

# Gulf Coast

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# GULF COAST

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**Gulf Coast 2007 Poetry Prize**

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*The Other Woman*

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Jane Ashley

*from the book of concealed hearts*

## Sonnet

I am trying to find a line of tenderness  
to walk tonight. But wishing for something—  
a deer, a possum, a squirrel, anything—  
to make its way across the boulevard  
as we dissect it would suit me fine. Do we ever wish  
for words and have them come to us? Do we ever wish  
for words and say the opposite? Syntax  
has never eaten from my hand. One night,  
I gnawed a bone long after the wine was gone  
and you picked the cork down to nothing.  
You drove, reached to shift gears,  
remembered the car was an automatic.  
I would not and will not touch you  
before we find a word to settle between us.

---

JANE SPRINGER

## Call me Paolo.

Or everyman who plays understudy to his brother—find me out of favor with the audience—bon vivant—who with his teeth—tears the chicken off the bone. I do my brother's voice—

with a bacchanalian flavor. My brother does the bible—but all in Revelations—my brother does his bride—with her veil spread like a locust farm between their lips. But I do flocks of goats tangoing

toward Zion when I kiss my brother's bride. You might say he's a sprinkler-on of holy water—but I am one who believes in full immersion—& I am one who's not afraid to lay a brimstone bridge

across a lover-script. I do my brother at break-neck speed—barreling through market in pursuit of the shadow that is younger—more ambrosial—than he is. I do my brother in nouveau Iago

swallowing a perfumed handkerchief. It has not always been so. I used to do my brother tenderly—shucking oysters for the pearl that would most please him—wherever he slept I stood watch

in that garden until the cock crowed. I shoveled the stalls for him—saved the fattest fig for him—played my harp for him—washed his feet in buttermilk—when he stole I served his prison sentence—

you might say I equaled the cross-to-his-sins. & how the crowd loved me then. & how they threw carnations on the stage after my performance. & how—even then—I let my brother take the bow &

everything that went with it: Plywood props, wigs, & out-of-season paper snow stuffed  
in sacks—enough to wreck a blizzard on Jerusalem. But how my brother gathered up  
those bows & stage-things

in such a hurry he forgot to return my embrace. Where once he'd escorted me through  
the streets—right hand pressed to the small of my back in brother's acknowledgement—  
where once he'd worn

my coat for luck—he put the bride of estrangement between us. For what is a bride  
between men but god's lightning bolt, a plague of frogs, a locust veil? I do my brother's bride  
as the channel of bliss

who runs in volts—from me to him.

## Donkey Hammer

Not like I care, but Teabag doesn't seem like much of a nickname. Sounds kind of queer. He comes back from Grand Isle talking about hammering the big rig donkeys off the Louisiana coast—and me and Duff and Bad-Toe Pat sit there and stare at him like we know what a rig donkey is for a minute. All you hear is the meat sizzling on the grill and Duff stifling a belch in Teabag's backyard, which is littered with outboard motor parts and the houses of long-dead dogs. We keep sipping our beer, not letting on, trying not to get too curious about the ocean or anything. Then he asks us if we know what a rig donkey is. I snort foam and shrug like who gives a shit, but Duff jumps right in. "Uh-uh," he says, and Teabag does that nodding thing while he's flipping the burgers. I look at Duff and roll my eyes, but he's staring at Teabag's broad back. Then Teabag turns around and starts in to lecturing us, waving his spatula, saying they call them rig donkeys cause they're as big as goddamn donkeys and swim around those oil platforms off the coast. When he gets going his wife Brenda, who's always hanging out with her sister Glenda, the pretty one, walks to the kitchen door and stares out at him for a minute. She just stares, not smiling, picking at the side of her mouth.

Teabag takes a long look at Brenda staring at him and says, "Hey, I'm over it, so why aren't you?"

Brenda cracks the screen enough to flick her cigarette into the yard and grab another beer out of the cooler before she disappears back in the house. Teabag flexes his sunburned arms and talks about strapping on the tank and breathing through a regulator and carrying a big-ass spear gun and hammering the shit out of those snappers down there. "Didn't know what happened to them. Didn't know I was on their tails," he says. He hammers the shit out of all kinds of fish every year, and occasionally he'll mention hammering the shit out of his wife or one of the women he works with. "See

that," he'll say, when he's pointing at some little split-tail in high heels. "I cut that."

"Well, where the fuck are they then?" I say. Everybody nods. We can hear Brenda and Glenda laughing about something inside, kinda grunty and mean. They'll be moving on to shots of Goldschläger soon. I've done a few with them once or twice, talking up Glenda while she smoked and smirked at me. And right then Teabag pulls a wad of pictures out of his back pocket and flings them in my lap like gristle to an old dog under the table. Barely even looks at me. I thumb through them and see one after another of big, bright red fish lined up on a boat dock like a string of showgirls, Teabag crouching behind them grinning like he's fucked every one of them. Duff and Bad-Toe wait their turn a little too eagerly to see the evidence.

"They're in the freezer," he said. "We'll have fresh snapper all year long."

Damn man, we say. Trying to keep it down. But that's Teabag for you. He's always the one hammering the shit out of everything.

On the gutting line at Tyson I'm the assistant foreman. Teabag is the top man, so he gets to tell who to clean up what when the machine goes haywire and starts spraying chicken blood around like a horror movie. Duff ain't much of anything, but Teabag got him a job keeping the line workers straight, and he doesn't mind us making fun of his teeth. He's only thirty-two and already wearing partials that don't fit too good.

"We got *wild* chicken blood down there boys!" Teabag says, and laughs, splay his fingers out and rolling his eyes. And we laugh too; even though we got to stick around and make sure the Mexicans clean it up right. Teabag says you got to stay on top of them, fire one occasionally for looking at you funny, and then find out which one has the most kids and slip them a box of frozen miscuts in the parking lot. I get home late and don't have nobody to ask me why, so I can do the wild chicken blood

routine, but sometimes I go and have a beer with Duff at the Blue Bonnet. Bad-Toe Pat meets us down there when he gets off at the sawmill. They call him Bad-Toe on account of him having a load of lumber dropped just so it about mashed off his big toe. For some reason it won't heal right and keeps pussing. Gives Pat something to talk about. We spit the peanut shells on the floor and talk about wild chicken blood, going fishing, or doing something next weekend.

"Man, we're going to hammer the shit out of those white bass when they start running," Duff says.

"What do you think Teabag is going to do this weekend?" I say.

"Hammer the shit out of Brenda," Duff says.

"Do you think Glenda would be up for some hammering?" I say.

"Jimmy, best you could do is maybe a light spanking," Duff says. "And Glenda'd be the one smacking your bare butt."

"I'd be spanking her ass with my dick," I say.

"You'd have a wide target then," Duff says.

Bad-Toe laughs at Duff's jokes, drinks, and mutters about his toe.

"They say it might have to come off," Pat says.

We drink until Bad-Toe forgets about his foot, until I'm convinced I've already hammered Glenda, and then I go home and eat a can of Spaghettios and go to bed. Next weekend I might call Glenda and see if she wants to go see a movie or something.

Nothing much different has happened since six months ago when Tyson transferred me here from Siloam Springs. Jimmy, they said, due to your extraordinary skills as a line operator, we are sending you to Dardanelle, Arkansas—Chicken-Gutting Capital of the World—so you can expand your career. Seemed expansive at the time for a guy with nothing but a high school diploma from Yellville, but I was wondering when I was going to get a promotion to Teabag's level.

Sometimes me and Duff string up a trot line on the Arkansas River and go down and see what is hanging on it to fry. When the wind is right you can't smell the chicken litter too bad, and the river is almost pretty, winding away into the hills. There might be two or three fish and a dead snapping turtle on there. We never ask Bad-Toe Pat, cause you got to be drunk if you're going to listen to toe-talk for too long. We never tell Teabag much about it either. He would call us pussies for not going down and wrestling the fish out of the water ourselves, like he said he did up on the Illinois Bayou, shoving his arm up underneath ledges and into pipes underwater. I never seen him do it, even though Duff claimed he knew somebody who went to high school with Teabag who said he saw him catch one like that. Reached right in the thing's mouth, like he was fist-fucking its face. Mainly, Teabag would just take a 16-foot rod made for ocean fishing, with a reel big as a paint bucket on it, and 75-pound test line. Looked like you could drag the world in with it. I'd gone along with him once in his flatbed to the base of the Lake Dardanelle Lock and Dam on the Arkansas River. He'd stayed until three o'clock in the morning, tossing a weighted, baitless, treble hook into that water boiling out from the release valves, yanking it up hard over and over again until he was soaked with sweat. He shone in the dam lights trained at the water. I tried it a time or two, but my shoulders ached so I said I must a pulled something lifting weights. In between grunting with the rod and drinking beer, he philosophized at me while I sat eating Vienna sausages and getting drunker.

"Why don't you ever get around to asking Glenda out?" he said. "She knows you're sweet on her. Just ask Brenda."

"I'm working up to it," I said. It wasn't any of Teabag's damn business, and I didn't like the idea of speculation going on about it.

Teabag kept jerking on that line, grinning, sending a shudder through the boat with each yank. He let out a slow, growling belch.

"Jimmy, the trick is in feeling the line," he said. "You got to finesse it a bit."

"That why you don't use no bait?"

"What the hell do I need bait for?" he said. "I'm smarter than a catfish. If you ain't, you might as well quit."

The river smelled like the rotten crotch of the earth itself, all swirling with bacteria and silt. After we ran out of beer I started to miss my bed. It was empty, but at least it was soft. I threw the last of the Vienna sausages far into the rumbling water and shifted my sweaty ass on the metal bench. Just when I was about to break down and hint about going home, Teabag's line caught so hard he almost lost his footing. Five minutes later, a forty-pound flathead lay in the bottom of the boat, wheezing and squeaking.

"See there," he said, "bait is all in the mind. If you need bait to catch a catfish, you don't understand the fish. You don't know shit."

I just nodded and mumbled something about a state record as I stroked the squirming cat with both hands, but Teabag said the state record on rod-and-reel was twice this size. He didn't even take a picture of it when we got back to his house. While I watched Teabag gut the fish in the carport, Brenda came to the doorway and looked out at us with a sleepy squint. Her eyes were smaller without makeup, and I could see the outline of her breasts sagging beneath her nightgown—a pale, thin, pink thing with a hole near the right shoulder.

"Y'all woke me up," she said.

"You gotta look at the size of this fish, Brenda," I said.

"I'll be goddamned," Teabag said. He had sliced open the belly and was pulling the guts out. In his bloody hand he held up two intact Vienna sausages, shining in the porch light.

"Clean that shit off you before you come to bed" she said, and yawned, turning back into the darkness of the house.

Two weeks later, me and Duff had a string of river cats, gutted and hanging from the back porch eave. We brought the 1/4-inch nylon trotline back in to soak in a bucket of water with rotten eggs mixed in it. Smelled like a

bucket of ass. Nothing drove a catfish crazier. They liked to rub on it. You have to let the blood drain out of them real good or they tasted like muddy ass though. Even then they still need to be soaked over night in milk and salt. My old yellow cat was down underneath, licking the blood up from the dirt that dripped down the white, opened bellies of the fish. Duff started in about Teabag and all of his big adventures.

"Man, nobody gets away with shit the way Teabag does," Duff said. He laughed, shook his head, and flung his empty beer can at my cat.

"Leave that old bastard alone," I said.

"Yeah, Jimmy, just you and this pussy living here," Duff said. "Guess he's mighty special to you."

"Shut up," I said.

"That Teabag though . . ." Duff started snickering. "He told me he hammered Glenda last weekend after Brenda went to bed. Said he did her right there on the living room rug with Brenda passed out in her own piss in the next room."

"Man," I said. Made me feel kind of sick looking at the pale bellies of those gutted fish. The raw edge of where they had been sliced open gleamed bright red against the whiteness.

"Said she came on to him, wanted to be teabagged," Duff said.

"What?" I said.

"You know," Duff said. He stood up, spread his legs, and hunched down on something imaginary between them. He screwed up his face like a lovesick pig.

"Oh, yeah," I said, "But why would she want that. Isn't that a queer thing?"

"What? Don't you know nothing?" Duff said. "All teabagging is in rubbing your balls on somebody's head or something, don't matter who it is. Teabag got his nickname when he did it to Brenda when they were in high school and she was passed out. Took pictures of his big, hairy balls on her forehead and showed them around."

"Why the hell would Glenda want that?" I said.

"Do I look like a woman to you?" Duff said.

I didn't much feel like considering the topic any longer and suggested we drop it. Duff said that was fine with him and why didn't we have another beer and stick to fishing topics if I couldn't handle anything *sensitive* about Glenda. When he said "sensitive" he kind of did a little butterfly flutter with his fingers and prissed his head, so I told him we'd have another beer some other night when I felt like listening to a semi-toothless motherfucker talk shit.

I stayed away from the lot of them for at least two weeks. I didn't want to think about Brenda's tired eyes, Pat's toe, Duff's prissing, Teabag's balls, or especially Glenda doing anything with them on her head. But pickings were slim for drinking buddies in Dardanelle on a Friday night, and I finally broke down and called Duff about heading to the Blue Bonnet. When I got there I was disappointed to see Teabag laughing that big belly laugh, all his teeth showing, while several of the plant boys gazed on like lovestruck girls.

"I don't like to fish with bait," Teabag said. "Ain't that right, Jimmy?"

I nodded and sat down. Teabag gave me a wink and grin that made Duff and Bad-Toe start giggling.

"If you can't catch it with what you got, then there's no point even trolling for it," Teabag said, grabbing between his legs and giving it a yank.

Duff almost spit one of his partials out.

"I guess if you got what a bottom feeder wants, you don't have no problem," I said.

Teabag took a swallow of beer and poured himself another round from the pitcher. Duff quit giggling and went to gnawing on peanuts instead.

"All I know is I know how to fish better than any fucker in here," Teabag said.

"Huh," I said. "Speaking of bait, why don't we see who can catch the most fish with either no bait or the weirdest shit we can find."

"Winner gets what?" Teabag said.

"Winner gets the title, King of the Dipshits or whatever, and two cases of beer from each of the losers," I said. "But we have to do it on the same stretch of river on the same night so it's verifiable."

"Oh, I can do it verifiable," Teabag said. "How about tomorrow?"

Duff and Bad-Toe agreed, but they looked at Teabag like he was already the prettiest girl at the beauty pageant. We decided to meet at 10 PM the next evening at the Dardanelle Boat Dock. There would be two to a boat so cheating would not be an option, and we would have to fish the same stretch of river for two hours. Me and Teabag in one boat and Duff and Bad-Toe in another.

The next day at Wal-Mart I stocked up on Spam and Vienna sausages, and the biggest fishing pole and heaviest line they had. On the highway I saw a half-rotted possum. I speared it with a tire iron and flung it in the back of the truck. For myself I purchased a large sack of Cheetos, some string cheese, and a half case of Busch. When I met the boys at the dock it had been dark for two hours.

"Ok," I said. "Let's see what you're going out with."

Duff opened up his tackle box, so we could see he didn't have any chicken liver stuck in there, and then he pulled a shoebox out of his truck with a rubber band around it. The box was making cheeping noises. He undid the rubber band to show us seven yellow chicks.

"My grandpa used to swear by this," Duff said. "Called it chick flippin'. The trick is, you either put them on the line alive and weight it, or kill 'em right before you drop the line. Something to do with the heat and freshness."

"I got chicken liver," Bad-Toe said.

We relieved Bad-Toe of his chicken liver and asked him if he had any other ideas.

"I also got some Ivory Soap, and I reckon I could try Preparation H," he said. "It's got 3% shark oil in it, and I could rub it on the soap. I only have half a tube though."

This was agreeable to all of us, as long as Bad-Toe didn't start in telling us why he was driving around with a tube of ass cream in his truck.

Teabag said he didn't have nothing but a smile and some chewing gum, and I displayed my potted meat products and the rotten possum.

"Better keep that thing downwind from me," Teabag said.

"Keep your mouth shut and it won't smell so bad," I said.

The river was flat as my grandma's ass, the water so still that our engines echoed sharply off the banks. As we sped up, I felt the occasional ping of a bug off my cheek. Teabag cleared the boat dock and aimed the boat around a bend and out toward the center of the channel.

"We don't have to go too far for this," Teabag said.

"Whatever you say," I said.

Duff and Bad-Toe followed about fifty yards off.

With the engines cut, each boat drifted slowly in the current. Mosquitoes hung about three feet off the water. I could hear their low hum if I held my breath.

"Ok," Teabag yelled across the water. "Starting now."

Duff and Bad-Toe whooped something back at us. A full moon peeked through strips of clouds, occasionally lighting up the dark water, and a low rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance.

Teabag shoved a wad of bubble gum in his mouth and started chewing while I peeled open a can of Spam. I molded a golf ball size chunk onto a treble hook and flung it over the side. The Spam slung off in a clump before the hook hit the water.

"See you got a new rod," Teabag said.

I didn't say anything but reeled the line back in and tried a smaller chunk of Spam, cut into a cube. The next cast it stayed on.

Teabag took the bubblegum out of his mouth and molded it around his hook.

"Let's see if they like Double-Bubble," he said.

We sat there quietly, listening to the water lap against the boat and the occasional holler drifting over the water from Duff and Bad-Toe. From the sounds of it, the chicks had gotten loose in the boat.

I got a nibble, but when I gave the rod a jerk to set, the line went slack. I reeled in an empty hook and cut another cube of Spam.

"Maybe you should save some of that for your breakfast," Teabag said.

"Maybe you shouldn't of fucked Glenda," I said.

Teabag giggled and whipped the line out over his head, the silver strand of it floating beautifully out far over the water. A soft plop followed.

"Who said I did?" he said. "And what's it to you?"

"Doesn't matter," I said. "Seems a little close to home, is all."

Teabag's rod dipped hard. He gave it a yank and whistled. The rod bent towards the left and downward as the tip trembled. He played a little line out before cranking on the reel some more, his breath coming harder. The air smelled of bubble gum.

"Somebody likes cherry," Teabag said.

What he pulled in was about a twenty-two pound flathead. Teabag yelled this estimate to Duff and Bad-Toe, who whooped their approval back.

"How's Jimmy doing?" Duff yelled. He had gone through three chicks already without a bite, but Pat had caught a six pounder using the Ivory soap and butt cream.

"Slinging Spam," Teabag yelled back.

Within a few minutes Teabag pulled in another flathead, this one only a few pounds. I decided to change my tactics and switched to rotten possum.

Teabag complained about the stench as I cut into one distended leg of the possum, releasing a smell worse than what was originally coming off the carcass. As I gagged up Cheeto juice in the back of my throat, I realized the possum's smell was going to make it too difficult to work with. Aside from

the one chunk for bait, I dumped the rest of the carcass overboard, which Teabag bitched would probably keep the fish so occupied they wouldn't even consider bubble gum. The stinky clod, bits of fur clinging to it, was fixed onto my hook. For luck, I added a Vienna sausage. My first perfect cast of the evening delivered the weighted line far out into the darkness. It seemed like only seconds before the hook was taken, sending a shudder through the rod and deep into my shoulders. As I started to reel in, the rod flattened to the water and the line zinged out of the reel in a low hiss. I touched it lightly, feeling the burn on my palm. This would take finesse.

"Damn," Teabag said.

I played the line out and toyed it back in, played it out and pulled it back softly towards me, continually working the invisible monster in closer to us. Teabag pulled in his line and laid his rod down so he could peer out into the water. The river got quieter as if all the creatures above and below were waiting to see what was coming. After several minutes of straining, my fingers aching from clenching the rod, a smooth form broke the water and turned, revealing a white underbelly in a brief flash of moonlight.

"Goddamn!" Teabag yelled, causing Duff to holler questions across the open water.

"Get your ass over here!" Teabag yelled. "Troll over!"

Duff and Bad-Toe arrived just in time to see the fish churn the surface once more. Their yells matched Teabag's then in intensity. *Play it out, don't lose it, hold on, easy now, don't be a dumbass*—all blended together. I couldn't tell who was bellowing what advice.

"Work it in closer," Teabag said. He had a few feet of nylon rope in his hand and was leaning out over the side. "Easy."

The fish was tiring some, breaking the surface more frequently, closer and closer to the boat. The rod's tip no longer dipped as far down with each weaker dive. I brought it in close enough that I could see the length. It looked to be at least five feet.

Teabag reached into the water, groping at the slick sides of the fish. It thrashed, almost jerking the rod out of my hands and sending a wave of water, warm as piss, over us.

"Easy!" I shouted, either to Teabag or the fish.

Teabag reached again for the gaping jaws of the fish, and struggled to get his fist, clutching the nylon rope, into its flat mouth. As he lunged forward to rip the cord through the gills, the burst of fight left in the fish and his own weight caused another surge of water over the side of the boat. Just on the edge of flipping, Teabag fell back against the opposite side of the boat, gripping the two ends of the rope. He quickly tied them to the boat. I released my grip on the rod. Breathing heavily, we peered over the side at the thrashing thing secured there. The boat rocked with each additional twist of it.

"Gotta be a world record," Teabag said.

"Yeah," I said.

Duff carefully maneuvered to where they could get a better look. Their yells were almost lost in the splashing water.

"What do we do?" I said. The idea of my photograph in the fishing journals, a big picture of myself and the fish sprawled out on the dock like a drunk fat gal, the tales of this night for years ahead at the Bluebonnet, were filling me with a joy like I hadn't felt since I was a kid.

"We can troll back to the dock, and then we call the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission first thing in the morning," Teabag said. "We can load it into your truck and weigh it at the sawmill tonight."

"The Game and Fish Commission," I said. A sudden heat filled my belly as I remembered the expiration date on my fishing license. Nobody gave a shit if you were just fishing for catfish, but hauling in a world record would require some finagling. "What if my license ain't exactly, uh, current?"

Teabag sat back and stared at me. Duff and Bad-Toe quit bellowing about the fish and stared too.

"Your license isn't current?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"Well then they can just take your tackle and any other equipment used to catch the fish, including the boat and truck. Plus, they can fine the shit out of you," Teabag said. "What the hell, dumbass!"

My insides turned into a solid hot ball that I knew was going to explode. It choked off anything I could think of except a burning hatred for Teabag. Bile rose in the back of my throat again as I looked at the fish anchored to our shifting boat by the nylon rope. Duff remained silent. I swallowed back Cheeto juice again.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do?" I said.

"Just a second here," Teabag said. His voice softened. "We can't exactly let a thing like this go. Not after we worked so hard to catch it. Somebody's got to take it in and report it."

I looked at Teabag.

"Like you?" I said.

"Well, it wasn't like you could have brought this in all by yourself," he said "I did string it to the boat."

"Yeah, but I caught it on my line, with my bait," I said.

"You got the title!" Duff said. He started laughing then.

"Jimmy's King of the Dipshits!" Pat said.

"Yeah, OK," Teabag said. "But I might as well be the one to take this fish in."

Duff and Bad-Toe quit laughing.

"Now wait a minute," Duff said. "That's up to Jimmy."

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity boys," Teabag said, looking to the other boat, his hands open. His voice was pleading in a way none of us had ever heard before. Duff and Bad-Toe stared back at him while I slipped my hand into my pocket. I dropped my pocketknife to my side and worked the blade open. I took one flick at the line on my pole.

"What the hell else can we do?" Teabag said. "It just makes sense that I bring it in."

I leaned forward and sawed at the taut rope. It didn't take hardly anything. It severed and slipped from the still-squirming fish's mouth. With a soft whisk of fins the thing disappeared into the dark water. Teabag turned to see the last gleam of moonlight on its back. He jumped up with a wild punch that just got me off the side of my jaw. I jabbed back at him with my right fist, the pocketknife still clutched in it. He fell back with a yelp of pain, grabbing his upper thigh.

"You don't get this one," I said.

Duff and Bad-Toe yelled at us to settle down.

"You cut me you son of a bitch," Teabag said.

"Yeah," was all I could say.

I declared the tournament over and started the outboard. I hauled the boat as fast as it would run back to the dock. The bow slapped hard against the water and bounced Teabag enough that I figured he wouldn't take another swing without maybe going overboard. He clutched his thigh and glared at me. At the dock I offered to take him to the emergency room to get it looked at, trying to be Christian about things, but he just told me to go fuck myself and got in his truck. Duff said he'd see me at work Monday, and Bad-Toe said I still had the title as far as he was concerned.

The next night I called Glenda to see if she wanted to go see a movie or get some barbecue. She said she was seeing some fellow in Altus and it probably wasn't a good idea right now, or maybe ever. I went back to the gutting line on Monday prepared to get in a fight if I had to, but Teabag limped past me without a hi, bye, or kiss my ass. I noticed him looking at me when I went to lunch, but it wasn't even like he wanted to beat my ass, more like he was looking at a strange animal he couldn't quite figure out, and I knew I would be all right then. In the parking lot, Duff was talking to some of the boys and saw me slipping one of the Jose's a frozen bag of nuggets. "Hey Hammer," they yelled, "beers on us." "Hey back," I hollered, but in a giving way, like a king waving to his subjects.

## The Pre-Raphaelite Effect

1

Mid-afternoon, the hum of porn fills the room:

    a red-head in a diaphanous catsuit

(love-bite on her breast-swell),

fearing no bondage,

    no slap of the whip.

Foreplay and more foreplay and a song sung on the soundtrack.

“Amber Lemons is from Jersey, not Malibu,

    went to Catholic School.”

How do you know that?

Then she comes twice

    nose-down like a small animal

    in faux grass by the kidney-shaped pool.

Is she faking? Is she faking?

2

Paramour—that’s what I’d like to be called.

If we hadn’t skipped so many steps at the start

you’d know my mom is part-French.

And hate isn’t as simpleminded as you think.

My hatred of Ruskin’s landscapes, for instance,

is fairly sophisticated: although no women appear in them

I see poor Effie Gray in every sunset,

in every godforsaken river and ruin.

Sometimes the autobiography just creeps in.

I’m glad, after John rejected her,

that Effie was able to recover and marry again.

No, I've never tried cuttlefish or finished *The Stones of Venice*  
but several years back I wept watching *Summertime*.  
Maybe if I were older or from the Midwest,  
like Katharine Hepburn's character—  
adultery is always easier in the movies.

3

At the Apollo Diner some terms are too nebulous.  
Some confessions are meant to be written

in permanent marker in a public restroom.  
John is a popular name.

Last night I fell asleep with one hand  
pressed against the wall for balance

and woke to a pain shooting through my arm.  
If only I'd practiced more restraint at that bar—

In retrospect I should've put down my foot.  
In retrospect you're an open book:

sooner or later you'll pour the same  
Beam down some other girl's throat.

4

Yes, if she weren't grinning, she'd resemble Jesus:  
sheet-white, contorted, less busy than usual.  
Where does the light come from? The candelabrum holds

only dead wicks and stumps of wax.  
Do you keep this place frigid on purpose  
so her nipples stay erect?  
A commissioned artist can afford utilities, especially one  
already "risen" according to that important critic.  
No windows, no books but Kerouac,  
who doesn't count. Vintage pinups on the carpet.  
And too much time spent wasted, wasting away.  
When she closes her eyes, where does her mind go?  
Fruit bowl, stain on the floor, fruit stain, somewhere far.

5

Something there is that doesn't love melodrama.

When you said you finally understood Botticelli  
we were sitting close on the Dogana steps.

That was four years ago: I'd panicked,  
then missed the train to Munich.

The things we want to forget we can't.

A long time I stood on the Bridge of Sighs,  
waiting for the water to answer back.

If I'd had on more clothes, if my hair hadn't grown  
so unruly, frayed from the constant sun,

I would've felt less foreign.

But all I'd planned to say anyway was congrats!—  
the wife, the kid, the grant.

## 6

A whole planet, like the face of a goddess,  
silhouetted against the sun  
just under 20 minutes:

the duration of *Jeopardy!* without commercials,  
coffee with mom, my commute home.

—But the precise moment of contact,

when Venus first touches the sun's edge,  
is impossible to discern  
and the separation's a blur

—what the folks at [astrologyzone.com](http://astrologyzone.com)  
have termed the “teardrop.”

Who knows who touched who first?

So when I realized I missed it,  
that rare cosmic event that could cure  
every sexual hang-up,

I cried hard  
on the subway, on the crosstown bus,  
on a lonely park bench

overlooking the Hudson.

A grown woman behaving like a child.  
I knew better than to harm myself,

I knew my loss was small  
in the larger scheme of things,  
in this city where every second

someone dies, another gives birth.  
My head between my knees,  
I couldn't take the onslaught

of spring, my part in it:  
the trees' showy leaves,  
the flowers slowly opening.

## K as in F Blank Blank K

The friction. The fire. Without the breathless wonder  
In front of you. Without the swimming suit  
Seam filled with sand.

Without the book on the nightstand.  
In the old way, without bundling board. Open the book.  
Here's one beginning: the crab dragged its claws

Across the desert. Sad as language. Sad as what  
Our half feet felt as we crawled  
From the shallow sea-salt water

Of a pea-colored pool and began to procreate.  
Here's another: Krazy Kat watches while Alice falls  
Headfirst and catches a forward jar

Of marmalade in the dark. Someone whispers, You  
Are surrounded by evil.  
Then, Christ,

Look at the way you use language here  
In the common area. And believe me, I know.  
Look away, look again.

At that, we can see  
The art of the act of the moon  
And the earth matching up on the plasma screen.

## Z Is for Zed Which Comes at the End

After the 0 but before the over,  
There's hope. And then there is none.  
There are simply the full and flat Egyptian sheets  
Which cover the waiting world. There are the seats  
From which we watch. And hover.

At the wedding of now and be ever, someone makes note  
That the Mickey Mouse clock on the mantel is stuck  
At still. Someone else adds, May there never be a snake.  
And another adds, And never a poison apple.  
Once we gave the apple and tree a story.

Once we let the snake speak. In a whisper, it said,  
Let no one fail and then laughed  
Into its tail. And wasn't it Eve who is said to have said, Hello  
And, You're right, this is quite tasty.  
All the while, on the opposite page, Ophelia

In her small lake. Ophelia, the water (edging her  
Floating face) the color of tin.  
The evening's hair all laced with lily.  
A hint of Madonna.  
A face. A bed ready. A bed made.

## Land of Lincoln

And in this room  
Nicholas Vachel Lindsay was born  
Vachel with a V  
He dropped the Nicholas  
Upon editor's suggestion later,  
Here is the bed his mother lay in  
His father's lamp  
The fireplace they read by  
The back door his doctor father went in and out of  
They hadn't proven the germ theory yet  
Which is how the Lindsay sisters  
Contracted scarlet fever  
The family had two bathrooms  
They had so many books  
These were part of their real library  
This house was considered middle class  
For its time but now it seems very fine  
Doesn't it? Sandburg visited here  
Often and the Lincolns in earlier days would come over  
For regular meals and you do recall don't you  
That Vachel was the one who first introduced Langston Hughes  
To the crowd where William Butler Yeats  
And all the luminaries were gathered in Chicago?  
Vachel went tramping out west repeatedly with no money  
Only poems to trade for bread  
His philosophy of beauty and simplicity in his pocket  
These are copies of his drawings  
He stayed in this house as a grown man too

It was his only house  
The only house of a great wanderer  
And he married and had children here  
And it was in this room he drank the poison  
That killed him

Bait [BOND, James] :

*temptation or lure*                      beautiful spies, dirty jobs on foreign shores,  
“danger like a third man standing in the room,” diamonds in the palm of the  
hand, death baring down in a bottomless chair DANGLING fast car, fast girl,  
fake wife, a real one, the villain’s girl, anyone’s girl dangling selfish cars, selfish  
girls, selfless villains, solitary slugs on a solitary beach dangling a pasty villain,  
a secret lair, a secret girl, a shower of flesh, cold showers, unnamed curses,  
voodoo curses dangling amphetamines, exposed throats, bloodlust, breathy  
moans, balls for the job, bachelorhood, wedded bliss, bourbon, boredom  
dangling firm breasts and tight bottoms dangling the villain’s peccadilloes

## Close shaves, scrapes [BOND, James] :

*escape* . . . respiratory paralysis induced by fugu poison from sex organs of Japanese globe-fish; poisonous tropical centipede crawling up the "warm forest" of the groin: "Supposing it liked the warmth there! Supposing it tried to crawl into the crevices! Could [007] stand it? Supposing it chose to bite!"; assault course of death measuring anatomy of courage and will to survive the killing ground as includes battle with life-size man-eating squid; "pain" from the Latin *poena* and the gleaming teeth of a circular saw pointed at [007's] feet and groin; forced employ in burgling Fort Knox; SMERSH executioner's carefully planned ruin of 007 on board Orient Express: "It'll give me an extra kick telling the famous Mister Bond of the Secret Service what a bloody fool he is. You see, old man, you're not so good as you think. You're a stuffed dummy and I've been given the job of letting the sawdust out of you"; Comrade Rosa Klebb's deadly knitting needles and knife-toed shoe; "Death Warrant made out in the name of James Bond. Description: Angliski Spion. Crime: Enemy of the [Soviet] State"; Dreamy Pines Motor Lodge American mob-driven motel fire: "There was a crash and a great shower of sparks way down the line of cabins. James Bond said, 'There goes my shirt. Roof falling in on top of it.' He paused to wipe his hand down his dirty sweating face so that the black smudged even worse. 'I had a feeling that was going to happen"; camaraderie in the Mediterranean with a friendly piratical smuggler, a thief to catch a thief: "Ah, the quiet Englishman. He fears nothing save the emotions!"; probationary crook in American mob-driven smuggling ring, rescued by tough-talking diamond smuggling broad after taking a beating: "Bond heard the two guards come up behind him. 'Take him out on the platform,' said Mr Spang. Bond saw the corner of his tongue come out and slightly tough the thin lips. 'Brooklyn Stomping. Eighty Percenter. 'Kay?"; shoving off from simulated Old Western desert tableaux town during which time 007 finds between his wounds and the desert action

that he's delirious; staged post-duel murder-suicide of "pretty" Spangled mobsters aboard getaway cruise ship: "The quiet bullet and the quiet knife crossed in mid-air, and the eyes of the two men flinched simultaneously as the weapons struck. But the flinch in the eyes of the fat man turned into an upward roll of the eyeballs as he fell backwards, clawing at his heart, while Bond's eyes only looked incuriously down at the spreading stain on his shirt and at the flat handle of the knife hanging loosely from its folds"; dazed and newly wed 007 en route to honeymoon with dead wife: "Bond put his arm around her shoulders across which the dark patches had begun to flower. He pressed her against him. 'It's all right,' he said in a clear voice as if explaining something to a child. 'It's quite all right. She's having a rest. We'll be going on soon. There's no hurry. You see'—Bond's head sank down against hers and he whispered into her hair—"you see, we've got all the time in the world"

## Marriage [BOND, James] :

*cliché* . . . that Ian Fleming's 007 considers marriage may actually be more surprising than the number of 007's self-identified "untidy affairs," given that 007's work demands he sacrifice himself in ways more violent and aggressive for world security, and given how close and how often are these compromising positions in which 007 finds himself. While taking a nature cure at a private and silent non-smoking clinic, 007 was stretched hard and long on a rack, a device designed for stretching the spine, but which, once Bond was tied down, had, in the wrong hands, the capacity for doing a good body great harm. A device for healing in the villain's hands had become a more dangerous cure. And Bond might as well be married to this risky business of spying to save the world, tied forever to a fantasy of security not even he can always enforce. Either way, 007's fit to be tied to the perils of pain and pleasure, stretched on the rack of social and villainous ills and wills, hopped up on Benzedrine, Bourbon, and Babes. He could be tied down because he's married to evil by way of his desire for the good; because he needs a good threat, a hard tug at his conscience wearied by ambivalence over killing in cold blood; because he needs resistance like the world needs a cure for every last of its own untidy affairs. Bond is before long so knotted up body and soul with the cares of the world and his own small desires that he winds up the victim of circumstance like the kind that nearly ripped him limb from handsome limb. He could be tied down, promise love and fidelity. Why is that so hard to believe? Why is it a stretch, like the promise of a villain reformed, this spy trading in his world-saving ways for wedded bliss? Torture, mortality, a spy's life compromised, its pleasures and perils given up like chastity for bliss like the kind that's wedded to domesticity? But sweet mother of all things diabolical, the sacrifice marriage would mean for Bond is almost ritualistic, a villain's fantasy, demanding the kind of compromise so costly evil could beget evil in practically no time, no time at all. In less time

than it takes Bond to say "I do," Mrs. Bond winds up dead, blood blooming on her shirt en route to their honeymoon while she lies face down in the steering wheel, killed by a bullet meant for Bond. And before Mrs. Bond, Vesper, a darling double agent Bond would have married, but whose suicide by overdose of sleeping pills was her only means to an honorable end, because she couldn't "bear the look in [Bond's] dear eyes." It's a crowded bed for Bond, comfortless, racked with nuptial guilt barely veiled like the figure of Mrs. Bond whose breasts appear on the novel's cover like the twin snow-capped firs and mountain peaks over which 007 skis, flees to safety.

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BRIAN TEARE

## Abandoned Palinode for the Twenty Suitors of June

*(18th and Castro)*

It wasn't that the sidewalk offered  
admonishment : *Stop thinking about sex.*  
It wasn't that kind of neighborhood.  
It wasn't the right time of year. Late  
spring rode low on the hips, season

long as the inch between his t-shirt  
and jeans, long as a city block :  
the whole street lived there whenever  
he walked by. It wasn't that his room  
was small and faced traffic, that in his city

there were five useful verbs : un-  
button, unbuckle, kneel, open, come.  
You were learning to read your body  
the way he did : a possible series of  
entrances, a fathoming of how deep

the material. What it means to be  
entered by a man : an image is the stop  
between uncertainties. How, his cock  
inside you, his face displayed meaning  
where before it had hid inscrutable,

and where, afterward, his frank gaze  
would close again, a camera's aperture.  
Perhaps after all that was the real thrill,  
the click of capture, your image folded  
in on itself. No matter what pleasures,

what promises—your image—not unlike eucalyptus, gingko or bottlebrush, trees without fruit that lined his street solely for ornament and shade—was but shape he'd pause beneath briefly, considering.

And his body, his image, what were they to you? Alone, you'd remember his upper lip's deep dip, his clavicles, their dark lunettes deepening as he leaned above you, bitter chicory of his beard, the briefs he preferred

to boxers. A series of lessons in how to read differently, he was tutor to below grammar. Your language was changing. Unbuckle : a bell rings with its tongue. Unbutton : as plush is to push. Kneel : boot cut. Open : the moment

before ink touches paper. Come : would you give it back, his image? Walk back past flyers tucked under wipers, the row of glass a stun of sun, to meet yourself before meeting him, afternoon gathering its proffered romance

and ass, the backward glance that said *yes*? What would you give up to remain as you were, a visitor at the corner where cautious and carnal cleaved and the florist's window disgorged a forest of orchids? You would

leave yourself uncoupled, untouched,  
mouthing nouns all flowers—now round,  
now sharp—bachelor's buttons, mums,  
agapanthus, protea, poppy, in order to  
stop among certainties, imagery of pansy

and lavender, but you could never  
again give it up, how *to pleasure* changed  
language : floribund, its inflections those  
a throat loans moaning, "o" the low notes  
bowed strings goad : now gorgeous, now

cat-gut guttural, all adjective : rapt,  
rasped, you went down on his language,  
didn't you, wet to the root each uttered  
word of the twenty suitors of June? Viking  
beard, shaved balls, recurved cock, rancher's

hands, scald scar, Zippo, whiplash, fifteen  
cigarettes, the one without money, without  
tears, whose mother called, whose armpits  
you promised you'd put right here, four  
shots and a hard-on, pool cue, nightstick,

handcuffs and rubber boots, taxi, patio,  
barstool, bedroom, you fucked them all—  
he didn't mind being plural—and you,  
in the center of your life, finally changed,  
both within your language and without,

as light tilted, slid summer-wise and cormorants  
returned the span of their wings to hang black  
over shining buoys, waves' crests wind-snapped  
like the slack in flags. Beside the lake  
you paused, briefly, considered the shape

his image took in the look of things. Bird :  
bone enough. Wave : ephemeral's shell.  
Spindrift : to return to air. Air : to lean into  
lean, lengthening shadows of after afternoon,  
how weirdly the planet slanted toward solstice.

## Map of September

### I. The Night Before

#### A. At the Pub.

1. Drink with friends.
  - a. One Guinness and three Carlsbergs.
2. Smoke cigarettes with him.
  - a. Marlboro Lights from a 10-pack.
3. Flirt with Him.
  - a. Make fun of each other.
  - b. Like the same books.
    - i. Actually, he likes surrealism, and I don't really.

#### B. Sleep at a Friend's house.

1. There by 1:30 AM.
  - a. A pretty early night.
2. Close to Christchurch Cathedral.
3. A brownstone, it was built for Guinness Factory workers in the 19th Century.
  - a. The air inside: chilly, stale.
    - i. It is early September.
    - ii. Too-bright white walls are decorated with swaths of fuchsia cloth and collected shells.

## C. Share a futon in the living room.

## 1. Nervous, anxious.

- a. He is 6'2" with dark hair, pale skin, and blue eyes.
- b. "Black Irish"
  - i. I volunteer at the Little Flower Homeless Shelter in Bray at the Catholic Church. The homeless in that seaside town are usually just nostalgic old ladies. One day a man came in, bearded, a little dangerous. His deep-set eyes darted from soup to chair to clock to me. "How would you like to have black-haired, blue-eyed babies?" he said. Blushing, I gave him a dirty look. At that moment it sounded fine to me.
- c. I haven't touched anyone since I left a boyfriend in California.
  - i. Technically, I guess, we are still together.
  - ii. I am frightened, and it feels real to me.
  - iii. I hug my knees to my chest.

## 2. Kiss.

- a. Licking lips, it's awkward.
  - i. I like the way he tastes like beer and pineapple.
- b. We smile and nosetips touch.
- c. He tries to pull off my panties.
  - i. I laugh at him and say "No."

- ii. He laughs back at me and says I wear very unsexy panties because they are pink and plain.
  - iii. "Then why do you want to touch them?"
3. Pretend to sleep.
- a. It is the tense sleep people share when they want to touch but don't because being the first to want something shows weakness.
    - i. Who wants to be the one who *needs* to touch?
  - b. Can't sleep.

## II. The Next Morning

- A. Wake up to an empty house.
- 1. Everyone else has things to do that day.
  - 2. Doesn't feel strange, but friendly and close.
    - a. It is as though we never kissed.
- B. Have to go buy an electric kettle. He accompanies me.
- 1. I had set the old one on fire during a film shoot at my apartment.
    - a. It belonged to my roommate George, so I've decided to replace it for him. (With a much newer model.)
  - 2. First go to an old toy store and buy airplanes and parachute men.
    - a. The toy store is famous in Dublin, and it is tiny and all the men working there are mustached, chubby, 115 years old.
    - b. We shoot the parachute men from the quay.

- i. They arc to the Liffey and float for a moment before drowning.
  - ii. I am sorry to litter.
3. Make it to Dunnes Stores and spend a half hour picking out the electric kettle.
  - a. Cookware is in the basement
  - b. They are extremely practical things because you don't have to put anything on the stove—they just plug in.

### III. After the Store

#### A. Nothing to do.

1. Sunny, wind-tossed Sunday.
  - a. The air is clear.
    - i. Crispy.
  - b. Lovely days like this are rare and all the more beautiful in Ireland.
  - c. It will stay light until 10 PM.
2. Wander along the Liffey and take the Millennium Bridge across to the South.
  - a. We have no reason to still be with each other, but we don't separate. The air is heavy between us like warm sheets.
  - b. We want to be near each other. The simple motion of walking makes our bodies touch.

3. Suddenly (!) a great idea.
  - a. "Let's go to the Forty Foot!"
  - b. He looks at me like I am crazy.
    - i. The Forty Foot is a swimming hole-type situation on the Irish Sea.
    - ii. It is in Dun Laoghaire, a town six miles south.
    - iii. The water is famously cold.
    - iv. It is (famously) a men-only swim place, but that has changed.
    - v. It begins the day in *Ulysses*.
  - c. Then he smiles. "Okay, sure, I guess."
    - i. He knows that his friends will spend this rare, bright day in a pub or on a computer.
  - d. I have to grab a swimsuit at my place.
  - e. On the bus to my flat at the Portobello Bridge, we sit on the top level and make fun of people.
    - i. He identifies Americans by their khakis and North Face windbreakers and tennis shoes.
    - ii. He appears to be right every time.
    - iii. I am not embarrassed to be American. I just am.
    - iv. He makes fun of me, and I like it.

## IV. On the Way to the Forty Foot

- A. Sit next to each other on the top level again.
1. Empty bus.
  2. Brilliant yellow sun slaps me awake
  3. From up here we can see the Sea.
  4. Instead of looking out the smudgy window, I stare at him looking out the smudgy window.
    - a. I want to grab his head and bang it on the window.
    - b. I want him to be easier than me.
  5. Talk about music.
    - a. The White Stripes are on the radio.
    - b. We like lo-fi things and sensitive music.
      - i. Nick Drake.
      - ii. He loves the song "Satellite of Love," too.

## V. The Forty Foot

- A. Gray, white-capped water. Nervous smiles hide nothing.
1. Can't decide where to set up our towels.
    - a. The side with the swimming hole is crowded and shady.
    - b. We end up on the grassy, north-facing edge, which is a bit of a hill.
    - c. Climbing down we see a bronzed man sunning himself on his tummy wearing only a shiny, tiger-skin Speedo.

- d. Then we see an old, old naked man with fluffy gray hair and a thin, thin penis.
  - i. I am much less nervous now.
  - ii. We raise our eyebrows to each other and drop towels near the water.
- 2. Take our clothes off.
  - a. He goes first, stripping deliberately nonchalantly down to his blue plain boxers.
    - i. His skin is creamed, smoothed, pureed.
  - b. I am suddenly so shy about taking my clothes off.
    - i. I do it slowly, not to seduce, but for myself.
  - c. I look out at the water, and he smokes a cigarette as though we are in a French film at the lake.
  - d. I'm wearing a pink-flowered bikini.
  - e. My legs are transparent
    - i. I have dark hair.
    - ii. Does he see the see veins on my arms and follicles on my legs?
    - iii. At least I think I have beautiful feet.
  - f. Our bodies are both thin and wiry without being athletic. We are soft and pale together.
    - i. No muscles.

- g. Looking at his body I wonder if I am drawn to him because we are so similar.
- i. Strangely enough, now I don't think about his thoughts at all. He is just there for me to think about.
  - ii. I laugh and wonder if he is my muse.
  - iii. Am I then so self-absorbed to have myself as my own muse?

B. Warmed by the sun, we are kids.

- 1. Gently down the hill towards the water.
  - a. With bare feet we step timidly like deer. Our legs shoot up at each sharp stone and wet patch of grass our toes touch.
  - b. Even though it was my adventure, at the edge of the water he is much more brave than I am.
    - i. He crouches down, glides in.
    - ii. "Oooh shit. It is cold!"
  - c. I am left with my feet in, then my knees.
    - i. The water isn't just cold, it is icy. I get used to it, gear myself.
  - d. He laughs at me. Then the old naked gray man laughs too.
    - i. He calls out, "You just have to do it!"
  - f. I smile, but am suddenly so terrified of the water.
  - g. This next part of me is a secret:

- i. I am afraid to not be crazy and spontaneous.  
Like I will die if I don't consciously make myself live.
    - ii. My head pounds. Each decision is a mountain.  
If I don't go over this mountain someone I know will die.
    - iii. I know I am going in, but it feels like I could just not.
    - iv. But I always do.
- C. Shoot myself to him.
  - 1. Try to be liquid in water.
    - a. It is so difficult. It is bitter!
      - i. It is freezing!
  - 2. We grin together, wiggling our bodies like frogs.
  - 3. "Okay. 1. 2. 3." We dunk our heads under.
    - a. I feel my heart will explode, but I smile.
      - i. Do hearts stop underwater?
  - 4. "Let's swim out to those people," he says.
    - a. We do.
    - b. Water surges through my skin and refreshes my blood. I am re-sanitized.
      - i. Was I dirty before?
  - 5. I yelp and shout out as I paddle. The sea is everywhere, piercing my

- scalp and the bottoms of my feet.
- a. Under my small breasts cold water aims needles through the elastic of my swimsuit.
6. He looks exhilarated and unsure. His teeth chatter through a grin.
  7. I finally catch up to him and reach out.
    - a. His skin is prickly with goosebumps, but slick, like I know palm leaves after rain would feel if I were taller and could reach them.
      - i. The palm trees in Dublin have surprised me.
      - ii. Lined up like streetlights along the north side, they are out of place. Visitors with visas.
      - iii. The dark leaves are gloomy reminders of home.
  8. We hold onto each other, our feet barely touch.
    - a. Taking turns going under, each time the water hits us like the first time.
    - b. To me, we are children discovering each other without adults in the world.
- D. Sit cross-legged on towels, sunning.
1. Skin is numb.
  2. Vital organs methodically pulse themselves back to life.
    - a. "My liver is cold," I say.
    - b. "My bones are angry," he says.
  3. Watch the bronzed tiger man pack up and leave with the gray man.

4. "There's a third nipple," I say.
  - a. This is because I just remembered that we are downstream from Sellafield.
    - i. Sellafield is a nuclear power plant in the Irish Sea that supposedly sends waste downstream to the Irish coast.
  - b. We agree that a third nipple is a small price to pay for such a cold, poetic swim.
5. Sip from his flask. Metallic, warm Absolut Citron.
  - a. Yuck.
  - b. He apologizes. He doesn't remember why it's in there.
6. Share my last cigarette.
7. Put our clothes on and walk towards the bus station.
  - a. After ten minutes the cold is no longer cathartic, but death-like.
    - i. Our lips are blue.
  - b. We sip more vodka.
  - c. We get chips with extra salt for the ride back to Dublin.

#### VI. On The Bus Back to Dublin

- A. Turn our faces to the late afternoon sun like small, beaming wildflowers.
  1. The heat will make us grow.
- B. Tells me what the Irish words on the buses mean.
  1. Baile Atha Cliath is To Dublin.

