GULF COAST

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Gulf Coast

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The Opposite of War

Their bodies want to love.
They sway and dart with a grace
That can only be affection.

The twitch, the flicker
Of fire under the skin. Look
At the wrist, like a bird

About to talon a squirrel.
But he will sink, swerve,
Emerge above or behind

And his opponent will return
To the simplest of dances:
Ginga. Ginga. Like water

In wind. Where does anything
Begin? Light flares and departs
The spine. Flame along a fuse.

Something reacts faster
Than language in the mind.
And something listens, lets go.

Kids holler into the circle,
Hop and shimmy along the fringe.
Two a little farther off to the side

Flip their bodies into the air,
Fearless of landing. What's heavy
Grounds us to the world.

What soars teases. Look:
Now one is inverted, legs
Aswirl. He could stay like that

Forever, kicking back logic
Like the stranger at a banquet
Who chooses two glistening pears

And walks off to eat them alone.

One Man at a Time

I take a man in my arms
And my eyes roll back,
Like a doll that needs
To be sat up. The world

Is dangerous. Look
What we do to one another,
As if nothing but having
Will sustain us. Not

The having, but the taking.
I want, I want. You,
Then me. The struggle
To give everything away.

Those times, it's not love
That resides there, is it,
But a lunatic colt,
Hoof to plank all night

Till the door gapes wide.
As though something
Deep in us must be tapped,
Rooted out. And so we try,

Slowly at first, like prowlers,
Until we arrive at certainty,

And that part of us quickens—
In panic? in joy? We fight back,

Eyes open, but blank, blind,
Choking on it, again and again,
Until it curls back
And we believe it is gone.

It's the loneliest work there is.
We do it thinking it better
Than the loneliness even of war.
But look at the wreckage.

There was one man I couldn't resist.
He carried himself like the leader
Of a small nation whose citizens
Whispered about his extravagant wife

And brewed their own beer
In basements hung with forbidden flags.
His hands were rough. Like the hands
Of a mechanic. When they touched me,

I hummed and whirred like a radio
Tuned to disaster. When he bent down
To fasten his shoes, then kissed me
Quickly on his way back up,

Clarity settled in the room like dust
Or a layer of soot.

Joelle Biele

"Mystery Surrounds Bird Deaths"

Police said an estimated 200 birds, some of which dropped out of the sky and pelted passing cars, wound up strewn along the highway about 4 p.m.

The Washington Post, March 31, 2000

As if a drop in barometric pressure, a hormonal dip
in the brain, some change in magnetic fields, as if

coded by one gene in one cell, one muscle's electric firing,
the starlings came like snow sliding from roofs, muted brass,

they were stutter and flare. Black armbands stepping in a parade,
mallets drilling, a low rolling drum, they were

sheets snapping, coins clattering, beads slipped
from a string. They came like one hundred horns

and one hundred bells, the roar of the guillotine, they were
a shout from the stands. They were steel taps hammered,

toe and heel, the snap of a dancer's fan. Hand on face,
knife on wood, without knowledge or forethought, they fell

like double-hungs, a kicked-out keel, and their long slide
was a skid on black ice, cards or pages bridging back.

They cleave. As if they couldn't see the road curve
or the road rise, the long line of brake-lights flashing,

or time the sun or the glare, as if they took
such pleasure in their dive, the green swerve of the world,

they couldn't come out. Caught in a draft of synapse and nerve,
air shot from the bay, they were horses' hooves, a squall of wings,

they were a sudden keening, as if they could descend so fully
into being, as if they are what they are, as if they are nothing else.

G. C. Waldrep

Laurentius' Harrow

To visit the reporter's daughter. Or,
to deliver oxygen to the beach.

To register the liminality of the zinnias. Or,
to invest in an aesthetics of laundry.

To ignite the ruins of a pioneer cabin. Or,
to persevere in the face of uncertainty.

To desquamate the catch. Or,
to replace the grouting on the windows.

To examine the valuable gems of Dresden. Or,
to select from among many offers.

To distance the niveous from the alabastrine. Or,
to adjust the gondola's pitch.

To pay homage to any suitable landmark. Or,
to postpone the process indefinitely.

To achieve some regimen of the body. Or,
to retract into a plangent misprision.

To say *apple* and mean *apple*. Or,
to whittle a shank from a steel bedframe.

To ransom a blow for a just cause. Or,
to ensure the profitability of that fertile crescent.

To erase the chalk line down the avenue. Or,
to mingle with the incurious denizens.

To remain within one's equipage. Or,
to silence the more vegetable disorders.

To decry the apis of lead. Or,
to regulate the apprentices' signatures.

To introduce an exegetical dissonance. Or,
to maintain there are no easy answers.

To sift the cereal from the metamorphic. Or,
to accession a landscape of synthetic remonstrance.

To make a last mad dash for the pergola. Or,
to give the widow your ball of string.

Possible Peacock, Possible Swan

Lately I have been preoccupied with small, emotional
pebbles. They are minuscule, and yet
they find the condition of absence intolerable.
Three of them together are enough to abhor a vacuum.
Six are capable of receiving a sympathy card.
I am quite smitten by them,
their perforated tragedy.
They are fond of grave
Victorian etchings, which they
continue to refer to as chromographs,
chromos for short.
Five are enough to weight one down in a stiff breeze.
Eight are enough for conversation, fifteen
can carry on some petty commerce with the ants.
Nine visited me once at evening
as I was laying old quilts on the grass for the sheep.
I was inclined to regard
the fragment as metonymy, symptomatic;
to suspect any botanical investiture—I was, in other words,
taking my cues from the flock.
This is the nature of song, to cleave and be cloven.
My guests expected me to denounce
the variform fallacies of dust
but instead I apologized for my complicity
in the recent collapse of grain futures
while the sheep emerged
one by one from their bosky vale.

Theirs is a small magic,
the sheep's, I mean,
as for mending copper-bottomed
pots or pans, or divining subtle shifts in the weather.
Chiefly the stones wanted
news of the glovers: how far they'd gotten
or whether they'd established a beachhead yet.
I told them that the queen of the glovers
had been afflicted with a palsy.
She had found no sympathy at the maple wharves.
They revealed that she was a distant cousin,
long-estranged...
Which spirit do you want, I asked.
The sheep were reclining
upon the patchwork, their bodies wholly vatic
& wholly there.
I licked a finger, tested the breeze.
Your bare hands, they said then.
Since that time I have been a priest of very shallow holes, ones
I can dig for myself.
Not minding these bleeding gums
or the fossil record. Because
my binnacle is a plenary concession.
With it I ransom the moisture from their tiny eyes.
Once I pledged fealty to the barque she sailed in.
Once I was her onyx swan.

Daniel Polikoff

Lovers in the Red Sky: The Bird's View

After Chagall

Good, there's the ass flying in
with the flowers. Look
how she loves him—the whole world
the color of her
passion, except the gold
fish of a moon
leaping over slumbering houses. And
him—her
bodiless lover, Mr.
Blue-in-the-Face, distant
dreamer not even looking at her
blooming breasts. No,
though their dark hair's one
night river, the eyes of the mind
stare out
alien stars. Hey,
donkey-ears, bring the bouquet
quickly—see
if you can make him hear
the minstrel air
before the red dawn
fades, and we all
fall down.

Steve Gehrke

Self-Portrait as St. Sebastian Pierced by Arrows

after Egon Schiele

All form wilts under the anxiety
    of being looked at,
of being looked into,
    gaze after gaze rippling
through the body, like sound waves,
    until the entire body
is a listening, a scream called back
    in all directions
from its core. At home,
    watching Wally
in the stutters and twitches
    of sleep, I can mine,
without touching, a whimper
    out of her, then the flickering
of eyelids, like moths slowing
    themselves to land,
until I have teased
    her awake with my stare.
When we fuck,
    we are two mirrors
pressed together, each filled
    with the other's emptiness.
After, we sit and talk,
    and I watch the flaws
settle back into her face.
    Here, I am refused reflection,

refused color. Wally smuggles in
pencils in her hair.
Mirror-less, unseen, I am fed
straight out
into my perception, exiled
into mop-handle
and rags, into cell door,
my attention coiled
into bed springs,
the frightening imbalance
of a chair. Down the hall,
men sing to each other
across the rows, invisible,
trying to melt the prison bars
with their singing, to charm
the bars into snakes.
Each morning, in the murky,
tadpole light
of an early dawn, we stand
beneath the showers,
as if beneath halos, our pores
opening, releasing
their steam, as if we might bind
together in the air,
as if, floating among soap bubbles
and groans, we might form
a collective deity. But objects
keep commanding us—
spigots and drain holes erupting
through the fog—
their presence echoing so deeply

that their weight must be
what's holding us in place.
I have taken the body
to the edge of collapse
in exchange for my release.
I have translated the body
into snarl, into deadfall
and crumb. I have prayed to be flayed,
walking naked
through an eruption of bees,
and I have woken
not to birdsong or the echoing
of hobnails down the hall,
but to the sound of my own angelic
twitching, the nerves
like a chorus of plucked strings,
a quiver of quivering,
a hundred difficult muses
launching their instructions
through the air. Even now, I wait
for their arrows
to enter me, like pins into a voodoo
doll, each pulled straight
through, so that it hauls a piece
of flesh away—hunks
of fat, the meandering veins—
their arrows made impotent
when my outline finally crumbles
at their feet. Model
for my executioners, mirror-less,
my shadow bricked

Steve Gehrke

into the wall, I stand, body
    slack, abandoned
to its perpetual slouch, though
    one hand rises now,
palm open, like a handshake,
    or an offering.
Let them come for me,
    I think, *let them take*
the painting hand first.

Arthur Saltzman

Captivities

At three years old, my daughter was rabid for animals. She was transfixed by movies about the adventures of heroic dogs and savvy cats that relied for survival on nothing but their native courage and bon mots recognizably voiced by human actors of the second rank. From her bibs to her sneakers, from her blocks to her cereal bowls, everything she owned sported at least one teddy bear, chick, dinosaur, or duck. (By an unspoken consensus of designers, this was—with the odd robin or lizard occasionally thrown in—the acceptable menagerie of the lovable.) She had an entire toy chest laden with stuffed animals, which were also heaped upon her dresser and crowded her, according to her own demand, in bed. Lizzie was basically the St. Francis of the pre-school set; if she wasn't accompanied by a furry or feathered companion before we left the house, she simply refused to go. On the other hand, we could convince her to visit the pediatrician just by giving her a glimpse of the barnyard stickers that would be her reward if she submitted without a fuss.

However, when it came to Saturday outings, it wasn't the local zoo she pined for. Admittedly, even in the context of a town with a modest tax base and a limited array of wholesome activities to choose from, the Dickerson Zoo was a second-tier attraction at best. By even the most lenient standards, its offerings were pretty paltry. A couple of indifferent giraffes emerged every so often to lip at the lofted straw. Two apparently boneless lions lay listless and splayed over a heap of tractor tires. The ravine that ringed their domain implied a threat that had evidently been bred out of them; possibly, they were just too bored to bother with the dads that bore exhausted toddlers on their backs or the dutiful, diaper-bagged, worn-down moms. A scabrous camel surveyed

its vicinity and, going by its expression, found it wanting. Dickerson was down to one stunned-looking monkey, which would thrash about in its hammock for a half minute, then, defeated by circumstance, slump against the smudged glass. A hornbill, looking totemic with indigestion, cast a somber eye and could not be prodded to react to anything. In half of the cages, you couldn't find animals at all: some had died off and not been replaced, while others, rejecting the premise of the zoo or just desperate for shade, slunk into blind corners and tucked themselves into the available shade, awaiting therapy.

Moreover, the zoo facilities were primitive: gouged and splintered picnic tables that hadn't seen paint for several seasons running, communal bathrooms designed by Dante on a bad day, and vending machines that dispensed stale birdseed garnished by dirt and rust, which the indifferent ducks ambled over, grudgingly, to accept. The gift shop's holdings were, shall we say, unimpressive, and, because the zoo administration couldn't afford to hire, the shop was often as not locked anyway. The snack stand's sandwich meats were untenable and, like the zoo residents, stank of resignation and mange. Parents desperate to quell their kids would risk only the overpriced snow cones, which bled their questionable, indelible chemicals through cheap paper cups.

Now, three-year-olds can invent pleasure almost anywhere, and even this denuded zoo offered charms sufficient for my animal-mad daughter to coo over. But it was no contest: while she'd never refuse a trip to Dickerson, she much preferred a trip to the Bass Pro Shop. Touting itself as the largest outdoor sporting goods store in the world, the Bass Pro Shop advertises its own immensity as much as it does its merchandise. Indeed, it annexes more of the adjacent acreage every few years, and there must be several citizens of Springfield who suspect that one day they'll awaken in the midst of shotgun ammunition, golf clubs, and knives, their bedroom décor having been supplanted by camouflage. Without a doubt, the Pro Shop is Mecca for the camping

and flannel crowd, and not even Wal-Mart boasts as many busloads of tourists on its premises.

As a displaced Chicagoan whose outdoor adventures had essentially been bracketed by "L" stops, I never did contract the seasonal fevers that afflict hunters and fishermen. Like someone who grew up in Vegas and never placed a bet, I keep my distance from Bass Pro, or at least I did until my daughter pleaded to see it. And once she did, she was hooked: not by dreams of masterful casts or tales of stopping power, not by the displays of a hundred means of outfitting oneself to face every conceivable variety of wilderness, but by the taxidermy to which fully one-third of the main floor had been dedicated. Mounted high above us were heads, horns, and severed and sewn halves of animals culled from jungle, desert, forest, and sea, with dozens of carcasses peculiar to Missouri propped throughout the store. Scores of stuffed birds were suspended like model airplanes, harking back to their previously vital force and capacity for flight. Installed upon the man-made cliffs and inserted into the artificial clefts was a strategic composition of antelopes, wildcats, moose, bucks, and boars. In short, we shopped under surveillance by perhaps a thousand delegates from the animal kingdom—some entirely present, others represented solely by parts and pelts—permanently attending upon and petrified by it all.

But these were not the creatures that pulled my Lizzie into the crowd. Rather, it was the land-based animals that had been arranged behind restraining ropes at eye level that enchanted her. Some seemed entranced, glassy-eyed, for, of course, their eyes had been traded for mibs and aggies. Others were rigged in assorted tableaux of killer and kill, deployed on apt landscapes and apparently complying with James Dickey's "The Heaven of Animals": "If they have lived in a wood / It is a wood. / If they have lived on plains / It is grass rolling / Under their feet forever." Jaws wired open and teeth set at the very instant before purchase, the predators were forever homed in on eternally acquiescent

prey and hinted that there was still a vestigial spirit that would bring down the claws, sink the fangs, tear every last gawking one of us to pieces if they could. But that bloody fantasy didn't hold up very long at all in this context. Rather, all of the inhabitants were dependably, picturesquely glazed, good citizens of a peaceable kingdom open from nine to nine daily, all manicured and cordoned off and, whatever the attitudes conferred upon them might have implied, serene.

And certainly that serenity had a lot to do with what set my daughter off; and she, who, almost predatory herself in her fixity of purpose, dashed through the masses, dodging adult legs as undeterred as a deer scampering through a stand of aspen, to reach what she called the Pro Shop Zoo, where domestication had been taken to its final extreme. If the animals' natural aura was dulled by proximity to so much naked consumption, not to mention by whatever wadding had supplanted their innards or by the synthetic texture of their dry-cleaned hides, it never bothered my daughter or slowed her toddler's safari through the stylized brush. Objectively speaking, this was an emporium of corpses, beasts with all of their biology scoured out, and manifesting Robert Frost's "Desert Places"—"All animals are smothered in their lairs." But to my daughter, it was paradise: an aphrodesia of species and, notwithstanding the Astroturf savannas and the faux glens, an uninterrupted dream of Elysian fields and streams.

Like a movie star or a mob boss used to special treatment, Lizzie would duck under the ropes to rush up to the animals and hug them. Not one among their rigid ranks failed to earn my little girl's adoration. The frozen polar bears next to the ATM delighted her into darting onto their makeshift ice floe, with all the intrepidness of Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for a bout of heavy petting. The rampant Kodiak, in whose clutches families took turns mugging for the camera, inspired Lizzie to launch a full frontal assault: she latched on by boarding one of its paws with both feet and drove her nose into its scurvy flank. The stopped

wombats and weasels, the stunned badgers and seized wolverines all met with her effusive approval. For Lizzie was omnivorous in her affections, and undiscriminating, ignoring neither fish nor fowl, each of which was accorded posthumous honors: an embrace, a nuzzle, a stroke, a tickle, a kiss. It was touching, once you got past the fact of her infractions, and no matter that it was probably so much careless, aggressive love that had already worn down the fur of a recumbent fawn until the scalp showed through and had broken off a piece of a mountain goat's ear. Lizzie giggled amid the bobcats. She offered jellybeans to the lemur and a sip from her Tippy Cup to the Great Horned Owl, staying them from the departures they'd been posed for—the pounce to the shelf where the bowling bags were kept and the flight to the rotary fan overhead, respectively. And with the lion and the lamb she lay down together and never wanted to leave.

Whether reclusive or vicious in life, the animals were cuddled in death and, by virtue of Lizzie's ceremony of innocence, redeemed in ways their vital counterparts at that other zoo would never be, not while they breathed. For that was the advantage of the Pro Shop Zoo: its inadvertent hospitality. Here you could *feel* the animals, which, if they could not reciprocate one's love, suffered it without repercussion or complaint. Let no one tell you different: that is as much love as any other kind.

***

"Be careful not to touch Nana's things," I tell her in advance. We have just arrived in Chicago, and eleven hours in the car have left me bent out of shape in every sense of the phrase. But I don't know how much instruction Lizzie has managed to take in, because she is fairly bursting at the straps of her car seat. The passion she and my mother have for one another is ferocious, absolute; having no agenda other than their mutual affections, they positively charge one another the

second Lizzie's been unbelted. When my mother turns her attention to my wife and me, Lizzie zooms into the house, flailing her stuffed monkey by its tail.

"Careful!" I call after her.

"Don't worry," my mother assures me. "I've put up anything she might hurt herself with."

"It's not her getting hurt so much as what she can smash," I say, but I'm happy to learn that Lizzie's protection and her pleasure are both higher priorities here. This is news. When I lived with her, Mom flinched whenever my brother or I even so much as sat in her living room, a tidy trinket museum reminiscent of Laura's glass menagerie in the Tennessee Williams play. Lizzie couldn't have understood that Mom's having without hesitation given her unconditional run of the house was as much a sign of how completely she doted on her as any of the clothes, toys, or special desserts she had waiting for her granddaughter. Regardless, I was relieved to see when I made my way inside with the suitcases that everything in sight had survived her.

After dinner, with Lizzie collapsed in front of a Muppet video and pinching half an ice cream sandwich (something I'd never have been allowed to eat in a carpeted room, by the way), Mom asked us to follow her downstairs, where she had some things to show us. Since our taste in décor seldom coincided with hers, we girded ourselves to compliment her on a new vase or on the undetectable way she'd rearranged the furniture. However, that was not the subject tonight. Instead, she explained, she wanted us to go through her possessions and tell her what we wanted after she was dead. More than a few of her friends had recently passed away—for some reason, the Northwest suburbs had suddenly become a hotbed of metastasized cancers, organ failures, and infarctions—and one of the results was that it now seemed to her imperative to get her bequests in order.

"But you're perfectly healthy. This is grotesque."

"Listen, honey," she said, "when the time comes, I don't want there to be any confusion about who has what coming to him. I especially don't want there to be any hard feelings between you and Jeff over anything you might particularly want."

"Mom, I don't want to do this."

"There must be *something* you can use."

"I mean, I don't want to do this *now*."

"How often do you come up to Chicago, Art? Now is what we've got."

And so we went through the stuff, with Mom looming over us as we considered what to want without seeming greedy, eager, or condescending. She worked us like a salesman trying to awaken and shape our craving. I picked up what looked like a jade ashtray, and Mom gave me the history of its acquisition. Marla slowed before a quilt, and Mom laid out its provenance for her. I fingered a candy dish, and Mom whispered the appraised value.

"Doreen asked to have the Chinese chest already," she warned me as I happened past it. Otherwise, though, we were free to stake our claims, secure in the knowledge that my mother's eventual death made these deals irresistible. And so, uneasily, tentatively, like comparison shoppers wary of hidden catches, we admitted that, yes, that mirror would go well in our bedroom, and, no, we didn't have a coffee table and could really use one, and, truth be told, we'd always admired the cherry nightstand.

"Really? Why didn't you tell me before? Take it with you when you go back."

"Mom!"

"The nightstand is not that big. You could fit it right next to Elizabeth in the back seat."

"Mom, we don't want it now. I mean, we want it, we'd love to have it, but not now," I explained. "*Some* day. In the *very* distant future. Then I promise we'll take it."

"You will?"

"We'll back up a truck to the front door. Trust me. There'll be nothing worth anything left when we get through."

And so, with her major holdings now apportioned, she was content. Apportioned, that is, with one exception: the mink coat. My sister-in-law wanted no part of it, and my wife had both political and sartorial objections to wearing real fur.

"What are you talking about! It's gorgeous!" she cried, draping it over the couch (which had already been spoken for by my sister-in-law).

"That has nothing to do with it, Mom," Marla said.

"Art, talk to her." By now, Lizzie had wandered in to see if we were in fact up to something more interesting than her umpteenth viewing of the Muppet video.

"I'm not getting into this," I said. Having snagged the nightstand, three lacquer boxes, and a cloisonné vase, I'd met my quota. "You're on your own."

"Forget it, Mom. It would just sit in the closet," Marla said.

"That's all it's doing *now* is sitting in the closet!"

"I just don't want it in the house. Please!"

"Well," my mother huffed, "maybe *you* wouldn't want it, but Elizabeth might want it one day. What do you think, sweetheart? Wouldn't you like to wear a real fur coat?"

By way of reply, she plunged into the coat, tumbling with it onto the floor, and began a clumsy impersonation of a bear (what did she k from minks?) trundling her way toward us. I would have scolded her, but once again, Mom seemed oblivious to a transgression that, had I tried anything like it years ago, would have won me punishment.

She was clearly so pleased that Lizzie had gotten into the spirit of this valedictory ceremony—had thrown herself into it, as it were—that lint and misbehavior were beside the point. Here was a level of domestic bliss I had never experienced in my mother's company. Without my input or sanction, the two of them had revised the terms of the contract that, so far as I knew, I was still bound by. Or maybe it was simply that the principal business of the evening—the disposition of love and death, the impending dispossession and departure—had rendered old stipulations irrelevant. There would be plenty of time for abstinence once she was gone, and nothing much else. In any case, it's practically impossible for any grandmother worthy of the name not to indulge her granddaughter's joy when it's right in front of her and hers to give. Because now is what we have.

Inside the fur, Lizzie was all smiles and writhes, as if being digested like that was the best joke she'd ever heard.

"Just look at that sweet little girl," Mom said. "How can you not..." And she couldn't stand it anymore, but gathered her up, coat and all, into her loving clutches. And in return, as was typical of her, Lizzie hugged back just as hard. Say what you will about heaven, but my guess is that the dead would give anything and all they have to be held like that, to hold on.

Michael P. Kardos

One Last Good Time

Caught in the ragged rocks of the Gaston seawall was a dead man whose name had been Vinnie Tucci, whose occupation had been driving a school bus, whose hobbies had included fishing (mackerel in spring, blues in summer, bass till Halloween) and college football (preseason through glorious New Year's Day), and whose wife Carla had spent the night seated at the kitchen table of their split-level, mug of coffee cooling in her hands, holding out hope that Vinnie hadn't done anything stupider than he'd already done, but was instead fucking her sister Amanda's lights out at a motel in Asbury or Bradley Beach or Sea Girt and would turn up later, rumpled and reeking of woman. Yesterday, Vinnie had kept the Number Two bus that was filled with second through fourth graders, kept it so long that newscasters were calling it a *hijacking* and a *kidnapping*. And while it was disappointing that Vinnie apparently had chosen to spend these last hours of freedom apart from his own wife, Carla also knew from the police outside that the moment his car pulled up to the curb, he'd be yanked into custody for a long, long time. So if Vinnie was showing Amanda one last good time in a thirty-a-night motel before coming home and facing the music, then Carla would forgive this last sin.

Carla hadn't seen Vinnie since before he'd left for his route yesterday morning, when he'd eaten four eggs that she'd served runny because he liked them hard, without toast because it'd gotten moldy, since he'd slurped down Wawa brand orange juice from its carton, grimacing from the pulp, then belching like a frog. He glanced at the wristwatch she'd bought him back when she bought him presents for no reason but love.

Last thing he said to Carla: "Hell, I'm late." Last thing she said to him: who could remember?—though it hadn't been about her sister Amanda, despite every morning beginning with that thought. Every day, the force of it—the affair—hit Carla afresh, hard, like morning sickness, not only in her gut but in her chest, her joints, her throat. Everywhere. During the day she would imagine their house the scene of fierce drama: demands and ultimatums, swearing, dish-smashing, photograph-tearing. So far, however, all she had done was to buy his juice with pulp. Undercook his eggs.

Now it was 2:30 a.m., twenty hours after Vinnie had left for work, and although Carla didn't know it yet, the seawall had him. The seawall: twelve feet high and nearly as wide, layers of jagged granite held in place by gravity and cement, designed decades earlier by the Army Corps of Engineers to protect the homes of those wealthy enough to influence state politics. The wall, however, was no match for the storm surges that once or twice a decade would leave homes waist-deep in seawater. Over time the wealthy moved to towns with wider beaches, and people like Vinnie Tucci's father moved to Gaston because property uninsurable against flooding came cheap. Here Vinnie had lived all his twenty-nine years.

He was dead, now—bashed head, then unconsciousness, then lungs full with seawater—and the seawall held him so firmly that even when the moon tide came last night, 9:34 p.m., the waves crashing against the wall and spraying cars driving along Ocean Avenue, no way was Vinnie going to get dislodged. He was there when the rats became curious, was there when a flashlight shined on his salty face at 4:18 a.m., scattering the rats, when Tark Healey, the cop holding the flashlight, dropped the flashlight, staggered back a step, and said, "Jesus Aitch."

***

You marry one sister, then begin to love the other. There's your problem. A dozen years ago, you flunked out of high school, worked for a moving company until your knuckles became gnarled and swollen, then began driving the elementary school bus, your old bus, the Number Two. Same oversized steering wheel, same smell of vinyl. Pay: three-fifty a week. Easy work, home by five. When you were young, the bus driver would creep the front tires over a speed bump, then accelerate quickly so the rear would bounce into the air, giving the kids a thrill. Now, this is something you do.

You knew Carla Van Sickle since the fourth grade, when she was all elbows and knees. Fast-forward fifteen years, and it's you behind the wheel, her in the school cafeteria slinging hamburgers and chicken patties. After you drop the kids off and before she goes inside to face a hundred pounds of meat, you light up cigarettes out by the basketball court. Carla isn't skinny anymore. She has become curvy. Her breasts are the sort that draw glances, and she has taken to wearing v-neck collars that are simultaneously proper and suggestive. Her eyes are big and blue, her laugh unrestrained. Standing with her outside the school feels as if you're cutting class together.

When you're with Carla—smoking cigarettes by the basketball hoop, or messing around in your apartment over the laundromat—her sister Amanda is fourteen. She isn't even on your radar screen.

In five years, though, after you've married Carla and saved money and purchased a small house, after Carla tells you the reason she's been awful lately is because you've knocked her up, then Amanda Van Sickle is nineteen, and you're cooked. While your wife is fat and moody, Amanda is lithe and living in your house temporarily because one lease has ended and she has yet to sign another. And though this little house and this pregnant wife are just the dream you've dreamt, now that the dream is real—mortgage payments that won't ever end, Carla's mood swings, her *hemorrhoids*, for Christ's sake—your life

becomes dominated by two thoughts: You must make love to Amanda. And Carla must not find out.

And make no mistake, Amanda *is* interested.

Very attractive, she said, referring to you. Then she nodded and said *very* again.

The situation: Amanda in your home, after work. The three of you at the kitchen table eating supper, drinking beer. A peaceful evening. Y complaining about your crow's feet, which had been bothering you lately whenever you looked in the mirror. "Look at me," you said. "I'm an old man!"

"Well *I* think lines around the eyes are attractive on a man," your wife Carla said. "Shows he's been smiling." Then to Amanda she said, "Aren't those lines attractive?"

And Amanda said—

She said *that,* then nodded, then said it again. And once she did, it was all over but the when and the how. Now, months later, your wife is large and growing. You've heard that some men go wild with horniness over their pregnant wives. These men don't have Amanda Van Sickle l in their homes. Amanda, with long legs and hair down to her ass. Whose full lips you need to suck, whose sly gaze makes your neck go goose-pimpled, whose voice purrs—you swear—like an engine.

The when: New Year's Day. Carla was visiting her mother who'd busted her hip and was lying alone at the nursing home. Carla didn't even like her mother. Called her a superstitious old bird. But you shouldn't have to be alone on New Year's Day, Carla said—"not unless you're watching ten hours of football," she added, and left. Which explains the how: you, alone with Amanda, a little hung over from two bottles of sparkling wine that you and Amanda had split while Carla drank non-alcoholic cider. Amanda in pink sweatpants and a plain white T-shirt and no bra in sight.

Miami and Nebraska were into the second quarter of the Orange Bowl. A small television squawked in the kitchen. In the den, you and Amanda were on the sofa talking resolutions, her feet on your lap.

"Don't you think that *happiness* is maybe too broad?" you asked.

She scooted closer, the backs of her calves now on your lap, the bulk of her against your hip. "But that's what I want," she said. "It's what I resolve to get."

"And how do you intend on doing that?" you asked, raising your eyebrows, daring her.

Her gaze locked on yours. "Do you really want to know?"

You said that you did.

"You'd better be sure, buster," she said. The television went to commercial. Something about a carpet sale. One day only, better act fast. Amanda took your hand and guided it under her T-shirt.

***

Question: How could Vinnie tell Amanda that he loved her, loved her hard, loved her to the point that he was willing to give up everything—his wife, his son or daughter—*Amanda's* niece or nephew—how could he say he was going to give up all this, the family, the house, even the town that meant everything to him, and not remember that it was her goddamn birthday?

Answer: he wasn't going to give up anything. It was a sign, or like Amanda's mother used to say, a *portent*. Amanda and Carla had lived with all of their mother's portents—houseplants dying even when you watered them, candles winking out for no reason, squirrels raiding the bird feeder. And while Amanda didn't necessarily believe that a squirrel eating out of your feeder foretold trouble, even she could see that a man willing to enter your body but not willing to commit your birthday to his memory made for one bad portent.

And Vinnie was leaving clues, or portents, or whatever, as large as billboards. Like the Trojans Amanda found in his glove box, the stupid idiot, as if Carla never went in there for mints. And because of Vinnie's clues, or maybe in spite of them, Carla knew what went on between Vinnie and Amanda. This was terrible, Carla knowing, terrible that Amanda *knew* that Carla knew, and terrible that despite all this knowing going on, the three of them still lived under one roof, acting as if nobody knew anything. The air got thick enough to choke on. Yet Vinnie didn't even notice. He thought he was still getting away with something.

Like yesterday afternoon, in the lull before Vinnie's route, when he had shown up at the motel with flowers. Amanda had laid them on the night table, and she and Vinnie had made love to the fragrance of lilies and hyacinths. Afterwards, outside in the parking lot of the Cheshire Motel, Vinnie had taken the bouquet from Amanda and headed toward the dumpster.

"Hey, wait a minute," she said, following him. "What the hell are you doing?"

"The flowers are for here," he said. "You can't be bringing them home."

"They don't have to be from *you*, you know."

"Nah," he said. "Too risky."

"It wouldn't be the first time a man has given me flowers on my birthday," she said, though this wasn't true.

He turned to face her, his eyes bright. He grinned. "Well, shit, Amanda. Happy birthday."

So the flowers had been a fucking coincidence.

Bottom line: if your lover forgot your birthday, if you found yourself accepting flowers from a man and having to throw them into the dumpster an hour later, then your lover didn't give a damn about you. Despite Vinnie's words (there had been a *lot* of words, though not as

many lately) there was no future with Vinnie. No, Amanda had messed up worse than she'd even imagined, and she came to see that if there was a relationship she could save, it was not with Vinnie, but with her sister.

Vinnie stood there, believing that because of his toothy grin, all was forgiven and forgotten, that in a day or two he and Amanda would be back at this same motel, or another one like it. He thought he had everything under control. "But you still can't keep the flowers, baby," he said, and batted her on the ass with the bouquet, hard enough to sting.

"Hey!" she said, grabbing the flowers from Vinnie. "Hey, you asshole..." She started smacking him with them—on the arms, the back. Vinnie held out his arms to stop the blows. He was laughing. She felt tears of shame coming to her eyes, but he thought they were playing. The more he laughed, the harder she hit him with the flowers. She tried to hurt him, but he kept blocking her swipes. He kept laughing. So she stopped hitting him. Her breath labored and face hot, she walked to the dumpster and threw in the bouquet.

She turned to face Vinnie. "I'm coming clean with Carla."

Vinnie shook his head. "You know you aren't going to do that."

"She already knows," she said, "but I'm coming clean anyway."

"We've been through all this. And what's best for us—"

"Shut up, Vinnie. Listen to me: I'm going to tell her. Count on it."

They stood in the motel's parking lot, the March wind whipping an American flag like in old war movies on TV. She meant it, coming clean, and she could see that Vinnie knew she meant it, because his face went pale, and he wouldn't look at her, and even when he started talking, he had nothing to say.

***

At 2:50 a.m., Carla watched her sister's car pull into the driveway. The police across the street turned on their flashing lights, silently, the silent part pointless because the neighbors were awake and peering out their windows at the patrol cars and the TV news vans parked in a line, everybody trained in the business of waiting.

Now the vans began belching out men with video cameras. One of the cops crunched across the cold grass, took Amanda by the elbow, and led her to his cruiser. The police had been hoping for Vinnie, didn't expect Amanda to know anything—why would they suspect she'd been fucking Vinnie for months?—but she was a body in motion at an hour when people were supposed to be in bed. Inside the house, Carla sat at the table in her brown robe. She lit a cigarette, the fifth one today, the fifth one since last summer, because good mothers gave up smoking. When Carla's cigarette was half gone, Amanda got out of the police cruiser and came to the front door, unlocked it, and slipped inside.

Amanda entered the dimly lit hallway crying, pathetic, because in no way should she be as worried as Carla, who wasn't crying. Amanda didn't seem surprised to see her sister awake in the kitchen. "Nobody's heard anything?" she asked—her way, perhaps, of letting Carla know she hadn't slept with Vinnie tonight after all.

"Where've you been?" Carla said.

Amanda looked out the window, at the police cars. Four of them. "Christ, I was out driving. For hours. I think I'm losing my mind."

"Stop it right there—don't make this about you. It isn't about you."

"No." Amanda was looking out the window. "No, I guess it isn't." Lately, her gaze avoided Carla's stomach. "So are you all right?"

"Me? I'm not the one who hijacked a bus." She took a drag from her cigarette. "I mean, who would do that? How could he not realize the consequences?"

"That's Vinnie for you." Amanda came over to the table and took a cigarette from the pack, lit it. "It's like that stupid sunburn he'd get

from being out on his boat and not wearing sun block." Vinnie used to charter a motorboat, summers, for extra cash. That was before the ocean got ruined with raw sewage and red tides, before syringes and colostomy bags washed ashore and a plague of filth killed the fish and drove away the weekend fishermen.

"God, it isn't like that at all," Carla said. Then, Carla would take Vinnie into their bedroom and rub cool cream on his beet-colored shoulders, his ears, the back of his neck. "How could you think it's anything like that?"

"All I mean is that he never thinks." She was over by the window again. "He actually told me once that he was immune to sunburn."

This was what people talk about after a funeral, Carla thought. The moments that make you shake your head and say, *He sure was a character, that one.* "But he isn't immune, is he?"

Amanda sighed deeply. She mashed her cigarette in the ashtray. "The fucking idiot. I swear..."

Carla watched her sister: wet-eyed, snotty, petulant as if stood up for prom. As if a bad sunburn were the worst thing in this world. *All I did,* Carla thought, *was invite you into my house. You were between leases. I asked you in. And now all of this.* She placed the coffee mug down on the tabletop. "You know what? Maybe you'd better not be calling Vinnie names, okay? Just remember whose husband he is."

"Oh?" Amanda looked straight at Carla. "Well, your husband says he loves me."

The baby kicked.

***

Scenario: you're cheating on your pregnant wife with her sister, and it's becoming more certain that in your not-too-distant future lies a fucking awful divorce where she keeps the baby from you. You're in Gaston, population 6,000, where everyone will know what you've

done. People may not know *you*, but this thing about you they'll know, because scandal travels. You're driving from the elementary school with a busload of precious cargo. You are sleepless from worry, knowing that when you get home today everything will change, because Amanda meant what she said about telling Carla. You've gotten pretty good at reading Amanda's eyes, and yesterday at the motel those eyes had been angry and willful.

The problem with Amanda is that she has a weakness, and you realize that this is partly why you ended up together. She doesn't respect boundaries. Her other weakness is that she wants a clear conscience, even if she—like you—doesn't deserve one.

Amanda has threatened you before, but only in the abstract. *I should tell her. I've got to tell her. I need to tell her.* Never was it, *I'm going to*. Yesterday was different. She'd meant it. Suddenly, she believes in honesty above all else. How about telling the truth back on New Year's Day? How about saying, *If we fuck, I'm going to tell my sister*. Where was the honesty then? So in the freezing parking lot of that god-awful motel, Amanda says that your only hope, if you are ever to be together, is to come clean. She's wrong. Coming clean offers no hope. You and she could never be together in Gaston. You'd have to move far away with her, and then you'd lose not only your wife and the house and your unborn child, but Amanda, too, because when you came down to it, Amanda wouldn't ever be satisfied living someplace faraway with you. She's got it too easy now, gossiping with the mothers of her high school friends while sanding and painting their fingernails, their toenails. At night, coaxing free drinks from the bartenders who are the older brothers of boys she destroyed in high school. Sleeping with other men when she cares to. You don't know this for a fact, but you h to assume. She's sexy and young and hits the local bars frequently, so what do you expect? You don't mind, much, though it's further

evidence that she wouldn't ever be happy with you, *exclusively* you, starting life from scratch in some strange town.

"Look," you said to her yesterday, after your voice had come back to you in the motel parking lot, "we'll keep this a secret until the baby comes. Then we'll tell her, and plan our future together." You've said this before, and some days you mean it, and usually it stops the debate.

"She already *knows*, Vinnie," Amanda said, shaking her head at your stupidity. "I'm just coming clean."

Despite what Amanda might think, your wife *doesn't* know. She suspects. But suspecting is a world away from knowing, because when you suspect something bad, you can still hold onto the hope—however remote—that you're wrong. Carla could choose to misread the evidence, to assemble the pieces so as not to fit. This is the only gift you're able to give your wife right now, the right to keep on deceiving herself until the baby is born. And now Amanda was out to deny your wife that gift.

All last night you thought, *Here it comes*. The three of you were at home, watching a program where detectives risked their lives, and every time Amanda glanced at you, or at Carla, you gritted your teeth, bracing yourself. Astonishing, Amanda's power over you. She, too, must have felt it, because all night she kept clearing her throat, as if to speak. Once again, it was only a question of when. Of how.

You barely slept, and after this morning's route you spent hours downtown killing time because you were afraid to go home. Now, driving the afternoon route, you are exhausted. Yesterday's conversation with Amanda replays in your mind. Right at this moment, Amanda could be at home with Carla, revealing every secret she swore to uphold. You're not paying attention as you should, and when the brown dog runs into the road, it's just a blur.

You hit it squarely, not noticing it until it bounces off the front fender as if the bus were made of rubber, and now the dog is in the

air, turning, and then landing in the gutter by the curb. The bus barely reacts, a slight shimmy. Not until you're thirty feet down the road does a girl happen to look out the back window.

"A dog!" she yells. "The bus hit a dog!"

Through the rearview, you see it's a big one—a retriever, or a setter. Unmoving. A woman runs toward the street. She's looking at you. No—she's looking at the rear of the bus, not at you, but you could swear she's looking into your eyes with shock and disappointment. You should stop the bus. But then you will have on your hands a busload of children weeping over a dead dog, and this woman, and then the police, who will take a report. There will be explanations to parents, to the school. Can you face this now? Today? In the few seconds of this deliberation, you are farther down the road and away from the scene. By not deciding, a decision has been made.

So this, you think, is how it begins.

You keep driving, missing one of your stops, then another. The children are running up and down the aisle, no longer crying about *the dog, the dog, the dog* but rather that they *want to go home.*

"Sit down, kids!" you yell. It is impossible to think with all of this carrying on. "Sit down!"

Most of them listen. One of the bigger students, a fourth grader with sandy hair, comes and stands next to you. "We have to go home now," he says, his voice shaky but controlled. He's on this bus every day, but you never gave him a second thought.

"I have a gun," you tell him, "and I'll use it if I have to. Now sit down."

This is highly effective. Word spreads, and momentarily all of the children are in their seats imagining what it is like to be shot. There are tears and sniffles, a few soft moans. You only wanted them to be still, however, not petrified, and so you take them to the McDonald's drive-through. "Thirty hamburgers," you say, and a staticky voice mutters a

price. You take bills out of your wallet and pay for the hamburgers. You drive to the next window and receive three warm white bags.

"Here," you say to the girl seated behind you, feeling both benevolent and ridiculous. "Pass these out."

Now the bus smells of fast food, and this is soothing to you and the children.

You drive east, toward Ocean Avenue. It is still too early for a parent to become concerned and begin the inevitable chain of phone calls: parent to school, school to police. You hadn't planned any of this, but now that you've done it, kept the Number Two bus, you're glad at least to be forcing a fate having nothing to do with your wife or her sister, with secrets or broken trust. You aren't waiting anymore for your sister-in-law to tell her sister that the two of you are in love and have been to bed together more than thirty times.

This bus ride will end in arrest, or worse, and you will lose your job and your freedom and your money, your wife and Amanda both, and while each of these individual losses could tear a hole in your gut, the broad loss anesthetizes you. By keeping the Number Two, you have reduced your options to the point where you feel comforted by the one thing you *can* do. You can drive the bus. You have a tank of fuel and well-fed passengers. You're tired, but also content to be sitting on this green vinyl seat, thumbs hooked over the steering wheel. Before you hit that dog your mind was everywhere. Not anymore. You've turned North on Ocean Avenue, have passed Rex's Italian Sausage and the amusement pier. On your right is the seawall. On your left, houses painted cheerful blues and yellows and greens, most with second-story decks, many with American flags flapping out front. The road ahead leads out of town.

