Prize in Nonfiction, and the Hackney Literary Award. He teaches writing at the University of Idaho.

Douglas Kearney is an L.A.-based poet, performer and teacher. His poetry has appeared in journals including *Callaloo*, *nocturnes* and *jubilat*; and anthologies. His first full-length collection, *Fear, Some*, is available through Red Hen Press.

John Kinsella has written over thirty books of biography, criticism, fiction, nonfiction, and verse. His most recent poetry collections are *Doppler Effect* (Salt, 2004) and *Peripheral Light: New and Selected Poems* (WW Norton, 2004). He has received the Grace Leven Poetry Prize, the Age Poetry Book of The Year Award, and the Western Australian Premier's Book Award for Poetry (three times). He is the editor of the international literary journal *Salt* as well as the International Editor of the *Kenyon Review*.

A journalist from Singapore, Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingde has edited thirteen books and executive-produced three audio-books. His poetry anthology *For the Love of God* was exhibited at the Prague International Poetry Festival. An alumnus of Harvard and Stanford, Desmond has recently been published in *Café Irreal*, *Dirty Goat*, *Pinch*, and *Xavier Review*.

Brandon Lamson grew up in Southern Maryland, obtained an MFA from Indiana University, taught creative writing to inmates on Rikers Island

for three years, and has published poems in various journals of ill repute, including *Hunger Magazine* and *Akkadian*.

Elizabeth Langemak lives in Columbia, Missouri.

Alex Lemon's first collection of poetry is *Mosquito* (Tin House Books). When not teaching at Macalester College, in St. Paul, Minnesota, he is at work on *Hallelujah Blackout*, a book-length poetic-sequence, as well as a memoir.

Timothy Liu's most recent books are *Of Thee I Sing* (University of Georgia Press, 2004) and *For Dust Thou Art* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005). He lives in Manhattan.

David McGee lives and works in Houston, Texas. His recent exhibitions include *Black Narcissus*, at Houston's Texas Gallery, and *The Black Rider*, at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. He was also featured in the group show *Double Consciousness/Black Conceptual Art Since 1970* at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, in 2005. In 2006 he was granted a Joan Mitchell Foundation Award.

Dora Malech is currently a Visiting Lecturer at Victoria University's International Institute of Modern Letters in Wellington, New Zealand. Her poems have appeared most recently in *American Letters & Commentary* and *Forklift, Ohio*, and are forthcoming in *The Canary* and *Post Road*.

Adrian Matejka is a Cave Canem fellow and his work has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Indiana Review*, and *Painted Bride Quarterly*. His first collection of poems, *The Devil's Garden*, won the New York/New England Award from Alice James Books.

Daniel Mendelsohn is the author of *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (Finalist for The National Book Critics Circle Award), *Gender and the City in Euripides' Political Plays*, and *The Elusive Embrace: Gender and the Riddle of Identity*. He writes criticism for *The New York Review of Books* and is currently the Charles Ranlett Flint Professor of Humanities at Bard College. He divides his time among homes in New York City, New Jersey, and the Hudson Valley.

Ben Miller was born in Davenport, Iowa, and currently lives in New York City. "Battle Hymn of the Iowa State Teacher's College" is a section from a longer work, portions of which have recently appeared in the *Yale Review*, *Agni*, *Raritan* and the *Antioch Review*. His nonfiction has been anthologized in *Best American Essays*, and his awards include a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Andrea Moorhead was born in Buffalo, New York in 1947. Editor of *Osiris* and a translator of contemporary Francophone poetry, Moorhead

publishes in French and in English. Her most recent collections are *From A Grove Of Aspen* (Salzburg, 1997), *le vert est fragile* (Écrits des Forges, 1999), and *Présence de la terre* (Écrits des Forges, 2004). Translations include *The Edges of Light* by Hélène Dorion (Guernica Editions, 1995) and *Updates* by Françoise Hân (Verlag Im Wald, 2000). She is on the faculty of Deerfield Academy, where she also is director of the Deerfield Academy Press and Poet-in-Residence.

Shabnam Nadiya is a nationally and internationally published writer and translator. Her work has appeared in print and online journals as well as several anthologies. She lives in Dhaka with her husband and daughter.