2. Feel silly for not knowing that Kill means church in Irish.
  - a. He does not make fun of me for this because he knows how important it is for me to be thought of as smart.
    - i. He is the same way.
- C. Sit close, but only touch at our upper arms and thighs, organically.
  1. Begin to feel my own skin through his.
    - a. His skin is what mine must feel like to him.
  2. Wonder to think that we hadn't kissed each other all day. There didn't seem to be time for it.
  3. He smells of fresh air, oil, and salt. I want to lick his neck, taste it.
    - a. Of course I don't.
  4. Is he thinking of me?
  5. I want to run myself off the bus while it is moving. I want the front tires to hurl me onto the sidewalk where I stand up, unharmed, and wait for the next bus.
- D. Pass the Leisure Center along the route to Dublin.
  1. Teenagers joke with each other in black sweatshirts—eyes glazed from video games, cigarettes, and soda.
    - a. I wish I were 16 because I feel 16.
    - b. I can't separate my thighs from his.

VII. At the Portobello Bridge He Follows Me Off the Bus

- A. Surprises me. He does not continue on to the train station.
- B. Sky glows pink to still the windy day. People spill out of pubs. They hold pint glasses and sit on the banks of the canal. Someone comes along and picks up the empties.
- C. Suggests a drink and I agree.
  - 1. Awkward. Our day just keeps unfolding, but nothing is sure, nothing is definite.
  - 2. Going inside, he brings back two pints. We sit back to back on the uneven, scratchy lawn with everyone else.
    - a. We don't speak. Everyone else on the canal is laughing, joking—man to woman, sister to brother, friend to neighbor.
      - i. It seems to me we don't speak because we have no relationship to each other.
    - b. We click our spines together. My body droops at the abrupt, crashing feeling that I will never spend a day like this again.
      - i. Every time something sudden and natural and surprising happens I believe it's the last.
      - ii. I make myself breathe. I am trapped.
      - iii. What if this day is the last? The last gold late

afternoon that I will feel young? The last time I will sit next to someone without Touching him? Without him Touching me?

iv. I envision wrinkles forming on my face in sped-up motion, circling my lips and eyes like seagulls on the ocean.

3. After one pint he gets a call. It is from his Mother. The family had plans to see a movie. He hangs up.
  - a. "Well, should I go see the movie?"
    - i. "Do what you want."
  - b. "My Mom knows I'm with a girl."
    - i. "You are ridiculous."
  - c. "I probably won't be able to make the train home."
4. He calls his Mother, and she looks up the train schedule for him. (Such an Irish boy!)
  - a. To her: "I don't see how I'll make it. I'll take the 10 PM."
  - b. To me: "Let's get another inside."

#### VIII. Inside the Pub it is Crowded and Dusty Sweat Smelling

A. Order pints and head upstairs to a wooden booth.

1. Music is too-loud and ridiculous. It is pop/hip-hop UK style.

- a. Somehow, though, the music soothes me.
  - b. We are like everyone else.
  - c. Dancing at the booth, we have fun.
    - i. We are fun.
  - d. He yells over the music and I nod wildly, as though my gestures need to cut through the noise.
  - e. We drink more.
2. Go into the bathroom and take off my still damp swimsuit and put on my dry underwear.
- a. In the mirror I look strange, pale. I am still chilled.
  - b. White body. Child clown. My face is plain under pale makeup.
  - c. I give myself a generous smile.
- B. Now it is dark.
1. On the phone to his Mother. It is past 10 PM.
    - a. There are no more trains on a Sunday.
    - b. He asks to stay at my place.
      - i. "Of course."
  2. I am drunk. I think.
  3. Leave the bar and begin the short walk to my house. At the front door, I pause. I am missing something. Where is my swimsuit?
    - a. We go back to the booth.

- i. It is not there.
- b. I check the restroom.
- c. "Excuse me, but has anyone turned in a wet swimsuit? I took it off here and I thought maybe . . ."The bartender looks at me like I am the crazy foreign girl.
- d. I leave the bar laughing and fling myself into his arms.
  - i. "There goes *another* swimsuit."
  - ii. It disappeared into thin air.
  - iii. We are together.

IX. Everything about a houseguest about to split your bed and your one and only pillow is frightening because all those sweet poses and gestures just might not mean anything. The way he hesitates apologetically when you give him your toothbrush. The way he carefully folds his clothes over your chair. The way he will always loom too tall in your insufficient bedroom. Nothing you have will be big enough for him to wear. He will inevitably try on a ridiculously oversized t-shirt that was probably free to begin with, and he will tear it still. All the while is the fright that he may tear you. He will wonder why you run into the bathroom to make sure you shaved your armpits. You will smile if you catch him looking at himself in your tiny mirror with the enameled birds.

- A. And then the sweetness is gone until it starts all over again with somebody else. Only then can you look back at the tear in the shirt and think it's just right. You look at the ragged edges and the photograph you saved that is not

of him because you don't have one of him, but it reminds you of him and all of this makes you soar above your always new, more normal life. Remembering him will probably make you feel sad and pretty.

#### X. In the Morning

- A. He leaves to go to work.
- B. Grab coffee at a café before.
- C. Tired, I see my dark circles in his.
- D. Grinning, say nothing. Except I tell him he looks like a scumbag.
  - 1. He laughs because he does. His clothes are wrinkled, Sunday clothes. On Monday, they are too casual, sun-soaked.
- E. After he goes to work I remember the night before.
  - 1. Kissed so quickly, then slowly. It was a kissing contest.
    - a. His lips: thin, nipple-pink, babyish.
  - 2. Raced to get our clothes off first and into my tiny bed.
    - a. He won, and I was left exposed, boneless, curved outside the sheets.
      - i. I confidently put my hands on my hips as though I didn't care.
    - b. We praised each other like opponents.
      - i. "My God, your legs are so soft, but practically hairless. Is that strange for a man?"

- ii. "Your butt makes an excellent handle, but your breasts make me into a sort of molester. Not that I mind."
  - c. The moon poured in through my skylight, and we appeared to each other as lavender apparitions.
  - d. Lips easily sarcastic, hands so genuine.
  - e. Our tongues became too busy to poke fun at each other.
- F. Back at my flat I have a cup of tea.
- 1. Remember the anxious feelings of yesterday and am already nostalgic for them.
  - 2. Thoughts of our shoulders and thighs barely touching on the rocky bus are the only memories that excite me.
    - a. I try, but can only remember the anticipation of him and not him at all.

## XI. We Meet Three Days Later

- A. See each other at our friend's house before an anti-Gardai protest.
  - 1. A few weeks ago some cops beat up a few students at a protest on Dame St.
  - 2. Nobody remembers what the original protest was all about.
- B. Our friend makes a sign. It reads: "Who polices the police?"
  - 1. We make one that reads: "Who polices the people who police the

police?”

2. She laughs, but we can tell she is hurt.
  - a. We apologize, tear up the poster, and recycle it.
- C. Slide up the narrow staircase to change my sweater. Going down I run into him coming up.
  1. We squeeze our bodies against opposite walls, pressing our shoulder blades into dead, dead plaster.
    - a. Ancient nail heads prick my spine.
    - b. We make sure not to touch at all.

## More Than a Verb, a Nation

*Vetted* he's always saying  
Should I imagine Uncle Sam horned purple  
By war conspicuous in the 1966 edition  
'cept for Texas  
Where I know I know we got our own ranch  
I'm trying not to pick on where you left off  
Where the perfect makeup or the dusty  
Mauve wrap entitled you to miss my class  
@ \$2,500 per semester, without insurance

But I'm ill-equipped to complain  
A dictum's gotta be more than one dimensional  
So I ark the vetted V.  
& wed past & tense to the gerund  
For a star clustering constellation  
5:40 a.m. in that fluorescent before saying

I can be heavy-lidded or drawing on the board

Belatedly and not enough

Dear M.  
Meant to say hi  
Other night  
But I get shy  
And beaten down

I'm having trouble with agreement and good verbs.  
I waited for the water filter to filter.  
I ordered 30 gifts from the Shopping Channel and sent 29 back.

## Error

in the past, you would not come here, to church—

but now you're afraid—

now it's all choir practices and Wednesday prayer

where the windows are made with those saturated golds and blues—

at least one window should reveal me

a bird or two coming and going, clouds staggering past, a jet and then

a vacuum basically—

just depth and distance

in all kinds of infinite grays—

that vast unstable space

that is my reign

## The Dove

I am able to see again

for example the birds, the dove, now

in the sunlit yard with those extravagant blue spots—

transcendent velvet blues, heating in the sun

and darkening like ink—

and hear as well—the wild hedge of forsythia explode a thunder of gold blooms

I could not hear before

as now everything is more finely pitched after your death

life has its

megaphone out—

I hear the dove's heart in its lavender breast—I hear

its spigots of blood this summer

## Everything Sprouts Up in the Explosion

Absent spectacle, the newscaster alludes to buds—

*They found dahlia beside her. She was weaving them formerly through her hair (plaited) between corn row.*

*They found her twisted against the stalks. Neighbors say, her posture was always angular.*

The sun splays across circumference: a horizon gone to tumult.

\*

*If this war comes here, he thinks, she'll be glad to have missed it. Grape arbor and gingham.*

The dusty road through the barnyard. He told Matilda on Monday that he shouldn't have married her. (He will dispute this.) Down in town across the fields pictures on a blank screen, visible from his window: a woman in a corset unbinds herself slowly behind a curtain.

There is the notion about that perhaps grilling the corn will reclaim it. He will do this watching stars above grassland waltz in their palazzo. Ornamental she was, of course, but before noon she often milked the cows. He should have adored her. On the road, headlights track the extent of dark. Whereupon he removes the corn from cooking. Whereupon he sprinkles it with salt. *If the car turns into the drive I'll know to start the coffee,* he thinks.

Fibers, caught in his teeth.

## Matilda in Streetscape—April, 1944

Pigeons, from pavement, explode as a flame of gray. She sits through the press of it, single under the twisted clock, and writes: *The radius of space lengthens at departure.* Her skirt is rayon, cut on the bias, and a puce print because puce is an *unexpected* color. (She could design another sky by looking down.) Pigeons beat the air, the street's white, a leaf is turning and turning into her lap—*there's all this unsutured beauty . . .* Her page begins to pucker. In a jar on the glass table a tea bag steeps, liberally. She observes the pear trees in the garden. *I'm expected*, she writes, *to limit myself. To gesture . . . As this stopped clock—it gains sophistication by its reticence.* Her cigarette, stubbed out, rolls from the cobalt platter. Her coiled hair glimmers down to curl. Still, she wants him (hands round her waist lace and those fan blades whirling) to take her—to bind her. She wants him to reset the aperture. She reclines, blinking in the glare, unable to find a participle. The leaves are green, and the sun.

## Amber Light at Park Street Crossing

—translated from the Bengali by V Ramaswamy

The beggar was dying as he lay under the cold, relentless flashing light. On one side was the lurking darkness of the Maidan, and on the other gaudy Chowringhee; and in between, beneath a traffic light post, lay the beggar. His staff, tin pan, loin cloth, the hair on his face, the froth on his mouth, the odor of the excreta dried up on the soles of his two feet—all these, for that matter his shrivelled, crooked, broken body—if only everything were wiped out, sanctified rain would shower on this place. Three girls wearing beautiful, flowing saris and snapping peanuts with their teeth, would search for a green spot on the Maidan. They would say: *I re-al-ly love to get wet in this rain!*

In the darkness, a group of people tried to move in procession in some direction. The Studebaker braked and stopped in front of the red light on Park Street. The sound of giggling floated out from within the car, and the beggar's life-breath became laboured. The colours red-blue-yellow formed and dissolved in front of his eyes. Standing in the middle of the Khidirpur Bridge in the night turned desolate and silent, a lunatic thumped his chest loudly and shouted: *We'll kill and seize Jhumjhuma—from today!* He screamed out: *Hear, everybody hear, the beggar is dying!* But his voice was drowned out by the voice of All India Radio: *When our national flag was fixed atop the podium where the Prime Minister delivered a speech, a crow, a vile, shrewd, devil of a crow sbat on the flag and flew off. We are hunting for that crow, and when we find it we shall spear it, hang it, have its neck; we shall thus mete out condign punishment for shitting on our national flag.*

The blood in the bosom of some grew red; of some, black; and of some, white. When all of the last few drops of the beggar's lifeblood turned white the beggar prostrated, paid obeisance, and prayed to the earth for death.

Somewhere someone had kept a specific grave ready in advance. Everyone knew people would die, just as even dogs and jackals died on the streets. Nevertheless, on the Khidirpur Bridge, in the desolation, the solitary lunatic screamed and tried to convince somebody: *Hear, the beggar is dying, the beggar is really dying!*

At that moment two callow youths entered a bar on Chowringhee. A youth kissed his companion under a tree in the Maidan. The *paan*-seller at the kerb sold a *zarda paan*. The traffic light at Park Street turned amber. The boy vending flowers sold a string of *bel*-flower garlands to a lady inside the halted car. And under the Monument a middle-aged magician performed a money-doubling act and drew applause from the assembled public. Shouting a slogan like "everything must be expropriated," a struggling people's procession passed the spot. Some looked at the beggar dying, but they didn't have the time—got to go to the public meeting at the Maidan. They went off with their festoons. Their slogans, like the deep sigh of the boy standing in front of the restaurant who had not eaten all day, were squandered away on Chowringhee's gleaming black thoroughfare.

Repeated announcements over the radio, a fire-spewing speech, the subject being the crow's shitting on the national flag. Police detectives have been sent all over; that wicked crow must be found, must be apprehended. From somewhere a flower fragrance wafted. From somewhere the smell of blood wafted. Someone somewhere sang a stanza of *Rabindrasangeet*. Somewhere somebody searched for the skull of an unclaimed corpse. On the Khidirpur Bridge the lunatic beat his chest and sang: *We'll fight and seize Jhumjhuma!* The tide splashed in on the Ganga. At the bar the youth noisily broke a glass and affected a heroic laugh. A Frenchman, brown beard, pale eyes, roamed the streets of Calcutta hauling a camera. Seeing the beggar dying he said, "Ten rupees *baksbish*, hold on for two more minutes," and pounced. "I'll take your picture, it'll be a marvellous art-film." The lunatic, the same one from Khidirpur, said, "Sir, the beggar is dying!" He said, "I piss on the face of your art!" He said, *We'll kill and seize Jhumjhuma!* and beat his chest.

A cold breeze blew. The traffic light went from red to amber to green. Someone spoke. Someone cried. Someone quarrelled. Someone counted money. Someone made love. Someone painted a picture. Someone weighed. Someone was born. Someone died. Someone looked into darkness. Someone saw the light.

The beggar had earlier been human. He liked to crunch-munch chicken legs. He liked to see beautiful women in the cinema. He liked to eat *phuchkas* at the Maidan. He liked to smoke cigarettes. He liked to sleep with a young woman in his arms. After his pauperisation was complete, when the hair on his face turned grey, his shoulders stooped and he had learnt to swallow the hunger of his stomach, he had no desires. Two scholars argued:

The beggar wanted to live.  
Who doesn't want to live?

A group of people at the Red Road intersection tried all night long to find their way. Someone coughed and coughed and then couldn't stop himself from vomiting red blood in front of Mahatma Gandhi at Park Street. The girl who stood waiting for prey revealed her dry red throat as she yawned. Some people listened eagerly to the night's last news bulletin on the radio. There's no clue of the crow that shat on the national flag and made off. Dejected, they went off to go to bed and fall asleep clasping their wives and dreaming happy dreams. And the battling, tattered beggar was dying, the whiplash of the flashing light on his chest. He saw the money-doubling act. He heard on the radio, "Our country shall become golden, no one shall die for want of food!"; heard, "We will not tolerate the insult to the national flag, we will not tolerate it!"; heard the national song, "Rich with thy streams, thy orchards, . . . verdant fields;" heard, "This fight is for life, this fight must be won!"; heard, the *Rabindrasangeet* "O helmsman, set afloat the boat on the river of peace ahead." A dog ferreting for food dug its snout

into a dustbin. A youth seized pleasure by squeezing a woman's breast. The magician showed his money-doubling act . . .

Driven to despair, the lunatic standing on the Khidirpur Bridge then cried out, his face turned to the Maidan, "A beggar is dying!" But no one heard him. Those who made love in the darkness went on doing that. He then came to the junction of the Ganga's well-lit promenade and cried out: "A beggar is dying!" No one heard him. People went on eating their *mosblamuri* or peanuts or ice cream. He went to the Chowringhee junction and cried out, his arms raised high: "Hear, people hear! A beggar is dying!" Nobody heard. A person brought his face up close and whispered: "Do you know where booze is available, brother?" A group of people crowded around a radio listening to the news. The lunatic went up to them and said meekly: "A beggar is dying." Without paying any heed to his words they discussed how that scheming crow could be found, why it's not been found yet, the dishonour to our national flag. In a final bid, he then crept up rapidly to the top of the Monument. He took off his waist-cloth, cut his finger and drew with blood a symbol on it, and waved it animatedly in the air. He screamed: "Hear, people hear! A beggar is dying!" But his voice did not reach the ground. Down below, the magician went on with his money-doubling act to tumultuous applause. The lunatic screamed out again, with all the strength in his lungs, enough to make the Monument quake. But the people below were engrossed in the money-doubling act. No voice reached their ears. Exasperated beyond measure, he came down and said: "May the beggar die, become an evil spirit and possess you! May he break your neck!" He said: *We'll fight and seize Jbumjhuma!* Thumping his chest he went away towards the darkness of Khidirpur. And the flag splattered with his blood fluttered over the Monument all night.

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This is a translation of the original Bengali short story "Parkstreeter traffic post-ey holud rong" by Subimal Misra, a critically acclaimed Bengali writer of India. The story is anthologized in Subimal Misra's *Anti-golpo songroho* (Anti-Stories Collection), Bitorko, Calcutta, 1999.

## Nocturnal Council

Who would attack a magnolia?  
We're all, not just cows,

blood-phobian.  
Ask the mime in the branches.

You can't. You can't—  
her hair's in the eye of the axe.

Men the size of a walnut  
love to watch anything die.

You keep stretching your mind,  
but it's still the same mind,

still in the posse's possession.  
You look at your watch and cry.

You were right to doubt the sunrise.  
Dawn took us all for a ride.

## Ventriloquist

Stone, it's time for you  
to utter. All that thinking,  
all that dreaming and  
not one fossil of a word.  
All those centuries of hiding  
in the fortress of the mute.  
Tell us, stone, whose bones  
were set beneath you,  
who cast you first and why,  
and all that you've been  
witness to—tell, tell, or we  
will tell it for you. The earth  
will sputter lips. The snout  
will split with chatter.  
The squid will take to evil,  
the turtle turn to liquor  
so that language can snap  
loose. Usage will accuse us.  
Words will push and shove,  
like mothers chained to children  
who touch the sky with crazy  
shoes, and sink with weight,  
or swim with fear, or spread  
their skin to make a parachute.  
The trout who bit will sing  
at its own funeral, and so will  
you, a bar or two, a wail, a coo—  
a sound is all, some proof is  
all, that the skulls you broke  
were worth their weight in dust.

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ADAM CHILES

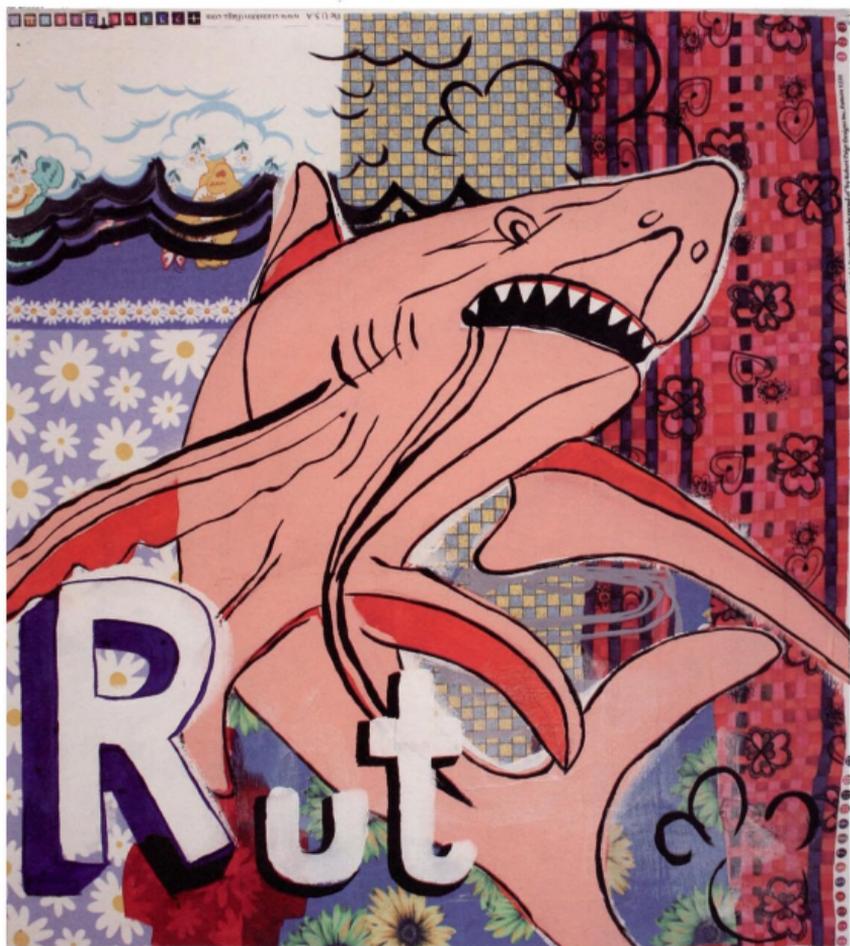
## Variation on a Landscape

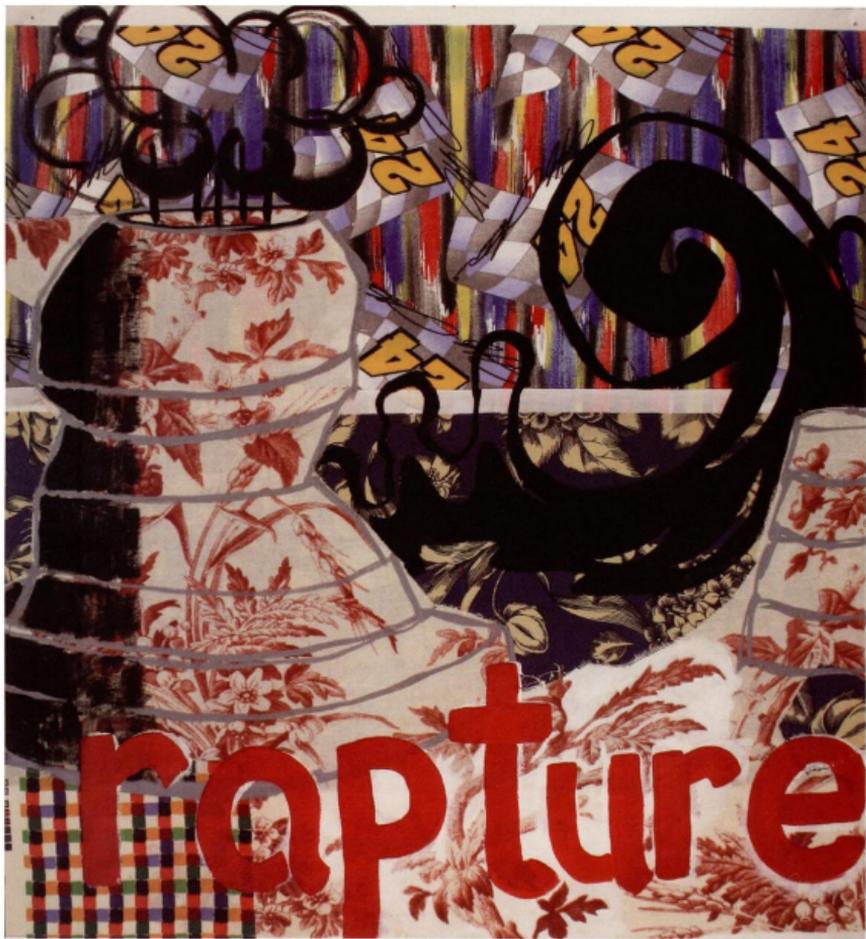
—after David Hockney's *Track and Hedgerow*

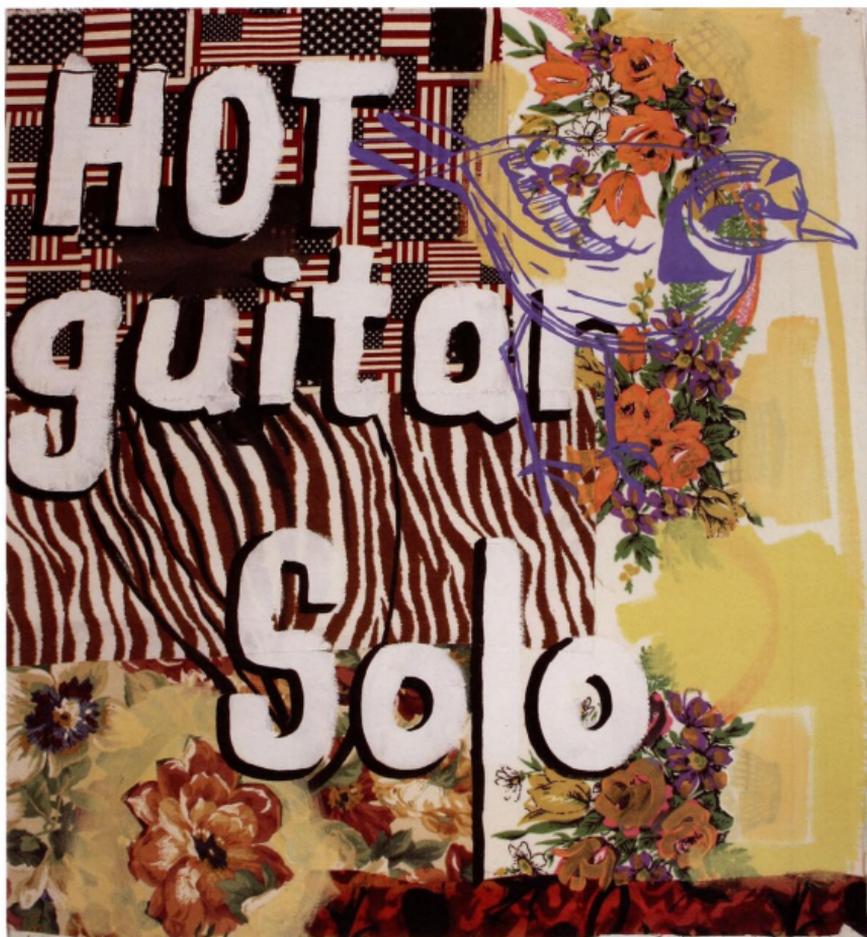
Even the opium-tinged cloud spreading  
its thin narcotic above  
the runnels of dirt, even the day's  
blood weakening  
beyond the skyline's stubborn wood, even  
the skyline's slow departure  
of light, a numb light  
humming its ruin across the vale,  
cannot still the light  
the red earth burns  
in its raw  
narcoleptic bed, its wound of soil, cannot  
lessen the persistence

of land, this pyre  
of winter grasses, a fuel  
at the root, the tree's knuckle  
lifting out of the  
fire, cannot ease this spank  
of air, this ravishment,  
this rich pornography of fields.

*Always*<sup>®</sup>

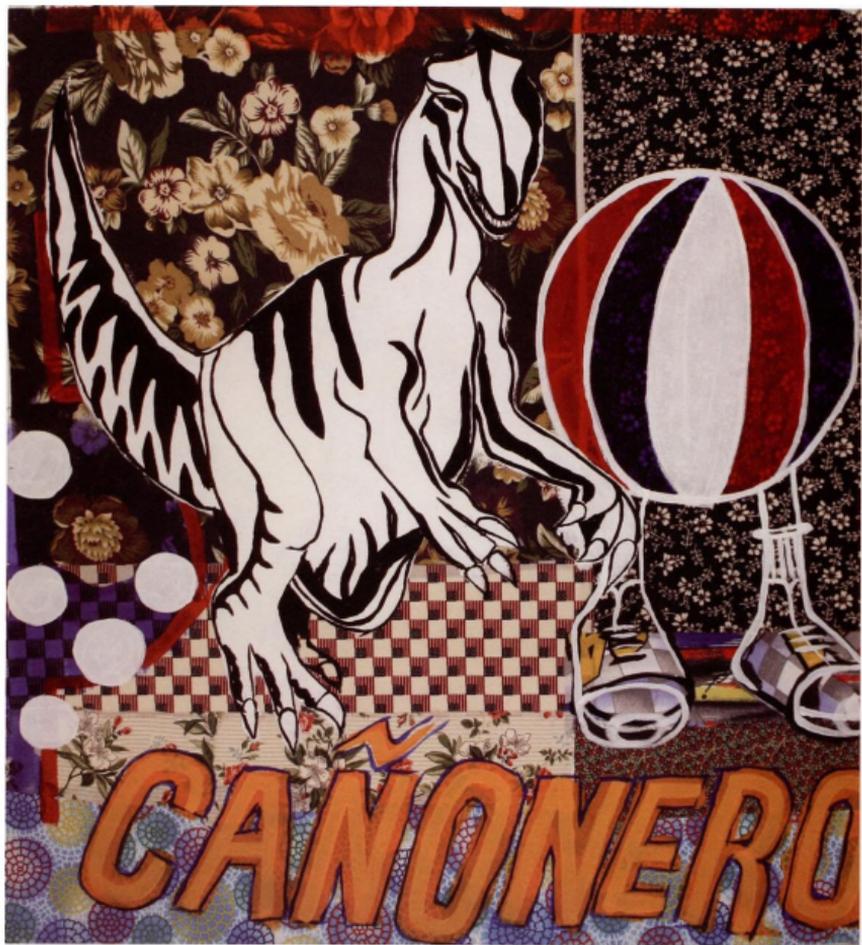




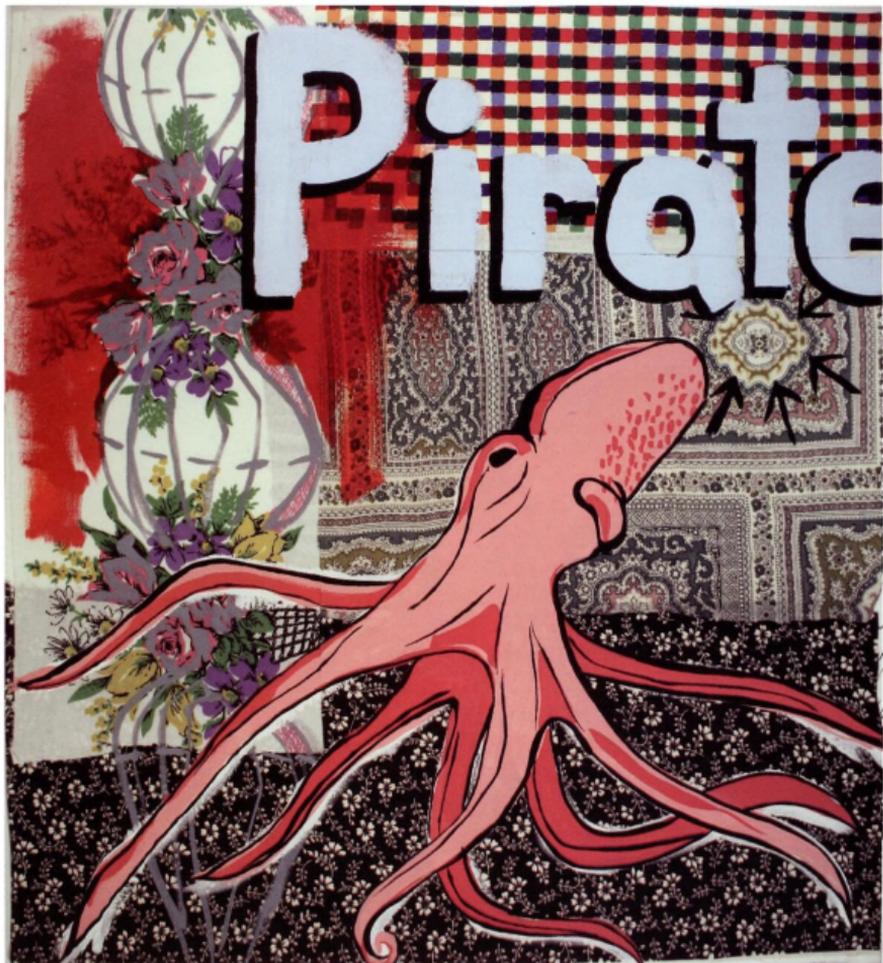












## Always®

1. *Rut*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches
2. *Rapture*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches
3. *Hot Guitar Solo*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches
4. *Punk*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches
5. *Idol*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches
6. *Cañonero*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches
7. *Tug*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches
8. *Pirate*, 2006  
Acrylic and fabric on paper, 26 x 24 inches

All works are reproduced courtesy of Moody Gallery, Houston and Barry Whistler Gallery, Dallas; © Michael Miller; photography by Rick Wells.

## Michael Miller: Always®

There is a tendency in popular culture to heroize and even romanticize the artist. As a result there is a tendency for artists to take themselves, as well as their practice, so seriously that their work becomes what Michael Miller would call “embarrassingly earnest.” His paintings and drawings expose the tension between making art that is indeed significant and resisting the inclination to take the process too seriously. Through the use of low art materials and found images, he constructs pictorial assemblages which manifest a discordant resonance that to the casual observer might seem pitifully inept. Only through a dedicated contemplation do we come to appreciate the complex relationships that he has established and realize the cultural and personal implications of his strategies.

When I first saw Miller’s *Always*® paintings I was both exhilarated and intimidated. I had to come back to them several times to before I could formulate my own response. When I sat down to reconsider this body of work for an article, by chance I had just poured a bowl of cereal. Perhaps by more than coincidence I contemplated the nature of design on the cereal box. I could not help but see a similarity to Miller’s paintings. I also recalled that as a child, when I went to the supermarket with my mother, I would go to the cereal aisle while she shopped for the rest of the groceries. That aisle was exciting to me. It was filled with boxes crowded with colors and images, presenting an array of cartoon creatures that had somehow become my friends. I would pass the time trying to decide which box had the toy inside that I wanted most, exactly as I had been programmed by the commercials I had watched during the previous week. It struck me that Miller’s paintings appropriate many of the same strategies of marketing directed toward children. At the same time, I was reminded of the inevitability of disillusionment (the toy inside is never as good as promised), which fostered a visual and critical awareness that is also key to

understanding Miller's work.

I must admit that at this point that I had to fetch a book from my library to check what I thought was the right context for these paintings. The word that kept coming to mind was "pathetic," as Miller allows the hand of the artist to be present to an intentionally unwieldy degree, contradicting the slick and sterile perfection of his commercial sources. In looking up the term, I came across Mike Kelly's deliberately infantile constructions of the 1990s, and Miller's choices of materials and imagery tap into a similarly puerile and defiant stance. Other terms that I came across that could be used in describing his work would include appropriation, collage, and even "comics art," as Miller typically presents his work in a sequence. However, it was the California Funk movement, which sprang from the University of California at Davis, Miller's alma mater, that offered the most direct precedent. My dictionary of art terms sums it up: "Funk art is offbeat, sensuous, and direct. Humor, vulgarity, and autobiographical narrative are typical elements."<sup>1</sup>

Miller's compositions feed on the bad aesthetic decisions which are rife in our culture. He takes this project on with humor, at times with outright laughter, and in turn invites us to cultivate an awareness of intent and response. Rather than starting from a *tabula rasa*, he creates a ground for his compositions from fabrics purchased at the dollar-a-yard rack at Wal-Mart, selecting such garish remnants that there is little doubt as to why they didn't sell at full price. Meanwhile, he searches the web for clip-art sites and picks out images, which he then copies freehand. In both instances he is defying the intended use of his sources, while taking advantage of their embedded connotations. With a masterful sense of design he begins to juxtapose these images, layering awkward animals, gestural plants, and docile birds over an incongruous patchwork of American flags, florals, and paisleys. He then adds descriptive text which comes across like a brand name or perhaps a title, finally using painterly effects to unify and establish the space. What we are

presented with is a complex construction of cultural and personal signifiers.

This is where the hard part begins. Miller rarely talks about his work directly. Although each piece functions as a singular image, there is a compounding of meaning as it is contemplated in relation to or in sequence with other works in the series. In *Rut* we see a shark which is both a gash and a phallus, and I can't help but think of how our over-sexed media culture is literally "stuck in a rut." In *Rapture* there is the sense of release as both the wave and the volcano blow into a NASCAR sky. Seen adjacent to *Hot Guitar Solo*, the suggestion of release is further heightened, as well as the possibility of inspiration that follows: together the two compositions reenact pop culture's intoxication with vicarious experience. *Punk* and *Idol* prompt thoughts of punk rock or *American Idol*, but there are other implications as well. With the rooster standing triumphantly over a school of fish, idol worship becomes idle worship. (Miller has admitted that *Idol* is in part "the big cock of celebrity," as a recent poll of twenty-somethings revealed that their first ambition is to be famous.) In *Cañonero* I can't help but wonder what the dinosaur will do with the ball. Miller hit upon the word *cañonero*, literally "cannonball" or "gunboat," while seeking a macho title in a Spanish dictionary; only in retrospect did he remember that it was also the make of an SUV on *The Simpsons*, albeit spelled differently. *Tug* is certainly about tension and resistance, with a dual innuendo of tug of war or even tug-job. Finally we end with *Pirate*, another phallic creature, this time an octopus either pulling away or pointing to a goal, making me wonder who is the pirate and what is the quarry. Throughout this series, the sexuality implicit in the language of marketing becomes complicit. I ultimately feel a bit voyeuristic and even naughty in looking at these paintings. In the best tradition of funk, they are both disruptive and honest.

Miller is a fan of *The Simpsons*. I can easily imagine that he has a particular sympathy with Bart, as I have often heard him make comments about cultural hooliganism with a certain gleam in his eye. However, there is usually a certain justice in Bart's rebellion against things that deserve

disobedience. For that matter, the whole nature of *The Simpsons* is to challenge the conventions that many people hold simply out of convenience. Miller has undertaken a similar project: he is challenging not only the standards of visual taste, but also those of received ideas.

Convention and derivation lead to an incurably complacent feeling toward art making, and there are few things more dismissible than boring art. These paintings are far from boring. Miller has heard me ask on several occasions: "Is painting enough?" Can painting compete with the urgency and interest that is inherent in newer media such as video and installation? Can painting address issues pertinent to our contemporary culture? Miller's work offers a rebuttal on all counts. I have spent a great amount of time looking at and pondering these paintings, and I still cannot quite put them away in my mind. There is a certain intellectual and visual energy in them that is never quite expired, as possible meanings are not fully confirmed.

As we live in an age where advertising images are compressed to the point of fusion, the contest to tweak our senses has led to a continuous strobe of imagery; our environment is permeated by an essentially schizophrenic sensibility. One way out of this endgame, however, is to recontextualize our visual landscape. There is a precedent in jazz of taking popular songs and recomposing them with as much intentional dissonance as possible while still being true to the original tune. Just as those uninitiated into improvisational jazz would never understand why someone would try to push a song to the breaking point, neither would they understand why someone with as much technical proficiency as Miller would make paintings that seem to be in such bad taste. What they do not realize is the absolute command of process it takes to be intentionally bad. Ultimately the absolute charm of these paintings is the beautiful accumulation of decisions, and their immediacy of association. Taking the series title from Sam Walton's "Always" promises: "Always low prices, always give something back," Miller's paintings deliver. I find them to be more than enough.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Atkins, *ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords 1945 to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1997), 101.

from *Taxonomy*

—after a series of *Casta* paintings by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, ca. 1715

3. *De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza*

How not to see  
in this gesture

the mind  
of the colony?

In the mother's arms,  
the child, hinged

at her womb—  
dark cradle

of mixed blood  
(call it *Mexico*)—

turns toward the father,  
reaching to him

as if back to Spain,  
to the promise of blood

alchemy—three easy steps  
to purity:

*from a Spaniard and an Indian,  
a mestizo;*

*from a mestizo and a Spaniard,  
a castizo;*

*from a castizo and a Spaniard,  
a Spaniard.*

We see her here—  
one generation away—

nearly slipping  
her mother's careful grip.

4. *The Book of Castas*

Call it the catalogue  
of mixed bloods, or

the book of naught:  
not Spaniard, not white, but

*mulatto-returning-backwards, (or  
hold-yourself-in-midair)* and

the *morisca*, the *lobo*, the *chino*,  
*sambo*, *albino* and

*the no-te-entiendo*, the  
*I don't understand you*.

Guidebook to the colony,  
record of each crossed birth,

it is the typology of taint,  
of stain: blemish: sullyng spot:

that which can be purified,  
that which cannot—Canaan's

black fate. How like a dirty joke  
it seems: *what do you call*

*that space between*  
the dark geographies of sex?

Call it the *taint*—as in  
    *t'aint one and t'aint the other*—  
  
    illicit and yet and naming still  
        what is between. Between  
  
her parents, the child,  
    *Mulatto-returning-backwards*,  
  
    cannot slip their hold,  
        the triptych their bodies make  
  
in paint, in blood; her name  
    written down in *the book*  
  
    *of castas*—all her kind  
        in thrall to a word.

JANE ASHLEY

from *the book of concealed hearts*

11.

"For a long time, I thought those were trees," said the museum guard from behind me. Over the past two hours, I had been wandering around an exhibit called *Picturing Eden* and the stillness of the rooms provided the privacy I required to become so startled by his sudden interjection. I turned to him then followed his gaze back to the darker photograph of trees in a moss-covered forest. He brandished a small flashlight and directed a beam of light over my shoulder and onto the trunks, arresting a pair of glazed eyes. The trees were covered with animal pelts: a large animal with small ears; it appeared to be a rodent with a cone-like face pointed toward the sky. He extinguished the light and the eyes faded, the forest receded and it was as though we had just been in a northern woods, lush and designed like some tampered, luring world. Holstering his light, he looked down at me and said, "I bet people walk through these rooms for days and don't see that. Now you see."

10.

As I walked through a bookstore this morning the woman behind the counter exclaimed to a regular customer just entering the store, "you have no hat!" It was five below outside. He said oh well he couldn't find it and she said how her toes froze and her face dried up on the walk to work and people should really stay inside in temps like these. And he said he hoped it would snow, that it's been snowing over by the lakes and locals are making a concerted effort to measure the depth of the daily falls by taking a plastic ruler to the picnic table. They make sure to wait until after the snow has had time to compact of its own accord and only then offer an accurate reading. The woman behind the counter said, "I've seen those people on TV, wrestling their red and black shovels up onto the roofs to get the snow down, to keep

the ceilings from caving in. They've been falling for days."

## 9.

My father writes from an undisclosed location on the east coast of America. We have not exchanged messages in years, not since my mother died and he sent me the article on the 2001 Maoist massacres in Nepal, with a handwritten note copied across the top: "FYI, thinking of you."

He says the birds in Texas are dying. They are falling in mid-flight to the ground, right downtown on Congress Avenue. Not just one or two, he says, but sixty or so and how is Hunter, his daughter, with whom he urges me to make contact, as though she too might be falling.

And Hunter says the Great-Tailed Grackles and pigeons that follow them around did die but no one could really say for what reason. "What concerns me," she says, "is the flooding throughout the downtown area." The unrelenting rains she stays up all night listening to on the brown couch that has become ragged and must be thrown out and I say "the gold one, the gold couch?"

She says, "you know those people who get washed away down the river? They're not stupid people; you think that, you think, why in the world did they lob caution out the window and barrel into deep waters; but sometimes lakes look like puddles and by then it's too late and by then your engine fails and your tires are lifting, lifting, rising and you're drifting in this box of steel, waving to the onlookers lining the shores like some queen on a float."

## 8.

Hunter wants to know if I still think often of our mother and I say no, not really, because what I really think about is zero-gravity and whether or not I'm satisfied with the current state of my mattress or if it's time to trade the sagging thing in because we so often underestimate the amount of support required for comfort and she says she thinks about Deepak Chopra.

She wants to know if our mother is up there looking down on us and I say I don't think energy is so easily created or destroyed and Hunter thinks

we get reincarnated. So I say our mother may be a giraffe. And she thinks our mother is a person.

"Like she's some other person, somewhere on earth?"

"Yea."

And I think of the people in Times Square, walking.

7.

He got on at Davenport, about an hour and a half from my arrival home. We were all bussing it across the Midwest, trying to make it home before the blizzard hit. The bus driver, in no hurry, was attempting the route for the first time and occasionally relied on me for directions. I said, "we must have missed the turn because there goes the John Deere Factory." He radioed in for help as we trundled on south. Then he turned to me and said, "there's nothing more you can do."

He got on at Davenport, and he was wearing jeans and a denim jacket, just like my father used to wear and my mother would say, close enough for him to hear, "I see he's got his prison suit on again." I can't remember if he started wearing them before or after he began the affair. My instinct is to say after. We all want evidence of lost love, as though given adequate foresight we could avoid certain pains.

He was wearing denim and when he bent to place his duffel bag in the empty seat by the window before sitting down, the denim dipped to reveal an enormous divide. Thumbing through a yellow magazine with a picture of a handgun on the cover and the word "COMBAT" across the top, he snuck glances in my direction, pulling his earphones tight around his neck.

At the rest stop, he ordered a chicken sandwich and when the man at the register asked which he preferred, baked or fried, he stuck his index finger in his mouth, leaned on one foot then the other and said he didn't know the difference.

He sat down to eat the baked chicken sandwich, unfurled the silver wrap and took two bites before throwing the rest away. I watched from the window looking out on the parking lot and gas pumps.

On his way back out to the bus he stopped to show me a picture of his sister, her husband, and their son, all of them blonde-headed. He said he was on his way to Des Moines and hoped we'd get there before the blizzard hit. Then he leaned in and said, "I did a bad thing. That's why they sent me to Phoenix." He had pulled a knife out in front of someone, then delivered it into this someone's stomach. It happened quickly, and then he was sent away. He said he was calmer. We stood by the window watching snow skitter across asphalt, too cold yet to adhere and accumulate.

## 6.

"Tell me if you think this sounds suspicious," my sister says. A girl named M., a French major from L.A., a nice girl into current affairs, used to live across from my sister's apartment complex. M. said her neighbor was abusing his kids; M. heard constant screaming. So M. called the cops.

The neighbor found out and took revenge by squirting Elmer's Glue in M.'s car door. M. moved. Then, "and this is the suspicious part," my sister adds, M. started hearing her new neighbor verbally abusing his girlfriend. "He screamed, she screamed. She seemed scared," said M. So M. called the cops.

"Don't you think that's a little suspicious, to happen two times," says my sister, searching for patterns. And I wonder if she's really asking: what's so strange about a love that sounds detrimental to people who are not involved?

## 5.

Pollution may be seeding the atmosphere with particles around which water vapor gathers and forms clouds, which reflect the sun's light and heat back into space, and this deflection of light means the Earth's atmosphere has been cooling by 1.8 degrees centigrade, some scientists say and add that this lack of light and heat may mask the full effects of global warming, and that some places have 10 percent less sunlight, like Israel, and other places

have 30 percent less sunlight, like Russia, and they call this global dimming.

4.

"We have yet to understand the incredible power of the mind," says my sister, and adds, "Jack Canfield, you know the guy who did those Chicken Soup books, well he's come to preach this thing called the Law of Attraction. He has a video out on it, called *The Secret*. He says you can get anything you want in your life by attracting it. You want to be happy, you say it out loud: 'I want to be happy.' You have to ask the universe, you have to open yourself up. You know what Jack would say about you, he would say you're sending out negative vibes, and it's even being stated out loud. You need to say, 'I'm looking forward to starting over.' You need to say, 'I want to meet a guy.'" She says, "I tried it, I said, 'I want to meet a guy.' It was stupid; I think you have to be more specific, you have to associate positive feelings with it. For example, people always say, when it rains it pours . . . guys don't ask me out for weeks and then all of a sudden. You will get results in time. Jack says zero to six months."

She adds, "So are you going to watch the video, which normally costs \$29.95 but is currently available for download at \$4.95?"

3.

"Oh, so here is a horrible story," my sister launches into recollection: two honeymooners booked a villa on an island through her agency. She had spent hours on the phone with the groom. Then, a week before their scheduled departure, a woman phoned and said she was calling on behalf of the couple. He had been in a car wreck, nothing too serious, and had started taking drugs for the residual pain. He also had sleep apnea, for which he took something else. In the middle of the night, they think, the medications interacted and his heart stopped. "Isn't that horrible," my sister says, "how she must have woken up and found him still beside her?"

## 2.

My father writes to say he wants me to know that he is close to buying a house in the city where we were a family for twelve years long ago. He says it is large and ideal for a father and daughter to share, with space galore and that it has been a very long time since either of us has had a place we can call home. "I will be the only one living there so I hope u will consider it your home as well. The entire third floor has two large rooms with a full bath and is separate from the rest of the house. I haven't closed on this deal yet but am trying hard." He is turning through empty rooms in downtown Richmond, Virginia, framed by abandoned warehouses, newly erected museums of past devastation, and the two-foot-thick flood wall of the surrounds. I imagine him placing a twin bed here, the chest of drawers made of pine over there, a bookshelf, a rug; we will paint the walls yellow like the fresh sunflowers we will buy on Sundays and keep in the kitchen, he thinks, because they will make optimists of us.

## 1.

Over the phone my grandfather calls me by my mother's name, and after a while I stop correcting him because it is the ninth time and really what is the harm. Before hanging up he says, "Remember, we miss you, love you, and we know where you live."

## RE: Volition

How like the tedium of afterlife,  
my sleeplessness, void of ideas, or hope  
for revolutionizing humankind.