If you stay on this road, the police will spot you. You imagine them shooting out your tires. Shooting you out of the driver's seat. When the road forks, forcing you to choose either to stay on the road or exit to

Sandy Hook, you exit. Sandy Hook is a peninsula jutting out from the Navesink River toward New York Harbor. Summers, pale New Yorkers flood to the national recreation area. But it's off-season, and the kiosk is unmanned, the parking lot empty. You drive toward the beach, where the parking lot ends. Where your ride ends.

When the bus is spotted, you'll be hunted down like a dog. No one w care that you bought hamburgers for the children. Although maybe after you paid your debt—fines? Probation? A year, two in jail?—you could move away but still see your child sometimes. Weekends, or once a month, or whatever Carla or some judge might allow. You could find a quiet town up in Maine or Vermont, where the lakes are loaded with bass.

"Kids, listen up," you say. You have everyone's attention. Even those whose heads were wobbling a moment ago have snapped awake. "Soon your mothers and fathers will come to take you home. But only if you sit in your seats and don't make a sound. Remember, I have a gun. Does everybody understand?" But who can tell? Nobody dares to move a muscle. And once the driver's door is open and you start running toward the wooden stairway that leads up and over the seawall, you don't look back.

On the beach, a wavy line of shells and seaweed and plastic bottles and jugs is being swallowed by the incoming tide. Though the sun hasn't set yet, a full moon glows red to the east. You look at your watch. By now, the first calls must be coming in to school. Soon, the police will be notified, and they'll find the bus. You run south along the narrow beach, sucking cold air, the ocean on your left, the seawall on your right, the sound of sirens in the distance. (For you? Probably not yet. But maybe.) You aren't a runner, not by a long shot, and soon you're panting, your knees shaky, a wave of nausea rising. Still, you keep moving. Keep putting distance between yourself and the bus. You

cover a mile, maybe more. Icy water licks your ankles. Soon there won't be any beach left. You've never felt so tired.

Back when you proposed to Carla, you actually used the word *hitched*. That was on the beach, too, not far at all from here. Low tide, warm September evening. There was the coat and tie. The down-on-one-knee. But you couldn't sustain it, the sincerity. She accepted, she cried and carried on, but even then you were disgusted that you said it like that—*hitched*—practically a smirk. Because you didn't *mean* hitched. You meant married, and you meant forever.

A few more stumbled paces as the nausea mounts. At the base of the seawall you double over and vomit on the rocks, not knowing if it's from hard running, or fear of the law, or what you've done to those children, or to Carla or Amanda. Or all of it. Despite the cold wind and surf, you're sweating, heart racing, eyes squeezed shut, hands clutching your gut. You've given up control of your body and are vomiting, and the taste of it makes you vomit some more. Behind you, close, a wave crashing. And when it rushes you from behind, you lose your footing and tumble forward. You feel the smallest tap of your head against granite. A light tap, like the little rubber instrument a doctor hits your knees with. It barely even hurts, and the lights go out.

Tap, and you're dead.

***

Maybe Vinnie had gone a little crazy today, keeping the bus, but Amanda understood it. Understood the calming influence of an automobile even better than Vinnie did. Some, when anxious, drank liquor. Others exercised. Whenever Amanda became stressed, she got in her car and drove. Destination unimportant. She would put in a CD—recently, it was the band Sublime, whose singer she found to be sincere and tragic—and play it as loudly as her Mazda's speakers would allow before the bass began sizzling with distortion.

When Amanda first described her solo excursions to Vinnie, he had looked puzzled.

"But where do you go?" he asked.

"That isn't the point. You aren't going anywhere. You just...drive."

"But why?"

When she thought about it, she didn't *know* why. "Try it sometime," she finally said.

Amanda had been in the break room at the salon when Vinnie's face appeared on television along with the words *School Bus Hijacking*. The news coverage cut to weepy and frantic parents, to the school's thick-necked principal, then to a recap—but no bus. No children, no Vinnie. She watched a while longer, then hurried out of the salon's back door. Got in her car, and drove.

She headed north on Ocean Avenue, the music blaring, unaware that she was duplicating the home stretch of Vinnie's own drive hours earlier. At the fork in the road where Vinnie had ended his drive, Amanda kept heading north, through the Highlands and Keansburg and Keyport. She drove the state roads and local streets, winding past apartments she'd never desire and houses she'd never afford, trying to give herself up fully to the music. At 11 p.m. she stopped for gasoline. At midnight, to pee. Other than that she stopped only for red lights and stop signs.

At 1 a.m., nearing the border of New Jersey and New York, she considered, as Vinnie had, driving north and never returning. She could keep going: Connecticut... Maine... Quebec. But did she have the courage? In wartime, if she were a young man, would she have made the one-way drive north to begin her life again? No, she decided, and turned the car south again. Headed to well traveled territory: the ruins of Asbury Park, where everybody secretly hoped to glimpse Springsteen so that they would have a story forever; she passed Lakewood and Forked River and Egg Harbor. By the time she

had listened to every CD in the glove box, the music wasn't doing its trick anymore. She imagined Vinnie in prison. Or avoiding prison but remaining with Carla—because there would be this kid who'd maybe have Vinnie's ears, or Carla's chin, and they would see this child as a portent of better things. They would try to make a clean start because there had once been love.

Amanda turned north again and headed home—rather, to her sister's home. In a few hours, the sun would be up on the morning of the third day of her twentieth year, and oh Jesus she wanted to drive anyplace but Carla's house, and yet she found herself driving there anyway.

She fumbled in her glove box for a CD. Moments later the car was full of sound. Vinnie never liked her taste in music. Never liked Sublime. *You want reggae,* he once said, *I got two words for you: Bob Marley.*

"Stop it!" she said, to nobody, and stepped hard on the accelerator.

***

At 4:30 a.m., Tark Healey made the visit. It wasn't the first time Tark, a veteran on the force, had to deliver death. This time, however, it would be a challenge to mask the sense of righteousness in his voice. His daughter had been on the Number Two.

He waved aside the questions of the TV correspondents, who, upon Tark's arrival, had sprung from their trailers, and knocked on the Tuccis' front door.

"Mrs. Tucci?" The woman was alarmingly pregnant.

"Mhmm."

"May I come inside?"

"What is it?

"May I come inside?"

She led him to the kitchen, motioned for him to sit at their table. She sat across from him. "This is my sister Amanda," Carla Tucci said.

Tark nodded to Amanda, a pretty girl, and then looked at Carla again.

Your husband is dead, and I'm glad for it, he wanted to say. Instead: "A little while ago, down by the beach. We found a body."

And here was the strangest part: the woman, not one word. Not a tear. Not a question, not a sound. Didn't even make eye contact with her own sister. She stood and went over to the kitchen counter and replaced the coffee filter. Scooped in some coffee grounds and began brewing a fresh pot. She stood there a moment while the machine started gurgling, then got three cups from the cabinet and set them on the table. She sat down again and faced the window; outside, everything took on a gilded hue in the morning light. Her sister watched the floor. Nobody looked at anybody. It was as if the news hadn't even been delivered.

David Hernandez

Proof

for Adam

Once he wrestled a bear, he said,
in a bar off-campus with eyes
glossy from lager, he wrestled
a bear. Claws and all, black fur
and the salmon of its muscles
leaping under the black fur.
Wrestled and won, he said,
the bear pinned and snorting,
pinned and one hundred pounds
heavier, with claws, with claws
and teeth, the electric blue current
of animal instinct. I was gullible
once, under kindergarten lights
with glitter and paste, building
a galaxy. A boy stole my stars
once, a bigger boy I wrestled
under the night of blackboard.
Wrestled and lost, pinned
and weeping with my back
to the carpet, with the fireflies
of glitter dazzling on my skin.
To the man who said he wrestled
a bear, wrestled and won, I said,
You're full of bear shit. But
a scar is proof and so began
the slow striptease of a pant leg
rolled to his knee. There, he said.
And his story sparkled on his flesh.

Why Maggots

Because bags of trash slumped on the side
of the house like black pumpkins. Because
eleven days passed and the bags were still
there, sun-baked, fly-mobbed. Because
they sighed as I dragged them down
the driveway. Because on the bent finger
of a nail jutting from a fence, one was torn.
Because the bag grew a mouth and yawned.

So dozens tumbled onto the concrete,
minute and white. So I thought, *Rice.*
So they wriggled over the pavement
and I thought, *Not rice.* So the knotted bag
of repulsion opened inside my stomach.
So I uncoiled the green hose and made
a river with my thumb, made the water push
each one under the wooden gate and into

the flowerbeds. Where they writhed.
Where in the muddy earth their spongy
and pale bodies writhed. Where marigolds
nodded yes, yes to every wind. Where
the brown-winged butterflies mingled
and ladybugs spotted the yellow petals
like flicked paint. Where nature pulled
her long satin gloves over her many warts.

Daneen Wardrop

[My youngest wanted to stay]

My youngest wanted to stay in me,

minnows so still they seem
to have turned water,
she lines me,
wanted to grow to be woman in me,

princess in parts, eyes, onyx,
hair, fins.

We drink water from the canal,

elbows bend in,
knees bend back,
neck retracts,

the only way
in,
every time I inhale

I fall into her.

Cathryn Essinger

From Another Life

In every house there is a window
no one has ever opened, a dog
no one has ever seen, a cat who cannot
be cornered or put into a sack.

There is one set of drapes behind
which you would not recognize
your own children. There is a chair
no one has ever invited to the table.

And if you walk out now to confess
to your neighbor, he will not pause
or look up from his chores. Slowly,
the pieces begin to fit; and you know

these are shadows from another
life, furniture from another place,
and the voices that rise each night
from the basement are so familiar

they could be your very own. Soon
a door will swing open, a face will
appear, and someone you love will
call for help, and you will not hear.

Davis McCombs

Home

A bee was scribbling
invisibly over trumpet vine
on the barn's side;
the windmill cranked
its gap-toothed shadow
on the grass, and then
a moth as big
as the boy's dusty hand
pressed its wings
into a plank
and disappeared.
It was like that:
a peacock roosting
on the chimney
of the house, cats
in the breezeway,
a shelf of books,
and distantly,
a freight train screeched
and threw a slash of sparks
into the bent iron
tracks before
the bridge—all true.
Less so, there was a road
and one night, years ago,
when glowworms lit
the right-of-ways
like exit lights

and that same boy,
walking there with a stick,
whacked at weeds
and hummed
a little wobbling tune
that was almost,
even then, a wheel.

White Space

All day snow fell on the river like thistledown,
sowing its spiked seeds into the trough
between the bank where a crow stopped squawking
and the bank where there was silence,
and the wind in the middle moaning like a low fire.
How to say it? How to get it in edgewise?
I walked out hours later under a night sky clouds
were fading from like breath from a lens,
its ground and polished depth becoming
visible, and there, low at the treeline, a squinting,
yellow eye, not answering but watching.

Nan Cohen

It Is Not in the Heavens, Neither Is It Beyond the Sea

But under my daughter's eyelid—
thinnest skin on the body.

Her eye, covered in sleep,
pivots in its bed of muscle.

My eye pivots also, to follow it.
She fell asleep easily beside me,

as if I were part of her, like an arm.
Her eye moves again, from right to left,

and right to left, grief covers me:
I'll never see what she just saw.

Melissa Stein

Pantoum

Little girl, your veins are showing through
your skin again. And again I will ignore it.
I will lay you down in the ordinary clover
and resume sex, our bored conspiracy.

Your skin again and again, I will ignore it—
although I can barely stand its blue-pink flush—
and resume. Sex, our bored conspiracy,
tethers me to the slim bent weed of your body

although I can barely stand. Its blue-pink flush
of fish's gills, albino snake's pellucid scales
tether me. To the slim bent weed of your body,
an artist might attribute the vulnerable beauty

of fish's gills, albino snakes' pellucid scales...
I am your husband. I can't see things the way
an artist might. Attributing "a vulnerable beauty"
is like a wry poem admiring its own cleverness.

I am your husband; I can't see things the way
I did before I knew you. Now my life
is like a wry poem: admiring its own cleverness,
it alienates the one who reads. I can't remember what

I did before I knew you, now. My life,
a deconstructed text. What's the point of writing that
alienates the one who reads? I can't remember. What
can save us from seeing too much?

A deconstructed text—what? Is the point of writing that
our roles are judged irrelevant? Only love
can save us from seeing. Too much
rain has filled the mossy gutters; too many hours

our roles are judged: irrelevant. Only, love
returns me to this house at night, where
rain has filled the mossy gutters. Too many hours
spent feeling thunder rattle the iron bedframe

return me to this house at night, where
I'm like one treading water, mindless,
spent. Feeling thunder rattle the iron bedframe,
I mistake its tremble for my own—

I'm like one treading water, mindless
of the riptide, deadly current so strong
I mistake its tremble. For my own
long, sweet strokes in the pale water

of the riptide—deadly current so strong—
pull me out to sea. And hold me
long sweet. Stroke in the pale water
your mermaid's flesh: you belong here tangled in sea-reeds.

Pull me out to sea and hold me,
little girl. Your veins are showing through
your mermaid's flesh. You belong here. Tangled in sea-reeds,
I will lay you down in this extraordinary clover.

Brenda Sieczkowski

Why I Paint

A herd of boxes huddles, dumb cardboard,
in the middle of my living room.
The walls wait for paint.

I can't take the orange
windowsills. Your favorite color—
you wore it, ballsy, with flip-flops, collarbone.

The vacuum thwack-thwack
of your devil-careless walk, and when you kicked
them off, the perfect shadow of each foot

on grimy polyurethane.
In one fat box is crammed a magazine
shut on the small formal shock

of your name in print, the article you wrote
on Miss Orange, queen of the Southern fruit
belles. For me, you were the South,

its dipsomaniac bloom and tacky elegance,
a place I will never, precisely, return to.
I stole your swagger,

and the bleakness it rolled over.
This week the Chinese boy I tutor
has to write a poem on color.

Orange, I say, is a class of color
no one precisely or dispassionately sees.
He asks me what I mean.

After Watching Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*

La mort is a smart woman—
elbow gloves and knotted pearls,

a string of heel taps receding down the empty hall.

I lack the power to recall this
princesse sombre

from a straining fish—
the shallow, ebbing gasps of

my grandfather unhooked from the respirator.

I do not know the French for *snuff:*
the way a candle turns so suddenly,

whatever else it seemed,
to requisite wax.

Je ne crois pas à la mort…

La vie, without parlor tricks, simply vanishes.

Stephanie Dickinson

Belly

I hadn't left the room for eight days. I stood at the sink and took the shaving mirror off the wall and looked at my belly. My navel had disappeared. It was a tumor for sure. I remembered the first time I stood in front of Grandma Lolie's mirror and she rubbed my stomach in cocoa butter and water lilies to make it flat and shine. "Memory, you don't want a baby in there," she said, sighing, and we both knew why. The water lilies we'd collected in the bayou, the kind that left the banks when the sun sank, floated out into the middle to clasp the hands of those from the other side. All night the water lilies would clutch and tangle so tight no flatboat could get through them. But in the morning they'd let go and drift back to the banks and all that would be left was a white smell over the brown water." And you know what they are?" Lolie would ask. They were the babies born in the weeds and then drowned. Those newborns had become lilies, alive for sometimes only seconds before they were slipped into the water. That was why the blossoms smelled like the soft spots on a baby's head.

Then I put the mirror away. I stretched out on the bed and willed myself to sleep, knowing that when I woke I would have the flattest, whitest stomach. I'd taken double precautions with Bluejay, who was the only one. I swallowed yellow Ortho Novum wafers, never missing. I kept the pills secret from him so he would use a Trojan. I snuggled into the pillows, two skinny ones that were here when I moved in. There was a magnolia tree right outside the window, a Goliath with twelve-inch petals. I imagined that I could smell it right through the wall.

My stomach growled so hard it kicked. The last big meal I ate was a month ago when I cleaned out my side of the refrigerator in the

dorm. Earlier that day I'd withdrawn at the registrar's office, signed all the papers, watched the blue-half moons on the girl's lids like the eye shadow itself was explaining how it was too late in the semester to get a refund. "Is Memory your real name?" the girl had asked. "It's sort of not even a name." My roommate's stuff sat neatly on her side of the refrigerator with her name, Jessica, written on Band-Aids and stuck to each of her Dr. Pepper cans. I drank her only Boysenberry Spritzer. I built a sandwich with her Pepperidge Farm bread and cheddar cheese, garnished it with spicy brown mustard and Goya pimentos and capers. I left my cell phone on her pillow as payment.

I drifted. My mother waited for me behind my eyelids. She had shining brown hair and a shy smile. She stood by the box air conditioner trying to pull it out of the window. I was afraid for her. Let me into the tree, she kept saying. It was the first time I had heard her mouth make words. It was the first time I'd seen her standing. Right into the tree with its white smells leaking.

When I woke it was still there. The belly.

Wouldn't an ice-cold Coke be fine and a pint of pistachio ice cream and maybe some fried rice with some big blue shrimps in it. I had to get dressed. I needed to go those four blocks to Gibraltar Savings on Maryland Street and write a check for three hundred dollars. First things first. I wiped off the plastic knife I'd used for mayo and jimmied the Emerson Quiet Cool out of the window. I scraped the wall getting the box a/c to the floor and made a pretty good scar in the paint. I rested my chin on the sill and let the hot air rush in. White smell filled the room and I inhaled as much as I could.

I waddled into the closet. What was I going to put on when I couldn't even start the zippers on my jeans? None of my clothes fit. Bluejay might have given up looking for me; it had been three weeks, four days, and eight hours since I walked away from the Rice

University campus not glancing back. He might have looked hard and worn himself out with looking; his part-Choctaw blood made him a good tracker with 20/20 vision. By now he would have given up on Houston and gone back to New Orleans. I thought about Jessica and Bridget and Jan, the girls who lived on the floor of my dorm and came from oil money. Even brushing their teeth, spitting into the sink they managed to look at me like I was shit and they were gold. "Are you knocked up?" Jessica had asked.

Outside the day had already begun and all the scraps of light were balling themselves up into the fireball sun. I had on the one thing that fit: a housedress that belonged to Grandma Lolie, a rayon shift patterned with green and yellow apples that rolled when I glanced down. My hair had grown in the month and a half since Bluejay had seen me. It wouldn't stop growing and I wondered if my head wasn't stretching, my brown hair thicker and darker, better to hide in it. He might not know me if he spotted me from the car. Bluejay had a hard head and I knew he didn't give up easy. He might have traded in his bad debt-collecting job for one of full-time looking. But Houston wasn't the Big Easy, it was fifty miles of city and I had burrowed myself into an out-of-the-way place. The magnolias were closed, blooms curled up, their leaves drooped like brown bags.

I cut over to Yoakum, walking past houses with yards of flowering pear, and then a used auto parts store. This was a city with no zoning. A Vietnamese man hurried around the salvage yard of tired fuel pumps and batteries no jumper cables could spark. He waved when I passed. My belly pulled me forward, causing my balance to be off. Sweat was breaking out on my face and neck, the tunnel between my breasts. I pulled my hair over my face.

You just hold on to the back of my dress, Mem. Almost four-years-old, you've got to start walking on your own. Grandma Lolie's got all these pizzas to hold. You just put your hand back there where the sunflower is. We're going

to eat pizza with your mommy. Not just Mommy but all her friends out there in the big room with her. They'll be hungry too.

Above the trees the Chemical Bank digital sign blinked 10:10 a.m. and 103 degrees. Miss England Fartie rose in my mind. If I were still in college I'd be in her air-conditioned classroom listening to her talk about the colors in the writing of Stephen Crane, how blue and red his stories were and how you could taste them in your mind as you read. Like "Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." I felt all his colors as my head started to swim from the sun. The unpretty bride on the sea-green figured velvet of the Pullman car and the dust of Texas, her face *gone yellow as old cloth.*

The sidewalk lifted and set itself down. I passed the Stop N Go where the top-out plumbers and sheetrock finishers were pulling in, piling out of their trucks with their thermoses, their radios jamming "Bohemian Rhapsody." I steered clear of Westheimer, the main drag that Bluejay would probably drive up and down if he was still looking for me. Mockingbirds in peaked hats screamed. The trees had already started their sweating. Only once did I see my mother's face quiet. What she must have once looked like. Grandma Lolie always took me to see her so I was never afraid.

Mem, you can't stay holding onto my dress all day. Go say hello. Don't be scared of her. She wasn't made that way, that's what the doctors did to her the day you were born. You can still see her prettiness, that kind of complexion we used to call peaches and cream. I put the magnolia petals on her face from the time she was three years old. And those eyes, the darkest biggest eyes with enough lash to decorate a pine branch.

I brushed Lolie's voice away. But it kept buzzing.

Gibraltar Bank and the cold air hit me flat out and I had to hug the counter where you make out your deposits or write checks. A man in white shirt and red tie hurried over to me from a corral where other men in white shirts were sitting at desks almost as big as the room I

was living in. "Can I help you with something?" I shook my head, the woozy feeling passed. I went to a window and put my check into the silver trough for the teller to pick up.

I told them not to strap your mommy into that wheelchair. So what did they do? They put her inside a metal brace. Still they can't keep her settled. Why can't they get Antoinette to stop jerking her hands and looking over her shoulder? Her skin is yellowy today. This is an eating room and it smells of toilets.

"I need to see some ID," the Latina teller said, looking at the check but not at me.

I slid my Rice University Student Identification at her. I stood there waiting. She was probably a Mexican girl from a one-syllable Texas border town and after dealing with all the smart-ass Anglos all her life now she had her own power.

"Do you have a Texas Driver's License?" she asked.

"No," I said, stepping back, "but your bank has my student loan money. I'd like to cash my check."

She had plum lips and waves of black hair. Finally she glanced up, scowling over her fingernails, and then her face broke into a smile. "You have a belly. When is it due? Looks like you've already dropped." She started clicking on her machine and ran the check through a stamper. "What denominations do you want the bills in?"

I folded tens and twenties into my coin purse. "I'm not pregnant. I have a swelling sickness."

I kept wading through the hundred degrees, wanting to lie down on the hot asphalt and let the trees sweat their leaves over me. I had to eat. The whole world was melting. The hunger in me moved, about to push me down.

I hate that brace they have her in. Like she's a bicycle wheel or a tomato vine that needs staking up. Can't they keep her hands still? I'm going to sit

over here and see if your mommy wants to eat some pizza. You take some around for her friends. Anyone want pizza? Big cheesy Creole pies for everyone. Antoinette, honey, don't you hit yourself.

The glass doors of Prinz's Drive-In closed behind me. My mouth was wet. I wanted a rare Blue Cheese Burger with bacon bits and hot wing sauce and crinkle pickles. Or did I want the Tex-Mex with salsa, a fried egg, and blue corn tortilla chips? I wedged myself into a booth inside the sit-down section. After I ordered I couldn't wait and squeezed some Ketchup onto a napkin and put it in my mouth.

The waitress, a mulatto girl with her hair all stuffed under a Prinz's Drive-In hat, brought me an extra-rare Blue Cheese Burger. "Early lunch? I'd eat my burgers bloody like this when I was big with my kids," she said, giving me an ear-to-ear grin.

I reached for the mustard. "I'm not having a kid," I said. I didn't know what it was.

She walked away and came back with a cold can of Coke and a glass filled with ice. "So you're having twins. You're carrying low and, I believe, they could be twins. Best to have a boy and girl at the same time and be done with it. I had three before I made my husband get snipped."

I slurped Coke through a straw. Best swallow ever.

Say goodbye to your mommy. That's a good girl, kiss her nice arm. Right there from her elbow to her wrist. Goodbye, Antoinette, honey. Mommy was only twenty and so small compared to the chair they had her in. To keep her sitting they put her neck and head into a brace that ended in metal thorns. The ring went around her forehead. All she wanted to do was look at something over her shoulder, way back there so far she would have to turn her head all the way around, ninety degrees. But when Lolie turned her chair around what she wanted to see was still way way over her shoulder. Her friends—the other inmates—didn't eat, but the aides and orderlies swarmed around the slices. I would run

my fingers down from her elbow to her wrist while Lolie stroked her hair and rubbed Jergens lotion into her hands. Sometimes Lolie brought a basket of all kinds of petals and one-by-one held them to Mommy's nose.

I tried to eat slow and chew at least four times before taking another bite. But I couldn't get it into my mouth fast enough. I turned toward the window so no one could see me pigging out. The food caught in my throat when the intersection light changed from red to green and a custard-yellow Mercury Marquis turned onto Richmond Avenue. That old Marquis coming this way could be driven by anyone; Bluejay Guy didn't have a corner on the classic-decrepit car market. He had another Marquis that sat out behind his shotgun house in New Orleans East. For spare parts only. I reached for the check and my purse, put out a two-dollar tip on the table. No way could anyone see from a car into a restaurant window but I hunkered down. By the time I paid four dollars at the cash register and took two tooth picks out of the dispenser the Mercury Marquis was gone. I went to the bathroom. These were the nineties and Bluejay chose to drive a tenth-hand living room down the highway, a car with a rebuilt transmission and 86,000 miles he himself put on it. It said a lot about how once he put his hands on something he didn't let go.

I kept a steady pace through the humidity, and then everything tried to take the air from me: the prefabricated apartments with sliding glass patios too lazy to raise themselves up. One more block and I'd be on Yoakum, but I couldn't go anymore. I had to lean up against a red tree and catch my breath. When I glanced over my shoulder I shivered. Was it the same yellow Marquis making the block and creeping along so slow like the driver wanted to check out every slab of sidewalk? The silver chrome kept coming on and I was too tired to move. Chances were it wasn't him circling the streets within a five-mile radius of Rice University, him knowing I'd probably be on foot. I let out a whoop

when the car turned into Fiesta Fajitas. Day laborers ready to pack in those mesquite-grilled beef chunks wrapped in soft tortillas.

When you finally get there next year I want you to stay at that Rice U summers too. I expect to be dead and I don't want you coming back to Louisiana. Listen to Grandma Lolie. You've seen how I'm dying of the climate. I can't breathe. Going round with the ceiling fan all day smelling shrimp grass, mullets, crawfish, gray and raw. People are dumb here. Out for the good times. Like the Babcocks across the alley. When they're not drinking and drugging they're on their knees praying. They built an altar upstairs and thought they heard the idols shaking and called the priest over to bless the house. I'm pretty sure those idols made of mud were doing nothing.

High noon and it felt like I was stepping into rain clouds. If I was in school I'd be sitting in Earth Space Science and listening to Dr. Wagner, the physicist who became a born-again-Christian, lecture about carbon carried by rain into rivers. He would diagram decomposing woody stuff and bugs and fish in the rivers chewing it up and returning CO_2 to the air. Water breathes, he'd say. The rayon shift plastered itself to me. Sweat. I wasn't making headway until I turned off, cutting through the Hollywood Apartments. The two-story complex had the colors of a Hemingway paragraph. Each unit came with a balcony and kitchen window where a curtain sagged. Like the grays in his story "The Killers." The hired guns are waiting in a greasy spoon for the Swede to come for his hash. From a radio a country singer crooned, *Did you ever hear a whippoorwill?* It was peaceful here among the grays. I walked past the pool surrounded by a picket fence. Lawn chairs lazed on a soggy carpet that sank under my feet like flesh. A diving board stuck out its stiff tongue. A soda machine stood against the laundry shack.

The blue water started calling. I figured I could drop my feet in and cool off. Give that custard-colored Marquis that was roaming around Richmond Avenue plenty of time to disappear. I stepped out of my

flip-flops, set my purse beside them. Why not take a sit in that pool? Everyone was at work or school. I took hold of the ladder that led to the deep end and lowered my bottom onto the top step. I had forgotten to put on underpants. I let the water flow up my dress. In the bayou when you pee you can feel the fish come and nip your thighs. I peed. I let the water wash me up at the same time.

Remember how those lilies hugged together and your Lolie had to get out of the boat to push and you took the tie line and swam us through? I taught you to swim real good. All those years ago your old grandma was a blue-ribbon swimmer at her Catholic high school. I put my face in waters you wouldn't dare to touch these days outside of a wetsuit. Getting the snakes all worked up. What are you going to do about that belly, honey? Whatever you do, stay away from hospitals and doctors. They gave her an epidural and the nurses or whatever didn't get it right. The doctor tried to fix it and sent her into cardiac arrest. They brought you into the world by c-section and your mother went out of it. Yeh, yeh, they brought her back but so brain-damaged. Well, you know that story. Lolie, why can't Mommy eat pizza?

The water was a perfect temperature. I hadn't been swimming since all that walking I did, leaving the dorm after midnight and not returning until just before light. When I'd cross Texas Street I'd be drinking a cherry Slurpee because even if it happened to be 5:00 a.m. and the coolest time in Houston it was still plenty hot. Passing ramshackle storefronts painted watermelon and turquoise, the men hunched up against them elbow-to-elbow drinking from paper bags, the oil-drum cookers already sizzling slabs of brisket. That was the last swimming I did.

I let myself float into the jelly water, cool. I was buoyant, dog-paddling out into the blue. Everything was fine. I rolled over, my hair flowing as I backstroked like a water hyacinth. Then I let myself go still. I closed my eyes and floated.

I could have sued that ugly old doctor right along with Charity Hospital but money isn't going to change what had happened to my daughter and I didn't want to let them off that easy. They figure it's all even when they give you money. I'm not like all those low down folks who have the lawsuit filed before the maggots have even hatched in the gullets of their loved one.

A door banged in one of the apartments and feet were running down steps. I heard a piercing whistle, the creak of the picket fence, and someone diving in. Then a swimmer was splashing toward me.

"Here, give me your arm. I'll get you in. Don't panic." I smelled his beery breath. It was a guy either my age or a little younger. He had a head of blond ringlets like sheep fleece that, even wet, smelled of pot.

"Go away." I turned my head. "I'm fine."

"You're a pregnant mermaid," he slurred. His eyes were opaque b of blue milk. Stupid eyes. The opposite of Bluejay's burning coals that could spot perch in calm green water. He saw every quiver and could name the fish. "I'll swim you in, mermaid," he said, one of his arms going under me. He was scissor-kicking; his milky shoulder that showed above the water had a girl's initials on them. "My roommate told me a pregnant chick fell in the pool. He's calling 911."

"Leave me alone. Nothing is wrong." I had to get out of here.

"Wow, your belly is sexy," he said, another blast of booze breath.

I tried to float away from him as he balanced me into the shallow end and stood up. When I felt his hand on my stomach I ripped his fingers away and my feet found the bottom. I waded toward the steps, the sun hitting my eyes and forehead. I grabbed my purse and wanted to hit him with it but I kept walking, dripping.

He followed me, wiping his hands on his wet cutoffs. "Hey, I could feel the heartbeat. It was beautiful, crazy boom boom."

"No, you didn't."

"Boom boom. Yeah, it was really strong. Wait you left your flip-flops. Hey!"

I didn't wait; I hurried, chugging along like a river barge after being weightless. The buses fogged over with a/c carried poor people deeper into the oil-and-gas-capital of the world, glass towers shimmering like icicles of crushed disco music.

Lolie's not stupid. I know the odor of how babies are made. I know where skin comes from. That milk that dries to the inside of your thighs and flakes off in the morning. I swear if I ever smell it on you, it'll kill me. Stay like those white petals that even in the heat keep their sweetness. You're my best petal. Your mommy threw batons in the air, marched in every Mardi Gras parade from the time she was five years old. Her Crescent City Twirlers won every trophy made. Look at her now sitting in the big room. Your mommy's nose all scraped and her hands going up and down. There's that ugly black spot on her chin that she likes to hit. I don't know why she likes to hit herself in the chin and make that popping sound. Unless her arm thinks it's twirling and has a baton in it.

The heat was bearable when you were wet from swimming but before I made the parking lot behind the apartment I was steaming. Rivers breathe. I went by the washing machines, listened to a dryer turning, a zipper pinging against the side of the spinning basket, like it was the only pair of jeans in the world. I padded down the runner of brown carpet outside my door and turned my key in the lock. The room had moved. I went inside but I already knew. It was cool. Didn't I take the box air conditioner out so I could breathe in the magnolia tree? The a/c was going, and then I saw the light switch on in the bathroom behind the blue plastic shower curtain that worked as a door.

"Memory," I heard him say in his beautiful Cajun voice, with his strangely accented syllables. "Come here, my mourning dove." I envisioned his handsome face still savage in the mirror, his black hair smoothed back away from his high forehead, his clay skin. His hands that he was always aware of like F. Scott Fitzgerald. Instead of the Great Gatsby, his nickname was Big Head. *Redbone. Big Head. Hear how they*

rhyme? Then I heard the sink go on and off. He pulled aside the shower curtain and stepped into the room. He took the room away from me. It had been mine and now it wasn't, and the air he was breathing away from me and making his too. His eyes held light, pupil and iris merged into smoke-black pools. He wore a blue shirt open one button too many and a gold-medallion with the face of a goat. Capricorn was his birth sign but he didn't take after a goat, a panther would be more apt. *Bluejay Guy is about as Jamaican-British as my thumb. He's a redbone. His father, a 50-percent Choctaw gambler, never traveled beyond the Vieux Carre. His mother cast love spells with onions. Then I hear him say he wants to be a movie extra. Poo-yee-yi !*

He let out a long low whistle. "I wasn't sure you'd even have the belly. You never told me that you were expecting. I've never seen a belly look more beautiful on a woman. God Christ."

My head was throbbing from the heat and sun, and the cold air striking my wet dress made my teeth clatter. He came close. I should plug my nose. He smelled good. Like dirt, the cleanest thing there is, mixed with Stetson, that cologne I'd got him for Mardi Gras that came with a shaving kit. Redbones were the best smelling men even if there was swamp funk mixed in with their blood. The Indian part kept them from sweating. Bluejay had brought Grandma Lolie with him. *I'm dead, Memory, your old grandma has crossed over but it doesn't mean I can't talk to you. I'm a bird these days, circling half-eaten potato chip bags, candy bars, soda cans. Sometimes they sabotage you with cigarette butts. I'm looking for your mommy but so far I can't find her.*

"How'd you find me? How'd you get in here?"

"Didn't you take that air conditioner out of the window just so your man could skinny inside? I know your perfume. Miss Magnolia."

"I don't want you here," I said, trembling, liking and hating his stupid compliments.

"Why'd you shut me out? Were you scared I wouldn't want it? I am so ready to be a father. It's a boy, damn straight, I already know."

I could feel him behind me kneeling and separating me from my shadow. Next he would take that from me same as he would pick-pocket money in the old days for his mother. I wasn't going to let him do that.

"There's no baby. I'm sick. Can't I be sick alone?" I was bone-tired of saying the same thing.

He pulled at the hem but Lolie's housedress stuck to me. "I never saw you in this dress before, Mem. The green looks nice with your pretty brown hair." His hand slipped down my leg and tried to encircle my ankle. Another whistle. "You're one swollen monkey. Have no fear, Bluejay Guy is here. He's not going to let anything happen to you or our baby. Say goodbye to this shithole, Mem. Goodbye to Texas."

"Fuck off," I said.

But he didn't fuck off. He laughed and clucked his tongue and let me know I couldn't get away from his love. "Goodbye, Houston. Hello, New Orleans. Mem, this dress is drying on you like a fresh layer of plaster. You have to come out of it. I looked for you over at Rice University and you had cleared out—lock, stock, and barrel." He snickered at his fingers sticking to the rayon dress with the fat apples that neither of us seemed able to peel from me. My teeth chattered. "Your roommate Jessica says she hadn't seen you for a month but that if I saw you to mention that you owe her for all the food of hers you ate."

"I'd like to see her try to get it from me."

"I flipped her a silver dime. Then she told me it wasn't her problem you got knocked up. From the looks of things she figured you might have already had it."

"Bluejay, there isn't any baby," I said, my fingers balling, my hand making fists. He couldn't make a baby in me with his words and

neither could Jessica or the guy in the pool. "I took the pill. On top of that you used a condom."

"They busted a couple of times."

"Did not."

"Since I'm in charge of my own baby-batter I should know," he snorted.

"I would have known by the mess."

"Mess. That's the finest batter on the Gulf. You can see that for yourself," he grinned.

"Would you just get out from behind me? You're giving me the creeps."

Then he let go of me and stepped out to my side, reaching into his pocket. I heard a click, saw a flash, and there was a knife in his hand. "You're not going to forget our good times. Sunny days, baby, all those perch we'd catch, buckets of the tiny ones we'd fry and eat 'em bones and all. I bet you can see those days even from here and there'll be days and days like that especially when that baby comes along."

"Put your stupid knife away, Bluejay."

"Crazy girl, I got to get you out of that dress some way."'

Grandma Lolie, she doesn't like my dirt cake. Mommy's head jerks away when I try to put the spoon into her mouth. I try to feed her with my fingers but she coughs it out. Where should I put it, Lolie? I open my fist and show her spittle and chocolate pudding and pecans. Am I still your favorite dirt cake maker?

He hooked the front of the rayon, wedged the blade beside his finger and sliced it open in one long easy cut. "Now turn around," he said, making another cut.

I staggered against the wall. Naked. Every week Lolie made phone calls to that doctor and anesthesiologist, not at their homes but to their offices, telling them she wasn't a kook but needing to remind them about Antoinette. She bought boxes of Christmas cards to send them

year round. SEASON'S GREETINGS. I was born Capricorn too. Once a police detective came to talk to Lolie about harassment by Christmas cards. What would you do if your daughter went into the hospital to have a baby and came out without her brain?

I staggered again. "Listen, it's finished, college is finished. I don't want to see anyone. I think I have cancer. I have three hundred dollars and that will pay my next rent."

"Crazy girl, my crazy Memory," he chuckled. "I showed up not a minute too soon. We'll get a doc to take a look at you."

"You're not my boss," I tell him. "Never. I'm not going to a doctor. Go to hell."

"Hell looks like this room I figure. I'm taking you to Big Charity."

You can go in there by yourself, Memory. You're seven years old and a grown girl. This is the doctor who delivered you and left your mommy in the big room. Dr. Hebert. The same last name as us, as half of New Orleans, a name common as houseflies. I want you to look into his eyes.

A nurse takes my hand and leads me back. After I stand on the scale to be weighed I sit on a sheet of waxy white paper. Dr. Hebert's hands are liver-spotted although his fingernails are shiny. Lolie, I think he wears clear fingernail polish like you do. The breath from his mouth is mullet and a fungus coats his tongue which ends in a tiny quivering point. My eyes don't go any farther up his face. I have to turn away.

"But first, mourning dove, dinner's ready. So come on and eat with me."

"I already ate."

Then I saw the take-out bag on the bed and how he had already put out a napkin with plastic fork and knife. Two beef fajitas, a gallon of Classic Coke on the dresser. Two mint patties. He'd written our names on parts of an envelope and slipped it under the mints he must have lifted from the courtesy dish of a restaurant. He wasn't going to let me go. Too thick-headed. Bluejay had been known to eat five fajitas at a

sitting, beef fajitas, meat only. Meaning no cheese, no onions, no lettuce, no tomatoes, and no salsa touching his meat. The only vegetable he would eat—ketchup. Not one fresh vegetable. It didn't matter how many times you explained that ketchup consisted of tomatoes and vinegar. That was Bluejay.

He leaned up against the wall next to me. "That's my baby in there."

"NO BABY." I yelled at him. "ARE YOU DEAF?"

Bluejay was deaf in his left ear from his time in Bridge City Reform School. When another redbone kid like him swung a metal dustpan up side his head and punctured his ear drum. His right ear was small as a seashell and Lolie said it meant he was cheap with the money but he wasn't.

"What have you been doing to your lips? They're puffy and raw like you've been licking and biting them." He raised a finger and I couldn't back away. "You're wild." I let him take the pieces of dress off and wrap me in a sheet. Hardly any air left in the room that he hadn't had and was returning to me used. I could feel Lolie asking me what to do with that redbone. She always wanted to wipe that smile off his face, hating the way he went around half-cocked and cocksure.

Then I sat down on the edge of the bed and he plopped down behind me and I inhaled him, the good dirt of his elbows and behind his ears, I smelled his skin's cleanness.

"That *was* you eating in Prinz's Drive-In," Bluejay said, reaching for his beef fajita.

"Might have been."

"How much does cheeseburger ketchup cost in there?"

"Dunno."

"I've been looking for you every day for three weeks. I walked myself around this city to try and get a feel for what walking distance was from Rice University. Lots of weirdos. I tracked you, Memory. I

think I should get an A+ for a job well done. I knew I was in your vicinity. We've got brains that talk to each other. For better or worse you can't turn that off. I had it down to about five blocks. I was out there with the leaves. I described you to counter girls at every Stop N Go and Kwik Check within a five-mile radius. That girl with the limp at the convenience store down this street thought I was a private detective. She'd seen you all right and wanted a five spot."

Go ahead, Memory, say goodbye to her. Don't forget to wish her a happy birthday. July 25th. Thirty-three years ago today that precious girl-child came into the world. I was past forty and Grandpa Festus said she was a miracle. Antoinette Marie Hebert. I told you that ruffled lavender silk wasn't going to be too fussy. My daughter's not going into that cremation chamber in her PJs. I wore that dress to a Mardi Gras cotillion. She's going to become fireflies. I've filled her box with carnival beads and petals. They'll get to be fireflies too. That lavender fan her hands are clasping belonged to Grandma Boniface.

I reached for the mint patty, opened its silver wrapper and popped it into my mouth. Sugar melted across my tongue and made my cheeks flush. Then I opened the sheet and looked at myself. I spread my hands over the belly. It was the first time in months I had touched it. I remembered asking Grandma Lolie what a navel was and why it lived where it did. She said it was my cork where you could put in or take out. When you're pregnant it disappears because it's where the baby is drinking your body into it. I could feel the blood in my fingertips pulsing.

"Feel it, Memory. That is both of us in there."

No. I drew my hands back, shaking, telling Bluejay it hurt to touch. Hot hot. Like the handle of an iron skillet left on the stove. No. He caught one of my hands in his. Go away. I wanted to watch the white tree. No. I wanted to smell the milk petals. Leave so I can sit on the floor and wait for the blooms to arrive but no matter how long. I'll sit

until I know that moment. Bluejay took my fingers and pressed my palm and his against my belly.

Then I touched it. A drum beating. Like a cup of sparking fireflies.