Émile Nelligan began to write poems in 1896 and made some attempt to enter into the literary life of Montreal. He was shy and the poems proved mostly unpublishable. His reason seemed to be failing. He could not sleep, wandered the streets reciting scraps of verse, transcribed his nights as poems the next day. In winter 1899 he suffered a breakdown and was diagnosed with dementia praecox. He lived from that time until his death in 1941 as a patient of Saint Benoit Hospice and then l'Hopital Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, in a state of remote indifference. Original versions of the poems can be found in Émile Nelligan *Poésies complètes* ed. R. Robidoux & P. Wyczynski (Quebec 1992).

Brian Nicolet is an MFA candidate at the University of Houston. In 2006 he received the First-year MA/MFA Scholarship to Sewanee Writers' Conference. He is currently a Senior Poetry Reader for *Gulf Coast*.

Joanna Osborne grew up outside of Portland, Maine and currently lives and works in Washington, DC. She holds an MFA from the University of Maryland and her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Fugue*, *Willow Springs*, *Salt Hill*, and *Cimarron Review*.

Benjamin Paloff is a poetry editor for *Boston Review*. His poems have appeared in *A Public Space*, *Fulcrum*, *the New Republic*, *the Paris Review*, and elsewhere, and he is the translator, most recently, of Dorota Masłowska's *Snow White and Russian Red* (Grove Press, 2005).

Padgett Powell has published six books of fiction. The last of them, *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men*, should have been titled *Hologram*, and the character Roopit Mogul should have been Ted Turner. The first of them, *Edisto*, was his thesis at the University of Houston.

Carl Phillips is the author of nine books of poetry, most recently *Riding Westward* (FSG, 2006). *Quiver of Arrows: Selected Poems 1986-2006* will be published in April of 2007. Phillips teaches at Washington University in St. Louis.

Josh Rathkamp's first book, *Some Nights No Cars At All*, will be published by Ausable Press in September 2007. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous journals, including *Indiana Review*, *Fugue*, *Meridian*, *Passages North*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Rhino*, and *the Drunken Boat*. He teaches at Arizona State University.

Roger Reeves received his M.A. in English from Texas A&M University. He is part of Cave Canem.

James Richardson's most recent books are *Vectors: Aphorisms and Ten-Second Essays* and *Interglacial: New and Selected Poems and Aphorisms*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He teaches at Princeton University.

Tim Ross's recent work can be found in *Ploughshares*, *Green Mountains Review*, and elsewhere. A former fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, he currently lives in Nashville.

Peter Sacks is the author of five books of poems, most recently *Necessity* (WW Norton, 2002), as well as of *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. He is a painter and a professor of literature at Harvard.

Matthew Siegel is enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Houston and has work forthcoming in *Passages North*; *Paterson Literary Review*; and *Forklift, Ohio*. He has been awarded a prize from the Academy of American Poets as well as a Bucknell Younger Poets fellowship and is the assistant editor of *Pebble Lake Review*.

Franklin Sirmans is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Menil Collection in Houston. He was a co-curator of *Basquiat* (Brooklyn Museum, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 2005-2006) and *Make it Now: New Sculpture in New York* (Sculpture Center, NY, 2005). A former Editor of *Flash Art* and *Art AsiaPacific* magazines, Sirmans has written for several publications including the *New York Times*, *Essence Magazine*, *Art in America* and *Grand Street*.

Aaron Smith is the author of *Blue on Blue Ground* (Pittsburgh, 2005), winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize and a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. His chapbook, *What's Required*, received the Frank O'Hara Award. He lives in New York City and is a poetry editor for *Bloom*.

Nicole Steinberg is co-editor of *LIT* and Associate Editor of *BOMB*. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *McSweeney's*, *The Bedside Guide to No Tell Motel — Second Floor*, *MiPOesias*, *PMS*, *Lumina*, and

Half Drunk Muse. She's the founder, curator and host of *EARSHOT*, a Brooklyn-based reading series dedicated to the work and presence of emerging writers in the New York City area.