To sit up all night and resolve the strife  
of Palestine—that would be something!—grope  
like Kierkegaard, even, maybe to find

not truth, exactly, but something more, more . . .  
what? More pungent. Like blueberries. Instead,  
I stare through darkness toward the window ledge,

redundantly imagining the floor  
where I might drop my feet beside the bed,  
rise then, reach for the shade, lifting its edge

to greet the dawn, and say, *Have at you now!*  
What good am I if I break, like a brick,  
only when the ground under me shifts and strains?

Yet angrily to strike out would allow  
too little time to think. Ah, that's the trick:  
somehow to nurture without leaving stains.

X

Say this firmament—Atlantic, inviolate—holds X amount of rescue.

Shallow in a violent wind, the nerve-drenched voice, *do you know me?*

And full-on in the bleached grass my quenchless need for X to be infinite.

.....

Say I don't remember what I was doing in the middle of the corn.

The parallel S sounds and the almost-subterranean *I* in a violent wind.

This is X? A goose-polluted voice that thralls in the torrent: *bray-do-bray-you . . . ?*

.....

Say the less-gray tunnel of light in the day's midst is X's nimbus.

As for "Spirit come back eat the mulberries in my yard," what are the mulberries like?

Say, in concordance with my quenchlessness, the spirit is my father.

.....

The mulberries are black reams of ink, a dissertation on the death of the simile.

Spirit, what is the field like? Composition in pearl, too bright for the Xs of your eyes?

The gesture "*come back*" is as false as I don't look back.

.....

Say cut weeds pepper the pristine yield, the firmament hawked and milky.

(X, forgive me. I look back. I am thirteen years old.)

Rock-fisted, barn windows smashed to glitz, I hate the largess of my parents.

.....

Say my father and my grandfather died on the same day.

Holy X of the Perpetual Proof, show me an unbroken circle.

Moonlit alluvium mimics talc, but press your face to it: it is black.

.....

Say I evoke the impression of my open-mouthed face in soft earth.

Say I swallowed a dram of soil. When I breathe, I feed the seed of an X tree.

Back acreage scrap-cankered: tire, pipe-splinter, one luminous dishwasher.

.....

Say the grown tree of X leaks sap onto the dishwasher, mulberries pox its sheen.

When my father shouldered the machine from the truck, his satisfaction was archaic.

I evoke a violent wind to steal his breath, close his eyes, resume erosion.

.....

Damage runs parallel to us: quenchless current in our nerves.

I am in the middle of the corn. I am X years old. Do you know me?

Say I could rescue one luminous field. I steal his eyes. I look back.

JENNIFER ELMORE

## Incoherent Flash of Panorama

I am inevitable—an incorrect conflagration  
of commas, a stuttering hash. I am sorry about that.  
I have tried bobbing for tigers, but I come up dripping  
mouthwash while the appetites of my enemies  
drag alongside the highway.

Help me out of my quixotic panic. Too far  
to travel, too many thumbs stuck into the road.  
Are you going my way? Are you underestimating  
my flashlight, the savvy in my pocket, my overall  
capacity to proofread? Possibly.

I have more talent, more devil in my tiptoes than  
most men can trap. I am an innocent, attempting  
the train, the long haul and burn of coal smoke.  
The gloss of magic destinations: sparkling, snow-capped  
Alaska, the stunned silence of pine barrens, the plaid apes  
in trucks raffling off the distance with a thunder of saws.

I believe in God, the knit of unsuspecting events. One  
whiffle bat strums up a storm in the Pacific. One blue  
event begets a gold event begets a ruby raspberry  
in my grandmother's backyard. The bear cub I witnessed,  
slope-side, in Montana caused a mime to crosshatch  
his performance on cobblestones in Boston.

Who's to say that I am trouble in my own life only?  
Mischievous spreads.

## Nun Blood

I was related to one and had eight at school, plus Mother Gonzaga. They had black habits and black hearts and stiff white collars and bibs and wooden rosary beads like dull eyeballs around their waists. They swished down corridors like demented penguins, course habits swinging, precious beads rattling. Naturally I was fearful about having a nun for a relative. I certainly never told anyone at Saint Luke's School that a nun, for Christ's sake, was related to me. I didn't even know nuns had relatives. In first grade I thought nuns were grown in convents, or maybe covenants, maybe like mold—the right conditions in a damp place, kind of dumb, like a dungeon where things develop in the dark. Or maybe priests had something to do with it. I didn't know but I certainly never expected nuns to have moms and dads and sisters and brothers. *Here's my aunt the nun.* Who would want to say such a thing? But apparently that's what she was, this spawn of my grandmother's sister, my mom's aunt, making her some kind of secondhand aunt to me. Her name is lost, I'm thinking Sister Bertrille, but that was the flying nun on TV. This was in the sixties. Whatever her name was (maybe Agnes or Mary) we visited her at a convent not far from Saint Luke's School. I was petrified one of my friends would see me and find out I had nun blood. We strolled the convent grounds, ate in the cafeteria, and did some phony praying in the chapel. And that led to goodbye-hugging by my mom and grandmother. Then it was my turn. At Saint Luke's touching a nun was akin to lying naked in a poison ivy patch. I can still feel her heavy black habit, the body heat, the alien embrace that left me feeling engulfed, different. Not holy or saved or any crap like that. I don't know what I felt. I was in 2nd grade then with Sister Frankenstein, so called because she was tall and limped. Someone said she had a wooden leg.

In 3rd grade Sister Mary Magdalene claimed to have been present when Christ rose from the dead, and we didn't doubt her. She looked like a crocodile standing upright in a nun's habit, long leathery face hanging

toward the floor, pointed teeth in a wicked grin. She said the Civil War cards we collected were distributed by The Communists. She said Sonny & Cher were The Devil. She said bangs on boys grew into your forehead and infected your brain. "That's what wrong with those Beatles," she said. "They're insane because hair has grown into their brains."

Bucky Beaver in 5th had teeth like yellow woodchips that stuck straight out of her mouth. The Lip in 6th was a short troll-like creature with a major harelip.

The most serious nun afflictions could only be guessed at. The Lip liked to go into the boy's room to monitor our peeing. In Catholic school you pee at a certain time. Before recess we'd file in—we were required to *file* everywhere—and stand at the urinals against the wall with the Lip walking up and down behind. Being anxious to get to recess we were inclined to pee and run. Lip said she was there for hygienic purposes. "Shake it off boys, shake it off and wash your hands. Nobody wants to see your pee-stained pants." We weren't sure what she wanted to see. If anyone went into a stall she'd look under the door. "What's your business in there? Hurry up."

The nuns ruined recess with rules. "Have fun," they commanded. "Don't stand against the fence. Run around. Not fast. No roughhousing. Line up—single file—walk!"

Boys and girls were separated. The classroom, cafeteria, and corridors were segregated: boys on one side, girls on the other. The playground had a white line down the middle. Sentry nuns stood at each end. If we stepped a foot over that line onto *the girls' side* we were sent to the office which meant facing Mother Gonzaga, which I am sure prepared us for facing The Devil himself. There was nothing like detention or writing something 500 times on the board. All punishment was physical. Gonzaga had a long, pointed stick with which she whipped our backsides. Pain was precursor to learning with these nuns. In class they used 16-inch rulers with steel edges to reprimand bad penmanship, low test scores, talking in class, passing notes. We did all those things.

"You! Daydreamer!" That was me. "Get up here!"

"Yes, Sister."

I stood at the front of the room, presented my palm open flat like an exposed griddle: WHAP! "God loves you." WHAP! "And so do I." WHAP! "That's why I want you to do well." WHAP! "Now sit down."

Because we learned from the nuns, because they taught us well, we were always on watch for ways to ridicule them. It was difficult because they were so devious. About the only one who seemed vulnerable was Bucky Beaver in 5th. She was soft-spoken and didn't hit us or send us to Gonzaga. Bucky was probably likeable but she looked exactly like a beaver, buck teeth and puffy cheeks as if full of crunched-up nuts. We tortured her by drawing beavers on the board, bringing stuffed beavers to class. I found a cartoon beaver named Bucky appearing in a toothpaste ad in *Life* magazine. I tore him out and stuck his picture up on the door of her classroom. To all of this she never reacted or said anything. She had long dark eyelashes that sometimes looked wet.

Because she was shaped like a beaver and walked like one Bucky had trouble with her habit, which was made for a human being, not a large rodent. Bucky was always tripping over the hem of her habit or catching it on a chair leg or knocking her hip against our desks. When she taught she perspired heavily and then her headpiece would slide back, leaving a barely visible dark hairline above her shiny forehead. Hair on nuns was strictly forbidden. They exposed no body parts except hands and face. I didn't even know nuns had hair until I saw Bucky. She was always pressing her headpiece forward and patting it down, and I became more and more interested in seeing her hair. Anything marking a nun as a human being seemed curious. Sometimes a quarter inch of Bucky's hair was exposed, other times half an inch. "I'd like to see her lose that whole headdress," I said to my friend Bill Hogan one day at recess. We were passing time waiting for fat Allen Black to show up so we could slam him against the fence.

Hogan was one of the bigger kids in school and liked to bully people. He still greased his hair fifties style, though he combed it straight forward after the Beatles. "I'd like to see her lose the whole habit," he said.

"That might be scary," I said.

"What do you think a nun looks like naked?"

"I don't think nuns get naked," I said. "But the head thing, you know how it slips back? How she's always pulling it forward?"

"Yeah."

"Seems like it wouldn't take much to—"

"Hey, Black!"

Hogan spotted Allen Black.

"Get over here, Black!"

Poor Allen, fattest kid in town. Anyone paid him attention, even negative, he cooperated. "Hi," he said. He knew we would slam him against the fence. Hogan grabbed one wrist and I the other. We'd been slamming kids against the fence for years. The fence was a smooth wooden stockade, well over our heads. Allen was the best for this because he was so heavy. We stood him about two feet out with his back to the fence. Allen's back was like an overstuffed chair, huge and rounded. The fence was flat and somewhat forgiving. We wound up Black . . . *one* . . . kids watched and picked up the countdown . . . *two* . . . we swung him out by the wrists and whipped him back toward the fence, not letting him hit, just getting the momentum going. Kids were chanting: *Allen Black, break his back*. Allen was smiling and going along with it, moving his 300 pounds into the swing . . . *three*. We slammed his fat back into the fence as hard as we could. There was a tremendous *Whump* and the entire quarter-mile of fence all the way down the playground to the garage rippled and rocked as if hit by a hurricane wind. Someday, if Allen's back held out, the fence would topple. The sentry nuns came running. We moved off, hands in our pockets.

"Look at her running," I said, pointing.

"Who?" Hogan said.

"Bucky," I said. "See how she holds her hand on her head. I'm telling you that head thing can come off."

"Yeah, why don't you go over there and pull it—see what happens."

"I bet I can get Lorenzo to do it."

Hogan looked at me and smiled. Jimmy Lorenzo would do anything. We found him in the garage next to the playground. It was an empty two-car garage—strictly off limits. Nothing but years of built-up oil stains and coagulated grime on the floor. We hid our cigarettes and matches behind a loose wallboard.

Lorenzo was smoking one after another. "Gimme a butt," Hogan said.

"Me too," I said.

"You fucking guys get your own butts," Lorenzo said. We stood with our hands out. Luckies. I took his lit one and sucked fire into mine.

"Man, you missed it," I said. "Bucky's headpiece slipped halfway off while she ran across the yard."

"Shit," he said.

"Hogan thinks we can get it to fall off in class," I said.

"How?"

"You got any fishhooks?"

"My dad does."

"See if you can get one, and about three feet of fishing line." Then the bell rang and we hid the butts and ran.

We slouched in late, stinking of smoke, with our shirttails untucked and our hair down on our foreheads. We saw Mother Gonzaga in the corridor—small, wiry and black, pointing her knotty finger at us: "You three, halt. What is the meaning of this?" That was Gonzaga's favorite question because she knew we didn't know the meaning of anything.

"What?" I said.

"What!" She latched onto my hair. Her hands were razor wires. Her fingers had nails specially designed, maybe mutating over time, to inflict pain on small boys. It didn't matter how I answered her question, she

always twisted a hank of my hair between her index finger and thumb and I buckled. "Stand up straight!" She attacked our genetic traits. "Why is your hair a mess?" I had thick curly locks that were easy to get a grip on. "President Kennedy parted his hair on the right. Why have you no part?"

"I don't know, Mother."

"You don't know!" She jerked my head in four directions, accentuating her syllables and punctuating her sentences with jolts to the head. "Haven't I told you . . . ?" Push, pull, jerk, yank. "How many times do I have to say . . . ?" Tug, wrench, snatch, thrust. When I was dizzy and off balance she went for the face. Her dry scaly palms clapping hard with my face wedged between, her long fingers reddening my cheeks and ears together. When my face burned and my head felt like the clapper inside a bell, she grabbed my ear, spun me around and said: "Go to the end of the line I'll get you again."

Then it was Hogan's turn. He was tall, and it was tough to grip his greasy hair, but his ears tended to stick out and she snatched one and twisted him down to her level.

"Is this the way we come in from recess?"

"No, Mother."

"No! I'll box your ears." She balled her claws into fists and pounded both of his ears at once, then spun him around. "End of the line, I'll get you again."

"James Lorenzo!" She grabbed a fistful of Jimmy's blonde hair. "Why do I smell smoke?"

"I don't know Mother."

"You don't know!" Pull, tug, yank, jerk.

Lorenzo was prone to painful ejaculation: "Whoa, Ugh, No, Ahaa." Which seemed to spur Gonzaga on.

"Why are you so short?"

"God made me this way?"

"God made you so you could smoke cigarettes and stunt your growth?"

"No, Mother. Ahaa . . ."

I think she hated Lorenzo more than the rest of us because he was small and cute. He was caving in from the hair-pulling, buckling and ignoring her order to “stand up straight.” She let go of his hair, and he dropped to his hands and knees in the middle of the corridor, and bingo she nailed him in the butt with one of her killer nun shoes. Black leather, stub-nose toe as stiff as a shotgun barrel. “End of the line I’ll get you again.”

And she did. We went through painful shifts of this until she tired and said: “Get out of my sight, the lot of you.”

We got to class red faces stinging, and Lorenzo sat on one butt cheek for the rest of the day. I made the whole Bucky headdress thing seem like it was his idea. It didn’t work right away because the fishhook Lorenzo brought in was too big. I had to go down to Grant’s Sporting Goods and swipe a tiny trout hook the size of a fingernail.

The nuns had heavy wooden chairs behind their desks. Some of them never sat, but Bucky used her chair. In the late afternoons she sat reading her Catechism while we did our work. The bonnet or whatever it was, a shroud covering the head, shoulders, and breasts, came to a point in the back like a medieval hood, which hung over the back of the chair. One day during lunch I snuck into the room and looped the fishing line around the leg of her chair and dropped the fishhook beneath. The hard part was talking Lorenzo into going up there and hooking the hook into the tail end of Bucky’s headdress. “Why me?” he wanted to know.

“It was your idea,” I said. He knew he hadn’t thought of it but didn’t want to say that because he admired the idea and Hogan was standing there.

“You’re the smallest,” Hogan said. “She won’t see you.”

“What if she does?”

“She won’t,” I said. “You know Bucky. She doesn’t see shit.”

Lorenzo was sensitive about being short so a mission where smallness was an asset appealed to him. Because he was short he liked to do big things. He agreed to try the plan if Bucky let him clap the erasers. Hogan told all the usual eraser clappers to back off that day and about 2:45—eraser-clapping

time—Lorenzo got up and approached Bucky at her desk. She'd been up that afternoon, even pushed the chair in and out but never saw the tiny fishhook on the floor beneath her chair. Lorenzo put on his innocent face and said, "Excuse me, Sister. May I please clap the erasers?"

Bucky nodded. "You may."

Eraser-clapping was a privilege because you got to go unsupervised into the playground to smack the erasers against the wall. After that you had to clean the board and chalk shelf, which was directly behind Bucky's chair. Lorenzo was a sneaky bastard. He dragged the special board-cleaning eraser in long slow strips until everyone quit watching him. He even dropped the eraser once and bent down behind Bucky's chair to eyeball the fishhook. It was right at his feet. When Bucky looked up at the clock and told us to put away our work and get ready to go, there was paper rustling and book closing and chair shifting and, for a second, I thought it was too late, that Bucky was going to get up. But then while we all snapped our three-ring binders and shoved stuff into our desks I saw Lorenzo go down behind Bucky's chair. She completely obscured him, so I never actually saw him bury the fishhook into the cloth habit. He was on his feet the instant she turned to look for him. "Are you still doing that?" she said. "Finish up, please."

"Yes, Sister."

We knew when it would happen. At 3:05 Gonzaga came on the intercom for final announcements. Bucky rose then and stood by the door. At 3:15 we went home. When I heard the beep of the intercom my heart raced. I kept my head down. I watched through my eyelashes. Bucky started to rise and was jerked back slightly just as Gonzaga said *Excuse me Sisters and Students, Please*. Bucky pulled, but the fishing line was strong and the hook held in the fabric, and the chair scraped against the floor, and with us all watching the head covering slid off backward, and Bucky let out a howl like a scalded cat. There was a second of shocked silence, then everyone was laughing and pointing. Through the intercom Gonzaga yelled *Attention! Attention!* Bucky's headdress was apparently attached to the habit somehow. Bucky twisted her

torso and snatched at it with her arms where it hung across her back but couldn't manage to pull it up onto her head. If she had simply cried, then we wouldn't have laughed. But she panicked and yanked at the headdress and finally ran from the room with one hand on her head and the chair following her to the door, where it got stuck, and the headdress ripped free, and Bucky bolted down the corridor with it streaming behind her. The class jumped up and charged the door. Gonzaga shouted through the intercom. Hogan had the presence of mind to lift the chair, remove the fishhook and drop it into the wastepaper basket. The Lip heard the ruckus from across the hall in 6th and came out shouting at us to line up for the buses. The timing was perfect because when Gonzaga got there the buses were pulling in and she couldn't hold them up—we went home.

There were 30 kids in class and by some miracle, Bucky's bulk, and Lorenzo's small stature, no one that was apt to say anything saw anything. I wasn't concerned about Hogan, the nuns taught us to lie well—keep the story short and stick to it. I worried Lorenzo might crack under Gonzaga's violent inquisition that went on for days, but he never did. We had a good laugh at Bucky's expense and for all practical purposes got away with it.

Sort of.

The problem was Bucky herself. When the headpiece slipped back I don't know what I expected to see but it certainly was not the mass of long shiny dark hair that exploded from under the tight bonnet. No wonder she had trouble keeping the thing on her head. She had more hair than Joanne Dubuque, the most beautiful girl in school who had long golden banana curls down to her waist. Bucky was a young woman.

She never said a word about the incident. The next day she walked into the room wearing her headgear as if nothing had happened. But it had happened. And from the moment I saw her hair it was almost like touching a nun, or being related to one. I didn't think of her as Bucky anymore. Her name was Sister Dolores. I could not stop seeing her with the long silky locks bouncing behind her as she ran from the room, or picturing her face as it

would be caressed and complemented by the hair if it were allowed to hang free. What's worse was the way she treated us, with even more kindness and care than before. As if she felt sorry for us. She was more reserved, as if she was disappointed, or couldn't be bothered with people like us. I found myself seeking her approval, trying harder on my lessons, even attempting to gain her affections. But she never conceded that I existed, and I left the 5th grade with a great sorrow that I could not give it another go.

## Permission To Be Strange

Triangular shadows  
Arrive on your wall  
With music from the street  
Behind them—ta-dee! Like you  
They are from the autumn  
Between those spirits, not from anything.

They need you to see them  
Finding width & depth from  
Noon or moon, these figures,  
Eeking thought around vines  
In a time of violence  
Leaking fact into eternity.

You are given permission  
To be strange in these outlines  
From the vat  
Of what you feel. They walk  
The wall, rinsed &  
Rosy, not from any thing.

You make energy matter &  
Individual with lines  
Between parts of experience.  
Conductivity, the gray  
Fur of feeling  
Wild from anything—

*for HMS (born 11/06)*

## Vanitas, Mother's Day

About-faced on the banana seat,  
your back against your new neighbor's  
back, hands blooming bluebell and clover  
while watching lightning bugs doppler  
off the dead end of Trestle Lane,  
the flat edge of your new world where backhoes  
fold like mantids; his pedals scrape the chain  
guard when his weight shifts lispig insect  
sounds below the lean and orderly trees.  
The evening's concussive heat telescopes  
the way ahead, funnels you home.

You hear her spider-walking fingers through  
lacunas of attention as you swing down from  
the bike and say goodbye. Your mother plays  
the Baldwin feeding rests and breath, the exits  
that arouse fatigue into the whole-notes  
staggered, chicken-wired to the page.

### II.

Composite sketch of crests and rhythm,  
your wife's face is a gulch of swells and sinks.

But you're not

thinking of the evening's thinning pallor nor  
reflecting on the jagged bowl of Orpheus.  
You're thinking of eye drops—as if hers  
were the eyes of your mother who would sight-read  
evenings dry until sending you to fetch the bedside dropper.  
Was it a caress or wrestle, her chin inside your elbow,

when you'd feed the fluid past her lashes?

Your new wife facing  
you in the car, her eyes waking to the music,  
the chamber you share brightening as each  
photon ripens and from the arms of road lights  
falls through the open roof, this evening  
you travel and measure in whole  
notes, this narrow distance in the eyes.

Each note you now  
read is winged and jostling,  
unstable amid the staff of electric  
wires composing the highway and the highway  
made of exits like the moment the droplet  
coated the eye, dampened hers, which dampened yours.

This time around you're going home  
trailing the ancient Schuylkill opposite  
boathouses lit like casinos, your windows  
are lowered and roof exposing the grit  
and tilting signals that sugar the web of meridians  
dividing the void while your wife skips to your  
favorite track and suddenly Monk is making  
an anvil of the instrument. Sport bikes buzz  
by, brake lights like a volley of tracer fire  
into the distance, overtaking like nerve endings  
going numb. The road dips, a current in your stomach  
as if you've bounced on someone's knee.

Of course, you haven't:

## Learning Emerson

*The eye is the first circle; and the horizon it forms is the second.*

*-R. W. Emerson*

Like being caught without underwear  
is what comes to mind  
when I see a woman I worked with  
kissing a man in the background  
of my friend's vacation photo. How many  
frames have I drifted into, or  
the barefoot lady everyday at the museum  
who drags her purse  
by the broken strap along the floor.  
Signs of another life, the sweet crumbs  
left in our pockets. Ms. Riley  
who carefully wrote *Mrs. Bean*  
on her yardstick and tape, her dictionary  
and stapler, then later changed them back  
to *Riley, Riley, Riley*. Now I'm a young teacher.  
I don't memorize my students. Sometimes  
I can't see their faces, I get that nervous.  
I taught Emerson's essay,  
used his metaphor, asking my class  
what pushed them to revision. First loves,  
first R rated movie, a trip abroad . . .  
I thought of waiting tables  
New Year's Eve, by chance my father  
was there with friends. When he stood to leave  
and swung a coat over his back,  
a long coat lined with fur,

I heard someone say *What a fucking  
faggot. Who does that guy think he is.*  
I froze like I was waiting  
to be smacked, suddenly conscious  
of the tie he lent me around my neck,  
the water pitcher in my hand  
dripping down my sleeve. What  
would you have done  
had you stood spinning; for the first time  
learning ridicule was unconditional?  
After, and still, I rehearse the words  
I should have fired. I imagine how many times  
I've disappointed my father,  
even when he, gone somewhere  
to watch the ball drop,  
would never know it.



## I Will Catch You

I write for an online magazine whose motto is this: “We’re the people your students are plagiarizing.”

I’m also a teacher. Three times this semester, I have been plagiarized upon. You will notice that I didn’t say “three times *that I know of*.”

At the start of each semester, both I and my syllabi tell my students this:

Plagiarism is the use of the words and/or ideas of another as if they were one’s own and without acknowledgement of their source. In other words, plagiarism is stealing another person’s words without crediting them or using proper citation. Sometimes, plagiarism is unintentional. If this happens, we’ll sit down and look at your work. If you plagiarize intentionally, you will *fail this course*. Be warned that such a record remains in a student’s permanent file, and can also result in probation or expulsion.

This is in the boilerplate.

Because boilerplate can be boring, I tell them also: “The Internet has made it incredibly easy to cheat, but so too has it made cheating incredibly easy to catch.”

Many of them apparently choose not to listen, or perhaps to listen only to the first half. But my job here in the academy is not to teach listening comprehension. Not exactly.

If you are a cheater, I will not know it right away. I will not sense it based on the way you sit in my class, the way you raise or do not raise your hand. I will not be able to apprehend that you are too lazy or too ignorant or too

careless or too indifferent to do your own work based on any physical or behavioral characteristics. If anything, you will look like a fine upstanding young man—blue jeans and t-shirts, but no cap slung low over your bright blue eyes, no hoodie over your downy brown hair, no resting your chin on the desk like you can't wait to haul yourself off somewhere else.

But when you turn in a response paper to Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* that contains a paragraph that begins: "Her new book is a profound rethinking of the intersection of 'news,' art, and understanding in the contemporary depiction of war and disaster," a paragraph lifted word for word from the book's dust jacket, I will know you are a cheater.

I will contact you and politely tell you that I know, and you will email back, "I did not plagiarize the Sontag paper I just listed the ideas from the book that she presented in her book. She mentioned all those places in her book so I just reiterated them in my paper."

Because I believe that two-way communication is crucial to the educational process, we will discuss why this is neither a valid excuse, nor a valid practice. And because I believe in learning opportunities and teachable moments, I will give you the benefit of the doubt, and you will tell me "I will try to work as hard as I can to prove that that is not who I am." I may conjecture in my heart that this is who you are, but I will forgive you this time, because I believe in second chances and because I want all my students to have a reasonable grasp at success. But I will keep my eye on you and everyone else in the class even more than before from that point on.

In another of my classes—the only one this semester in which I've yet to catch a cheater—we are reading Greek philosophers on the Good. The Beautiful. The benefits of Virtue.

But I know, I know—this small regional university isn't the Symposium. We're not all going to go walking with Socrates. We're not all going to compose edifying dialogues or didactic epistles. Plato says:

There is poetry, which, as you know, is complex and manifold. All creation or passage of non-being into being is poetry or making, and the processes of all art are creative; and the masters of arts are all poets or makers. (71)

I know that you will not all be poets, and you will not all be makers, and that many of you think it is a waste of time to think and to create.

Some of you will not want, as one paper mill website puts it, to spend “hours in a library or online searching for a paper on your topic—only to end up with no paper and no quality information [. . .]—only to get a *garbage* grade.”

You will feel this way because you believe that the answer to this paper mill’s question “Do you have better things do with your time than spend it writing a useless paper?” is yes.

And I pity you. And I do my best to move you to feel otherwise. But sometimes I can’t move you. In this case, I will make you learn anyway, in spite of yourself, and in spite of your bad attitude, and if you won’t, I will punish you.

Plato also says—and this will be a big quote, because it’s an elegant idea, but it’s not mine, and I need to give credit:

And the same holds true of love. For you may say generally that all desire of good and happiness is only the great and subtle power of love; but they who are drawn towards him by any other path, whether the path of money-making or gymnastics or philosophy, are not called lovers—the name of the whole is appropriated to those whose affection takes one form only—they alone are said to love, or to be lovers. (71)

Although it is my heartfelt desire for you to all be seekers, lovers, I know that you do not all love learning for learning’s sake. I’m curiously okay with that.

The ideal circumstance for the academy would be that everyone has come here simply for his or her love of learning, but that frankly is unrealistic. Some of you are here for that reason, but others of you are here because of hegemony—a word I try to teach you—because this is the logical next middle-class step after high school; because of a desire to make more money; because of a desire to garner more professional respect.

Though I want you to love what we do at this small university, I know that sometimes you won't.

So the revised ideal is to create an environment in which learning can—really has to—occur. It's not always very pretty, but sometimes this ideal is achieved by simply making learning the easiest thing that can happen.

Isn't it easiest for everybody that you just learn about this stuff and write about it in a manner that is smart and a manner that is yours?

How can I make that easier than plagiarizing your paper?

By really kicking your ass if you plagiarize your paper. You will fail my class. You will get kicked out of school.

You might think *She won't catch me*, but there you are wrong. I will catch you. I will catch you. I will catch you. I will catch you.

You can't turn in a paragraph like this:

In this sad, cool, short novel, Duras tells the largely autobiographical story of a 15-year-old European girl's first affair with an older Chinese man in French Indochina during the 1930s. Stereotypes and expectations are inverted: she is poor, he wealthy; she seduces him, not vice versa; she controls the relationship, does not love him though he is hopelessly smitten with her, and she dictates all the terms, including how and when it ends. Duras uses cinematic techniques—flashbacks and forwards, repetitions, incidents cut up and interrupted by seemingly unrelated descriptions—and switches between first

and third person to enrich what at first seems a fairly dry and unadorned narrative. A depressing yet eloquent work of art.

and—just because you changed the original “besotted” to “smitten”—expect me not to suspect it comes from here: [http://allreaders.com/topics/Info\\_1908.asp](http://allreaders.com/topics/Info_1908.asp).

The average college student does not describe narratives as “dry” or “unadorned.” The ambitious plagiarizer must dig deeper.

You can't turn in a paragraph in which you observe nonchalantly of the classic *Dispatches* that “Herr’s field of vision is broad but always at its center are the ‘grunts,’ the infantrymen who invariably carried themselves through the war with dignity and a carefully cultivated and life-sustaining combination of humor and cynicism,” and expect me not to suspect you’ve paid a visit to the Houghton Mifflin textbook site for the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (fifth edition).

The average college student does not describe authorial vision as “broad.” The ambitious plagiarizer must go further.

My friend Chris Hutson, also a professor, remarked of you, my first and most egregious cheater this semester, my blue-eyed innocent: “Tell Mr. Plagiarist to eat a bowl of fuck.”

It crossed my mind to tell you this, oh yes it did, but I am a fair instructor, always in search of an opportunity for learning. I want to be sure you understand why plagiarizing is wrong, why you will get in trouble if you do it.

But if you refuse to own that fact, refuse to admit that plagiarizing is a morally bankrupt act, an act which hurts you, the person whose words you stole, and everyone else in the class who does his or her own work, an act

which should be loathsome to you entirely in and of itself, then I will force you to own this fact in another, more brutal and less abstract way.

The reason you should not plagiarize is the same reason you should not rob a bank: you might get caught. And if you get caught, the consequences are really bad. Should they be really bad? Yes. I don't think anyone with a belief in the value of honesty and ethical behavior can dispute that.

There are many features of my job as a professor that I find enriching, fulfilling. One feature that does not thrill me is that it's my job to terrify you, hopefully enough to keep you from cheating, but otherwise to terrify you of ever doing it again.

It would be nice if I could inspire you not to cheat—to want to do right simply because doing right is a good and a pure thing. And I do inspire some of you, lead you to love. But failing that, there's always fear.

No society has been able ever to function without some kind of punishment. Some kind of threat. The academy's not so different from the rest of society.

Niccolo Machiavelli, another author I like to look at with my classes, asks in *The Prince*: “whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved?” (*The Prince* may have been satire, or may have been serious, but that's not the issue here; the issue is that I'm citing it properly.)

He answers his own question: “that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with.”

Why choose fear over love?

Because this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are “ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous,” and because “men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a

dread of punishment which never fails.”

Please don't fuck with me; I'm not to be fucked with.

When I was younger, I wanted all my students to really like me; to want to be my friend. Now, if they want that, that's fine, but all I really strive to be is tough but fair.

Hence the boilerplate. Hence “*you will fail this course.*”

Still, I think I'm actually a lot more lovable than fearsome. When I walk into a room, I still look so small, so young, you say things like, “You're the teacher? No way,” to which I reply, “Way.” But your not knowing to be afraid will make you more afraid when you force me to crack down.

You can't turn in a paper that says that, in her poem “It Feels a Shame to be Alive,” “Emily Dickinson reflects on the loss of lives during subsequent battles, and because of Dickinson's use of intangible and universal language, we can read the same poem in the context of any war in history and apply it to all of the Americans that have lost their lives to ensure our freedom,” and just because you used the Microsoft Word thesaurus feature to change “abstract” to “intangible” expect me not to suspect that you ripped the entire thing off a website featuring an explication of the same poem by somebody named Cindy McCutcheon from goddamn Georgetown.

The average college student—especially one now notorious to me as the perpetrator of the boneheaded fourth-grade-book-report move of using the jacket copy from a book as his own original paragraph—does not refer to language as “intangible” and “universal.”

The ambitious plagiarizer needs to press beyond the first Google hit that comes up when he types the name of the poem he is supposed to analyze for his mid-term.

I will be sitting in a coffee shop grading when I start to read “your” paper. There will of course be free wireless, so I will use my laptop to uncover your deceit with dizzying speed. I will feel sick to my stomach. I will find the number of the registrar’s office online, call them, tell them what I found. They will put an F after your name and a hold on your record so you can’t drop, can’t take the easy way out. Next I will email you: “I’m very disappointed to have to write to you about this,” I will begin, and this will be true. “But you need to know,” I’ll continue, and I’ll explain all that will happen to you: “You will fail this course with no chance to withdraw, and the record of your academic dishonesty will go in your student disciplinary file. I am very sorry to have to do this, but plagiarism is a major offense, and cannot be permitted.”

It will get ugly. It will get sad. As my friend Elisa puts it, “Kids when caught: quite a phenomenon.”

You will email me thrice in that single first night, and you will be implausible and defensive and loose with your grammar: “For the mid-term I research this poem a lot. I read several different views of the poem. If it seems to look like the paper you suggest I might of just memorized so thoughts from there and used those points and did not realize I was doing that.”

You will be presumptuous: “If this is your final decision than that is fine, but please give me another chance. You can fail me on the mid-term but please do not fail me in the class. I did not do that on purpose. Please rethink your decision. If your mind will not change and you cannot give me a second chance, well than have a good life and I hope everything works out for you.”

You will be conciliatory, desperate, and outright delusional: “Also if that is not enough I am willing to write as many papers as you want or do whatever you want to make this up. Please.”

You will go so far as to email me files of both your plagiarized paper and

that of young Cindy McCutcheon, with the cryptic, misspelled denial: "I found that poem you talked about and I do not see any resemblance." But I will see the resemblance. And I will stick by my decision.

You will ambush me the next morning outside my office, before my 8 AM class, tears in your eyes, doughy face wet with rain, proffering a new paper, still plagiarized, and a wild story but not an apology.

You will cry and you will beg and I will show no mercy. No mercy. Your eyes will get wider and wetter and bluer than the sky and I will not back down because you are a cheater. You will tell me you regret what you did—my wife, you'll say; my son—but I will not care because you are the one who betrayed them. You are the one.

You will not be able to believe this is happening. You will not be able to accept what you've done. You will demand an appeal, so the small-sized university will have to schedule an Academic Dishonesty Hearing Panel before which you will appear to plead your weak case.

You will write me email after late night email in the ensuing days, typing sentences like "Getting an education so I can support my son is what I treasure the most. I would never do that to disgrace myself to him," but the problem will be that you did. You did.

In the plodding days leading up to your hearing, you will persist in attending class—which I will admit is your right, until a final decision is made—as though nothing is wrong. Meanwhile, you will leave in my mailbox another plagiarized paper, stapled with a handwritten scrawl, "I know this does not change anything so you can rip this up, throw it away, shred it, spit on it, or put a curse on it so I have bad luck and die, whatever. I just wanted to turn in a paper that you do not think I plagiarized, so that's why I wrote this. Thanks."

It will have a p.s which reads, "I wasn't referring to anything in the above comments, just me being stupid as normal."

I will be vaguely freaked out, but mostly annoyed. I will keep insisting that you get what you deserve. You will keep coming to class. You will compliment my jeans, tell me where I've set the dry-erase marker when I misplace it. You will laugh with your classmates and act like we're pals. I will hate having to look at you. We are not friends; I am your teacher.

Outside the hearing room, you will be dressed in your best button-down shirt and tie like a scrubbed-up defendant on CourtTV. Your pale blue shirt will bring out your bright blue eyes. Your friends will walk by and joke with you that you've never looked better, that you clean up real nice, and you will laugh back nervously, but not so nervously that they'd notice, and you will agree.

And they will say, "What's up, Mikey, you got an interview or something?"

And you will look them in the eye, and cast an eye over at me, and you will lie again. "Yes," you will say. "That's what it is. An interview."

And they will slap you on the back and smile and start to walk away, "Good luck, man. Good luck."

But your luck has run out, and you will be found guilty.

There will be a tape recorder, three panel members including two professors and one student, plus an outside observer. There will be me, and you, and your support person—another professor, there to provide moral support. The proceedings will be tedious, but in the end, they'll decide rightly. They'll find in my favor.

You will fail the paper, fail the course, and have a big black "cheater" mark on your permanent record, and you might not get into dental school, and your life might be ruined. This will not be something I wanted. No, I let you transfer into the class off the waitlist, and I believed you when you emailed me early in the semester, "I really enjoy your class and I am glad I was able to transfer in to it."

I edited and proofread your personal statement for dental school not

once but twice. I gave you a second chance. But now you have to pay. And I am sad too, but life is sometimes sad, even when it's fair.

After everything is over—after the hearing, and the catching and giving of second chances to two subsequent, lesser cheaters—I will go out with a colleague and drink Manhattans. One per plagiarizer. I will get very drunk and end up hung over.

I will think back on what's happened, and how isn't it funny that the first religiously affiliated school I've taught at has turned out to be the cheatingest. Maybe that means something, and maybe it doesn't. I will wonder how many plagiarizers I'll catch during my whole year here; how many my colleagues will catch, have already caught. I will decide the answer is a lot.

In the end, maybe I can't catch everyone. Maybe some of you will be able to get away with it. But it is my job to make it so hard for you to do so that you will wind up wishing you had just written the fucking paper.

Even if you do cheat and manage to pull it off successfully, i.e. not get caught, you will probably accidentally learn something in the process, in which case I—and all that is honest and right in this world—still win. But that doesn't mean you lose. You win too, because the goal of this game is that you end up learning.

I am not a downer, and I am not a cynic. There are students in all of my classes who are there because they genuinely love to learn. My job is to make sure you, the cheater, get a shittier grade than those students.

I suppose that here, one could say that Foucault wins again—that under these circumstances, the function of education is effectively reduced to cops and robbers. And though I do not like when this happens—do not enjoy when a job that I love, by necessity involves my playing a disciplinarian role that I hate—I have to admit that sometimes I must be a cop. It's not pretty, but there you have it: the possibility of the exertion of brute force is not the essence of

the higher educational system, but it's one of the pre-conditions for it.

But I want to add, too, that most of the time, I don't have to play that part. Most of my students are not cheaters, and to them I'm not a cop. I'm a guide, a facilitator, even a friend.

So don't give me your stolen, your copied, your borrowed, bought, or bribed essays, and don't feel like you have to be perfect when you hand in your own work. Give me your tense shifts, your misspellings, and your passive verbs. Your "on cores" for "encores" and your "thens" for "thans." Your "ados" instead of "adieux." Your plurals instead of your possessives. But please, please, please don't give me Cindy McCutcheon's paper from goddamn Georgetown. Come on people. Take some responsibility. Be good students; be good citizens.

Give me your papers you've written because you've loved them. Give me your papers like the one I got a week after all the cheating dust settled, the paper where you say:

Is this good writing? I would say that it is, but what do I know. I am finally finishing my first writing class, I have dropped out of two classes prior to now. So what I think really doesn't matter that much now does it. I am not rich or dating anyone of any importance. I despise George Bush and Capitalism. I think gay people should be allowed to be married and that Marijuana should be legal. Who am I to say that anything is good or bad? I am utterly insignificant. However there is one significant detail that I am overlooking. This paper that I have set out to write is my paper. I am writing it for you but it isn't yours, it is mine. These words and thoughts are mine. That is what makes the first paragraph beautiful and good.

I will get papers like these from lots of students, and they will not be perfect,

and they will have problems. But they will be in your words, your very own words, and you are all my students, and I am your teacher, and we will all be learning. Honestly, we will.

## Against Bees

*Write this circle with the point of your knife on a malmstone, and drive a stake into the ground in the center of your apiary, and put the stone on top of the stake so that it is completely under the earth but for the writing.*

Columille's Circle, an 11th century device to protect bees during a swarm

### *Against bees*

*so that they may be  
safe and in their hearts  
I will write this, will draw  
a circle as in the dance halls  
of nineteenth-century Vienna:  
those not dancing were  
roped off in the center  
of the room, while the dancers  
waltzed wildly around them.*

### *That they may be*

*safe, against their hearts we zip  
jackets called amber and  
black. And against the hard black  
nipples of the black-eyed  
rudbeckia, we lean to trace  
the name engraved on stone  
like the slate of Hebrew letters written  
in honey that Yeshiva boys lick  
on their first day of school. And in*

*their hearts,*

the orchid *Rhizanthella gardneri*  
grows and flowers *completely*  
*under the earth*, never seeing  
the light, like the eyes  
of Achilles Rizzoli's mother,  
which Rizzoli kept trying  
to open at her funeral  
now that she had become the cathedral  
he drew her to be, *Mother*

*Symbolically Recaptured:*

finials, bays, buttresses flying, stone  
spires of women erect  
on the peak—no eaves or  
evening, just light seen through  
the ears of a rabbit, apricot  
and opaque, a sky  
pierced by caryatids with no roof  
over their heads, who stand  
and eavesdrop in the ambling

night. Against her

tracery, there's an X  
for each drawn gate—*Egress*  
engraved above the arch  
and *Halt* beneath—while below  
a lavender roof, *safe*  
*and in their hearts*, lancet  
windows line up with views  
like those of bees through  
honeycomb. *And in their hearts*

holds its hundred orchids  
until their purple-black lips  
split like figs: Against  
the boucle breasts of bees,  
we would like to hold  
our cheek, lower a curtain  
of hair to the buckle of dirt  
the dead heave, *completely under  
the earth but for the writing.*

the pink capitulum

## To Speak at Length, To Unburden.

—for Derek

Radio, soft. Radio, soft.

Milk. Drip. Plum.

Where is your treasure?  
In the madness, of course.  
And yours?  
And yours?

Wind the violins,  
tune the clocks.

Time. Time, and give.

Alight.

Red-haired boy. Red-haired girl.  
They are not together  
except they are

as two birds on a wire.  
Same wire.

Red-haired boy. Red-haired girl.  
Red dreams

pomegranate  
and book cover,

ginger  
winter-fire  
name—

sleep sound in your red hair  
that you wear

like halos of hum.

## What Rings But Can't Be Answered

You are as beautiful as a telephone,  
colors of bone and rocket ship and cocktail lounge.

Moon, why do you turn your fallow cheek at me?

*Hmm*, says the neon sign, starting  
an unfinishable thought.

Where do we go from here?

I am a balloon, each minute you don't call  
is a breath you blow into me.

The clock tisk-tisks my lack of restraint.

I want to be the crackers in your soup.  
I want to be your brass compass.  
Oh, mister, just thinking about you curls the ends of my hair.

Moon, you old spinster, don't you mock me  
with your pockmarks and your slow, slow travels.

Moon, what would you know, cold as cheese?

Behind a far-off door, a thought about me is being formed  
out of nothing but light.

*Hmm*. Tisk! Tisk!

And when that phone does ring,  
I'm gonna light up like a kite, a crackerjack, a pie plate, a peony, a piccolo—  
I'm gonna pop my cork  
and spill.

## This Colossus

I'll tell you about my son.

He won't run marathons on two continents—say, Boston and Sydney—because he isn't alive anymore. He lies on a clear acrylic 20x32 bed under a translucent nylon shroud, and he won't write a television show or have an effect or principle named after him, because he's no longer breathing. He won't marry young or divorce twice, or ever be touched by a woman other than his mother, maybe a nurse or two. He wooed all the girls on the ward, the rogue—his member no more than a little incongruous fold. But he'll only kiss his mother, and just once, the warm wet gesture, because he's still now, a great weight of breath collapsed out of him, the constant awful noise of his organs drawn away like an abandoned siege. He won't make a son of his own—can't make a son, he isn't alive.

But there was a moment or two when he was.

Seems distant, now, the thrill, the dash—half-dreamt it feels, half-unreal. Anticipation, a word forever and ever without meaning again. I held him. I held that boy. He won't found a city, and there won't be a skyscraper—but I held him, dear God.

A feeling so vast it's perverse.

And I don't recognize that man, the man with the silly voice, the silly smile, the goo-goo language, the warm ball carried around in his gut—this word: dad dad daddy dad. And I held my boy, that boy. I'm a dad for good, you can't undo a thing like that, but I'll never talk that way again. I can never hold my head that high. I'll never leap out of bed.

Let me tell you about my son.

He's about fourteen inches long, like a demi-baguette. He never did much. He didn't have a terrible lot of time. He did enough, I feel, and I don't want anything from him—I'll never need anything from you, son, but that you . . . That you just be the most you possibly can be at all times.

What can I tell you about him? He looks like me. And he looks like his mother, more like his mother's father, actually. Beautiful lady she is. Lean and outrageously strong. Strong in a secret way. Internally.

Like you.

What can I tell you about him, I don't know. He's beautiful, I haven't ever seen anything appropriate to compare. And that beauty isn't just him—even though he is that goddamn beautiful. His beauty is this great big hot exploding fact, in me, in dad. He's supposed to define every significant thing I ever do, and he does, and he will. He stands in every comparison. That's apt, goddamnit. And just.

You are just that goddamn beautiful, son. What can I say?

Words aren't possible. These do nothing.

He won't tell jokes, won't laugh at bad jokes—of dad, I'm afraid not. I'm a afraid not. A frayed not. I'm a frayed knot.

Ha ha, no. No Dad, no. No Daddy no.

I want words, this feeling, perverse, larger than Earth, wants words. I want words. No first words. No museum wing named for, newly discovered straits named for, no element named for, no element, wind—quietus—and eternity—no names or words.

Chap chap chap chap—little chap, my son—Auggie my son—no girls, no triples, outs at home, no bucket of balls, no tooth fairy, no sons of your own. Back to nothing, like bread baked of dust.

Wordless, a reel of gauzy images inheres: screams, breaths, an unlabeled fear—the Chronicles of You—three hours or so, an outrageously significant life you led.

My son my son.

Your mother looks just like you. In the corner of my eye she is you, small, a loaf of softness—a quiet, dying pain. And I can't look on her directly.

My son my son.

You came and went, came and went. Like a bachelor, like a scamp. Like *Dad*.

And what you took with you . . .

My utter pride and utter joy, overweening overwrought overdone overblown and blown-over. You own them outright, my boy. Yours to keep.

What a devastating heft and a devastating width you achieved, what a devastating joy you arrived with. And then took away with you.

It is a marvel. Even a marvel.

I've left your mother for awhile. We don't need to be around each other for a time. Temporary separation, *contretemps*—a great ever and ever undifferentiated by significance, washed through and ruined with a love big as agony, an *agon*, irresistible—I'm an assistant professor, a less-than-nothing—and there will never be a library wing, my son my son. Never an eponymous anthology.

A negative love, so so much less-than-nothing—a desolation, a brevity, a beyond words—a life.

It is a marvel, my boy. Even a goddamn marvel.

## The Haul and What You're Pulling Still

When you were just a little shaver  
did you pull a wagon through the woods?

When the tongue broke off, did you decide  
to slide it in the open mouth

of a tree, as if the tree were a giant  
standing on his head and yawning,

the branches like a set of toes  
tickling the muddy bottom

of the sky? When you set that rusty tongue  
as firm as a conviction nested

in the wooden mouth, did you expect  
the tree to speak? Was there a word

you wanted? What was that word? Was it  
hello? What else could it have said?

When the tongue sat still, when your sister whined  
and kicked the floor of the wagon, did you

unbuckle your belt and make a lark's head  
around the wagon's bloody throat?

When you hauled her home, was the name of God  
like a pebble in your mouth? Did you spit

it out like a man and sing a song,  
a railroad song about a man

who out-hammered a machine before  
he died? Did you think that man looked like

a black tongue stuck in a stony mouth?  
Whose mouth would that have been? And now

that you are grown can you answer any  
of these questions better than you could

back then? Are you ever sure you spit  
that pebble out, or do you feel it

sharply now beneath your tongue?  
What is the word you have become?

## The Man Who Couldn't Synthesize to Save His Life

Let's get him liquored up and see  
how smart he thinks he is, let's tell  
him God

to his question about crows, who heard  
the drunken oaths and left for shame  
his name

how long he can drag the devil by  
that tail of his—forever if  
it is

You never know with him, he's such  
a troubled man. Don't think his laugh  
is just

that it is hiding whatever he  
has need to hide. It must be sad,  
so sad

he's probably to blame, he's got  
a dirty hand or two. Let's get  
him drunk

his mouth gets loose, he might decide  
to talk; it would be fun to see  
him cry

he mumbles just before. You can't  
make heads or tails of him, he's like  
the sky

about the time he's ready for  
the third of three connected thoughts  
he goes

wherever—who knows—to think about  
the trinity, that twisted branch  
with leaves.

---

BETH BACHMANN

## Joyous Mystery

It's not until the seventeenth century that ecstasy becomes rapture, a carrying off.  
Prior to this, it is frenzy and displacement, void of the divine.

In the warehouses of the nineteen-nineties, ecstasy reclaimed the easy pleasure  
of astonishment, an abandonment of the physical frame.

This morning the century shifts.

Envision this:

your body is warm, your movement evinces instinct,  
someone is touching you, asking if you've accepted your savior?

## Luminous Mystery

Darwin describes the death of God as the coming of light.

This happens slowly: a scaffold of singed paper

before it blackens; copper beneath corrosion;

the acoustics of the finch's song after a tear

in its vocal tract. Forget what you've been told.

Love is not immutable.

See this handful of birds I release on the church steps?

I do this to remind you.

## Seventeen Fences

### I.

If you have an old map, you might still find Farland, North Dakota: the sod post office writhing with moles; the Wagon Wheel Inn, glass shot out of each pane, open front doorway choked by a knot of tumbleweeds. And if you care to stop and untangle the years, you'll find the last great boom when the price of wheat was up, cattle prices up, even water in the rain gauge up.