"That's it, girl," he said. "That's the heartbeat."

Like a headlight shining into the darkness.

D. E. Steward

Magio

Three missionaries each with a small church in the Valley of Virginia, one-two-three along a single dirt road off the western slope of the Blue Ridge, north of the old Rockfish Gap road, over the mountain from Charlottesville

St. Stephen's Mission at Yancey, called Berrytown now, had a three-room school and a clothing bureau, Rocky Bar a one-room school, and Lynwood a clothing bureau and a one-room school

Yancey was Aunt Florence's, Miss Price lived at Rocky Bar, Miss Lohman at Lynwood

On two Sundays a month, ministers came to preach and offer communion, one week Reverend Loving, Mr. Fisk on another. On the off weeks, the mission ladies held services at their missions without sermons

Mr. Fisk drove a green Ford from Mission Home east of the Mountains and would stay for dinner at the Yancey Mission House. Reverend Loving drove a black Pontiac with rusted chrome over Swift Run Gap from Charlottesville, slugged down the leftover communion wine and left directly after the service

Yancey's clothing bureau had tables and bins for shoes and old clothes that churches in the North railway-expressed down clean and sorted in big cardboard boxes

Splintery wood floors and a mothball smell, creaking stairs, empty four-pane windows, loose old putty baring the tiny galvanized glazier's points, long rain gutters full of oak leaves and acorn tannin water

And a bare, narrow, unused stage stood mysteriously in the big, otherwise empty, room upstairs

The Yancey and Lynwood clothing bureaus were open every Thursday afternoon, clothes and shoes were sold for a nickel and up

Thursdays the same as Saturdays, or Mondays or Tuesdays, because except for the mission ladies themselves, nobody had a job or had anywhere else to be but where they lived, in the Blue Ridge on the land

Yancey had a huge white oak between the church's sacristy and the clothing bureau's covered stoop, and three box oaks just north of the clothing bureau and the school

There was another box oak between the windowless east end of the clothing bureau and the westside of the school, and a big white oak behind the school's east wall at the edge of the field leading up toward the mission house

The two north-side rooms of the three-room Yancey School were derelict and all eight grades moved into one, the south-side room warmed by winter sun

And all of that is gone

Yancey's three buildings were razed in the 1950s, and the oaks cut down

When the Yancey Church and its river stone chimney and steps was demolished, its consecrated altar and the St. Stephen's name were moved to the stone church at Rocky Bar

And Yancey's site became a crowded trailer park, Berrytown's modern rural squalor being less picturesque than rural poverty back when

Yancey's buildings were white clapboard with dark green trim. The Rocky Bar and Lynwood buildings, blond-brown river stone

Ocher-colored river stones, from the creeks south from Elk Run. West Swift Run, Hawksbill Creek, Gap Run, Walls Run, Two Mile Run, One Mile Run, Big Run, Hangman Run, Lewis Run, to Deep Run and Madison Run

Gap Run splits Berrytown, One Mile Run splits Rocky Bar

Deep Run and Madison Run drain the Port Republic Battlefield

There were a lot of crab apples near the now-abandoned cabins up the runs, fine apple orchards on the farms out on the valley floor

About where the crab apples were, only the older people know

Burnt ocher, close to the dominant color of the river stones is a moderate reddish orange yellower than crab apple

Successive rural pasts there like a series of template ocher overlays forgotten and stacked aside to molder and eventually disappear

Every generation, every family, every farm, every ditch and dug well, every shed and hog pen and outhouse, every fence and gate, every mountain cabin, every smokehouse, all the way back into the 1700s

And the rich Indian-mound Shenandoah culture totally lost in a black hole behind everything the first settlers built

All gone, like the Mission's buildings and the oaks and everything else that was part of Yancey before it became trailer park

The day after the battle at Cross Keys in 1862, about six thousand to a side fought again on the east bank river flat between Port Republic and Lynwood

The Port Republic battle-map shows that the Lynwood Mission site was involved, that the low ridge behind Lynwood Mission was a Union artillery position overlooking the flood plain of the South Fork of the Shenandoah out front, the Valley's floor

Union forces arrived at Port Republic on a forced march along the old road right through Yancey and Rocky Bar

"The riders fought and were slain: / / Their horses wander neighing. / / By the bridge there was a house. / / Was it south, was it north? / / The harvest was never gathered."

Those events in early June, 1862, have been by far the biggest thing that ever happened there

In the 1940s, a dozen slicked-down threadbare churchgoers walking together on the Yancey to Rocky Bar to Lynwood road, some of the kids without shoes, were a significant crowd

On a clear, chilly October evening with the Milky Way vivid, sinuous, and deep above patches of river bottom fog, 82 years after the battle, Aunt Florence took me along from Yancey to Lynwood in her green four-door Chevy

She was bringing new Advent purple altar cloths to Miss Lohman. When she went inside, she told me to wait in the car

Advent purple, to Christmas white, to Epiphany white, to Lent's purple or maroon, to Easter white and gold, to Pentecost green, onto Advent purple cycling through the Episcopalian year

A troop train heading north on the Norfolk & Western passed while I waited, out in the Valley rolling north from Roanoke and training camps farther south

A digital night-snake of the coaches' lighted windows, the engine smoke trailing back, that train a mile long

Troop trains were frequent then moving up the Norfolk & Western, it was late in the War and blackouts were no more

Troops headed for Europe or the Pacific was an historical overlay hard to imagine, going away from Virginia in front of me like that, me with no idea then of what had happened 82 years before where I was standing waiting for my own future as Aunt Florence came out the door

She had taken my brother and me to live with her only two days before

I was seven, my brother four

When Aunt Florence came out of the Lynwood mission house I was crying, shivering in my yellow and black plaid jacket

She didn't seem to notice until my voice caught driving back, our headlights dusty on the road on through Rocky Bar, no roadside lights there except from kerosene glow through the cabin windows, power hadn't yet come to that part of the Shenandoah

She had no idea, driving in the deep darkness, of how to answer me and my sobs, but it was probably the best talk we ever had

With her bad feet, her chocolate lust and *The Book of Common Prayer*, she certainly didn't know what had happened at Port Republic in 1862. I never talked much with Miss Lohman at Lynwood or Miss Price at Rocky Bar, so don't know, but doubt that they had history in their souls either

The three mission ladies would speak of "the mountain people," and seemed to try to run their missions like small hill stations under the Raj

Aunt Florence scorned most of her congregation, and when I began to understand the depth of her tory derisiveness, I increasingly scorned her

My brother and I must have been extremely difficult for her, a woman who had always lived alone, me never wanting to come home, my

brother always staying inside by choice, hiding in bed with stomach aches so as not to have to go to school

After that chilly Port Republic evening with the troop train going through, I was on my own, would listen, learn of course, listen, listen, listen and not obey

Below the mission house partway down the hill there was a step-stile. On the way down to school I used it every day

Up one side and down the other, cedar treads so narrow you had to go over it sideways. Climbing it, I'd gape at Massanutten, the mountain ridge on the western horizon, that dominates the Valley there

My brother and I would kneel on the bedroom floor looking out, fore-arms on the sill staring west at Massanutten

Massanutten divides the forks of the Shenandoah

From its topknot of bare rock brow front of the long ridge twelve miles away, that mountain's symmetric curve down to the valley floor was the most emphatic and serene reality in our lives

On that Massanutten knob in 1862, Confederate signalmen flashed word to Jackson that the Union troops were moving south toward Port Republic

The Blue Ridge, the Valley of Virginia, the Appalachian wall

In Jefferson's time, from Charlottesville back over the Blue Ridge
behind, the Shenandoah was the land of smokes, the nearside of the
western wilderness

On the far side of Massanutten the first Scotch-Irish pioneers ascended
the Shenandoah's North Fork trekking southwest to Cumberland Gap

They came in off the Atlantic, strode out from Philadelphia on the
Lancaster Pike through Chambersburg and the Great Valley via
Martinsburg to the Shenandoah and down the Valley of Virginia, for
Tennessee and the West

A century and a half after those slave-free settlers, following the
Battle of Port Republic, Stonewall Jackson withdrew up Madison Run
through Dundo Hollow to Browns Gap

At Browns Gap two thousand feet over the Piedmont where Jackson
passed on his way to Charlottesville and the Seven Days, is a single
military grave

William H. Howard of Louisa County, Company F, 44th Virginia
Infantry, CSA

The stone is four tenths of a mile off the ridge, on the left side of the old
Browns Gap wagon road

The June day Howard died, other troopers must have stood around
his freshly dug grave slapping deer flies, tired in the dust of thousands
trailing in close double-file route march, the officers' horses without
forage up there on the hardwood slopes

Troops in the second year of their war scratching at their filth, sweating, concerned temporarily, for the duration of Howard's burial, with the nature of heaven and hell

Across the Confederacy, the rebel dead went into graves like that and the survivors pondered on the worth, the cause, the cost. Then their column would form up and move out for the next skirmish or encounter with their familiar enemy

In numbers considerably larger than the Rebel casualties, the Union dead generally went to ground more formally, with piety, flags and volleys, and pompous covenants to maintain a reverence for the dead with which those graves would from then on forever be met

Churches in the North collecting, cleaning, sorting and shipping clothing to Blue Ridge missions was probably one of the last consequential acts leading from the more desperate manner of the Confederate dead

As most often that sort of anonymity is accorded to lost causes and losing sides

The years since the Battle of Port Republic tumbled like river stones wash lower down the runs toward the valley floor in freshet, rumbling, thudding, sanding in

But like the Indian mound graves scattered on the Valley's wooded slopes, the Port Republic Battlefield is still there

And if there were now a retreat to an historical overlay or two behind the pickup-truck present at Yancey and the other mission sites along that road in the rural Virginia countryside, nostalgia would be reified

Then it would come clear, what lasts and why

If the trailer park at Berrytown was gone, the oaks tall and somber again, the mission buildings restored and back on their foundations, the community of people walking on the road to church again intact, perhaps somebody might appear to fill the Yancey clothing bureau's mysterious stage with awareness of it all

Velma Pollard

Grannany

"Don't make ghost fool you, is not today man start think that anything him see him mus get you know. I am sure you notice the tendency and though I am not one of those who blame everything on slavery I think it really have to take a little blame. Why I mention slavery is because I was thinking of the GreatGrandNanny of the district I grow up in. They always used to say that everybody in that district related and you might want to laugh but is true. Plenty people never believe when all these people say them have the same grandmother for we accustom to believe is only man have plenty children with different partner. Now that big historian go to record office and look it up we find out say that is true that that one lady was great-great-great-grandmother to eight families in the district. Apparently she was a young girl when she come here and get sell to the master of the coffee plantation there.

It seem like all the able-bodied men decide they have to have their time. How else you can explain that she never have more than two children for one man and for most of them is one? Now if it was early up in slavery days you could say they used to bring more men than women on those ships but according to the records she come sort of late down. Of course you could say the men get the practice early and continue it till late even when the statistics wasn't quite so serious.

How the story come down all of these people talk how them hear that their Grandy was pretty: smooth black skin and heavy engine hair and a kind of rear that move to its own music when she walk. Nearly every year she had a baby. Seem like nearly every year somebody different walk with her. I suppose that was before jealousy create here. And as far as the plantation and the boss man go, woman make to have baby so more and more slave would born. When you find one that

breed well—low her. Breed well mean didn't get too sick to work. From what I hear Madru would work up to the day before she have baby. And she didn't have no long labour. Not like some of them.

People say that even Bakra didn't allow himself to get leave out but that she did say long time 'Mi no want no malata pikny.' Of course she couldn't prevent him from holding her down anytime him feel like. In fact, I hear that him use to position himself at a certain angle to look out the greathouse window in the evening when she going home. Used to call her 'my Hottentot Queen.' But she always keep a shut-pan with green pine grater and dry and she would steep it in boiling water. Like tea. Strong. And she would drink that after every time him go to her.

Yes, she was a good breeder but she set up her own standards and figure out how to exercise her choice."

Lesley Jenike

Gravity Sends Them

A stray circling the cul-de-sac
charged the yard. I let the spaniel out
to meet him. She'd sensed him
and he came: a fox-like anecdote,

fastidious and roaming. She was in love.
I couldn't collar him and bring him inside.
His strangeness would've ruined my Sunday
game of me-against-me chess, gin.

I watched him climb the chain-link fence,
hang, then force himself over
like a purse snatcher or a fever too hot
for its host, so hot I heard thunder.

I stood panting at the glass
and through the casement I could smell
his stink of lawlessness, a disease
I'd read about under the cover

of dumb moon and catalpa. *Bitch,*
I said, *He doesn't want you*
and the spaniel laid herself down, grief
undoing its heavy latch. Today we focus

on our domestication. She circles
before she sits. I read poems with waifs

and candles then sing along to a concept
album about a mother and her son.

She wants him to see, to hear, to speak
so breaks a mirror. I read somewhere
that all oceans are one. Gravity sends them
kicking and screaming to a single table.

Kathy Nilsson

Overwintering

The man gathers flowers strewn by a storm and places them
in water. He comes out of injury as florid as any
opening in him during the peaceful care of a wound.
His smooth brown heart rests like a ship at the bottom
of an ocean. About to set sail, he looks at all the lovely
things of this world. Apples cast blue ovals on the table.

Fastidious, uneventful. The sound of a bell is a natural
partition. A moment of disappearing. Is there a chance
of a beautiful prognosis? What kind of behavior
is sleep when someone perceives they must, having
sung all their life, desist and then, shrinking uniformly,
become common salt, animal earth, carbon, nil?

Kelli Kaufmann

Untitled (If)

If a new penny flipped from the 86th floor drills a hole lengthwise, straight down him like breath through a whistle,

if he looks up too late at the sound of a truck horn and feels a sudden chill, if the chicken salad's off, the pilot light's out, and the blow dryer's in the tub, if the pain's not nothing,

if he walks off a cartoon cliff and looks down, if she calls out to him one bright afternoon in the park, if he looks up from his book, shades his eyes, and smiles as his heart stops.

She wouldn't know, not yet. She's just stepped—into a cab on the avenue, leaning forward to repeat the address—onto a stage rimmed with clamshell lights and sparks from her sequins, wearing a feather-duster headdress—into the woods when the frozen lake cracks like a gunshot—

he asks, where were you when Kennedy? She asks, where were you when Lennon?

She's in an elevator, reaches into her blouse to scratch, remembers herself and waits—she stands barefoot in a pool of refrigerator light, wondering what's to eat—she sleeps—she closes her eyes and leans into the man standing behind her—

As he dies he thinks of sixteen, of sixty, his bicycle horn and the change on his father's dresser, one long winter night and she, oranges, he's wearing his good suit and can not stop hiccupping, bees, bees, a match lights, burns out, and smells like a birthday party.

Matt Rasmussen

Land O' Lakes

A tinfoil lake rattles the sun
as a canoe crosses it

approaching my shore.
The Native American girl

walks toward me, kneels,
offers a golden box of butter,

and then she's on the box
I am holding.

Apparently, I've accepted.
Come, she says, we will

burn beauty into something
even more beautiful.

It is evening inside
the refrigerator.

I lie down shivering
near the lake.

The giant red ring
hovers behind her,

generating warmth.
You must fall asleep

in your dream to wake up
in your life, she says.

I can hear the vegetables
dying in the crisper

and through the door,
the television weeping

openly, unashamed.

Jack Martin

I Bought a Hat

I bought a hat with goggles.

I bought a hat that turned into Humphrey Bogart.

I bought a hat and fell into it.

I bought a hat and this matching underwear tank top set with horses and pistols and crap on them, and then I bought two books and some food and something more. I forget but it added up to $350. I was baked. Butch and Sundance were with me.

I bought a hat, sat down on a bench, and fell asleep.

I bought a hat with the money I was saving for your funeral.

I bought boots and a hat, and I even put on trousers.

I bought a hat, and midway through the second encore a brunette in Levi's and a green bodysuit appeared a breath away from my ear and said, "What do I have to do to get that hat?"

I bought a hat and a miniature blimp.

Translate into Japanese: (1) How much is it? (2) I bought a hat and two shirts. (3) Please give me a cup of coffee. (4) Please send it to Japan by sea-mail.

I bought a hat and fell out.

Miles Waggener

Front Matter

In one version of our lives together we never leave the shore.
The barman, all too happy to drop ice into our tumblers
and close the door behind him, lets us stay
inside the solarium facing the sea

and rain, a tonsure of gray skin, a makeshift sun,
ouzo clouding drops upon panes never reaching
the pebble floor. Our room could be taken
to higher ground.
The sea as when dreaming
of something written, holds us. To look away
would it leave us where an eye had been?

Once, on another shore we came upon a bird,
cells, tiny sockets emptied and filled, an alveolar world
of bones composing what is not water, what we see as
spaces opening, say as doors
whose voices the stranded tend to hear, whom we address

though we feign talking to the ever reaching.
Though we feign talking to each other.

Susan Goslee

[My mind, a magpie, steals razor blades, guard]

My mind, a magpie, steals razor blades, guard
rails. Not plans, but what ifs until they shove
all else out of the nest, until a shave
against, over the median, a hard
pull along the wrist would still, would shut-up
the possibilities. It's not a bright
idea, worse than the sadness I have brought
somehow swooping down on myself. Big Top
Highway Motel. No net. I have more
respect for how sick logic after nine
p.m. can circle. There but for the mere
grace of God, and my dog; he stays sunny noon.
Here, hot showers, shaves, but then blade,
guard rail. My magpie waiting in its shade.

Joe Bonomo

Backyard Theater

The lawn was as flat as the floor of a theatre. The terrace, rising, made a natural stage. The trees barred the stage like pillars. And the human figure was seen to great advantage against a background of sky.

Virginia Woolf

Tiny fragments of boy all over the yard. Don't despair—this isn't yard trauma or some other sort, the kind of violence nestled, a good dog under foot while you watch television, the kind of noise switched *off* and *on* but never *off.* Simply let this boy walk into the backyard and slowly, as if to a music only in his head—or perhaps yours—bend to gather the colorful bits of himself *by means of a camera tube, such as an image orthicon or vidicon, converting light rays into electronic signals for modulation upon a radio carrier waves for transmission over wires; the television receiver reconverting the signals into electronic beams that are projected against the fluorescent screen of the kinescope, or picture tube, reproducing the original image* such as it is. How will this drama play out? Though dreams vanish by day's end, perhaps we create our soul as we live. There is a crowd on the outer blocks approaching.

Tiny fragments. We wonder where we first saw ourselves. Was it in the image of the young mother in the hospital lobby carrying a version of yourself—though smaller, smiling through you to this day—or is that a photo between photos in a shoebox? We dot the yard, though we don't own the yard. Shadows gather in corners near compost, slick leaves droop toward every afternoon: somewhere a thin dog barks a faint memory of fields. Fading light eclipses the bounty of a day demarcated by plot and fence—on decks, ice melts in bright clear glasses, desire in language recedes as the dark *what-ifs* in an ash tree blink and fly. All over there are damp carpets. Stillness. Subdivision. Stillness.

Rummage through the playhouse. Rummage through the playhouse for props, for costumes, for masks and games, imagined lighting for the corners, for direction—there is an empty milk-bottle box from another's generation: in the web and eggs, in the shadows of an underworld in bloom listen for music and motive. Drag out *hand-me-downs* and bright African tribal costumes. That quick shade belongs to the grackle. Ignore the ice cream truck, its shrill siren. We'll drag out chairs from the kitchen and set them up in the yard, uneven displays of ambition. Up there, in the balcony seats, a winged creature we can't name. Costume, lights, seating—where are the players? Come from practice and lessons, most will filter in and out as we go, tragedians of twilight adolescence, when the world leaned on its ears as if to listen to us and spun carelessly on. A tiny finch tangles himself in a common bush and we commence.

You will play the dog. You will play the brother. You will play the moon. You will play the best friend. You will play the best friend leaving. You will play the sister. You will play night. You will play yourself. You will play the window. You will play *underneath-the-bed*. Hurry now, the afternoon light is fading. Let's begin before we smell dinner in the melancholy blood. Read the script from the air. Places, everyone!

SCENE: A backyard, bordered on three sides by a chain link fence. Audience perspective is from a wooden deck jutting out from the rear of the house, looking into the yard. A large ash tree grows toward the right side of the yard; in the left portion of the yard there is a tree trunk. A wooden playhouse stands against the back fence with four windowless windows. Grass grows unevenly. On the horizon the audience can dimly perceive Mt. Fuji in postcard-perfection. This is from a dream.

An afternoon lasts a millennium.

Tiny fragments of boy all over the yard. A ghostliness permeated by the human. The yard breathes in its stillness. Cars over the hill *shoosh* themselves into the sinuses of the waiting actors. A bird splinters. A squirrel *chuffs*, peeved at the presumption of narrative prowling beneath him. A bus roars by. Evening waits impatiently. Nothing.

One by one lights begin to appear on facing houses. A bedroom window goldens forth its claim on the lives within, tosses silver into the yard. Action. Silhouettes flick across. (Distant horn.) All over the neighborhood, silverware falls and rises, dishes disappear into sinks, and then into cupboards, and then a kind of hum settles around homes, the glow of TV igniting the placid *yes* of desire to form. A few animals gather at windows to peer into colorful dark, senses stirred by what drifts into the loss of human evenings. And in the yard the actor waits, the actors of himself wait. There seems to be great pleasure in stillness, in observing with pointed ears the slow tumble of lives and the hanging of lives on walls for the wrinkles to lift. The slow nightly circling of humans and furniture, each animating the other finally towards some restful sleep. Soon it will be entirely dark. The chairs in the yard will grow cool and damp with the moon.

Cherene Sherrard

Whistler's Walk

At the final interview, Mrs. Proctor and the foundation head, Dr. Doreen Scott, spent the entire time admiring Marcia's skin.

"What do you use?"

"Ma'am?"

"Your skin," Mrs. Proctor said, "it's like..." She looked around the foundation office, formerly the master's study, her eyes resting on the cherry finish of the bureau, "...mahogany. Polished mahogany. What do you use?"

"Soap, mostly. Aveeno."

"Ah," she nodded, as if Marcia had confessed a home remedy.

They hired her on the spot. The applicant pool was less impressive than they'd anticipated, mostly comprised of illiterates, single mothers, and preteens. When Julianne Proctor and Doreen Scott were young coeds, they would have jumped at the chance to spend their summers exposing the world to their Southern heritage, to promenade around the main dining room as if each were the lady of the house, safe in the knowledge that it was only a dress rehearsal for the time when they would take their places at their husbands' tables. Nowadays, they were lucky to receive sufficient nominations for the cotillions held at the estate during the Mardi Gras season. Their nieces and friends' daughters preferred to gallivant on the beaches of Hilton Head rather than volunteer for a summer. How times had changed, they reflected as Marcia read from the script that they handed her near the close of the interview.

The wording and inflections of that brochure were now committed to Marcia's memory, part of the carefully preset tour written out by the docents. She suspected they wanted to reassure themselves that she could read and did not stutter.

"You're very lucky," they said, congratulating her when she finished, "only well-spoken young ladies may conduct our guests through the house."

Marcia would later tell Candace: "I expected them to burst into applause. Like I was a talking dog on *That's Incredible.*"

"You ain't kidding," Candace said, twisting the zigzag paper around a pinch of tobacco. "When I said I need to leave before four to pick up my girls, Mrs. Proctor stared like I was some kind of circus freak. Then she asks 'how old I was when I had my first baby and what about school' and 'hadn't I ever heard of birth control?' I told her I knew birth control, but she didn't know Trevor Leon Powell!"

Candace does not give tours. Instead, she tends the beverage bar in the gift shop. She befriended Marcia on her first day at Oak Lane, telling her who was nice and who was stuck up and which burrito to select from the lunchroom vending machine. Besides Mrs. Proctor, Candace is the only white woman working at Oak Lane who will go out of her way to speak to Marcia.

After seven months, her recitation has taken on the seamless rhythm of a book on tape. Organic pauses punctuate the question and answer periods, peppered with details she pretends to have researched on her own. The weekend before her first solo tour, she had rented all the picturesque Civil War films she could find, from *Gone With the Wind* to *The Blue and the Gray.* She paused and rewound the scenes where the women engaged in coquetry and self-sacrifice. Alone in her room, she affected an accent that even Vivian Leigh would have been proud of.

"Marcy," Mrs. Proctor says, "your slip is showing."

"Morning, Mrs. Proctor."

Marcia's skirt always catches on the wires threaded through the heavy crinoline they are required to wear. She tugs at the petticoat, and then twists the navy overskirt until the hem is parallel with the

red rayon ruffles. Before turning back to Mrs. Proctor, she admires the lace fichu resting lightly over her bosom. The bodice of the dress was designed for a less-endowed woman.

Mrs. Proctor sips the foam off her cocoa; she looks like a hungry goldfish, and Marcia can tell she is itching to reach her long silk-swathed fingers under the dress and give the underskirt a good yank. The Oak Lane Preservation Society insists each of its tour guides wear antebellum attire, right down to the corsets, which they provide, courtesy of Victoria Secret's "Southern Romance" collection.

Like many of the senior docents, Mrs. Proctor donates her time. Once, only society members, donors, and volunteers staffed Oak Lane. That was before the travel editor for *Southern Living* visited the estate and raved about the "glorious evening sunsets viewed from a chaise lounge," the "molten sweetness of Aunt Maggie's pralines" and the "lulling echoes of evening song rising from the ruins of slave cabins." After that, the tourists came in droves. Developers bid up the prices of nearby, long-abandoned plantations and invested more money into hiring historical advisors, architects, and contractors who specialized in restoration and renovation. To accommodate the tour demands, the Society began to advertise for guides at River City Community College. It was not a prospect that pleased the docents.

Her costume arranged, Marcia says, "I better go meet the first group," then waits until Mrs. Proctor jerks her chin in acknowledgment.

Dismissed, Marcia walks around the front portico, pausing at the top of the steps between the classic marble columns. Her eyes rove the well-worn receiving stairs, following the path that ends at the highway and resumes on the other side before sloping into the river. Beyond her field of vision, huge barges traverse the Mississippi. She imagines the former owner striding to meet one of those barges, and then returning, flushed with the wealth of a recently sold cane crop.

She surveys the group from the veranda. There is the man in khakis, focusing his Nikon on a group of young girls, sisters probably, who impatiently flank their mother. A trio of women with long straight hair sits between the gardeners' leaf pyramids, their eyes closed, heads back, bare arms outstretched, legs bent in the lotus position. There are all the usual families. One of them notices Marcia right away. The conscientious daughter gestures to her mother and father to stop their conversation and pay attention. The son pushes his glasses up onto his nose, clutching a pen and a spiral notebook. Marcia knows all these tourists. The chatter drifts to her in snippets: *Kate, don't touch that; Roger, Donne-moi l'Evian, spit out your gum. Which plantation is this? When do we get to eat?*

A few minutes pass. The sunlight peels through layers of cumulus in the fields surrounding the estate. Now, only the cluster of men in business suits hasn't noticed her. She waits for a lull in their conversation and says: "Ladies and Gentlemen, if you will follow me into the foyer. We will begin our tour."

She has just finished the introduction, always conducted in the main hall, when a rapid knocking at the window causes her to wince—the windows were manufactured from 160-year-old Venetian glass—and she motions to the two latecomers to use the rear entrance.

"Sorry, we were taking pictures," one of women says as they link arms and situate themselves slightly away from the group.

Marcia smiles what she hopes is a gracious smile and launches into a thorough history of the family portraits. As she leads her obedient line carefully through the house, she finds herself continually drawn to the couple. One of the women has long dreads extending halfway down her back, and the other wears a fuchsia sundress. A flash of color against the neutral tones of the interior, the sundress flutters on the periphery, perpetually in her blind spot.

They whisper continually. Then, as she is explaining the difference between regular and mourning china, Fuchsia Dress asks, "Where are the slave quarters?"

Marcia's smile stings as she gestures through the windows to East Pavilion and says, "That's where the ruins of the slave cabins used to stand. But the foundation felt the location would be better served by a gift shop."

The two glare at her in astonishment, but there are no more questions, leaving her free to proceed outside to the back veranda.

"The second owners of Oak Lane, the Jefferson Daniels, arranged for a new kitchen to be built adjacent to the house so that the heat, smoke, and stench of the food wouldn't overtake the living areas. Just before serving dinner, the slaves would carry the food from the kitchen down this path through the geometric garden and into the dry pantry which connects to the dining room."

Marcia points to a pathway of smooth stone blocks, a little more than a thousand feet long, bordered on both sides by hedges. Everyone in the tour cranes his or her neck towards the path.

"They called it whistler's walk. Can anybody here tell me why?"

The group is silent.

A young boy, about nine, raises his hand and says, "Why?"

Marcia smiles; it is all in the timing. "Because the slave who served in the dining room would have to whistle as he carried the food from the kitchen to the table along this path. Can you guess why?"

They shake their heads.

"So the master would know that the food hadn't been sampled."

"What if you didn't know how to whistle?" the boy says.

Before Marcia can respond, his mother says, "Only those who could whistle probably had the privilege. Am I right?"

Marcia nods, says, "Sometimes if you are very quiet, you can still hear the remnants of a tune in the garden. We call it whistler's ghost."

A hush descends as they listen for a moment, hearing only the wind in the oaks and the buzz of mosquitoes. After an appropriate pause, Marcia ushers the group into the ladies' parlor. When she looks back, the women have gone.

Jerry kicks gum wrappers and bottles around the parking lot as he watches Marcia lead a group through a maze of hedges on the west side of the house. She looks like a page out of a child's coloring book. But instead of flesh, the child chose burnt sienna; where chartreuse would have served, she went for black. The result was a Technicolor paper doll set against Oak Lane's historic backdrop. To him, she is irresistible; he imagines her as a pliable, but permanent, wax model on a Hollywood film set.

The moist air off the Mississippi keeps the red clay around Oak Lane packed tight. But on days like today, when the river is low, an afternoon breeze stirs it into spinning clouds that catch you unaware. Those dust clouds set Jerry sneezing the day he met Marcia. She interrupted a mini-tempest while crossing the parking lot. It must have stung her eyes, because she paused to wipe her face before offering him a glass of lemonade before he had to crawl back under the tour bus.

Their fingers barely touched as she extended the glass, but he noticed the tips of her gloves still came away a pale red, and he looked down as he said, "Thank you...Miss?"

"Marcia."

"You live out here?"

"No. In River City."

"I'm Jerry."

"Much obliged."

He was handsome in a tall, athletic way. Body a bit too skinny for his frame, but not wiry or youthful. Most folks put him closer to forty than thirty. Still, something about him must have caught her eye that

day, because she lingered in the English garden during her lunch break, trampling rose petals as she paced the rows.

Today, he doesn't linger. He puts his hands in his pockets and looks down the highway, his back to the group as they pass near enough to notice a lone black man in the parking lot. Visiting a woman at her place of business might be taken the wrong away, and he doesn't want anything to interfere with his plans.

It is Candace who delays Marcia's return home after the last tour of the evening. Marcia is exhausted and wants nothing more than to soak in a hot bath and read the latest issue of *Essence*. Instead, she waits at the foot of the main staircase while Candace sneaks upstairs to the master bedroom with her boyfriend Trevor.

The bed in the master's bedroom was hewn from the wood of a single tree, felled in 1832 by Mr. Phillip Randolph for his new wife. Four cylindrical posts flank a tall mahogany headboard and three Gothic arch panels with leaf-carved rails and round ribbed posts. Marcia cracks the door. She sees Candace and Trevor twisting beneath the double wedding ring quilt, a present from Dorothea Hall's grandmother on the day of her nuptials. Sadly, the war robbed Dorothea of a groom, and the quilt was never used, until now. It is dim, but the light from the hall illuminates Candace's hands. Her fingers clench the headboard as Trevor propels her backward. Marcia winces as Candace's hands bend at the wrists to cushion the wood from the wall. She moves away from the door.

As she waits, she thinks of the bills assembled on her coffee table, framing the letter she received yesterday afternoon and left open on the kitchen table for her mother to see: an acceptance from Agnes Scott, offering a partial scholarship.

The couple descends, arms linked, and then all three walk in silence to the parking lot. Only after Trevor leaves, does Candace venture a conciliatory smile.

"You want to stay over tonight? I'll do your hair for tomorrow, those spirals you like?" she says.

Candace's hands shake as she pulls a single cigarette out of her bodice. Marcia, who has already changed back into her street clothes, opens the trunk of her car and tosses in a garment bag containing her uniform. She unlocks the passenger door for Candace.

By nine o'clock, when Marcia pulls up in front of their apartment, her mother, a nurse, has already begun her shift at River City General. But she's left the lights on in the kitchen to welcome her daughter home. An "I Love the Gators" magnet, purchased on a trip to Orlando, the only time her mother ever left the state, affixes Marcia's admission letter to the refrigerator. At the bottom her mother has written a note in red ink: *There's a plate in the microwave. Call Jerry.*

Did she even read it? Marcia pushes "cook," and then three minutes on their microwave before sinking into a kitchen chair. Candace offered her a Filet-O-Fish, but the greasy smell of McDonald's filling the interior of her car made her ill. How easily Candace pacified her daughters. There were three in all, Amanda, Alicia and Vanessa, the two oldest with their mother's dark brown hair and green eyes, the youngest, Vanessa, with Trevor's blond curls. Marcia isn't sure who fathered the other two. Candace never speaks about him.

It is not too late to call Jerry, but instead Marcia draws a bath. She is still bothered by the women—she can't remember which one was wearing the fuchsia dress, or even which group they were a part of because in her mind they have already joined a segregated tour, a disapproving black congregation whose job it is to make her feel uncomfortable, at the front of which is always her mother. Lately, one or two straggle

from the rest to surprise her (arms folded, hands on hips, mouths turned downward) each time she turns into a hallway or opens the door to the dining room at Oak Lane. Now she's afraid they could be in the house with her, waiting for her to open the bathroom door in her towel. Catch her with a question when she's not prepared. One thing she does appreciate about Jerry is that her job does not seem to bother him. Calling him might take her mind off the stragglers, but she decides it is not a good idea.

Jerry watches the phone. The game is on, but he is not watching it. F time in ten years the Saints are poised to go to the Super Bowl, and every man in River City has his eyes glued to the television set. Except one. Jerry Cahill sits on the edge of his sofa in front of a blank screen, staring down at the caller ID box every time the ring sounds. The trill illuminates the emptiness of his home.

Glancing at his wall clock, he sees that it is past time for Marcia to arrive home. He knows this, not because she told him, but because he follows her every Wednesday, Thursday, and Monday, and knows to the hour the days she works nights, the days she locks up, and the days that she gives her friend a ride home to her trailer. He pictures her sitting at her kitchen table, head bent, pen and checkbook in hand, a small solar powered calculator beside her. He recognizes that posture. The set of her chin against her left palm, her arched brows convex in frustration. The wistful smile that glimmers just for a moment, when she pauses and peers through the mini-blinds, meeting his eyes as he waits in his car on the opposite side of the street.

Their first date was three weeks prior, and he did everything right. Everything he knew would please a girl like her. Bought pink carnations. Made reservations at Dupar's Fish Emporium and ordered a bottle of wine instead of by the glass. He also stood up every time she left the table to go to the bathroom. Three times. He remembered. Their

conversation gave him no sign that he might not see her again. Quite to the contrary, there is every reason to think she shares his enthusiasm. There is the list, after all.

He glances up at the bulletin board on the wall behind the TV, just to the left. An erasable board he uses to remind himself that he needs eggs, butter, toilet paper. Now, it is absent of such mundane items. Now, it reads simply: Marcia, followed by:

1. Kiss shared at the door
2. Feeding her one spoon of chocolate cheesecake.
3. 3 emissions of laughter.
4. Admired the car, cherry freshener.
5. Sat with ankles touching under the table

He discovered this last one because he purposefully dropped his napkin to check. His mother taught him that nice girls don't cross their legs in public.

The phone rings. He leans over, spying the words "out of the area" in the little green window on the handset. He knows it is her. He lets the phone ring twice, and, shaking a bit, picks up the receiver.

"Hi there."

There is a pause and then, "Is this Jerry...Kay...Heel?"

"Marcy, you know it's me."

"Um, Mr. Kayheel, this is Suzette calling from Bell South."

Jerry is confused. Why is she playing this game? Should he play along? He tries to be a good sport. "Yeah, sure. Suzette."

"Uh, yes. Are you aware that you could be saving as much as five cents per minute and amass frequent flyer mileage by switching to our local long distance plan?"

"Why, no Suzette. How does that work?"

"With local long distance you pay one monthly fee and receive up to 100 free calls. Whereas now..."

He gets impatient. After waiting all evening to call her, she decides to play this game.

"Listen here," he interrupts, "I've been thinking about you, and I was wondering if you'd liked...um...bowling. You see, I'm part of a league at the garage, and we bowl at High Lanes on West Creek road every Friday night. I was thinking you could come. You don't have to bowl, if you don't want to. If you're afraid of messing up your nails. I notice you keep them polished. So if you think you'd like to come, I could pick you up, say around seven?"

There is no response on the other line. He can tell she is considering his offer. Afraid she might say no, he does not wait for her to decide.

"Tell you what. I'll swing by at seven and if you are waiting outside then I'll know your answer is yes."

He hangs up and then instantly regrets it. He forgot to remind her to wear thick socks.

Marcia reclines against her inflatable pillow in the tangerine scented bathwater, her papery curls pinned atop her head. Without her glasses on, the edges of the tile bleed into the steam rising up off the water. Each night, she soaks the day away in the tub. She transports herself far away from the boundaries of River City to the manicured quads of Agnes Scott. Her hair is cut in a professional bob. She wears a white blouse and a gray or black plaid skirt. Maybe even a sweater set. She wonders if she might carry a backpack, or a satchel? On campus she will smile at everyone. But it will be a serious smile. An intelligent smile. It will not matter that she is five years older than the average freshman. She will go to her professor's office hours and make sure they know that she, Marcia Miller, is serious about her studies. That she plans to do great things.

The phone ringing in the kitchen seems miles away. No doubt it is Candace calling to whine about Trevor. She has stopped wasting good

advice on Candace. Two weeks ago at a happy hour, Trevor squeezed her ass while she was ordering an Amaretto Sour. When she turned around, he looked away and whistled, as if it was a big joke. Later he cornered her on the way the bathroom.

"What do you want?" she asked.

He leaned in, pressing her back against the women's bathroom door, close enough for her to smell the mix of tobacco and Jack'n'Coke on his breath, to see the white film coating his tongue.

Marcia met his gaze briefly, and then glanced away, twisting her mouth in distaste. He backed away a little, stung by her clear disinterest. Trevor had what one might call all-American good looks, and he was not used to resistance. But Marcia perceived something sultry, dangerous around his eyes, which were the color of an overcast sky.

She repeated her question, keeping her voice even, but low.

He stood there just looking at her. She waited a few moments, and then pushed past him. Rejoining Candace at the bar, she finished her drink and told her she was going home.

Candace looked concerned, "What's wrong? Did Trevor..." Her eyes darted uneasily around the room.

Marcia shook her head, "Did I say anything about Trevor? I'm tired. I'll see you tomorrow at the big house."

Once outside, Marcia took a deep breath, expelling the smoke and seediness of the bar at the same time. She noticed a man a few feet away from her car. Just standing and watching her. She half turned to go back inside, but then he crossed the street and faded into the darkness. She walked swiftly to her car, got in, and drove home.

After that incident, Marcia has been careful never to be near Trevor again. She refuses the double dates that Candace always wants to arrange with his black friends, and she bites her tongue when she sees Trevor exiting the Waffle House with a redheaded woman wearing pink heels and tight jeans. She does not tell Candace that the woman

grips the hand of a strawberry blond little girl who could be Vanessa's twin.

The next morning, Marcia lays her gloves on the table and fills her mug halfway with coffee before adding in three packets of sugar and filling the other half with lukewarm milk. She pulls a chair a few feet away from the breakfast table and flips her skirts over the back so they won't wrinkle.

"Why don't you eat before you put on that getup?" her mother asks.

They stare at each across the table, each taking in the other's uniform. Her mother is just returning from the night shift, and this is the one hour they share in the house together before Marcia leaves for Oak Lane. Marcia wonders if she looks as fatigued as her mother does at the end of the day. Her faded scrubs make her brown skin look sallow, and her hair is pulled into a tight bun at the base of her neck, drawing attention to the delicate lines beginning to worry her forehead.

Marcia drinks her coffee, but does not touch the oatmeal, toast, or hard-boiled eggs that her mother has placed on the table. When she finishes, she removes her acceptance letter from the refrigerator and lays it on top of her mother's newspaper.

"Did you even read it?" she asks.

Her mother slides the letter over to the side of the table. "What's a six-letter word for prostitute? Whore is too short."

"Try harlot."

"That's right. You were always so good at these."

After filling the letters in, she considers Marcia for a moment. How immaculate she is, not a wrinkle or smudge anywhere. Even her make-up is perfect and understated. Only her hair, which is still contained under a bandanna, is out of place. She looks like a little girl playing

dress-up in her mother's clothes, except, her mother thinks, those are not my clothes.

"You must have really impressed those society ladies for them to give you that scholarship."

"It's only a partial scholarship, but thank you for at least acknowledging it."

"How are you going to make up the rest?"

"I'll manage."

Her mother shrugs.

"You could at least say that you are proud of me."

"I can barely look at you."

Marcia pulls the bandana off her head and tucks it in her bag with her street clothes.

"I've got to go. Candace said she'd do my hair before we go to work."

Jerry wakes to a loud rapping on his windshield. It is Marcia, dressed as Scarlett O'Hara. How lovely she looks, he thinks, even her face bears the smoldering expression that Scarlett always fixed on her beaus. A real firecracker she is.

He wipes the saliva from the corners of his mouth and cracks the window.

"Have you been here long?" she asks.

"I thought you might like a ride to work. I remembered how much you liked my car, I opened a new one of those cherry fresheners."

Marcia frowns.

"I have my own car," she says, "and I have to pick up Can...a friend on the way."

"Alright then." He cannot hide his disappointment, "I'll see you tonight."

"Tonight?"

"At bowling."

"I have to work tonight Jerry. I won't feel up to going out after."

"Oh. Well. We can stay in. I'll make you dinner."

She glances at her watch. "I'm going to be late."

Without saying goodbye she walks away, and then turns back to point at a street sign. "You know," she says, "after two hours, they tow."