D. E. Steward's "Bayue" is one of a four-part memoir of a 2005 voyage in the Bering Sea, and is part of an extended project, *Chroma*, that has been appearing piecemeal in literary magazines for the last twenty years. His "Magio" was published in *Gulf Coast* 18.2. A poetry collection, *Torque*, was released late in 2006 from Kings Estate Press.

Bradford Gray Telford was educated at Princeton and Columbia and has published poems, essays, and translations in many journals, including *Lyric*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Pleiades*, *the Yale Review* and *Bloom*. The author of two humor books, Telford just won the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize and was recently named a Finalist for the Donald Justice Book Prize, the Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize, and the Morton Marr Prize.

Sarah Vap is the author of *American Spikenard*, winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize, and *Dummy Fire*, winner of the Saturnalia Poetry Prize. Both books of poetry were written while studying with Beckian Fritz Goldberg at Arizona State University.

Urban Waite was born in Seattle and is a recent graduate of Emerson's MFA program in Boston. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart, as well as *The Best American New Voices* series, and can be found in *Fugue*, *Redivider*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *LIT*. He is thankful to Helena Maria Viramontes for her early support of "The Life and Death of Seals," which is part of a larger group of linked stories.

Maya Washington has been commissioned by the Family Housing Fund (January First) and Youth Performance Company (Colorful Women of Invention). Her work is featured in *Talking Stick Volume 15* and in the anthology, *The Playwrights' Center Monologues for Women*. As an actor and choreographer, her work has been seen in theatres throughout the United States.

Anna Wilson edits local history books in Chicago, Illinois.

Monica Youn's first book of poems, *Barter*, was published in 2003 by Graywolf Press. She is currently working on her second book, *IGNATZ*, which is based on George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* comic strip of the 1910s-1940s. She lives in Manhattan, where she is a media and entertainment lawyer.

C. Dale Young is the author of *The Second Person*, published this season by Four Way Books, and *The Day Underneath the Day* (Northwestern 2001). He practices medicine full-time, edits poetry for *New England Review*, and teaches in the Warren Wilson MFA Program.

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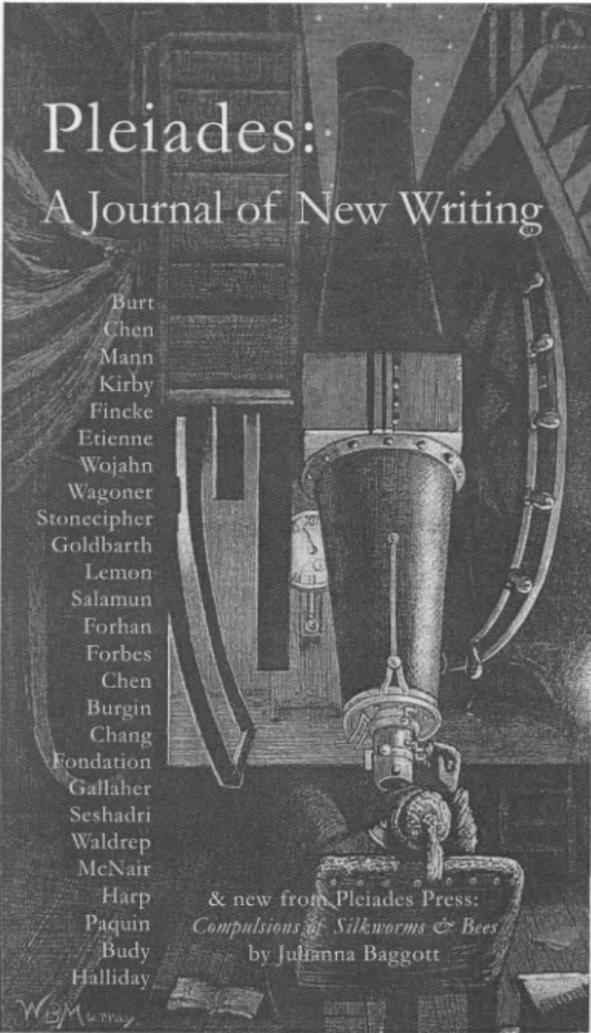
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