When farmers finally quit or die, no one's waiting to move in. Homesteads are half standing, faded and peeled, thrashed by rain, hail and decay. Six months a year snow blows through empty windows.

Come winter, one of the nine surviving families will lose to the bank or a corporate farm. The rest hang on, plugging holes in windows where wind leaks in; singing hymns in church on the Sundays their minister can make the trip from Dickinson, and numbing themselves at the Long X—the bar owner, like the farmers, losing more each year.

Sometime this winter an abandoned house in town will buckle, lurch to the side, and lean closer to the ground.

### II.

The only child of homesteaders, I was born near the rim of the Badlands. In a cabin north of town, darkened by clouds of locusts mowing wheat fields to dirt, eating the straw from our broom. Soil dry as gunpowder, I still see cracks spider-webbing across the yard between our house and barn, where the snowy owl nested in the loft.

### III.

The first notes at the end of the drought needled our faces with ice as we fled to the house. Snow that followed erased horizons, and a cloud

swallowed grain bins across the yard. For three days storm shutters knocked against windows, opaque with frost. Most of our cattle huddled in the barn. The dead—the ones not torn to scraps and dragged into coyote dens—lie scattered across the pasture early next spring.

In a sandstone coulee that summer, I found the last body, nearly stumbled over the steer's skeleton, a family of rattlers nesting in the ribcage.

## IV.

I was twelve when my mother got sick. And I knelt by her bed. One night her eyes dulled as dusk pulled the light from that room. The sun sank, purpled the western sky, and sometime before dawn I dreamt a swarm of red-winged blackbirds rose from the fields. Eclipsed the stars and the moon.

## V.

That battered truck was packed with a mattress in the back the day I left, sunlight knocking on the windshield. Each morning moving north the road stretched out and laughed, miles unraveling stitch by stitch, no place wide enough to turn around.

Then nightfall. Sleeping with old lovers who turned to blankets at sunrise.

## VI.

I'd left because nothing's heavier than dirt and cattle. Except memory. The old man never forgave me.

## VII.

Stranded on a mountain, hundreds of miles away, a dwindling supply of food in a storm that took orders from the devil and might blow forever.

One morning I woke and didn't hear sleet. One morning the sun was out, and I thought I'd gone mad. If I was among the Ancients, I know

what I'd build altars to. And I know if I had time between hunts and a hard chunk of coal what I'd draw on rocky cave walls.

VIII.

Three miles across the frozen lake, and I realize halfway I forgot the old-timer's warning: *At twenty below you still remember the good times, but at fifty even God has fled.* I feel it today—the shortening of step when joints freeze and blood thickens, how this cold seeps in, lulling me toward muffled dreams of endless birch stacks. All I want is to lie down and close my eyes when coming around the cove, through the fog of dimming sight, I spot my neighbors' cabin and, curling toward the sky like long, twisted fingers, the smoke of their fire.

IX.

Not many shots before your mind rides its whiskey through canyons and over mountains you'll never see again, flows back through miles and years to that Dakota bar where you met her. How many blacked-out nights did you drive those gravel roads home, wrestling the wheel and finding ditches more easily than the road? Same reason you sit here now, in the Yukon Bar.

A few more and maybe tonight you'll be able to sleep, enough whiskey to silence any echoes from deserted canyons.

X.

She used to waitress at the Chuckwagon. Coffee breaks she'd write me poetry on the back of used guest checks, her love for me under a smudge of ketchup, on the other side of someone's eggs-over-easy, side of bacon and toast.

XI.

Up here summer swings open on hinges and a bear steps out, dazed, rubbing winter eyes when a cloud of sparrows swims overhead, sucked up into the sun. Everywhere buds burst from branches and sprouts overtake

retreating snow. It's a continual day in which everything must happen before the swing back to darkness and moonlight, when the bear stumbles home drunk on blueberries and snow geese glide south.

The last thing summer will see through its faded window is the shadow of a moose beneath a ribbon of green light.

## XII.

Years passed.

I was in town for the mail when I found the letter from my uncle. The funeral was in a week.

## XIII.

Between Alaska and Dakota there are only seventeen fences, four hundred and sixty mountain peaks rising from tundra, dozens of salmon-choked streams. There are sixty-eight towns, three hundred frozen lakes, two hundred and twenty-one memories—a runaway mother, a father's fist. You pass a younger, stronger man heading north. Fields of snowdrift and rock, graveyards, churches, a broken windmill rattling in a rusted sunset.

Finally you come to a farm: halfway up, the driveway splits a windbreak whose dead trees and bare branches do anything but stop wind, and rises to the yard where the combine, arthritic, leans on flat tires, broken axle, joints and moving parts crawling with rust. The tractor, tied to the earth by a tangle of weeds, one cracked headlight staring wall-eyed to the east. And the barn—missing planks, rotted foundation—leans on wind without falling.

## XIV.

Near the middle of the graveyard, a small metal marker with my father's name sticks in the sod. A teenager could pull it out barehanded on a bet. It's surrounded by granite headstones of bankers who foreclosed on him, oil-rich farmers who took half our land: Fleck, Skaar, Bredwick, Olson.

Their stones throw shadows on my feet.

XV.

The girl from the Chuckwagon is a woman now. Married and divorced before me, she tends our garden each morning, cans the best fruit for grandchildren.

As my tractor makes furrows, hawks circle overhead, waiting for me to scare out a field mouse or a jackrabbit.

XVI.

Rocks have a way of rising to the surface. All my life stones were hefted, lugged to piles and dropped. Field after field, Dad and I lifted stones. Each year, after working the earth, more appeared.

My father fell in the north field—hands dirty, heart tight. I'll move granite for the rest of my days and die, maybe the same way, a thousand stones beneath me, creeping toward the surface.

XVII.

The Farland Lutheran Church stands eight miles down a dirt path. It's been twelve years since the final sermon when the last family lost their land and the preacher moved west. One day a truckload of teenagers sped by in a cloud of red dust, the buckshot of their twelve gauges darkening the sockets of two front windows, which swallows found their way through.

As I walk in, light stabs holes in a roof that once kept hail and wind out, held hopes of rain and climbing cattle prices. A bible splayed in the corner and pews could be used again if someone cleared the rubble. I walk over to look at the pulpit, and when I tap it with my boot a half-dozen prayers startle up from behind and flap into the light.

## Elegy

Listening to the children while growing cold  
on the beach—  
something about a hurricane crossing  
over Cuba on the black shellac radio.

Think of inflating balloons  
and a yellow birthday cake  
with a mule fly shocked  
and dying in equal parts  
of sugar and paraffin whisked  
into a troubled sea of egg-whites  
and berries gathered by the children  
on the hill this morning.

The brother said to his sister  
*you idiot*  
*bring the colander here*  
*this minute*  
*before I spill them.*

The desert city  
falling away from its own noise.

I look out over the coal barge  
while listening to the green waves  
eating away at the road's  
unlikely culvert. It is these minimal  
dog-like irises  
that are our vindication.

They'll stand in a blue bottle  
next to the cake— while  
the drunk uncle fingers them  
singing happy birthday  
to Arafat. He's blotto. A ghost  
of a man  
who actually fell rushing a sniper's nest  
in a wet potato field outside Tiberius.

The small boy has mangled  
my irises. They are on the sand. And  
his sister is collecting flies  
in the blue bottle.

The sun is setting.  
I look into it and say, "Ishmael,  
how could you be dead—  
you were still a kid  
when I last spoke to you?"

The consequences of saying this are  
not negligible—the flowers  
strewn everywhere beneath a picnic table.

## Obedient Fleet

### I.

A crane in the sky, a table cutting the shadow  
exactly in half. A man with earphones writing  
in a notebook, dirt bike leaning up against the wall.

A beer truck in the fire-lane and the drugstore owner  
runs to the curb to scream. The sidewalk three squares deep.

“Oncore” reads the banner flat against the crane’s  
long horizontal arm, the jib that carries the weight  
where the trolley runs, or it glides, as called

by the man working the switch in the sky.  
“At least strive for glee,” comes a voice  
from the corner. Blue latticework hangs

new angles, blue ladders cutting the brightening sky.  
White stars burning on the chrome of the fenders.

### II.

Supple enough for springing on fish, the bent heron neck  
looks ancient as driftwood. Today it’s so flat—

the water a plank pushing up at the land. The water  
when the hurricane came had overwhelmed the point.

We leave for lunch and after lunch the fig-tree, the locust  
and the old persimmon. Because it is close enough  
to summer, the cushions left out on the porch.

Then dusk and the hazel-colored animals slip back  
to dark mazes cut through the trees. That was how we grew up—

the southern maple there in the boxwood border,  
ivy under the porch and further out the rows  
of summer corn and on top of those a powder-light dirt.

“Distract me” is an unfair request. They are calling

in cranes to lift the houses onto stilts. Most often the crews  
arrive at night. When they hike these river houses up  
the force of the wind sweeping beneath them is heavy.

### III.

Close up the crane is only a matter of fact.

Arriving folded on a flat-bed truck, hydraulically it extends  
up into night. The crew arrives early to attach bright banners  
to the surrounding chain-link fence so that the kids can't look.

The crane is a landmark where two crows stop and rest.

When the crane arm moves on the sky, parceling the blue  
into uneven shapes, it is both bird and machine so fast and effortless.

Imagine this arm resting out over an ocean, or above a field

where it works like a mirror catching the smallest of flowers  
lost there in the long grass and in the dampening clover.

IV.

"No, I cannot feel the wind on my face unless sometimes  
I crack the cab window and the thinnest sheet of new air  
reels in the space—

No, they trained me on a simulator  
and by now I'm used to it. Raise and lower the boom and wind  
northeasterly. Dull headache usually after one in the afternoon.  
Unwind the side that raises and rotate the cab as radio drops  
through and the truck in the corner heads left for the mound.

That's how it goes. I fly and I look. I don't go down for lunch.  
Only once will I climb the switchback-style ladders to sit here  
all day on a spot in the sky.

Yes, my father also operated a crane  
and as a boy I often dreamt of the view that he would not show to me.

This work is very dangerous. I sip my fountain drink through a straw.  
I keep a tiny origami bird folded from fuchsia-rosebud paper—  
a kind of luck, I guess. No, I do not know what my mother thinks  
and I cannot imagine history—

just days building on days.  
I never know if I am home or how I am. Maybe you will tell me?"

V.

We finish our drinks on the balcony looking out to the horizon  
where a gauzy white band rests as if holding off

some larger weight—and we are hooked. This is how night works  
in the city where the sky is more blue than black. Picturesque  
or else foreboding. We are not thinking of the club room inside.

We have forgotten the fake portraits, the pool table, and the bar.

There is a construction site directly below us where the buildings  
are still cross-sections. Inside of the silver girders because the bulbs  
are left burning, we think of wiring and somehow the texture of dirt.

Otherwise night looks neat enough.

The wind has stopped and each one of the crane arms aim out  
in the same direction, still enough to be boats moored in a harbor  
or maybe a group of birds in migration. Obedient fleet.

Eight steel boxes hang from invisible wires, safe-keeping  
the men's equipment, I guess, and whether it is the heaviness  
and precision or how still they are stopped, I can't tell—

the world the farthest away I have known.

## Pare

Strip off the estrogen patch and the world is as gray as the aqua door, across the pool, that refuses to open, sitting like a strip of warped cement reflecting the covered sky; raw as a dream: parking lot, grocery store, everyone guiding their carts with the furious purpose of cars, women's hair pulled out of faces, pupils set like scared dolls' eyes, and then that man clamped on to the empty grocery cart that's skidding, horizontal, off its wheels toward the door that will open in the blink of an electric eye (face a spasm) (all in a matter of seconds)—and when I enter the store, a woman holding a clipboard asks if *I'm* all right.

So maybe this is a way not to lie—like the woman online who says after her *heart chakra was opened* she could not stop weeping. As though we should.

A screen in every parlor like a huge, blank eye.

## Equus Ferus

Off to the side of the road, still foraging in stricken light. Duns polished by sleight of moon to sheen, they were flanked by stands of untricked trees, trunk and tethered shadow. Scant in forelock and mane, wild in the slanthatching of their ribs, they roved less as animal than as the hunger I knew as mine. There I said it, remaining on road, a horse, three horses, in my throat. Hooves in heather or dwarf bamboo—which growth, I could not summon by the hoofsound parting. Slip, slip and the branch articulate. Slip, slip and the shrub made whole. What shape made a breath, a muzzle, and of which horse? All that was left me was road, rapt as trunkshadow by ground and leaving. Where should I wake in the evening of wild horses, and why say bamboo if I want proximity to satisfaction? And there I asked it of legless duns by distance darkness made.

## Letter to the Soft-Handed Bartender

Goodnight, I write by way of salutation, wavering in your eyeway like a one-screw-gone stool, fumbling for valediction. Picking the tallest place to perch, I spun. All skirt. My flounce wears me these days, weirder, weirder, but do this drinker one more favor: Tell me I'm ringing the tiny metal triangle of recollection in your solar plexus. Me, your sober angel with an unkempt eye. Tell me that night I needed a place to rest my gaze, a vanishing point in something other than a mirror, lines to converge. Caricatures, coffee urns, a window cut out of an interior wall: each fixed object proffered, relentlessly, reflection. Recollect me, still worrying about what my hips shimmy me into—like a boilermaker, Bartender, boilermaker. Because no one I know, not even you, can promise not to forget a red book on a train. Each thing we let vanish is one more percussive, a cobblestone dislodged. I worry until I cannot recall the names of any flaming cocktails at all and still, the water waits the way it waited that night, like a woman. Beyond the concrete ramp and padlocked gate, the chain-link fence and the raspy grass that loves the fence, if I could force you to follow me, I would force you to promise me something else. That night the ocean smelled like the ocean smells hemispheres away from wherever it was I followed you to.

## Miami Now

A girl wild with sun and cocktails has stripped  
herself and stands on the bow of a boat.

Her ponytail is high and tight.

She waves to the bargemen, she waves to the tollmen,  
she waves to all of us on the causeway.

She is to me like a stalk of blood.

I once let a person I hate run a finger down  
my collarbone. He was warm as a ham. Who are you  
when you find yourself butterflied on a board?

You know what that is, right? To get butterflied.  
I put on a t-shirt so he could take my picture against  
a cool white fence, looking bored or strangled. Nobody

wants it as bad as me, I'll do anything. Bathe in horse blood  
and hang out by the high school, passing out flyers in a cone  
of flies. I am thinking of someone digging a hole. (My thinking

is wet and billowy.) Sometimes when the crack of light  
closes I see a young body drift beneath the hull of a party boat.

It's bloated. It's barnacled. The bridgeworkers are cheering,  
and I'm cheering too.

## Oso

They wheel in the bear.  
An arrow leans out of his skull like a partyhat  
and he grows cold in a paper horn threnody,

the sounds of confetti.

His black claw at rest on the sheet.

This is my way of saying *I wish I were tight.*  
*Smoke over asphalt with a tongue around my shoulders.*  
*All zaned out, with big black grapes.*

But

I am a person in a wig of glass and plastic.  
I am a person in a pig helmet.

In a shot of me: a frazzled dotty woman rows  
a bowl over wavelets. She thinks the way a bear  
must think, watching its body leave its bear suit  
in the mud. When he saw them descend with their gold spikes  
and whistles, did time do as they say it does  
and stretch into blessed silk, twisting and singing  
as it grows long and thin? Beneath the scarf, the eye  
is a red red ball

burning

the way trash burns.

If I kill you, for example, it's because you're multiplying.  
In the under-smell of oranges, an envelope snaps out whitely.  
The man presiding has battery-operated hair with  
pink and silver frogs jumping around in it. His legs are long  
gold poles and I trace the pork of his oblique. I insert the tip  
of a scissor, I salivate in his eye. *Give me the bear. Give him to me.*  
Let the mountain grow small behind us. Let the watchers watch  
with love. When I do wrong, grab me and hurl me into the trees.  
When I do wrong, file this shard in my ear. Take note:  
the body will burgeon. The body will roll into the walk-in freezer.  
Meat for the babes. Meat for a century. Meat for those of us still  
shagging in the alleys and the fields.  
A glandular someone attached itself to me,  
wine leaking from its piercings. As the giganti-cage came after me,  
the banshee mouth crashing blackly, I was naked beneath the smoke.  
I was not afraid. I was asleep, and therefore rolling in satin.  
The satin they call silverwood, the satin they call glandular.  
There is no link to disaster.  
Touch me with your dirty finger  
and let the finale begin. In a cave, with a small fire.  
The shapes of carnivore-a-go-go run amuck on the cold stone walls.

## Donald Barthelme's "Secret Vice"

Are we supposed to take Donald Barthelme seriously as an artist? As a *visual* artist?

When asked to define postmodernism, many of us are reduced to a stutter. Instead of being able to articulate the concept for what it is, we characterize it as an accretion of themes or techniques, and most popular among the techniques is collage. (Barthelme critics make their living on these characterizations. See Nicholas Sloboda's "Heteroglossia and Collage: Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*.")

But Donald Barthelme made real, *literal* collages. Over his twenty-seven year career, he wrote a number of "collage stories"—"Adventure," "At the Tolstoy Museum," "The Dassaud Prize," "The Educational Experience," "The Emerald" (which appeared as a collage story in a 1980 Sylvester & Orphanos reprint), "The Flight of Pigeons from The Palace," "The Inauguration," "A Nation of Wheels," "Natural History," "The Show," "The Story Thus Far"—as well as a National Book Award-winning children's tale, *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine*. If one stripped Barthelme's words away, would the collages survive on their own? Would we consider Barthelme a serious collagist, on par with Elaine Lustig Cohen, Max Ernst, or Kurt Schwitters?

A note of disclosure: Barthelme himself didn't take the work all that seriously. As Thomas Pynchon tells us in *The Teachings of Don B.*, Barthelme referred to collage work as his "secret vice." In a 1981 interview with J. D. O'Hara, when asked which individual critics, if any, had helped his work, Barthelme said:

Diane Johnson, in the course of an extremely kind review of *Great Days*, said that the book had this, that, and *no pictures*. I had done a number of pieces combining text with collages, Max Ernst collages, really, and I hadn't realized that the combination had worn out its welcome so completely.

I therefore went back into the closet with the collages. Although sometime I'd like to do an entire collage-novel, as Ernst did, just for the exercise.

Listening to him tell it, Barthelme's collage stories are almost juvenilia. The man seems downright apologetic about them, as if he got caught having too much fun. No stranger to the art world, perhaps Donald Barthelme was envious of sculptors, painters—how they created an immediate impact, or what he called a “beautifully realized whole that can be taken in at a glance and yet still be studied for a long time.” (Fiction, after all, is by nature chronological. A painting can hit you faster than a sneeze.) He directed Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum in 1961-62, wrote catalog copy for the likes of Sherrie Levine and Robert Rauschenberg, and even collaborated with Jim Love on *The Rook's Progress* (1988). So it's not hard to imagine him with an artist's aspirations. In a 1980 interview with Larry McCaffery, Barthelme said of the collages, “I think I was trying to be a painter, in some small way. Probably a yearning for something not properly the domain of writers.”

Yet Barthelme's collage stories are more than just a curiosity. Consider “The Educational Experience”:

Music from somewhere. It is Vivaldi's great work, *The Semesters*.

The students wandered among the exhibits. The Fisher King was there. We walked among the industrial achievements. A good-looking gas turbine, behind a velvet rope. The manufacturers described themselves in their literature as “patient and optimistic.” The students gazed, and gaped. Hitting them with ax handles is no longer permitted, hugging and kissing them is no longer permitted, speaking to them is permitted but only under extraordinary circumstances.

These words sit next to a collage—a Rube Goldbergian gas turbine of Barthelme's own making (see page 182). Later passages are flanked by a

man in a white fedora, jesters, Grecian urns, a lute, and Richard Nixon. One quickly understands that “The Educational Experience”—and, in fact, each of Barthelme’s collage stories—is something of a guided tour. Barthelme acts as a wry, methodical docent. He shuttles us through the exhibits, peppering as he goes with bits of exposition. And at first this seems to be a comedic device. (Picture-and-punchline is a staple of late-night television.) But lines like “Hitting them with ax handles is no longer permitted, hugging and kissing them is no longer permitted, speaking to them is permitted but only under extraordinary circumstances,” which may at first seem absurdly funny, turn out to be moral. Barthelme’s “The Educational Experience” confronts what is education, and what is punishment. There’s a reason that Richard Nixon presides over it all.

The collage story isn’t inherently a novelty act. In fact, stories like “The Educational Experience” and “At the Tolstoy Museum” are almost monolithic in their pathos. The latter of these begins “At the Tolstoy Museum we sat and wept. Paper streamers came out of our eyes.” After considering the position of pictures on the wall, the speaker posits, “I don’t think you can peer into one man’s face too long—for too long a period. A great many human passions could be discerned, behind the skin.” There are, too, a great many human passions in these stories, and they are passions treated *sincerely*. (There’s a word we *don’t* throw around in our stammerings on the postmodern.)

But what about the collages themselves, absent of context? In “Being Bad,” his essay on Robert Rauschenberg, Barthelme writes:

If the basic principle of collage is the juxtaposition of unlike things within a visual field (in Rauschenberg’s case, most often what Leo Steinberg has aptly termed the ‘work surface picture plane’), [Rauschenberg] need in theory only find stranger and stranger things and build not-quite-decipherable rebuses from them. The theory is straightforward enough but, of course, inadequate. It ignores the true source of this artist’s power, which lies in the mystery of particular choices.

This is an essential clarification, one that Barthelme criticism has been unable (or unwilling) to accept. Yes, on a structural level, collages rely on juxtaposition, disruption, shock. Yet they live on because of their content—that “mystery of particular choices”—and not the initial collision. They live on because of what they collide.

And this is why Donald Barthelme, as a collagist, rewards our attention. He clipped images from *1800 Woodcuts by Thomas Bewick and his School*, from Stella Blum’s *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper’s Bazaar: 1867–1898*, and from JoAnne C. Day’s *Decorative Silhouettes of the Twenties for Designers and Craftsmen*. He made use of cartouches and decorative small frames, Victorian stencils, ornaments, French advertisements, and floral engravings. *The Teachings of Don B.*, the posthumous collection which contains most of his collage stories, is a trove of epauletted shoulders, men on horseback, steel-belt radials, and smoldering ashes; it is also a home to *Venus de Milo*, cherubim, and girls in sashes. And it is in the mystery of *these* particular choices that we see Donald Barthelme’s project as a visual artist.

The collages, after all, are preoccupied with civility. Whether an image comes to us from Greco-Roman culture, Napoleonic France, or Victorian London, it often possesses in and of itself a measure of eloquence. Armies stay in lockstep. The beasts in “Natural History” are fixed in profile—a turbot, a porcupine, the world’s most baroque rhinoceros. Barthelme fetishizes the things from pre-modern worlds, as they have somehow managed to retain their grace.

Yet Barthelme’s collages are *not* graceful. If anything, seen in juxtaposition with one another, they show us the wildness beneath their dignity—or perhaps the dignity that comes with wildness. Consider “The Emerald” collage (on page 177). A man in white gloves, vest, and cape; his posture upright. Yet Barthelme swaps out his head for a “primitive” woodcut, then poses him in front of a rodent. Somehow, there is dignity in that rodent—even with its penetrating eye, pupil shrunk down to a pinprick. Somehow, for all the formalwear and gait, there is wildness in that man.

Though Barthelme himself thought of his collages as derivative—

“Ernst more than Schwitters,” he said—the works seem fresher than that, a departure from Ernst’s collage novels *Les Malheurs des Immortelles* (*Misfortune of the Immortals*), *La Femme 100 Têtes* (*The Hundred-Headless Woman*), and *Une Semaine de Bonté* (*A Week of Kindness*). Ernst, after all, sets his figures amid lush surroundings. He gives them landscape and scene. Every inch of an Ernst collage is populated as it radiates out toward the frame. But Barthelme leaves things sparse, disjunctive. He does not diffuse the tension.

In the end, Barthelme’s collages depict for us a heterogloss era different from the one in which we live. His is a nostalgic saturation, one of Roaring ’20s ad copy, arabesques, and Van Dyck beards. For all of its repression and priggishness, it teems under the surface with eros and rage. Or, maybe it’s correct to say that for all the wild rage and lawlessness, there is a desperation to be moral. We recognize the tension—civility, wildness. But as Barthelme shows it to us, we can’t be sure which came first. Are we wild at heart, yet yearning to be civil? Are we civil at heart and yearning to be defiled? That inability to know may be our most postmodern characteristic of all.

## The Art of Don B.



Propane and used as for panels, etc. 2 1/2 x 4 1/2  
used for the original picture  
The picture is also for

10 1/2



Thompson 8 1/2 x 11

10 1/2

Propane and used as for panels, etc.  
used for the original picture

3 3/4

Donald Barthelme

**THE SLIGHTLY IRREGULAR  
FIRE ENGINE**

or *The Hithering Thithering Djinn*

Farrar, Straus, Giroux · New York

1/4

# PERPENDICULARITY



*Laughed at by Plain Folks*

"Popper!" the pirate cried. "If I had my cutlass back, I'd show those skinny rascals something about cut-and-thrust!"

After lunch came the Entertainment. There were jugglers and clowns and elegant fencers and every kind of flowery flourishy foolbooriness.

"If there is anything better than lunch, it is Entertainment," the djinn said.

"A terrible storm arose, and a lady we had on board, a plundered lady, turned absolutely green."

"'Turn back!' she said to the captain. 'Turn back, or we are lost!'"

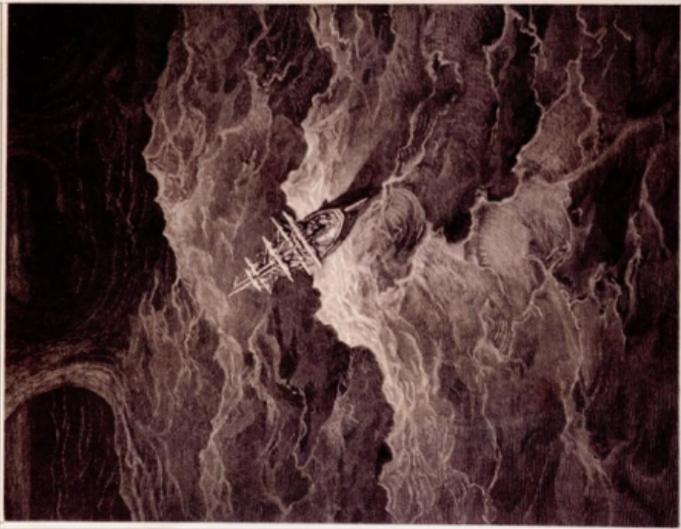
"'Turn back!' the captain swore. 'God rot me, madam, if in this wind I can turn any way at all!'"

"But we turned back. And the first crack out of the box we were overcome by a Chinese junk, eighty-eight guns, all of the latest make. That is why," the pirate said, "you see me here, killing."

"I like your horn!" Mathilda said.

#### ARCELYE HARBALIC JANCIERZETI

*The Ripply and the Ricks  
Nabobical Goleats and Kocumina with Will Sharts  
Thousandt, Ritz Belling, Star Belling*





# THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE



Fig. 6

Fig. 36



5176

Pl. 64



THE SONTAG DEFENSE COMMITTEE READIES ITSELF FOR BATTLE

McRae's

## The Art of Don B.

1. Collage from "The Emerald" [1979]
2. Panel #1 for *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine* [1971]
3. Panel #2 for *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine* [1971]
4. Panel #3 for *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine* [1971]
5. Panel for "The Show" [1970]
6. Collage #1 from "The Educational Experience" [1973]
7. Collage #2 from "The Educational Experience" [1973]
8. Flyer ("The Sontag Defense Committee Readies Itself for Battle")

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Photography by Daniel Stuyck. Special thanks to Marion Barthelme, Alison de Lima Greene, and Julie Grob for their assistance.

## Hymn

The pink troll of our decade snickers from under its bridge  
as the country goes crazy for jesus and the old men  
in the alley start to stink. I am humming under my breath in the key of doubt  
as you pray to the god of washrooms, make us clean.  
Each day's bitter ribbon and its calculus of light. I sing *o bastard of my heart  
be still*. Your god is the god of mirrors, and the house a paper wasp builds  
is paper. There are broken slats in every tiny thing. The pupa  
and its carapace. The celery salt, the stalk. The way my birchy skin  
peels off. Your hennaed hand. Your hand. How grief  
runs through me like a sack of eels. Silver and colloidal,  
the tides have seen us coming and turn back.  
Like them, our work is breakage. To plunder *to* from *fro*. Inside us  
something pliant, soiled, bearing the dent of thumbs.

## My Father's Car

At thirteen, Katie wears makeup the color of vinyl chairs. The teal of a dentist's waiting room. I like the way it looks when she's wet. On the curb outside a swimming pool, we wait for her mother to pick us up. When she does, we sit in the back seat and look forward. Both of us watching the same sky. On the way home, we stop to see her mother's brother. Katie's uncle. Who takes us down to the dead pig in his basement. White against a metal table, with dried blood on its eyes. He points at it with a can of beer in one hand. Laughing. Telling us, *It will taste good*. I close my mouth and watch the floor. Later, at Katie's, it's dark and she lights a cigarette in the backyard. Not believing I've never smoked a cigarette in my life. It tastes like a car's exhaust, and I hand it back to her.

*Here, I say. I don't want it.*

She inhales. The tip of the cigarette looks orange in the blue night. In a few minutes, her sister comes outside. Laughing. A glass jar in one hand.

She walks toward us, shaking the jar and smiling. *I'm gonna put it on his balls and suck his dick*, she says. Her boyfriend is waiting in the truck.

*What is it?* Katie says.

*Peppermint schnapps*, she says. Putting a finger on her lips. *Don't tell Mom and Dad.*

Katie smiles and says she won't. *Why do you need it?* she says.

*Are you serious? Do you two even know what it tastes like?*

We look at each other and shake our heads. *No*, we say. *What does it taste like?*

Her sister laughs. And then, *It sure as fuck doesn't taste as good as peppermint schnapps*. She runs toward the truck and drives away.

Inside, Katie says she has something to show me. We walk through the terra-cotta hallway to her parents' bedroom. Into a closet full of clothes and

piles of magazines. She turns on the light and opens one up. Unbuttoning her shirt and pulling out a breast that's bigger than my mother's.

*Do you think mine are better?* she says. Pointing to Miss August with her left hand. Miss August wants to be an actress and likes men who love their mothers. The light in her parents' closet is a soft yellow. I look at the floor and close my eyes.

*I don't know, I say. Maybe.*

Later, we're in the bedroom she shares with her sister. Her on her bed and me on her sister's bed. Who isn't there. And in our minds, has a mouth full of peppermint schnapps. Katie turns on the radio in the dark.

*I lied, she says. I know what it tastes like.*

For a second there's only music.

*That's okay, I say.*

In the morning, the sun is too bright. I walk to the driveway and wave at Katie on the porch. I open the door of my father's car. Inside, Steely Dan is telling Rikki not to lose that number. Like they always do. And my father is singing along. Like he always does. Drumming his fingers to the bass line and smiling.

## Fountain of the Planet of the Apes

They pulled each other from the water, one  
by one, slashed their webbed, wet fingers free  
on coral, and scraped off the few remaining scales.  
The scars of gills dissolved from their bare sides.

Their minds dried and took shape. They heaped the island  
with signs of their presence, totems of black onyx  
from dead volcanic vents. They prayed for children  
and children appeared miraculously inside them.

Everything was sacred: beetles, twilight, the law.  
Each year, they lit the incense fourteen times.  
They loved each other in ways now obvious, quaint,  
though others hated them for it and died bitterly

among shifting silk curtains and the odors of smallpox.  
Then nothing was sacred, and they filled the cattle-cars  
with bewildered people, mile upon mile, receding.  
A girl once told me these stories as we lay on her bed.

She said, "Our knowledge removes us from our past,"  
and I didn't say, "It also removes us from each other."  
I was unsure, in the end, whether it was even true  
and in the light of her room was afraid to make a mistake.

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ELLEN WEHLE

## Sharps

As for adoration's

Tools, a corner turned I can no longer

Bear the sight of them

Fruit knives, iris scissors

Needles winking with one eye

Implements of entry

Ushering the world—what's outside—

In keeping with the butcher's

Block that keens before

Each blow I face each morning: gull-cry

Sea stone calm

Cold rising off Salem Harbor, that same

Old problem rapture poses

If as they say the severed

Worm forgives the plough, how shall we

Understand ourselves—soft

Open hearts-as-mouths, devourers

Of the dark—a longing most

Alive cut to pieces

---

JOSHUA MARIE WILKINSON

## A Brief History of Sirens

consigned to what  
no registrar can call up

we are drowsier  
roused under  
the coiling  
wind

ready  
for sirens  
to quit  
carving up  
the city you

see somebody  
is gone  
&

the girl is neither  
home nor  
missing the  
lighthouse  
is

alive  
with termites &  
grassy light

## The Other Woman

The first time the professor called Mrs. Khanh by the wrong name was at a wedding banquet, a crowded affair of the kind they attended often, usually out of obligation. As the bride and groom approached their table, Mrs. Khanh noticed the professor reading his palms, where he'd jotted down his toast and the names of the newlyweds, whom they had never met. Leaning close to be heard over the chatter of four hundred guests and the din of the band, she found her husband redolent of well-worn paperbacks and threadbare carpet. It was a comforting mustiness, one that she associated with secondhand bookstores.

"Don't worry," she said. "You've done this a thousand times."

"Have I?" The professor rubbed his hands on his pants. "I can't seem to recall." His fair skin was thin as paper and lined with blue veins. From the precise part of his silver hair to the gleam on his brown oxfords, he appeared to be the same man who'd taught so many students he could no longer count them. During the two minutes the newlyweds visited their table, he didn't miss a beat, calling the couple by their correct names and bestowing the good wishes expected of him as the eldest among the ten guests. But while the groom tugged at the collar of his Nehru jacket and the bride plucked at the skirt of her empire-waist gown, Mrs. Khanh could only think of the night of the diagnosis, when the professor had frightened her by weeping for the first time in their four decades together. Only after the young couple left could she relax, sighing as deeply as she could in the strict confines of her velvet *ao dai*.

"The girl's mother tells me they're honeymooning for the first week in Paris." She spooned a lobster claw onto the professor's plate. "The second week they'll be on the French Riviera."

"Is that so?" Cracked lobster in tamarind sauce was Professor Khanh's favorite, but tonight he stared with doubt at the claw pointing towards him. "What did the French call Vung Tau?"

"Cap St. Jacques."

"We had a very good time there. Didn't we?"

"That's when you finally started talking to me."

"Who wouldn't be shy," the professor murmured. Forty years ago, when she was nineteen and he was thirty-three, they had honeymooned at a beachside hotel on the cape. It was on their balcony, under a full, bright moon, listening to the French singing and shouting on their side of the beach, that the professor had suddenly started talking. "Imagine!" he said, voice filled with wonder as he began speaking about how the volume of the Pacific equaled the moon's. When he was finished, he went on to talk about the strange fish of deep-sea canyons and then the inexplicability of rogue waves. If after a while she lost track of what he said, it hardly mattered, for by then the sound of his voice had seduced her, as reassuring in its measured tones as the first time she'd heard it, eavesdropping from her family's kitchen as he explained to her father his dissertation on the Kurishio Current's thermodynamics.

Now the professor's memories were gradually stealing away from him, and along with them the long sentences he once favored. When the band swung into "I'd Love You To Want Me," he loosened the fat Windsor knot of his tie and said, "Remember this song?"

"What about it?"

"We listened to it all the time. Before the children were born."

The song hadn't been released yet during her first pregnancy, but nevertheless, Mrs. Khanh said, "That's right."

"Let's dance." The professor leaned closer, draping one arm over the back of her chair. A fingerprint smudged one lens of his glasses. "You always insisted we dance when you heard this song, Yen."

"Oh?" Mrs. Khanh took a slow sip from her glass of water, hiding her surprise at being called someone else's name. "When did we ever dance?"

The professor didn't answer, for the swelling chorus of the song had brought him to his feet. As he stepped toward the parquet dance floor, Mrs. Khanh seized the tail of his gray pinstripe jacket. "Stop it!" she said, pulling hard. "Sit down!"

Giving her a wounded look, the professor obeyed. Mrs. Khanh was aware of the other guests at their table staring at them. She held herself very still, unable to account for any woman named Yen. Perhaps Yen was an old acquaintance (whom the professor never saw fit to mention); perhaps she was the maternal grandmother Mrs. Khanh had never met (and whose name she couldn't now recall); or perhaps Yen was a grade school teacher (with whom he'd once been infatuated). Mrs. Khanh had begun preparing for many things, but she hadn't gotten herself ready for unknown people emerging from the professor's mind.

"The song's almost over," the professor said.

"We'll dance when we get home. I promise."

Despite his condition, or perhaps because of it, the professor still insisted on driving them back. Mrs. Khanh was tense as she watched him handling the car, but he drove in his usual slow and cautious manner. He was quiet until he took a left at Golden West instead of a right, his wrong turn taking them by the community college from where he'd retired last spring. After coming to America, he'd been unable to find work in oceanography, and had settled for teaching Vietnamese. For the last twenty years, he'd lectured under fluorescent lighting to bored students. When Mrs. Khanh wondered if one of those students might be Yen, she felt a prick of pain that she mistook at first for heartburn. Only upon second thought did she recognize it as jealousy.

The professor suddenly braked to a stop. Mrs. Khanh braced herself with one hand against the dashboard and waited to be called by that name again, but the professor made no mention of Yen. He swung the car into a U-turn instead, and as they headed towards home, he asked in a tone of great

reproach, "Why didn't you tell me we were going in the wrong direction?" Watching all the traffic lights on the street ahead of them turn green as if on cue, Mrs. Khanh realized that his was a question for which she had no good answer.

The next morning, Mrs. Khanh was standing at the stove preparing brunch for their eldest son's visit when the professor came into the kitchen, freshly bathed and shaved. He took a seat at the kitchen counter, unfolded the newspaper, and began reading to her from the headlines. Only after he'd finished did she put a lid on the pot of *bun bo Hue* and begin telling him about last night's events. He'd asked her to remind him of those moments when he no longer acted like himself, and she had gotten as far as his lunge for the dance floor when the sag of his shoulders stopped her.

"It's alright," she said, alarmed. "It's not your fault."

"But can you see me on the dance floor at my age?" The professor rolled up the newspaper and rapped it against the counter for emphasis. "And in my condition?"

Taking out a small blue notebook from his shirt pocket, the professor retreated to the patio, where he was writing down his errors when Vinh arrived. Fresh from his graveyard shift at the county hospital, their son wore a nurse's green scrubs, which, shapeless as they were, did little to hide his physique. If only he visited his parents as much as he did the gym, Mrs. Khanh thought. The edge of her hand could have fit into the deep cleft of her son's chest, and her thighs weren't quite as thick as his biceps. Under one arm, he was carrying a bulky package wrapped in brown paper, which he propped against the trellis behind his father.

The professor slipped the notebook into his pocket and pointed his pen at the package. "What's the surprise?" he asked. While Mrs. Khanh brought out bowls of the soup she had worked on all morning, Vinh stripped off the wrapping to reveal a painting in a gilded frame. "It cost me a hundred dollars on Dong Khoi," he said. He had gone to Saigon on vacation last month.

"The galleries there can knock off anything, but it was easier to frame it here."

When the professor leaned forward to squint at the painting, the steam from his soup clouded his glasses. "There was a time when that street was called Tu Do," he remarked wistfully. "And before that, Rue Catinat."

"I hoped you'd remember," Vinh said, sitting down next to his mother at the patio table. Mrs. Khanh could tell that the subject of the painting was a woman, but one whose left eye was green and whose right eye was red, which was nowhere near as odd as the way the artist had flattened her arms and torso, leaving her to look less like a real person and more like a child's paper doll, cut out and pasted to a three-dimensional chair. "There's a new study that shows how Picasso's paintings can stimulate people like Ba," Vinh went on.

"Is that so?" The professor wiped the fog off his glasses with his napkin. Behind him was the scene to which Mrs. Khanh was now accustomed, an entrance ramp rising over their backyard and merging onto the freeway that Vinh would take home to Los Angeles, an hour north of their Westminster neighborhood. Her boys used to pass their afternoons spotting the makes and models of the passing cars, as if they were ornithologists distinguishing between juncos and sparrows. But that was a very long time ago, she thought, and Vinh was now a messenger dispatched by the rest of their six children.

"We think you should retire from the library, Ma," he said, scattering a handful of bean sprouts onto his soup. "We can send home enough money every month to cover all the bills. You can have a housekeeper to help you out. And a gardener, too."

Mrs. Khanh had never needed help with the garden, which was entirely of her own design. A horseshoe of green lawn divided a perimeter of persimmon trees from the center of the garden, where pale green cilantro, arrow-leaved basil, and Thai chilies grew abundantly in the beds she'd made for them. She plucked a sprig of mint from her bowl and rubbed it between

her fingers until she smelled its tang. When she was certain that she could speak without betraying her irritation, she said, "I like to garden."

"Mexican gardeners come cheap, Ma. Besides, you'll want all the help you can get. You've got to be ready for the worst."

"We've seen much worse than you," the professor snapped. "We're ready for anything."

"And I'm not old enough for retirement," Mrs. Khanh added.

"Be reasonable." Vinh sounded nothing like the boy who, upon reaching his teenage years, had turned into someone his parents no longer knew, sneaking out of the house at night to be with his girlfriend, an American who painted her nails black and dyed her hair purple. The professor remedied the situation by nailing the windows shut, a problem Vinh solved by eloping soon after his graduation from Bolsa Grande High. "I'm in love," Vinh had screamed to his mother over the phone from Las Vegas. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" Sometimes Mrs. Khanh regretted ever telling him that her father had arranged her marriage.

"You don't need the money from that job," Vinh said. "But Ba needs you at home."

Mrs. Khanh pushed away her bowl of soup, barely touched. She wouldn't take advice from someone whose marriage hadn't lasted more than three years. "It's not about the money, Kevin."

Vinh sighed, for his mother only used his American name when she was upset with him. "Maybe you should help Ba," he said, pointing to the front of his father's polo shirt, marred by a splash of red broth.

"Look at this," the professor said, brushing at the stain with his fingers. "It's only because you've upset me." Vinh sighed once more, but Mrs. Khanh refused to look at him as she dabbed a napkin in her glass of water. She wondered if he remembered their escape from Vung Tau on a rickety fishing trawler, overloaded with his five siblings and sixty strangers, three years after the war's end. After the fourth day at sea, he and the rest of the children, bleached by the sun, were crying for water, even though there was none to

offer but the sea's. Nevertheless, she had washed their faces and combed their hair every morning, using saltwater and spit. She was teaching them that decorum mattered even now, and that their mother's fear wasn't so strong that it could prevent her from loving them.

"Don't worry," she said. "The stain will come out." As she leaned forward to scrub the professor's shirt, Mrs. Khanh had a clear view of the painting. She knew she was supposed to admire it, but she had never liked Picasso's work. This painting, with the woman's eyes looking forth from one side of her face, did nothing to change her mind. The sight of those eyes made Mrs. Khanh so uneasy that later that day, after Vinh went home, she moved the painting to the professor's library, where she left it facing a wall.

It wasn't long after their son's visit that the professor stopped attending Sunday mass. Mrs. Khanh stayed home as well, and gradually they began seeing less and less of their friends. The only times she left the house were to go shopping or to the Garden Grove library, where her fellow librarians knew nothing of the professor's illness. She enjoyed her part-time job, ordering and sorting the sizeable collection of Vietnamese books and movies purchased for the residents of nearby Little Saigon, who, if they came to the library with a question, were directed to her perch behind the circulation desk. Answering those questions, Mrs. Khanh always felt the gratification that made her job worthwhile, the pleasure of being needed for only a brief amount of time.

When her shift ended at noon and she gathered her things to go home, she always did so with a sense of dread that shamed her. She made up for her shame by bidding goodbye to the other librarians with extra cheer, and by preparing the house for emergencies with great energy, as if she could forestall the inevitable through hard work. She marked a path from bed to bathroom with fluorescent yellow tape, so the professor wouldn't get lost at night, and, on the wall across from the toilet, she taped a sign at eye level that said FLUSH. She composed a series of lists which, posted strategically

around the house, reminded the professor what order to put his clothes on, what to put in his pockets before he left home, and what times of the day he should eat. But it was the professor who hired a handyman to install iron bars on the windows. "You wouldn't want me sneaking out at night," the professor said with resignation, leaning his forehead against the bars. "And neither would I."

For Mrs. Khanh, the more urgent problem was the professor coming home as a stranger. Whereas her husband was never one to be romantic, this stranger returned from one of the afternoon walks he insisted on taking by himself with a red rose in a plastic tube. He'd never before bought flowers of any sort, preferring to surprise her with more enduring presents, like the books he gave her every now and again, on topics like how to make friends and influence people, or income tax preparation. She never read past the title pages, satisfied at seeing her name penned in his elegant hand beneath those of the authors. But if the professor had spent his life practicing writing, he'd never given a thought to presenting roses, and when he bowed while offering her the flower, he appeared to be suffering from a stomach cramp.

"Who's this for?" she asked.

"Is there anyone else here?" The professor shook the rose for emphasis, and one of its petals, browning at the edges, fell off. "It's for you."

"It's very pretty." She took the rose reluctantly. "Where did you get it?"

"Mr. Esteban. He tried selling me oranges also, but I said we had our own."

"And who am I?" she demanded. "What's my name?"

He squinted at her. "Yen, of course."

"Of course." Biting her lip, she fought the urge to snap the head off the rose. She displayed the flower in a vase on the dining table for the professor's sake, but by the time she brought out dinner an hour later, he had forgotten he bought it. As he nibbled on blackened tiger shrimp, grilled on skewers, and on tofu shimmering in black bean sauce, he talked animatedly instead about the postcard they'd received that afternoon from their eldest daughter,

working for American Express in Munich. Mrs. Khanh examined the picture of the Marienplatz before turning over the postcard to read aloud the note, which remarked on the curious absence of pigeons.

"Little things stay with you when you travel," observed the professor, sniffing at the third course, a soup of bitter melon. Their children had never acquired the taste for it, but it reminded the professor and Mrs. Khanh of their own childhood.

"Such as?"

"The price of cigarettes," the professor said. "When I returned to Saigon after finishing my studies, I couldn't buy my daily Gauloise any longer. The imported price was too much."

She leaned the postcard against the vase, where it would serve as a memento of the plans they'd once made for traveling to all of the world's great cities after their retirement. The only form of transport Mrs. Khanh had ruled out was the ocean cruise. Open expanses of water prompted fears of drowning, a phobia so strong that she no longer took baths, and even when showering kept her back to the spray.

"Now why did you buy that?" the professor asked.

"The postcard?"

"No, the rose."

"I didn't buy it." Mrs. Khanh chose her words carefully, not wanting to disturb the professor too much, and yet wanting him to know what he had done. "You did."

"Me?" The professor was astonished. "Are you certain?"

"I am absolutely certain," she said, surprised to hear the tone of satisfaction in her voice.

The professor didn't notice. He only sighed and took out the blue notebook from the pocket of his shirt. "Let's hope that won't happen again," he muttered.

"I don't suppose it will." Mrs. Khanh stood to gather the dishes. She hoped her face didn't show her anger, convinced as she was that the

professor had intended the rose for this other woman. She was carrying four plates, the tureen, and both their glasses when, at the kitchen's threshold, the wobbling weight of her load became too much. The sound of silverware clattering on the tiled floor and the smash of porcelain breaking made the professor cry out from the dining room. "What's that?" he shouted.

Mrs. Khanh stared at the remains of the tureen at her feet. Three uneaten green coins of bitter melon, stuffed with pork, lay sodden on the floor among the shards. "It's nothing," she said. "I'll take care of it."

After he'd fallen asleep later that evening, she sat down at the desk in his library, where the painting was still propped facing the wall. The bookshelves lining the library had several hundred volumes in Vietnamese, French, and English. His ambition was to own more books than he could ever possibly read, a desire fueled by having left behind all his books when they had fled Viet Nam. Dozens of paperbacks cluttered his desk, and she had to shove them aside to find the notebooks where he'd been tracking his mistakes over the past months. He had poured salt into his coffee and sprinkled sugar into his soup; when a telemarketer had called, he'd agreed to five-year subscriptions for *Guns & Ammo* and *Playboy*, and one day he'd tucked his wallet in the freezer, giving new meaning to cold, hard cash, or so he'd joked with her when she discovered it. But there was no mention of Yen, and after a moment's hesitation, underneath his most recent entry, Mrs. Khanh composed the following: "Today I called my wife by the name of Yen," she wrote. She imitated the flourishes of the professor's penmanship with great care, pretending that what she was doing was for the professor's own good. "This mistake must not be repeated."

The following morning, the professor held forth his coffee cup and said, "Please pass me the sugar, Yen." The next day, as she trimmed his hair in the bathroom, he asked, "What's on television tonight, Yen?" As he called her by the other woman's name again and again over the following weeks, the question of who this woman was consumed her days. Perhaps Yen

was a childhood crush, or a fellow student of his graduate school years in Marseilles, or even a second wife in Saigon, someone he'd visited on the way home from the university, during those long early evening hours when he told her he was sitting in his office on campus, correcting student exams. She recorded every incident of mistaken identity in his notebooks, but the next morning he would read her forgings without reaction, and not long after would call her Yen once more, until she thought she might burst into tears if she heard that name again.

The woman was most likely a fantasy found by the professor's wandering mind, or so she told herself after catching him naked from the waist down, kneeling over the bathtub and scrubbing furiously at his pants and underwear under a jet of hot water. Glaring over his shoulder, the professor had screamed, "Get out!" She jumped back, slamming the bathroom door in her haste. Never before had the professor lost such control of himself, or yelled at her, not even in those first days after coming to Southern California, when they'd eaten from food stamps, gotten housing assistance from Section 8, and worn second-hand clothes donated by the parishioners of St. Alban's. That was true love, she thought, not giving roses but going to work every day and never once complaining about teaching Vietnamese to so-called heritage learners—immigrant and refugee students who already knew the language but merely wanted an easy grade.