Make believe is not just for children, but there is something different about the pretending that adults do. Not everyone needs flamboyance to get into character. It is there as soon as they drop in their punch card, take a seat in the office cubicle, or neatly arrange their papers in front of the judge. Hours can go by without them saying a word to another, and still they keep to their script. The lines, when cued, emit seamlessly. This is not true for Marcia. As a drag queen might need the squeeze of nylons and the pinch of stilettos, or a highway patrolman not feel quite as steady unseated from his motorcycle, she can't do it without the corset—already a size too small—hooked as tightly as possible. Only after everything is in place, and she stands at attention on the veranda, does the euphoria descend.

Today she is antsy and can't wait for Candace to finish her hair.

"Careful girl, you're burning my ear."

"Shush, don't move. I'm just...about...done," Candace says as she squeezes the curling iron, loosening and tensing its grip on an inch-wide section of Marcia's hair. She blows on it twice, "There. That was the last one." She slides the iron free, leaving a fat smoking coil in its place.

Candace gives Marcia a hand mirror and awkwardly balances a larger glass behind her so she can view the back.

"Mommy," Vanessa runs, pink and steaming, into the kitchenette, her sister Amanda close on her bare heels, clutching her school clothes in balled up fists.

Candace jerks the iron at the flustered Amanda. "I told you to mind your sister."

Turning, she projects her voice over the applause of the audience on the *Price Is Right*, "Ma, will you get them dressed?"

To Marcia she says, "You like?"

"I think you missed your true calling."

"Oh, this is just for fun. Next time, I'll put a cellophane on it."

"No, nothing fancy. This is just right."

Marcia removes the drape she has used to cover her uniform.

"Mammy!" Vanessa says, catching onto her petticoat.

"Excuse me."

Marcia snatches the ruffles out of her hand.

"This is Marcia, honey," Candace says. "She doesn't recognize you in your work clothes."

On the way to Oak Lane, the two do not banter or joke or complain. Marcia takes in the flatness of the delta, the fallow land, the stooped forms of scattered migrant workers picking over the last of the bolls.

After a moment, Candace asks, "Is it okay if I push the seat back?"

Marcia nods, barely taking her eyes off the road, waiting for a straightaway to push by the semi she's been riding for the last few miles. Once she passes the truck, she turns her attention back to Candace, but she has fallen asleep.

Marcia does not tell Candace about Jerry until they arrive at Oak Lane and are sitting on the back steps of the big house, facing the separate kitchen, sipping a tall, sweating glass of sweet tea. Then, she tells her how she and Jerry had had one date and how strangely he behaved. How his whole manner was disconcerting. He gobbled up

her every word, and then got short with the waitress when she brought mashed potatoes instead of baked with her fried catfish.

"Where'd you find him?" Candace asks.

"Here," Marcia replies. "He works on Gray Line. One of their buses got a flat, and he drove up here to fix it. I brought him a glass of lemonade."

Candace shakes her head and makes a face. Her glass has begun to drip onto her navy skirt. "You're too nice to folks."

"Well he was nice too. But after that one date I didn't plan to see him again. You know I'm not interested in a steady man right now."

Particularly one from River City, she adds to herself silently. She does not want to offend Candace.

Candace looks thoughtful. "Seems like I knew a Jerry who worked on my Ford, you know, when the front axle went? He was nice too. Let me pay him half up front and the rest over a couple of months. I sure appreciated it. You think it could be the same guy? You ever seen his shop?"

"Nope. I told you we didn't go out again. And that's what's strange, because he picked me up from your house, and I had him drop me off at the corner of Fifth Street and Monroe after dinner. But somehow he knew just where I lived."

"It might come in handy to have a man who knows how to fix a car. Particularly as yours is always breaking down."

"I'm telling you there was something not right about him."

Candace is skeptical and Marcia is frustrated with her. As long as a man pays for dinner and opens the door, Candace thinks he's Prince Charming. Marcia sighs. Some women can be smart about everything else and then here comes a pair of tight fitting-jeans and a thick money clip and they scrape their priorities down the garbage disposal. She is never going to be like Candace. Or like her mother, who still listens to Smokey Robinson on Sunday afternoons, holding her father's picture.

After the story of the ghost, Marcia shoos the group into the parlor, skipping the master's office and the nursery. How will they know? She is tired and this is the last tour. Everyone else has gone home, and she still has to lock up.

It is a privilege to lock up, Mrs. Proctor reminds her, carefully affixing the heavy, iron ring and its three dangling skeleton keys to Marcia's skirt. In the antebellum times, only the mistress of the house could carry the ring on her person, she says, as she makes Marcia recite the tasks she has the honor of performing that evening. It is early Spring, and though the days are extending, she feels uneasy to be alone on the plantation as the violet evening light creeps from the river, through the Spanish moss draping the canopy of trees flanking the house. That sultry glow pours in through the cracks in the handmade lace curtains in the ladies' parlor and plays with the shadows on the velvet draperies in the upstairs bedroom. She covers the furniture and locks the upstairs rooms first. On her way downstairs, she hears it.

"Sth, sth, sth, sth."

Marcia circles the house, trying to pinpoint where the sound, the sound of an old woman sucking air through her long lost front teeth, is coming from.

"Sth, sth, sth, sth."

There it is again. This time more distinct. She walks to the office window and gingerly holds aside the curtain.

Standing partway between the old kitchen and one of the garden hedges is a glimmer of light, bent to look like a man. Nearly transparent, a blink and he might waver. But he is there. Peering through the office window, Marcia feels strangely not alone. Her bottom lip quivers and then begins to tremble. The room, the world, goes quiet.

The figure nears the house and then disappears. She remains frozen at the window, wondering where the master would have kept his rifle.

Surely there's an old gun around the place, assuming that whatever's out back may be frightened by a gun.

There is a loud rapping at the door. She jumps, startled, but at least a knocking door is less suspicious than bent light sucking air.

She lets the curtain fall and exits the office, walking into the entry. As she nears the door, she sees a man in dark overalls and a red baseball cap peering through the windowpanes framing the front door. It is Jerry.

"What's he doing here?" she says to no one in particular and then ducks quickly into the parlor.

But she is too slow; he sees the edge of her petticoat trail against the cedar plank floor, and he raps on the door even louder. This time calling her name. "Marcia, open up. It's me."

Marcia retreats to the rear of the house and unlocks the back door. He is crazy, she thinks, love crazy to come up here after me this late. With everybody gone after I tell him I can't meet him. There is a phone in the office, but to reach it she has to cross the front door. She dismisses that idea, thinking that by the time the sheriff drove the twenty miles out to Oak Lane it would be too late.

She opens the back door and tiptoes quickly down the stairs. Cursing as the old planks creak and groan with every gentle step. A faint musical trill punctuates her swift movement. Why couldn't it have been the ghost she'd seen and not Jerry?

She decides to hide in the kitchen, which has no door to lock and conceals as much of her as will fit behind the old wood-burning stove. It scarcely covers her skirts. Why hadn't she changed earlier? She prays that in the gloom and dark she will be hard to spot. Then, she hears whistling. This time she knows it is not the ghost. It is Jerry, coming to punish her for standing him up. How would he do it, she wonders, almost laughing at Mrs. Proctor's reaction to the impropriety of her dying on the premises. Perhaps he has a weapon, but no. He is

strong; he has large hands, the hands of a working man. He'll probably strangle her. Strangle her and then rape her. Or maybe the other way around. Why did she hide here, in a shack with only one way in and out? She bites her lip and tastes blood.

She catches his shadow before he enters. It prompts her to act. This man is not going to find her an easy mark. Kneeling down, she grasps the heavy handle of a cast iron pot, noting it is the perfect diameter for blackening redfish—the Friday lunch special. A pan of this quality cannot be purchased new. It feels centuries old. Marcia will not wait for him to get to her first; she jumps from behind the stove, brandishing the pan like a battle axe.

Jerry steps back.

"Marcia?"

"You stay away, you hear?"

Her voice is a screech-owl's cry. He does not recognize her in it at all. The Marcia he remembers has a melodious cadence, and she is always polite. This harpy appears to be insane. Her hair swings loose from its pins, and sweat darkens the bodice of her gown. He marvels at her anger. It is a repulsive thing to behold. Is she afraid? Why? All he wants is to treat her like the lady he thought she was, a lady who desires a man who will take charge and care for her. Somehow, it has all gone wrong, and she has become afraid of him.

One good swing at the head, she thinks. The one useful thing her father taught her was that if you shoot, shoot to kill. She applies that advice to the cast iron pan. She will tell Mrs. Proctor that she has never seen this man. Then she hesitates. Mrs. Proctor might think they are in this together; that's what white people always think. They might say she let him in. That together they planned to steal...what, she couldn't say. All those old foundation ladies speak of Oak Lane like it's a treasure trove, but there is nothing here she would ever steal. Nothing but history, and you can't steal that.

"Don't come any closer," she warns.

Jerry feels disgust for her. He felt a wash of sadness the first time he set foot on the grounds to repair the bus tire. He wanted to tell Marcia she didn't have to work here. But it is too late; she is already a part of the architecture. He recognizes her fear and anger. As if he has insulted her by offering his hand. He knows the expression she wears like a flag because he sees it all the time on the faces of white women when he asks, hat in hand, if they called for a tow. He always waits patiently until the look dissipates, and they judge him trustworthy. Occasionally, the look freezes on their faces, and they shake their heads, preferring to risk a random good Samaritan rather than to join him in the front seat as he tows their car. He feels disgust for Marcia and her misplaced fear. Why is she afraid of him and not this place? She wants to join him to this property, to make him one more unsettled ghost, one more unburied corpse. Well, he won't let her. He backs away. He wants to forget her. To forget the look that says: I'd rather be mugged, or raped, or murdered than have you save me. He shakes his head. If he looks like that kind of man to her, what must he look like to them? As he walks away, he doesn't feel like whistling anymore.

Marcia waits in the kitchen with the pan until it is fully dark. Then she races out. It is quiet but for the chirping of crickets and the far-off honking of geese departing for their Northern homes. She trips over something in the doorway, dropping the pan with a thud as she breaks her fall. She stands up and reaches down to retrieve what has tripped her. It is bouquet of white roses, plucked from the English garden, strung together with a piece of twine. The roses, picked in their maturity, have already begun to wilt.

Rosa Alice Branco

Maritime Adventure

(translated by Alexis Levitin)

It's night when the trawlers go down the river,
the sound of their motors doesn't smother the slapping of the waves,
they look like fireflies with women's names:
Rosy, Gloria, Princess of the Seas,
as they slip through sewage, plastic bags
and bottles, the maritime adventure
peopled with new artifacts. One has to
shake the oil from the fish, brush them off, flip shut
their switch so that their mercury becomes invisible
and the fishmongers can show off the gills of healthy
jewfish of good lineage. It's no longer what it used to be
and I suspect it never was. How romantic it is to gaze at the river,
the procession of trawlers, Christ crucified, his mother
crying. It's Good Friday, the weekend,
the seaside drive is filling up with cars, people cramming
into bars along the beach. Later at night comes the benediction
and a halo of sanctity descends upon the fish,
the sardines, the whiting, the sea-bass,
may they pray for us, now that they are lit by oil
and mercury glistens in the heart of the elect.

Fisherman & Son

(translated by Alexis Levitin)

His eyes roll 'round his cigarette.
He's worn out, for night has intruded on
his midday. He opens a can, pours off some oil,
and dunks his bread right then and there. Scarcely
any motion as he waits for a tug on the line
that will drag him in forever. Down at the bottom now
he's reading *The Lusiads*, without dissecting all the clauses
or the puny fish that he has caught. Half a dozen eyes at
the doorstep and his wife scraping scales from the floor. It pains him,
that doubled-over life that he has given her. Now he flows, Canto
to Canto, and feels himself a Vasco da Gama
heteronym parting the seas leading to his goddess.
May he rest in peace, the family crying all those days
without support. The tallest stripling takes his father's place,
but times have changed, there's rage in the kid's saliva,
in the smell of fish that leads to nothing. His eyes
are on the land. Late afternoon, the seaside road.
Cars, one by one, are rolling by at cruising speed.

Zack Finch

Spectacles Lost in the Sea

The shark is certainly circling something.
And the seashells' whispering suggests
A mysterious take: jeweled flesh;
Therefore, a theft. Life guards itself
With death, leaving the rest of us bereft,

Wide open for suggestion—like the meaning
Of the green flash at the close of the sea swallows'
Mating parade: the bleeding
Fish they pass between them, from beak to beak,
Is symbolic of speech. It must have been silent

The hour you rushed down to the beach with your
Wind sleeve. The dark silhouettes of the fishermen
Mending their nets cut a dangerous
Figure. The sea too was curious, and so it rose
A little higher in the moonlight. Trauma is like this:

Cutting the cast away to find the broken body
Vanished: Nothing but knots in the mesh, or perhaps
An empty hourglass, thoughtless and sandless.
The body's bronze offers no good defense: In-
Visible rays hurt the most. On the beach now,

You can run with your eyes closed but never run into
Me. This is symbolic of grieving: rubbing in lotion
In circular rings around the far-sighted eyes
From which the last bit of light has departed. The green pieces
Of glass we are hunting are therefore especially smooth.

Ronaldo V. Wilson

from Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man

Incident and Episode in the Red House

The white man in his bed is cast in a low red light. Grey hair coats his skin-rubbery torso. The brown boy is wearing blue G-Star raw denim jeans, a black Donna Karan slim tight top with green cashmere socks and olive-toned clogs, which hang over the side of the white man's waterbed. How the brown boy arcs and extends his legs over the white man and off the bed makes him think of two knives piercing through his own hard, smart skull.

The brown boy said, before he lay in bed, while on the toilet shitting: *I felt good after writing that poem—it was honest*, but knows that it is not honest, to think of something so private and to say it out loud. The brown boy spoke to one of his brown girlfriends who said, *Your life needs more suspense.* The brown boy suggests to the white man: *We should commit a double suicide.* The white man tells him: *Oh, go do Tae-Bo.*

On the telephone with the brown girl's grandmother, the brown boy tells her he found the bag he was looking for, a weekend tote, black, canvas with white threaded leather straps and a thick leather bottom. And it's Coach. The white man had a version of it waiting for him as a Christmas present, but the bag was tan with black trim—absolutely no use for the subway.

The brown boy and the white man drove to the Hamptons in the silver car, and went straight to the Coach store for an even exchange. The brown boy does not tell the grandmother this, nor that the white man

remembered, automatically, the bag was something the brown boy said he wanted, nor that his white man had it waiting for him, in the red house on the big bed in a box.

Go Shower—is what the white man tells the brown boy to get him off the phone. He tells him three times before the brown boy moves.

The Chinese takeout is green and tan. In the shower, the brown boy knows what the shrimp will taste like, smothered in the bean sprouts and egg, fried and doused with oyster sauce. The food is predictable and exactly what he wants. The broccoli will clear him out the way he likes. To fill the white porcelain pot in the bathroom, where he will start in the morning, the first half of the Lewis biography of Booker T. Washington, is some of the knowablility the brown boy needs to get going.

Go Shower. This command reveals his relationship to the white man. He follows his lover's orders like a slave without anything but the promise of being fed and shown a movie.

The brown boy and the white man watch *Bring It On*. The brown boy says, *Their moves are black*, as a reflex to the dancing white cheerleaders on the screen. The brown boy is ready to read race as the white man doles the Egg Foo Young gravy over his own rice, but not before he smashes it down, flat, ready to absorb whatever amount of egg patty he can fit on top.

The brown boy is slightly sickened by his white man's hunger. But what takes over the brown boy's body, while he eats, is the charge of the black girls' hips and the fat black boys who bobble in their over-

sized tent shirts, their hard steps hitting as they stomp in the space of a shot.

When the white man watches the film, he is taking in *all love story*, lusting after the brunette white boy lead who falls for the blonde girl who is not offensive, just already worn-out around the eyes.

The brown boy is fascinated with the white girl's little waist and hips and notes the difference between hers and the black girl's. The lead black girl cheerleader, the white girl cheerleader's dark twin, has no love story. She has no function, but to dance and to be better at it than the white girl. The black girl's stomach is like a cylinder, tight, but not corseted in like a vase or figure eight. The brown boy moves with the black girl, and his chopsticks twitch when she and her squad out-dance any of the white girls who try to steal and reproduce what makes her, her—them, them.

The Brown Boy's Flesh

While being driven home in the silver car, towards the clear house down Route 25 A, the white man told the brown boy about a dessert he had at *Pace's*. When he said the flavor, *chocolate coffee bean gelato*, the possibility of its taste had only a second to register before the shock of its sight.

It was as black as your shirt. When the white man says this, the brown boy thought he was going to say: *it was as black as you*. The brown boy skips his skin and looks down at his shirt, the fabric a deep black, the color he imagined the white man spooning into his mouth at the end of dinner at the steak house.

What a life the brown boy has. If he were there, he would have ordered a marinated steak, medium well, charred just enough to kill the meat's run of blood. He wouldn't have ordered anything like *chocolate coffee bean gelato*; but, if he saw it, he would have been fascinated by something so black for dessert. In fact, he would probably have taken it from the white man, giving it back to him for only a taste.

The Brown Boy's Final Killing

After a barbeque, the brown boy is floating in a millionaire's pool with a gunite base. The sky is black above him, muddled. His body sinks just below the water, where he looks up into the black, where there is not a star to be seen. His hands lift through the water to cup a moth that floats on the surface.

If the others were not around, would he let it go, free it from the water to fly up in the black sky? At what point did he think to kill the insect? At what point did he decide that its life needed to be over? All he knows is that he thought nothing as he aped himself, half out of the water, above the small winged creature, forcing whirlpools and cross currents with his muscular arms, *to drown the moth.*

Of course, the moth died, swept under, gone, like it never existed. But at its last moment, when it did exist, it may have thought something, like *why?*—feeling a brown body from nowhere draw it to its death, the end of its white, winged self.

The Brown Boy's Silence

All I do is eat chocolate, get fat, and feel depressed. The brown boy—feeling sorry for himself—thought that this was something he meant as he thought it. But because the white man has made an omelette for the brown boy and is now cleaning the windows, the house smells thick with egg, butter, and Windex.

Even though he does it all for him, the brown boy resents that the white man has time to cook and to clean the windows, and thinks this as his breath becomes more and more shallow, breathing in butter and the drops of mist that V out of the bottle.

In summer, when the sky opens up after the August rain, the brown boy and the white man go to the beach. Fire Island is not the end of the world, where the brown boy wishes they could go, but at least at Cherry Grove, there is sometimes no one and nothing but a stretch of white beach that extends outward and cuts into the green of the ocean.

The brown boy hates the others who end up near him at the beach—mostly the ones smaller than him, the ones who are not born with the fat that has ebbed against him most of his life. The men at the beach, most whose pink chests are caved in and fatless, sharp and hard, grate his nerves. He hates them because his own body is soft and brown, and his voice is deep. Unlike theirs, his voice does not lilt into the air, nor would he ever use it to boast about money, toy dogs, real estate or what work he's left behind at the office.

Because he is trying to be free, the brown boy sometimes brings ear plugs. They cancel out what he does not want to hear, muffling out everything but his breath and the force of the waves pounding the

beach. And if he stuffs the plugs deeper, he can't even hear that. He only hears his breath and sees the water skirt up the beach, one flat surface, spreading out, then back into a single sheet.

On the beach, without sound, it seems cruel that the brown boy thinks about the white man lying there dead, his body pitched and bloated. He loves him so much, but he thinks being in silence and in such close range with those whom he hates makes him think of even his own white man's death.

He imagines himself cleansed of the thought, carried out and up over the ocean and dropped in the middle of it, swimming beautifully in any direction to escape it. Stuffed in behind his ear plugs, he hears only his pulse. He tries to listen for the silence after a single beat. In this quiet, for that moment, what can he do but just sit there in it, waiting for his white man to wake?

Susan Lewis

The Embrace

And in that ecstatic moment, he squeezed her harder than he had ever done before, crushing her ribcage against his like a sprig of lavender or a wedge of lemon, a bagpipe or an emergency alert, squeezing out her fragrance and her juices and her cries, cracking her hollow bones in order to coat himself in her yielding flesh. He did this to her because there was no other way to endure the concentrated intensity of attachment deposited by their years of intimacy, but also because, like Menelaus once, he could no longer do without one more thing: a certain piece of information. So he held on, while she, like Proteus, ran through her repertoire of alternatives: not lion or serpent, tree or torrent—but Lolita and hag, consumptive and shrew. He knew enough not to be surprised that the force of compression he exerted on her living core would transform her, as sand is transformed to stone by the weight of the world. And so, like the Grecian hero, he continued to hold on, contemplating the possibility that she might split down the middle, where the pressure from his embrace bore down the hardest—in which case, he thought, he would welcome the prospect of holding two of her. Or perhaps she might melt down into an entirely new form. And although he worried about the continuity of her identity, he felt sure he could adjust to anything—anything, short of erasure, or any other change which might somehow silence her, so that he would never find out what he needed to know.

The Appointment

The diagnosis was greed. The doctor, who had a degree in reality, told her she had all the symptoms. The patient demurred, citing her slavish addiction to duty. At this, the doctor, who was not known for his bedside manner, laughed knowingly. Oddly enough, the two conditions often showed up in tandem. Did she scurry about for hour upon hour, attending to the needs of others, thinking all the time of eventual rewards? Ahh—just as he expected. Enough said—intervention was imperative. Otherwise her contradictory impulses would pull her apart. The patient began to snivel. Are you saying I have to give up zabaglione *and* grooming every member of my extended family? Whatever will I think about? There are some things you cannot prepare for, counseled the doctor, scribbling on his pad. Does this mean you will be ending my life as I know it, whispered the patient, breathless with a strange excitement. I'm saying even the loftiest soufflé must fall, with or without the hard metallic plunge of an expectant spoon, snapped the doctor, who had his own complement of fetishes and phobias to guard.

Sue Allison

Plumbers and Other Men

I was hoping the plumber would wear his hat. I looked forward to it all day. When you get up close, you can see it is a faded, greenish-brown fedora, quite worn, never cleaned. If I saw it in a flea market for fifty cents I wouldn't buy it, but there is something about it that I like. When it is lying on a toolbox next to the toilet, or on the kitchen floor in front of where the disposer is stopped up again, it never looks like much and I stare at it, fascinated to see it is nothing but a dumb hat and yet yearning for him to put it on, to make it come alive.

It is a sight to behold, a man in a hat, fixing your pipes.

The men who come to my house to fix things that have broken down are on the whole very stylish men. My furnace man wears tight jeans and tight white shirts and shiny penny loafers with pennies in them. He looks as if he's going out dancing, not down into my basement to adjust my boiler. My landscaper wears a diamond earring in one ear and vintage baseball jackets from teams that no longer play. My pool guy also wears an earring: a single small gold hoop. The mason who put an iron fence around my garden and then laid down a new patio because the old one, he said, was crumbling, looks like a bass player in a jazz band, or a fashion photographer, someone on the cutting edge of cool. He looks this way because he always wears the latest in sunglasses and haircuts and hats. It's how I know what the latest is.

My piano tuner, who always wears grey trousers and a navy blue blazer, has a wife who has a pet pig about whom my piano tuner has fashioned amusing stories. It takes him almost a whole day to tune my piano, and every so often, in the course of this day, I'll come into the room where the piano is to pay my respects. I think that's the best word for it. I don't really know what he's doing and am quite sure that if I asked how it was going, in a conversational way, and he told me,

I still wouldn't understand, and I don't think he would be pleased it caught my fancy to patronize him like that, by asking him a question I wouldn't understand the answer to, so I just come out now and again and sit on the couch, and pretty soon he'll start telling me a story about his wife's pig.

He starts one of these stories by confessing his awe at the pig's intelligence. Like how the pig built himself a house at the edge of their yard and after there was a big storm which blew the pig's house down, the little pig pulled all the pieces one by one to another part of the property and built his house up again. And how the pig is very polite in the house, and quite independent, and takes guests' alarm at seeing a pig on the stairs with sophisticated aplomb. My piano tuner has three dogs, but they sleep outside: it's his wife's pig who has the run of the house.

I have no idea if these stories are true or not, but I believe them.

My piano tuner works all day without stopping and without eating or even drinking a glass of water. He lays a multitude of tools at his feet when he arrives and when it is time to go, he packs them up into two cases and puts his two cases one on top of each other on a luggage trolley and is out the door and down the walk and into his car and gone surprisingly quickly, given the endless, unhurried time he spent inside.

After he leaves, I always sit down at the piano, but I can never play. All I can think about is my piano tuner and his wife's pig and how I wish I had one: a pig, or a wife who had a pig, or a husband who thought it was amusing his wife had a pig. Or I wonder if what I really want is to be happy tuning other people's pianos and telling them stories when they sit down, as if at a performance, as if expecting something from you, and you give it to them.

K. Bradford

Of Digestion

In the alley, a garbage truck swallowed
someone's history whole. In just one morning,
decades carted off turn easily to landfill.
Note for next time: remember to leave your heart
and last rites out for pick-up on Mondays.

On Division Street, black children at a fence
between the projects and new condos,
threw rocks and yelled, *White People!*
Rock paper scissors cut: would the mayor please
leave a few inches on either side
when building one city atop another.

At 2 a.m., our soldiers sang karaoke,
Christmas carols in April, over cheap American beer.
The next day they invaded more Iraqi homes.
Once, the neighbor's dog buried a bone, then lay
on top of the dirt pile all day and into the night.
Finally, the neighbor dragged the dog in,
coaxing him with steak or ribs.

Remember to dig grieving holes, and grieve.
Our bodies, turned to piles of hardened salt
mark our way—memorials and monuments,
this country pocked with open graves.

Hurricane Q

If then, if now. Our storyline unraveled.

A flood came through. Your house
smelled like September. Or, like a year
that has run away too soon.

I said, I will marry the cat if I need to.
Bury my books if you say so.
I am foolish like that. Rash,
like the orange marigolds popping up
too soon. I do not like their color,
or what they tell of time.

A boat came for your things.
The oarsman carried you out
of the house, and led the town's fleet
away from harm. I wish the town,
and the sorrow, had floated away too.

I do not like the smell of rain.

Erik Campbell

Hong Kong Airport

We're sitting here on an aluminum bench, causalties of Bogart
Movies and WWII, because smokers don't know what to do

In airports. But we can fathom why the little, pink-lunged Chinese girl
Is staring at us, watching us sit on this aluminum bench, in this miasmic

Plexiglas cloister, safely quarantined from the rest of the protein-rich
21st century. We became anachronisms so gently, it seems, gone

The slow way of the fedora. We looked about us one day and everyone
Was busy bleaching their teeth or running in place. The spaces

We once filled with sibilance grew smaller, smaller than end-of-century
Answerability. But, you see, we believe that, ultimately, our senses

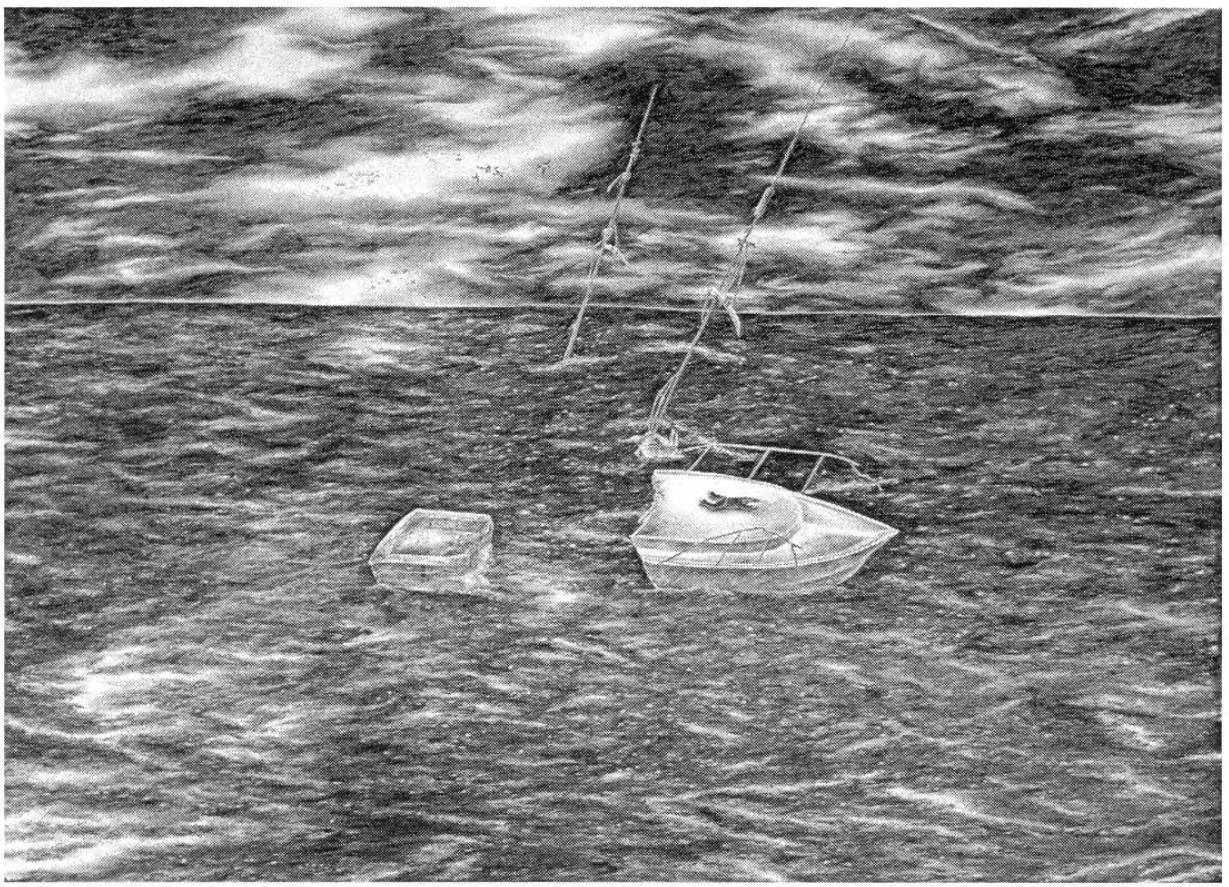
Will be used up one by one. So look at us as a preemptive strike against
The inevitable, endorsed by Phillip Morris and what your grandfather

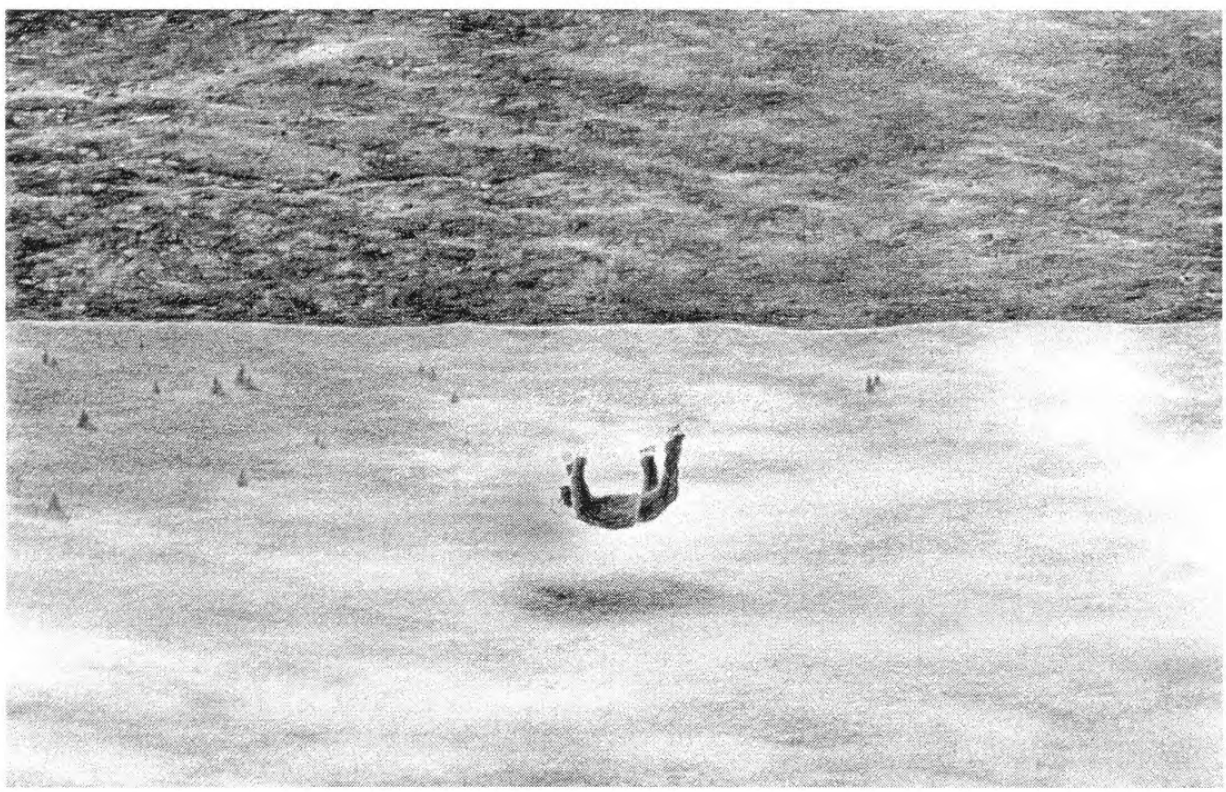
Thought was sophistication, or the cheapest way to fool his empty,
Protestant belly. Even the Chinese in this glass box are democrats for now,

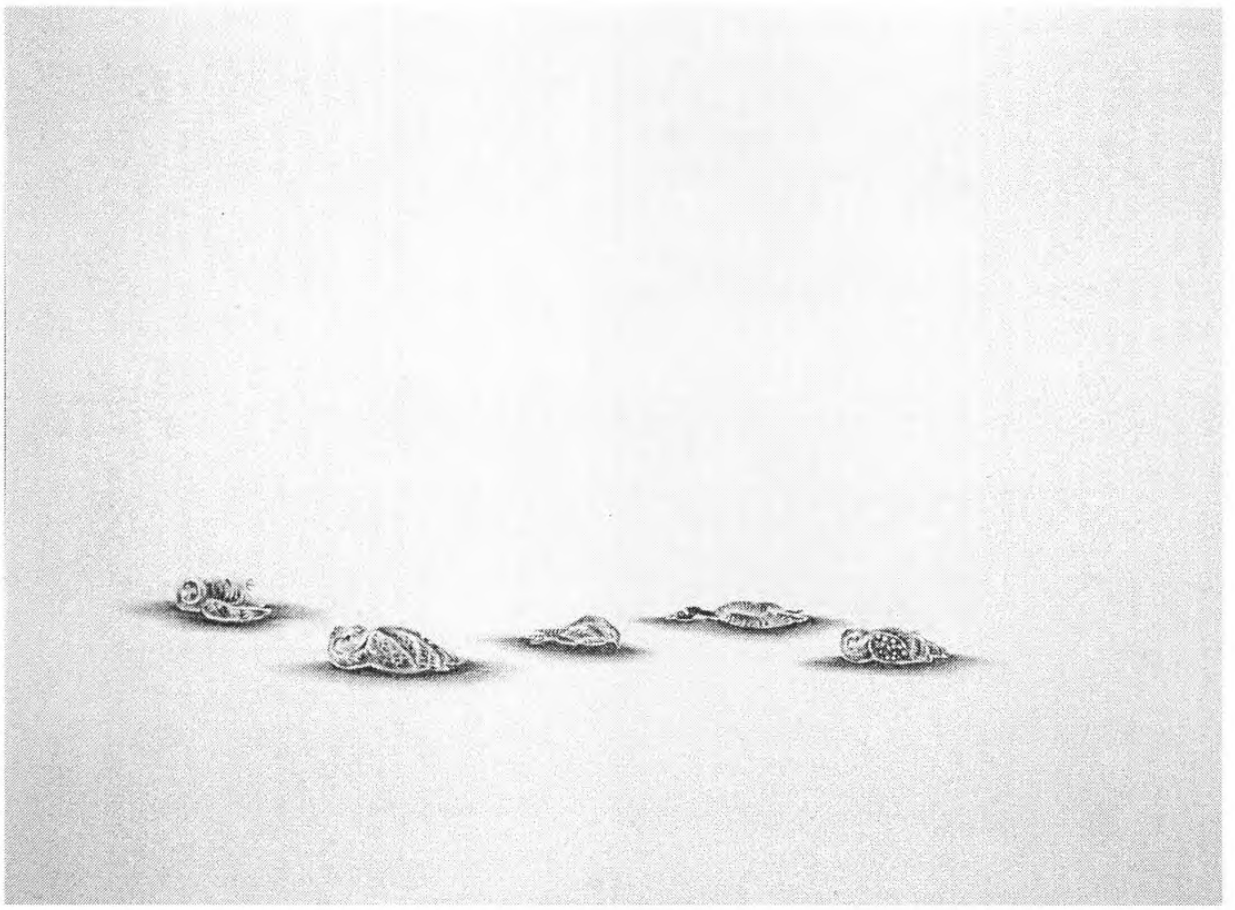
Men who understand and so ignore your limpid air. We're watching you
Read your fashion magazines, waiting for the Starbucks to open, listening

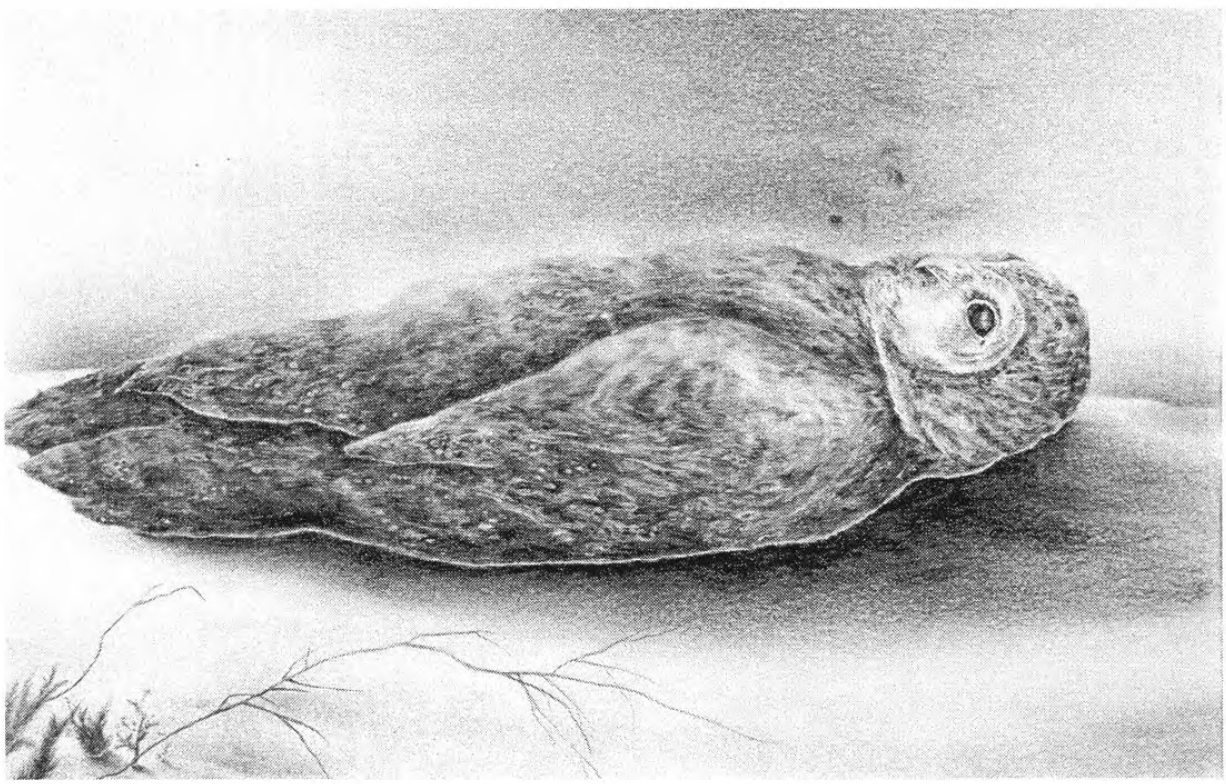
To one of your iPod's 5,000 love songs. It won't be long and you'll be
Boarding for Bangkok or London. But we're here for you still, sitting

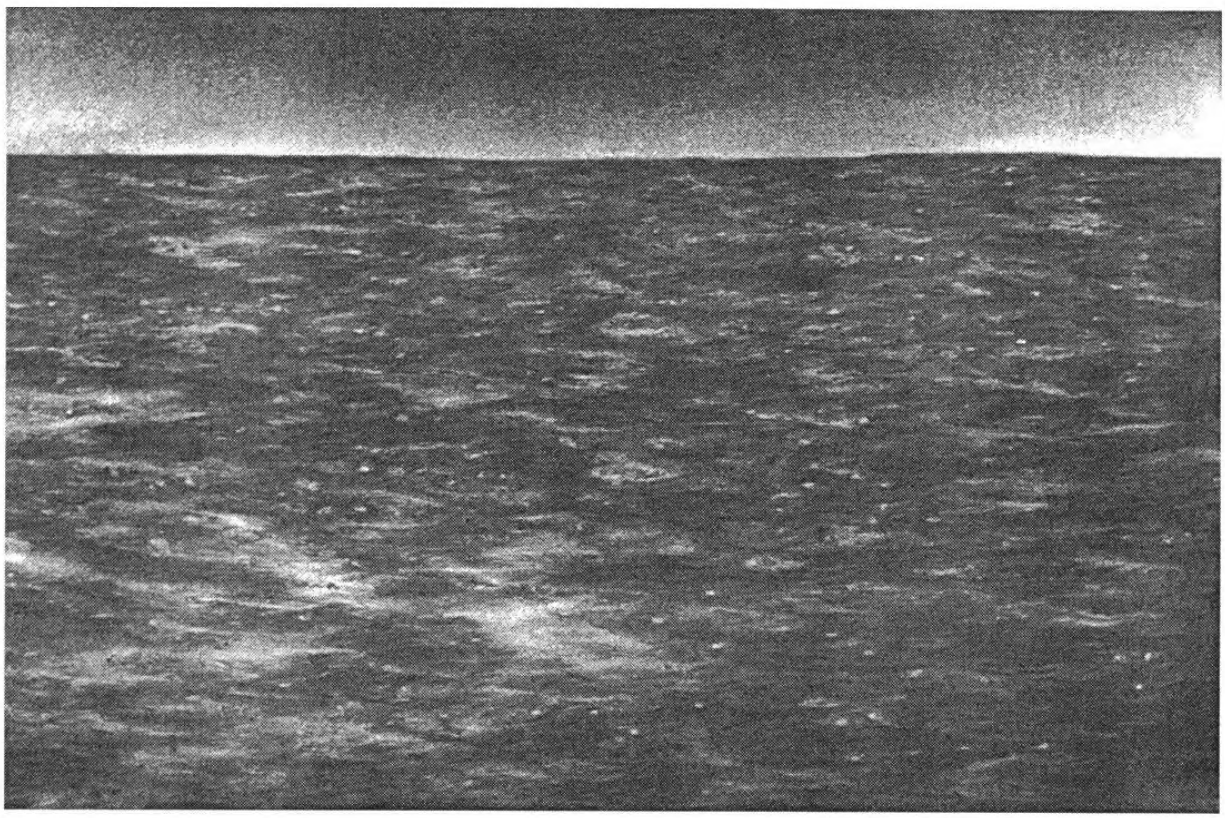
Lesson-like, in a row, paying attention to the sound of our breath.











Cover:
The Lost Landscape With Rainbow (Based on Caspar David Friedrich) , 2005
graphite on paper 20 5/8 x 48 1/2 inches
Collection of Paul Rickert, Greenbrae, California

Page 143, *Low Cloud Landscape, No. 2*, 2003
graphite on paper, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches
Collection of Jerry and Helen Davis Houston, Texas

Page 144, *This Man Fell Silent*, 2005
graphite on paper, 32 x 40 inches
Collection of Nash Flores, Dallas, Texas

Page 145, *Falling*, 2005
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches
Collection Carlisle Vandervoot, Houston, Texas

Page 146, *Forgetting*, 2005
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches
Collection of Jane Scott, New York, New York

Page 147, *They Walk, Fall, Continue, and Die, No. 6*, 2003
graphite on paper, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches
Collection of Kerry Inman and Denby Auble, Houston, Texas

Page 148, *Five More Fallen*, 2004
graphite on paper, 7 1/2 x 10 inches
Collection of John Robertson, Toronto

Page 149, *Leaving*, 2005
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches
Collection of Susanne Joyner, Reston, Virginia

Page 150, *Darkening*, 2005
graphite on paper, 6 1/2 x 10 inches
Collection of Bill and Charlotte Ford, New York, New York

Alison de Lima Greene

Robyn O'Neil: Leaving

I've been here so long I can't really recall what, or how, or who I was before. Okay, that's not exactly true. I was a son, a brother, a husband, a father, and a garage door salesman.[1]

Robyn O'Neil leads us into a landscape at once familiar and alienating. Far-reaching vistas, snow-bound vignettes, and unlimited oceans summon up travel journals, half-remembered news items, or perhaps dimly recalled children's books. At the same time we recognize that this is nature at its least welcoming, a limbo without mercy through which we pass on the way to oblivion.

The eight drawings gathered together in these pages were selected and organized by O'Neil. Although they were sketched over a two-year period, and were not originally conceived as a folio, they suggest a narrative thread consistent with her larger production. Using a standard .5 mechanical pencil, HB lead, and a well-worn smudge stump, O'Neil constructs these intimate compositions with the economic precision of a Renaissance predella. And much as Fra Angelico or Giovanni di Paolo chose scenes from the lives of the saints to illuminate moral choice and sacred belief, O'Neil addresses the human condition. She has observed: "I work without denying the seemingly mundane traditions of artmaking at its most basic. I make graphite landscapes and I populate them with images ranging from humans throwing up to birds of prey mating in free fall... What is the prime focus? Death."[2]

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[1] E. Tyler Lindvall, "As My Heart Quiets and My Body Dies, Take Me Gently Through Your Troubled Sky," 2005. This text was written in response to O'Neil's drawings and is quoted courtesy of the author.

[2] Robyn O'Neil, unpublished statement, November 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

O'Neil has arranged these drawings with a cinematic cadence of set pieces, long shots, and close-ups. She opens this sequence with one of her most pared-down and silent landscapes, essentially an establishing shot. A dramatic shift is introduced over the next two pages with the catastrophic scenarios of *This Man Fell Silent* and *Falling*. The next sequence of four drawings moves from meditation to the concrete fact of death, while the closing image of a darkening sea offers a *tabula rasa* and a return to elemental purity. Man is cast in the role of the intruder—impotent, aimless, adrift, or out of control—a fact O'Neil underscores with deliberately awkward draftsmanship. Like Robert Altman's McCabe, these protagonists lose their way, ultimately to vanish into the landscape.

We know nothing of the past which shaped these men's lives, nor do we really know what happens to them, despite the inevitability of such images as *Falling*. That they are of our time and place is attested to by the fact that they are wearing track suits and Nikes, but the landscapes into which they have been cast seem unchanging and eternal. In their isolation they are most akin to such navigators as Joshua Slocum (1844–1909) and Donald Crowhurst (1932–1969), both of whom disappeared at sea. Crowhurst's logbook, which chronicled his ill-fated effort to establish a world record for solo circumnavigation, offers a particularly telling analogue to the liminal mood O'Neil evokes in her drawings: "God's clock is not the same as our clock. He has an infinite amount of 'our' time." Crowhurst added as his final entry, "It is finished, it is finished, it is the mercy."[3]

[3] British artist Tacita Dean has explored Donald Crowhurst's saga in a number of works. See Tacita Dean, *Teignmouth Electron*. London: National Maritime Museum, 1999. Both quotations from Crowhurt's logbook are taken from this unpaginated publication.

A different stage of passage is suggested by *The Lost Landscape With Rainbow (Based on Caspar David Friedrich)*, a large detail of which appears on the cover of this publication. Here we see a man, holding a pilgrim's staff, poised at the beginning of his journey. A withered tree in the foreground and a flourishing oak in the distance are easily recognized tropes, as is the rainbow which arches across the page. As the title readily discloses, the composition is based on Caspar David Friedrich's *Landscape with Rainbow, 1808-10*, a recently recovered painting that was lost for over fifty years following World War II. O'Neil pulls the composition into a more horizontal format and eliminates the herd of goats which defined Friedrich's protagonist as a shepherd. In other respects, however, she remains true to the original's Romantic spirit of aspiration and transcendent humility.

O'Neil is not alone in making drawing her exclusive idiom; such contemporaries as Amy Cutler and Marcel Dzama have also explored popular graphic conventions as a means to reinvigorate the Modernist project. However, O'Neil alone makes the quest for the absolute—one of the central myths of Modernism—the subject of her work. Kasimir Malevich's 1927 essay on Suprematism could serve as a map to O'Neil's territory:

> The ascent to the heights of Non-Objective art is arduous and painful, but is rewarding nonetheless. The familiar begins to recede into the background. The contours of the objective world fade more and more, step by step, until finally the world, everything on which we have lived, becomes lost to sight. No more likeness or reality, no idealistic images, nothing but a desert. I was fearful of leaving the ordinary world of will and idea, but the

> promise of liberation drew me onward, onto a desert filled with the spirit of Non-Objective sensation, where nothing is real except the feeling.[4]

For O'Neil the absolute does not lie in pure abstraction; she freely alludes to the history of art, popular culture, and, perhaps more indirectly, current events throughout her compositions. However, like Malevich, she is willing to cut to the bone and venture into the desert.

[4]Kasimir Malevich, "Suprematism," 1927; as quoted by Dave Hickey, "Dialectical Utopias," Harvard Design Magazine 4 (Winter/Spring 1998), 2.

Nicole Walker

Thistle

What has the power to reshape? Outside sources usually—backhoes and Big Macs, concrete and liposuction, but what can change topography from the inside?

For instance: A hernia is a weakness in the wall of the abdomen. Some hernias are present from birth while others develop later in life, often as a result of persistent straining. Hernias tend to occur at places where there is a natural weakness in the wall of the abdomen, such as in the groin—called inguinal hernias. Hernias occur in both men and women, although inguinal hernias are much more common in men.

Another example of change made from the inside: The Thistle landslide began moving in the spring of 1983 in response to groundwater buildup from heavy rains the previous September and the melting of deep snowpack for the winter of 1982-83. Within a few weeks, the landslide dammed the Spanish Fork River, obliterating U.S. Highway 6 and the main line of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. The town of Thistle was inundated under the floodwaters rising behind the landslide dam. Total costs (direct and indirect) incurred by this landslide exceeded $400 million, the most costly single landslide event in U.S. history.

Cause: When I was three my twin sisters were born. Apparently, in a moment of iconographic cuteness, I asked my grandmother when I found out they were twins, "Why so many?" Indeed. Many times my mom and dad must have asked themselves that same question. I can't imagine how they changed two sets of diapers, or how either parent slept when one twin would fall asleep just as the other woke up, or how they kept track of how many bites of applesauce each one ate. I had always imagined my mother breastfeeding both of them at the same time. She said she did, once in awhile. But unlike the image in my

head of two babies cradled in her arms, crossing her chest, she showed me how she held them: heads in hands, elbows wide to her side, feet pointed outward—it's called the football position. My mom must have felt like a tapped keg—set 'em up, she would say, and the twins would drain her double D's down to a deflated C like football players who drain their forties on Friday nights.

I, however, adapted to their twinness quickly. When my mom wants to let me know how much she appreciates me, she reminds me of how I'd run and get their bottles or find them a blanket. When I was eight, I could make tacos from scratch. I thought the twins were super fun dolls. I liked to hold them—in the cute way, with their feet crossing in front of me, their heads in the crook of my elbows like Koaloas in the crotch of bamboo.

When they were older, I started to carry them everywhere. Even more koala-esque—I carried one little twin in my arms and let one climb onto my back. We'd go up the stairs and down the stairs, outside into the backyard and up the rock path my dad built to the garden, and down the deck stairs and across the street to where my mom played bridge where she would tell me to put them down for once. They were old enough to walk. I was going to break my back. But I loved doing it. I loved that they loved it. I played favorites every day, letting the best one of the day—the one who smiled at me the most, or made the best joke, or gave me half of her peanut butter cup—ride in my arms. I tried to be even and switch every day but that was even harder to keep track of than how many bites of applesauce each one ate.

Cause: In 1983 there was a big flood that affected all of northern Utah. A flood that transformed the landscape—even the cityscape. The concrete, man-made roads and bridges buckled and broke as the snow melted and headed toward the Great Salt Lake any old way it wanted—channel, riverbed, waterway be damned. Hills came down and rivers overflowed. City Creek, Salt Lake City's main water

source, was redirected over ground and around the downtown, to State Street—an eight-lane major thoroughfare. Now, I live right by City Creek, and I wonder where the water has gone. It comes down the canyon, runs into the park, and then disappears. How could that same river have possibly ended up in the middle of the road teenagers dragged on Saturday night? In 1983, it was lined with sandbags. People fished from the sidewalks.

One of the few places permanently affected by the landslide was Thistle, Utah. Thistle, in the first place, was already practically ghostly by 1983. As a railroad town it had ebbed and flowed with Union Pacific's tides. The apex of its population stood at 600 people in the early 1900s. By the time the landslide hit, Union Pacific was mostly happy to find a way out of the money-losing line. As the speed of locomotives had increased, the need for stopovers and refills in small depot towns had lessened. By 1983, only fifty people still lived there in the town of Thistle.

Symptom: I was showering in my mom and dad's bathroom when my mom opened the shower curtain to hand me a washcloth and noticed the lump. She asked how long it had been there. I did not like her looking at my vagina. I told her as much. But she kept looking anyway. I told her I was OK and showed her my neat trick. If you pushed on the lump, it went away. I thought she would like that—it was a little like ironing—press it down and the protruding wrinkle goes away. She did not like it. She called the doctor.

Symptom: For awhile, those floods transformed the riverbeds and the canyon floors, but the most dramatic changes came from underneath. As the water sopped into the sandy ground far above in the mountains, the underlying valley aquifers began to fill. The aquifer just above Thistle filled to the brink and then it bubbled over like any lid

that tries too hard to hold the contents of its burgeoning cup. The land that capped the groundwater spectacularly split from the underlying ground and steamed right in to the town of Thistle. Thistle—dry, pokey, brittle. Nothing wet about it. Not usually. Not until 1983 when the rules changed and the lid was no longer tight enough and the cup no longer big enough and the whole side of the mountain shifted its weight to the up and over and then down on the town of Thistle.

How literally can you take the metaphor between land and the body? My body houses a mere ten or so species of mite and yeast and bacterium, and occasionally another human body. A chemical imbalance of any sort can disrupt that number, but even if I manage to kill all the mites off of *my* eyelashes, if they were to go extinct all over *me*, six billion other human-planets would continue to sustain the very same species of mite. The earth, though it may have six billion other brothers and sisters in the universe, as far as we know, is the only one to house anywhere from one-and-a-half to six million species on it. See how a body repairs itself. See how a planet does.

Everyone had to look. My dad. The nurses. The doctor. I think my mom even made me show my grandmas. Such showing involved pulling down my pants just far enough that the slit that began my vagina stayed barely hidden behind my pink-for-girl underwear. The doctor poked at my bulge, made it disappear back behind the wall of muscle from which it had escaped. He was surprised. He'd never seen anything like this on an eight-year-old girl. And I was happy. This was something cool—something only boys got. Now maybe I could do something properly boyish and hit a goddamn baseball.

In Thistle, when it kept raining through May, you knew there was trouble. The railroad tracks had bent and risen before, but now they

twisted so much that the trains had stopped. The silence. You couldn't sleep. Your whole life you'd slept in the back room of your three-room house with your dreams soundtracked by the pump and whine of metal on metal. The struggle of the engine's climb was your struggle to emerge from sleep and catch the open car up to morning. Now you toss and turn and listen to your sandstone foundation melting like sugar in lemonade.

When the toe started nudging its way down Billy Mountain and toward the river bed, you weren't surprised so much by its moving but rather by how slowly it did move. When they came to you in the middle of the night and said, *Provo's close to your left, Price is close to your right. Take your essentials and go,* you looked around your room—you grabbed the *Great Brain* series and a copper bell your grandpa bought for you at the Bingham Copper Mine's gift store. Your mattress, which had begun to smell like the sea, and your coat, scoured from pitching sand into sandbags, you left behind. You moved upland and out of the path of the bulging river.

By the time I was admitted to the hospital for my surgery, I was so used to everyone looking at and poking the lump that I practically ran around naked. I decided it was more boy-like to refuse embarrassment. I even took a sort of pride in the bump and the way it could disappear magically like the "where's my thumb" trick that I could never master. I spent the whole night keeping the nurses up by pressing the "come quick" button and asking for another popsicle. They kept bringing them to me even though it was the middle of the night. When the girl in the bed next to me woke up screaming and the doctors and nurses rushed in and pulled the curtain around her bed for privacy, I remembered thinking as I sucked on my popsicle, what a wuss that girl was. Whether for the screaming or the need to keep the reason for the

screaming hidden behind closed curtains was one and the same thing to me.

After: When the earth split open and out poked a nice new lake to sit behind the big toe of earth that had moved the river bed and your house, they thought, won't that be nice for irrigating these desert farms. Your house, half-melted sandstone and half-broken-beam, sat at the bottom of their new lake and waited for the drought that was sure to come and give at least its ragged rooftop back to God. Later it was determined that the new lake was unstable and they bulldozed the earth-made dam and began work to restore the road that wound up the hill from Spring City.

Three days after the surgery, I came bounding down the stairs as my Aunt Bev came in our front door. "What are you doing up? Shouldn't you be resting?" She looked so shocked by my recklessness. But I felt fine. The stitches itched a little. What did I care? It was my cousin's birthday, they were in town from Las Vegas and I had people still bringing me popsicles. Plus, now I could keep my pants on most of the time. Life had never been so good.

Later: The steepness and severity of the Rocky Mountains actually insist that railroads be laid in the path of potential landslides. Where the land has slid before is where the grades are gentlest. The beds roll and undulate, cushioning the heavy steel cars and their heavy coal cargo up and up the thousands of feet that would otherwise require mountain goat or pickaxe. The Rockies are not known for forgiveness or for making it easy to pass through. And their weather is not the weather of the coasts or the plains. It is unpredictable and non-negotiable. Later, ten years of drought will invite wildfire and beetle infestations, denuding the land of trees more quickly than any logging

company. Then two years of wet will soak the land that's no longer made stable by stubborn root. The land can't be held back or kept under. It moves of its own volition. You can build all you want all over its skin. It certainly does not care. It has plans to take it back.

Later: My body had been re-formed. There's a scar that runs just below the top of my pubic hair that I would show anyone who asked. It didn't seem odd, them asking. I, for one, took the scar as evidence of my uniqueness. And my toughness—I still like to pick my sisters up—both of whom are now taller than me. It made me sad though that the thing that I thought made me toughest—my ability to admit my injury, to show my flaw—actually led to an immodesty that made it clear that I was a girl. Right down to my anatomy. The body, re-formed, had been returned to what it always had been. And the willingness to show off, to prove unafraid of surgery and unconcerned with privacy, did not have the mountainous effect of transforming me into one of the guys.

Harriet Levin

The Road Between the Rims

The badminton racket is a manifestation of myself, lying deep
down in the bottom of a creek. The kind that snaps back, taut.
Resilient, strong enough to strike on its own and smash a birdie.

I walk around to the back of the building peering in through the windows.
Wood floors, metal desks, a chair on metal coasters, an orange extension
cord bundled into the corner. There I am again, wound up, back in the moment,

shock and aftershock. The wind bores through me. Swaying branches make a cleft
in the road, forge a route. It's brand new, unused to degradation, nettles drifting.
I used to want a souvenir—maple syrup, maple candy,

maple sugar, everything's maple in Vermont, or one last cappuccino
in the café—but I don't now. Now I defer to the weather, to blankness
spuming and the gas station attendant's oily hands when I ask for change.

When I was keeping myself away from poetry, getting manicures and haircuts,
I'd open up bottles of nail polish in different shades and brush them on, then remove
them, until I couldn't decide which color I wanted.

After the manicurist massaged my skin with oil,
she fitted me with gloves, the final sword thrust in the bull's hide.
Money cusped the conversation, a clavicle supporting its neck and head.

A pick-up parked in the driveway. The house facing me with all its blinds.
I hope the driver won't haul away the junk that's been accumulating in the yard.
Wood scraps, blackened garden gloves, cracked terra cotta, ice skates, wagons.

That's the stuff I like to write about. Whose gloves were they and do they still mold
to skin? Someone's essence arrived at by focusing on the gloves, earth
ground in. The things someone might throw in a fire

to listen to the sizzle and restore oneself to reason. So the
gloves, pelted with flames, turn out to be inflammable.
Reason is not restored—there I am again.

Minnie Bruce Pratt

Drinking Coffee

from the north and the south windows

At the Journal Square Deli, a stocky short grey-haired woman wearing blue ear muffs, not much older than me, rather mannish, comes up to me while I'm sitting at the table, and says, in a flat high-pitched voice, "Will you buy me an orange juice?" I look up, bewildered. "Will you buy me an orange juice? I'll be sitting over here." And sits down two tables away, the small single table. The man with a cane behind me laughs, cane laid across the top of his table, and says, "She wants you to buy an orange juice and give it to her." I say, "I know," and get out my wallet, two dollar bills, and walk over to her, press them into her hand. "Here, you can get it for yourself." But she says, plaintively, also a little bewildered, "Where is it? How much is it? They won't sell it to me, they won't let me sit here." So I go to the case and get Tropicana Pure Premium, a pint, pay for it, and get 65 cents in change, and take it to her, put the carton in her hands and the change on the table. She says, "Thank you." I say, "You're welcome," and sit back down. One of the staff, a skinny Latino maybe not older than high school, is mopping the floor around our feet. She says, again in that flat high voice, "Hi! Hi! Do you like your job?" He says something very low that I can't hear, and mops away without pausing. She drinks her juice, and walks to the side door, pausing to throw out her carton and say to the two older burly white men in winter coats sitting nearby, "Hi! Hi!" One is wearing a pair of Nike sneakers without socks. Outside the wind chill is 15 degrees. She goes out into the concourse and walks a few steps, stops, hesitates as if she's forgotten, as if she's remembered something, then walks slowly on.

Upstairs, in line at the bank, an African American woman, with a barely walking child with untied shoelaces, is anxiously looking through her purse, "I guess it's not here, not here, wait a minute, baby." An East Indian man in his sixties is nervously aligning the checks in his hand. A tall white man steps out of line, faces the teller, says, "I need your help." Out in the foyer, a Latina is saying to her friend, looking in her purse, "I thought I had $20 left in here, I had $100 at the start of the day." She enumerates each purchase and bill she paid during the day.

At the Starbucks on the Gold Coast by the river, two white men in suits bend their heads together over their cappuccinos, antiphony, alternating whisper and louder: "30 million dollars... They may have said, increasing value..." "Some federal..." "I don't really. They were interested buyers but he wasn't ready to sell... " The company *was* for sale. The stock price went up but..." "And it's illegal to..." One lowers his voice. "Yes, and the equity option... This is the net unrealized earnings... 1.7 million now but..." "They don't fire people who are..." He laughs. "They fire people who..."

Sometimes I go by the bank when I go to get coffee, there's a Fleet branch above the Deli and by the Starbucks. The drivers for the armored trucks are told to hit the accelerator between stops, speed up, speed up. No time for a coffee break. The time while the money sits alone in the truck is time when no one is making money on it.

Roy Seeger

The Mating Habits of Slugs

My name will be Balin or Melinda,
depending on my chromosomes, but
after a rough break-up when I am twenty,
I will light one cigarette off another
until I form a conclusion I can
live with about the way people find each
other. I will walk the long way to
the deli; it will be raining. I will watch slugs
make love in the wet grass. This is more
than a gesture, more than luminescent
skin on puddles; their bodies shed
boundaries through a consolation of slime
the ground slowly absorbs into itself
becoming the grass beneath them.
I will look away but
                there they are, dripping
and in love. It's enough to convince me
I am due, that even a staggered wind
will carry my body's pheromonal
singles ad until someone responds
who could be living in a back-
water town I won't stop at until my car
needs gas, until the disembodied
hand of legacy pries his terrible fingers
from my own future children
who will resemble me whether they are born or not.

Sarah Manguso

How Are Things?

Things are killing me faster than I can count.

When I run fast my foot hurts. When I run slow my other foot hurts. Another goal met!

After seeing the doctor I buy a bag of candy and tear up my tongue. Another goal met!

No mercy comes down like candy.
No mercy comes down like tongue cuts packed with wet sugar.

Comes down like the bowlful of eleven-colored beach glass I picked up in 1979 by the splinter with my soft small hands behind our rented cottage.

Circus

It's a sucker's game, roustabouts hiding in the tent-corners while the elephants stand there stomping, tears in their eyes, knowing their humiliation does not quite keep the audience's attention.

It's my arm, my arm whimpers Anti-Gravity Girl as the medic manipulates her legs with great skill.

But no one hears her and the wind blowing across the hole in the ceiling sounds like a voice saying *this is the end the end Marianne and all the arms and hearts you broke in this world will wait for you forever in the next.*

Ellen Morris Prewitt

Rollerblader for Jesus

First I found my skates and then I found Jesus. The skates—Rollerblade skates—hadn't been missing that long, two days or something. I'd never known Jesus. Then he appeared, there in the front closet where my mom's boyfriend, Jimmy, had thrown the skates because I hadn't put them away like he said. I laced on the boots—pink laces and green wheels—and Jesus appeared in a pink cloud to tell me it was going to be all right. "Skate on," he said.

My mom doesn't like that kind of talk. She doesn't skate, she wears shoes like the ones I used to slip on my Barbie's feet when I was little. She totters around the kitchen so that Granny shakes her head and pooh-poohs. Jimmy likes the Barbie shoes. Barbie had strong plastic calves, so does my mom. Not plastic calves, but strong from playing basketball in high school. We used to shoot hoops sometimes, but the ball never got near the goal, it would fall back on my shoulders and hit me around the head. I hated basketball. With Rollerblade skates, the wheels are lined up one behind the other, just perfect. Like a knife edge that you're walking, except you're gliding. Unless you've hit a rough patch, which is just the way things are around here, rollerblading is smooth like melting ice, like icing on a cake, sugary, heavenly.

"I don't want to hear any more talk about heaven. Or Jesus," my mom says.

Still, I think it was a sign. Jesus talking like a surfer dude, except saying "skate" instead of "rock." The real thing.

So I decided to become a rollerblader for Jesus. My mom says, "Yeah, and before that, you wanted to retire the national debt." I only told that because Miss Warren, my fifth grade teacher, made us write down our dreams. You shouldn't hold someone's dreams against them.

"A do-gooder," my mom called Miss Warren after the parent-teacher conference. She didn't like Miss Warren's hair, Miss Warren teases it a little so that it poofs in the back. But Miss Warren is really pretty, she's young like my mom but new out of college. She's here in Mississippi on the Teach for America program and started the Scholastic Achievement Award that I'm working to win, for the smartest person in the class. She tells us we can go to college anywhere, even out of state, wherever our dreams take us. She says there's a school in New York City where Lewis Granger, a boy in my class who went for testing and found out he had perfect pitch, could just sing all day long. Miss Warren's not a do-gooder, she's a dream-gooder. And being a rollerblader for Jesus isn't a dream. It's a goal.

My granny who we live with, she has more fears than dreams. She doesn't look like she's scared unless you know that licking her lips means she's worried. Ever since Papo died, she rides around with a mannequin doll blown up in the front seat of the car so no one will think she's alone. The doll leans against the window, it can't sit up straight. It wears a wig. I don't know why Granny thinks anyone would believe the doll is a person. It's naked, but she buttons a sweater on it in the wintertime, and one of her aprons in the summertime, an apron with a bib. Whenever Granny takes a turn too fast, the doll hits the window, knocking her wig catywhompus. Granny says to the doll, "Don't you complain, Missy." When Granny's driving, she taps her brakes all the time, it makes everyone in the car sick to their stomachs.

"Quit pumping!" my mom yells. "You're making us sick."

"Use the bib if you feel like upchucking," Granny says.

Jimmy calls Granny "Maw-Maw" even though her name is Granny. "Maw-Maw and her naked doll," he says, like it's something nasty.

"Granny," I say.

"Maw-Maw's not good enough for you, Miss Prissy Pants?" he says. "That's what I called my Maw-Maw," like Granny isn't her real

name. Or like she isn't even a real person, just the same thing everybody else has.

We've been living at Granny's for a while. My mom and I moved in, Jimmy only visits. Sometimes if Granny goes to bed early, Jimmy spends the night. I hear him tip-toeing out in the morning, Granny's floors creak and pop, they are linoleum, yellow squares. I peeled up the edge of a square once where it was already curled. Underneath was plywood, like what you would use to make a playhouse. Now the linoleum is really curled, like the Wicked Witch's shoes after Dorothy lands on them in her house. All of the floors in Granny's house slope. If you let loose a marble, it will roll all the way until it plunks against the wall. My mom says, "Be grateful for a roof over your head."

I don't wear my skates in the house, no matter what Jimmy claims. Except for that time he threw them in the closet and I had to crawl in and get them, I always sit on the front steps and unlace the boots. The front step is painted but peeling. Sometimes ants crawl in and out of the paint chips. Jimmy walks over me like I'm a step, too, just taller. I'm bent over unlacing the boots and he lifts his leg. If I look, I can see the dirty sole of his shoe, chewing gum stuck on it, leaves and dog crap stuck on the gum.

"Letting flies in," he says and thunks me on the head to close my mouth when he realizes he can't claim I'm skating in the house or something.

I used to worry about my mom dying, because she's the only parent I have, and my Granny might be so sad she'd say, "I'm too old and worn out," and the State of Mississippi would give me to a foster home to be raised with eleven other young'uns. My mom would lie in the hospital bed, wasting away with the cancer, her face white and drawn, upset that she'd never get to see me win the Scholastic Achievement Medal for the entire fifth grade, not knowing I'd be in the foster home and when you're living with eleven other young'uns in a foster home,

winning the Scholastic Achievement Medal is the least of your worries. Then she'd die and they'd have the funeral where Lewis Granger would come and sing sad sad hymns in perfect pitch, and after that I'd be all alone.

Instead, my mom started wearing Barbie shoes and now we have Jimmy. He says, "I need a hair of the dawg," when he's had too much to drink and his head hurts like hell. And he says "braw." It's bad enough to walk in the room and hear your mother's boyfriend talking about her bra, but for him to call it a braw. He tells me to "be good or else I'll run off to Vegas with your mama." He calls me "Little Nell," even though my name is Rae Nell. I go by Rae. It was my daddy's name. He spelled it R-a-y. I spell it R-a-e because I'm a girl. Jimmy says "Little Nell" like he's making fun. Jesus says, "Skate on."

Jimmy blames my mom for the way I am. He says I arrived in this world a blank slate and my wonko personality is my mom's handwriting on my soul. Granny says only a man would think children arrive in this world as blank slates. "Why, when you weren't any bigger than a p mite, you'd scoot that booty along the sidewalk, trying to go places. You spoke a full sentence at eleven months."

It helps to have Granny around, but mostly she says what she thinks to me, not Jimmy.

Granny tells me she believes I saw Jesus in the front closet, really. But I can tell she's trying to be nice. Whenever I start to explain how I'm going to win the Scholastic Achievement Award for being first in my class, then smartest in my school and win a full scholarship to a four-year college, out-of-state, she rolls her lips against her gums and says, "That's counting chickens, that's what that is."

I think about counting chickens when I'm on my skates, whizzing downhill and counting: here chick, chick, here chick, chick, chick. I spread my palms out for balance like Jesus walking on the water, Jesus and the faithless Peter who said, *Oh, shit,* and sank. Except Pastor

Brevard never says, *Oh, shit*. But if I were in a tiny boat and a storm was raging and the son of God said "Follow me" and I stepped out on the water and I began to doubt and as I doubted I began to sink, I'd be saying *Oh, shit* as I went down. You never go down on Rollerblade skates. Unless you hit a rock and then that's gravity, not a lack of faith.

It's hard to find a place to skate around here because there's not a lot of concrete. You gotta be "hitting the ro-ad," which is what Granny says my daddy did after I was born. In some places on the road where they've patched with tar, it's smooth as glass and you fly. Until you hit the gravelly asphalt that makes your teeth chatter and clunks you around so much that the trees and the grass and the fence line are all blurred from your head bobbing. But there's no such thing as a sidewalk on the rural route and I don't know who would give me a lift to town where I could skate in the school parking lot, and still it would be rough. When I hit a gravelly patch, teeth chattering, head knocking on my neck, I think: Skate On.

One time, after my toe stubbed a pothole and I skinned my knee up pretty bad, I hitched a ride with Granny to the Piggly Wiggly. She thought I was being good company for grocery-shopping, but I slipped the skates in the back seat to try out the parking lot at the Pig or maybe next door at Denson's where they sell ice cream and Cokes. I sat in the back seat because the naked doll was strapped in up front. When we stopped at the four-way, I saw Lewis Granger from school and he saw me in the back seat and he saw the naked doll in the front seat. I swear he knew it was a naked doll in an apron... Her lips are funny. Even if Lewis couldn't tell she was a doll, he could tell she was a weirdo. I skated in front of the house after that. If my mom sees me whirring by with my palms out, she says, "Stop that." I skate on.

With no one at home believing me, really, about seeing Jesus, I told Miss Warren because she encourages you to contemplate your dreams. First, she got sidetracked on that—Jesus being a dream—but when she

heard I'd crawled in the closet because Jimmy's head was pounding without his "hair of the dawg" and he was mad as hell, she leaned back in her chair and her eyes narrowed.

Usually, her eyes sparkle when I raise my hand and know the answer, her eyes crinkle around the edges. But this time her eyes narrowed like she suspected something, and she sent a school officer out to our house, a man from the Neshoba County Superintendent's office. The man sat my mom down in the living room and asked her all sorts of questions. "That's personal," my mom said, and asked the man to leave.

Because my mom wouldn't answer the questions, Miss Warren called me away from recess the next day and asked me her own questions, mostly about "your mom's friend."

I told her Jimmy had a dirty sole.

"How do you know he has a dirty soul?" she wanted to know.

"Because I've seen it. When he lifts his leg and straddles me and I look up."

She pursed her lips. "That's what I was afraid of."

And she hurried me back out to recess like she wasn't afraid of "that," she was afraid of me. I'd never thought before of Miss Warren as being fearful like Granny. She doesn't have a naked doll.

I told that to the lady counselor the next week, about Miss Warren and fear and the naked doll. The counselor had taken me out of science class to answer some more questions even though science is my favorite subject and we were studying about Gregor Mendel and the peas and how the world came into full flower. You can't win a Scholastic Achievement Award unless you excel in science and understand the world as it turns.

"A naked doll?" the lady counselor said. She let her face go flat like she didn't want me to see what she was thinking. "Your mom's boyfriend has a naked doll? In the house?"

"Not Jimmy, Granny. It keeps her company since Papo died," I said. "Granny starts licking her lips, then she starts the pumping that makes everyone sick at their stomachs, and the doll gets banged but good."

The next day, Miss Warren acted real skittish around me. When I could find a minute to myself with her, I asked if everything was okay.

"Kind of sort of," she said.

Which means not at all.

I couldn't figure this out, but it had something to do with me seeing Jesus. Which I also couldn't figure out because everyone talked about Jesus all of the time, and what? No one expected him to show up? That makes no sense. Or maybe it wasn't him appearing but my taking him serious enough to decide to be a rollerblader for Jesus. Or maybe it was because Miss Warren and the lady counselor and the man from the Superintendent's office thought being a rollerblader for Jesus meant I had to give up my scholastic ambitions and never become the smartest girl in school or win a full scholarship to a four-year college, out-of-state.

And I really resented that. All those people thinking Jesus would force me to make that choice. "Rollerblader or smartest girl in school," he'd say. "One or the other."

No, he wouldn't.

What he said was, "Skate on."

So I did.

Then one day while Jimmy was off doing his "lawndry," and Granny was over at Aunt Mary Beth's playing dominoes and my mom was on the porch painting her toenails with wads of cotton stuck in between each toe, the whole group of un-believers showed up.

I was tromping up the hill—that's the trouble with whizzing down the hill, you have to tromp back up, sideways, so that you don't slide—when they flew by in their car. A packed car. Miss Warren and the lady counselor and the Superintendent man and other people I didn't know.

Everyone wedged in beside each other. No need for a naked doll in there.

I was sweating pretty bad from going up and down the hill and I didn't want Miss Warren to see me such a mess if there was any hope at all that she would still nominate me for the Scholastic Achievement Award. Plus, the sun was making me dinky in the head, shooting black spots into my eyes, like those little squiggles that are amoebas except instead of being under a microscope they were in the blue sky whenever I looked up. I needed a rest, but even more I needed to get to the house to make sure that boatload of people didn't interrupt my mom while she was doing her nails. Fingernails, maybe. Toenails, never. Because it took so much concentration, and if she messed up, she had to wipe the whole thing off with polish remover and start all over again. My mom didn't need that.

But by the time I made it back up the hill, the people were already crowded on the porch and in the yard and my mom was standing up with the cotton between her toes, her hands on her hips. She saw me clomping across the yard, clomping in the scraggly grass making the bugs fly, feeling like Frankenstein with my skates always so heavy when the smoothness was gone.

She said, "What *have* you told these people?"

I wasn't sure I'd told them anything but I thought back on it anyway. I couldn't come up with a fib in any of the answers I'd given to the questions they'd asked. There *was* something, though. Even Miss Warren was looking at me funny. The Superintendent man banged his clipboard against his leg.

Then I started getting mad, them all looking at me like that.

"I just saw Jesus and I wanted someone to know," I said. "Like Lewis Granger wanting to tell everybody about having perfect pitch and how he opens his mouth at the drop of a hat and sings, perfect

pitch." I lifted my heavy boot and stamped the stupid ol' grass. "I'm going to be a perfect pitch rollerblader for Jesus."

"Look at her legs, all the bruising," the lady counselor said, like just because I fell down every once in a while, I could never be a perfect pitch rollerblader for anyone, much less for Jesus.

"What does that mean, Rae?" Miss Warren was inching away from the group like she was about to bolt. "A rollerblader for Jesus?"

"In my free time," I said. "Not when I should be studying for a test or doing extra credit or anything."

I sidestepped toward Miss Warren, my wheels digging in the dirt. I didn't know when it came to winning the Scholastic Achievement A whether you needed for the teacher to like you or if it was based on pure grades. I'd always thought Miss Warren liked me fine, but now I didn't know.

"I intend to win the Scholastic Achievement Award and go to a four-year college on scholarship, out-of-state, and in the summers I'm going to skate the country, being a rollerblader for Jesus," I told her.

A trickle of sweat dropped in my eye.

I blinked it out.

The two people I didn't know were whispering behind their hands and the lady counselor was raising her eyebrows, saying, "She feels a need to escape, and who can blame her? Look at this place," while my mom was taking the steps, slowly, watching her feet so that the cotton balls didn't get messed up, saying, "Rae Nell, what did you tell them about Jimmy and Granny's driving doll?" Calling it a driving doll instead of the naked doll. But she stopped when the lady counselor said the part about, "Who can blame her? Look at this place."

It was bad enough, this group of important people gathered in my front yard and all they wanted to talk about was dumb ol' Jimmy who said "lawndry" and Granny's stupid naked doll who rode around with

her because she was too afraid to be out in the world alone, and now the lady counselor had said something that sounded rude to me.

My mom must have thought the same thing because she turned on the lady counselor and started yelling at her about "my so-called friend." And who should drive up in the driveway but Granny and her naked doll and right behind her, Jimmy, who got out of the car with the lawndry basket in his arms, yelling at Granny for pulling in first so that he had to walk all that way with the full lawndry basket, maybe drop-p clean clothes on the grass. Mouthing off until he saw all the people in the front of the house and me kind of sort of off to the side and then he yelled, "Rae Nell! What have you done?"

Calling me by my real name now that it mattered.

"I've told them about how you won't even go around me when I'm sitting on the steps, how you step over me like I'm just another step and I have to look at all the groady stuff on the sole of your shoe. And how dumb you are, throwing my skates in the closet just because you've had too much to drink and your head is pounding. And how you can't even say "dawg" right."

I turned to the group. "Ask him. Ask him what that basket is he's carrying in his hands." I pointed at dumb ol' Jimmy standing with his mouth open, letting in flies.

He looked down at the basket where he'd folded his clothes so neat, because he believes in keeping everything neat. "My lawndry? What's wrong with that?"

By this time, my mom was on my Granny like white on rice, yelling at her about the driving doll, except now she was calling it the naked doll like we always did, how that stupid naked doll had gotten them into trouble with the people from Rae's school, dammit. That made my Granny mad as hell because no one tells her how to live now that Papo is dead, why, she's a widow, for God's sake. She waved her arm at the boatload of people that only kind of sort of included Miss Warren

because she was standing beside me now, a finger on her lips like she does when she's asked us the question and is waiting for some smart person to raise their hand with the answer. Then she knelt in the grass so that she could be closer to my height, but I was taller than I usually was because of the skates and so she had to rise back up and just bend forward.

"Rae, is Jimmy a jerk?"

I nodded my head. "And he can't say fawg or braw or dawg right."

"But that's all?" she asked.

"He's an idiot," I said.

She smiled a little then with her eyes. "And you didn't really see Jesus in the closet? You just said that because you were mad at Jimmy for being a jerk?"

Now that Miss Warren and I were being friends again and maybe the Scholastic Achievement Medal hung in the balance, I wanted to be able to tell her that I had never seen Jesus, that I'd made it up. But I couldn't. Because it wouldn't be true.

"I saw Jesus. In the closet, in a pink cloud. He told me, 'Skate on.'"

"Rae, how do you know it was Jesus?" she asked.

Well, that was about the stupidest question I'd ever heard. But if someone thought Jesus could show up in your closet on a pink cloud and you not know whether it was him, I sure wasn't the person who could explain it to them.

So I just said, "What difference does it make? I'm going to do what he says, even it if costs me the Scholastic Achievement Medal."

Miss Warren held her hand up, palm out, like she does when someone gives her an off-the-wall answer to a question and she's trying to decide if there's any truth in it. Then she straightened.

"Well, what about you unlace your skates and you and me go to Denson's for a Coke? You look hot as blue blazes."

She laid her hand on my shoulder. "Anyone who can skate on these rough roads and be the smartest girl in her class, both at the same time, she deserves a cold Coca-Cola."

"And maybe an ice cream?"

"Maybe."

I didn't mention the medal again because she'd said "the smartest girl in her class" and that meant the medal, and you don't have to stomp all over something once you know it's true.

I unlaced the boots and ran to put them in the front closet, squirming past my mom who was yelling at the lady counselor again and Jimmy who was studying the Superintendent man and saying, "You're a Jefferson from over in the Stranton community?"

When I opened the closet door, it was dark and quiet in there. I stepped in and waited a minute, then whispered, "You don't have to come again. I got it the first time."

I lifted the boots and shook them, saluting the pink cloud that had been.

"Skate on," I said.

Then I went to Denson's with Miss Warren and ordered a double-decker ice cream, strawberry on bottom, chocolate on top. And when we saw Lewis Granger sitting at the counter, I didn't even wince when Miss Warren called him over to our table and he sat down and opened his mouth and sang, his face stretched all rubbery underneath his freckles, his head thrown back.

After all, anyone can tell you, Lewis Granger sings with perfect pitch.

Daniel Nester

For Real Your Friends Are Blue Bloods

and that's OK. But why won't they sit
near us? Blue bloods aren't especially shy,
are they? Are we too old to "hang" with
them? Why do they wear dark ski
sweaters on a hot Spring night? Did they just
fly in from Switzerland? Why do they look
so alike? And why so pale, so fragile, so
easily frightened? Did you meet them
at a Pavement show in Vermont? Did they
buy coke from you there? If they did
buy coke from you there, do you have any
now? Do they have some? Why won't they
share the coke with us? We promise we won't
hog up the blue bloods' lines or the conversation or
mention that they're wearing dark sweaters
and it's, like, 80 degrees outside. People
can wear whatever they want to, after all,
even pale-faced blue bloods who like
to do coke at Pavement concerts in Vermont and
stay indoors, out of reach of those skin-cancer-causing
ultraviolet rays. And wear dark ski sweaters.
Did they even order a drink? And we saw you
lean in to hear what they were saying—are they
quiet as well as shy? Or maybe they're from
a foreign country, like Switzerland, and they
aren't so confident in their speaking English. Or
maybe you met them on a ski trip—lots of
blue bloods love to ski—do you ski, too?