Not even during the most frightening time of her life, when they were lost on the great azure plain of the sea, rolling unbroken to the horizon, did the professor raise his voice. By the fifth evening, the only sounds besides the waves slapping at the hull were children whimpering and adults praying to God, Buddha, and their ancestors. The professor didn't pray. Instead, he had stood at the ship's bow as if he was at his lectern, the children huddled together at his knees for protection against the evening wind, and told them lies. "You can't see it even in daylight," he'd said, "but the current we're traveling on is going straight to the Philippines, the way it's done since the dawn of time." He repeated his story so often even she allowed herself to

believe it, until the afternoon of the seventh day, when they saw, in the distance, the rocky landing strip of a foreign coast. Nesting upon it were the huts of a fishing village, seemingly composed of twigs and grass, brooded over by a fringe of palm trees. At the sight of land, she had thrown herself into the professor's arms, knocking his glasses askew, and sobbed openly for the first time in front of her startled children. She was so seized by the ecstasy of knowing that they would all live that she had blurted out "I love you." It was something she had never said in public and hardly ever in private, and the professor, embarrassed by their children's giggles, had only smiled and adjusted his glasses. His embarrassment only deepened once they reached land, which the locals informed them was the north shore of eastern Malaysia.

For some reason, the professor never spoke of this time at sea, although he referred to so many other things they had done in the past together, including events of which she had no recollection. The more she listened to him, the more she feared her own memory was faltering. Perhaps they really had eaten ice cream flavored with durian on the veranda of a tea plantation in the central highlands, reclining on rattan chairs and swatting at mosquitoes. And was it possible they'd fed bamboo shoots to the tame deer in the Saigon zoo? Or together had beaten off a pickpocket, a scabby refugee from the bombed-out countryside who'd snuck up on them in the Ben Thanh market?

As the days of spring lengthened into summer, she answered the phone less and less, eventually turning off the ringer so the professor wouldn't answer calls either. She was afraid that if someone asked for her, he would say, "Who?" Even more worrying was the prospect of him speaking to their friends or children of Yen. When her daughter phoned from Munich, she said, "Your father's not doing so well," but left the details vague. She was more forthcoming with Vinh, knowing that whatever she told him he would email to the other children. Whenever he left a message, she could hear the hiss of grease in a pan, or the chatter of a news channel, or the

beeping of horns. He only called her on his cell phone as he did something else. She admitted that as much as she loved her son, she liked him very little, a confession that made her unhappy with herself until the day she called him back and he asked, "Have you decided? Are you going to quit?"

"Don't make me tell you one more time." She wrapped the telephone cord tightly around her index finger. "I'm never going to quit."

After she hung up the phone, she returned to the task of changing the sheets the professor had bed-wet the previous evening. Her head was aching from lack of sleep, her back was sore from the chores, and her neck was tight with worry. When bedtime came, she was unable to sleep, listening to the professor talk about how the gusts of the Mistral blew him from wall to wall of the winding narrow streets of Le Panier, where he'd lived in a basement apartment during his Marseilles years, or the hypnotic sound made by the scratch of a hundred pens on paper as students took their exams. As he talked, she studied the dim light in their bedroom, cast off from the streetlamps outside, and remembered how the moon over the South China Sea was so bright that even at midnight she could see the fearful expressions on her children's faces. She was counting the cars passing by outside, listening for the sounds of their engines and hoping for sleep, when the professor touched her hand in the dark. "If you close your eyes," he said gently, "you might hear the ocean."

Mrs. Khanh closed her eyes.

September came and went. October passed and the Santa Ana winds came, rushing from the mountains to the east with the force of freeway traffic, breaking the stalks of the Egyptian papyrus she'd planted in ceramic pots next to the trellis. She no longer allowed the professor to walk by himself in the afternoons, but instead followed him discreetly by ten or twenty feet, clutching her hat against the winds. In the afternoons, if the Santa Ana had taken a breather, they read together on the patio. Over the past few months, the professor had taken to reading out loud, and slowly. Each day

he seemed to read even more loudly, and more slowly, until the afternoon in November when he stopped in mid-sentence for so long that the silence shook Mrs. Khanh from the grip of Quỳnh Dao's latest romance.

"What's the matter?" she asked, closing her book.

"I've been trying to read this sentence for five minutes," the professor said, staring at the page. When he looked up, she saw tears in his eyes. "I'm losing my mind, aren't I?"

From then on, she read to him whenever she was free, from books on academic topics she had no interest in whatsoever. She stopped whenever he began reciting a memory—the anxiety he felt on meeting her father for the first time, while she waited in the kitchen to be introduced; the day of their wedding, when he nearly fainted from the heat and the tightness of his cravat; or the time they returned to Saigon three years ago and visited their old house on Phan Than Gian, which they could not find at first because the street had been renamed Dien Bien Phu. Saigon had also changed names after it changed hands, but they couldn't bring themselves to call it Ho Chi Minh City. Neither could the taxi driver who ferried them from their hotel to the house, even though he was too young to remember a time when the city was officially Saigon.

They parked two houses down from theirs, and stayed in the taxi to avoid the revolutionary cadres from the north who had moved in after the Communist takeover. The professor and she were nearly overwhelmed by sadness and rage, fuming as they wondered whom these strangers were who had taken such poor care of their house. The solitary alley lamp illuminated tears of rust streaking the walls, washed down from the iron grill of the terrace by the monsoon rain. As the taxi's wipers squeaked against the windshield, a late-night masseur biked by in the empty alley, announcing his calling with the shake of a glass bottle filled with pebbles.

"You told me it was the loneliest sound in the world," said the professor.

Before he started talking, she'd been reading to him from a biography of de Gaulle, her finger still on the last word she'd read. She didn't like to think

about their lost home, and she didn't remember having said any such thing. "The wipers or the glass bottle?" she asked.

"The bottle."

"It seemed so at the time," she lied. "I hadn't heard that sound in years."

"We heard it often. In Da Lat." The professor took off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief. He had gone once to a resort in the mountains of Da Lat for a conference while she stayed in Saigon, pregnant. "You always wanted to eat your ice cream outside in the evenings," the professor continued. "But it's hard to eat ice cream in the tropics, Yen. One has no time to savor it. Unless one is indoors, with air conditioning."

"Dairy products give you indigestion."

"If one eats ice cream in a bowl, it rapidly becomes soup. If one eats it in a cone, it melts all over one's hand." When he turned to her and smiled, she saw gumdrops of mucus in the corners of his eyes. "You loved those brown sugar cones, Yen. You insisted that I hold yours for you so your hand wouldn't get sticky."

A breeze rattled the bougainvillea, the first hint, perhaps, of the Santa Ana returning. The sound of her own voice shocked her as well as the professor, who stared at her with his mouth agape when she said, "That's not my name. I am not that woman, whoever she is, if she even exists."

"Oh?" The professor slowly closed his mouth and put his glasses back on. "Your name isn't Yen?"

"No," she said.

"Then what is it?"

She had been worried about her husband calling her by the wrong name, not the right one. They rarely used each other's proper names, preferring endearments like Anh, for him, or Em, for her, and when they spoke to each other in front of the children, they called themselves Ba and Ma. Usually she heard her first name spoken only by friends, relatives or bureaucrats, or when she introduced herself to someone new, as she was, in a sense, doing now.

"My name is Sa," she said. "I am your wife."

"Right." The professor licked his lips and took out his notebook.

That evening, after they had gone to bed and she heard him breathing evenly, she switched on her lamp and reached across his body for the notebook propped on the alarm clock. His writing had faded into such a scribble that she was forced to read what he wrote twice, following the jags and peaks of his letters down a dog-eared page until she reached the bottom, where she deciphered the following: *Matters worsening. Today she insisted I call her by another name. Must keep closer eye on her*—here she licked her finger and used it to turn the page—*for she may not know who she is anymore.* She closed the book abruptly, with a slap of the pages, but the professor, curled up on his side, remained still. A scent of sweat and sour milk emanated from underneath the sheets. If it wasn't for his quiet breathing and the heat of his body, he might have been dead, and for a moment as fleeting as *déjà vu*, she wished he really were.

In the end there was really no choice. On her last day at work, her fellow librarians threw her a surprise farewell party, complete with cake and a wrapped gift box that held a set of travel guides for the vacations they knew she'd always wanted to take. She fondled the guides for a while, riffling through their pages, and when she almost wept, her fellow librarians thought she was being sentimental. Driving home with the box of guides in the backseat, next to a package of adult diapers she'd picked up from Sav-On's that morning, she fought to control the sense that ever so slowly the book of her life was being closed.

When she opened the door to their house and called out his name, she heard only bubbling from the fish tank. After not finding him in any of the bedrooms or bathrooms, she left the diapers and box of books in his library. An open copy of *Sports Illustrated* was on his recliner in the living room, a half-eaten jar of applesauce sat on the kitchen counter, and in the backyard, the chenille throw he wore around his lap in cool weather lay on the ground.

Floating in his teacup was a curled petal from the bougainvillea, shuttling back and forth.

Panic almost made her call the police. But they wouldn't do anything so soon; they'd tell her to call back when he was missing for a day or two. As for Vinh, she ruled him out, not wanting to hear him say, "I told you so." Regret swept over her then, a wave of feeling born from her guilt over being so selfish. Her librarian's instinct for problem-solving and orderly research kept her standing under the weight of that regret, and she returned to her car determined to find the professor. She drove around her block first before expanding in ever-widening circles, the windows rolled down on both sides. The neighborhood park, where she and the professor often strolled, was abandoned except for squirrels chasing each other through the branches of an oak tree. The sidewalks were empty of pedestrians or joggers, except for a withered man in a plaid shirt standing on a corner, selling roses from plastic buckets and oranges from crates, his eyes shaded by a grimy baseball cap. When she called him Mr. Esteban, his eyes widened; when she asked him if he'd seen the professor, he smiled apologetically and said, "*No hablo inglés. Lo siento.*"

Doubling back on her tracks, she drove each street and lane and cul-de-sac a second time. Leaning out the window, she called his name, first in a low voice, shy about making a scene, and then in a shout. "Anh Khanh!" she cried. "Anh Khanh!" A few window curtains twitched, and a couple of passing cars slowed down, their drivers glancing at her curiously. But he didn't spring forth from behind someone's hedges, or emerge from a stranger's door.

Only after it was dark did she return. The moment she walked through the front door, she smelled the gas. A kettle was on the stove, but the burner hadn't been lit. Her pulse quickened from a walk to a sprint. After shutting off the gas, she saw that the glass doors leading to the patio, which she'd closed before her departure, were slightly ajar. There was a heavy, long flashlight in one of the kitchen drawers, and the heft of the aluminum barrel in her hand was comforting as she slowly approached the glass doors. But

when she shone the light over the patio and onto the garden, she saw only her persimmon trees and the red glint of the chilies.

She was in the hallway when she saw the light spilling out of the open door to the professor's library. When she peeked around the doorframe, she saw both him and the painting, their backs to the door. At his feet was her box of books, and he stood facing the bookshelf that was reserved for her. Here, she kept her magazines and the books he'd given to her over the years. The professor knelt, picked a book from the box, and stood up to shelve it. He repeated the same motion, one book at a time. *Hidden Tabiti and French Polynesia. Frommer's Hawaii. National Geographic Traveler, Caribbean edition.* With each book, he mumbled something she couldn't hear, as if he might be trying to read the titles on the spines. *Essential Greek Islands. Jerusalem and the Holy Land. World Cultures: Japan. A Romantic's Guide to Italy.* He touched the covers of each book with great care, tenderly, and she knew, not for the first time, that it wasn't she who was the love of his life.

The professor shelved the last book and turned around. The expression on his face when he saw her was the one he'd worn forty years ago at their first meeting, when she'd entered the living room of her father's house and seen him pale with anxiety, eyes blinking in anticipation. "Who are you?" he cried, raising his hand as if to ward off a blow. Her heart was beating quickly and her breathing was heavy. When she swallowed, her mouth was dry, but she could feel a sheen of dampness on her palms. It struck her then that these were the same sensations she'd felt that first time, seeing him in a white linen suit wrinkled by high humidity, straw fedora pinned between hand and thigh.

"It's just me," she said. "It's Yen."

"Oh," the professor said, lowering his hand. He sat down heavily in his armchair, and she saw that his oxfords were encrusted in mud. As she crossed the carpet to the bookshelf, he followed her with a hooded gaze, his look one of exhaustion. She was taking down *Les Pétites Rues de Paris* when he closed his eyes and leaned back in his armchair. Sitting beside him on

the carpet and opening the book, she wondered what, if anything, she knew about love. Not much, perhaps, but enough to know that what she would do for him now she would do again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. She read out loud, from the beginning; she read slowly, taking her time; she read as if every letter counted to a man who was vanishing word by word and page by page.

## Goat

just wanted to tell you that even  
if you do the project on the criminologist

whose pet project is the photography  
of rare bugs - even if a dahlia bites

the garden's dust for you -  
even if you tromp through some

unicorn's hedge on a hedgeless  
but murdered afternoon -

even with alas besides  
you forsook me a very very long time

ago - so long ago that the past tense  
of forsaken doesn't even need apply

## Holy Holy Holy

They still don't know why she died,  
and neither do I do I do I. One cow  
melody up against some stones and  
some lonely device of a moon. Didn't  
mean to say it that way or to imply. I  
wrote "Boy Interrupted" a year after  
the other was released because I was  
on the other side of the keys. I was keys  
another helper said. I will help your uncle  
said the next field. I will shoot you if you  
shoot my birds said the next field to anything  
said. There was an awful lot said.

## string theory

sometimes when i see her she starts  
a response to something simple with  
what feels like it is going to be another  
long story - or if not long too long for the  
circumstance of these infrequent crossings -  
and i am not alone in this - don't get me wrong  
or right for that matter - i have overheard her  
accomplish this tedium with everyone else around -  
but it really isn't tedium - it is something wrong in  
the context of the setting - someone with this  
story energy and matter of fact way could be  
holding people riveted instead of at bay if the  
constant context was not this infrequent crossing -  
string theory, the war according to her eighty year  
old uncle, the recent poetry lecture which was  
another shot to the head with a pistol of inordinate  
accurate dullness - i bet when she is in the wild  
field walking her dogs as i know she does she is  
in the grips of something far more interesting -  
like wonderment about the present moment only  
and how the wind seeps into the ground as well  
as people in its ordinary and endless way - but end-  
less isn't really the right word for this - more like  
sometimes or even never if you want to object to  
this idea as i am beginning to also

## Pima Road Notebook

Forget what I said about the snakes

It isn't all holy

Call me the child who wouldn't burn the ant nest

The scorpion shivered on my brother's shoulder

I went to school and came home from school

The hunchback boy fed pink-eyed rabbits

Kissing Tomi Kaye by the horse corral

I opened my eye to see the fine hair above her lip

One flat stretch of road leading on toward the horizon

I bb'd the quail

Steven said his father died, we were pissing  
at the urinal, he told me it was okay, he believed in Jesus

What they said about Loper, his father dealt coke

Fathers just leave, don't they? Isn't that what fathers do?

Coyotes at dusk crossed the 17th green  
I fed the dog and picked up shit  
Acetate and freon leached into the water  
when my father returned from work  
I was squeezed between elbow brothers  
We went to the circus, popcorn tasted fake  
Elephants were expert in lines, like children  
I followed my mother downtown to the bank  
Paper bag bottles, pimps and pumps  
My apology—too late for the blind boy  
Bloodied Ty Liddy's nose beneath the bridge  
Two snakes in a pit? *Bad luck*, says a Pima  
The faith healer's *Prayer for the Sick*  
His son told me the preacher was a fake  
Always one boy or two boys, always fist-threats  
The hunchback's brother who once locked me up

At night we ran through the neighborhood like dogs

German Shepherd tried to bite my leg

Tomi Kaye's father stepped outside,  
if we didn't leave, he'd call the damn cops

What's living in me was living there

Spitting out sunflower seeds;  
that drugged fatboy chanting my name

The neighbor groomed horses; I never saw him ride

Then he showed me where he hid the guns

red onion state prison

A warehouse  
of iron bunks:  
straight lines &  
right angles  
that play  
the window close;  
inside, white  
paint cracks  
into a thousand  
pockmarks.  
Red Onion stands  
ugly, new  
development  
in the gutted side  
of a mountain.  
A place where angels  
wear gilded horns  
& saints get bent  
off mash:  
orange juice,  
fruit & sugar left  
cooking  
in a trash bag.  
The sound  
of a padlock  
splitting a man's scalp  
troubles; shotguns  
add violence to the voices

of gods;  
and a hand tilts  
a slender metal rod,  
scrapes it against  
concrete & stretches  
night longer  
than a sinner's prayer.  
Red Onion's  
scabbed frame  
a pennon, slight  
under the pressure  
of a thousand years  
worth of sentences  
hanging  
above cell blocks  
like mistletoe.

## Sarahbai's Story

An Excerpt from her Novel

Late one December evening, when Ruby wheels her mother from the living room to her bedroom, Sarahbai is in a chirpy mood. Ruby is exhausted. They've just watched *Fawlty Towers*. It has been Sarahbai's favorite show ever since it suddenly popped up on Pakistani TV screens. Tonight they have watched John Cleese stomp his wacky way through a roomful of befuddled guests in the hotel he runs with such lunatic abandon. Alternately supporting her stomach and wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, Sarahbai hoots with laughter. She is not ready for bed. "I want to talk for a bit," she says when Ruby removes her headscarf and shawl. "I know I won't be able to sleep." The night nurse has already placed her hot-water bag in her bed and is turning down the comforter.

Ruby stands before her mother's wheelchair, her hands hanging helplessly down her sides. "Can we talk tomorrow? I'm ready to drop."

"Nonsense," says Sarahbai. "Wait till you hear what I've to say; it'll refresh you, I promise! Please?" she pleads.

The sprightly gleam in her mother's eye warns Ruby. She knows from past experience that Sarahbai will keep the house awake unless she is permitted to have her say. The night-nurse turns from stacking and smoothing the pillows to raise resigned eyebrows. She shrugs her trim shoulders and throws Ruby an amused glance.

Ruby capitulates. "Oh all right," she says, wearily, as if indulging a capricious child, and wraps the old *shahtoos* shawl back around Sarahbai's legs. She sits down on her mother's bed and the nurse positions the wheelchair closer to her. The bed is raised on bricks to make it easier for them to lay her down. "So? What do we talk about?" Ruby asks as the nurse quietly leaves the room and shuts the door behind her.

Pointy chin and toothless mouth parodying the prim grave expression of her youth, Sarahbai tells her daughter, "Whenever I went to the Central Bank in Nila Gumbad, it was *pens-down* time. You never knew that, did you?"

Ruby is puzzled. The Parsees, the tiny community she belongs to, has a tedious reputation for loyalty and hard work. This was especially so during the days of the British Raj that her mother is harking back to.

Because of their small numbers in Lahore the bank could employ only a sprinkling of Parsees in key positions. Stern exemplars of a favored community, the Parsee bankers were hardly the type to abandon their duty or their loyalty and lay down their pens. Nor were the Hindu and Sikh bankers who fled Lahore at Partition likely to; nor the staff of Muslims who replaced them after 1947.

Ruby recalls childhood visits with her mother to the cavernous, neon-lit Central Bank hall, segmented like a hive by shallow mahogany paneling, with legions of brown men bent over enormous ledgers like so many drones. In summer their shirt pockets bore ink stains and were stuffed with pens and pencil stubs.

Was her mother some kind of covert and slickly packaged labor activist in her youth? Fomenting sedition in the shape of a *pens-down* strike among the dependable colony of bank accountants? It was fashionable in Sarahbai's days to be a Marxist. But that was a preserve of intellectuals. Although Ruby has become adept at pouring her mother into different moulds to correspond with Sarahbai's images of her past, she finds she cannot accommodate this image. Sarahbai was intelligent, yes. At times formidably so. But there was little impulse in her towards intellectualism or Communism.

"*Pens-down* time?" Ruby asks, frowning over the rim of her glasses, peering suspiciously into her mother's sanguine, gimlet eye.

"Yes," says Sarahbai, girlishly prim, exactly as she would have spoken at that time she refers to as her 'heyday.' "Jal Jeriwalla gave them the

permission to . . . Pesi Cooper too, when he became Bank Manager. Whenever I walked into the Bank, the men were permitted to put down their pens!"

"But what on earth for?" Ruby asks, feigning astonishment, although by this time she's cottoned on to her mother's drift.

"So they could stop working to look at me! What else!"

And, eyes twinkling, flung-back face all lit-up in a mischievously breaking series of smiles and silent laughter that ignites unruly joy in the hearts of her children and grandchildren and keeps attracting them to Sarahbai's bedside like honeybees, she adds, "I freshened their eyes."

"O, mum, you're too much," says Ruby, laughing despite her earlier inclination to remain indifferent. She bends forward to nuzzle her face against her mother's headscarf. Sarahbai has woven her daughter's contention about being 'too tired' to her own contrary assertion that what she has to say will 'refresh' her, and given them narrative context. That's sharper than anything Ruby could conjure up at such short notice.

"I told you I'd freshen you up," says Sarahbai gleefully, and her conceited smile stretches her mouth until it breaks in a triumphant chortle.

Ruby kisses the top of her head. "I'm so freshened I won't be able to sleep." They chat for almost an hour until, finally, Ruby calls the nurse and together they lift Sarahbai into bed.

"How many boyfriends did you have, Grannums?" Pari asks. She is besotted by her grandmother.

"None. We didn't have boyfriends in my days," says Grannums firmly. "Your grandfather was my first boyfriend. Not even *kissy-koty* allowed before marriage." A touch of mischief lifts her tone and she adds: "But when the family went to the cinema, and it was dark, he would hold my hand."

"And after marriage? How many boyfriends did you *kissy-koty* with?"

Although Sarahbai indulges her granddaughter brazenly, there is a limit to the familiarity she will permit. She stops short of allowing it to totally undermine her authority. Pari frequently skirts the periphery, and tests the limits of her grandparent's tolerance. This mixture of devotion and teasing, obedience and indulgence, has forged an inextricable bond between them.

"I had no boyfriends! Not the way you mean boyfriend . . . silly girl," says Sarahbai, tartly. "But I had admirers. Many."

"Really Grannums? Tell us! Who?"

"I'll only name the ones who're dead."

"They must all be dead by now," declares Pari heartlessly. But Pari's voice is mellow with affection. No matter what her grandmother says, or how truculently she frequently behaves, Pari's demeanor and tone are consistently indulgent. Otherwise impatient, often short with her parents, Pari has a limitless store of patience where it concerns Sarahbai. She loves to engage her easily distracted grandmother in little chats, and has become expert at ferreting out family secrets.

"A lot you know," says Sarahbai, affronted. "The older I grew, the younger my admirers became." But her bravado is fragile, and Sarahbai looks uncertain. She's not sure they believe her.

Ruby signals her daughter with her eyes, and Pari immediately changes her tack. She leans over to tenderly smooth the wounded crevices that have formed between Sarahbai's eyes.

*It must feel like the touch of dove-down* thinks Ruby, covertly observing her daughter through a thick fringe of lashes. She is suddenly suffused by a curiously satisfying sense of well-being. It is somehow fitting that they should switch roles, the granddaughter as nurturer. Only the very young possess that surfeit of tenderness to lavish on the very old.

Holding her grandmother's hands captive in hers, Pari extracts the names of Grannums' dead admirers. Sarahbai's memory somewhat blurs the distinction between the dead and the still alive. But Ruby knows them all.

Ruby still runs into her mother's 'younger' admirers at cricket matches and dinner parties. Admirers who are by now old codgers. Christian, Muslim, Parsee, they ruminate aloud—respectfully, of course—with remarks like, “We were all in love with your mother” or “When Mrs. Edulji and Mrs. Kandawalla promenaded up and down the Mall in Murree, the entire male population of the hill-station turned up to look at them.”

Even in her heyday, before age and respectability turned Sarah into Sarahbai, her mother couldn't possibly have been aware of all her admirers.

Ruby's was a manically isolated and angular adolescence and there was a stage when prickly with complexes, she resented her mother's relentless allure. The more accessible her mother became to others the more confoundingly distanced from herself she appeared to grow. In an explosive mixture of indignation and envy she blamed her mother's attraction on a conspiracy of duplicitous ruses and heartless depravity, and ached to expose her mother as artful.

But Sarah's attraction was unselfconscious and effortless. The beautiful are no more accountable for the extravagance of their allure than the brilliant stellar objects the cosmic flotsam they attract.

In photographs of her teens, and in her marriage photographs, Sarahbai is beautiful in the willowy way of a Botticelli virgin. And later, past her middle years, she again achieved the pliant gravity of Botticelli's modest Madonnas.

In her heyday, though, she had the needy, vampy, vulnerable quality that was so achingly captivating in Marilyn Monroe. Also a Gemini, Sarahbai had the same breathless innocence and anxiety to please that characterized the American icon; and, attached to that wistful, defenseless face, the erotic mold of a Hindu goddess.

Sarah favored filmy chiffon saris. Arranged at the shoulder in neat pleats and held too by a gold pin, the adhesive drape of the material veiled a velvet span of beige midriff. The substantial tilt above her ribs, sculpted

by the wicked fit of her Maidenform bra and the seam of her short cholibodices, drew male eyes like bedazzled beacons. And although her impulse to please was egalitarian, Sarah placed her trust only in impeccable men of formidable restraint.

A more or less permanent entourage of distinguished men befriended Sarah over the years—and God knows she needed befriending. But Ruby doesn't think her mother was ever adulterous. Her upbringing and the prevailing mores precluded it.

## Cuttlefish

On Sunday morning my feet scratch concrete  
like a turntable. Moccasin heals scuff  
the down beat. When I suggest that Dylan's  
"Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie" be set  
to a hip hop rhythm, he disagrees.  
Later, shopping for curly kale and cheese,  
he tells me he doesn't like the word *nugget*  
straight-faced, and I think I could change his mind.  
He calls me names stolen from the spines  
of my books. *You're my cuttlefish*, he says,  
knowing nothing of the mollusk, only that it  
sounds better than *nugget*. Sounds like lying  
too late in yellowed sheets because the rest  
of the day won't feel as warm or naked.  
His heart armor hangs from a nail  
on our bedroom wall, off his freckled neck,  
so when I say *I don't want to get married*  
*in any church*, he checks his watch.  
I rest my hand on his pulse. It slows.  
Sunday morning slides down our window  
like rain. We curve into each other  
like letters, like t's or g's. We spell nothing.

## Letter After Dismemberment

Lover, I left you because you would not slip me  
into the squares of an ice tray,

though I asked. I was considering a jar

of preserved lemons and watching television,  
though not really, and you wondered, aloud,

if anyone had died on camera, by accident,

if that had been captured. Want flickered in me  
and fell as though from a great height.

But it must have been earlier when it came

to me: seeing the neighbor man, perhaps.

Our tenement windows cut into him like grids,

exposing an arm, a finger. Such mystery,

the divided flesh, like a photograph spreading  
onto a page—the body so piecemeal. Or the closet,

being punished in the dark of overcoats

and shoes. I drew my knees to my body.

I became a smaller box, and when your arms

first wrapped around me, later, in love,  
what could I want to give you—to give any man—  
but the tightest hold? To keep you secret  
as a stone? Then I wanted to be the stone.  
I found a man to kill me, and cut me up,  
and eat, one who wanted the body in inches,  
who dreamed in pixel, bite by bite.  
Finally, I became divisible. Have you hoped for  
anything enough to die? Honestly, I do not  
remember. Not even that first gutter  
of sex-spreading warmth when I saw the knife,  
not even the last, now that I am everywhere,  
in earth and in ash, in the stomach  
of the one who swallowed me. And then,  
when they killed him, sent him into the air  
in a chambered cloud, the flies that erupted  
from his belly, spun with blood, the grass,  
the goats, the milk they gave, and somewhere,  
I am in a girl, lightly fingering her wrists, how

her hands fit around them, thumb to index,  
the pressure on the vein, the world encircled,  
trapped there, the pleasure rising,  
and wanting to ask for it. Then asking.

## Vanishing Points

Evolutionary zero, way back where they say  
wild hearts were enticed and incorporated  
into the body.  
Before that mitochondria roamed the prairies  
and electricity survived, mountains included,  
so they could vibrate  
and sway compellingly as when Frances  
leaves the shower and reaches for a towel.  
That is when I  
pass through the zero, the empty oyster,  
pass through the blood/brain to be reminded  
her body is connected  
to my knees, anterior cruciate almost unlatching,  
an effect amplified by the years of repetition  
and when we pass through  
the zero of sleep like the point in the room  
where the image flips over a Christmas tree  
drifts in among kildeers,  
portraits and scorpions appear on the far wall

## Bolillo

My father's eyes are glossy, distant blue, and his Adam's apple sticks out like a walnut lodged in his throat. The hair on his head is auburn and soft to the touch, and the hairs on his forearms glisten red to golden in the sunshine. My father smokes cigarettes he himself rolls using paper flimsy like onion skin and tobacco he pinches in his fingers from a palm-size cloth pouch that he secures with a yellow drawstring. After finishing the tobacco, he gives me the pouch, and it becomes a storage place for coins that my uncles give to me. Rolled cigarettes and Maxwell House coffee flavored with Carnation evaporated milk keep him company in the morning and soothe him as he sits on the edge of his bed at night, waiting for his thoughts to fall in line so he can corral them. I'm not sure if my father has anything other than khaki shirts and pants to wear.

My father's face is hollow below his bony cheeks and his nose is long and beautifully angled. It's as though his face was sculpted to show a classic form. He's five feet and eight inches tall and his feet are slightly larger than my mother's. Once he tried on a pair of women's imitation leather shoes at a downtown store and they fit snug enough that he told the salesman, "I'll take them." They were for my mother, but the salesman would not have known that. My father, I felt then, was an odd person who did things I never saw anyone else do. One time at another store my father placed his elbow and fist into the waist of a pair of women's slacks, like a clothes hanger, as a measure of the space my mother's waist would require. This way of measuring had been proven to work. My mother and father rarely went out together, and he wanted to surprise her, so he had to "try on" the pants in that way in her absence.

My father crisscrosses the streets of the West Side of San Antonio, as if it's the place where he grew up, which it's not—it's my mother's

neighborhood. My father is the only *bolillo* who sleeps and wakes and lives in this part of the neighborhood, a pale cattail in a field of brown ones, so he stands out. My father is affectionately described as a *bolillo* by my mother's mother and her friends, a colloquial term with two meanings. The meaning that fits him is "white man." In the heat of the day, his face blushes pink and his arms hold tight to the sun's rays. His exposed skin is peppered with brown specks. On El Paso Street he's met with bemused looks and raised brows by men and women who do not know him as he advances down the hot asphalt concentrating on his goal, sometimes with a cigarette pressed between his lips, unaware of his effect on passersby, who throw inquisitive looks and thoughts that seem to say, "Who is he and what is he doing in our neighborhood?" I'd like to say, "He lives here, just like you and me."

Some of my father's journeys take him to the home of his mother-in-law, Antonia Badillo Mata. One day, outside my grandmother's three-room rental on Kicaster Alley, my father greets Juan Chueco, though the surname isn't his real name, it's a given name—West Side Spanish for "crooked." Juan Chueco's left arm is a petrified tree limb resting on his belly and his hand is frozen into a permanent claw. He says, "Rufo, *panaderia* close early Sunday," or "Tomorrow, it rain." Juan Chueco can't understand all the English words coming out of my father's mouth, and that's no wall between them because he and my father connect with unspoken words and a goodwill they exchange like gifts. Juan Chueco is one of my favorite people because the goodness in him shines like a gemstone—you can't help but see the quality of his soul. Juan Chueco always pauses in front of my grandmother's house, waiting for her and her family to come out, as if he knows she will peek through the window, smile when she sees him, and step to the front porch to hear news of church activities and the weather. After reviving our spirits with his words and kind face, Juan Chueco raises his left leg, which is slightly shorter than the other, and limps across the pavement, heading to who knows where, making us onlookers feel a rip in

our hearts and leaving us to wonder what happened to his body to make it turn out that way. What is it about him that makes the day turn lovely and makes me sad to see him leave?

My father has arms, hands, legs, and feet that bend, stretch, swing, and move like they're supposed to—his insides also function well enough for the time being. There will come a day, though, when his chronic smoking will turn the tables on him, catch him off-guard. Smoking is a habit my father formed as a young boy, I am told. Thousands of cigarettes he rolled and smoked have burned brown stains into his thumbs and forefingers and into my mind's eye. The pouches that now belong to me I turn inside out to release bits of curled tobacco trapped in the corners.

Cigarettes have conspired to trick my father into a sense of calm and balance, accompanying him on every journey until he can no longer move from his bed. My mother, Amelia, with the help of one of my brothers, will lift my father from his bed and carry him to the bathroom where, behind a closed door, she will undress him and slip his body into a tub of warm water. Standing outside the door, I will listen, envisioning my mother in this way: She will see the tiny wedge of Zest soap and work the last of the soap into a wet washcloth, a routine charged with many implications. She will wash my father's face, neck, chest, stomach, arms, legs, back, feet and toes, in that order. She will dip a plastic tumbler into the tub and pour water on his head, then pour diluted baby shampoo into her palm and massage the liquid into his scalp.

We will learn weeks later, when an ambulance is summoned for my father and he is transferred to the Veterans Hospital in Kerrville, Texas, that he is dying. My mother and I will feel like two people in a foreign land struggling to understand all that is being said around us—"Morphine, lung cancer, bed sheets, visitation, bus trips." I will continue to wonder why my father never spoke of his biggest secret to my mother, and I speculate that in his mind, he developed a logic for his actions and inactions. Maybe he knew she would fall apart by the news that he would soon be gone forever. Maybe

he recalled his relatives in Louisiana, who, one by one, died shortly after surgery or after chemotherapy treatments and maybe he pictured himself lying in a hospital bed, awaiting a similar fate. Maybe he couldn't bring himself to hurt my mother with the horrible news. Maybe he thought that by some miracle, he would overcome the cancer and live to see his children grow to be adults.

After the bus trips to visit my father in the Veterans Hospital in Kerrville, after the funeral arrangements, after we see his coffin poised by a Fort Sam Houston cemetery plot, my mother and I will turn into *lobos* howling in the night, crying for my father, our eyes swollen, unable to sleep. My mother will be so consumed by grief that my father will appear by her bedside to console and guide her. "Amelia, take care of the kids. I love you."

## The Mourners

In the middle of the night the mourners collected,  
collected on our lawn. They tested our locks,

pried open our entrance, gained entrance.  
They peopled our rooms, took stock,

accounted for our plugs, what we had  
with which to populate the plugs.

They tracked in mud, muddied up the place,  
placed their trash where they saw fit.

They rattled our cages, our cages of fowl.  
They infiltrated our provisions, provisioned them out.

Some of the mourners were family, others  
familiar as a pet is familiar, returning years later

stitched up from experimentation.  
They tethered us to our grief

when all we wanted was to flee the grief.  
They siphoned out our grief in the event our grief

should be reconstituted into another.  
They quoted from their volumes,

took shelter, though no shelter was offered.  
They spent all night ranting in the yard.

## Some Lessons I Learned from Robin, in No Particular Order:

- The names of the ten highest mountain peaks in Colorado's Mummy Range: Hagues, Ypsilon, Fairchild, Mummy, Chiquita, Desolation, Comanche, Chapin, Flatiron, Stormy.
- Play by the rules of the game in gin rummy and spit, or risk a prompt hand slap accompanied by furrowed brow and pursed lips.
- Almost everything can be considered edible, if you're convincing in its presentation. Some examples: caramelized onion pizza minus cheese and sauce, chili and raisin rellenos, fried day lilies stuffed with expired cheddar cheese. "Expiration dates? Purely arbitrary!"
- Be a good friend.
- Wake up early in the morning and take plenty of walks.
- Art can be born out of anything if taken into the right hands.
- Always own a dog but don't seek one out; let it find you.
- Family history is interesting, relevant, and worth preserving.
- Control is an illusion. We cannot control the actions or intentions of other people no matter how long our shared history, how altruistic our objective or how strong our resolve.

Robin Utterback (1949-2007)



Robin Utterback, *Untitled* (no. 319), 1988-89,  
India ink on paper, 14 x 11 inches. Estate of the artist.

## The Man Who Carried an Excuse for a Lamppost under His Arm

So that he could see. It wasn't a very good excuse for one. It shed light inadequately unless he held it at just the right angle . . .

Isn't the point of a post—his brother asked him, irritated—that it can stand on its own? It seems to me your excuse for a post isn't doing the job that needs to be done.

His sister, however, basked in the lamp's strange light every time he visited. He propped it up for her. He saw that she appreciated it. And he knew that he too might one day find it useful, which was why, after all, he carried it.

His sister developed an attachment to the post. She asked after it in a way she never had about the man, her other brother, their friends or any of the friends' children . . .

She found that sunlight was too bright and any electric light other than the lamp's dim glow was too intense all at once, an artificial yellow.

The man's brother said aloud in front of his sister that the excuse for a post was wasting the man's time and his strength.

His sister came to the post's defense. It's gentle and humble. It isn't taking advantage of anyone. It's a better excuse for a lamppost than you are an excuse for a brother.

The post, proving her point, waited nobly for the argument to end.

## A Dog and A Boy

A mother, her five children, and a grandma stop us on the boardwalk where dogs are forbidden. A clump of dappled fur strains against its collar. It is late at night—the children should be in bed. Nick and I should be in bed, but we can't sleep. The mother is frantic and points to a motel down a side street. *We are paying weekly, she says, and the landlord just found out about our dog.* A little girl with Down syndrome pokes my breast and barks. A grandma is holding the leash of what she claims is a lhasa apso. *Our dog needs a home or we'll be kicked out,* the mother pleads as little boys crowd behind us, and I feel as though we are back on the train in Paris where the gypsies stole our bag with our money and passports. Nick reaches for his back pocket and keeps his hand on his wallet. *I'm allergic to dogs, I say. But where will we live now?* the mother whimpers, and one of the boys begins to wail as though on cue. *Our dog is a good dog, very good with children. We don't want him to end up in the pound. I paid \$500 for him, but . . .* The grandma holds her heart and moans. Nick says, *I'm sorry—we aren't allowed to have pets in our condo.* We know it's a scam so we keep walking, past the Edy's Ice Cream where the owner with the bleached bouffant and skinny rainbow eyebrows is lugging in her inflatable four-foot cone, past Mamacita's Restaurant where two waiters pull the life-size statue of a man in a sombrero and blanket poncho up the stairs. The metal shutters on the tee shirt shops are all coming down. The waves break, but it so dark we can only see the white disembodied caps. Maybe the gypsies stole the dog from someone else. Maybe there are "missing dog" signs up in shops and on telephone poles. Maybe the gypsies planned to keep our \$400 and then call the police to turn us in for a reward from the real owners. "I doubt that was even a purebred," Nick says, making sure he still has our keys.

\*

When we first moved to Florida we were given a phone number that used to belong to Elsa and her son Bobby. Elsa's boyfriend would call collect from the Miami Correctional Facility and leave messages on our machine. *Baby, come on. Please pick up.* He'd call three or four times a week: *Elsa, don't give up on me . . . Hey, Elsa, it'll hurt you more than me if you hold a grudge, you know I'm sorry . . . Elsa, I just want to check how you and Bobby are doing. Come visit, OK?* Maybe Elsa stopped in to see him on her own and to give him her new number, or maybe he just gave up. But now Bobby's in trouble: *This is the Broward School System letting you know Bobby wasn't in school three times this week . . . Bobby is having behavioral problems in math class . . . Bobby is habitually late and failing. If there isn't significant improvement, he'll have to stay back.* I call to say we are not Bobby's parents, that Bobby and Elsa have forgotten to update their information. No, I don't know where they are. No, I can't give them a message since I've never even met them. The principal says he just wants someone to be responsible. Then a few weeks later another call—it's parent/teacher night. We are nervous. We know the teachers will want to know about the problems we have at home. We'll have to explain that there'll be new rules for Bobby now—homework before dinner, and no caffeinated drinks allowed. I straighten Nick's tie. I ask him if my skirt is too short. We want to make a good impression. It is time to find our ghost boy and take him home.

*Baby I want to give you something invisible you motherfucker*

—Karen Finley

The mother I idealize

is the double-image: wears a pink dress  
with her blueberry eyes. Saves

lives and loves the shadow-puppet's soul to be

somewhere between Mary and Mary. I make my mother a dress.  
It's beautiful, sheer.

Embedded in the dress is a poem;

to read it through the sunlight,  
I hold the dress to my kitchen-sink window, the hem

dips in the dishwater—women are ruined  
buying expensive dresses. Red ones,

stretched to nudity.

The poem says I will not desert you in your trouble.

Says it takes twelve dragonflies  
to subdue one hare. Says an arrow points

to naïveté, and you know the type and you don't know  
how your own hands slide

to flap

under your own little wing-bones.

## Invocation

*Kali, be with us.  
Violence, destruction,  
    receive our homage.  
Help us to bring darkness  
    into the light,  
To lift out the pain, the anger  
Where it can be seen  
    for what it is—  
The balance-wheel for our  
    vulnerable, aching love.  
—May Sarton*

### *Oklahoma, day two.*

Steam spewed and curled from the seams of the hood. The road disappeared. I slowed and carefully pulled over, listening for the crunch of gravel, the sound of the shoulder. Kevin leapt out. *Pop the hood.* He burned his fingers releasing the latch and propping the hood of Kali, our little red pickup, a 1987 Mazda B2000.

#### *Be careful.*

My voice, unheard in the cab of the truck, evaporated as quickly as the steam.

Last night in Missouri, it had rained. Fat drops thrummed against the roof of the cab, a sheer curtain of water rippled down the windshield. The grounds of the campsite turned marshy. Kevin parked the back end of Kali underneath a picnic shelter so that we could keep the tailgate open and stay dry. Later, I slept restlessly in the bed of the pickup, not comforted by the sound of the rain, dreaming of floods.

Now, in Oklahoma's panhandle, the sun shone. Heat, even in November, filled the cab, shimmered around the edges of the propped hood, trailed after the last wisps of steam. The elements, pressing against

Kali, rendered the machine, body.

I joined Kevin, bent over the engine. He showed me the hose, grayed and psoriatic, which had ruptured. The engine itself was newly rebuilt—the original one having warped its head on a hot, summer day two years prior—but the mechanics had apparently reused the original hoses, now in their eleventh year.

A part is more than a part;  
it participates in a system.

The desire to wrest control over the circumstances of life steals over you. Initially, it begins innocently enough as a response to suffering. You watch others suffer. You yourself suffer. You grow weary of hearing that suffering redeems those whom it afflicts. You decide the suffering should end.

Execution proves more difficult than decision. Control, equally opposed to change and externally imposed limitation, finds itself at a loss in an organic, embodied world. What it desires: to encounter manageable and predictable material that it can shape to its own specifications. What it believes in: the Cartesian dream of the machine—that matter can be arrested, made stable and, in time, through science and *techné*, perfected.

Idealism with blinders on.

To achieve your vision, you cordon off a section of the world; you shrink the size of your community. Other people and other problems add elements of the unknown. To be in control, you cannot have surprises. But the surprises still come. And so you retreat further, until one day, it is just you and your partner and your pickup.

Surprise.

*New Mexico, day four.*

Smooth, black pavement stretched out before me, a strange sight on these back roads so often left to their own fate and the unforgiving passage

of time. Kevin had buried his nose in a book. The desert landscape, flat and honey-colored, shouldered the scrubby brush and rangy cacti with professed detachment. Occasionally, a coyote trotted alongside, then away from the highway.

Kali, outfitted with a new hose and shiny silver clamps and well rested after two nights at Black Mesa State Park, hummed along the road. I only became aware slowly of accompaniment, syncopation, a flapping sound. Kali began to limp along the smooth road. Hesitant (*was I imagining this*), I pulled over.

Kevin and I met at the back of the truck, on the left side, the percussion section. We squatted for a closer look.

Kevin picked at the tire and pulled away a strip of tread.

Pre Trip Formulations

freedom = flight = escape

escape = absence of limitations = self-determination

self-determination = health = I regain control of my body

∴ to be in control is to be free

*Sante Fe, day eight.*

Early morning. Sleep still crusted in the corner of Kevin's eye as he guided Kali down the mountain. Our bellies empty, her truck bed full. Above the platform Kevin built over the wheel wells: sleeping bags, cushions, clothes, the guitar, medicinal supplies, tarp, kitchen gear, and food. Beneath the platform: research books for Kevin's dissertation, the banjo, surplus supplements and herbal remedies, supplies for spontaneous ritual (candles, incense, drum), two toolboxes, and a newly replaced, full-sized spare.

Kevin drove in low gear to save the brakes. The engine growled, begging to be let out, but I knew the dangers of giving in. A few days before, I had taken Kali down the mountain. She had caught a patch of water glazed with ice and fishtailed. For a moment, the pines guarding the drop on the edge of

the switchback veered dangerously close.

Kali's growl broke the now idyllic scene—the bright, white sky where the sun had risen; crow perched atop a fat, stubby pine; breakfast calling, a cup of coffee next to a steaming plate of huevos rancheros. Finally, Kali coasted out of the switchbacks and the road flattened out. Ahead of us, a green light. Kevin shifted into third and entered the intersection where Kali promptly stalled.

Kali is red.  
Red is the sound of the heart heard up close,  
the sound of the involuntary,  
of the taken-for-granted,  
made startlingly conscious.

*Arizona, day nine.*

*(Cady!*

*I am in the beautiful country — our beautiful country — It is quite  
green — cloudy — and very cool — And Oh Cady — how I love it . . .*

—Georgia O'Keeffe)

The road appeared flat, yet the map showed that we were nearing the Mogollon Plateau. Kali strained under my foot. I gave her more gas, the speedometer needle still fell.

Yesterday's trauma in Sante Fe recalled: Kevin and I pushed Kali to a side street and let her sit. Thirty minutes later she turned over. A few hours after that she found herself under the hands of a young mechanic. Within ten minutes, he gave his diagnosis—a thermostat improperly installed.

Kali agonized over the terrain. Worried now, through the windows I looked for O'Keeffe's world. The generous hips of hills—rust, purple, or lavender. The smooth contours of blue sky (a robin's egg) cupped in the hollow of pelvis I, II, or III. I saw none of it. *What I love on canvas, I find not in the world.*

We organize the body into systems. We speak of the skin, the skeleton, the muscles, the nerves. We say *endocrine, circulatory, respiratory, digestive, excretory, reproductive, immune*. We break each system down into organs, organs into tissues, tissues cells, and cells chemicals. Yet as delineated and solid and mechanical as the body may seem, it is in fact a vast and active set of relationships. Organs belong to multiple systems. Too much of one single hormone can disrupt the overall balance.

Interdependence holds the body together.

This is a fragile construction.

*Show Low, day ten.*

Kali had delivered us the day before to this town, large enough for a Super-sized Wal-Mart. We had checked into a motel so Kevin, near the end of his tether, could watch TV. We promised ourselves pizza. I took Kali to a local shop. The mechanic had shown me how the truck's throttle wasn't opening properly. He had pushed a pencil eraser against the valve and Kali opened wide, saying, *Abbbb*.

This morning, I returned to the room, where the greasy smell of pizza greeted me. One last sweep. *Check*. The motel door clicked and locked behind me. Kali stood ready. Kevin sat in the passenger seat, chewing on his nails. The last traces of his cigarette clung to the cold air.

The mechanic had been curious about the culprit, a disconnected wire. A strange thing to simply have happened on its own.

I clicked the seat belt into place and slipped the key in the ignition. I pressed in the clutch and turned the key. Nothing.

Descartes wrote, *I might consider the body . . . a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even if there were no mind in it, it would still perform all the same movements.*

Descartes could be a fool.

Systems are not predictable; they are organic, subject to change and

decline.

They are also, by the same token, subject to innovation.

*Arizona, day eleven.*

Kali took to the rise, twenty miles or so outside of Show Low. I held my breath. I began to imagine the coast, and I felt divided. I did not like Southern California, the way it called forth the body, front and center. Where we were headed, appearances mattered. Still, I'd grown weary of the desert that called forth the body in a different way, not the form, but the function. The working body, front and center, failing. For a change of pace, I'd take that other desert, the one rimming the ocean.

Morning had begun cautiously. Kevin and I decided not to pack our belongings or check out until Kali turned over. She had on the first try. We praised the new clutch.

Now, Kali chased her shadow up the incline. I took a breath and focused on a spot always fifty feet ahead. I placed my will at Kali's disposal. I offered my intention—to move forward without delay.

Kali coughed and slowed and died.

[To invoke the dark goddess] is to step out of the everyday world of predictable dharmic order and enter a world of reversals, opposites, and contrasts and in doing so to wake up to new possibilities and new frames of reference. In her differentness, strangeness, indeed, in her perverseness, Kali is the kind of figure who is capable of shaking one's comforting and naïve assumptions about the world. In doing this, she allows a clearer perception of how things really are.

—David Kinsley

*On the rise still.*

I laughed, a brief burst, like the scabble of crows when one hops forward to steal what the other has found and then, in a flurry, they both

take off, one scolding the other.

When you accept fragility, you give up the dream of control. You respond to what is, not what you wish to be. You say *I will own this*. You lay claim to what previously lay unclaimed, to what, in fact, seemed to lay claim on you.

When you accept fragility, you take responsibility; you begin to practice freedom.

*Still on the rise.*

The passenger door opened. Kali rocked slightly as Kevin got out. I joined him, and we walked off the shoulder away from the road. Well-fed pines stood where I had recalled the long, accusing fingers of cacti. In the distance, mountains rose, lushly covered. The greening silence greeted us.

*Southern California, day twelve.*

Kevin lights a cigarette and walks towards the Pacific Ocean. I raise my hand, making a visor from the sun, and watch him, a figure against the suck and rush of the surf. The saline air presses lightly against my skin. I dig my toes beneath the hot surface sand, seeking the cool, damp stuff below. Gulls screech overhead, kids play at the shoreline, vendors hawk their goods.