I didn't know that. Do they like to ski so much
they wear dark sweaters all year round? But
that still doesn't explain their pale faces—if
they really are avid skiers, they should have
"ski tans," right? They'd look like two
red-faced raccoons here at the bar. Do they
wear lots of sunblock or white zinc on their
noses? Are you afraid we'll ask them
lots of these stupid questions? We won't. We promise
we won't frighten them—we know how
to handle ourselves in the presence of blue
bloods. So why won't they sit near us? Why?
Even your blue-blooded friends got to learn
to mingle. Remember that. For real.

From My Desk

And I read poems from old magazines
by people never heard from again.
And I read them all—poems about kites
and maps and turtles, mothers in waiting rooms.
And I mock-gouge my eyes out, head-shakes
above the eggshell pages. And I scold
this grouch in these eye-sockets.
And I open the window to take in
the just-warm breeze. And I wave my head around
as a boy brave-arms from a car, palm-lifts,
boy-hairs ruffled. And I think how air thins out underneath
fast-moving things, and I see my own terrible ideas
vanish in the soft air of Brooklyn. And I think
how this will never get old—more obscure people
will always throw more things up in the air.

Mark Yakich

Oedipus

You can't stop the clouds
By building a ship.

Without a line to preserve
Form, a song is nothing

More than hand-to-mouth.
Opium, ecstasy,

Stars. You must love
Like an ass

Before a woman
Can perform

Udinisms for you.
How true is truth

Breaking wind?
Know, the wind

Is more modest
Than an aspen,

Or in your mind a portrait
Of your mother

Making love to
Your father, no hands.

Panopticon

Tears
Of India
Are the finest
Of tears. Our tears are
Handpicked and specially packed
In unique foil and tissue linings to preserve
Their superb flavors. To insure you have the best
Quality tears, look for the seal of the cross. And then
Look to yourself (not your brothers and sisters) buoyed by tears.

CJ Evans

Big

It's Spring and the bees are big.
He likes to put his face to their fur
and breathe the clinging scent
of the flowers they've visited.

He finds an orange large as a door,
pierces it, and drinks the juice.
He's not sure how he feels
about the new world, but the juice is nice.

When the wind blows and the dandelion seeds fall
from so high up they knock down
the men who walk with arms crooked for the arms of ladies
wearing printed dresses and hiding lace,

he is afraid of how big all the little things seem.
When the rains come and the corn sirens its growth,
or he doesn't want the cloying smell of the Earth
so strong in his nose,

he wishes for before, when he was alone.
In the fall, the trees are so tall the leaves break loose
and simply drift off to be shredded by comets.
And the rot begins, the world folds in on itself.

Nothing smells sweet anymore except the breeze.
This is when he leaves her
and the world shrinks and shrinks
until the flies, once again, think his chest a cliff.

Chris Souza

Toads

At midnight Main Street's empty
except for the flash print of a man
beneath a sputtering lamp:
here,—gone, the negative sings.
Left on, the *Antiques* sign glows green,
ghosting a wooden horse, the slender T's
of child-size crutches, and, just there,
in the orbit of its box, a glass eye, the stolid
blue of dislocation. Gathered here, a dozen burials
repeat themselves and dismantle spoon by spoon,
which is how the dead relieve us or complete us.
Ready in this light, an iron toad waits—
his inscrutable grin destined for a garden
or clever pantry. *1891,* a yellow tag declares,
and, *today only,* all our toads come cheap.

David Shumate

Drawing Jesus

The first patient drew Jesus as a tall, slender man with three smiling heads, one eye in the center of each. Another sketched him as a stick figure wearing a yellow hat. The teenage girl from Alabama drew a white vulture with a halo above its head. At the table by the window the Hungarian immigrant whose language no one understood drew a face with a scar running down his cheek, a ragged red beard, and the kind of wild eyes that frighten children. The old woman who has lived half-a-century in the asylum painted a picture of a dozen orange boxes and asked me to guess which one Jesus was hiding in. I pointed to the box with the bulge in the middle. The Hungarian started laughing. Then they all joined in.

Kevin Winchester

Shine

The Jewel Tea man is knocking on the screen door, and I imagine him standing there with his grip full of dishes and teapots in the Autumn Leaf pattern. Momma's trying to put together the whole set, but now she's got us in the back bedroom, and ever so often, she lays her finger against her lips to keep us quiet.

A good breeze is coming in through the window, and the curtains billow out and then settle back against the sill. You can smell the honeysuckle lifting through, and I know it's time for the bream to be moving over the beds. Outside, I can hear the salesman shuffling on the porch; he clears his throat and knocks again. Hank Williams is singing from the kitchen radio about how he's so lonesome he could cry, and to keep from being bored, I hold my fingers in a G chord, and then move to the C when I hear the change in his voice. I shut my eyes and picture Uncle Harley's Gibson, the one I'm gonna buy.

When the song is over, I lean my head back against the wall and out of habit run my thumb over the fingertips on my left hand. The calluses are rough and feel almost as hard as my fingernail. The Jewel Tea man knocks one more time, but he cuts it short. I hear him leave, and his shoes sound heavy on the porch steps, like he's tired.

He comes around once a week, and for a while Momma was buying a place setting or a bowl ever time. But lately, since Pop's been on union strike, we get herded into the bedroom when the Jewel Tea man knocks. Momma don't want to hurt his feelings turning him down, she says, but I don't get it; I know he can tell we're in the house. I suppose he sees ever kind of no you can imagine, trying to sell people stuff they might want instead of what they need, especially with money getting tight everywhere. I cain't tell the difference money-wise when Pop goes

on strike, but it's not like we live high on the hog anyway. Most times we have what we need.

I work some odd jobs myself, for my own spending cash. There's nothing too interesting about any of them, and I'm always wishing I was doing something else while I'm in the middle of. I cut Otis Wolfe's yard once a week for five bucks, and Grandaddy gives me ten or fifteen for helping him with the farm, depending on how hard the chore. I'm saving for that guitar of Harley's. It's a 1956 Gibson J-45, sun-burst finish. When you chord it, it sounds sweet as honey water bubbling over mountain rocks. He'd give it to me, I know, but when he first started teaching me he said there's a special bond between a man and his favorite guitar that wadn't like nothing else in the world. Somehow, even then, when I played that Gibson I understood exactly what he meant, so I felt like I ought to earn the right.

At home, I got a cheap Silvertone Momma bought me from Sears, but when I go to Grandaddy's for Harley to give me a lesson he lets me play the Gibson. It ain't his favorite; he plays a 1942 Martin, one of the big jumbo models, with herringbone trim and mother-of-pearl inlay on the fret board. He talks to it just like a person ever time he takes it out or puts it back in the case, so after I'd learned most of the chords and could strum four or five standards, I asked would he sell me the Gibson one day. He grinned and told me when I had a hundred dollars and knew forty songs by heart to come see him. That's only about a tenth what it's worth, but I just nodded and said that sounded fair to me. The songs were no problem and I'm only twenty dollars short. Course I figure the grass'll need cutting ever week on through July or August, so that Gibson is good as mine.

Harley always kinda looks out for me that way. Pop don't think too much of him, though. He's really Pop's uncle, Grandaddy's brother. I don't know all the history to it, but I've heard Pop call Harley a

no-count ingrate, heard him tell Grandaddy he ought to throw him out on his ass. Pop's got his way of seeing things, and he ain't one for taking slack, and it's true Harley ain't never worked a public job like most people, and he drinks a little bit, but he ain't had a wife or kids to worry about neither. For some reason, Pop don't seem to think too highly of musicians in general. And Harley, he probably could've been a country-and-western star in his day. I've seen pictures of him and his bands, old advertising posters for shows and dances with Harley leaning back against this '47 Ford, one foot propped up on his guitar case and his hat pulled down kinda low in front with the rest of the band standing off to one side. The posters are all in black and white, but I think it makes him look kinda edgy, a little bit dangerous, like some of the rock groups you see today. Momma says he played all around, even recorded some back when Charlotte was the music hot spot, back in the thirties and forties, before it all went to Nashville.

Course that was all before his arm got stuck in the hay baler. He reached up to straighten a bale, and Grandaddy didn't see him, moved forward, and the machine caught his shirtsleeve. It didn't hurt him too bad; he lost half his little finger and his hand and wrist are scarred up pretty good, but Momma said the worst was it messed up nerves and stuff in his right arm. Harley's never said a word about it to me, but I reckon it slowed his playing down considerable. I can tell his rhythm hand ain't as smooth as it should be, and I figure that might've kept him from making it big and all. He used to play with some guys over at the VFW once a month and maybe a square dance here and there, but lately he's about quit even that. Most times it's just sitting around Grandaddy's, strumming old songs between sips from his Mason jar.

Momma finally peeks out the window and decides the Jewel Tea man has moved on, so she turns us loose. Maddie stays around the house with Momma mostly, being the baby girl and only six, but I can see more and more tomboy in her. She says next year she's playing

baseball. Pop started letting her play with us evenings in the back yard and she hits pretty good already. Momma'll fuss some about her being the only girl on a boys' team, but she'll play. Callie though, he's at that age where he's a nuisance to me, twelve going on twenty, Pop says. He's always wanting to follow me around, and he bolts out the door right behind me. I cain't wait for the day I move out on my own and get away from him.

"You going to the Pond today?" He swings around in front of me and starts walking backwards. "Take me or I'll tell it."

I shove his shoulders to get him out of my way, and he stumbles but then catches himself. Prile's Pond is across the cornfield behind the house. The path ain't no more than a rabbit trail, and the bank's all grown up and snaky, but there's plenty of bream and yellow perch and you cain't see it from none of the houses. It's posted, but me, Steve, and Gregg sneak down there to fish.

"I got to mow," I tell Callie and start digging around the shed for the gas can. "Don't nobody go to the pond no more."

"Lie," he says. "You and Steve and Gregg go down there to smoke cigarettes."

I pick up the screwdriver from the shelf—you have to use it to hold the carb float open on old man Wolfe's Toro to get it started—and point it at Callie. "I catch you following me, I'll bust your lip," I tell him.

He grabs his bike and pedals off toward Bucky's before I can take a swing at him. When he tops the hill, I can see his arm straight up in the air, and I know the pest is giving me the finger. I'm just glad he's gone and ain't figured out me and the guys are planning on camping out tonight, or else he'd hound the devil out of me.

Otis Wolfe's got a big lot to mow, and it takes me about two hours. The hardest part is getting his old Toro started, and the rest is just riding around thinking. I daydream about the Gibson, mostly. That, and playing professional one day. Harley tells me I'm getting pretty good,

that I might have a shot if I keep up my practice. I guess I must've dwelled on it too long because when I go to get my five from Wolfe he points out all the spots I missed, and I spend another thirty minutes finishing up.

On the way home, I can see thunderheads piling up off to the west and I worry we might not be able to camp out, plus I know I'll be stuck in the house with Callie and everybody else after supper. There ain't no getting around it, and there's already a pretty stout rustle of thunder sounding, so I get the Silvertone and work on my scales a little while, then run through a few songs; mostly old standards—Hank Williams, Carter family, a couple of Gene Vincent numbers Harley showed me. I mess around with a Rolling Stones tune, try to play along with the record, imagine what it'd be like on world tour, all the different places I'd see, all them girls screaming. I get aggravated after a verse or two and forget about the rock-star stuff because I cain't quite figure out the progression. There's a chord I'm missing, some kind of ninth or augmented probably, one they don't use much in the country standards. Harley won't teach me any rock songs, so I'm on my own to figure it out.

It's not but a few minutes, and I hear Pop yelling at me to cut that racket off and wash up. He ain't too crazy about the music I listen to, and like I said, he don't rate me playing the guitar too high either. Seems like he's always after me about something, and lately he's been on this computer kick, telling me that's what I should be studying, how they'll be everywhere one day. I don't figure he knows any more about computers than I do, and besides, they sound about as interesting as mucking the barn stalls. I read that *Space Odyssey* book; I don't think me and Hal the Computer would get along so well. I guess Pop don't mean nothing by it, it's just with the strike and all, he's thinking about money more than usual. Him and Carlton Price have some house painting jobs

on the side, but they ain't steady and some of these strikes have run three or four months.

After supper we have to sit in the den for an hour because Momma says it's family time. Usually I'm bored, but lately I've been paying more attention to the news. Tonight there's a piece showing where the cops and National Guard are turning fire hoses on these hippie kids, and it makes me mad at the cops, but I know better than to say anything in front of Pop. At the end of the show, the numbers hang on the screen telling how many was killed, wounded, or missing in Vietnam for the week, and nobody says anything for a minute or two afterwards, not even Callie. Finally, Momma gets up from her chair to go do the dishes, and that usually signals family time is over. Tonight, she stops with her hand on the back of Pop's chair.

"Riley," she starts. The only word I can think of to describe the tone in her voice is hollow, or maybe just distant, like her mind is on something other than what she's saying. Either way, it catches me by surprise. "You need to buckle down when school starts back," she continues, not looking at me, but staring kind of vacant-like at the TV screen. "Maybe a little less time on that guitar and more on the books. You really should start thinking about college."

She's usually not the one to say anything about my music, and I don't make the connection until Pop snaps back at her.

"He'll go if he's called, Ruth Anne. Service might do him good, get that mule-headedness out of 'im," he says.

"No son of mine's going over there in that mess," she says, and then heels around for the kitchen. Pop lowers the footrest on his ratty La-Z-Boy and follows her; I can hear their muffled voices straining against each other.

The thunder gives way to a full-on downpour, and some of the rain is blowing in the front window, so I get up to close it. Momma and Pop are still discussing things pretty good, mainly me, and I try to

listen in. I ain't too sure about this war at all, but the idea of traveling somewhere, anywhere different from here, gets my attention. I cain't make out what they're saying, and I decide maybe I'll go read for a while. I do all right in school, but I'm no Einstein or nothing. 'Course, most of the books I like ain't the ones assigned at school. Momma takes us to the library regular, and she don't care what I check out, so I usually pick four or five that sound interesting, the kind that'll make me feel like I'm somewhere else. The one I'm on now is by a guy named Kerouac, and it's all about this journey of his. There's plenty in there about music, too, and I get the idea he must've felt the same as me sometimes. You know, that feeling there's something big waiting for you out there if you could just break free of where you are, something new and important. Something exciting. That Kerouac fellow understood it all right.

The rain finally lets up. Outside's got that smell to it, musky and clean all at the same time, the kind of smell you only get after a good rain. The air's thick like it's holding back a promise, and the sky off to the west is streaked pink and purple with broken rays of sunshine splintering through, and the colors strike me so that I have to stand there and let it soak over me a minute before I pull my sleeping bag out of the shed.

"Git that plastic out. Ag'in' the wall, by the fertilizer." Pop's standing on the back steps nursing a beer when he yells at me. "Ain't no call to sleep on the wet ground," he says.

It takes me a minute to turn it up; the shed's a mess, and Pop's still standing there when I come out. I was hoping he'd go on back inside, save me the lecture, but it don't look like that's gonna happen. I tuck the plastic in with my bag and trudge on by him.

"Where you boys sleepin'?" He tips the neck of the Miller bottle at me when he asks.

I consider a lie for a second, almost out of habit, just to keep him off my back, but decide against it. Camping with the guys is not something I usually catch a lot of grief over anyway.

"Out back of Steve's," I tell him. Where we live is kind of a neighborhood. There's two streets that join up—makes about a mile and a half loop, there ain't but ten or twelve houses scattered through. Plenty of woods in between. The field behind all the houses is usually planted in corn or soy beans, hundreds of acres I reckon, and Prile's Pond is back in there too. There's woods behind Steve's house that stretch into the cornfield, toward the pond, with a little clearing right in the middle. Feels like you're really in the wilderness somewhere, at least after it gets dark.

"You out rakin' round the neighborhood all hours of the night, I'm gone hear about it." He takes a pull from the Miller and nods at me before he swallows.

"We're just camping, Pop." I answer without looking him straight on. Truth is we usually end up circling the block most of the evening when we camp out, trying to come up with interesting stuff to do. Nothing bad, just stuff, but last fall we kinda got in some trouble over the church bus. A little ways down from us, on the main road, there was some off-brand church that had set up shop in Hollingsworth's old gas station, and they had this beat-up bus parked out front. We sorta ended up down there and seen the keys in it, and one thing led to the n Wouldn't of been a problem if Steve knew how to drive a stick. He swore he could, but when he popped the clutch, the thing lurched right through the roll-up door, the one they'd painted with this pitiful excuse of Jesus on the Cross. It didn't look like any Jesus I'd ever seen to start with, and after Steve bashed the nose of that bus chest high through him it was a sad sight altogether. It was a while before we could camp out again, even after the whipping and being grounded. To think about it, I guess I can see where Pop's suspicion comes in.

"None of that kid stuff," I tell him, shifting my bag and the plastic from my right arm to my left. "Just sittin' around a campfire is all."

"You gettin' 'bout the age that wild streak gone cause you some grief, the kinda grief your momma cain't get you out of. Half them boys over there fighting's there 'cause of some trouble. Jail or service is what they'll tell you. Time you was growing up. If it ain't a trade you want, then you better pay your momma heed and hit them books. Computers, that's the ticket, what put them fellows on the moon. More future than you gone find in the factory. Or playing that damn guitar." He leans over and spits at the ground when he says it, like he's trying to get the taste of the words out of his mouth.

He could've left off about the guitar. It ain't something I can change is what he don't understand. I hear songs in my head most all the time, even when the radio ain't playing, and everything, *everything*, has a rhythm to it, a melody of some sorts. I sure don't have *open the pod doors* running through my mind. There ain't no point in saying nothing, so I straddle my bike.

"We're just camping out," I tell him again.

"Forgit them notions Harley's putting in your head. He ain't got a dime to show for music. Gone through ever cent Daddy had, keepin' him up. Hit's a sorry excuse of a man what lives off handouts."

"Yeah, I know." It was close to what he wanted to hear.

"No meanness," he shouts after me as I pedal off.

W spread the plastic out and roll three of the bigger pieces of wood around the fire ring for seats, and Steve shakes out a Marlboro, hands me one. Gregg's already piling up twigs and some bigger branches for later; he's got a little pyro in him, set his momma's couch on fire when he was about four or five.

"What you figure we ought to do tonight?" Steve asks.

I take a draw on the Marlboro and try blowing a smoke ring but it never shapes up. "Hell, I don't know," I tell him, "You got something?"

"You know those old wagon wheels in the Simpson's front yard? T ones with the roses growing on 'em? I figure we oughtta steal 'em."

"What are we gonna do with 'em when we get 'em? I ain't sure I see the point."

"Stealin' 'em's the point. I don't give a shit what we *do* with 'em. Throw 'em in the pond."

"I don't know. Don't sound like much of a challenge." I throw my butt in the fire ring, and it lands next to the little pyramid of branches Gregg's built up. He takes a stick and knocks the butt over against a rock and snuffs it out.

"Shit's too wet," Gregg says. "We need lighter fluid. Maybe some gasoline." But he goes on trying to get it started.

"We could go to Luanne's, look through her window, see can we catch her coming out of the shower." Steve's already lighting another smoke.

"I heard she let Arden Stratton feel her up," I say.

"That's a lie," Steve settles back against his log and props his feet on the rocks of the fire ring. "Where'd you hear that crap?"

"Arden," I tell him.

"I guess so. Hell, he'd say anything to try to keep people from talking about his no-count daddy."

"It's what he said, is all."

Gregg's got the fire going and is adding leaves and some bigger sticks. It's smoking pretty bad what with everything being wet, and I keep leaning this way and that to keep it out of my eyes. What little bit of light was left is gone, and it feels like a black wall has sprung up around us, closing everything off just at the edge of the campfire light. We carry on, Steve bringing up different things we might do, lying about girls, Gregg poking at the fire and throwing something new on

ever few minutes. I'm mostly just sitting, staring into the coals, smoking cowboy killers and noticing how some of the bigger pieces of wood will shift from time to time as they burn, how the smallest thing, just moving a bit, will cause the flames to dance up higher or die out completely until finally the pieces cave in on themselves, the fire eating the heart right out of 'em. Nothing Steve says sounds like any fun, and for a minute, I wish I'd brought my guitar, but then I figure Gregg would try to use it for firewood once he's burned everything else up.

We manage to make two laps around the block. Everybody's lights are off already, and the night air has that weight to it, not heavy and thick like during the day, but more just a tension, like there's a possibility to it that people don't realize while they're sleeping. Like all your options are open, and you just gotta pick one; there ain't nobody stopping you or telling you what you should or shouldn't do.

Somehow, knowing it is enough tonight. We take a look at those wagon wheels, but the grass is awful wet, and even Steve don't feel like taking them anymore, so we head on back to the campsite. Boring's got a way of covering everything. Me and Steve both roll out our bags; Gregg rakes the coals around for a minute and stirs up a little blaze before he spreads his bag open. I shove my jacket and shirt in my stuff sack and use it for a pillow, fold my hands behind my head and settle in. Gregg's still standing over the fire, and it's casting shadows back and forth across him so he looks like one of the guys you'd see in a cheap horror movie. He kicks the last log, the one he was using for a seat, on the coals and tosses his poker stick in after. The cinders dance up, and I watch them trace toward the sky before the night seems to swallow them up. The big log smothers everything, and the fire dies to nothing but a glow even before Gregg stretches into his bag.

Nobody says anything for a while, I don't know how long. I'm thinking the sky looks like a black tablecloth with salt spilled all across it. I spot the North Star, both Dippers, Orion's belt, try to make shapes

out of the other stars stretching above us. As soon as we quiet down, everything else starts up. First off I hear a whippoorwill call, another one answer, then it's the cicadas, crickets, you can even hear the bull-frogs over at the pond chiming in. It builds up to the point you almost cain't stand it, and then somehow they all stop at the same time and everything goes quiet again. There's a rustle off to my right, something in the underbrush, probably just a possum or maybe a 'coon, but I don't think much about it. The next time I hear it, it's moved farther away. I'm almost asleep, still listening to the quiet, when Steve speaks up, and his voice startles me a little bit.

"Thirty-two more days," he says. "I get my license and we're free."

The crickets start up again, but only for a minute, like the bridge in a song, before they fall into another rest. I don't turn sixteen until Fall, Gregg not until after the first of the year, and it almost feels like Steve's bragging a little bit. I don't bother to answer, and I hear Gregg fidget around in his bag, adjusting the zipper.

"After that, we can go anywhere we want. None of this Huck Finn camping-out shit anymore."

"Shut up and go to sleep, ass-wipe, you ain't going nowhere." Gregg rolls over after he says it, zips his bag up.

I look at the stars stretching on and on, and try to imagine where they might end, what it would look like standing there at the edge and it makes me feel empty and small, then stupid for thinking about it. I focus on one that's shining a little brighter than the rest and realize it's probably a planet, but I don't know which one. I wonder if there might be somebody up there, lying in a rain-soaked clearing, listening to whatever kind of night animals they might have there, looking across all that black nothing and seeing the Earth, glowing stronger than what's around it. I wonder if there's somebody lying there wondering if there's somebody lying here looking back.

I catch the flash of a shooting star from the corner of my eye, and I t my head in that direction, but it's gone. I think I see the vapor trail, but then I tell myself it ain't nothing but my mind trying to convince me, painting a picture of something I've seen before. That shooting star didn't last but a second and I know it's gone forever, know that I missed most of it, and even if I did catch a flash, the rest of it is just filled in by my memory. I make a little wish for that Gibson all the same before I roll over and start fading to sleep. The rain has made the spot I'm in soft, and it feels like I'm sinking down in the ground, the earth forming up around me.

We slip off fishing for a little while after we wake up, but the rain from yesterday's still got the water stirred up and muddy so ain't nothing biting. I give up after an hour or so and tell Steve and Gregg I'm heading home, kinda hoping they'll leave too. You got to watch close for snakes walking by yourself, there's copperheads all in here, but Gregg don't budge and Steve's already casting again, so I make my way pretty slow, singing the verses to "Honky Tonk Women" out loud as I go.

Back at the house, I get my sleeping bag stowed in the shed and figure maybe I'll lay down and sleep a little bit before I start on my chores, but I see Pop's old Falcon top the hill. He's going faster than he should, and for a minute I don't think he'll get her slowed down to turn in the drive, but he does. It ain't a good sign him coming home this time of day. Him and Carlton just started a new painting job and there's no way they've finished, so they've been fired or something else is wrong. Either way I can tell by his driving he's on the warpath about something, and I figure right off I probably should have kept my line in the water a while longer. He gets up to the house just as I round the corner, and when he brakes, the front tires dig ruts in the drive and I

hear a spray of gravel pinging against the oil pan and underside of the bumper.

"Git your Momma 'n' them," he yells without cutting the engine.

"What for?" I ask him.

"Boy, what'd I say?" He answers and starts laying on the horn.

I take the steps two at a time, and Momma's already shooing Callie and Maddie toward the door. "Riley, what's the matter?" she asks me.

"I don't know," I tell her. "Pop says come on. He's fired up about something."

Everybody piles in the car and Pop tears off, slinging more gravel. He barely even slows down at the stop sign, just turns hard to the right and barks the tires a little bit when he straightens out on the main road. Momma keeps asking him what's wrong, but he don't answer for a while; he just keeps wrenching his hand around on the steering wheel like he wants to twist it off the column.

"That goddamn Harley," he finally says, pounding the heel of his hand on the steering wheel in time with each word.

"Eli, the kids." Momma snaps at him, then cuts her head around at us in the back seat. "What's happened? Is everybody all right?"

Pop still don't answer but goes back to wrenching the steering wheel again. Callie leans over next to me and says, "You smell like cigarettes. Momma, Riley's been smoking cigarettes." I shove him up against the side of the car, and he tries to give me a frog, but I dodge his fist for the most part. Momma just turns around and tells Maddie to sit between her brothers. She'll remember it later on though, I know it, and I'll get a lecture, probably grounded again.

Pop keeps shaking his head, disagreeing with something in his mind, but he doesn't say anything else for a while longer. I've figured out we're headed toward Grandaddy's, and I'm getting a queasy feeling, kinda like that feeling right before you throw up, that something

has happened to Harley, or maybe Grandaddy, something bad, but I know better than to say anything.

Just as we turn on Grandaddy's road, Pop speaks up. "Ruth Anne, I swear I'll kill him."

Momma looks at him for what feels like a long time, looks at him hard, then just lays her hand across his arm and pats it a few times. I can see the muscles in his forearm coiling under her fingers. "That bastard," Pop says, "with my bare hands I'll kill him."

I cain't hardly believe it when we come around the last curve. Momma starts crying, but Pop don't say a thing. I can make out the barns and outbuildings, but the house is just gone. Four fire trucks are pulled up in the yard, but there ain't much activity, just two hoses spraying what's left of the house, which ain't much, mostly just foundation stones, and one hosing down the big oak that stands next to where the porch used to be. Smoke's curling up from the piles, and everything's charred; most all the leaves are gone from the oak on the side close to the house.

There's a knot of people standing in Aunt Jenny's yard, across the road from Grandaddy's, and Pop wheels in there. All of his brothers and sisters are there, 'course you can throw a rock from any of their houses and about hit Grandaddy's. All my cousins, too. I reckon all the other neighbors are there and more; everybody knows Grandaddy and Harley. I see two deputy cars and an ambulance with the back door open. Harley's leaning against the side of the ambulance with a couple of the emergency people checking him over. His shirt's off; he ain't wearing nothing but his undershirt, and the galluses of his overalls are loose and the bib's folded down around his waist. There's bandages from his right shoulder all the way down his arm, and his hair don't look right. It's always been gray and straight as a floor joist, and he wears it kinda long for his age, but everything on the one side is down close to his head and curly, frazzled looking, and when we pull up,

it hits me that it's been singed. Two of the deputies look like they're standing guard over him.

Pop is out of the car before it even stops good, leaves the door standing open, and makes a beeline for Harley. I see Grandaddy angle over to cut him off; he gets between Pop and his path to Harley. Pop's straining against him, and Grandaddy's losing ground. Harley don't seem to notice. The other two deputies join in and grab Pop by each arm. They all start to scuffle a little bit, Pop swimming to break free and the deputies leaning harder into him. They finally wrangle Pop over toward the other cruiser and slam him up against it. He's yelling something at Harley, still trying to get at him, but I cain't make out what it is 'cause Momma's gone to crying pretty loud at this point, screaming "Eli" to get him to stop. It's all a jumble.

The air is sharp and cuts into your eyes, and the wood-smoke smell hangs so heavy that I don't feel like I can get a good breath down in my lungs, hard as I try. They've got Pop in the back of the one squad car; Harley's in the ambulance. Everybody else is milling around, crying and hugging each other. I make it over to where Grandaddy and Maw are standing. His eyes are rimmed red, but he's standing stiff and proud, staring at what's left. I start to say something, but the look on Grandaddy's face makes me feel kind of empty, and I figure anything I say will just come out sounding stupid, like a kid.

I cross the road and sorta mingle in with the volunteer firemen, trying to get a closer look. The safe is still there, but the paint's been charred black. Three pieces of the parlor furniture, the set that was in the hallway by the door, have been drug out toward the tractor barn and are covered in soot and cinders. One of the firemen notices me and just stares for a minute.

"You need to get back across the road, kid," he says.

"Is that all that's left?" I point toward the furniture.

"Ain't nobody hurt too bad, kid. That's the main thing."

That's when it hits me about the Gibson, and all I can think is to get away, so I wander off toward the barn without saying nothing to anybody. I check to make sure Callie hadn't followed me, but nobody's noticed me at all and the crowd standing in Aunt Jenny's yard may as well be a million miles away, so I climb up in the loft and settle down on a couple of bales, looking out the loft door toward where the house used to be, trying to think, sort things out.

Every guitar is different. Some's got music in 'em and some ain't; you can feel it, you know it soon as it's in your arms and you rake that first chord or hit the G run. That Gibson was chock full and it was my music what was in there, every note. Mine.

It's quiet up in the hayloft, so quiet it makes my head hurt. I kick a bale down toward the feed bin, just to hear it thump against the other bales, but it don't help none. All I got in my head is the Gibson, and I try to make myself remember what it sounded like, try to hear that warm tone in my head, the way a chord rolled out of the box and just wrapped itself around you like summer, ringing clear as the morning sky. Hard as I try, all I can hear is the quiet.

I try to make myself feel sad for Grandaddy and Maw and Harley, but I cain't, not really. Rub my eyes, but I cain't bring no tears. I try to picture all the stuff that used to be in the house, where this chair sat, where that picture hung. I think about all Great-Grandaddy's antiques, what Momma always called the family history pieces. Wonder where Grandaddy and Maw and Harley will live, what they'll do. But all them thoughts slip away. I cain't hang on to a single one for more than a second. All I can think about is that guitar, *my* guitar, and there ain't nothing but mad swelling up inside me.

The ambulance is about ready to pull off with Harley, and the deputies have let Pop out of the car by the time I wander back over. Pop is sitting on the big quartz rock in Aunt Jenny's front yard with Momma,

rubbing his back and shoulders while he's trying to explain what happened.

"Daddy said he'd been drinking pretty heavy past day or two," Pop is saying.

"Was it an accident?" Momma asks.

Pop shakes his head no. "He piled those damn guitars on his bed. Fiddle too. Poured 'shine all over 'em, down his right arm. Daddy happened by just as he threw the match on it all, pulled him out. Shoulda let the bastard burn."

Everybody just stands there, not saying anything else, and I can feel the mad still growing in me, filling up inside me till I think my chest is gonna bust open. And then, the words come out of my mouth all in a rush, like I never thought 'em before I said it.

"What about my Gibson?"

Pop's hand flashes out quick as a snake, and he backhands me across the jaw. At first I don't feel a thing, but I notice the acid taste of blood in my mouth soon after. Me and him stare at each other, the silence hanging between us, and Momma starts crying again, moves to get up and come to me, then changes her mind. Right then I understand what Harley's done, the why of it. Of knowing the ache you have for something that ain't never gonna be. That's when it hits me: how clear it all is to me don't make a bit of difference, and there ain't no way Pop's ever gonna get it. I turn my back on him and stomp to the car, sit there and wait, staring off into nothing, running my thumb across the calluses on my fingertips. The bruise I know is already coloring my cheek will be gone in a couple of days.

Frances Richey

Kill School

That was the summer he rappelled
down mountains on rope

that from a distance looked thin
as the dragline of a spider,

barely visible, the tension
he descended

into the made-up
state of Pineland

with soldiers from his class.
They started with a rabbit,

and since my son was the only one
who'd never hunted,

he went first. He described it:
moonlight, the softness

of fur, another pulse
against his chest.

The trainer showed him
how to rock the rabbit

like a baby in his arms,
faster and faster,

until every sinew surrendered
and he smashed its head into a tree.

They make a little squeaking sound,
he said. *They cry.*

He drove as he told me:
You said you wanted to know.

I didn't ask how he felt.
Maybe I should have,

but I was biting
off the skin from my lips,

looking out
beyond the glittering line

of traffic flying
past us in the dark.

Waiting

In my dream a girl
floats on a raft.
She bends,
pulls from the river
a small dark
winged thing,
brings it to me,
a stone, John,
(my son's first name,
the one we never use)
chiseled into it.
I'm half awake:
5:15 a.m.; 1:15 p.m. in Iraq

***

On the way to the doctor,
I carry the dream in my body
over the snowy walk
past Wollman Rink...
8 a.m.; 4 p.m. in Iraq

Ben has asked for warm clothes,
lip balm. I'd forgotten
it could get cold in the desert.
In the beginning,
all the stories were about
the heat, anguished

faces; that Iraqi man
on his knees, caught
in crossfire, the futile container
his arms were
around his small son.

***

9 a.m.; 5 p.m. in Iraq
As the cold dime of
the stethescope sweeps
my back, I imagine Ben
underground in a
concrete room, maps
spread out on tables,
tacked to walls. He moves
from map to map,
never leaves the room.
This is how I keep him safe.

***

The vertigo started in March
when he told me
he would be deployed.
I sat down on the sidewalk
at the corner of 43rd
and Broadway, waited
for the spinning to stop.

12 p.m.; 8 p.m. in Iraq
The technician gives
me earplugs, presses
the button that slides
my body into the white
tunnel, where harsh
knocks and alarms
hammer out the map
of my brain—hidden
in its burning pigments,
the memory of my son
when he was three, sitting
by a window, waiting for
the rain to stop so
we could walk through
the mud to the lake
where we would place
our hands on stones,
let ladybugs crawl all over them.

***

I believed if I was present
for his football games,
he wouldn't get hurt;
that if I made the two hour drive
from Stamford to Ramsey
in half the time
that day he ran into a tree,
I could keep him
whole in his body.

Mid-afternoon, September,
after Beast, that first
training Plebe year, I fixed
him in my mind,
and he called
later that evening: "Mom,
were you at West Point today?"
And I said no.
"But I thought
I saw you on the Plain."
I said no, but what time
did you see me?
And he named the moment
I'd prayed for him.

I thought it had something
to do with our
heartbeats, like clocks
placed in the same
room. Once

I believed I could
close my eyes and know,
even when my son was
on the other side of the world,
if he was alive.

Home on Leave

with so little time, he paces
outside the planetarium
while I rest on a slate bench.
It has rained all morning, cutting
the brutal heat.
His face
is still beautiful, more serious;
his shoulders built-up. He shakes
his head and says
I use the word brutal too easily.

He has another life
where he stuffs a plug of tobacco
inside his cheek, straps a knife
to his thigh, searches
the homes of strangers, alert
to anything that moves. In that life
he knows the difference between
killing and murder, that even
though the children are frightened,
he must keep his helmet on.

***

He buys our tickets
as if I were the child, ushers me
to the second floor where we disappear
into galaxies, vast

and moving too fast to take notes.
From the moment he arrived
all he wanted was to enter this sphere
together, to fumble for seats, indistinguishable
from the others in the black bowl of a sky
not yet turned on.

A voice in the dome
tells us behind each star we can see,
the night hides millions more,
like the words we don't say
behind the ones we use to
get through moments like this when
too much time has passed between us
and every visit could be the last.

***

What is a star?
Just another body that will live
and die driven by fire? Who dreamed it
into life before space
gave it a home? Questions
a mother doesn't think to ask
as her small son
points to its shining.

Above us
hunters and heroes
morph into necklaces strung
from carbon and dust. They spiral

farther and farther away. We can't
touch them. We can't touch
any of them, though the voice says
every atom of oxygen we breathe
was made inside a star.

***

If they're in our blood,
why must they be so distant?
I don't know where he's going
or how far apart we might drift.

Our seats rumble.
The earth whirls through us.
He will leave again, and
again I'll be broken, a relic
of that young woman I was when
I stood over his bassinet and
hoped his rash would heal
if I changed to cloth.

Lightsey Darst

Azaleas

Yesterday I found blood on my sheets
for the first time in years. Felt like being
a girl again, to strip first
the sheet I'd slept on, then
the mattress cover, finding how
deep the stain.

When I hid in the closet playing
hide-and-seek, my young heart
went on making noise
though I willed it to be still:

hidden in those games I gave away
all of myself, peeling
layer after layer;
I thought I had no limit. One night

I was not found
until my mother called me in. By then
I'd opened everything

to the azaleas.
Fuchsia and red,
flesh-scented bloom, they never
gave me back.

Ruth Gila Berger

Returning

Three pigeons keep returning to the same window ledge, one apartment over. Their dazzle of purple-green shimmer and brownish gray firmly places them into the confused mosaic of who I see myself to be. Just divorced and at a new address, I lean against the screen to consult with these beautiful-ugly birds on the meaning of home. I have never seen them cross the small alley between my building and the next to land. They stay clear of my two windows. The pigeons' hideous coo always comes from the same place. Each shaded fleck of clay and spot of damaged mortar is scripted in their eyes. It is history and home—their little corner of the world.

Growing up, I had such a place, where the pier of Piermont starts to extend into the Hudson River. A ratty beach with an operetta of broken glass, the occasional bones of boats, a mound of large rocks, concrete slabs cracked off the storm wall, rusted poles missing their charge of fallen wire fencing. Three short steps from where one of the poles lay downed grew my world's bitchiest shrub, a bush that survived the frustrated kicks of factory workers and boys, chemicals dumped upriver, and a hurricane that felled trees. Beguiled by her insistent green, I too pulled at her leaves and leaned over with my ear to her new twigs, hoping to learn a lesson in mean. I imagined myself coming back to dig her up after I'd danced away on the glittering lights of the Tappan Zee Bridge, across the river to the city, where, grown-up, I could change my name and burn red candles on a low table through the night. My corner, where I could project my seething into the knead of waves, watch it unravel in the spread of seaweed, get lost or lodged in the red plastic of a discarded taillight. My corner, located at the end of the old factory parking lot with a few parked cars like the strewn clothes and correspondence of the busy, independent woman I wanted

to become. This was where I went to escape my impatient knees and anxious ribs, returning since I was five, then dancing and prancing by the water's edge.

The day I decided to claim that stretch of beach starts out painted gray, except for the three beaded necklaces I wore. They hung down to my knees in bright yellow, aqua, and pink, swinging as I ran, hunting anything that sparkled; bits of blue and white porcelain lost in the wreck of some ancient galleon, an algae-maimed glass eye, a doll's arm, and the faded discard of an unfinished love letter.

Each time I remember the couple who walked their dog past me, I taste peanut butter and play with the ghosted texture against my tongue and teeth. The man wears a faded tie-dye T-shirt and the woman, a filmy skirt. The Hudson ripples and glitters with sun. I see my mother in her paint-flecked dungarees, grabbing my hand and shrieking, "Jesus Christ! Ruth, that's not a dog. Shit! That's a raccoon!"

While I claimed the small ugly beach, my mother took the entire shoreline. The pier, the marsh, trees, water, the other side, the shadows, details, motion, and the light. She'd stand and let her eyes grow blank. Her irises became a crazy sponge that wrung itself out every so often to absorb more. I picture each little piece of landscape lodging in her throat, stomach, and lungs like swallowed shards of glass, later to be extracted along with bits of bone, tissue, and blood, then given abstract translation on a canvas—landscapes: collage, watercolor, oil paint or pastel, acrylic, charcoal and ink. Their colors would blur and charge me, jeering like the gangs of *West Side Story*. Beautiful young men, armed and angry: the oranges—guns, yellows—brass-knuckled fists, blues—extended blades; the rest of them: greens, gold, black, and umber—chains, tire irons, bottles, sticks, and bats. They all came at me and I hated them, a thin, sad child wanting the calm comfort of rainbows and not the garish clash of my mother's vivid distress.

There's no place like home, when the cows come home, lights are on but no one is at home, nothing to write home about, home sweet home, just wait till your father gets home, eating me out of house and home, a house is not a home, a man's home is his castle, sorrow will come home to roost, can't it wait till we get home? home, James, and don't spare the horses, drive your point home, bring the house down, a house of ill repute, a woman's place is in the home, hearth and home, keep the home fires burning, that brought it home to me, time to go home, home field advantage, this is so homey, I feel so at home here.

What she addressed with paint, I now muddle through with words. I wonder about those landscapes, if she took the Westchester hills, dark blue, black, and yellow ochre and confronted her own often suicidal and manipulative mother with a jagged fringe of inflamed red water. She had to create her own river to erase the river that held my grandmother.

Grandmother, mother, daughter: I have come to believe we are only understood as a trilogy. Bestowed upon me is a legacy of staring into water, the impossible Hudson, skin luminous and volatile. It is our mirror of clashing currents, oil slicks, and debris. Sometimes in the shaky light of whiskey sours and red wine I see my grandmother shift into my bones. I can feel the gestures of her hands in the moments I am coy or deliberately ambiguous about my answer to an invitation. Sometimes her sarcasm escapes my throat, skittering into crevices where I can't reach, leaving me cold and angry with myself for judging an acquaintance by her mannerisms. Or I notice Gladys in the corners of my mouth, stretched open when I apply mascara.

"I've never seen a woman do this with her mouth closed. Even in the bathroom at the Russian Tea Room."

In winter memory, Gladys stands small on her Manhattan patio, looking past the sad shipping yard with its bared, extensive skeleton of rotting trains, past the Westside Highway, at the river. She is not dis-

tracted by the gossip of gulls. Her eyes are blue and wind-torn; I can see her gritty water peopled by Polish ghosts, wrestling childish battles with siblings over oranges and chocolate in the shtetl, then grudges over red velvet dresses and ice-skates bought with rent money in New York—all the small hurts and hates that should have been made irrelevant by Nazi gas.

Grandmother, mother, and daughter: I am struck by our common need to reinvent the ground. In all her landscapes, I see the walls my mother needed to build, so much better to have her life mirrored by the irrefutability of earth. But the discordant strokes reveal the fear that her life was just paint. That her careful rendition of home, husband, child, and career could be so easily erased she would find herself Bronx-bound, unable to leave her mother's home, she'd stand, unprotected from her father's acidic gaze, her lowered eyes—a confirmation of his fear that she was nothing, an incapable, impractical child. A weak woman unable to get good meat or peaches that weren't rotten without her mother's assistance. A misguided girl who might be fooled by the image of a motorcycle and run away with a goyim who didn't clean his fingernails.

I was seven the first time I stopped trying to talk to her. She was getting ready to have a hysterectomy, and I overheard her on the phone with my teacher, apologizing that if I was having emotional problems, her surgery was the reason. It was the first time I remember my thoughts about deliberately dying. While I didn't have the word, suicide, I toyed with the idea. I wondered if throwing myself off the roof would give me a peaceful, permanent remove. I opened my window, climbed onto the top of our front porch and sat chewing on my knees, my fingers laced together, holding my ankles in. The facts of my life were hammers banging against the inside of my teeth. My jaws ached

as I clenched them to keep from screaming into the quiet neighborhood night.

For the duration of grade school, I came home crying on an almost daily basis, heart scratched and stinging, each time explaining between sobs how my classmates pushed or ignored me, made fun of my clothes, wouldn't let me play with them, called me names. About how the teacher hated me because I was Jewish and stopped just short of encouraging their cruelty. The boredom of not being allowed to read, do math more advanced than counting, or draw the things I wanted to strangled me. Each word of my mother's conversation dropped a rock into my stomach.

"I'll have to talk to your father."

She abandoned her promises like dirty paper towels.

***

Today, I stare at a pastel drawing of my mother's above my desk, a landscape that shifts into a woman's shape, her personhood only visible as a shadow containing mountains, clouds, a river, horizon. Squinting, I try to imagine my mother as she might stand in her bathroom mirror, left hand gripping a pad at the top. Her right moves like a busy squirrel, dipping, grabbing a pastel and dropping it just as quickly. She changes her stance, smudging and shading color over color. The river courses over these attempts at her face. The bully mountains push and shove my mother's small shoulders so she hunches into an even smaller space. My eyes turn heavy and my temples screech their objections to this sudden concentration. I lack the paint to fill my mother in. While I listen with joy to her natter on the phone about the classes she is taking—modern dance, singing, acting, clowning, in search of fun, fulfilling a teenage fantasy, herself—my teeth ache from an almost-alien clench. I can't hear any of it without spiraling backwards into a childhood chant of hatred. My litany of

hurts shark each other up before I can articulate any of them. What knowledge of my mother do I have that is not boiled in the grudges and resentments of a child?

I remember my inordinate rage and breath-catching irritation at her humming and chirping off-key in the kitchen at breakfast. Now, I crudely think of the morning-after giddiness which follows getting laid. But then it was only one more layer that excluded me, a momentary happiness rendering me that much more invisible.

Looking back for a bond, I only see us shopping. Once, she found an off-the-shoulder black sweatshirt, splashed with turquoise, white and silver, à la Jackson Pollock. It was a trip we took three days before my first date, me pretending to be rich and British with my nose in the air, and her, cute and messy, both of us laughing on the escalator. A wonderful, brief, mercenary respite.

"Just don't tell your father the price."

Her concern made me crazy.

"You're growing up too fast." This from a woman who ran screaming from an overflowing toilet, who consistently used the toothbrush I had to write my name on with nail polish and mark with a tag of tape, who didn't use a hairbrush, who was mystified by light switches, and who couldn't name The Beatles. Those mother/daughter moments don't take up much space in my memory. Sometimes she asked me if I wanted a hot fudge sundae, then, could she have some?

"Why don't you just say you want one?"

I'd ask again and again, my preference for spicy over sweet, strong and vocal since I was a baby.

Personal disclosure, on my part, was used only for parsimonious purposes. It took me close to three years to tell my mother I had been menstruating. I didn't see it as my "glorious" passage into the land of "womanhood," only as a messy nuisance that necessitated costly

supplies. As I skipped more periods than I had, a stolen box of tampons lasted me from twelve to fifteen.

My mother confronted me in the car after I had written Tampax on her grocery list.

"Your father's worried about Toxic Shock Syndrome."

"I'm not," I told her. "What? He heard it mentioned on the radio and thinks he's an expert?"

"When did—"

"It's not like there haven't been a ton of magazine articles on this or anything telling you that if you're not stupid and don't change, you're fine. Look, if it's going to be a big deal, forget it. I'll buy my own damn tampons."

***

Until recently, I thought the pier of Piermont was natural, an irritable hiccup in the good mood of grand-scale tectonic evolution. I have since learned otherwise. The jetty was built. The invasive Japanese knotweed which grew relentlessly from where it had been planted to hold the railroad banks took on another meaning. It was logical to use something to hold up the hills, just as the white spin of rage is a natural response. The idea this landscape could be studied, weeded out, rebuilt, was new.

In the pier's canvas reproduction, I see my mother's carefully constructed image of a powerful woman, anchored in the pylons. Each ton of fill was a bank against the erosive doubts of her father, the gravel and dirt smacked down over his endless criticisms of her weight, handwriting, speech, choice of men, judgment of character, ambition, intelligence, and ability to move independently in the world. She was too studious, not studious enough, not friendly, naïve and too trusting, unkempt and willfully unattractive, then vain, frivolous and shallow with silly delusions about artistic achievement. Each burnt umber jot

and violet rendering of trees planted to hold the land contains her voice yelling back at him. Here, I am able to give her paint words. *See me, my dependable husband, my beautiful child and home, my practical car. Everything you were afraid I'd never have is mine. Mine. I am something despite you.*

It is this Hudson shoreline that helps me understand why my parents' house, a white, no-frills Victorian, was not a place of comfort for me.

There's no place like home, home is where the heart is, the lady of the house, charity begins at home, nothing to write home about, home is where you hang your hat, a house built on sand, a house is not a home, are we home yet? sorrow will come home to roost, homebase, would you do that in your mother's house? don't you people have homes to go to? take it on home! hammer it home, a house divided against itself cannot stand, don't try this at home, home away from home, put your house in order, I feel so at home here.

What do I consider home? I have turned this question over and filleted it like a small-boned fish. The answer now: the memory of my lover Sandra's back. Her freckles, a galaxy of brown spots I rearrange from the dots that dance just after I close my eyes. Sometimes—the sight of her spins my stomach, rattles my breath and spreads my legs—home can be the heat, the closing space between our sweaters or skin, which builds a wall around us wherever we are, alone anywhere. It is the convoluted map of hairs I leave across her bed, debris she collects, clicking a grumbling tongue, laughing when I repeat the question she taught me in Serbian.

"Are you complaining again?"

***

The city of Minneapolis is tearing up the block where Sandra lives. A jackhammer rams through the pavement, revealing layers like the strata of rocks cut by water. Small stones peek out—fearful eyes, from the scatter. They shine with tears the summer-heavy dust and ruined asphalt have been unable to suppress. Walking, I find tiny black pebbles clinging to the hem of my jeans—these specks of tarry street are my moments of irritable hurt: how Sandra laughed at my failed soufflé, didn't sufficiently appreciate my efforts, yelled at me for not calling when I said I would. They are things I try to let go of, only to discover their accumulated, sticky insistence when I break at something irrelevant.

Home is the pile of once-used tissues I don't throw out. Frugal or disgusting, it comforts me. Or the earring I leave out of its box for all the days I can't find its mate, the grit of city construction I breathe outside my door, and the Saturday night warble of returning drunks, slamming theirs. It is the loosening of bones once my heels are flung off and I've turned to lock the dark-grained door whose swirls reveal a h skull, the face of a sad bear, and other, less-reliable shapes. More than an address, it is a mishmash of moments: tripping in drunk and laughing, the fact of my bleach-scented hands, newly clean toilet, the bottles, cans, and newspaper in the kitchen trash, evidence of my lack of discipline in recycling, the books not yet alphabetized, the pictures perfectly hung, the ancient, battered camp-chest I catch my toe on and the phone I can always find by its shriek. Home is a hodge-podge of stray memories like my recent bronchitis; days my love brought me a smoothie and caresses, or the way her brow curled when we had some wine turned vinegar. It is the place where loss, like my three pigeons, c struts, and clucks before settling down to roost; where afternoon can find me struggling with the hazy shame felt in the stretch of skin under dried tears. Also, the mildew-scented wedding dress I keep from

another life, and cat hair from the cat who no longer lives with me, shuddering off the slates of an oscillating fan.

Sometimes my apartment is haunted by the possibility of ghosts. What if the relationship I giggle about and bask in dissolves? What if the lover, who heightens the color of all these things, leaves? Would my city swagger change? There have been times when, heart-broken, my steps got smaller, taken back to childhood, step-on-a-crack superstitions.

The future becomes an apocalypse and I wonder what will happen to my view of the street. Would I still see galaxies in the sparkle of broken glass and heated granite or would it turn to an ugly, malignant decay? There's no doubt I'd still see Sandra, situated in the building kitty-corner to mine. The children's artwork adorning the lawn of the elementary school might grow garish if I saw her walking past it on her way home. Eyes drawn by children in faces attached to pink triangular bodies might knife me, suddenly harsh and accusing. Parking signs might turn nasty, foil my attempts at numbness and become something for me to smack into, jolt me into the reality of being solid, bruised and leaking foolish tears.

Sandra's choice to leave or mine, it wouldn't matter. I catch myself shivering as I glare at the rug I've had since I was three, a Peruvian weave with roosters, llamas, flowers, centipede-like designs, and little girls. My love's penchant for all things colorful adheres to the aging threads. I fight to untangle it and extract the lilt of her voice.

The probable impermanence of people sticks bitter in my mouth. Creating bricks, mortar, and shelter from an embrace is a dangerous proposition. Home is not a word I readily trust.

Five hours after we met, home was Craig's fingertips tracing and smoothing my eyebrows as he lay propped on one elbow. The fact I slept instantly and soundly, for the first time in years, launched the thought, *In this man's arms was where I belonged.*

***

Some silken afternoons a panic crawls under my skin, raising hard painful goosebumps. What if history repeats itself? I fear the church bells which break open my mornings. Alone, their clang and chime might only echo in my stomach, an annoyance of obnoxious noise, pulling me into tears and hiccups and a horrible longing for that lost smile. A splintering or shatter of feelings is not the only threat. Sandra moves in the limbo of exile. A Croatian Serb who left before the war, she cannot return. We wait for a judge to grant or deny her asylum.

***

My lover's twelve-year separation from her home and family imposed by finances and war forces me to face how I have rejected mine. Looking back, there is something artificial, even pretentious about it—*I see a red door and I want to paint it black. No colors anymore, I want them to turn black. I see the girls go by dressed in their summer clothes. I have to turn my head until my darkness blows*—teenaged.

Late one night, I talk to Sandra about how I have cringed from my mother's affection—her goodnight kisses—for as long as I can remember, vigilant as a butterfly protecting her wings, furious at feeling like my neck was a choice chicken bone to be pounced on and sucked.

A moment in the tangled end of my teens comes back to me. It was the nasty breakup of my first extended relationship. I met him right after graduating from high school. We spent our last weeks together throwing acid in scratches cut by the lies we told each other. One afternoon, caught in a downpour of tears, I found myself thinking, *This is where girls go to their mothers. I should do that.* Suddenly Pinocchio, moving on strings pulled by a Hallmark sentimentality, I tripped into my parents' room and fell against my mother.

"He doesn't love me, mommy," I heard myself say.

I stayed in her arms for somewhere between two and fifteen minutes before I fled to the shower and sank down with my arms around my knees, then a real girl, shedding real tears against the desire to scour myself with steel wool. *Well, I tried it.*

***

Sandra cocks her head at me, opens her mouth. Shuts it. Absently puts a hand down to pet her dozing cat, a Cornish Rex named Reetzo—Serbian for curly. I watch her lips.

"She loves you. I'm sure she looks back now and regrets. I mean, when I'm sixty, I'm sure I'll be horrified at how I was with Reetzo, squeezing him, hugging and kissing him when I know he wants to get away. Why don't I just let him go? But he's my first cat and I just love him. It's like each time I see him, he's new, and I just love him and want him close to me. You know? People regret. People forgive."

"I'm not a cat."

"Honey. But what can be said? It's a long time ago. People forgive."

Sandra talks about her mother differently than I speak of mine.

"She's my mother—she did her best and I'm grateful. Of course she was a bitch—she called me names—she still tries to tell me what to do. But all that happened when I was a kid and is in the past. She did what she knew to do. I'm a good person."

I wonder about these words. They fly at me like spit stones, scolding. But I see a familiar anger in the way Sandra's back stiffens, pushing her face forward, rendering her eyes opaque. Old injury and confusion twist, imparting a slight new thickness upon her voice.

"You can't live in the past. She's your mother."

An increase of phlegm reveals the hurt contradicting her words and I wonder what of her mother's voice Sandra hears on any given bad day.

Is her way of looking at her mother better than mine? To say all the fights, anger, resentments, disappointments and betrayals are merely part of every mother/daughter relationship—all of it, a matter of course and therefore not worth being pulled out and examined apart from what was good?

"You're strong, look at you, all you've done. People forgive. Sometimes it seems you don't want to let go, like you want to dwell on the bad things. Would you really change them? Now, I mean."

I don't want to be abandoned on a palette, stuck in the hardened glops and smears of dried, rejected paint, a landscape in its own right. For my future, I need to isolate the strokes. Anger works like a fixative on pastels, invisible yet controlling an image created years ago. Behind its chemical seal, I'd never be able to see that rage, let alone examine its effects on every aspect of my life, with friends, lovers, anyone. I want to see the dust—to say that fine-powdered cerulean is my revulsion at the smell of neediness, the shadow of my mother always desperate for a hug; maroon, an impatient rage when someone else's anxiety puts her shrill hum in my ears, and yellow ochre—the internal hurricane of resentment, guilt when I push someone else away.

The first time I became aware of the violence of my revulsion was years before my divorce, on a late flight to Minneapolis, returning from a visit to New York. Quietly, Craig told me it was not acceptable for me to pick him up and swing him around to force a barrier between my mother and me. I laughed, shocked, and I argued momentarily with his memory. Still displeased with my behavior, he marveled at how I'd been able to lift and move him like that, given my bad back. For an impossible hour we stared straight ahead, at the seats in front of us, until our excitement at returning home compelled our hands to interlace comfortably again.

***

Much of Piermont had already changed from what it was during my childhood. Torn down long ago, the factories exist only as they were behind a blink, in the blur of dancing red on black. Growing up, I imagined them a group of fat, old men, mutton-chopped and Vitalis-ed, griping about the rising cost of beer, cigarettes, and the latest demands of their stiff-haired wives. The smallest and youngest of the three might get carried away, almost rising, his seat groaning under tensed thighs. He'd start to yell about the indifferent city-folk taking over the town, the Reagan-era politics that left the three of them closed and abandoned, prisoners of huge locks and occasional hoodlums searching for sellable scrap. The two others would laugh, cough, and tell him to shut up. After all, fate was fate. They'd return to silence, waving the air they occasionally suspected held marijuana smoke, nostalgic for Frank Sinatra, irritated by the noise of "kids these days."

I recently returned, bringing my lover to tour my old stomping grounds. The baseball field, further out on the pier, is the place whose change hurts me least. Here I earned the nickname "Babe Ruth the Strikeout" after returning to the bench all but the two or three times I was walked. Too afraid to swing, I was the second-worst player in the Piermont T-shirt league, trumped only by the girl who ran the bases the wrong way twice. Now well-maintained, it is a benevolent grass face with one continuous dirt eyebrow and a receding cattail hairline. The cigarette-butt and soda-can-collar sagging mesh fence, gum-littered dug-outs, and battered, bullet-riddled scoreboard are only there in my memory.

The changes made to my corner were much more profound, its surroundings almost unrecognizable. The water tower I named a bleached daddy-long-legs standing tippy-toed was the first pier structure demolished. The factories followed and were replaced by townhouses and condos, art galleries, and cycling shops. Several yards from my beach

is an expanded stretch of perfect lawn, now picturesque with flowers, cheesy stone angels, painted rocks, the wood fence, and vegetable rows of a community garden. This coming together, this collected effort by adults and all sizes of children is progress. I wonder how it might have altered my internal map if this area had been so pretty in my youth. Would I have come here to sit among these angels to quiet my stomach-born thunderstorm? Or once after sucking cock, then smoking and staring at a twenty in my hand? Would I have stepped careful, trying not to crush the flowers as I left?

A white pagoda sits inland from my corner, an invitation for conventional romance by the pristine walking path. The glint of sun off it stabs my side, the contrast of the small beach, now effectively fenced-off, solidifies the change. The drifting laughter and exclamations of tourists answer my question. There is little chance I could come here to be alone. I needed the beach as it was, half-devastated, ignored and mostly forgotten, its dowdy rocks easily accessible from the edge of the parking lot, the crumbling asphalt like rotten teeth in a desperate grin. I needed the beauty of oil rainbows in mud, and my stubborn, bitchy bush that survived by growing out sideways from underneath any concrete. This spot by the Hudson is no longer home. My city pigeons would huddle here dopily, cringe at their dull roundness reflected in the water. They'd leave in a skulk before anyone noticed to chase them away to make room for the swans.

But it is still the place I go to consider my mother.

***

I know how ghosts adhere and grow roots inside, how they gnash their teeth and feel permanent. Mom, I tried to read the letters your father sent you during your college and graduate school years but couldn't get through them. It is hard to imagine what was in his head, that he worried and wanted the best for you. Perhaps his cruelty was unconscious and fundamental; you were

all wrong, first a daughter in a Jewish culture that valued only sons. Maybe the abandoned barn of his rejected religion bred termites, guilt he could only temporarily eradicate with anger—you bore the brunt of his own father's disappointment. I wonder if he was not like me, living with a constant narrator. Maybe he saw bits of himself scattered like pebbles in you, the butterfly he dreamed of when he should have been studying for a test. You might have been the dirty tomboy he played stickball with until she wasn't allowed to run with boys or was dead from some poverty-induced disease. Possibly there was a madman in his mother's tenement, and the stench outside his door indelibly etched the man's desperate face into your father's memory, resurrected by the self-portrait you once proudly brought home. You stood, holding it up in the twilight, grinning until your picture chilled his blood and compelled his rage. I understand how that rage can rip through the veins and render you a puppet, doomed to repeat the same garish red hills, the same black-green horrific sky.

***

Many mornings as a child, I followed my mother's eyes beyond the windows of the porch we dubbed California, sagging off the house like an earthquake could sink it in an imaginary sea. These moments solidify easily. I picture her dark brown hair, curls mostly weighted by grease, a neglect that bred prisms when the light hit her head. The style is a mix of cowlicks and her absentminded hands, their irritated swipes betrayed by smudges of paint.

For years I chafed against her disregard of the demands of femininity and commented with a snide disgust. Hostile and nasty as a child, I longed for the smallest attempt at a presentation of normalcy. Later, around eighteen, I proudly recast her lack of bra, unkempt hands and face, inside-out and mismatched clothes as a feminist rebellion. It was her nonconformity that gave me the idea that most of the curling iron and lipstick fuss was not necessary.

Now I can discern the narrative of depression and its subterranean landscape made visible. I have experienced my own skin turning to frozen soil, my bones immovable bedrock, and thoughts impossible to follow and name as individual drops of rain. Having spent months on end unable to recognize a coffee cup as a coffee cup and not just one more reflection of my worthlessness, or to think past the mountain ridge of a few shaky words, I understand the desire to project what's inside-out, to paint the water an obvious shade of confusion. To step away and breathe free.

The water is where I go to understand my mother, her Hudson. I think the edges of our rivers are quite similar. They are where we play. The marsh holds a new idea on each migratory bird, the cattails grow and break with endless experiments of thought. The elegant herons and uptight gnats take on all flights of fancy and the simple mass traps insanity outside in the unruly mud. Memory commands the sky, mine still bitter with the brightly colored streaks from polluting chemicals. I don't have pretty words to paint a picture of resolution, only mongrel greens and grays, gold and cerulean, the cadmiums and scarlet of my mother's reinvented water and sky. I wonder if she addresses me there, with the strokes of her brush, in her home, one street up from the Hudson.

Alicia Erian and Keya Mitra

Defining Love, Enduring Brutality

Alicia Erian has a BA in English from the State University of New York at Binghamton, and an MFA from Vermont College. She is the author of a collection of short stories, The Brutal Language of Love *(Random House, 2001), and a novel,* Towelhead *(Simon & Schuster, 2005). Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared most recently in Penthouse, the New York Times Magazine, Playboy, Zoetrope, Nerve, McSweeney's, the Sun, Open City, and the Iowa Review. She began writing seriously in 1986.*

The narrator in Towelhead is Jasira, a half-Lebanese teenage girl living with her father in Houston during the first Gulf War. The novel focuses on Jasira's struggle to find her identity, her turbulent relationship with her father, and her early sexual experiences with other men. The novel also explores the racism and sexual exploitation that Jasira experiences as a physically attractive, Arab American teenage girl.

Keya Mitra: You published a number of short stories and a short-story collection, *The Brutal Language of Love*, before writing this novel. How did you transition from writing short stories to a novel?

Alicia Erian: I didn't transition well at first. I wrote one hundred pages in which the voice sounded too old, events were occurring too quickly and without basis. Then I trashed those pages and started again. Basically, I tried to think of a novel as a giant short-story. That seemed to make things easier.

KM: What were some of the challenges you experienced in writing a novel?

AE: Mostly I found it daunting to keep track of each person's story-line, to remember not to forget what was happening with the various characters as the story progressed. And I had to really fight the urge to wrap things up at the end of every chapter. After writing short stories for so many years, it's hard to leave things unresolved like that. But you learn to relax and live with it.

KM: How do you think the novel as a form differs from the short-story?

AE: I'm not sure it really does. It's just longer and with a few more characters, a few more story elements. The idea that you can "take more time" with a novel ended up seeming ridiculous to me. Novels should be as well-paced as short stories. The extra pages shouldn't give you license to try your readers' patience (or your own, for that matter).

KM: Did you have the plot in mind before you began writing, or did it emerge as you were writing your draft? Had you already created the characters before writing the first draft?

AE: I never map out what's going to happen in my writing. I try to trust myself, my abilities, the process. I believed that if I stuck very close to the characters while writing this book, a plot would present itself to me, and it did. This theory never failed, which was a relief. All I knew at the start was that there would be Jasira and her parents, the family next door, and the nice pregnant lady. Oh, and the *Playboy* magazines and the black boyfriend. And that it would be set in Houston during the first Gulf War. That seemed like plenty to get the ball rolling.

KM: In *Towelhead* you allow us to really inhabit Jasira's mind. What made you decide to write from a first person point of view?

AE: I knew she was going to be a pretty straight-forward, plain-spoken character, and that the flatness of her voice would end up providing a lot of the humor in the book, so there was no question it would be first person.

KM: What were some of the advantages/disadvantages of writing from this point of view?

AE: I can't think of any disadvantages. The main advantage was that I, as the author, was only responsible for this one character's perceptions.

KM: Can you talk about your writing process during the time you were working on this novel? Did you set aside a particular time every day to write, or did you write when inspired? What were some of the frustrations of working on this novel? What were the most rewarding aspects of the process?

AE: I've written both my books out longhand in my local public library. I'd go there for a couple of hours every morning or afternoon (for both books I was able to write full-time while my now soon-to-be-ex-husband worked as a professor), then type in whatever I came up with on the computer at home. It made the job slightly less isolating to get out for a little while. I don't believe in waiting for inspiration, really. Writing is hard work. You get up every day and do it. Period. What was both frustrating and rewarding was never knowing what was going to happen.

KM: How did you revise this book once you had written a draft? How did the novel change from one draft to the other?

AE: After trashing those initial hundred pages, I only wrote one draft of this novel. That said, I would write a chapter, then go through it a couple of times afterward to make sure everything was okay, but I had no intention of going back over the whole thing. It was a painful book to write and while it was something I definitely wanted to write, my goal was always to make sure everything was pretty much in place as I went along. I didn't want to spend any more time with it than I had to.

KM: The title of this novel, *Towelhead*, points to Jasira's alienation from the mainstream white culture. At times, Jasira seems equally ostracized by her own culture. Her own family seems threatened by her sexuality and independence. Can you talk about the ways in which Jasira experiences discrimination and opposition, both from society and her family? Does she ever find a community she can inhabit?

AE: I think that Jasira experiences a very surface discrimination. The kids at school call her names that they think apply to her when they find out that she is half-Lebanese. As far as her family, she has this father with very set ideas about what girls should and shouldn't do, ways they should and shouldn't look, etc. She has to follow his rules. Her mother is pretty self-focused and has her own agenda in terms of the rules she lays down for her daughter. And that agenda is, basically, that she doesn't want Jasira interfering with her love life. The community Jasira finds is that of men who desire her and are occasionally good to her, but more often than that, they tend to be selfish where she is concerned. But Jasira is hard up. Feeling good occasionally is a wonderful deal for her, since she feels good almost not at all with her family.

KM: Although this novel is set in 1991, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the title and theme inevitably bring up issues about Arab

American identity in a post 9/11 world. What was your inspiration for this novel? Did the current crisis with Iraq influence your writing?

AE: The inspiration for the novel was a What-If scenario. My mother sent me and my brother to live with my father in Houston when I was eleven and my brother was nine. It didn't work out very well, and she had to come and get us seven months later. I have always wondered, as an adult, how things would've turned out for me if I'd stayed living with my father in Texas. *Towelhead* seems like one plausible scenario.

The current crisis with Iraq definitely inspired this book. The backdrop of the Gulf War was actually missing from the first hundred pages I wrote. Then September 11th happened and I realized that having a sort of political lightning rod would be a really interesting element to add to the novel. The war is always looming, until at one point, about two-thirds of the way into the book, Mr. Vuoso, the army reservist next door, uses it to his advantage, which causes an important shift for Jasira. It is not a story about the war. It's a story in which the war lurks, constantly applying this low-level pressure to the human drama.

KM: Jasira's father in the novel is a wonderfully complex character, as is her mother. What were the challenges of writing about the different generations of an Arab American family? Did you find it difficult to write about the father and mother from the perspective of a teenage girl? Were you ever worried about making any of the characters stereotypical or two-dimensional?

AE: I feel very strongly that Daddy is a funny, charming, smart, focused, and principled man. To me, he is intensely fascinating and quite likeable. His problem is that he is, at the same time, not very well-behaved toward his daughter. He is stressed out about a million different things, and he takes it out on this kid (who also contributes to

his stress). I'm not excusing him, but it is frustrating to me when people propose that he is flat-out evil. More than anyone in the book, Daddy cracks me up.

Once I found Jasira's voice, which took some doing, I didn't find it difficult at all to write from the perspective of a teenage girl. I was relying heavily on recollections of my own experiences with my father, my own emotions about my relationship with him. In fact, that aspect of the book was quite difficult, quite uncomfortable. Not so much the writing of words, but constantly having to place myself in Jasira's head, which is a messed up place and doesn't begin to get straightened out till well into the book.

I never worried about making the characters stereotypical or two-dimensional. I worried only about what I always worry about: telling the truth as I know it.

KM: Jasira's father is labeled as a "Saddam-lover" due to his Lebanese background. Do you think that such stereotypes drive him to seek a more "American" identity? How is he impacted by the racism he confronts on a daily basis?

AE: During the first Gulf War, I was really fascinated by my father's view of things. As an Egyptian, he was often highly critical of Arabs, of their inability to get their acts together. Which wasn't to say that he wasn't also highly critical of Israel, for example. But it is always interesting to hear people discussing their own people. They're harder on them, harder than anyone else would have a right to be. My father thought that Saddam Hussein was a bad guy who needed to get the boot. I think he was sincere in this position, and I suspect it must've also made him feel good to be able to join with at least some of his fellow Americans in feeling this way.

KM: For some of this novel, Jasira's father is an unsympathetic character, frequently physical abusive and selfish (as shown by his overnight stays with his girlfriend). But at the end of the novel, he shows some degree of remorse for his actions. Do you think that Jasira's father changes during the course of the novel?

AE: I do think Daddy changes. And Jasira's mother, too. I think they both come to the conclusion that they're not the greatest parents, that they might need some assistance in raising their daughter. I would also like to think that they begin to see Jasira flourish slightly under Melina's care, and that ultimately, they want their daughter to flourish. Alan Ball, who has optioned the book, told me last year, "There are no good guys or bad guys in this book. The mom, for example, is no doubt who she is because of her own upbringing." So I believe that while Jasira's parents do a poor job, they are also able to wish for their daughter's happiness.

KM: In *Towelhead*, violence and sexuality are often intertwined, particularly in Jasira's mind. Her relationships with men center on exploitation, from her father's beatings to Mr. Vuoso's sexual violations. Can you talk a little bit about the overlapping themes of desire and assault and how they relate to Jasira's perception of herself and her culture?

AE: Jasira's father beats her, and her mother won't protect her. This is her definition of love. We get our definitions of love from our parents, and we carry those definitions with us until the end of our days. We try to replicate them in our romantic relationships, since they're what we know. When Jasira goes looking for love, therefore, she is not interested in some sweet person. She is interested in someone who is dangerous and sudden and moody. At the same time, this person has to really

want her, and she has to feel that. She is desperately lonely for love, but it must be a hard-earned love. That is what she knows how to experience.

I do think that Jasira feels that her father is the way he is because he is Lebanese, and not because he had a messed-up childhood of his own, which is usually the case. Certainly as a kid, dealing with my own father, I felt that everything that was wrong with him was because he was Egyptian. Then, in my teens, I began to spend more time with other people in his family, particularly his brother, and I realized that I was wrong. Dead wrong. It took me a long while, but I really grew to love my Egyptian family, who are the warmest, kindest people. I came to be able to separate them from my father, from his culture.

I do think that it is not unrealistic to say that culture plays a role in forming people, of course. But as an adult, I have come to the general conclusion that my father is just a sad, messed-up guy who also happens to be Egyptian.

I think Jasira has a long way to go before she can draw similar conclusions, though. I think she's just starting to get up on her feet in this book.

KM: From the beginning, Jasira is a sexually curious teenager as well as a physically well-developed young woman. Her family often sees her sexuality as dangerous; her mother sends her away after her boyfriend shows interest in Jasira, and her father won't even allow her to wear tampons. Can you talk a little bit about the clash between sexuality in an American versus a traditionally Arab family?

AE: I can only speak from my own experience, which is to say that while I wouldn't consider my father to be "traditionally Arab," I always had a sense that my body was something not to be revealed, that I shouldn't wear too much makeup because it made me look like

a whore. That sort of stuff. My mother was a lot looser, though she did remark once that I looked like a French whore in my first passport photo. I was rather fond of heavy makeup back then.

KM: The men in this book are often shown to be sexually aggressive toward Jasira. Even Thomas, a genuinely caring boyfriend, touches her breasts before actually kissing her. How do you see the men in this novel? Do you believe they deserve any sympathy?

AE: Absolutely, they deserve sympathy. I love the men in the book. Mr. Vuoso is a pretty big failure, but he has a couple of shining moments that mean the world to Jasira. He is just not a very in-control person. He wants both to defend this girl against her father and to have her for himself. At times he lets her run the show, other times he exerts a very pure sort of aggression toward her.

Thomas is a 13-year-old boy. It's his job to grab girls' breasts whenever possible! I worry that in our modern world there is no room left for gender roles. I consider myself a pretty ardent feminist, but part of that, for me, is allowing that men and women feed off of each other in very specific ways. I'm not saying it's true for everyone, but some women like to be grabbed and fondled and groped and claimed by the men in their lives. Men, I think, have a wonderful capacity to show their love through their greed. I would hate for this to have to turn into a bad thing. When my girlfriends and I discuss the men in our lives, we generally offer up their greediness as proof of their love for us. It makes us laugh and roll our eyes and feel good. I think that with Thomas, Jasira is discovering this interaction between the sexes. She revels in his gusto for her.

KM: Mr. Vuoso's relationship with Jasira displays a series of contradictory behaviors: he is accusatory, protective, affectionate, predatory, and

compassionate at different points. Do you see Jasira's relationship with Mr. Vuoso as a clear case of molestation? Does Mr. Vuoso have any redeeming qualities from your point of view?

AE: Mr. Vuoso is probably my favorite character in the book. Again, he is a failure, but a lovely one at times. I don't see how Mr. Vuoso is much different from anyone else I know, quite frankly. He's more intense in his wrongdoing, perhaps, but he's a mix of good and bad.

I think that Mr. Vuoso does molest Jasira. But because of the nature of their relationship, because she participates in so much of what goes on between them, I also see what happens between them as something that affects her in ways that connect to her definition of love. That is to say, in the two scenes in which Mr. Vuoso imposes himself upon Jasira, she is both aware of him as someone who shouldn't be doing what he is doing and someone who is a meaningful part of her life. He is molesting her, yes, but as a lonely child with an array of feelings for him, she responds to what he does with very unclear feelings. After the first scene, for example, she becomes even more involved with him, as opposed to less. This happens because of his response to his own deed. Jasira has never seen an adult regret his or her actions toward her, which is something she sees as almost heroic, and which therefore cancels out the deed itself in her eyes, at least to some degree.

KM: In much of this novel, the men seem to have power over Jasira. However, as she moves out of her father's home and begins a relationship with Thomas despite social opposition, it seems that she gains autonomy. Does Jasira have power in her relationships with Mr. Vuoso and her father? Do you see her as a powerful figure?

AE: Jasira is not overtly powerful. But she is powerful in her capacity to observe, and she is powerful in her capacity to let others be themselves.

I think she is also powerful in her sense of loyalty to herself. And in her capacity to endure pain. This is her downfall, in many ways. It keeps her in situations she should be getting out of sooner.

KM: The theme of interracial relationships comes up often. Jasira's father is racist toward African Americans and the mother also demonstrates a clear concern for Jasira's "friendship" with Thomas before she begins dating an African American herself. From your point of view, do interracial couples still experience this degree of opposition in American society? Is there a particular stigma toward Arab/African American couples?

AE: Again, I can only speak from my own experience on this point. When I was in high school, I wanted to date this black boy and my parents said no. In matters such as these, my parents are generally very liberal people. So I was shocked by their behavior. I know they thought they were protecting me, but it just seemed like a very dumb idea of protection.

KM: You manage to sustain a convincing teenage voice throughout the novel. What were the challenges of writing from the point of view of a young woman? What made you decide to write from a first-person perspective?

AE: The main challenge is that you don't get to do a lot of linguistic acrobatics. Jasira is pretty plain-spoken. On the other hand, I think that that aspect of her voice is probably where a lot of the humor in the book lies.

I wanted to write from a kid's point-of-view because I had never written a novel before and was terrified and thought that placing this

limitation on myself would restrict the amount of information I was responsible for as the author. Kids only know so much.

KM: In your novel, you bravely tackle the often "taboo" subjects of child molestation, pornography, and sexual confusion. Was it difficult for you to write so honestly about such issues?

AE: It wasn't fun. But it was also an exercise, as a writer, in pushing myself to be uncomfortable in order to tell a story with (hopefully) some power.

KM: The novel is moving and disturbing, but it often contains an undercurrent of dark comedy. How do comedy and tragedy work together in this novel?

AE: I think voice is pretty important in terms of humor. It's funny to say big things in a small, flat way. It's also funny to say things that you're not supposed to say. Which, actually, people do all the time. And then I laugh when they do it.

KM: The movie rights have been sold to Alan Ball, acclaimed for the series *Six Feet Under* and the movie *American Beauty*. How do you feel about the novel being made into a film?

AE: I feel great. I want the book to have a good, long life, and if Alan makes this movie, it will certainly help with that goal.

KM: Do you see writing as a largely solitary process? Do you show your work to others when you are working on a novel? Where do you gain support and inspiration?

AE: Writing is solitary when you do it, then you should bug everyone you know when you're done and make them tell you what they think. I do show my work to a few very good writer friends when I am finished with it, yes. As far as having a community of writers around me, I would say it's good to have some, but you don't need loads. They'll wear you out.

I am inspired by anything that makes me uncomfortable.

KM: You received an MFA from Vermont College. How did your time in a writing program shape your work? Who were some of your mentors? How did this program change you as a writer?

AE: The program was great in that it gave me time to do a lot of writing, with good feedback coming my way. I worked with Phyllis Barber, Brett Lott, Sharon Sheehe Stark, and Ellen Lesser. They were all excellent writers and teachers. Phyllis was wonderfully gentle with me when I started, Brett pushed me to write faster, Sharon encouraged me in my choice of subject matter, and Ellen taught me the joy of revision. I needed them all.

KM : Can you talk about your literary influences? Who are the people who have influenced you or inspired you?

AE: I love *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole, *Bad Behavior* by Mary Gaitskill, lots of stuff by Martin Amis, Charles Bukowski. Mostly I read nonfiction, though. I get very impatient with the artifice of fiction.

KM: Are you working on a new project? Do you have any goals or plans for the future?

AE: I am working on a new novel called *Hutch*. It's about an ex-Marine and his relationships with his soon-to-be ex-wife and his new girlfriend. He's a very charming bully.

I plan to keep writing books.

KM: What is one piece of advice you would give to emerging writers?

AE: Work your butt off.

Barbara Duffey

How to Obtain the Girl Scout Badge for the Avant-Garde

Lara Glenum. *The Hounds of No.* Action Press, 2005. Paper, 64 pp., $12.

Don't worry if you're not quite up to speed on your avant-garde poetics. Lara Glenum will help you. Her kinetic and visceral first book of poems, *The Hounds of No,* ends with an appendix that presents her "Manifesto of the Anti-Real." In eight witty declarations of her aesthetic, she creates a poetics with a political backbone. The "anti-real" takes "the secret side-door to the Sublime," while realism restricts us: "When the door of fascism is opened, Realism will be seen lounging like a whore in its inner sanctum." Her manifesto is bold. And convincing. I'm caught up in her energy when she declares, "Even in its most discreet moments, art explodes." How could I not be entranced? She speaks to the pyromaniac in me.

Sometimes I want to doubt her for being a bit too clever. Precept #2 asserts, "The Anti-Real does not deny the Real," only to be footnoted, "Even though the Real does not exist." *Ha-ha,* I think. *Very funny.* But then I hit #5: "Irony is not a device. It is a state of being." *Touché.* I start to realize there are more forces at work here than I had first imagined.

Her poems are organs beneath a permeable skin, and I can see and feel through the skin, but never fully remove it. The speaker of Glenum's poem "Crushifix" seeks a similar removal of skin: "Do only we disjoin our lungs? / Will the howls overreach me before we / Can take off our skin & let it be hung / On a mannequin, spritely fitted?" The work of these poems is to reveal what would remain once the mannequin dons our coverings, wears our skin for us so that our bodies are open to observation. Some mystery must linger, though; we're not hanging the skin on the mannequin ourselves, nor is the mannequin taking it off of us. The passive voice of "let it be hung" suggests an

actor absent from this poem. Even flayed, the whole story remains hidden.

The bulk of poems preceding the appendix were singing already, but they all resonate with much more power once the reader encounters Glenum's manifesto. Each poem takes on an even deeper level of meaning, one that elevates the merely witty, playful, clever, or absurd to the ranks of political rebellion against the tyranny of realism (or the realism employed by tyrants). When I first read the poem "Excrescence," for example, I had little patience for its opening:

O his creamy jets
of dime-store hypnosis
are
luscious and spoiling
with a sweet poison that I slather on my

neural interstices
while
he drags his pink tongue over my salt-caked spine.

It somehow succeeds at being both raunchy and too elevated in tone at the same time. We wouldn't expect "neural interstices" to be the sort of interstices upon which "creamy jets" are slathered. That surprise combines with the elevated diction to make the poem read like a trick to me. It doesn't seem to accomplish anything with its surprise. However, once I learn that this poem seeks the Sublime through the "side-door," at least according to the manifesto, its ending of "And then... And then!" feels triumphant instead of tongue-in-cheek. Glenum isn't trying to impress me with her vocabulary; rather, she's stretching her diction to its utmost in order to "dilate" the way we think of poetry, language, sex, bodies, and the world.

These poems, however, should not be mistaken as slightly stranger versions of cheerful, transcendent lyrics. Rather, they heave with

darkness. Take my favorite part of my favorite poem, "Aborted," for instance:

> You say,
> *This life is stillborn*, toting out a pair of dried-out ovaries
> and a crucifix of spit. My days
> snap in two
> like fingerbones.

Each linguistic choice seems perfectly tuned to the emotion here. I can feel those fingerbones snapping, and though I couldn't tell you for sure the dramatic situation of this poem, I can feel the sudden loss inherent in those days. The "dramatic situation," as I usually think of it, refers to some correspondence to the Real, which the Anti-Real opposes, after all. The Real allows us to be controlled. Glenum's art expands us when its experiments and the emotion motivating them converge.

It is an expansion into darkness, however. Even baton twirling turns ominous. We first encounter it in "Kriemhilde & Sock-Monkey's Busy Day," in which Kriemhilde, writing from the Admiral J. Sock-Monkey Correctional Facility to a group of scientists, says, "I *am* very interested in your experiments. I do own a baton. When do you visit?" The reference to the baton sounds light-hearted, a joke even, but it is not. In "The Scientists' Instructions to Sock-Monkey," the scientists reply to warn, "The nature of the experiment is such that you will be shown pictures of your adolescent daughter lying naked & face-down on a flaming lawn, impaled on her own baton." However, such horrors accompany personal expansion for Sock-Monkey: "The nature of the experiment is such that you will no longer be a stupid doll."

Glenum's theme of personal expansion in the face of violence and totalizing systems becomes even more apparent when her poems also take politics as their subject matter. As we might expect from Glenum, these situations do not parallel what I'd see on the evening news with

its claim to tell the real story. Rather, she deals in archetypal systems of power—how people try to control each other in general. Glenum's fascination with the body and her resistance to political oppression both work well in "Message to the Department of the Interior," a poem in which the speaker decides to grow another body:

> I know you said I should try to relax & ignore the residue the bombs left in my torso
>
> by eliminating all my bodies & proto-bodies, but who can relax in our republic now that it's laid its terrible eggs on our tongues

"Our republic" can harm us not just through physical violence, the "bombs" left in the speaker's body, but also through its control of our language, the "terrible eggs" it lays in our mouths so we speak as it wants us to. By example, Glenum urges us to resist. A plurality of bodies might be a way to avoid the government's control and to have a better chance at speaking freely.