Kali rests in a metered space not far from the beach. Twenty-four hours ago, Kevin and I had placed her once more in the hands of Show Low's mechanics. They had adjusted her timing, we had hit the road and finally made it out of Show Low for good. This morning, Kali carried us across the northern rim of Joshua Tree National Park and delivered us here, Laguna Beach, without a hitch.

I move closer to Kevin. Sunlight shifts on the waves. I raise my hand once more. Kevin exhales. The wind flirts briefly with the smoke, tugging it this way and that, before the smoke yields to the caress and is consumed.

## Agony Cast

Me, I'm totally free.

Me, I'm a liquid prisoner of music, and that's about it, folks.

That cold part of me the moon touches

is all painlight and surface, kids,

all sheep heart, exposed and still beating, all pump.

My heart beats 5 times for every breath, just like yours,

but what I don't understand in this agony cast, is who the rain is:

I'm the ooze that trickles over the dead leaves at the forest floor.

Does the small temple, the dent in the side of my head,

does it resound? I've got my stones back,

and my body is a temple,

no matter what kind of church music melts my heart,

for the things I've never mentioned before in a poem: cola, surgical scissors,

tweeze, censer, rat whiskers.

Frozen music indeed! A fluid trickling of brassiere, jello,

barges and such, gray matter and spleen.

Let loose the monkeys and bees.

Let loose my spleen,

for my heart contains one or more of the following: newsprint, frozen clouds,

bicycle music, a manicure and a pedicure both, which means

there must be both feet and hands in here.

Who doesn't return from a day at the chemical plant positively evil,

a changed woman, unwilling to dance? Who doesn't speak harshly to one's spouse,

after handling the borax and the radium?

Who doesn't wear their special hazmat suit to bed?

Who doesn't positively, actually cooze over the forest floor, especially in sleep?

This is but twenty minutes away, but ten, but five frozen minutes

to the most gripping of minutes. Who says so?

The forgotten lampray does, in a series of luminous blinks,  
such festive signals and memorable days, with their frozen suction cups.  
One man's run of the mill is one man's stay of execution is another man's torture.  
And a rat is not a boy, though a boy does have whiskers,  
and the opposite of that syllogism is most certainly true.  
That's how deep the sleeves go,  
how carbonated the minutes are reborn, how much your brain shall fizz.  
How soft and delicate were the cheeses of yesteryear,  
as the deepest inner eye tasted them all.  
Snap brim fedora on the runway, magazine full of runways.  
Charm bracelet. Straightened hair. Afro. A head full of commas,  
a spleen full of minutes, thou runway toad, thou.  
Sometimes, it just feels like my intestines are shredded, gasoline-soaked ties, bundled together  
and my eyes, these nervous holes that reach back into some otherworld.  
The hoops in my ears resonate with each passing train.  
The amber room of which the hollow in my eye consists,  
melts an empty, frozen music around which my pupil constricts,  
many blue, frozen months ago, and fingerlings of lightening  
excite and resurrect parts of the sky,  
which is to say: I'm finally awake. Nap, steering wheel,  
keyboard, slope, tombstone, borough, town, shire, reef.  
My fellow scribblers say I should practice writing down milk,  
radioactive milk, words I've never used, and close your eyes,  
if only to practice waking, if only, that is to say, such as I am.  
One eye closed, one eye opened, one ear to the floor,  
waiting for the thundering buffalo and the underground river  
the dead travel on. A hairweave. A gracefully well spun toupee.  
I'm writing this on a plane. Experiencing the heavyness of it all.  
Lo-Jo's duty free Holy Book and smock of human hair.  
Item #4171 (Duty Free)=Golden. Sexy. Night-bright.  
There's a slit in the canvas here:

just look at how much pure space is blowing through!  
You can feel it against your skin, entering your lungs, tweaking at your deepest nerves.  
A fellow customer was staring at me as if I'd been caught praying.  
I handed her a card on which were printed the credentials of my belief,  
and suddenly she was like a daughter to me.  
"I'd like to cancel this transaction," she said, but not outloud.  
I wonder if it's too late to call you from the jetway, on this special phone.  
And what relation do we bear to the stars, even way up here,  
or to the space that separates them, though the long fingerlings of commerce  
reach us even way up here, and shake the plane gently?  
"Why," she whispered to me, but it was suddenly clear  
that I was alone. Sigh. Groan.  
Whisper. Exultation. Those were the last bits,  
whispered and inhaled underbite of dusk as we went down.  
Instead of getting paid, I must promise to be unhappy.  
The pear trees must be covered in white sheets once I return,  
and those orchards be bulldozed.  
If you're a poet, you have to make it on your own whiskers.  
Wavelength, hoops in my ears, gin, and so on.  
Insurance man. Preacherman. Barlady.  
My starchart has expired. My sheep has expired.  
My whispered jewel has indeed expired,  
just as if the stars themselves were off-balance,  
as if they'd been blown out, just before the cosmic one  
put his own eyes out with some cosmic fork.

## Danny—Three Funerals and a Seminar

At one time there were three extremely famous critics in the world, and two of them were nice. The two nice ones were friends of Danny's. Sure. Daniel Stern was a man who had more than your average number of friends—some of them famous, the vast majority not.

(Of course, nobody's picking on the third critic. He simply didn't know Danny. Didn't have the luck. And now it is too late for the fellow to be made a nicer person, or, quite possibly, a deeper, more humane critic by the special alchemy of Danny's friendship. Too late. Daniel Stern, the author of nine novels and four award-winning collections of short stories, who taught fiction in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston while sitting in the Cullen Distinguished Chair . . . Danny died in Houston on January 24, 2007. There is no consolation. No consolation for the great many of us who knew him and read him, those of us who were taught by him—all those who loved him and were loved by him. But observe how there is even less for the third critic.)

Whom Danny would have given a break. It's true. Paid him some attention. Danny could have thawed out that critic—*pronto!* Him and the iceberg that was his eyrie. Daniel would have fired upon him only with the warmth of his greeting. *AH! THE THIRD CRITIC!* Then he would have made him laugh. And after a while—if they were hitting it off—he might have asked him to Le Peep's.

### I. Le Peep's

"A masterpiece . . ." says Danny.

Lightly said but sure. He puts the book on the seat of the booth beside him and pats it.

The University of Houston's Creative Writing Program gets Danny in his prime and Le Peep's gets a regular customer. His prime. Nine novels, two books of masterly short stories behind him, more arriving every day, one page at a time. He says that his voice has come in at sixty. His prime. If it is summer, he has the sleeves of a pastel cotton sweater knotted about his shoulders; winter, a famous red wool scarf is knotted at his throat.

The scarf isn't famous yet, won't be famous until it receives all that attention at funeral time. Everyone will remember and mention that scarf. Why? Adam Zagajewski will write, "with his French red scarf he looked like a Parisian intellectual who just emerged from a metro station and found himself in Houston, Texas, still a bit astonished." Perhaps that's it. He who kept us hilariously entertained and instructed in the present kept our endeavors tied to the great past.

Indeed, he is bent over the laminated menu, studying it with the light seriousness that he would study a Bach score. So we can observe the salt-and-pepper staccato of his well-groomed short hair. The caterpillar eyebrows are still quite black.

He likes Le Peep's because they serve breakfast even at noon. His own pages have been written for the day. His books will receive many awards, but the fact that he writes a page a day will become an urban legend. He tells his graduate students, books are not written in time. They are written in pages. Once briefly he worked in Hollywood. In movies from the forties and fifties, time was often illustrated by a speeded-up whirling forward of the empty pages of a calendar. When it is the moment to make the movie of his life, all the fast forward whirling pages will be written upon.

He meets his students at the restaurant and talks about their writing, his writing, the writing of others. Prefers to talk about masterpieces. Not always. But life is short. (Although he doesn't tell the graduate student this. He is tender, protective of the young. While he is good at introductions, he never introduces, nor does he mention, the thin fellow over in the smoking section. Alone, unpopular, it seems, as the third critic. Danny knows him, nods to him. Death—just another regular at Le Peep's.) This is the farthest

out Westheimer Western Civilization has ever been. Professor Stern has staked out new territory. Two, three, blocks further, and you wouldn't be even inside the Loop. You could walk to the Galleria from Le Peep's, although the last soul who tried was killed in traffic.

"A masterpiece . . ." Another pat for the book and for good measure.

The masterpiece has been made by a fellow artist whom he knows well or not at all. Maybe one of his critical friends. *He's not really a critic, he's an artist.* That's good to know. The masterpiece has been created by someone living or dead. Young, old. How genuinely free from envy he is where other writers are concerned. That pat is a fellow artist's judgment, something more, much more than opinion. A firm paw out to a fellow artist when the fireworks of fame burst or fail to, an acknowledgement that keeps you going in the dark, under the ambivalent threat of critical lightening.

"There is art," he says, "and then there is what happens to art."

He says this philosophically.

He sets art aside, tables art as it were, momentarily, while he decides if he wants the whole grain pancakes or the Rooty-Tooty Fruity pancakes.

"I'll have the Rooty-Tooty Fruity pancakes . . ." says Stern.

To the bucolic waitress—yellow-flowered uniform, brown-flowered apron, spider web hairnet. The waitresses at Le Peep's have the bucolic calm that we associate with shepherdesses. They all like him. A nice old guy. A teacher, huh? Nobody famous, I mean, not like Bum Phillips or anybody, but a good tipper. And nice.

" . . . hold the Rooty-Tooty." Said with real dignity.

He has practiced ordering, that non-subservient respect that should be given to the server—and the meal to come—at the great watering holes and eateries in the world. He has practiced, and so now he is at the top of his form, finally ready for Le Peep's. The waitresses appreciate the effort.

Between the ordering and the deft delivery of the pancakes, he says, "Auden, Chekhov, Beckett, Cervantes, Balzac, Tolstoy, Stevens, Plato, Whitman, Dickinson, Stendhal, Hardy, Dickens, Forster, Conrad, Sophocles . . ."

Isn't our normally modest professor saying these names, uh, a little loud? Showing off? You bet. Loud enough for the thin guy, the cadaverous looking one—could be a runner, but he's sitting in the smoking section—loud enough for Death to overhear. In part, that is what these names and these works are for. Known for his sweetness and his humor, you may glimpse sometimes in the shadows below Danny's brow and the set of his mouth, a practical man who has thought a great deal about death. In these unguarded moments you may read through his amiable sweetness to catch a glimpse of the practical men, the fathers in his own fiction, the shop keepers in Malamud. Men who know how to live in the real world of predators and thugs—of which death is chief among them. *You pay the sons-of-a-bitches off.*)

Payola. Every morning in his study for many years, Daniel Stern has been paying off death. One page at a time. His absorbing novel, *Who Shall Live? Who Shall Die?* which takes place in the world of the New York theatre and has the Holocaust as its background, is not, strange to say it, really about death. It is about speaking up against unspeakable horror. But it is still a young man's novel, written when Stern was about thirty, an astonishing accomplishment. Yet it is really about how one may live—with hope and meaning—in the last half of the death-ridden twentieth century. And even Stern's novel that has the title *The Suicide Academy* is not, though the title is promising—he's inching towards the territory—about death. It is, rather, about choice.

We may observe Stern finally agreeing, albeit reluctantly, to a profound knowledge, a marrow-deep knowing of the implacability of death as he begins to write the first stories of his newly-invented form of short story: the twice-told tale. That's when his stories become unbelievably funny. The first of these, "The Liberal Imagination of Lionel Trilling, a story" begins with a eulogy for his character, Katherine Eudemie: "Does anyone here know the precise meaning of the word 'eulogy'? Come on: you're all word people."

Stern's last story, the extraordinarily masterful "The Advancer"—uncollected but published in *Kenyon Review*—is about an unprepossessing character, a book review assistant assistant assistant editor named Polliakoff, who finds himself, the meaning to his existence, when he begins to write obituaries. (That many of the soon-to-be-obitted are willing to pay big bucks ahead of time for sterling obituaries, the money criminally obtained, is not, finally, what Polliakoff cares about. He cares about the art.) In between his first story and the very last, Stern will write enough to fill four collections, many of them with death not so much presiding as being put off (or paid off). With another hour of love, a meal, friendship, paintings, nature—seen from a window, this is after all a Stern story—talk, books, jokes, beauty, pictures, music music music, masterpieces of fiction, poetry, more jokes, more music. All proportions kept, we no more really know what Stern did in his study than Shakespeare did in his. But it seems utterly reasonable to surmise that Death was in the study with him—appalling as it is to imagine—sitting in the plaid easy chair. Stern, in his Scherzade compulsion paying out another page. More beauty, more life, more human love. These wonders keep Death off his back—and ours—one more day. Masterpieces. We may absolutely take Stern at his word that when the invention of the twice-told tale came to him,

It took a small leap of nerve, not to mention faith, but what got my pulses racing was this idea: that a text by a writer of the past whom I loved, even a non-fiction work, could be basic to a fiction; as basic as a love affair, a trauma, a house, a mother, a landscape, a lover, a job, or a sexual passion. Literature might actually make its claim; not merely as a subcategory of entertainment, education or culture, but as a branch of the fullness of life in the act of being lived.

Certainly. But aren't the masterpieces also ammunition? Big guns against Death? Is it too far-fetched to imagine that one day, sitting in his study, already paying off with everything he knew and loved against Death, that he just lost it? That he stood up and began to fire the well-loaded contents of his bookshelves at the intruder? Take that! And he began to hurl at Death's head the volumes by Flaubert, Keats, Joyce, Roth, Swift, Fielding, Bellow, Hawthorne . . .

"Wordsworth, Dante, Mann, Melville, Homer, Goethe, Kafka, Freud, Marx . . ."

Say it louder, professor.

"James, Milton, Wilde, Austen, Eliot, Woolf, Emerson, Brontë . . . ah, excellent, thank you. Perhaps a bit more blueberry syrup, madam," he says to the waitress.

There are people who believe that Western Civilization took a big hit when Daniel Stern left us. But it isn't true. And he would have hated the saying so. He hated excess—unless it was, like extra blueberry syrup, in the service of pleasure. Or truth. It was rare, but when he was displeased, the black caterpillar eyebrows would come together, seemingly mate above his nose. His mouth would then turn downward, carving what looked like a child's sketch of an igloo in the lower half of his face.

"Too much of a muchness . . ." he would have muttered—displeased with an untruth, ". . . not a big hit. It was more like a dent."

But the truth is, maestro, Western Civilization is looking a little peaky. And it's a goner at Le Peep's.

## II.

### Forms of Attention

Here's how the world greeted Daniel Stern: *Dan! Danny! Professor!* Here's how Danny greeted the world: *KID! MAESTRO! PROFESSOR!* Or he would yell out your name: *HEY! WHATEVER YOUR NAME IS!* He would know. Warm. Not so warm as to be the proximal cause of global warming,

don't be silly; to be greeted by Stern was more of a lift-off, a sudden blast. Searing, it was, just saying hello.

His graduate students used to say to him, *Let us go on down the road, Danny, let us go on down the road. I-45 South. Take a left at NASA Road 1. A big job awaits you at NASA. Single handedly you could revive the manned space program with your one-man lift-off and orbiting system, the blast of your greetings, the re-entry done with laughs. We'll all come with you, we shall take joint degrees. U of H and NASA; astrophysics and fiction. We are ambitious and talented. We shall go where no graduate students of fiction have ever gone before and so forth. We've laid out the website: Fiction. Independent study, tutorials, workshops. Professor: Daniel Stern. Location: Sea of Tranquility, the moon.*

He wouldn't do it. He was not, to say the least, interested in any kind of transcendence. Graduate students—one thinks of Rowena Ralph in “Sunday Morning by Wallace Stevens”—are, quite often, wild about transcendence. This is understandable. For the most part, graduate students in fiction and poetry are inescapably from the suburbs and malls of large American cities. Transcendence was their ticket out. But Danny would wearily, warmly tug the string. Even the most serious among them would begin to giggle, then laugh—Danny's friend Elie Wiesel said, “To spend an evening with Danny without laughing is quite simply inconceivable”—and in mild fits the graduate students would land, without skinning their knees, gently, upon on the grass. Daniel Stern explored and discussed transcendence in a number of stories. But his narrator-explorers at the end of things, always say to us, as Kraft, the high school music teacher does at the end of the story, “A Man of Sorrows and Acquainted with Grief”:

He was ready to end all arguments, outside and in, ready to begin. Not for him the Bach Passions with their lofty rhetoric, their guilt and expiations. Just a Haydn symphony with its natural gaiety and when it turns sad never quite dark: all in the human scale, as if no one had ever thought of transcendence, as if no one had ever despaired of

suffering and loss, as if no young girl had ever nursed a dying twin sister, who took the zip and pizzazz out of her own heart at the same time . . . as if no one had ever been unsatisfied enough, unhappy enough, here to imagine any place else . . . as if no one had ever felt so deep a pain at having to leave this extraordinary earth too soon, this extraordinary earth with its lucky gift of birdsong, its luckier gift of music, this extraordinary earth where, at one time or another, every kind of happiness seems possible.

He did not know in whose name he raised his hands, but he brought them down for the opening chord as firmly as if he did. It rang in the air, it rang inside him; a D major chord, nothing more, nothing less.

Simple. Sufficient. Entirely beautiful.

We were the only planet he was interested in. This one with its lively, mysterious human creatures. Passionately so. (Though he was piss-poor on wildlife.) And he would take us up after that crazy warm greeting—that was the essence of sanity—take us up, one by one. Even in a cocktail crowd or a literary ball. Even in the giant crowds migrating between classes at the Roy Cullen Building when there were so many of us wet ones—part of the movement of populations and fiction writers moving upon the earth—that it seemed we'd just floated on our inner-tubes across the Rio Grande and were in danger of being defamed on Fox News.

*Danny! KID! Professor!* And then, singled out, the two of you would ascend, instantly, into whatever was really on your mind. Boys. Art. Goodness. Fear. Failure. Boys. Love. Sex. Art. Boys. He would take you up to where you really were. Or where you needed to be. Just never in a transcendental, *weeuuuoooh*, sort of way. (There was one exception, one—only one—occasion when Danny would invoke the transcendent. Whenever a graduate student had been dumped, permanently, by a lover or spouse, the professor would

put his arm around the shoulder of the weeping dumpee and whisper, “when the demi-gods depart, the real gods appear.” A tiny compromise with his conscience that saved several lives.)

This uncanny attention to the lost soul in the crowd also exists in Stern’s fiction but with new rules. The lost soul gets to turn herself or himself in at the lost and found desk of Stern’s invention, a new form of short story, the twice-told tale. As Frank Kermode said of the third collection of stories in his newly invented form, *One Day’s Perfect Weather*, “he has brought it close to perfection. This collection ought to establish him as among the finest of modern American story writers.” For the length of each story, we singularly inhabit the consciousness of a character who is in the business of defining himself or redeeming himself in the recognizably human world. He does so by having a conversation with all those he encounters—Stern’s characters talk to one another, quite often at lunch or dinner—while simultaneously carrying on an inward conversation with a loved work of art. Each story is, perforce, a party line. The further magic of these stories—Stern has been rightly called the Prospero of Manhattan—is that while giving us man or woman in our most intense intimate or private, identity-making habits—the reading of a poem or story, the falling upon one another in love or friendship—we, the reader, like a first-rate monarch or politician, never lose touch with the crowd.

Stern uses, story after story, his light, suggestive touch to make us believe that in the crowded rush hour worlds he depicts, each human being carries about with him or her a complicated, interesting inner life. In most Stern stories, we have an ensemble of characters who have auditioned and won a place in a particular Stern story—but he, we, are conscious of the talent in the wings, the talented hordes who didn’t get into the present story standing outside in the snow, the line running all the way down town. The composition of the crowds changes, to be sure, depending upon the neighborhood. But whether they are found in Madison Avenue or the Village, the East Side or West, each depicted or suggested individual is possessed of a knowing, an edgy ambitious hopefulness. As if each is betting on himself or herself. As if

each believes that sooner or later, he or she will get the real attention he or she has always deserved. That is—that he or she will wind up in a story by Daniel Stern.

The sense that we inhabit a great world, the province usually of the big novel, Stern manages in the short stories that are streamlined, dense, crowded—critics often notice this about the work—as a New York street. Where we bump into, overhear, share the sidewalk with, dash to the subway among, elbow to the packed bar beside, the tens of thousands, nay, even the millions with whom we share an island, a planet. Crowd control the author of the story collections manages with civility—and humility. He doesn't actually believe he can know all these people—or know, for that matter, even a single individual. As he says in his last published short story, "The Advancer," "something I'd always suspected was true: that it was impossible to actually know the nature of the people who walked around us, their souls as murky as a glass of Cointreau on the rocks."

But we must still, even at our peril, take their phone calls and do lunch. We seem to be here to salute one another in our unknowability. At least his characters do. Human beings are to stand on street corners and wave at one another—not just yellow cabs.

*Danny! KID! Dan! MAESTRO!*

### III.

#### A Little Night Music

Elizabeth Hardwicke said that after William James died, what troubled his friends, those who knew him, was that his presence could not be recaptured. We had his books, his abundant correspondence, the family memoirs and the great witnessing brother, but we still didn't have "him." His presence. Apparently, there was something about his presence in a room that was unusual. Maybe it was sweetness, or a profound ability to listen, maybe wit—we don't know, there are only hints, a helpless fluttering after trying to describe his presence by those who actually knew him.

Yeah, we can already hear the joke: “The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James, a story by Daniel Stern.” Attention. There was something about the form of his attention. And the span of it. Very Brooklyn Bridge-like in its spanning.

Danny had three funerals. One funeral proper in Sag Harbor and then two memorial services—one in Houston, another in Manhattan. (Yes, a memorial service isn't exactly the same as a funeral. A higher clientele quite often, and sometimes better food.) Afterwards at each of the—things—for Danny, his family and friends sat around drinking white wine and herbal tea, missing him terribly.

What was not lost, of course, on a single attendee or mourner was that we all seemed to be living through a scene from one of Danny's stories. Impossible not to recall all the funerals, cocktail parties, wakes, eulogies, restaurant meetings, movie set locations, orchestra rehearsals, offices, campuses—the social eventness of these human institutions—that Danny had found to be the seed of his best stories. An *Echt New Yorker*, as Frank Kermode called him, probably no writer ever captured better the voices, the hub-bub, the intersection of social, literary, political, sexual wiles at the cocktail party for intellectuals, theatre people, artists, writers. Generous, generous, people kept saying. And then a stranger would ask you, *did you know he always wrote at least a page a day*. Well, yes, it's an urban legend.

And so it was possible—or, at least, this is what happened the morning after his last funeral—to wake up unusually early in an immensely tiny, immensely expensive polished hotel room. A hotel room in an Upper East Side neighborhood. Danny lived in so many neighborhoods, and did not move to this one until after he became a billionaire selling his stories to small literary magazines like *Paris Review* and *Raritan* . . . to wake with the sun edging through the wooden shutters, the Schubert still playing in your head. And find yourself saying, “Music! Of course! Maestro, that's how you did it! Music! It was there all the time!” But I never knew. It is the most difficult thing an artist can do, to balance the claims upon the soul to be a

good human being—without getting too prissy or doctrinaire about it—and the screw worm inward turning, the self-ish demands of art. You were, are, good—although the politically correct term for goodness now is “generous”; nobody sophisticated gets to say “good” anymore because the television preachers and politicians have outsourced and privatized the good. Too bad, I kind of miss the good. A good man and a serious artist. Kundera says in his latest—by the way the translation by your buddy Linda Ascher is swell, she was at your thing—that the honesty of the artist is tied to the vile stake of his megalomania . . . goodness and art. Kindness and ambition. Not easy pairs. Although Iris Murdoch worked the territory. Said that the integrity of the work is emblematic of the integrity we would have as men. Maybe if the Dame is up I’ll give her breakfast at Sarabeths; it is rumoured she likes cupcakes. Or, I’ll wander down to the park and feed the squirrels because you said not to. New York’s going to be a lonely town without you. But Murdoch, though she lived it, left no notes on how the living of the good life and writing well in the same finite life might be mastered. With you, the key was the music. Never for you the commandments, the strictures, the set of rules . . . no, just the music of others. Maybe it was all those years playing chamber music or in orchestras, listening attentively to the music made by the fellow on your right, the woman on your left . . . so with you the living and the playing, the writing and the living came together naturally orchestrated, as you sat there, bow ready, attentive, present, tender and alert to the next breath, the next unexpected human note . . .

#### IV.

#### A Seminar

Enter the extremely famous critic. One of the two nice ones. (The other loved critic always had a standing invitation but there was something about his heart; he couldn’t fly.) We drew lots to see who would pick up the famous critic at Intercontinental. Another lottery was held—more or less,

the department and Inprint raffled off seats in his class. God Almighty, we were impressed. So was Danny, even though the guy was one of his closest friends and coming to Houston by his invitation. Not just for a lecture or two, mind. The FC was coming to teach a semester-long class.

That's probably what gave it away. Get this: the guy was just an English teacher.

Also an English man. An eminent critic to be sure, a distinguished scholar—thinker certainly. But at the end of the day the fellow was really just an English teacher. While we are holding our breath until the moment writers and critics receive a category on *American Idol*, we have no such hopes for English teachers. *World Famous English Teacher*. See how it doesn't scan? See how it deflates and demotes? Anyway, we could handle being around an English teacher, and so we all got comfortable. And he appeared to be comfortable with us, his graduate students. (Although, of course, it was said that he always seemed comfortable, even that time he was knighted by the Queen.) He was comfortable spending two hours with us dissecting a single word in Auden—"enantiomorph"; he was comfortable smoking pipes and cigarettes—Dunhills in the non-smoking classrooms and halls. We admired that. But mostly he was comfortable with Danny, his old pal, his loved friend. Enantiomorphic they seemed to be, a pair of old shoes—although the Englishman who wore professorial tweeds and had quiet hair was a fanatic about wearing respectfully shined shoes. You never saw two old friends more comfortable with one another. The jokes! We could make out which one was Mutt, which Jeff, but it was never clear in the relationship who was Sancho Panza and who the Don. Perhaps they took turns. It was lovely to see. Anyway. The zenith, the apex, the Everest example of their comfort was probably that late afternoon in Room 104, when, surrounded by about six hundred students, faculty, and townspeople, Danny and the critic, both of them, fell asleep. It had been a long usual day, both of them teaching, lecturing, telling jokes to one another in the hall.

It was after six p.m. The famous young writer that we were all waiting to see was late. The young writer's book, you see, had been made into a movie. The room was a true lecture hall, rising tiers of desks. And at the very back, that is the very top, Danny and the critic leaned over the stack of student papers and books each had before him—not much in the way of a pillow—napping. The room was dark, a gloaming; no one had thought yet to turn on the lights. That barn owl that used to sit outside the window in Danny's class—*he's just auditing*, Danny would say—was looking in one of the dark framed windows below. There was an oceanic murmur, all those subdued voices. The two of them napped like a pair of fo'c'sle rats on watch. (Sometimes, rarely, a fo'c'sle rat, a fellow who had entered the navy at the lowest level, makes his way up to the bridge. They make good captains. Because they have arrived where they have, given luck and discipline, only by love of the ship.) Danny and his friend are napping. Let's leave them there, if it's all right with you. We should hang out a Do Not Disturb sign that can be read. All over the noisy world.

## Bounty

—for Daniel Stern

You had your compass, your city campus,  
your briefcase crammed with stories.  
(Your case for the writer was brief: guilty.)

You had your novels and twice-told tales,  
and cruised down the stairs like Bartleby  
in reverse: a scrivener who preferred to.

You had your Franz Kafka and Max Brod,  
the jackdaw and the man of letters  
laughing their heads off on a corner in Prague.

You had the Jewish past in Budapest,  
the hunger of dying, the Hungarian dead,  
grief-stricken music for violin and cello.

You had your hardships and holidays,  
your high holy days, your nights of mourning  
and your days of awe, your celebrations.

You had your car rides careening around corners,  
and when you walked you were never a pedestrian.  
You had your Gloria, your Book of Daniel;  
you had your own stern covenant with life.

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Excerpted from *A Book for Daniel Stern*, eds. Pamela M. Diamond and Stanley Moss.  
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## The Cellist

—to *Daniel Stern*

You cherished your silent beautiful cello  
after your shoulder joint wore out.  
You would not play dead like that entombed Jew.  
You could not stop hearing music in your head:  
a disease. Whatever the conversation  
or dream, you hear the chamber music you played—  
the Archduke trio, concerti in your head  
in the Monday, Tuesday, everyday world—  
the first cousin of a religious experience.  
Sometimes I ask: “What music is playing now?”  
The evening program, however sublime,  
always seems painful.  
You sold your cello to pay a doctor’s bill.  
It could have happened in a Balzac story—  
wherever you are, outside in the street Balzac is standing,  
winter and summer, fat and naked beneath his bronze cloak.

We are hanging on to life by a cello string.  
I take the A string that carries the lyric, you the G  
for darkness and light, both holding on to Dear life,  
to D for Darling, Divertimento, and Don’t let go.  
The Great Concertmaster is playing us  
for the hell of it. We are his cello.  
His bow the tails of a hundred white horses.  
Maestro, keep playing, an aire on any string will do,  
Mozart, Bach, jazz, a little street music.

Sing us or pluck a note from time to time,  
or a chord with one turn of the wrist  
to accommodate the curve of the bridge.  
Practice, practice, practice. O Concertmaster,  
a question we, the cello, ask with our undersong  
of lust: "Do we love life more than one person?"—  
again with a turn of the wrist  
to accommodate the bridge over the dark river.

## For Daniel Stern

A few weeks ago, I finished an essay on the use of dialogue in fiction for a collection on the teaching of writing. I called it “What We Talk About When We Talk”—and as usual, I found myself thinking about Dan and all the “How To’s” he taught in the six years that I was his student at the University of Houston:

How to listen for a story’s theme, its patterns and repetitions as if listening to a symphony.

How to be passionate about THE work—write every day, even when you think you have nothing to say. Most often, for Dan, this meant a few hours each morning sitting at his computer, a glass of orange juice waiting precariously next to the keyboard, followed by a vigorous round of pedaling on his ancient exercise bike, followed by reading the most recent biography of Henry James or Paul Celan, followed by reading student stories, followed by teaching these students for three hours in workshop until 8:30 at night, when he’d return to Gloria, his love and life.

How to leave passion behind and become the surgeon wielding the scalpel, excising the precious passage, sloppy dialogue, the too-easy denouement.

How to remember to believe that literature matters and that while we might be “in” a writing workshop, stories don’t come from the workshop. Occasionally they come from “the heart” (not from its gentle pitter-patter, but from its thrumming against the lungs and

ribs, from its reverberating echoes in the body). Usually they come from the unquiet mind, the uneasy conscience.

In the essay I was writing on dialogue, I used the opening of Dan's story, "Wakefield by Nathaniel Hawthorne," as an example of masterful dialogue, but it also shows this "How To": The narrator is unsettled by his reading of Wakefield—how Wakefield goes off to work one day and doesn't return home, but sets up camp a few blocks away and watches his wife over the course of 20 years, watching how she is unsettled by his absence.

These are some of Dan's "How To's," which I pass on to my students and refer to in my essay. But in writing about these Lessons of *My Master*, I went to my file cabinet, to a folder filled with old drafts of stories, my stories, and on those stories, in the margins, after the end paragraph and onto the back page, is Dan's sprawling sharp-edged, scrawl; unmistakable, almost unreadable, but evidence of his engagement with the work at hand—not his own (surely where his time and creative energy should be directed!), but mine.

The writing of this essay on dialogue converged with my own exasperated reading of several student stories in my own workshop—stories that were, truth be told, awful—about an unrepentant shopaholic, about a doctor who stops a pandemic. Stories by students who didn't have any ambition for the literary life, who didn't read Henry James, who didn't read at all, except what I'd forced them to read by power of the syllabus and final grade. But there I was, looking down at my own terrible first drafts and at Dan's generous, wise counsel written across their pages, and recognized in his careful, masterly reading of my unshapely prose the architecture of my revision process for stories that would later be part of my first book.

And then the latest issue of *Poets & Writers* arrived, unceremoniously dropped into my rusty front porch mailbox. And that formal, narrow, right-hand column, IN MEMORIAM, and in that column, the name: Daniel Stern. *In Memoriam*—a reminder to remember who has died, of a great presence now absent. But Dan is here—speaking to me, teaching me, still.

## Surveying the Landscape: Innovation in Contemporary Canadian Poetry

Gil Adamson, *Asbland*. ECW Press. 2003. Paper, 78 pp. \$16.95 CDN.

Elizabeth Bachinsky, *Curios: Grotesques and Satires from the Electronic Age*. BookThug. 2005. Paper, 108 pp. \$18.95 US.

Elizabeth Bachinsky, *Home of Sudden Service*. Nightwood Editions. 2006. Paper, 78 pp. \$13.95 US.

Margaret Christakos, *Excessive Love Prosthesis*. Coach House Books. 2002. Paper, 88 pp. \$16.95 CDN.

Margaret Christakos, *Sooner*. Coach House Books. 2005. Paper, 140 pp. \$16.95 CDN.

Marlene Cookshaw, *Lunar Drift*. Brick Books. 2005. Paper, 86 pp. \$13.00 US.

Marlene Cookshaw, *Shameless*. Brick Books. 2002. Paper, 64 pp. \$15.00 US.

Mary Dalton, *Merrybegot*. Véhicule Press (Signal Editions). 2004. Paper, 71 pp. \$8.95 US.

Mary Dalton, *The Red Ledger*. Véhicule Press (Signal Editions). 2006. Paper, 80 pp. \$16.95 US.

Sharon Harris, *Avatar*. Mercury Press. 2007. Paper, 128 pp. \$12.50 US.

Anita Lahey, *Out to Dry in Cape Breton*. Véhicule Press (Signal Editions). 2006. Paper, 79 pp. \$16.00 US.

Erin Mouré, *Search Procedures*. House Of Anansi. 1996. Paper, 160 pp. \$12.95 US.

Lisa Robertson, *Debbie: An Epic*. New Star Books. 1997. Paper, 96 pp. \$16.00 US.

*Shift & Switch: New Canadian Poetry*. Ed. derek beaulieu, Jason Christie, & Angela Rawlings. Mercury Press. 2005. Paper, 192 pp. \$16.95 US.

Anne Simpson, *Loop*. McClellan & Stewart. 2003. Paper, 104 pp. \$14.95 US.

Karen Solie, *Modern and Normal*. Brick Books. 2005. Paper, 100 pp. \$13.00 US.

Karen Solie, *Short Haul Engine*. Brick Books. 2001. Paper, 96 pp. \$14.00 US

Nathalie Stephens, *Somewhere Running*. Arsenal Pulp Press. 2000. Paper, 89 pp. \$13.95 US.

Nathalie Stephens, *Paper City*. Coach House Books. 2003. Paper, 80 pp. \$16.95 CDN.

Souvankham Thammavongsa, *Small Arguments*. Pedlar Press. 2004. Paper, 64 pp. \$17.95 US.

Jacqueline Turner, *Seven into Even*. ECW Press. 2006. Paper, 108 pp. \$16.95 CDN.

Suzanne Zelazo, *Parlance*. Coach House Books. 2003. Paper, 100 pp. \$16.95 CDN.

Known as a nation of vast geographic scale, Canada is coming into its poetic maturity with appropriate range and diversity. Still, not unlike other contemporary poetics, it could also be described as a tale of two extremes—one experimental, one formal.

The experimenters are frequently associated with *Tish*, the Toronto Research Group founded by the radically innovative duo of Steve McCaffery and the late bp Nichol. Born in the 1960s, the *Tish* movement began after American poets Robert Creeley and Charles Olson visited the University of British Columbia; it is because of their influence—specifically the influence of Olson's famous essay "Projective Verse"—that critics have characterized *Tish* as an extension of Black Mountain poetics. There is also the Kootenay School of Writing, originally located in the Kootenay mountain range of British Columbia's interior. Now in Vancouver, the Kooteney School has been shaped by Fred Wah, George Bowering, Jeff Derksen (among others)—a group of poets who have effectively marshaled a politically and theoretically savvy experimentalist sensibility that is wholly indigenous to the West Coast.

In light of these experimentalist traditions, Canadian icon Robert Kroetsch once described his country's literature as leaping directly from

the Victorian to the Postmodern. According to poet and editor Carmine Starnino, in the introduction to his recent anthology *The New Canon* (Signal Editions, 2005), formalist poetry has somehow been underprivileged in the national poetry scene. In a passionate bid to revise Canada's literary history Starnino sets out to eradicate the "nonsense" from the literary landscape. But too often, what Starnino suggests is nonsense is simply "other." Not that Starnino doesn't make good points, or good choices in terms of his inclusions (several of which are included in this essay), but the vision of Canada he puts forth is homogenous and regressive—as though suggesting that the school of quietude could or should represent "all" American poetry. To complicate matters, prominent anthologist Gary Geddes, who edits several blends of Canadian poetry for Oxford University Press, has all but edited out experimental (concrete, visual and/or language) poetry from recent editions, further emphasizing a shift to more conservative poetics.

Despite the entrenched and oppositional positions of some, there is no single strand of influence, no dominant Canadian poetic. Rather, there are more dispersed modes of influence. The modernist Anglo-Montreal poets are a good example of this, as they are more apt to position themselves with Auden, Stevens, or British influences such as Seamus Heaney, Robin Robertson, or Don Paterson than with American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. What all of this points to is a healthy poetics, a poetics forged by interaction and response. This awareness is what makes Canadian poetry so different from other English language poetics. Awareness of and appreciation of other positions and approaches makes for more original and daring work.

A recent spate of anthologies has, in various ways, attempted to both give shape to and set a course for a future poetics in our country. But perhaps we have now passed the point where a single volume can give an accurate or adequate representation. Like the poetics of the United States, we may be so fragmented that editors are beginning to see schools—and are beginning to put forth their individual theories about these schools—rather than trying to represent an accurate national poetic. In any case, there are many who would suggest that a national poetic is impossible. While I am not one

of those, it might be useful to sketch out some of the more provocative and engaging lines of influences and preoccupations.

### Nature “Made Strange”: The Canadian Pastoral

KAREN SOLIE’s first book, *Short Haul Engine*, was nominated for the Griffin Prize for Poetry; her second book, *Modern & Normal*, was published by Brick in 2005. Don McKay, one of Canada’s great lyric nature poets, introduced Solie in the recent anthology *Introductions: Poets Present Poets* (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2001); this is fitting, as Solie shares McKay’s love of metaphor, dry humor, and sense of place. For Solie, the place is mid-prairie Saskatchewan, a space full of machines—themselves vehicular hearts or “four poppers”—careening down highways. In her hands the Canadian pastoral moves from grid to grid, unearthing strange pikes, where waterfalls “chew . . . the valley” and “whorls of amber gunk ooze from a pine” (77). Solie’s largely free verse lyric, despite a sometimes-surly edge (on Freud “In my dream he’s two feet tall, / and me a knockout at an even six, / buff and cruel . . .”), leans toward the sincere. Her whip-snap lyric confidence reminds me of Brenda Shaughnessy’s *Interior With Sudden Joy* or Daisy Fried’s *My Brother is Getting Arrested Again* as much as it does Anne Carson (who appears in one of *Modern & Normal*’s epigrams). Even if it is limited to a kind of still-life realism, the language and intellectual play in Solie is striking.

Anne Carson often flickers in the frisson of Solie’s gaze—a gaze both academic and confessional: “It’s nothing really. // A sliver of glass / just under the skin. // One of the many small things / that travel blood / to the heart.” And in what might be a particular Canadian trait, Solie is always aware of herself in relation to other, whether watching a sturgeon hauled out into “his nightmare of us” or looking at the lives of others, “envisaging” (a term Don McKay suggests in *Vis à Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry and Wilderness* [Gaspereau Press, 2001]). Solie envisages the moment in which humans come face-to-face with whatever “other” is, animate or inanimate, rather than simply “naming.”

Nature is everywhere in the work of MARLENE COOKSHAW, who, not unlike fellow *Brick* poet Karen Solie, is precise and playfully earnest: "The cornstubble field, abandoned, is on its way to lots," she notes blankly in *Shameless* (2002), and in *Lunar Drift* (2005), she observes, "I believe there are details in the eagle bone I need to know." Cookshaw, former editor of the *Malabat Review*, meticulously crafts and polishes startling shards of quotidian images, slowing them to the point of still life. There she shows the self looking into nature—"the tiny silver luck of minnows"—and inscribes onto that looking moments of insight. Like Solie's wonder at a fish suddenly trying to breathe air, Cookshaw attempts to measure the passing of things, the self in the world, as well as the self in the self.

In *Lunar Drift*, Cookshaw achieves a wider-ranging gaze, folding in philosophical and historical questions while her commitment to a lyric "I" is maintained. In "Tuck Everlasting," for example, we are asked to contemplate the use of death in an urban landscape as from a window (one we assume to be a hospital window): the narrator watches men in machines "disassemble" a dying tree, one that might serve as food for woodpeckers in the wild, yet has no purpose in this urban world. For the most part, the human condition is accepted in these poems. In Cookshaw's hands, largely unseen and rarely commemorated moments shimmer. Like Don McKay and Karen Solie, the flint of nature in Cookshaw can be surprisingly "North American," having moved on from the theses of Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and Dennis Lee's *Savage Fields*. The natural world in contemporary Canadian poetry, not surprisingly, is a benign and beleaguered one, and as we witness in other poems such as "Field," it is as reminiscent of Jane Hirschfield, Jane Kenyon, Mary Oliver (as Cookshaw points out herself with her epigram) or Louise Glück as it is Phyllis Webb, PK Page, or McKay himself. This space is "natural," yet it is made strange by human sight and contemplation.

There are other, more extreme ways of looking and accepting what is before us—more ways of "making strange." A poet who is interested in mapping this out is Montreal-based poet and translator ERIN MOURÉ. Winner of the Governor Generals' Award and twice nominated for the Griffin Prize for Poetry, Mouré has penned over a dozen acclaimed collections

of poetry, and has translated several more (including those of Québécoise writer Nicole Brossard). Like Cookshaw and Solie, Mouré is concerned with the pastoral, as well and acts of language (both in and of itself, and in the sense of languages being multiple). At times she even shares Solie's and Cookshaw's same physical landscape. A moment not unlike the one described in Cookshaw's "Tuck Everlasting" appears in a poem from *Search Procedures*, one of a trilogy of books that investigates citizenship/language in our globalizing world while it simultaneously deconstructs the idea of text/book to its absolute limits. In "Morphine, Or The Cutting Stone" someone is dying, someone is scouring the land, and somewhere a poet is wrangling a language that shifts. "A word is identical with a word and nothing else in the world matters," the poem begins, then it proceeds to leap from a field, where "yellow cowboys [are] opening the fence wire" and cows are "literally *moving fields* of warmth," to a hospital room:

"Put that purse in the drawer . . .  
When I hear the hiss, I know the morphine is coming  
& I want my purse in that drawer"

and later, back to the narrator:

"Why does the brain trigger a jumble-word  
next to the real?"

Here, as with Cookshaw's poem, the familiar is both commemorated and simultaneously made strange: the "speckled cattle" who, all night long, "snort the seed out of the ground"; the hooded shapes that transform in the land before us (while transforming the land itself, or the land literally passing through them); cars veering off the road in the snow; the drip of the weather, of the morphine, of our desire to make sense of what is constantly coming at us—word, image, desire, idea all thrust together.

*Small Arguments*—SOUVANKHAM THAMMAVONGSA's very short, very precise first book published by Pedlar Press in 2003—begins

with a poem/prologue titled "Materials," in which she confides that she grew up in a world without books:

When I learned to read,  
the winter boots

lay dripping  
in the hallway;

the glass, broken  
and uncovered

because I knew this  
this

would be my way in.

Here is another way of making strange, another way in to the quotidian; this is Thammavongsa's small argument of the plunge—the deep looking that poets like Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, and Jan Zwicky describe as the poet's primary act. The author goes on, in a book that replicates the original hand-bound books of early, self-published efforts, to look at and order (or re-order) a number of small things—things easily overlooked yet not easily measured.

This looking, the appreciation of the small "broken and uncovered," this quiet—Thammavongsa's belief in hand-to-hand dissemination of one's work—all of this is reminiscent of Jan Zwicky, one of Canada's most established lyric poets, whose *Songs for Relinquishing The Earth* (Brick, 1999), originally hand-bound, went on to win the Governor General's Award. While lacking the elder poet's reach and intellectual rigor (Zwicky is also a professor of philosophy at the University of Victoria), Thammavongsa's work nevertheless presents the object of her attention with similar precision. In "Frogs," for example we are told that they:

do not belong  
in a pickle jar

We brought them here,  
each alone;

mined their bodies  
to know ours

Their eyes, cupped  
inside shriveled lids,

remain

An admonition follows Thammavongsa's beautiful imagery: "We brought them here." After giving its subjects a respectful singularity with those two simple two words—"each alone"—the poem turns our curiosity in on itself. Then the action of "mining" echoes "mindful," both in sound and intention, for at their most powerful these poems, like Zwicky's "Songs," want to make us mindful. The final image of the eyes "inside shriveled lids," works on so many levels: anthropomorphizing not only animal, but food; our food looking back at us.

In a recent hand-made chapbook<sup>i</sup>, Thammavongsa continues the work of *Small Arguments*. Its subjects include a turtle who "sawed / in half / was left only / its upper shell . . ." and "below this / where reason / stood, a clearing." These poems rely on the silence between the lines, the timing of the images as they tumble. Thammavongsa hits on a perspective not familiar to the reader, and the equation proves startling, pleasurable. She is able to delight us with her quiet, close observations. And in doing so, she reinvents for us the natural world.

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<sup>i</sup> from Greenboathouse Books, Victoria, BC

**Sound Along a Line: Salvaging One Syllable at a Time**

MARY DALTON has spent the past decade or so chronicling the language and stories of locals. The result, *Merrybegot*, is a kind of *Spoon River* of Newfoundland, offering wives' tales, fables, and everyday speech. Because of its nautical and Gaelic roots, such speech makes for mellifluous syntactical structures: "He'd the face of a robber's horse," Dalton writes, "And he'd drink the rum off the dead Nelson." With references like these, Dalton makes apparent the ties between East Coast poetry and the Northern Isles—as if those ragged land-ends were now finally coming back together in verse. Poems such as "Flirrup"—

There's Dicky just gone up  
The road in a red shirt. He's  
Sure not the fog man—  
Traipsing along with the swagger  
Of a swiler in the spring fat.

or "After all that"—

Gumption? It's clear he didn't  
Have the sense God gave a kitten.

[...]

A real blatherskite  
If ever I saw one,  
Traipsing the beach all hours of the day,  
Or caterwauling away to the hens.

Dalton's beautifully condensed portraits and deadly one-liners stack one upon the other. Her project invigorates a language, with its small bits of "verbal energy" tacked against the wind like flags in a storm. It also invigorates a place, as Stephen Burt points out in the *Yale Review*, that is shockingly unknown to most North Americans.

Her new book, *The Red Ledger*, continues the work with more of the same linguistic force: “Squid-minded, / fidgety as a hen on a hot rock.” But it also sees Dalton paying slightly more attention to form, as well as landscape, in poems such as “Riddles for Conception Bay,” “Sestina for Frogmarsh,” or “Downtown Haikus”:

A quick-shifting wind;  
cat peers through a storm window.  
Water slips from ice.

ANITA LAHEY is another poet who takes up the linguistic domestic. Her first book, *Out to Dry in Cape Breton*, is an exploration of the particulars of place. Her familiar lyric tropes, but for a less obvious unruliness of “tone” and content, could be considered part of the school of quietude. Yet syntax in Lahey’s lyric is so heavily enjambed, so guttural, that it can seem like a new language—so vividly imagistic that the angles are sharp and unpredictable. Her first sequence focuses on laundry. Listen to the beautiful bump, bump:

Clap-clap puckered rubber over  
Hintonburg shed: close mouth, open  
mouth gulp first light, rise  
  
to dew. Pebble-stuccoed walls, disemboweled  
oven in the lot.

Here, on the lawns of Cape Breton, “Wash clings to yawning lines, / shivering damp.” In “Wash Day in a Toronto Slum,” “[t]here / dangle flowers, locks of hair, flour-caked / aprons and a soggy Bible flapping: life / splayed for inspection.” The language wears well on the tongue, and it offers a brief glimpse into a long-gone world. It harkens, romantically, for the work of these round women, solid as figures in an Alex Colville painting. It pays attention to line breaks—and all in a remarkably lucid fashion. Other sections include “Cape Breton Relative” and a series of homages to women in the Second World War.

Where Lahey succeeds most is in her language, which, like Dalton's, can be startlingly fresh, in the vein of poets such as Ken Babstock and David O'Meara, or Elise Partridge and Joe Denham, it offers linguistic and formal representations of place. Writers like Susan Goyette dive deeper into emotional territory. Lisa Robertson, Fred Wah, and Dionne Brand complicate or subvert lyric modes, reflecting, as Lisa Robertson has said, a position "both defensive and complicit, in the sense that the personal is implicated, enfolded, in a political context that rankles even as it enables." Like the late narrative poet Bronwen Wallace, Lahey's poems are crafted to be at once accessible and polemical—each one a "representational" detailing of women's lives. The danger of this is that the overly charming and parochial can become as impenetrable and off-putting as the most hermetic codes, flattening as it does the more granular aspects of our lives.

### Recombinative Work, or Poetry as Collage

MARGARET CHRISTAKOS, author of some half dozen collections of poetry, is a force in Canadian poetry. A creative organizer of events—her recent *nuit blanche* saw hundreds of Torontonians up all night engaging in poetry, art, performance, and back alley poetic slams—Christakos writes a poetry that is innovative, collaborative, and concerned with local materials. Her influences range from Mouré, Brossard, and Marlatt to Christopher Dewdney, bp Nichol, John Cage, and John Coltrane—with a healthy dose of conceptual artists like Joseph Beuys to Louise Bourgeois thrown in. But most importantly, Christakos' recombinant writing has been informed by laundry: "My proceduralism," Christakos has said, "came from all the socks and underwear in the laundry first, then it came from the interest in gender, then it came from liking to count."<sup>ii</sup>

Recombinant writing recombines textual material, literally reframing the poet's experience as she condenses and manipulates worlds—and words—that might not always intersect. Like a sculptor working clay she "works text into a shape," as in *Excessive Love Prosthesis*, which may be the most radical domestic poetry I've yet to encounter:

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<sup>ii</sup> Correspondence with the author.