This book delves into its fascination with bodies. Skin, semen, orifices, organs, sacs of all kinds, and pigs recur in this work. Every poem I've cited in this review pays precise attention to the details of the body, and they are in no way unrepresentative of the work in this book. Even the most corporeal of Glenum's poems stretch beyond the body, though; for example, "How to Obtain the Girl Scout Badge for Succeeding in the Afterlife" deals with the speaker's organs even after she's made it to Heaven:

> ::The sky will roll itself up
> like a scroll &
> a squadron of seraphim with blue reptilian tongues
> in towering baroque wigs : will dislodge my organs :
> & place them in concrete urns

inside a white dwarf to dry ::

Some readers might dismiss this poem as pure fancy, but its ending grounds it in emotion even if a reader hasn't reached the manifesto yet:

::& No one will ever guess
that I died the same as I lived ::
with a sharp ::
string of tears hanging out of one eye :
hysterical and
useless

I read this sentence with an indefinite antecedent; the eye could be "hysterical and / useless," or the "string of tears" could be, or *she* could be. She could have "died the same as she lived," "hysterical and / useless." The word *useless* on a line by itself at the end of this poem is tragic. The "string of tears" would be "useless" sentimentality, no help in artistic explosions. Even observation itself, represented by the eye, would be impotent if she realized this vision of heaven, reclining on "pink shag carpet / like Zsa Zsa Gabor on amphetamines." Art should be active in the face of hegemonies.

The fact that Glenum leaves the antecedent of "hysterical and useless" up to our interpretation is consistent with her philosophy; it "dilates" our perception, lets us think in a larger way than a single interpretation would allow. She wants to leave us unsure, not "affirmed." If you read a poem and can pin down a particular interpretation as being "right," then that work seeks to control you, not expand you, and you should be suspicious. When Glenum's poems succeed, they unite her political philosophy, artistic aesthetic, and powerful emotion in poems that read more like experiences on a page than they do like traditional poems.

When Glenum's poems aren't as successful, they sound beautiful and strange but don't invoke images, emotions, or ideas as well as the end to "How to Obtain the Girl Scout Badge." For example, the line

preceding it is vague in comparison: "& watch / the saints deepen behind the machines." I'm attracted to the long *e* sounds in "deepen" that echo in "machines," but I can't picture saints "deepening" and I don't exactly know what that process might be. As a result, I skim over that line and it doesn't have much of an effect on how I read the poem; I want to get to the end, where I'll be rewarded with a beautiful image.

It could be argued that imagery could become too Real in these cases, could serve to "affirm" instead of "dilate" our perceptions. That might be my only criticism of her aesthetic system: I'm not sure how to reconcile Glenum's obsession with the body and her criticism of realism. Even if she uses bodily imagery in new ways, such poetry remains firmly grounded in the most real existence we know—our physicality. To avoid realism completely would be to live completely in abstractions. It's hard to doubt her, though, when she's already told me that irony is a state of being. How ironic that the very mode for getting at the Anti-Real would seem so real to me.

However, Glenum's imagery, even when it invokes familiar physicalities, always "explodes" our way of seeing the world. That "sharp string of tears" could be "sharp" in the sense that they're emotionally painful, or they could be physically sharp, like an icicle, as if the tears have frozen onto her eyes. My mind expands to include all possibilities at once. Glenum ends the book (before the appendix) with the poem "Regime of Bliss," in which she prepares us for her manifesto: "I slough the dead cells / off / a sparkling set of aesthetics // and promote / outright / the Regime of Bliss." She replaces tyrannical regimes with her own; again, an irony, since she seeks to liberate us from regimes. Glenum's book does what it sets out to do; it is, by its own standards, art. It explodes.

Albert E. Martinez

Reluctantly Domesticated

Holiday Reinhorn. *Big Cats.* Free Press, 2005. Paper, 224 pp., $14.95.

Unlike in real life, there's something undeniably appealing about poorly behaved yet brutally honest characters we find in fiction and movies—and poorly behaved and brutally honest teen girls, in particular. In director Terry Zwigoff's startlingly funny movie *Ghost World,* we watch two misanthropic teens tromp around their neighborhood withering everyone in their path with scathing observations, perfectly timed kill-me-now eye-rolling, and always-on-the-ready sarcastic asides. They fear no one. They're ready to call bullshit on the world, and it's little surprise that happiness eludes them. The trouble and misery the girls generate for others is deliciously entertaining.

In the title story of Holiday Reinhorn's debut short-story collection, *Big Cats,* we also follow the story of two poorly behaved girls, Brenda and Polly, who call each other "blood sisters" and work the food-concession side of things at a zoo. They agree to set out on this particular day to break their manager's rules and see who will be first to hook up with one of the male laborers doing community service in the park's loading docks. On the first page, we see this juncture in their lives observed perfectly through Brenda's perspective:

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

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

We sense that it's going to be a wild ride. And lucky for us, we're right. Among other things in this story, we witness these potty-mouthed girls in the throes of teen awkwardness. While stories about girls navigating the rough waters of their teens may not be anything

new, what Reinhorn does so well is create the unique world of Polly and Brenda. As with most of the other stories in this collection, Reinhorn accomplishes this mainly through quirky, fully developed narrative voice. In Brenda, the main character, she introduces a breathless first-person narrator who tumbles through her day fully aware of the hierarchy of her work yet bewildered by the mysteries of a sexual energy blossoming within her and Polly. In a phrase, they're boy crazy, or at least crazy with the possibility of sex. Their competitiveness thrives not only in the differences between how their bodies are forming, but also their work assignments, and, more importantly and lingering in the background, in the imperfections of their mothers. What unfolds is nothing short of enthralling.

While many of the other stories in this collection are also populated with people misbehaving, mainly it's the adults who could use a spell of discipline. The housewife in "Fuck You" coerces a Little League ball player she's picked up on the street to hang out with her by her pool; she then splits a beer with him, and they take turns cursing into the desert afternoon air. The mother at the wheel in "Charlotte" navigates traffic and voices profanities at an annoying tailgater while asking her daughter to light cigarettes for her; later that night, she ditches her children to hang out at her boyfriend's place. The wife in "The Heights" one afternoon destroys the dignity of her husband's doctor with a humiliating story from their shared past.

This is not to say the men found here are without their faults. In "Get Away from Me, David," we encounter an alcoholic, traumatized loan officer who wrestles with his conflicting personalities and the image of his dead wife on the one day when everyone expects him to be dependable and responsible. The endearing, fumbling collegiate man on a date with his future wife in "Golden Pioneers" can worry about nothing but the minor logistics of the deception he has created for their one night at a cheap motel. And in "Africa," a ranch hand finds himself wrestling with conflicted feelings about the mother of his child while hauling a cooler full of horse sperm to New Mexico.

Lock all of these characters in a room together, and you'd have a lively gathering. Not one boring minute. For the most part, we can also say this about Reinhorn's collection.

Her canvas is admirably large and textured. The characters are drawn from a diverse set of backgrounds and occupations, and their troubles are menacing if not always easy to name. This, to me, is the sign of a writer both playful and confident in her narrative abilities. While "Big Cats" sets out to capture the raucous life of teens, "Golden Pioneers" goes after the quiet dynamics of gentle attraction and the power of personal history. And whereas "Charlotte" sketches the mysterious boundaries of the adult world as witnessed from a young girl's perspective, "By the Time You Get This" explores a mother's world flattened by a daughter's death. Reinhorn appears unafraid of going wherever interesting narrative leads her, which usually involves characters uncomfortable with conforming to life's rules. They're characters who want to carve their own paths in the face of the looming responsibility of family. What holds this collection together is the theme of ordinary people living clearly imperfect lives. Reinhorn often leans on weighty-yet-humorous parent-child relationships to explore these lives.

From a craft perspective, Reinhorn seems most drawn to first-person narratives. Eleven of the thirteen stories here are told from the first-person point of view, and none of them feel similar to each other. While on one hand, this is a testament to Reinhorn's storytelling prowess and her ability to develop convincing and distinct narratives for each of these point of view characters, occasionally we encounter a story that is less compelling. In "Seashell" we meet a character named Lonnie and see the contrast between her home life with her children and parents versus the support group she attends on and off. As interesting as it may be at times, Lonnie's tale ultimately comes across as more of a character study than a story with narrative drive and shape. Among Reinhorn's impressive arsenal of talents, perhaps this occasional willingness to allow characters to drift into slack terrain is one

of her few weaknesses. Rarely do short-story collections, particularly writers' first books, hold good and solid straight through. In books as solid as this one, the gemlike stories often require less-shiny ones around them to generate a complexity for the collection as a whole. The standouts here include the title story, where we find the writer riding the rush of a lively voice, and also "The Heights," where she settles into a mature, steady rhythm, the lean narrative requiring nothing more than a single scene to deliver the reader into the world of a household on an emotionally brutal afternoon.

Of the two stories here not narrated in first person, one uses close third person, and the last, entitled "Last Seen," borrows the form of a police investigation, complete with journal entries, interviews, and excerpts from textbooks—all of it material associated with the disappearance of a high school girl. Needless to say, this story stands in sharp contrast to the others in the book for its rapid shifts in tempo and roaming point of view. The reach of "Last Seen" suggests a writer pushing at the narrative bounds, wanting to expand a group of characters into novelistic scale. Yet for all its ambition, this story falls short of delivering the goods it promises. With all the build up, one anticipates a juicy spectacle. It's similar to the disappointment one may have felt in high school after hearing there was going to be a rumble in the parking lot after class, then showing up and hearing that the principal has already wrangled the would-be participants into his office while the rent-a-cops cleared the area. What a bummer, one thinks. The whole thing had the makings of something chaotic and worthy.

Tradition seems to dictate that when encountering a sharp and talented literary hopeful, we should round up her closest literary predecessors and present them as proof that the young writer has arrived in a worthy literary neighborhood. Taking into mind Reinhorn's focus on restless parents spinning through rough-edged lives, her quirky, often funny characters, and her lean dialogue and clean writing style, we can play her real estate agent and get her situated—Raymond Carver lives down the block, Lorrie Moore is across the street, and Amy

Hempel is around the corner. What this kind of commentary leaves out about her, though, is that while readers may see similarities between her writing and that of these contemporary fiction celebrities, Reinhorn has her own distinct voice. She shapes sure-footed tales that vibrate with life. Her style may invite comparisons, but her characters are wholly original, reluctantly domesticated beings, forever roaming the terrain seeking something out there, just beyond their reach. And for this, we can only anxiously await her next book.

Leslie Harrison

True Tragedy Is Local

Gabrielle Calvocoressi. *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart: Poems.* Persea Books, 2005. 68 pp., $13.95, paper.

In Connie Willis' recent novel, *Passage*, a character who suffers a series of near-death episodes (tunnels, bright lights, feelings of peace, visits by dead relatives, etc.) reports that in each of her N.D.E.'s she finds herself on the *Titanic* as it is about to go down.

Were the membrane between life and fiction a little thinner, she might be joined on the deck by Gabrielle Calvocoressi, whose first book, *The Last Time I Saw Amelia Earhart*, suffers an anything-but-fatal attraction to the famously tragic. The vanished aviatrix, a devastating circus fire, environmentally poisoned towns, siblings dead at birth or soon after, Gettysburg, and yes, a wreck at sea all draw the attention of this gifted young poet in her first book.

The volume consists of a mere twelve poems. Three of the poems—the title poem, *Circus Fire 1944*, and *From the Adult Drive-In*—comprise forty-four of the book's sixty-eight pages and few of the rest could be considered short poems. The poems are carefully crafted, narrative, patient, and deeply interested in disaster and the stories we make of it. In this, especially the passion for narrative, a resistance to complication, the very public subject matter, and a reliance on the long poem, the book could be considered traditional, almost a throwback. Its dependence on plain language and lyric intensity owes much to contemporary writers, especially Eavan Boland and Mark Doty, and announces an attempt to recover poetic ground abandoned to prose years ago.

It is a risky thing to take as subject matter what is already acknowledged as both public and tragic, riskier still to tackle territory long occupied by melodrama. How do you treat Amelia Earhart when much of the world mourned her vanishing? How do you address an

event so internal to the culture that both the fact and the feeling are so much a given that we take them for granted? *Oh yes*, we think, *Amelia Earhart—just awful.*

The Hartford Circus Fire, which another poem takes as subject, is less well known, but is well-documented, especially in New England (where Calvocoressi grew up) and is as unequivocally tragic—a 1940s visit to Hartford, Connecticut, by the Barnum & Bailey's Circus ends in a fire that destroys the big top, killing most of those inside.

Virtually all the circumstances of the poems mentioned above and several others in the book are unequivocal—that is to say that there is neither moral ambiguity nor emotional complication to the disasters. They are just that: unredeemed disasters. Despite the historical nature of most of the subjects, the poems are not dry, nor exhaustively factual, nor are they situated in moral ambiguity and complication. In short, they are neither conventionally historical nor in the mainstream of contemporary poetry. Rather, they seem more closely allied to newspapers.

Newspapers localize news. Headlines note the one American killed in a distant plane crash; stories about hurricanes feature sidebars about local emergency workers sent to aid the victims. This is an attempt to make disaster real to readers who have no way to grasp the statistics that quantify a monsoon in Bangladesh or a plane crash in South America. This localization is at least part of the project of the disaster poems that make up most of this book. Calvocoressi knows that true tragedy is local. Take section eleven of *Circus Fire 1944*:

> XI. Night
>
> They said anything with wheels would do
> so Isaac brought our tractor round,
>
> stacked children like they were bales of hay,
> burned his hands on their smoking skin.
>
> That night he dreamt a lion came
> to steal a calf from our hushed barn.

He leaped from bed and ran outside.
It is a sight I will not soon forget:

my love weeping inconsolably,
bent double under stars.

Just as drivers slow down to gawk at a wreck on the highway, then search the paper for the account, the poem slows us down to see this tragedy up close. And the event is made real in us through the local voices. A connection, a community is forged.

These poems are spoken by individuals, mostly eyewitnesses, but not the famous or infamous. In the Earhart poem, we hear from a miner, a housewife, a pregnant teenager, and a bystander, as well as her flight mechanic, husband, stepson, radio operator, and ground control. And each voice is moving and thoughtful—and reductionist, in the best sense of the word. That is to say that this great shared tragedy is reduced again into the voices of individuals who feel compelled to speak and to filter the experience through their own lives:

III. Diane McGinty, St. Mary's Home for Wayward Girls

I don't think she meant for it to happen.
She probably just lost control
and before she knew,

everything had changed.
I bet she was scared all along
but couldn't tell anyone

because they'd just say
she got herself into this mess
and had better get herself out.

Just as the speakers seem to be ordinary, so too does the language of the poems. The speaker in these poems communicates in the plainest language and least complicated syntax imaginable. Most sentences conform to the norm in English (subject, verb, object)—the proper things in their proper order: *Afterwards she was everywhere; Matthew works night-shift; I dream she's found me hiding; it's easy to lose someone; I didn't want to be there; Everyone makes mistakes; I go back there sometimes and think.*

This simple, centrist language and syntax give the poems a quiet power that compels the way great journalism does—instead of ratcheting up the emotional load with rhetoric, the unadorned language lets the event speak for itself. This allows the reader to move toward genuine feeling uncomplicated by rhetorical coercion, which situates the poem and the reader inside the culture that shares these disasters.

The more usual relationship of contemporary poet to culture is a kind of guerilla war in which the poet strafes the reader, firing off references like semi-automatic rounds. This hipster approach, which owes as much to Puff Daddy as to Pound, makes no claims to be "about" the culture that serves as the foundation of the poem; rather these poems are about the ever-present lyric *I*, and the cultural references serve as both a kind of shorthand used to create community (if you get this reference, you and I share a connection, therefore this poem has something to say to you specifically) and as evidence of the *I*'s anxieties in an anxious world.

Calvocoressi's poems are very much about the culture. Her relationship to culture and the *I* is a throwback to poems like Milton's *Lycidas* or even the great early ballads in which a poem has as foundation a thinking, feeling writer but which is spoken to and by the people of the culture it arose from. Calvocoressi carefully imagines a circle of people who feel they must speak or are expected by their relationship to the "news" of the poem to speak—speakers who have something to say to a general public. The lyric *I* vanishes; the writer recedes. The absence of the lyric I and the poet's fidelity to the individual and emotional truth of the history she rewrites is about as far from confessional

as it is possible to get. In fact, in the closing poem of the book, *Having Never Been To Gettysburg,* the poet offers something of an *ars poetica*:

> Sedge grass, Little Bluestem, Bristlecone Pine
> (O if this were the worst of it)
> Not me, that insatiable lyric, darkening
> The doorway of small town beauty
> Parlors.

"Not me," she says. In a book of utterly transparent syntax, here we have a notable level of syntactic complexity. Is she saying, "Not me, (and) not that insatiable lyric," or "Not me, (I am not) that insatiable lyric?" The deletion is recoverable in at least these two ways. Both offer a removal of the contemporary poetic *I* and perhaps even of the poet herself. She is the wizard behind the curtain asking us to look elsewhere. "Not me," she says. "Pay attention to the others here in this small town of a book."

And yet. Despite the plethora of names, there is no real plethora of voices. It is all one voice. Though these poems identify the speakers of the different sections by name, or job, or location, and though these names belong to historical people, the poems forsake the individual, forsake reportage in favor of a more archetypal substitution—self becomes a deeply careful, public abstract—voice as everyvoice.

And a remarkably consistent one. This strength and unity, this coherence is achieved through consistent syntax and lexicon, and through a lyric intensity that operates at a fixed register that, despite the quietness of tone, is obsessed with the horrible ("You never saw one alive. / They just littered the shore, / fist-sized, finless, no real shape." "Chickens don't struggle/ till your teeth close on their neck"). Coherence is further reinforced through the poet's reliance on couplets and tercets to impede and move the reader forward. The voices do not separate themselves into individuals, but instead are spoken through a consciousness utterly committed to its own voice.

This may be the biggest flaw of the book. The writer seems not to trust the reader quite enough to let the lyric intensity lapse so the ordinary and distinctive voice can erupt. Instead of rhetorical coercion, we get a kind of lyrical coercion in which we are given an historical person being ventriloquized by a poet who replaces uniqueness with an admittedly lovely, but too-consistent lyricism. This combined with the subject matter flattens the book and distances the reader that little, unnecessary bit.

For example, in one section of *Circus Fire 1944*, the voice becomes so removed from the personal that it is identified only by location.

> IX. Northwood Cemetery
>
> Hard to see where the pasture ends,
> the graveyard begins. Often cows get confused
>
> and can be found grazing between stones
> lodged in the ground. On cold days their breath
>
> rises from plots they stand pruning.
> Soon a farmer will come to collect them:
>
> a black and white procession lumbering
> toward barns, their bells breaking the silence.
>
> Someone might marvel how they make their way
> home without once looking back.

What is admirable is this book's cleaving to its own integrity of vision, its own narrative powers—to the stories poetry can tell, and the ways it can tell them, and the consolation and loveliness they make in the telling. As admirable is the ground reclaimed with this book—ground that intends poetry to be situated within the culture, not

outside taking potshots, and certainly not within a single, hypothetical speaker.

Calvocoressi reminds us that there is no large disaster—only many small ones happening at once. In this first book, she is a poet whose grace is in the middle of the language, as it is in the middle of the small towns we all at some point came from, and in the large disasters we all share, with the unlikely communities that large, sad events sometimes create. Her syntax is plain, the language direct. Deeply concerned with disaster, this book is its opposite—a shining, well-made thing.

Mónica Parle

The Thief of Memory

Dominic Smith, *Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre.* Atria Books, 2006. Hardcover, 306 pp., $24.00.

When you find old photos in a cardboard box at a junk sale, flipping through grey faces on cardboard, it's hard to imagine the flurry of imagination that brought photography into being. Beginning with the turn of the nineteenth century, artists, scientists, and amateur chemists were engaged in a frenzy of testing every imaginable combination of lens, chemical, and base to try to fix the shadows of light. Part luck, part divination and much experimentation gave birth to the century of images surrounding us.

In the center of this spirit of invention was Louis Daguerre. His 1839 discovery of light's impact on mercury, resulting in a medium he called the daguerreotype, made him known across the world. His exhibitions in Europe drew people to view his masterpieces, openmouthed, as they saw the world around them represented not in paint, but in mercury. Daguerre, the master of mercury, used it to work his magic, recreating his world in light and shadow. But Daguerre's celebrity didn't come without costs. The mercury crawled into his nervous system and took root, causing seizures, physical weakness, and eventually, a clouding of memory. In his novel, *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre,* Dominic Smith charts Daguerre's descent into illusions created by mercury poisoning. Filled with descriptions of Daguerre's artistic process and the world surrounding him, the novel admirably captures an era long before our digital age. In Daguerre, Smith creates a vivid main character who leads us through a charged atmosphere; the work brims with ruminations on the nature of the artist and the upheaval of revolutionary politics.

The novel begins, appropriately, with a vision. Daguerre soaks in a fragrant bath. It is nearly a decade after the advent of the daguerreo-

type. In a perceived moment of clarity, he sees a series of images that lead him to believe that the world will end. "The vision...was really a series of insights and hallucinations, a feeling of things coming into focus." Ever the artist, Daguerre prepares for the apocalypse as only he can. He sets out to capture the images of ten items that range from the celestial—the sun and the moon—to the everyday—a flower and an apple—and finally to familiar subjects of art—the nude woman and the mysterious object of love. Daguerre is careful to select items that are both symbolic for him (the apple from the Garden of Eden) but also aesthetically ideal. In fact, Daguerre's friend Baudelaire convinces him to switch from an apple to a plum for its originality, not for its symbolic merit. Smith uses this device to great effect, sending us out into the streets of Paris as Daguerre searches for his quarry. Daguerre's list culminates in Isobel Le Fournier, the woman he loved as a romantic youth. With one bewitching kiss tucked in his memory, Daguerre knows that he must see her again, to "balance the cosmic ledger." What follows is a quest for this woman through bohemian Paris and the French countryside, both of which are gripped by a revolutionary fervor.

Smith's Daguerre is a man consumed by a similar fervor. Smith writes:

> In many ways, his boyhood mirrored the revolution—born in 1787, two years before the Bastille fell; showed signs of rebellion against his father as Parisians raided the royal tombs of the Abbey of Saint-Denis; clamored towards puberty during a coup d'etat; departed for Paris in 1804, aged fifteen, to find his place in the world as Napoleon crowned himself emperor.

As much as Daguerrre's life may have mirrored the revolution, his own revolution is an internal rather than a populist one. He rebels against his father's steadfast morality, his commitment to a rigid work ethic and propriety. When he flees to Paris, he goes to hone his skills as an artist, not to join the proletariat.

Near the beginning of the novel, Smith writes, "Mercury poisoning was beginning to filter out the unsightly." So what happens after the artist's brain begins to unravel? How does he make sense of the world? Smith seems to be making something different of this. The young, brash Daguerre is consumed by an obsession with realism, with the pursuit of something in its natural state, a sort of recapturing of his life in the country. When he is a young apprentice in the opera, Daguerre's master tells him: "Every artist must have the technique first to capture what he sees, then the vision to capture what he doesn't see."

Smith traces Daguerre's initial experiments with light and etching in the form of dioramas, walls of canvas that he strings up against the soft Paris sun. As the light throws shadows of the city on his canvas, he traces the lines, angles and cupolas, bells and trees. Smith tells us that the dioramas are so realistic, that the audience reacts as if they are indeed real. Men genuflect in front of the images of churches, women take out their umbrellas when a storm threatens. But a reviewer of his dioramas claims that they possess "the stillness of the grave. The idea produced is that of a region of a world desolated; of living nature at an end; of the last day past and over."

After his apocalyptic vision, Daguerre wonders if he had predicted the apocalypse so many years earlier, if the artist inside him captured what he saw and mapped onto the canvas the end of the world. But the implication, too, is that Daguerre's work is empty, that he sees the shapes and the forms but cannot get past the first half of his master's advice. In other words, he can't move beyond the real into the unseen. In many ways, this relates to Daguerre's perceptions of the people around him. Throughout the novel, dreamy, contemplative Daguerre stands in contrast to the swirling tempest around him.

Even though he is ambivalent to the world surrounding him, Daguerre is closely tied to one of the figures from his past: Isobel, the object of his search. She is largely a figure of memory. Smith presents her through Daguerre's flashbacks of their childhood idyll in the country. Isobel was a maid in Daguerre's childhood home. She cultivated

gardens of herbs, which she prescribed to Louis in an effort to medicate his imagined illnesses. She views their flirtation as a thing of childhood, but he thinks of their relationship in much grander terms. She served to spark Daguerre's artistic aspirations. As his career develops, he remains obsessed with her, projecting her image onto all the women he sees. It is as if others don't exist. His work and success are in the hopes of someday reconnecting with Isobel.

But this novel is a populist one, even if Daguerre doesn't realize it. Aside from Daguerre and Isobel, Smith peppers the narrative with a bevy of characters. One feels that Paris is a pulsing city, alive and filled with people. Two of the figures associated with Daguerre's apocalyptic hallucinations are strangers, a man who sells eggs on the street and a young girl on the roof of Notre Dame who sails into the wind and plunges to her death. At every turn, someone crosses Louis' path, and though he sees the person, he is not able to glimpse the unseen beyond the particulars of the physical, beyond the body's shape and features.

In the early part of the novel, the principal characters around Daguerre are smudged, incompletely fleshed out in the pages. They are visually described, but they float in and out of the novel without the weight of character. Baudelaire, who calls Daguerre the Thief of Light, seems to exist as a shadow of the real man. He argues with Louis about the nature of art, but he seems to function primarily as a plot agent—showing up now and again to get it moving along. It is difficult to separate how much the reader fills in his character (based on the popular image of the bohemian) and how much is on the page. Pigeon, a down-on-her-luck prostitute, also seems faint. She poses nude for Daguerre, fulfilling one of the items on his list. She is surprised by Daguerre's gentle nature and is intrigued when he doesn't seek her out for her professional prowess. She seems less complex than I'd expect, given the care that Smith pours into Daguerre and Isobel.

The question of characterization in this novel necessarily brings up the question of point of view. In the first two thirds of the novel, Smith perfectly captures Daguerre's perspective. His narrative is lush

and filled with tangible visual descriptions. Daguerre lives in a world of colors and shapes. From poison blue bottles and the Nile blue sky to mercury beads as "tiny as planets of glass," Smith's shimmering language sets Daguerre's world spinning in radiant color and tactile shapes. Furthermore, the signs that Daguerre interprets as harbingers of apocalypse are all visual. One imagines in the days leading up to the revolution that there was a cacophony of rumors on the street, but Daguerre seems oblivious. The reader is seduced by Daguerre's point of view; as such, the revolution falls to the backdrop, leaving us mired in his own personal drama as opposed to the very public one.

The contrast among the concrete Daguerre, the static Isobel, and the translucent surrounding characters feels somehow appropriate because we are so firmly seated in Daguerre's point of view. One feels this is partly Daguerre's failing. As good an eye as he has, Daguerre can't quite penetrate the form. He traces every line of these characters as he did his dioramas, but he doesn't find the meaning inside.

However, when barricades are set up in Paris streets and violence eats at the countryside, Smith opens up the narrative. For the first time, perspectives other than Daguerre's are given voice. Given her own narrative, Isobel ceases to be the country milkmaid of Daguerre's memory—she is a woman full of hard edges and deep lines. This is a smart move for Smith because through Isobel's reading of their past and her view of Daguerre, the reader's world grows, even as Daguerre's does. This is one of the most powerful sections, the point of departure at which the novel no longer persists in Daguerre's veiled perception of the world around him. Here, the characters become fuller and less two-dimensional.

From a rich palette of mercury visions, childhood idylls, and revolution, Smith's novel aspires to much—not only to capture the real but also the unseen.

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Cathryn Essinger is the author of two books of poems: *A Desk in the Elephant House* (Texas Tech University Press), and *My Dog Does Not Read Plato* (Main Street Rag). She is a member of the Greenville Poets, a small but active poetry group that gives readings and conducts workshops.

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Steve Gehrke's third book, *Michelangelo's Seizure,* was selected for the National Poetry Series and is forthcoming from University of Illinois Press. His other books are *The Pyramids of Malpighi* (Anhinga Press) and *The Resurrection Machine* (BkMK Press). His poems have recently appeared in the *Georgia Review, Kenyon Review, Slate,* the *Threepenny Review, VQR,* and the *Yale Review.*

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David Hernandez's second collection of poems, *Always Danger,* won the Crab Orchard Award Series and is forthcoming from SIU Press in March 2006. His first collection, *A House Waiting for Music,* was published by Tupelo Press (2003). David is married to writer Lisa Glatt. Visit his website at www.DavidAHernandez.com

Lesley Jenike is currently a doctoral student at the University of Cincinnati. Her poems have appeared (or will appear soon) in *Blackbird, Washington Square, Crab Orchard Review, Sou'wester, Sonora Review, Alaska Quarterly Review,* and elsewhere.

Michael P. Kardos is a Creative Writing Fellow and doctoral candidate at University of Missouri. His stories have appeared in *PRISM International,* the *Florida Review, River City, Crazyhorse,* and elsewhere. He is currently working on a novel as well as a collection of stories set on the Jersey Shore.

Kelli Kaufmann lives in Chicago. By day she makes educational video games a toys. She has an MFA from the University of Michigan, where she won two Hopwood awards. Her poems have appeared in *RHINO,* the *Spoon River Poetry Review,* and The Academy of American Poets anthology, *New Voices.*

Harriet Levin is the author of *The Christmas Show* (Beacon Press), which received a Barnard New Women Poets Prize and an Alice Fay di Castagnola Award. Recent work appears or will appear in *Antioch Review, Ploughshares, Confrontation,* and *Kestral.* She lives in Philadelphia and directs the Writing Program at Drexel University.

Alexis Levitin has published twenty-one books of translations, including the recently released *Forbidden Words: The Selected Poetry of Eugenio de Andrade* (New Directions, 2003), and he has placed his translations in magazines such as *American Poetry Review, Grand Street,* the *Kenyon Review, New England Review, New Letters, Partisan Review,* and *Crazyhorse.*

Susan Lewis has been the featured poet in *Sulphur River Review,* and other poetry and fiction has appeared in numerous journals, including *New Orleans Review, Seneca Review, Pool,* the *Berkeley Poetry Review, CrossConnect,* and *Cimarron Review.* Her collaborations with composer Jonathan Golove have been recorded and performed at the Kennedy Center and at Carnegie Hall.

Sarah Manguso is the author of *The Captain Lands in Paradise* (Alice James Books, 2002) and the forthcoming *Siste Viator* (Four Way Books, 2006). She teaches at the Pratt Institute and lives in Brooklyn.

Jack Martin lives in Colorado. His poems have appeared in *Mudlark, Ploughshares,* the *Florida Review, River Styx, The Journal,* and other journals. "I Bought a Hat" is a collage. Some of the phrases were found or suggested through a Google search: "I bought a hat."

After traveling throughout Southeast Asia and working in San Francisco during the late 1990s, Albert E. Martinez earned an MFA in fiction from New Mexico State University. His work has been featured on *Nerve* and in *Best New American Voices 2006*. He sleeps in Berkeley.

Davis McCombs teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Arkansas. His first book, *Ultima Thule,* was chosen by W. S. Merwin as the winner of the 1999 Yale Series of Younger Poets, and it was later selected as one of five finalists for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Keya Mitra is a PhD candidate in fiction and literature at the University of Houston, where she also received her MFA. A fiction editor for *Gulf Coast,* her own work is forthcoming in *Best New American Voices 2007, Ontario Review,* and *Orchid.*

Daniel Nester is the author of *God Save My Queen* and *God Save My Queen II.* His most recent book of poems is *The History of My World Tonight.* He edits the journal *Unpleasant Event Schedule* and teaches writing at The College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY.

Kathy Nilsson lives in Cambridge, MA, with her husband and teenage son.

Robyn O'Neil received a BFA from Texas A&M University-Commerce. She was featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, and has exhibited at Inman Gallery, Houston, Bodybuilder and Sportsman Gallery, Chicago, and Clementine Gallery, New York. In January 2006, *Perspectives 150: Robyn O'Neil* opened at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston.

Mónica Parle recently completed her MFA in Fiction at the University of Houston. Her work has appeared in *Gulf Coast, Lineas desde el Golfo,* and *Literal.* Currently, she is Assistant Editor at *Feminist Economics.* She moonlights as writer, putting what conscious hours she has after work into an ongoing novel project.

Daniel Polikoff has published poems and translations in over twenty journals, including *Nimrod* and the *Chariton Review.* Mr. Polikoff teaches literature in the Bay Area, where he lives with his wife and two children. He is currently at work on a book on Rilke and Archetypal Psychology.

Velma Pollard is a retired Senior Lecturer in Language Education, formerly of the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica. She has published *From Jamacan Creole to Standard English*, a handbook for teachers, and a monograph, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari*. She has published three collections of poems, two collections of short fiction, and a novel. Her novella, *Karl*, won the Casa de las Americas Prize in 1992.

Minnie Bruce Pratt's most recent book of poetry, *The Dirt She Ate: Selected and New Poems*, received a Lambda Literary Award, and her work, *Crime Against Nature*, was chosen as the Lamont Poetry Selection. She is Professor of Writing and Women's Studies at Syracuse University and can be reached at www.mbpratt.org.

Ellen Morris Prewitt is the author of the yet-to-be published collection, *Southern Stories That Aren't About White Trash, If You Can Believe That* (*I lied)*. Other stories have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Peralta Press, River City, Eureka Literary Magazine*, and *Hurricane Review*. One of the stories was nominated for a 2006 Pushcart Prize.

Matt Rasmussen's poetry has been recently published or is forthcoming in the *New York Quarterly, LIT, Poet Lore*, and *Poetry Midwest*. He received his MFA from Emerson College in Boston, MA, and currently lives in Hopkins, MN.

Frances Richey's first poetry collection, *The Burning Point*, won the 9th annual White Pine Press Prize. Her poems have appeared in *River Styx, Salmagundi, Notre Dame Review*, the *Cream City Review*, among others. An Assistant Editor for *Bellevue Literary Review*, she teaches yoga and meditation in New York City.

Arthur Saltzman's books include *Objects and Empathy*, which won the First Series Creative Nonfiction Award from Mid-List Press, and *Nearer*, from Parlor Press. He has won the Columbia Nonfiction Award, the *Nebraska Review* Creative Nonfiction Award, the Victor J. Emmett Memorial Essay Award, and the Ames Memorial Essay Award. He teaches at Missouri Southern State University.

Roy Seeger recently received his MFA at Western Michigan University where he was poetry co-editor for *Third Coast*. His poems have appeared in *RHINO*, the *Laurel Review*, and *Verse Daily*, and are forthcoming in the *Cream City Review, Hotel Amerika*, and *West Branch*.

Cherene Sherrard was born in Los Angeles. She is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A graduate of the Cave Canem Summer Workshops, her fiction and poetry have previously appeared in *Crab Orchard Review, 5AM*, and *Dark Matter II: Reading the Bones*.

David Shumate's work has appeared in many journals, including the *Mississippi Review, Atlanta Review, Mid-American Review,* and *River City* as well as on Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac* and in his anthology *Good Poems for Hard Times.* His collection of prose poems, *High Water Mark* was awarded the 2003 Agnes Lynch Starrett prize.

Brenda Sieczkowski studies poetry in the University of Utah's Creative Writing PhD Program. Previously, she has had poems appear in *New England Review, Margie,* and on the *Poetry Daily* website.

Tracy K. Smith is the author of *The Body's Question,* which won the 2002 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and *Duende* (forthcoming in 2007), both from Graywolf Press. She is the recipient of awards from the Rona Jaffe and Whiting Foundations, and she teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Princeton University.

Chris Souza earned her MA in Creative Writing from Boston University and currently teaches Writing About Literature at Bristol Community College in Massachusetts. Her work has appeared most recently, or is forthcoming, in *The Laurel Review, GSU Review,* and the *New York Quarterly.*

Melissa Stein's poems have appeared in *The Southern Review, The American Poetry Review, New England Review, Many Mountains Moving, Seneca Review, North American Review, Calyx, Crab Orchard Review,* and many other journals, and have been included in several anthologies. She is a freelance writer and editor in San Francisco.

D. E. Steward has more than six hundred literary magazine credits. His month-to-month project, *Chroma,* is in its twentieth year, with more than a hundred and forty of the months (of which "Magio" is one). His shorter poetry appears mostly in small press independent magazines.

Miles Waggener's first collection of poems, *Phoenix Suites* (The Word Works, 2003), won the Washington Prize. Recent poems and translations appear in the *Antioch Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Clackamas Literary Review, Salt Hill,* and others. He teaches writing and literature at Prescott College.

G.C. Waldrep's books of poetry are *Goldbeater's Skin* (Colorado, 2003), *Disclamor* (BOA, forthcoming 2007), and a chapbook, "The Batteries" (New Michigan Press, 2006). In 2000 or 2001 he read a poem that included the phrase "possible peacock, possible swan" and has since been unable to track down the source, despite diligent searching. If you are the poet, or know the poem, please contact him at gcwaldrep@deepsprings.edu. Reward offered!

Nicole Walker is finishing her PhD at the University of Utah. She has published fiction, poetry, and nonfiction in *Ploughshares,* the *Iowa Review, Fence, Shenandoah,* and *Crab Orchard Review,* among other places.

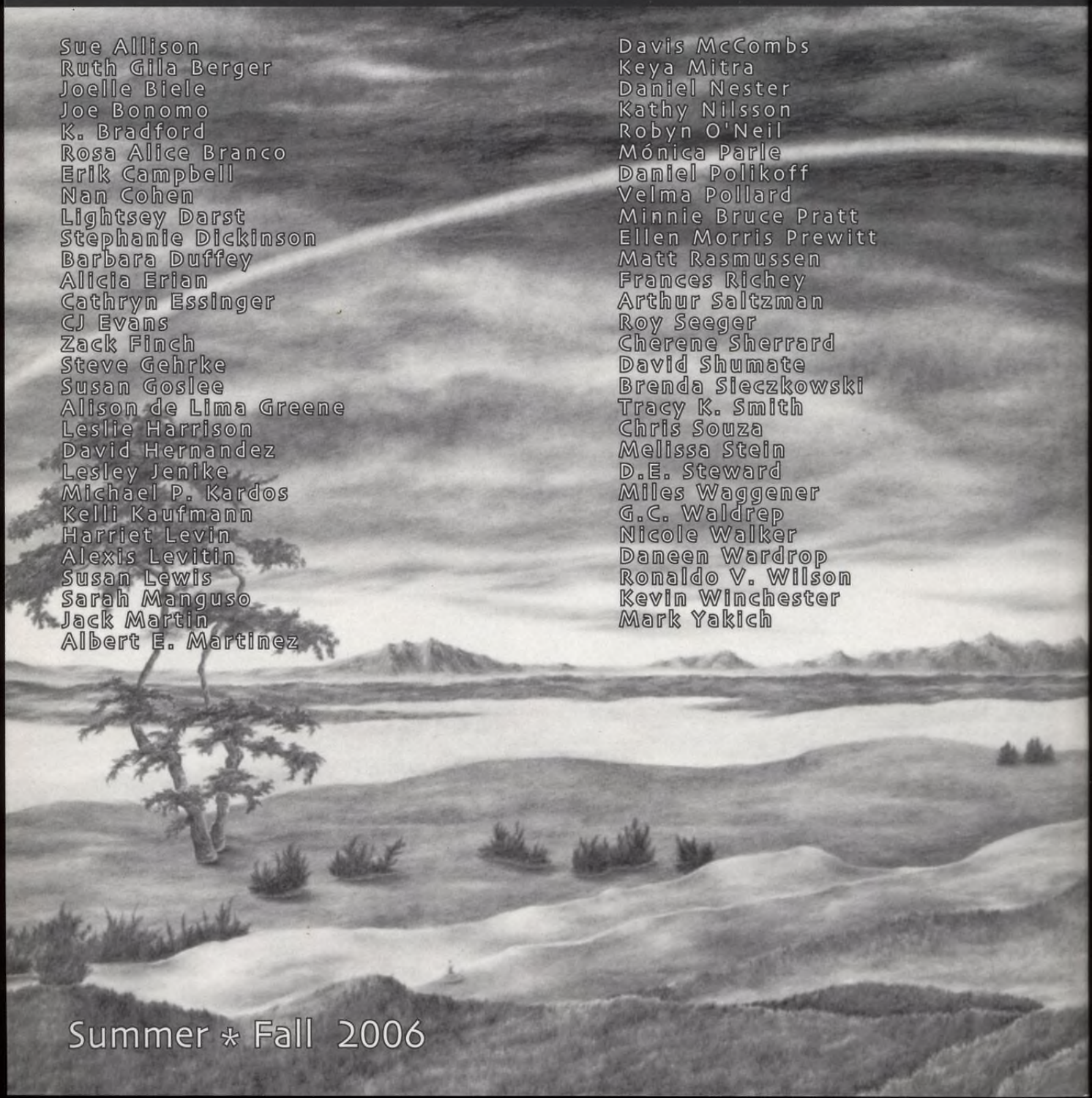
Daneen Wardrop's poetry has appeared in *Seneca Review, TriQuarterly,* the *Antioch Review,* the *Southern Review, Michigan Quarterly Review,* and elsewhere. Her work has been awarded the Bentley Prize from *Seattle Review* and nominated twice for a Pushcart. She has authored two books of literary criticism, including *Emily Dickinson's Gothic.*

Ronaldo V. Wilson's poetry recently appears in *Blithe House Quarterly, Callaloo, Corpus, Fence, Harvard Review,* and *Nocturnes (Re)view of the Literary Arts.* A former Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center Poetry Fellow, he is currently a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center and a visiting instructor at Mount Holyoke College.

Kevin Winchester lives in North Carolina and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University. His fiction has appeared in *StorySouth, Southern Hum, Writing Quartely,* and the anthology *Everything But the Baby.* Currently, he is an adjunct instructor in the English Department at Wingate University in Wingate, NC.

Mark Yakich's first collection of poems, *Unrelated Individuals Forming a Group Waiting to Cross* (Penguin, 2004), was a winner of the 2003 National Poetry Series. A new chapbook, *The Making of Collateral Beauty,* will be published by Tupelo Press in 2006. Mark's website is www.markyakich.com.

Gulf Coast



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Summer * Fall 2006