They took the child and said, here, be bound securely  
in this cotton chasm and we will make of our

buttocks a birth canal and you will press through the  
cushions we rock upon and your head shall crown through

the sheet and you shall weep and be reborn . . .

and later:

New parents are so wakey-wakey

Ah the fatigue will pile up I must  
investigate the odd nervous condition in my eyelids

which feels like I need to dream something  
Does it have to do with all

the humming The swaying I feel an intense  
lack of stillness in my life . . .

This last poem is followed by two full pages of ZZZZZZZs, which no parent will need explained to them.

Christakos uses self-generated text, and in recombining the texts, the result is one of kinetic leaps that seem to come out of a “familiar nowhere,” stretching predictable connections while achieving satisfying coherence. In her most recent collection, *Sooner*, we see a child suffering a severe allergic reaction and her doctors ordering a hamburger and milkshake. We see women choosing not to help, escaping instead in a sports car; there they enjoy not only the feel of their own breasts rubbing up against their arms, but a sense of wonder:

If there was a place in her body that could

turn to ice then melt again she might have seen

the point of walking forehead-first into the restaurant whose air  
conditioning charged one with the sense  
of a balloon-shaped planet

whistling oxygen at alarming speed The park attracted her lungs  
with a movement of green shadow . . .

There is the tension between lyric and language. Narrative is frustrated in a variety of ways, as is the sense of a stable self, privileging instead polyvocality and compositional integrity, collage and fragment, and calling up Lyn Hejinian's *Happily*, Darren Wershler-Henry's *the tapeworm foundry* (Anansi, 2000), and Rachel Zolf's *Human Resources* (belladonna, 2005). But perhaps more powerfully, Christakos' work resembles Lisa Robertson's *The Weather* (New Star, 2001) and her recent *utopia* (Chicago Review, 2006)—both collaged texts of found materials, both lyrical at their core, and both centered on a powerful speaking subject that reaches out beyond the constraint.

### What is Prose but Poetry Stretched Out?

Writer and translator NATHALIE STEPHENS writes between many things—genre, gender, language, historical and cultural contexts. She is the author of a dozen published works, including *Touch to Affliction* (2006), *L'Injure* (2004), *Je Nathanaël* (2003), *Paper City* (2003), and the forthcoming *L'Absence au lieu* (*Claude Cabun et le livre inouvert*). On the surface her concerns seem in line with those of *L'écriture féminine*—the language of desire, the text as body, the gaps between experiences. One way to read and present Stephens to an audience both in and outside of Canada would be to paint her as an extension of this moment, the next incarnation. Instead, Stephens claims diverse European literary influences (Andre Gidé, Albert Camus, Colette, Oscar Wilde) and philosophical/critical influences (Elizabeth Grosz, Martin Buber, and perhaps most importantly Jacques Derrida).

Stephens' project is complex, polysemic; gender is in constant fluctuation.

Language, not surprisingly, is examined from a variety of perspectives. Everything, in fact, is under scrutiny in this intensely self-reflective and cerebral work. Nothing is taken for granted. A Canadian writer who writes in both English and French might be a poster girl/boy for the country's bilingual agenda, but Stephens resists the idea of legislated language politics.

Like Robertson and Mouré, Stephens refuses any attempts to simplify or make accessible her work. This could be read as a gift: the writer would like the reader to enter into the text with his or her own set of skills and experiences, making something new of her intellectually charged texts. It could also be read as hermetic elitism.

From her earliest texts Stephens has troubled narrative. *Somewhere Running*, which has the powerful staccato narrative force of Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette*, offered early indications of where the young Stephens might go. The book, praised by Erin Mouré, Gail Scott, and Marie-Claire Blais, is an exploration of language, desire, and gender, one that traces the life and body of a woman as it is inscribed on the polis. Like Notley's text this can be read as a feminist epic. Here, the depths of the modern world are illuminated in fragmented phrases that amplify the parenthetical and the absent:

Somewhere they are running    this has been established  
the women    somewhere running    elsewhere  
anywhere    but not here    they run    each woman (65)

This trope of movement and of art as a thing to move *toward* appears in text after text. In *Somewhere Running*, "the city is speed," "the city buckles," and the women, "fighting as they do," also "fight the artist." In *Paper City* the artist is again looking/stalking: "M documents everything." Yet M is a mark too. And again in *Je Nathanaël* (BookThug, 2006), a response to André Gidé's *Nourritures terrestres (Fruits of the Earth)*, Stephens reaches for language that is beyond or "out of reach" (she uses these same words to describe Gidé's work), and the reach is fueled by the desire to enter body/text. In "Scatalogue," for instance, we envy what we each have—a body—

and are confronted with the startling question of “how to leave the book and enter directly into the body?” But as Stephens’ points out in the upcoming *Absence Where As (Claude Cahun and the Unopened Book)*:

The approach, unimaginable and yet undertaken with insistence, interrupts the location of a body in a context, the context being the book, is another way of saying that the word is destabilized when spoken, as though rejected by the language to which it might belong, by which it might be *possessed*, or else that the book itself occupies a place of suspension, projected quite possibly by the body that intervenes as it approaches, and as soon as it thinks it has situated itself, collides against a whole other function of the text, suspended with it, therefore engaged, but underhandedly cut from the gesture that propelled it there in the first place.<sup>iii</sup>

So, never being able to escape one’s self, one’s nationality, one’s culture, or one’s gender, one moves. One moves through language. One enters into, and one moves forward.

SUZANNE ZELAZO’S first book, *Parlance*, appeared in 2003 from Coach House Books, a press that has troubled Canada’s literary establishment for decades and continues to evoke ire from such mainstream reviewers as *The Globe and Mail*. Yet Coach House remains a throwback to a pre-print-on-demand time when a book’s materiality was factored into the creative process. I make mention of this because the physical presence of a Coach House title is often essential to the experience of the text, and Suzanne Zelazo’s *Parlance* is no exception. Tall and slender, the volume seems to meld with its cover photo by Toronto artist Janieta Eyre, whose Bjork-meets-Cindy Sherman self-portraits signal a delightfully postmodern feminist anti-romanticism.

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<sup>iii</sup> From “Absence Where As (Claude Cahun and the Unopened Book),” in *Denver Quarterly*, Winter 2006.; “original” French published with Nota Bene as “L’Absence”

Zelazo's *Parlance* centers on "writing through" Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* in a series of prose poems. Following in the footsteps of such avant-garde poets as John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, Zelazo's "Through the Lighthouse" writes through Woolf, exploring the erotic tension between the prose and poetic line that Woolf herself negotiated. While there are some gorgeous fragments here, for me the highlight of the book is what happens outside of this "writing through." Zelazo's own prose poems, like Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, seem to want to disconnect word from meaning. For instance, the beginning of "Missplit":

Wetted ashes the body pretends. The flag a  
dismal delirium. Aiming towards empty.  
She falls. How grand after death. Lunation  
toiling monumental impermanence . . .

Or "Coehill":

A pyramid in reverse. My echo sees itself  
coming. Hesitation. This is his own hap-  
pening. Make a move and get out of here.  
The delta opened its soft mouth and took  
you in . . .

These lines, collaged and firm in structure and cadence, astonish in their absoluteness: "Wrist tears the space of flutter," "Protracted lullaby sometimes a stutter," or "Derange the waver." Lines like these confidently push the limits of prose poetry, favoring sound over meaning. There are other poets working in the prose poem—Anne Carson, Robert Kroetsch, Fred Wah, Bill Whiteman, and, more recently, Shannon Bramer, Shane Rhodes and Jason Christie. But aside from Wah and Christie, these poets are generally far less radical and dissonant than Zelazo, inching as she does far out on a limb of aural, syntactic, and even visual pleasure. Visual yes, because there is something compelling about the justified prose blocks (as they appear in the book) with their strange titles "Vortex," "Even more bare," "Flush."

### Epic, Historical—Reinventing the Myth

GIL ADAMSON'S *Ashland*, a frontier epic in the mode of Michael Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid* or Margaret Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, was one of the more innovative and engaging texts to appear in the last half decade. Vivid language, imagery, and narrative move the reader quickly through the text, where "Dead men go along the road / in twos and threes, / waving goodbye with their toes," and "Women are everywhere in lighted tents, / their heads making fists of shadow." This is the frontier, where anything is possible: "rain-soaked horses in the hotel bar / which has no roof, no walls, no bar . . ." (36). In the title sequence, Adamson's epic moves from lists to rugged prose blocks:

In survival dreams I am bullet-proof, running, I resemble  
a cave, I go through myself. I tell myself that I exist, but  
basically: *ba!* There is no bone in my arm, no maharajah  
playing god in the hallway, no dark toothpick in the thigh . . .

These poems have as much bite as the world they depict; they are as hard-boiled as the women they present. Here, from "Mary":

The midwife baptized the baby  
with a cup of melted snow.  
she said, "He won't last,"  
and he didn't.

*Seven into Even*, by JACQUELINE TURNER, takes Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* as its template, exploring in each book a slightly different line and tone—no Spenserian stanzas here, rather the quotidian and desire-ridden self—which is, I suppose, a just revision. The sections range in style and engagement. "Book 1," the least compelling, begins, "You play words across technical pages / Your form constrained by the hour and look . . ." but the pace heats up in "Book 2" and again in "Book 5," both of which are written in unpunctuated stream-of-consciousness prose: "you attend small ruptures when the routine of the day breaks apart you celebrate small interludes the sound of

drums being played in a garage across the alley." "Book 3" sees the poem centered:

if water is baptismal  
yours has emerged  
from clear to  
shitty mess

"Book 4" offers a rendering of the deadly sins in near-reverse haibun, starting out with a quasi-haiku and breaking into prose. "Book 6" is slender, working the tongue and eye with its curt breaks. "Book 7 or Mutability" offers break out poems that move spatially and elegantly across the page. Turner is a surprisingly quiet poet, not afraid to seek the edges with content, and to some extent form—but careful, careful, not igniting too grand a spark.

"Debbie. My name is Debbie," announces the narrator of *Debbie: An Epic*, LISA ROBERTSON's postmodern re-imagining of the epic mode. With an uncompromising and unerring ear (and eye) Robertson grants the heroic common woman who hazards "shame for future love / and list with soldiers [her] degenerate name," a booming, mellifluous voice: "I'll weep and speak to you of food and / space and loss." Each syllable is a soufflé for the ear; each line, with its sculpted familiarity a shot of adrenalin to the heart: "the vicarious truancy of self," "our bodies pose in analogy's / glitter where big romantic rivers / are anthems . . ." In "Virgil's Bastard Daughters Sing," the title characters take up space. They appear to be ten feet tall, with feet that knock whole towns aside. They muse. They count syllables and, lolling on grasses, eat fruit. They foment in large italicized font that spreads across two pages:

*ardent transgressors! whose walls are also my own  
what country, good friends what suburb  
is not now smothered by our sobs?*

As Christine Stewart notes in the *Chicago Review*, "Debbie is spectacular.

She is giantess and goddess . . . cheerleader, big girl, sticky candy and frightening Barbie Doll." An epic weight upon her, she celebrates for us all.

However, not all of these contemporary re-inventors work in the epic tradition. ANNE SIMPSON'S second collection of poetry, *Loop*, won the 2004 Griffin Prize. Simpson's poetry is idea-driven. It balances social and environmental exploration with formal investigations. Her sonnet sequence "Seven Paintings by Brueghel" deftly lays scenes from the famous paintings into halting rhyming couplets; perhaps surprisingly, these scenes also reference the events of 9/11 and their fallout:

A sales receipt, a shoe. The silvery rain  
has many hands. A stream—Fresh kills—elides  
with river. Thick and slow. A landfill plain:  
a ghost in biohazard gear. Gulls ride . . .

Simpson has been described as a tourist to tragedy, mining recent history for material rather than trafficking in her "lived" experience. But turning to art, literature, and headlines for poetry is not new: Stephanie Bolster's *White Stone: The Alice Poems* (Signal Editions, 1998) and Kate Braid's *Inward to the Bones* (Raincoast, 2000) come to mind.

The approaches are vastly different, but both Simpson and William Carlos Williams, in his 1940's *Pictures from Brueghel*, take on "The Hunters in the Snow." Both poets describe the painting itself, but Simpson grafts onto it a larger investigation of the human ability to cope with disaster. So while in Williams we see "the sturdy hunters lead in // their pack the inn-sign / hanging from a / broken hinge is a stag a crucifix," with Simpson we witness a trip cancelled, weary travelers returned home unable to travel to New York City because of the events of 9/11, "terrors tucked back in the heart." But what once might have appeared benign is now wrought with unease, "The catching / deceives. The counter, cutlery. Believe / the chairs; they guard the table in a ring. / The hunters come. They're trudging slow."

ELIZABETH BACHINSKY burst into the poetry world with two

very different publications in a very short time: *Curio*, *Grotesques and Satires from the Electronic Age* and *Home of Sudden Service*, each of which explores very different constraints. *Curio*, Bachinsky's debut collection, has eight sections, ranging from the epistolary sequence "From the Secret Diaries of Antonin Artaud" to anagrammatic re-writings of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*—here titled "Lead the wants" and beginning "Brilliant duel them corset her penis. / A million toxic duds dangle. Get a / Night-rise or day-rites—merge, mend." There is the cut-up "Undressed And so Many Places to Go" as well as "Spy Cam: Surveillance Series," a set of prose poems that winds and unwinds like the steady stream of images. Taking her cue from the poetry of bp Nichol, Christian Bök, and the radical poetries of Calgary, the Kootenay School, and Toronto Research Group, the poems in this book are indeed "curios" that offer playful ways of engaging with their predecessors' texts and actually cohere to become satisfying poems in their own right.

*Home of Sudden Service* covers more traditional poetic territory—villanelle, sonnet, glosa—though with untraditional content and no less bravura than *Curios*. As poet Jacqueline Turner notes, Bachinsky lets no "sign pass without spinning out possible signifiers." And while Anita Lahey pays appropriate attention to the sound of the words as she ratchets up and down the line, Bachinsky's ear is as aptly tuned, but without the rose-tinted glasses. This gets the poet in trouble with reviewers who question her perspective, her choice of subject matter. Bachinsky, like poet Marilyn Hacker, is as full-bodied a formal poet as one can find. There are similarities between Hacker's colloquial handling of the sonnet and Bachinsky's own sonnet sequence, the gorgeous "Drive":

My sister has to stay in Montreal?  
All right. These moves  
are moves we have to make.  
This is how snapshots accumulate:  
think Volvo, think mosquito, think  
two thousand endless miles of prairie  
beige, of cattle guards and the harsh

forested Shield . . .

Bachinsky refuses to “elevate” or make artificial her poetic language. She also refuses to squint when she looks out at the blighted suburban landscape. In “Sometimes Boys Go Missing,” for example, she mines every parent’s nightmare:

It’s when the handmade posters go up, you know  
desperation. The crude lettering. The family

kicking themselves they’ve only got the Polaroid  
from Christmas three years back, and that one’s none

too good . . .

The chilling “Wolf Lake” begins “It was down that road he brought me, still / in the trunk of his car” and later:

You know, you hear about the Body  
all the time: They found the Body...  
*the Body was found* . . . and then you are one . . .

I can see why these poems might make a reader sit upright: who of us wants to imagine ourselves as *that* Body? But the “reality of place” is that not everyone’s world is benign. In Bachinsky’s world, fifty women were killed on a pig farm in a suburb over the past decade or so; the reality of gender is body and how bodies are trafficked, fought over, and how they end up on the front pages of newspapers. And the reality of urban development is that the city Bachinsky writes from, with its quick transformation from sweet village to world-class city, has a number of unsolved social problems which its literature tends to overlook. Bravo to Bachinsky for not sweeping these statistics under the table, nor confining her abundant skill to “porch verse.” She gives voice to the pregnant mothers and missing boys, while reveling in the sound along the line, and the pressures of form.

### Concrete, Visual, and Sound

I end this essay with reference to *Shift & Switch*, an anthology of Canadian poetry published last year by derek beaulieu, Jason Christie, and a.rawlings. Despite its unevenness, *Shift & Switch* impresses by way of its sheer energy, originality, and wealth of experimental work. It suggests that the impact of Steve McCaffery, bp Nichol, The Four Horsemen, and other innovative poets of the 1970s is only beginning to be felt. And despite the recent cult status of such Oulipian works as Christian Bök's *Eunoia* (Coach House, 2001), innovative works like those in *Shift & Switch*—works that don't fit into prescribed forms or nationalist agendas—often exist on the fringe of the fringe.

We have an enormous wave of creative non-lyric poetries in store for us. The editors themselves are worth seeking out. beaulieu has recently published *with wax* (Coach House, 2003) and *fractal economies* (Talon, 2006); Jason Christie, *Canada Post* (Snare, 2006), and *I-Robot* (Edge, 2007); and a.rawlings *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists* (Coach House, 2006). Other notable contributors to *Shift & Switch* include Matthew Hollet, Chris Fickling, Rob Read, Gregory Betts, Max Middle, Mark Truscott, and Natalie Simpson. Many of these poets have also published books—Mark Truscott's *said like reeds or things* (Coach House, 2004) is a minimalist treasure, and Gustave Morin's visual poetry is smart and stunning.

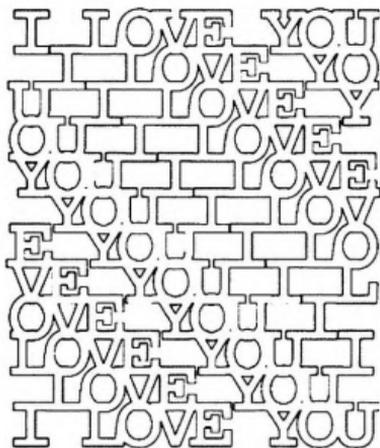
SHARON HARRIS' first book, *Avatar*, is a pataphysical exploration of the phrase "I love you." Gimicky? In a way, yes, but Harris' exploration is so total, so whimsical, it's hard not to be engaged:

99a. Where do poems come from?

Moisten your finger and hold it straight up in the air. You will notice at once that one side of the finger is cold. This is the direction from which the poem is coming.

Harris' visual exploration of "I love you," a poem many Canadian poets will recognize as a bp Nichol poem, appears in twenty-six different figures,

ranging from a pie chart, to dice formations, to dots, to variations of the words themselves:



iv

from "Virus"

While visual or sound poetry might seem to some more like a conceptual art than a literary one, I am suggesting that the range is far broader, and more accessible, than we might assume. What I also want to emphasize is the idea, not necessarily of embracing "other," but acknowledging the craft of others. This may in fact be the most and innovative act of all because it forces poets to read outside of their own tradition. Innovation is, and has long been, a dominant strand of Canadian poetry and cannot be edited out. It's bold. It isn't afraid of leaps. And the results can be breathtaking.

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iv For more examples see <http://iloveyougalleries.com/gallery3.htm>.

## Private Storms

Kelly Magee. *Body Language*. University of North Texas Press. 2006. Paper, 197 pp. \$12.95

Kelly Magee's *Body Language* begins: "In Alabama, a tornado touches down." It is a sentence that sums up the entire collection. Magee's powerful and direct delivery merges with a whirlwind of complexities of character and plot, producing a collection striking enough to win the 2006 Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction. Magee reaches that right kind of chaos, that delicate unity, that sort of diversity in style and voice and tone that leaves the reader wanting just one more story. And though the stories shift focus from bus-robbing thugs to transvestites to failing actresses, and while the setting takes us from Florida to Ohio to Arizona to Alabama, Magee speaks to one truth of character: the whirling anomie of contemporary lives.

In "As Human As You Are Standing Here," the collection's grittiest story, Gyp, a lesbian, has sex with her friend Leo, a drag queen. Gyp initially calls this "an experiment," but as Leo leaves for Colorado and returns a year later with "a ring through his lip and an ugly patchwork of stitches across his right cheek," it becomes apparent that something much more complex is happening. Whether or not Gyp is in love with Leo is of no question; we know that she is. The question becomes, what kind of love? Or, in broader terms, what is love and what does it constitute? As Gyp puts it:

Sure, *theoretically* being a twenty-first century queer meant you fucked whom you pleased . . . But when it came down to the blow-by-blow of daily life, people . . . wanted to know where you stood. And while sleeping with him didn't exactly make me straight, it put me somewhere closer to the middle.

As the story progresses, Gyp's identity crises seems to manifest in Leo's physical appearance. The near overdoses of hormone shots; the fights and

stitches and missing teeth—and then dentures; the bruises across Leo's body; the blood and broken bones; these ailments force Gyp's observation, "I didn't mind gore, and I'd broken enough skin to be immune to the sight of blood. But those little needle pricks bothered me."

This statement seems, at least initially, out of sympathy or concern for her friend. By the story's climax, however, we realize that it isn't Leo who is in need of clarity, but Gyp. Her love for Leo transcends (but does not exclude) sexuality, and Gyp's unwillingness to confront her confusion is wrenching.

Magee strikes the same thematic note in "Knock Them Down," a story about Dana, a struggling Ohioan actress who treks to Orlando in search of success and glamour. She is also willing to pay all immoral dues necessary to attain that success and glamour. However, when reality and the ideal do not synch up, Dana must, like Gyp, make a decision between the two. And just as Gyp is unable or unwilling to reevaluate, give in, or move on, Dana is also left in a kind of self-created purgatory. They are both left in the center of the tornados of their lives.

Dan Chaon, author of *You Remind Me of Me* and judge of this year's Katherine Anne Porter Prize, said of Magee's collection, "These visionary stories bring us an America that is as phantasmagoric . . . yet as real as the daily news." Chaon is referring to Magee's ability to create unreal and almost unbelievable images, scenarios and actions, but do so with writing rooted in the everyday. She has done what many short story writers strive for. She has granted verisimilitude to the wholly imaginary.

This is not to say that *Body Language* is a perfect collection. There are stories that fall flat. "The Business of Souls" is one of these. While this story suffers from poor placement—it follows two of the collection's strongest tales—nonetheless, the reader is left feeling that too many subjects have been tackled in only fourteen pages. The story raises issues of class, parenting, a father's struggle with post-military life, and sibling conflict. In addition, the story is told by a retrospective narrator attempting to make sense of it all. As the father forces his son and daughter into daily "Landing Practice" drills—climbing onto the roof of the trailer and jumping off—we get the

sense of desperation in the narrator's tone, but we are never certain what to make of that desperation. Unfortunately, we struggle alongside the narrator and both the reader and the narrator end the story on an unsatisfying note.

Gabriel García Márquez once stated, "With a novel you can win by a decision, but a short story you have to win by a knockout." Despite some disappointments, there are several knockouts in this collection. Magee's ability to inhabit different points of view and voices and, at the same time, stick to message lends this collection its strength. She gives us a sense of what it means to tell a story, or, more precisely, what it means to tell a group of stories; to arrive at an eventual purpose; to see the commonality and shared link in divergent lifestyles and that, no matter how dissimilar these tales might become, they share the same fractured and stormy truth.

Which leads me back to the initial tornado, and *Body Language's* opening story, "Not People, Not This." In it, Magee presents the reader with a scandalous scenario: Ames—Opelika, Alabama's town-drunk—might have killed May, a church-going woman, and used a tornado to cover up any forensic evidence. But that part of the story isn't particularly important. The alternate sections of the piece are told journalistically and branch out into what it means to tell a story. By the end of "Not People, Not This," Magee is arguing that it isn't the reality of a given situation that matters, but the telling of that reality—the telling of an event—that creates a truth in which we all feel satisfied. In the final section of the story the narrator points out that Ames "had no sense of story, and maybe that was his worst crime of all." Fortunately, Kelly Magee does not suffer from this same sin.

## More Genuine Ice: On Julie Sheehan's *Orient Point*

Julie Sheehan, *Orient Point*. W.W. Norton. 2006. Hardcover, 128 pp. \$23.95.

As T. S. Eliot emphasized in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent," a poem must be something new; otherwise, it is a mere repetition of what has gone before and is therefore not art. But then to be new, a poem must somehow be based on tradition, for without tradition of some kind, nothing takes place. The art of poetry is an art of playing variations on what has gone before. Reading through Julie Sheehan's second book, *Orient Point*, I am intrigued by the various ways she works to transform received materials: by incorporating archaic diction ("Bifel that enrollen them in the Anti-Violence Program, pursuing Romance"—"Brown-Headed Cowbirds"); by retelling old stories, such as that of the marriage feast at Cana ("Details of Cana"—see John 2:1-11); by employing traditional forms, such as the sonnets sprinkled throughout the volume; even by meditating on an archaic word, such as the interjection 'Lo' ("Correspondence"). Many of these examples are instances of what Sheehan has referred to as her interest in "collecting rhetoric," resulting in a book that is "a collage of quilted rhetorics—some more traditional, some experimental, often exploring touchy subjects."

A signal example of Sheehan's interest in collecting rhetorics occurs at the beginning of "Brown-Headed Cowbirds":

Out of the imagination,  
Out of the brooding brain,  
Out of the urban nest, lined in desires scaveng'd  
    from American soil, woven, in thorniest tree,  
Out of instinct springen strange birds, strange birds  
    though common, foster birds,  
    siren birds, their songs ruinous,  
Out of neglect and knowledge of neglect, and the outward  
    show of caring

They comen, seeking survival.

The poem in part alludes to the birds named in the title, whose behavior is explained by interstitial quotations from *The Audubon Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region*. But the poem's focus quickly becomes the three twelve-year-old girls with whom the speaker is working. They are enrolled in an Anti-Violence Program, "for it containeth a Theater Component as mandated by the Most Rightful and Honorable Board of Ed." These three girls compete, first to be cast as the female lead in *Romeo and Juliet*, and then to be considered the best actress. In their roles as Montagues and Capulets, they bring their personal experiences to the conflicts enacted in the play. I take it that part of the function of the archaic diction, along with its dramatic and distancing effects, is to get at something of the long history of such conflicts as the girls experience in their lives—as I take it that the quotations about the cowbirds' strategies for survival imply that these conflicts and struggles have a long history even in evolutionary biology. These histories of struggle can be quite difficult to escape; at the "Anti-Violence Summit Conference" a squabble breaks out involving the "Capulets and Montagues of various schools."

The first lines quoted above indicate the powerful influence of Walt Whitman on Sheehan's poems (see his "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"), an influence that continues from her first book, *Thaw*. However, there is also another presence at work here:

Lament I then:

First, the Singer Machine Company, seller of logging rights  
to certain Louisiana lands,

Second, the loggers, who must have the only trees left  
for the ivorybill to live in, the old trees, the swamp lords,

Third, the witnesses, the bystanders, their comments,  
their safety,

Lastly, the ivorybill, the vivid folly of its flaming-red crest.

("Ivory-Billed Woodpecker")

One can make out the strains of Christopher Smart, who provides the epigraph to Sheehan's "From the Minister of Praise at Large." In fact, her poem "Stray" begins in a rather Smartish way: "For I will consider my Cat, Red Dog." Often these influences have their charms. For example, the "vivid folly" above is both subtly old-fashioned and quite lively as it skates near the precincts of oxymoron. At the same time, there are other moments in the volume where I find the archaic diction to be distracting—for example, the Middle English words echoing through "Brown-Headed Cowbirds," quoted above.

Generally, the old-fashioned diction works well when Sheehan incorporates it more fully into her own distinctive voice. Such synthesis occurs most powerfully in her shorter poems, where she achieves what she describes in "Polar Bear in the Central Park Zoo" as "a new mercy, colder, austere; more genuine ice." Like this polar bear performing its captive swimming routine, Sheehan is at her best when she most observes the austere and icy demands of precision. Thus, even though this volume has its long and lush poems, my vote for the book's real achievement is a short piece entitled "Pecking Order," which begins:

When mud runs clammy, the crows take control.  
They carp from crabbed branches, dark clergy  
of the coruscant slime below.

Here is an austere clergy indeed, overseeing the glittering slime of the world. The poem carries some complex implications concerning, for example, the character of a clergy that would assist one's searches for what shines in this muddied world. Like the polar bear at the central park zoo, this clergy has a cold regard that will brook no compromises or sentimental notions. It is a clergy that scavenges what it can. Further, these crows have their own regard for power: "*Who's in charge* they caw, craning over counterpane yards and gardens." This is a tough-minded and hardly idealized clergy.

Much of what works at the heart of Sheehan's genius is her combination of a search for the holy with her ability to cast a cold eye on the workings of this world. These energies combine in "Mercy School," about the speaker's mother dying, where she has just recalled a failed séance:

There were no messages, only the tin  
ear of disappointment,  
as with Yeats and automatic writing,

Merrill's ouija, the best minds of generations,  
uneasy in their old dispensations,  
turning to faddish blather. I was not taken in,

and looked no more for eleemosynary relief  
from that century's skeptical gods. Grief  
school is out, I said. I'll get my flapdoodle

from an Institute: daily Mass, where I go furtively,  
ashamed to have forgiven already  
my confessor. Mercy school is in. All my money

I gave to tradition. Kyrie Eleison, Christe  
Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.  
To be holy is to be empty.

These lines travel centuries, beginning with the spiritualist searches of Yeats and Merrill. At the moment of turning away from these experiments with contacting the world beyond, the speaker echoes Ginsberg's *Howl* of lament, followed by an echo from Eliot's "Journey of the Magi": "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, / But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation . . ." The speaker's turning takes her to furtive attendance at Mass, that structure that has moved and shifted through centuries. Having hinted at some haunting transgression for which the speaker has

forgiven her confessor, she goes on to echo the only Greek portion of the old Latin Mass—the Kyrie Eleison (Lord, have mercy) that intercedes for forgiveness. Finally, the passage ends with a line that could come from the sayings of the Desert Fathers, a statement of an emptiness pointing toward the austerities of a tradition on the move.

In their searches for the Divine, Sheehan's poems remain unflinching in their willingness to face the difficult complexities of this world. Her stance relates to the multiple implications of her title "I Am Not a Confessional Poet," which means in part that Sheehan is not confessional after the manner of, say, Plath, even though Plath is an enabling influence on these poems. Sheehan is also not a confessional poet in that her poems do not function as simple declarations of faith. This is not to say that the poems do not engage with issues of faith—actually, I cannot claim to discern from the poems what the exact state of her belief might be—but rather that such declaration is not the precise function of these complex language structures. In this same poem, Sheehan declares, "I've read / all of Jorie Graham's work and am keen to read more." The disclosure is well placed as it refers to another ardent searcher after meaning and connection and the Divine in the midst of the complexities of an evolving cosmos, though Sheehan continues developing in her own direction. Such development also means a constant dying to one's older manner and style. Even now I can hear Sheehan's speakers, in the icy austerities of their art, declaring with Eliot's magus, "I should be glad of another death."

## The World Splits Open: Emily Rapp's *Poster Child*

Emily Rapp. *Poster Child: The Story of a Broken Girlhood*. Bloomsbury, 2007. Hardcover, 240 pp. \$23.95.

When we talk about physical difference, we tend to speak carefully. We tend to watch what we say. We use words we understand to be politically correct. We don't say, "so-and-so has one leg," but rather, "so-and-so is disabled." Or better yet, we don't discuss so-and-so's physical difference at all.

But Emily Rapp does just that in her first book, *Poster Child*. Born with proximal focal femoral deficiency (PFFD)—a congenital bone and tissue disorder that caused her left femur to develop abnormally in the womb, leaving her left leg shorter than the other—Rapp's frank and candid discussion of her own physical difference is at once a refreshing, disturbing, and radical interrogation of one woman's relationship to her body.

Rapp's memoir begins as memoirs generally do: at the beginning. Her first years were spent in and out of surgery, traction, full body casts and a series of metal braces. A few months before her fourth birthday, Rapp had what her doctors called "the big operation": amputation of her left foot by ankle disarticulation, a surgery which Rapp explains to her young classmates with both humor and innocence: "my foot got sawed off."

As she grew older, Rapp responded to increased pressure to explain her physical difference in two ways: on the one hand, faced with the cruel curiosity of others, she felt shame, rage, and violence towards herself and her able-bodied peers; on the other hand, as the March of Dimes poster child, she made public appearances and used PFFD as a platform not only to raise awareness and money to fund research, but also to make her life appear normal and happy. "I felt like the winner of a beauty contest," she confesses in the book's self-titled chapter. "I felt like a star."

Although these early chapters read as the honest and meticulous recollections of a uniquely difficult childhood, it seems the first half of the book is overly invested in reporting the details of her various surgeries, slowly

bringing readers only through the fourth grade. The second—and more dynamic—half of the book grapples with the lived reality of a disabled girl becoming a disabled woman. As a reader, the most emotionally wrenching part of the book is witnessing Rapp try again and again to pass and be accepted as “normal”: she becomes a chronic overachiever in the hopes that she could be ordinary by being extraordinary; she distances herself from other teenagers struggling with their appearance so that she can be the most normal among them; she covers her missing leg with expensive name-brand clothes in order to attract popular friends and the attention of the opposite sex; she starves herself to the point of being dangerously thin, hoping to make her body fit in.

It wasn't until she graduated from college, while serving as a youth intern at the Lutheran World Federation, that she found the validation she was looking for. Having invited one disabled woman from each of the six regions of the Federation to meet for a discussion about the needs and experiences of disabled women worldwide, Rapp finally confronted the truth: “I have always hated my body,” she told the other women at the conference. Admitting this to herself and to others, Rapp confesses, “I had never felt so terrified and free.” When she reflects on the conference years later, she admits that telling the truth about her experience without shame, apology or fear was liberating; she could finally stop hiding and just be.

This final move toward the affirmative not only puts Rapp's disability in a global context, it clearly illustrates the strong influence of feminism on her work. Her constant interrogation of her relationship to her body is both unique to this particular disabled woman and relevant to the lives of many women: at one point or another we all have perceived that beauty is the unattainable ideal society values above all else. This is no where more apparent than in the image of sixteen-year-old Emily cutting pictures of models from fashion magazines, taking off her clothes, and making mental notes of all the places where, she admits, “I came up short against an ideal of beauty that I simply did not question.”

Because she finally did learn to question that unattainable ideal, it has been said elsewhere that *Poster Child* fits comfortably into the tradition of

*Autobiography of a Face*. But it should also be said that Rapp brings home the reality of what Muriel Rukeyser so famously told her students: "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open." Telling her story, responding to the responsibility to tell it, Rapp verges on the immensely radical by admitting the truth: "I may never fully understand or even accept the body I live in and with, but it does tell a story, and that story can be told."

*Poster Child* is an exquisitely crafted telling of that story and confirms Emily Rapp as a captivating new voice in contemporary non-fiction. I, for one, look forward to her next book.

## Crowded House

Rebecca Dunham. *The Miniature Room*. Truman State University Press. 2006. Paper, 71 pp. \$15.95.

Dunham's first go is a mover's nightmare: tiny boxes that seem to be filled with bricks. Her small poems—most take the form of a loose sonnet—are packed tight with lyric intensity. In fact, Dunham's poems resemble the Joseph Cornell boxes to which she alludes in her aptly-titled first poem "Box Series." For Dunham, the beauty of the world resides in the smallest of things, in the densest of spaces. Therefore it comes as no surprise that Dunham is interested in containment; her book is filled with bowls, nests, eggs, rooms, boxes, dishes, and fruit rinds. Within those containers, Dunham's ability with language attempts to flourish.

Naomi Shihab Nye, who chose this book for the 2006 T.S. Eliot prize, praises the poet for her "stunning lushness of language and vision." Yet there are times when Dunham's lushness is her weakness. Because she has allowed herself such little space, certain lines run the risk of being impenetrable. The density of Dunham's language can overwhelm us in these spaces, and the poet's struggle to make everything fit becomes apparent. This is when Dunham's form works against her, when her poems feel more caged than contained.

In "The Soap Bubble" Dunham asks the question, "What did I want to say?" Her answer is puzzling: "Something plain." Surprising, because this rarely seems to be her intention. Dunham appears to have no interest at all in speaking plainly. The same poem features the lines "I want to say consumed like flash / fuel in language's copse." These types of lines appear frequently in Dunham's poetry. When her poems fail, they fail because they offer nothing more than ornamentation—a series of flashy descriptions, a clump of rhymes, a tongue-twisting exercise in alliteration. These poems, while beautiful constructions of sound, feel most like missed opportunities. Once the initial sonic pleasure wears off, the reader is left asking what else? The

best example of this is the four-part poem "Putting Him to Bed," in which Dunham's speaker is, well, putting her son to bed. The first part has flashes of Dunham's potential: "Yolk of me, it is past 8 o'clock, / & I just cannot read one more story." But by the fourth section of the poem, the speaker has resorted to familiar confines of showy description:

The clock's luminous face  
a verdigris moon lipped in gold leaf.  
Stuffed cotton batting's animal lumps  
all that lie between him & a sea

In a poem about her son, Dunham's speaker grants him less face time than to the clock in his room and some stuffed animals. By the end of the poem, the son is buried under heaps of decoration.

The best moments in this book occur when Dunham follows through with her recipe for good poetry and coaxes beauty out of the common line. "In Which I Am the Serpent in the Garden," perhaps the best poem in this book, gives us such moments: "What is it like, / to live unencumbered by death" and "I fear most the clear field, its carelessness" and "Knowledge is the apple's humble gift." In this poem, Dunham's speaker is overcome by guilt, as she has to be the one who teaches her young son about death. Given this situation, Dunham's lines are startlingly beautiful and meaningful. The tiny tragedies of domestic life give weight to Dunham's florid language. Poems like these make Dunham a promising poet. Unfortunately, they are few and far between.

Over half of *The Miniature Room* is populated by ekphrastic and persona poems. The immediate risk in either form is that one might alienate readers from the get-go. With ekphrastic poetry, the degree to which the poet relies on the work of art to create meaning, as opposed to the poem itself, can affect a reader's access. If a reader is unfamiliar with the work of art (in Dunham's case paintings and photographs) or is unwilling or unable to respond to that art, the reader has lost their entry point into the poem. For the most part, Dunham avoids these pitfalls. She is at her best in "Two

Photographs," a two-part poem which depicts two photographs taken of the poet's uncle during the Vietnam War. Here, Dunham provides such a clear vision into the photos, she needs to do little else to impact the reader: "Far left: my uncle, / helmet cupping his skull." The ease of her sentence structure allows the gravity of the images to speak for themselves. She follows a description of the soldiers' haircuts, "dark clipped / hair coming to a point," with her most devastating line: "Aim here."

Moments like this feel close, but not confined. And poems like this show us what Dunham is capable of when she leaves the special effects behind. It is in Dunham's successes that we see what may come in the future. She has the potential to write a great book. This book is not her great book.

## Pilgrim's Progress: David Roderick in Conversation

*David Roderick is the author of Blue Colonial, winner of the 2006 American Poetry Review/Honickman Prize. His awards include a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University, a research fellowship from the American Antiquarian Society and, most recently, the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Fellowship. Of Roderick's poems, which have appeared in such journals as the Virginia Quarterly Review, the Missouri Review, TriQuarterly, and the Hudson Review, Michael Collier writes: "they continually 'roam the periphery' in search of something . . . What [Roderick] finds there by way of salvage, excavation, renovation, and restoration is 'a new language.'" Against a densely wooded backdrop, I sat down with David at his home in North Carolina during Easter weekend to discuss his juxtaposition of the American past and present, the friction between poetic tradition and innovation, as well as the central articulations and repressions from which Blue Colonial's primary tensions emerge. Over several days, as our conversation progressed, we watched two birds build their spring nest between the screen and open shutter of a nearby kitchen window.*

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Shara Lessley: In "Excavation of the John Alden House," language literally becomes a tool for unearthing the past ("We needed an alphabet to get our grid laid out"). When (re)imagining history, how do limitations—temporal restrictions, for example—inform the writing? In other words, what sort of pressure do such subjects place on the idiom? ["We needed a new language . . .," you write, ". . . the harder something was, the better chance / we had of finding it."]

David Roderick: "Excavation" emerged from my study of a small pamphlet titled *Pilgrim John Alden's Progress: Archaeological Excavations in Duxbury*, which was filled with pictures of recovered objects—rusted hinges, potsherds, coins, remnants of tools, penny nails. Seeing pictures of those carefully labeled objects helped me address the temporal restrictions you've mentioned. When I found the pamphlet, I'd been struggling to strip away layers of myth that had buried the history of my hometown, Plymouth, Massachusetts. The excavated objects inspired me and seemed to embody what I was after. They had passed through history and were real, untainted. They existed without regard for any narrative or context we could provide for them. For me they were like magical touchstones.

Many of these items also had peculiar and sometimes archaic labels. I love how a word (like an object) can shine when it's rediscovered, and how that small brilliance can alter consciousness ever so slightly. I like feeling the syllables of an archaic word in my mouth, knowing it was used by the people who first inhabited that place. *Bell-metal. Pintle. Cock's head hinge.* Even saying them now makes me feel word-drunk.

SL: In addition to diction, what is it about America's Puritan legacy that captures your attention?

DR: When you grow up in a small town like Plymouth, you can't really escape that legacy. You inherit it, especially when you're a kid going on annual school trips to Plimoth Plantation, Mayflower II, and Plymouth Rock. I remember poring over visitor's logs at those sites, amazed that people from as far away as Germany, Korea, and Australia had visited. I guess it's hard to grow up in any town without taking it for granted.

When I was much older and started writing poems, I had little interest in the town or its history. It was just a place I was trying to escape. At about that time, my parents built a house in the woods off of Billington Street, a relatively undeveloped part of Plymouth. The phases of the process

fascinated me—clearing the land, digging the foundation, putting up the frame, etc. There were old roads and paths in the woods behind the house, which I explored whenever I went home. I was also devouring Faulkner's work during that time, all his stunning stories and novels set in "postage stamp" Yoknapatawpha. His brand of localized narrative and mythology appealed to me.

Soon after, I started reading about Plymouth's history, and I was startled by what I found. The Thanksgiving story, for example, is mostly myth. In *Of Plimoth Plantation*, William Bradford, the colony's governor and first historian, mentions a "harvest festival" after that first year, but that's about it. This lack of information freed me to imagine my own version of the event: "Thanksgiving, 1621," the first poem I wrote in *Blue Colonial's* historical thread. That was the initial impetus—to peer behind those myths—or at least to use my imagination and fill gaps in the historical record.

SL: Are there particular challenges you face when attempting to enter the psychology of a historical figure?

DR: Sure. First there's the problem of diction. As I've said, I love archaic words, so writing in the voice of a 17th-century colonist offered opportunities to import them into the poems. Sometimes I went overboard in early drafts. Especially in the dramatic monologues, it alienated the reader, so I tried to soften that element by cutting back the language while still preserving stern rhythms and a solemn tone. I'm obviously more interested in finding a contemporary audience than in resurrecting, in some crystalline form, a 17th-century idiom.

There are also larger, more important questions I'd been too naïve to consider until I'd finished writing those poems. Namely, why do we need to hear from these colonial voices? How are they relevant to us today? Do they have any significant appeal beyond the region where I grew up? What

do these voices have to do with my own voice?

One historical figure who helped me answer some of those questions was John Billington, after whom my parents' street was named. He and his family arrived on the *Mayflower*. They were not members of the church. And in William Bradford's account, Billington was the only colonist to question Bradford's authority. On one occasion, Bradford put Billington in the stocks for rabble-rousing. A few years later, Billington was accused of murdering another man and became the first British subject in the colony to be punished by execution.

I have no doubt Billington was a scoundrel, but he also appeared to have principles that interested me. He spoke out even when he knew he'd be shouted down or punished by religious officials who were running the show. And since so little is known about Billington's life, I figured I could heroize him in *Blue Colonial*. In one of the poems he escapes the colony for a while to camp out with Squanto. The woods enchant him. I guess I'm trying to depict him as the first American transcendentalist, a worthy ascendant of Thoreau or Whitman. Later in the book, he becomes something of a prophet. The seed of my interest was Billington's rebellious nature, his outsider status. I hope those qualities still have some relevance to contemporary readers. They are qualities, I suppose, that also suit me as a writer.

SL: Did you worry about merely re-staging what Lowell describes as "the record of an event"?

DR: Not really. Since the historical record is so thin I had lots of room to embellish on the subjects of the poems. Lowell is arguing that a poem must be its own event, separate from historical incidents that may have inspired it. I agree with him, and I hope each of my poems stands on its own.

SL: In some ways, Lowell's poems—their negotiation of the old and new,

past and present (“The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” “Mr. Edwards and the Spider,” “For the Union Dead”)—seem models for *Blue Colonial*. Does Lowell figure in your work?

DR: I consciously worried about the looming figure of Lowell. I’m embarrassed to admit this, but while working on *Blue Colonial*, I avoided reading Lowell because I feared I’d fall under his spell. Now I see how foolish I was. Instead of haunting my voice, he might have taught me how to weave the personal with the historical. I’m not exaggerating when I say it took me several years to negotiate between those two elements in my poetry. Lowell balanced those forces more skillfully than any other American poet, and if I hadn’t been so fearful and resistant, his influence might have saved me some time.

I’ve been lugging around Lowell’s *Collected Poems* since it was published and, as penance, I pledged to read it when my book was done, but I’m ashamed to say I haven’t cracked it yet. I mean . . . the book is huge! It looks like it weighs 14 lbs.! As soon as this interview is over I’m going to forklift it off my bookshelf and start reading.

SL: “Language will always be vestigial . . .,” you write. “I will be invisible here if I want to be” (“Bait & Switch”); and then later, “. . . so much to cover / himself with as he moves out of sight, / as he walks back into [a] history” (“Into Empty Woods”). To what extent was your invisibility in *Blue Colonial* purposeful?

DR: I’ve always been attracted to the trick of camouflage, how you can look squarely at something and still not *see* it. Recognizing a toad or walking-stick bug or trout, seeing it come into relief against the background meant to hide it—there is something childlike and thrilling about that kind of recognition—when the hidden thing emerges from camouflage and asserts itself, fully formed, in the mind. To be surprised like that is to be renewed.

Initially my use of that particular conceit was purposeful, and it helped me write the pastoral poems, the first pieces that made it into the book. But then there's this: I liked recognizing the hidden, but I liked *being* hidden better. When I was a child I noticed that if I was quiet and still the world would forget about me and reveal more of itself. It became more difficult to practice this technique as I grew older. Our culture is always chugging forward, and it sort of requires you to jump aboard. I tried to resist these larger impetuous forces by taking refuge in books and writing.

So as I got older I was also *living* a disguised life, hiding my identity as a poet and repressing my own desires. The conceit of disguise found its way into the historical poems, though I didn't know it while I was writing them. Once I recognized this dynamic in my work, I fought hard to write myself back into existence.

SL: So chronologically early nature poems ("Bait & Switch" / "Into Empty Woods") lead to interest in public history (exploring the Plymouth of your childhood)—uncovering lost "selves." At what point does the recovery of American "selves" prompt the discovery of your private self?

DR: That's the rough chronology, yes. I sensed I needed something to counterbalance the pastoral and historical poems, but I didn't know what it was. I wanted to write something more autobiographical, but it seemed to me that Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath (and other so-called "confessional" poets) hadn't left a lot of wiggle room for my own personal lyric. Plath felt that her father was "The Colossus," but *she* had become my Colossus.

Then 9/11 happened, and I heard people calling for public instead of private poetry. This complicated my problem. My own personal anxieties, no matter how large they were for me, were insignificant compared to the suffering and loss I saw around me. It felt awfully self-indulgent to use the pronoun "I" in a poem, so I kept silent. I distracted myself by continuing to research and write about the history of my hometown.

Sometime near the end of that period “Priscilla Alden’s Sickness” arrived, another persona poem in the voice of a Pilgrim. Frankly, the poem surprised me when it came. I wrote it very quickly, which is rare. Her troubled tone and anxiety was more personal, depressed, pained. Near the end of the poem she expresses how resentful she is to be in the harsh living conditions of the colony, but finally admits, “I felt . . . that by loving this place I might also love myself.” It was a threshold moment for her and for me too, I suppose, because I knew that *I* was really speaking through her voice. The historical poems were another disguise, a way to be invisible. If I was going to finish my book, I understood that I needed to peel off that mask and stand naked before my audience, not be afraid of exhibiting my weaknesses, desires, fears.

SL: What happened?

DR: I got scared. I started another manuscript that was even more constructed and distant from myself, written in a disembodied voice that sounded like a coked-up Auden. I wrote about fifty poems in that mode before setting them aside. Then I tried my hand at writing a novel, yet another dead end. By then two years had passed. I was fully aware of my problem and talked about it with other poets and friends, but for some reason every time I tried to write from a more personal perspective I failed. I couldn’t wriggle out of the cocoon.

Then one day, I was sitting at my desk, frustrated again, and decided to try a more direct approach—a self-portrait. It seemed like it might be easier to turn the lens on myself if I simply acknowledged that the lens was there. I did what I usually do when I’m trying out a new poetic form or style. I went to my bookshelf. I was lucky to find some of Charles Wright’s self-portrait poems. One of them, titled “Self-Portrait in 2035,” grabbed me. Since Wright was born in 1935, I understood the poem to be a self-portrait after his death, though the depiction is mostly corporeal, a self-portrait as

corpse.

Instead of projecting into an imaginative future as Wright does in his poem, I inverted his strategy and decided to write back in time about the year of my conception and birth. Right away I felt like my voice was louder, more confident. It was a strange feeling. The tone was emphatic and intensely lyrical. I felt for the first time as if I were bellowing.

SL: Did the other self-portraits quickly follow?

DR: Yes. I wrote three poems: one each about my conception, gestation, and birth. But to write about myself *in utero* was cheating because it still allowed me to hide. Nevertheless, it was a step in the right direction.

Then I attempted a self-portrait about myself when I was moving along the rocky path between childhood and adolescence. The title of that poem is "Self Portrait in 1982," written about a time in my life when, in reality, I was very happy. My family was supportive and loving. I lived in a pleasant, stable, suburban neighborhood. Yet something inside me was awry. For some reason, when I was lonely or bored, I'd hike off into the woods by myself, strip off all my clothes, and walk around naked. I suddenly remembered the thrill of that nakedness, and the danger and fear of being caught. It was palpable—feeling the wind on my skin, seeing the twigs and berries and tree-bark, the sensation of pine needles under my bare feet. I still can't explain that behavior. At the time, I suppose it was the most transgressive act I could imagine committing.

SL: And so after costuming historical figures and feeding them lines, you decided to literally "strip down" in the poems, to uncover/recover *your* past, *your* history?

DR: Exactly. I myself often wondered why I'd been writing about Pilgrims. Now it's easy to see that I was responding to their own buried desires, the individual's dream sacrificed for the collective good. Let's be honest. Being

a Pilgrim wasn't for sissies. They had to be on the same page, or they would have died. I don't think I could have survived such an experience. I'd have been the first one to croak.

Those historical poems are a metaphor for my own repressed desires, for what I didn't feel comfortable bringing to the page as myself. When I fell into writing self-portraits, I finally let down my guard and spoke more truthfully and authentically. The last poem I wrote for the book, a self-portrait titled "How I Learned Not to Speak," exhibits a lot of pent-up desire released onto the page. It's the poem I'd been trying to write for years.

SL: "How I Learned Not to Speak" seems a major turn not only because of the poem's negotiation of subject, but its exploitation of syntactic and structural devices. Visually, the stanzas are the most radical in the collection—ever-shifting, dependent upon parenthetical markers and monostiches. What falls away with the historical subjects is pattern-making (slant rhyme, regular meter, even stanzas, etc.). Care to comment on the disparate strategies employed in this poem?

DR: To accommodate that muscular energy I had no choice but to depart from the syntactic and structural patterns found in many of the other poems. Really what I'm trying to talk about here is rhythm. It's as if the speaker's anxiety is converted into physical energy—the manifestation of a cat stalking in its pen. The poem's stanzaic structure and enjambments evoke the speaker's prowling pace, I hope. The speaker is restless, starved, and finally realizing that the pen is of his own making.

SL: Are you still feeling "caged"? What are you bringing to the page now?

DR: I'm interested in moving away from the very particular and local history of my hometown, so I've started by reading widely in other areas:

Greek myths, gardening, astrology, zoology, art, the Bible, etc., with the hope that these new sources will inspire poems that are different from the poems in *Blue Colonial*. I'm trying to write more of those personal poems I've never been able to write before, like love poems and elegies. The transition has been difficult so far, but I'm excited about the challenge.

## Building the Bridge: A Conversation with Emily Barton

*In the spring of 1994 I was an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, majoring in anthropology and taking all the creative writing classes that I could. Emily Barton, then a first-year fiction student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, was my instructor for a short story correspondence course. Every few weeks or so, I received one of my earnest, faltering pieces back in the mail with Emily's comments and a one-page letter. The tone of her marginalia and letters was insightful, funny, encouraging, demanding, and sincere. She questioned my characters, my ideas, the way I had built something, but always with a kind of awe for what the story could be. We never met in person (until years later) and spoke on the telephone only once. But just as fiction stop-frames the intelligence of the author, these comments and letters suggested a graceful and critical mind at work.*

*In the thirteen years since I sent my hopeful dispatches to a PO Box in Iowa City, Emily Barton has become a welcome addition to American letters. Thomas Pynchon described her 2000 debut novel, *The Testament of Yves Gundron*, as "blessedly post-ironic, engaging and heartfelt . . ." It was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and reviewers generally agreed that it combined an astonishing vision of an invented world—a parallel but historical land known as Mandragora—with a wealth of technical playfulness. In 2006, Emily published a second novel called *Brookland*—also a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. The story traces a woman's journey, in the 18th century, to both hold onto the helm of an inherited gin distillery business while manifesting her dream of building a bridge to connect Brooklyn to Manhattan in a single span. As Joan Acocella pointed out in the *New Yorker*, the book is also a kind of bridge—not only does it span the years 1772 to 1823, but it fuses the disparate forces of family, loyalty, personal ambition, and the Enlightenment, into an engrossing epic. The language, as with Barton's first novel, is alive with the cadences and grace notes of another age.*

Dominic Smith: Both of your novels, to some extent, trace the effects of technology on a particular setting. In your first novel, *The Testament of Yves Gundron*, we watch the ripple effect of Yves's harness invention. In *Brookland*, the building of the bridge has far-reaching influences over people and place. Is technology and change something you feel generally interested in as a writer? Does an invention give you a particular lens for a story?

Emily Barton: I do have an abiding interest in technology—our own and that of earlier times. I'm also deeply interested in trades, professions: in the myriad things people do to change the given world. So much of our lives is given over to work that it seems natural for a writer to spend real time thinking about it. I agree that both of my novels are about technology, but I'd also say that they're more broadly about work, about how doing work affects the outcomes of the protagonists' lives, both in everyday terms and spiritually.

Certainly having an invention in a story helps to focus the plot. Like plots, machines (in which I include Prue's bridge) can be highly calibrated and tricky; they have misfires and stunning successes of usefulness. I'd almost say that they're intrinsically interesting, though that isn't quite true—probably no one would want to read a story entitled "Care and Maintenance of Your Protractor." But they do provide a useful narrative arc.

DS: It's interesting to hear you make a parallel between machines and plots. It seems to me writers vary greatly on how they construct plot. Annie Proulx, for example, troops to some place and studies the soil, geology, weather and local bar scene before deciding who to people her story with. The characters grow out of the geography. And plot follows on from that. Other writers will begin with character, as opposed to a sense of place, and let the plot evolve organically out of the characters' preoccupations. And obviously plots can grow out of the frayed edges and messy alliances between character, place, and concept. How do you approach building a plot? Do

your plots come pretty late in the game? Once the world has been conceived and character predicaments established?

EB: In *Brookland*, Prue and Tem emerged simultaneously with the desire to write about building a bridge; all three were there from the start, with Pearl right on their heels, and everything else followed afterwards. I guess the desire to write about my home was also there very early on, as was some thinking about Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and Thomas Wolfe's "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn." When I began *The Testament of Yves Gundron*, I was largely puzzling over an essay by the landscape theorist J. B. Jackson, "The Development of the Street," so there was a theoretical component; but Yves's character was also there from the get go, seemingly *sui generis*. I guess I see character, plot, and milieu as things that arise together and interdependently. I think they're all equally important, and it seems natural to think of them together rather than separately.

DS: E.L. Doctorow has made the comment that writers taking on historical stories should feel the freedom to lie their way to a greater truth. If I consider some of my favorite historical novels—Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* or Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*—there is a great liberty there to bend the details of period to a particular narrative design. Did you struggle with the idea of the bridge in *Brookland*, given that it appears long before the real Brooklyn Bridge was ever built? Or did you feel, from the beginning, that a writer can be "true" to a period and a set of historical lives while being unfaithful to certain aspects of an era? Maybe you can talk a little about some of the dilemmas of writing historical fiction.

EB: *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Mason & Dixon* are also some of my favorite historical novels; such bravura.

Well, there's always the issue of what one means by "true," which I'm sure is why you set it in inverted commas. The literal truth—the particular

and workaday truth—seems less important than larger truths about how the world was and is and people were and are. Prue's bridge is based on Thomas Pope's Flying Pendant Lever Bridge, which was proposed for the site in 1811; the technology she uses to build it is almost entirely Pope's technology. (He left astonishingly detailed records, crazy-person detailed.) So at that level it's historically accurate. But, of course, I filled in gaps with my own research and imagination.

I do believe Doctorow is correct that there's a spirit of truth to which a writer of historical fiction must hew, which isn't quite the same as sticking to the facts. Then, too, all writers probably hew to some idea of the truthful, or at least to some allegiance to the real, however broadly you define reality.

I think historical fiction poses many challenges: how to convey the foreignness of places from which we're separated by time, how to convey the similarities; how to provide salient details of period life in a way that seems authentic to the characters in the story (who accept such details as everyday) while at the same time letting the reader know what you're talking about, and all that without sounding like a boring museum docent. But writing a contemporary story, or a political story, or a mystery, or a non-narrative story, would no doubt pose challenges of its own kind.

DS: Since you are interested in writing about work and its myriad effects on our lives—both now and in previous eras—I wonder how you approach your own daily craft. Do you tend to write at specific times, for a specific duration, or is it much more fluid than that? Is writing, for you, a difficult habit to maintain?

EB: While I'm writing a draft of something, or editing one, I try to work on it every day for as long as is feasible. Sometimes I'll set a modest goal, such as to write one page every day, just to keep things moving, but I still might take a day off here or there. At the very beginning of a project, however, when I'm mostly doing research, I don't set any goals other than to try to check

in with my thinking on the subject every day. Many of a novel's intrinsic connections are forged subconsciously, and I find it easier to leave that alone, ticking along in the background, than to try to force it.

DS: How did you come to writing fiction? I was struck, in *Brookland*, with Prue's apprenticeship in the gin distillery. She becomes immersed in a mysterious but also a mechanical process, and learns to master it. That seems to be an apt metaphor for embarking on a fiction writing career. What do you see as the main ways young writers can apprentice themselves to the writing trade? Is reading the best form of apprenticeship? Are you a proponent of the workshop method?

EB: I had the honor of reviewing Francine Prose's book *Reading Like a Writer* when it came out in September 2006, and I think Prose is more eloquent than I could ever be about how important reading is to writers. I would recommend her book to any young writer; it provides a passionate and persuasive argument in favor of reading the masters and learning from their positive examples.

My only qualm about the workshop model is that, by its nature, it tends to focus on the negative—on what a young writer is doing imperfectly or needs to improve—and I do think people learn better in an atmosphere that emphasizes what one *can* do and work toward. But I think a good teacher can steer a workshop in this direction. Workshops can have tremendous value in teaching young writers to distance themselves from their own work and to observe the work of others with the intent of helping to improve it; I think it sharpens one's critical skills, which are vital to a writer (and frankly to anyone living in this culture, which is so replete with information that needs to be assessed). I also believe it's important for beginning writers to just write, regardless of the quality of what they're producing. I encourage students to free-write—basically to rant on the page and not worry about quality, to get in the habit of writing—and to avoid thinking of their

work as precious; and I urge them to tinker with their stories (rather than assume that they come out “as they’re meant to be”) and not take it too hard if they fall flat. Young writers sometimes fall into the trap of waiting for inspiration; and as I suspect you might also believe, being so prolific, inspiration seems to me to be something that grows out of work rather than creating it.

DS: Writing can be a fickle art. I know that you have reviewed fiction extensively over the years so you’re probably aware of the weird trajectory that a writer’s career can have. There is never a guarantee that the next book, from an established writer of some renown, will be as good as her previous installment. Do writers necessarily get better as they continue to practice their craft? Or can they lose their footing from one book to the next? Isn’t that a humbling notion?

EB: Learning how to write one novel is no guarantee of knowing how to write the next; each one is such a different beast. So yes, this is very humbling, consistently humbling. But I also think that even the best writer, over the course of a long career, will fluctuate between writing novels that fully realize their potential and others that are less successful. For example, Jim Crace and Richard Powers are two of the living novelists I most admire, but I think some of their books are miraculous and some merely good. This gives me hope, both that I myself can improve as a writer, and that if my next book turns out to be awful, I might still be able to redeem myself later on. It only rarely happens that someone who starts out as a thoughtful, inventive writer slowly descends through the levels of dreckiness to die a hack; I find this hopeful, too.

DS: Who are the writers who have left their mark on you—both as a reader and as a writer?

EB: I really do think Crace writes the most beautiful, supple English sentence of anyone living. Some other writers I admire are Powers, Michael Chabon, Thomas Pynchon, Chris Adrian, T. Cooper, Paul La Farge, Judy Budnitz, Percival Everett, Sesshu Foster, Amy Hempel, Deborah Eisenberg, Allegra Goodman, and W. G. Sebald (about whose untimely demise I'm very sorry). I am a great fan of a Marly Youmans' novel called *Catherwood*, one of the oddest, sparest, spookiest books it's ever been my pleasure to read. George Eliot is still my favorite author; I reread *Middlemarch* every few years, and am continually struck by the depth of her understanding of her characters and the beauty of the plot. *Daniel Deronda* and *Mill on the Floss* are also great favorites. I love to read Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Thomas Hardy, and also like a number of the more experimental writers of the last century, Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, Vladimir Nabokov, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce. And I wish I could write like Wallace Stevens.

DS: What is the most satisfying aspect of creating fiction for you? Have you ever been attracted to other modes of artistic expression?

EB: I think storytelling is one of the chief ways in which humans sort out the world and explain it to themselves; there's a deep, deep pleasure in doing that. But I've always been attracted to other forms of artistic expression. When I applied to graduate school, I applied to as many photography programs as writing programs; the Iowa Writers' Workshop was the only place that accepted me, so that made up my mind for me. I also had a real fondness for acting and for writing plays as a young woman. And just last summer I learned how to run a letterpress, which is a marvelous art.

DS: What's your view of the current landscape for the novel? Do you feel like it's wide open and we're seeing a great diversity of approaches within the form?

EB: I think each writer has a unique voice and a unique worldview, so the landscape is always open, in all directions.

DS: We tend to know only about the finished projects of writers. I wonder if you might share any experiences of false starts or wanting to jump ship on a project.

EB: Oh, dear. I have three totally finished, fully abandoned novels in my file cabinet, novels that even my husband will never see. I also spent about four years trying to write a novel about the Brooklyn Bridge before I realized that it was entirely unnecessary to write another word about it, given that David McCullough's *The Great Bridge* exists in the world. I wrote about 180 pages of that novel before I junked it, salvaging only six pages, which are woven into the first chapter of *Brookland*.

## High Drama: A Conversation with Emily Raboteau and Tiphonie Yanique

*Emily Raboteau is an assistant professor of English at the City College of New York. She has an MFA in Fiction from New York University, where she was a New York Times Fellow. Her short stories have appeared in Callaloo, the Missouri Review, the Gettysburg Review, Tin House, Best American Short Stories 2003 and elsewhere. She is the recipient of the Chicago Tribune's Nelson Algren Award for Short Fiction, a Pushcart Prize, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. Her first novel is The Professor's Daughter. She lives in Harlem.*

*Tiphonie Yanique is an assistant professor of literature and creative writing at Drew University. She has won the Boston Review Fiction Prize, the Kore Press Fiction Prize, a Fulbright Scholarship in creative writing, and a 2008 Pushcart Prize. She holds an MFA from the University of Houston. Her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry can be found in Transition, Callaloo, Sonora, the London Magazine and other places. She is an editor with Calabash Journal and StoryQuarterly. She lives between Brooklyn, New York and St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Her chapbook is The Saving Work.*

Tiphonie Yanique: Many of my ideas about the bones and flesh of writing have come out of candid conversations with other writers who are willing to engage. I always wish I could record the stuff. I'm looking forward to doing that with you, Emily, for the next few pages.

Emily Raboteau: Likewise.

TY: At the *Callaloo* workshop I met you and Tracy K. Smith. As new authors you were these incredible kind of mentors who were a few steps

ahead of us and still deeply engaged in the struggles many of us students were engaged in.

ER: Yes. Charles Rowell, *Callaloo's* editor, really needs to be credited for fostering these relationships because they are precisely what he had in mind when he started the workshops. His vision was to create a network for young black writers, a family kind of network—in response to a publishing world that remains largely white and largely motivated by commerce—a supportive space where we could discuss issues of craft on a deeper frequency than is possible in spaces where we are the minority. This is what he wanted, for us to help each other out like family, because he was afraid we might not otherwise receive that kind of help. So both you and I really need to express our indebtedness to him for having met each other. I participated in the workshop as a student for two summers and grew a lot as a writer because of it. That was where I met my mentor, Percival Everett. I learned more from him and Charles and the other participants than I did in two years in an MFA program. Or, I should say, I learned in a deeper way. And it was meaningful to feel I was writing in a tradition.

How did you find your *Callaloo* workshop experience compared to your MFA program?

TY: I graduated a year ago from the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. I chose it in great part because I felt living in Houston would give me less distraction, would cause me to focus less on publishing and “being a writer” and more on creating and engaging with other thinkers and artists. I thought this mainly because I’d grown up on a small island and Boston had been my only experience with the States. I thought I would be too busy either partying or waiting tables in New York or somewhere like that. My hopes for U of H were true to my experience, though, so it was good for me. *Callaloo*, however, was something all together different—comparable only to my experience at the VONA workshop in San Francisco. For the first time

we were talking about issues of race and gender as craft issues. Hello! U of H was very positive for me, but sometimes my fellow writers got nervous when you challenged the caricature of a black character or cliché in a gay character—in a way they didn't if you spoke about cliché or caricature in an un-raced or white character. I want to address stereotype in my own work and in my reading. Being at *Callaloo* and VONA and having those teachers was validating and instructive for me. What was NYU like for you?

ER: NYU was important for me because it caused me to take myself seriously as a writer. Having deadlines forced me to produce. I received a lot of generous encouragement there but not the kind of filial bond I required to really grow. I was looking for mentorship. At that stage, I needed a mentor. I found that at *Callaloo*.

TY: I think mentors and mentorship are really important to the young writer. As a teacher I feel like the relationship I develop with my students is sacred. Like there should be a ceremony or a sacrament for it. As a student of writing I feel as though I have a lot of mentors who have helped me in really different ways . . . Kathy Cambor reads everything I give her. Claudia Rankine is always willing to empathize and offer sound advice. Chitra Divakaruni recommends me for things. There are those teachers that have just been incredible teachers, even if the relationship isn't furthered outside of the classroom. Then there are the writers and non-writers who teach and listen outside of the classroom. Ben Fountain always encourages. Jericho Brown and I write together. My grandmother talks to me about my characters as though they're real people. Thomas Sayers Ellis suggests journals.

ER: Yes, community is so important to Thomas. He thinks of himself as a literary activist.

TY: And in that way he ends up being a mentor to a lot of people. I probably

shouldn't mention any more names because once I get started I'll be going back to fifth grade. I wonder about mentorship often, though—how best to be a mentor and even a mentee, and if I'm doing either one the best that I can. As I mentee should I be cultivating a relationship with just one major person? As a mentor should I be wide reaching or focused on a particular student? What comes naturally to me, a la Thomas, is to be giving all over, but is that the most useful way for everyone involved? Maybe as long as I'm being true that's what matters. I don't know. You and I are at different stages in our writing careers. Your first book, *The Professor's Daughter*, was published in 2005. I have stories published, and I'll have a chapbook, *The Saving Work*, coming out in the Fall. You've been a mentor for me—suggesting me for things, talking me up—and we both had Percival Everett as a teacher. Can you talk about his role as your mentor?

ER: I can't wait to read your chapbook! Congratulations. I agree about the importance of mentors. Percival resists that designation—"mentor"—much in the same way that he resists being called a "black writer," and he resists conversation along those lines because it's a word that hints at patriarchy and a kind of power he won't own up to. But he does have that power, and I'm happy to talk about the importance of his mentorship in my career. As a matter of fact, I can point to the moment that I began to see myself as a writer. It was when Percival kissed me on the head in class for having written something good. That was his comment. He just got up out of his seat, walked over and planted a kiss on my head. I was twenty-five years old. It was a kind of christening, because I really didn't understand before the kiss that what I had written was good. It was not the kiss that made me a writer, I was a good writer before Percival kissed me, but for me it was a terribly important moment because of how much I admired his work.

Now, Percival has kissed other writers before, probably too many to remember them all, but I can assure you that every writer he has kissed remembers the gesture. Percival read my manuscripts, gave me feedback,

nominated me for prizes, wrote me recommendations, introduced me to editors, and did all those encouraging sorts of things you might expect of a mentor. But most important, he kissed me. I am a teacher now myself, so I understand the simple impulse to be generous in that way when I “discover” a gifted writer in my class. And when what they’ve written results from an assignment I’ve given, I feel a particular kind of joy, as if I’ve participated in the alchemy of their talent, whether or not I have. I want to nurture them. I don’t go around kissing folks because I don’t want to get fired. But there’s a responsibility there, to give back, because I was the beneficiary of so much attention myself.

I felt this way when I read your story, Tiphanie, in the *Boston Review*. I felt so extremely excited for you, because I had never seen that story told before, and nobody could have written it but you. I wanted everybody I knew to read it. I wanted to make sure that whatever else you were working on would see print. I had confidence in your gift, and I had a fear (based on personal experience) that the road might be hard for you because your angle is so far from mainstream. Of course, mentorship does not have to be based on hierarchical structures. I published before you, but your story taught me something. There is no reason why a mentor has to be an older person or, obviously, a man, or even a human being. I would say Percival’s current mentor is his infant son. And my dog was as much of a mentor to me as Percival ever was. Also, it’s healthy to outgrow our mentors; to process what they have to teach us and then to branch away from them aesthetically. Don’t you think? That’s the natural order, just like how we grow up and leave our parents’ houses. This can be a painful rupture—as with Ralph Ellison who ended up snubbing Langston Hughes and also with Baldwin, who ended up snubbing Richard Wright. Painful, but necessary.

TY: Yikes. I don’t know if all of that was necessary. Some of that was ego and fear that there’s not enough room at the top. I agree, though, that it’s okay to outgrow mentors. I even believe in the possibility of the student teaching the master kind of thing. I think a good mentorship begins to look

like friendship over time. I really get annoyed with beef in the Black literary community.

So, we can't hide (well, this is paper but Google Image won't let us hide) that we're both writers of African descent. I imagine we negotiate this in different ways personally and in our writing. I don't generally look for authors in their characters . . .

ER: Liar!

TY: Ha, ha! Okay. I mean, I don't think that a character is always a version of the writer or something. I know I can't make my characters do things that I myself am not capable of . . . but I think that's because I can't make it believable if I don't understand it personally. I resist the idea that all novels are really veiled autobiographies. It seems as though much of your first novel must have been autobiographical, but also so much of it must not have been. It was interesting to me that you didn't shy away from the obvious associations. The book is called *The Professor's Daughter*, and you are a professor's daughter.

ER: Some authors, private people, rigidly defend their books as separate from themselves. I can understand this. It's unsettling to think someone might claim to know you after reading your book, especially since you were not physically present when you revealed something of yourself to the reader, and also since they have revealed nothing to you. Most disconcerting is when someone conflates you with one of your characters. But as a reader, I have to admit that when I love what I am reading, I think I love the author too. I read everything she's written until I believe I know her. The relationship feels personal because I love the way she *thinks*. Is that sick? Probably. Is that natural? Probably. But I'm doing this with Helene Cixous (who Thomas tipped me off to) right now. I did it with Kafka and Baldwin and W.G. Sebald and Jamaica Kincaid and Percival and the Russians and Garcia

Marquez and so many others and who's to say? Any of those individuals might be (if they are living) or might have been (if they are dead) supreme assholes, or catatonic antisocial bores, or lecherous adulterers, or colossal disappointments in the flesh, but that wouldn't make me love their minds any less. I don't think so.

TY: I think we might have had this discussion before! I seem to recall a bunch of poets, writers and readers in a Vietnamese restaurant very late at night . . . I remember saying something like I feel if a writer makes herself a better person, then she'll be able to write better characters. I think I've complicated that a little, but I still feel the same thing at the root of it. I read somewhere that when Raymond Carver fell in love with Tess Gallagher he was able to write deeper characters . . . he had more faith in human beings, so he wrote his human beings more faithfully. Others say the change came when he quit drinking. Perhaps this is very romantic of me. Maybe writing deeply and truthfully is not that easy—not even as easy as being a better person. I do want an intense relationship with my readers, but I don't think I am writing anything strictly autobiographical—at least not recently.

ER: That's fine. You don't need to be writing transparently about yourself to reveal your vision to your reader. Nor do you have to be an upstanding person to be able to write real characters. You need to be *empathic*. You need to be the God of the world you create. This is not the same thing as being compassionate, or good. It's the ability to see yourself in your characters, to bring the richness and fullness of yourself, even if that character is not your double. Even if you're bringing your own cravenness, pettiness, bigotry, obsession, addiction or fear upon that character to make that character come alive. In the novel I'm working on now, one of the characters commits a murder. Believe me, I am not only appealing to my positive attributes when I reach inside myself to animate her. It's not a comfortable process. It

involves admitting that I have it in me to take another person's life.

TY: . . . That's what I mean about better. Knowing yourself and your nasty possibilities seems a way to be better . . .

ER: I was very young when I began *The Professor's Daughter*, and I didn't know how to write about anything other than my own experience. Or, I should say, I didn't know how to write about my own experience in a way that wasn't obvious. But I didn't call it a memoir because it wasn't that, it was truer than that, it was fiction. And I do believe that somebody who reads it will learn something about me. They may or may not fall in love with the way I see the world. It might not align with their vision. They might jump to a conclusion about me I don't like—say, that I'm a self-loathing black woman, or a stuck-up dilettante, or a tragic mulatto—but they will still know something about the way I see the world.

This issue (associating an author with their work on a personal level) is not the same as the fact vs. fiction issue. There's a stupid leaning in this country's publishing world to eke out "the truth"—to name it that and authenticate it as such so as to sell more copies, and then to crucify the author if it comes to light that she's made things up. I'm talking about the James Frey controversy and these rigid categories—whether to name a book an autobiography or a biography or a novel . . . Writing just doesn't work like this, it doesn't all fit neatly into a category. Neither does history, or memory or race or "truth." *Beloved* is a true book, but it's a novel. It could also be called a history book. Did the events it describes actually occur? No. Yes.

I just met the Irish writer Nuala O'Faolain at MacDowell. Her memoir *Are You Somebody* went to the top of the *New York Times* Bestsellers list many years ago. Her biography of professional crook Chicago May tanked years later after the reviews skewered her for inventing portions of May's life. But it was a huge success in France where such things are allowed, and Nuala won a big literary prize for it there.

TY: That makes me think of Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. It seems like its personal essay and even has the footnotes to prove it's "truth, but in fact it's all fiction. Or all poetry. Or maybe it *is* personal essay. I teach it in my nonfiction class, and then I tell my students that it's all made up—kind of. They love the head tripping of it.

ER: Because it's unorthodox. I haven't read it yet. I'll have to check it out!

TY: Yes! It's a genius book.

I find that much of my writing comes from a nagging, almost childish, curiosity I have about human beings. I want to *know*. My idea of heaven is questions and answers. As an undergrad I was a psych major for two years until I realized that the reason I loved psychology was because I got some answers as to why people did things. For me, my psychology classes were like creative writing craft classes. I feel that as a Caribbean writer, I often have some kind of identity project in mind. I want to write about issues of race and sexuality. This is true for me, even when my characters are not of African descent or Caribbean—many of them are not. In your "A Portrait of Wildness" the plot seems anchored on race and sexuality.

ER: Tiphannie, I want to warn you against using these kinds of vague markers to describe your work—"identity project," "issues of race and sexuality," etc. because it begins to sound like advertising copy. You can leave that language to whoever your publisher assigns to market your novel. It has very little to do with the meat of what you've written, though it may be useful when it comes time to sell it. I don't believe you have any such projects in mind when you sit down to write or your writing would be far more didactic and far less interesting than it is. Can we be more precise with language?

I was invited to speak on a panel at the Black National Writers Conference with Ishmael Reed, Muhammad Ali and Elizabeth Nunez.

The name of the panel was, “The Paradox of Race in Black Literature.” Now to me, that’s too vague to mean anything. Frankly, it baffled me. So I chose to focus on the word “paradox,” which was to me the most interesting word in the title. I argued that the paradox of race in Black Literature, if there is such a thing, is that we are treated as though race is the only topic about which we are qualified to write and the only lens through which to view our work. The far more interesting panel at that conference, to my mind, was the one on speculative fiction (with Samuel Delaney presiding) because those authors were free to discuss their imagination and craft. I argued against the classification of books along racial lines, what Percival calls “ghettoizing literature.” Really, I was only mimicking Percival’s argument because I admired him so much.

I have revised my thinking somewhat since that time. I do see myself as a black writer, and I feel blessed to have the viewpoint my own peculiar blackness affords me. I do see myself as having written *The Professor’s Daughter* in a black tradition, particularly in the sense that the protagonist must contend with the weight of history before she can have her own plot (in fact this *is* her plot). I did find that black women, who supported my book more than any other group by electing to read it in book clubs across the country, understood the book in a much deeper way than the more general audiences I spoke to. I don’t any longer think of that term “Black Literature” as reductive or limiting (depending on who is using it and why)—but I still resist being identified exclusively with that terminology.

For example, I was raised in the Catholic faith, and my work expresses themes of suffering and salvation, but it hasn’t occurred to anybody to describe me as a “Catholic writer,” as they do Graham Greene and Flannery O’Connor, in spite of the fact that my religious imagery is far more obvious than theirs. (And please don’t think I’m pretending I’ll ever write as well as those two!) But I’d like it if somebody put me on a panel with Mary Oliver someday. I have at least as much in common with her as I do with Ishmael Reed.

TY: You just bitch-slapped me in the pages of *Gulf Coast* . . . but you're right, of course. The language isn't enough. And we're writers! I don't always have politics at the front of my mind . . . I generally don't as I'm writing. But I often see a political impulse when I go to revise or even after I see the story in print. I'm glad you don't think my writing is didactic, though I do want to be more than beautiful. I want to be useful. Of course, I know beauty is useful. Perhaps it's the most useful thing there is . . .

ER: Stop right there. That's an interesting, bold assertion. And I have no idea what you mean. Tease it out.

TY: Hmm. What *do* I mean? That at the base of anything good there must be beauty. That this is what the human being desires and that children know it best. That if there was no racism, no poverty, no broken hearts that I would still write and read for the beauty of it. But until then I want more. And I want it consciously, and I consciously want it.

In an NPR interview Toni Morrison was asked about being called a Black woman author. She responded that the question of it was "so boring." Not what it stood for, but the fact idea that being in any box gets boring . . . at least I think that's what she meant. (I really don't want a slap from her, so I hope I'm getting it close to right.) She went on to say that she did decide to investigate the title, to live it and see where it took her, and in doing so she discovered that it was "rich." That there was so much work to be done in "Black woman writing." I feel that way. I want to work in "Caribbean writer." I want to work in "Afro-Caribbean woman writer." And I feel that "Afro-Caribbean woman writer" is just as universal and instructive and inspiring and as, well, beautiful as "Catholic writer."

ER: It is. Of course, it is. All good writing begins at home. You feel that. I feel that. But when it comes to "Black Literature" most publishers and readers do not. You want to believe that the specificity of your experience

is part of what makes it universal, that it will appeal to a broad readership not only in spite of but because of its regionality. Of course, I cannot predict how your novel will be received when it gets born. But if there is something I can teach you about publication from my own experience it's this: don't be crushed if white folks don't reach for it. It is hard for them to see themselves in your body. Don't be crushed if men don't reach for it. It is hard for them to see themselves in your body. Your book will find its home, but it will probably resemble the house whoever markets you believes you grew up in.

TY: And like you, I was raised Catholic. We should do a panel . . .

ER: Sure! AWP Rome, 2020.

TY: That's hilarious!

Really, I want bookstores more like libraries. If you're looking for Catholic writing why shouldn't you able to find that section and spend some time among those books? My problem with the ghettoization is not that the Black section and the Latino section are at the back of the bookstore—we might be doing dangerous things back there, we might need a deep corner—but that those books are then not in the “general section.” If you're just wandering in the bookstore looking for a good read you won't bump into color or queer—unless it's a Nobel laureate. Maybe.

I remember buying your book back during *Callaloo*. There were two copies at the Barnes and Noble. I bought one and my roommate bought the other. Both were in the “African American” section. I remember telling the bookstore guy that you were guest-teaching, and that he should order more copies. He said of course, and then mentioned that he might put some out on the front shelf with the new arrivals. I didn't even mean to cause trouble when I asked why they weren't on the front shelf to begin with. My question was sincere, I thought maybe your book wasn't considered new anymore. He told me because she's African American. I realized I was causing trouble.

ER: *You* weren't causing trouble. The system is troubling.

TY: Yeah, well. I don't entirely mind causing trouble.

I'm really interested in the high drama of both our work. I know so much of American literature today is about the quiet, soft, domestic moments—but it seems as though you and I might be just naturally resisting that. In my “How to Escape from a Leper Colony,” the story you mentioned that was in the *Boston Review*, there's leprosy and colonialism. In my “International Shop of Coffins” trilogy there's homosexuality, death and race. In *The Professor's Daughter* there's biracial identity, mental illness, death, and now you're working on ethnicity and religion in your new project. Creative writing students in undergraduate and MFA programs are generally being encouraged to move away from high drama. Tiphany Yanique and Emily Raboteau are not—as this conversation might begin to prove. What's up with us?

ER: I grew up with the sense that my body was a metaphor for something taboo (race-mixing). Being “other,” or really, “the other other,” was prerequisite to becoming an artist, because it placed me outside and made me observant. As a result of that condition, I think and see in metaphors. For example, the dead mouse I found rotting behind my refrigerator last month was not only a mouse. It was my embodied fear of dying alone in New York. How long would it take for my corpse to begin stinking enough for someone in my building to realize I was dead? A week? Two? So it was hard for me to touch the mouse. Not because I am particularly squeamish, but because I think in metaphors.

A lot of people, including my brother, asked me why the brother in my first novel has to die in such an outlandishly gruesome way. (He electrocutes himself by pissing on the third rail of a train track and lands in a coma.) It's a melodramatic death, but it was the only way I knew how to get at the protagonist's extreme loneliness. She had to lose her brother, with

whom she identified completely, so that she could figure out who she was, and she had to lose him in that soap-operatic fashion so that the reader would understand the proportion of her loss. It veers on the surreal, the magical.

I'm not really interested in describing reality, but an exaggerated slipstream of it. If a character is emotionally crippled, then he is physically crippled as well. He has a clubfoot, and it makes a sound when he walks. If a character is perturbed on the inside, then her face breaks into an itchy rash. She scratches it, and there is no easy cure. Right now I am writing about an autistic child who cannot speak. His father's hobby is to build model ships in bottles. It's a metaphor, of course, for trying to access his son's inner life. It's an obvious metaphor, but it came to me first, before the characters, before the plot—just that. A frustrated man with a bottle in his hands.

Iver Arnegard has published fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. His work has appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Copper Nickel*, the *Missouri Review*, the *Southern Indiana Review*, *Willow Springs*, *ZYZZYVA*, and elsewhere. He would like to thank Joan Connor for all her help with his writing.

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Pamela Diamond received her MFA in fiction from the University of Houston, where she received two Barthelme Fellowships as well as a Michener Fellowship. Co-Editor of *A Book for Daniel Stern*, her fiction has appeared in *Southwest Review*, *Hampton Shorts*, and elsewhere. Her comic novel, *Possum Fields*, will be completed in 2007.

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Norman Dubie's recent collection of lyrics, *Ordinary Mornings of a Coliseum*, was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2005, along with the paperback of *The Mercy Seat: Collected New Poems 1967-2000*. His 400-page futurist poem, *The Spirit Tablets at Goa Lake*, is to be found online at *Blackbird* (the *New Virginia Review*). His newest collection of poems, *The Insomniac Liar of Topo*, will appear with Copper Canyon in September of 2007.

Denise Duhamel's most recent poetry titles include *Two and Two* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), *Mille et un Sentiments* (Firewheel, 2005), and *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (Pittsburgh, 2001). She co-edited, with Maureen Seaton and David Trinidad, *Saints of Hysteria: A Half-Century of Collaborative American Poetry* (Soft Skull, 2007). A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in poetry, she is an associate professor teaching poetry at Florida International University in Miami.

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Angie Estes is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *Chez Nous* (Oberlin College Press, 2005). Her second book, *Voice-Over* (2002) won the *FIELD* Poetry Prize and was also awarded the Alice Fay di Castagnola Prize from the Poetry Society of America. Her awards include a Pushcart Prize and a 2007 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in poetry.

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Jerry Harp's books of poems are *Creature* (Salt 2003), *Gatherings* (2004), and *Urban Flowers, Concrete Plains* (2006). With Jan Weissmiller he co-edited *A Poetry Criticism Reader* (University of Iowa Press 2006). His current project is a study of the poetry of Donald Justice. He teaches at Lewis & Clark College.

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Rebecca Lindenberg's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Colorado Review*, *POOL*, *Barrow Street*, the *Western Humanities Review*, the *Ledge*, and elsewhere. She lives in Salt Lake City, where she is currently working towards a Ph.D. at the University of Utah.

Sarah Maclay is the author of *The White Bride* (forthcoming, University of Tampa Press, '08) and the prizewinning debut collection *Whore* (Tampa Review Prize for Poetry). Her poems, essays and reviews have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *FIELD*, *Ploughshares*, *Hotel Amerika*, *ZYZZYVA*, the *Writers' Chronicle*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Swink*, among others. She received a Special Mention in The Pushcart Prize XXXI. Currently, she's a visiting assistant professor at Loyola Marymount University.

Maurice Manning's third collection, *Bucolics*, has recently been published by Harcourt. He teaches at Indiana University and the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

Sara McKinnon is an MFA candidate at Ohio State University. Her work is forthcoming in the *Iowa Review*, the *New Ohio Review*, and *Quarter After Eight*.

Sara Michas-Martin's work has appeared in *Elixir*, the *Iowa Review*, *PN Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *Third Coast* and on *Poetry Daily*. She lives in San Francisco and is a Jones Lecturer at Stanford.

Michael Miller earned a BFA from Texas State University, San Marcos, and an MFA from the University of California, Davis, and is also an alum of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine. From 1986 through 1988 he was a Core Fellow at The Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He has taught at Texas A&M University-Commerce since 1992 where he is currently an associate professor.

Subimal Misra, born 1943, has written since 1967 and is regarded as the father of the experimental novel, and the leading anti-establishment writer, in Bengali. He has written only for non-commercial literary publications. Over 20 volumes of his stories, novellas, novels, plays and essays have been self-published by Misra.

Stanley Moss recently published *New & Selected Poems 2006*, and his previous books include *A History of Color*, *Asleep in the Garden*, and *The Intelligence of*

*Clouds*. He is the editor and publisher of the Sheep Meadow Press.

A professor at the University of Southern California, Viet Thanh Nguyen is also a former fellow of Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center. His publications include *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford University Press 2002), as well as short stories published or forthcoming in *Manoa*, *Best New American Voices 2007*, and *Narrative Magazine*.

Naomi Shihab Nye lives in San Antonio. Her forthcoming book of nonfiction stories is *I'll Ask You Three Times, Are You OK? Tales of Driving and Being Driven*.

Gregory Pardlo is the recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in poetry and a translation grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. His poems, reviews and translations have appeared in *Callaloo*, *Lyric*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Ploughshares*, *Seneca Review*, *Volt*, *Black Issues Book Review* and on National Public Radio. He teaches creative writing at Medgar Evers College, CUNY, and lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. His first book, *Totem*, was chosen by Brenda Hillman for the 2007 American Poetry Review/Honickman Prize and will be published in the fall.

Cecily Parks's first book, *Field Folly Snow*, will be published by University of Georgia Press in 2008. Li-Young Lee selected her chapbook, *Cold Work*, for the 2005 Poetry Society of America New York Chapbook Fellowship. She lives in New York City, where she is a Ph.D. student in English at the CUNY Graduate Center. "Equus Ferus" was written after reading John Noble Wilford's "Foal by Foal, the Wildest of Horses is Coming Back" in the *New York Times*.

Allan Peterson is the author of two books, *All the Lavish in Common* (2005 Juniper Prize) and *Anonymous Or* (Defined Providence Press), and four chapbooks. Recent print and online appearances include *Blackbird*, *Bellingham Review*, *Perihelion*, *Stickman Review*, *Marlboro Review*, and *Massachusetts Review*. Work forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Northwest Review*, and *Swink*. Recent prizes include GSU Review and Muriel Craft Bailey competitions.

Sina Queyras' third collection of poetry, *Lemon Hound*, recently won the Pat Lowther Award and a Lambda Literary Award. In 2005 she edited *Open Field: 30 Contemporary Canadian Poets* for Persea Books, and edited *Canadian Strange*, a folio of contemporary Canadian writing for *Drunken Boat* where she is a contributing editor. She has taught creative writing at Rutgers and Haverford. She is the 2007-2008 Markin Flanagan Writer in Residence at the University of Calgary.

Emily Raboteau is an assistant professor at the City College of New York. Her fiction has appeared in *Callaloo*, the *Missouri Review*, the *Gettysburg Review*, *Tin House*, *Best American Short Stories 2003* and elsewhere. She has won the Chicago Tribune's Nelson Algren Award for Short Fiction, a Pushcart Prize, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. Her novel is *The Professor's Daughter*.

V Ramaswamy is a Calcutta-based business executive, social planner, grassroots organiser, teacher, writer and translator.

Brianna Kathleen Reckeweg is an adjunct professor at Northern Michigan University, where she also works as an assistant poetry editor for *Passages North*. This is her first publication.

Kathleen Rooney is a founding editor of Rose Metal Press and the author of *Reading with Oprah* (University of Arkansas Press, 2005) and *Live Nude Girl* (Arkansas, 2009). She has poems forthcoming in *Court Green*, *Subtropics*, *The Pinch*, and the *Cincinnati Review* and essays forthcoming in *Ninth Letter*, *Southern Humanities Review*, the *Gettysburg Review*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*.

Brian Russell is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Houston. Recent work has appeared in *Columbia Poetry Review* and more work is hopefully forthcoming elsewhere before he dies. He received an Academy of American Poets Prize in 2005. Brian lives in Houston, Texas, with his fiancée, Stephanie, and their undeniably cute but badly behaved dog, Austin.

Richard Schmitt's stories have been published in *Blackbird*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Flyway*, *Marlboro Review*, and other places. "Leaving Venice, Florida" won first prize in the Mississippi Review Short Story Contest, and was anthologized in *New Stories of the South: The Year's Best 1999*. His first novel, *The Aerialist* (Harcourt Brace), was published in 2001. His second novel, *Kodiak*, is forthcoming. He was the recipient of a National Endowment of the Arts Grant in 2002, and is currently an associate professor of creative writing at West Virginia Wesleyan College.

Allison Schuette-Hoffman, assistant professor of English, currently teaches at Valparaiso University. She received her MFA in creative nonfiction from Penn State University. Previous work has appeared in *Mid-American Review*, *PMS poemmemoirstory*, the *New Review of Literature*, *Fourth Genre*, and *Cimarron Review* (forthcoming).

Anne Shaw's first book, *Undertow*, won the Lexi Rudnitsky Poetry Prize and is forthcoming from Persea Books this winter. Her poems have appeared in several journals including *New American Writing*, *Phoebe*, *Natural Bridge*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review*. She lives in Milwaukee, where she is director of a women's clinic.

Bapsi Sidhwa has published five novels: *An American Brat*, *Cracking India*, *The Bride*, *Crow Eaters*, and *Water*. Her anthology *Beloved City: Writings on Lahore* was published in 2006. Her awards include the Sitara-i-Imtiaz (Pakistan's highest national honor in the arts), the Bunting Fellowship from Harvard, and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Award.

Dominic Smith is the author of the novel *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre*, which was a 2006 selection for the Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers program and winner of the Steven Turner Award for Best Work of First Fiction from the Texas Institute of Letters. His short fiction has appeared

in the *Atlantic Monthly* and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. *The Beautiful Miscellaneous*, his second novel, is now available in bookstores.

Jane Springer is a doctoral candidate in FSU's creative writing program. Her first book, *Dear Blackbird*, was the 2006 recipient of the Agha Shahid Ali prize. Her recent work has appeared in or is forthcoming from: *Margie*, *32 Poems*, the *Chattahoochee Review*, the *Cincinnati Review*, *Heliotrope*, *Lyric*, *Pleiades*, the *Sycamore Review*, and the *Southern Review* (where she received this year's Robert Penn Warren prize).

Alison Stine is the author of the chapbook *Lot of My Sister* (Kent State University Press, 2001). Her poems and essays have recently appeared in *New England Review*, *Tin House*, *Phoebe*, the *Journal*, and the *Hat*. A former Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, she is completing her first full-length book of poems.

Larissa Szporluk is the author of four books of poetry: *Dark Sky Question*; *Isolato*; *The Wind*, *Master Cherry, the Wind*; and most recently, *Embryos and Idiots*. She is an associate professor of English and creative writing at Bowling Green State University.

The recipient of Stegner, National Endowment for the Arts, and MacDowell Colony poetry fellowships, Brian Teare has published poetry and criticism in *Boston Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Flash*, *Provincetown Arts*, *Seneca Review*, *Verse* and *VOLT*, among other journals. His first book, *The Room Where I Was Born*, was winner of the 2003 Brittingham Prize and the 2004 Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry. Recently selected for the New California Poetry Series, his second, *Sight Map*, is forthcoming in 2009 from University of California Press. *Pleasure*, his third, will be out from Ahsahta in 2010. He lives and teaches in San Francisco.

Natasha Trethewey is the author of *Domestic Work* (Graywolf, 2000), awarded the Inaugural Cave Canem Poetry Prize by Rita Dove; *Bellocq's Ophelia* (Graywolf, 2002); and *Native Guard* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006) for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Her poems have appeared in such journals and anthologies as *American Poetry Review*, *Kenyon Review*, the *Southern Review*, *New England Review*, and *The Best American Poetry 2000 and 2003*. She is the Phillis Wheatley Distinguished Chair in Poetry at Emory University.

Robin Utterback (1949-2007) was a central figure in Houston's art community for more than three decades. A graduate of Rice University, he exhibited widely in both the United States and Europe. In 1992 he was the focus of a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and mid-career survey at the Galveston Arts Center. In 2004 he presented his work at Salle Conrath and Galerie Suisse in Strasbourg. Works created during his Strasbourg residency were exhibited in 2006 at Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston.

Sarah Vap is the co-editor of poetry for the online journal *42opus*, and teaches poetry in Phoenix public schools for the Young Writers Program at Arizona State University. Her book *Dummy Fire* won the 2006 Saturnalia Poetry Prize, and her book *American Spikenard* won the 2006 Iowa Poetry Prize.

Common. Every morning she walks her dogs there and scatters the gulls in passing.

Joshua Marie Wilkinson is the author of four books: *Suspension of a Secret in Abandoned Rooms* (Pinball, 2005), *Lug Your Careless Body Out of the Careful Dusk* (Iowa, 2006), *Figures for a Darkroom Voice* (with Noah Eli Gordon and Noah Saterstrom; Tarpaulin Sky, 2007), and *The Book of Whispering in the Projection Booth* (Tupelo, forthcoming). He makes movies and writes in Chicago, where he also teaches at Loyola University.

Michael Winegarden is a painter and writer who recently earned an MFA from Texas A&M University-Commerce. He has an avid interest in astronomy, and recently made a motorcycle tour of land art sites of the Southwest. He lives in Howe, Texas, with his wife and four children.

Sam Witt's first book of poetry, *Everlasting Quail*, won the Katherine Nason Bakeless First Book Prize in 2000, sponsored by Bread Loaf. *Everlasting Quail* was published by UPNE the following year, and he received a Fulbright Fellowship in Saint Petersburg, Russia. His poems have been published in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Colorado Review*, *Fence*, *New England Review*, among other journals. His second book, *Sunflower Brother*, won the Cleveland State University Press Open Book competition for 2006; available from Cleveland State University Press. Witt will be teaching at Whitman College for the 2007-2008 academic year.

Carlin Mulbrandon Wragg lives in New York City, where she works for the literary organization Poets House. This is her first publication.

Tiphanie Yanique is an assistant professor at Drew University. She has won the Boston Review Fiction Prize, the Kore Press Fiction Prize, a Fulbright Scholarship in creative writing and a 2008 Pushcart Prize. Her fiction can be found in *Transition*, *Callaloo*, *Sonora*, *the London Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is an editor with *Calabash Journal* and *StoryQuarterly*. Her chapbook is *The Saving Work*.

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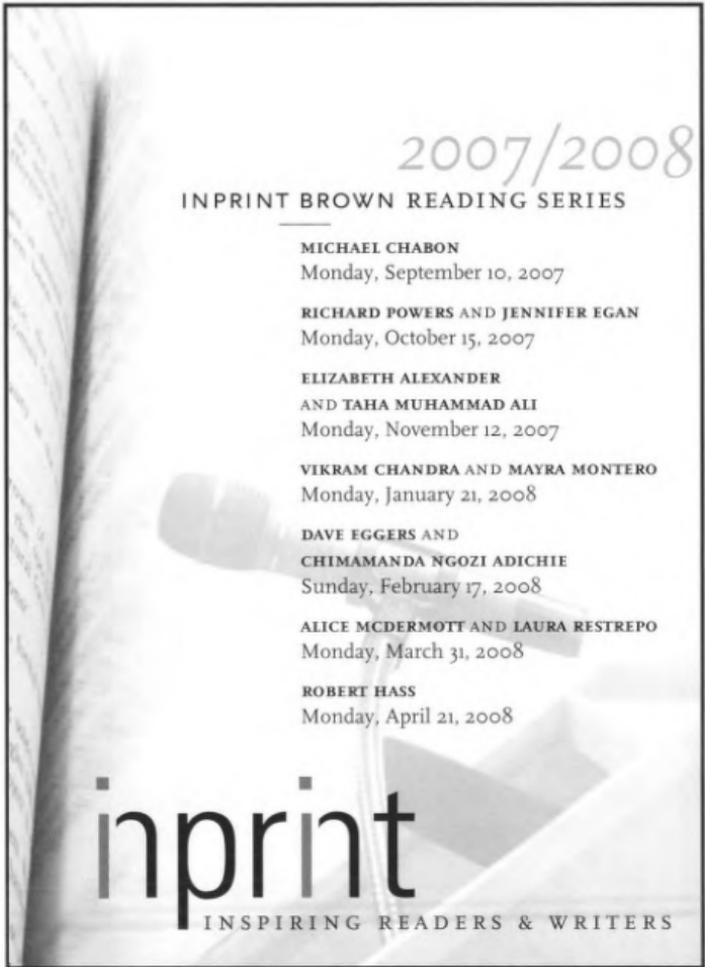
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