





# New Orleans Review

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Tony Nozero

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*The Elitist*  
Louviere + Vanessa

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Christopher Chambers

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*Strange Litany*

Shame of the body  
and of the sun  
and of the spirit  
that sutures them  
together

Black raven  
on the white fencepost  
looking for another—

Soul lost in forest seeks same

Body trapped in cloven pine seeks same

Word once used in exactly  
the right moment seeks same

Shame of the body  
laid in the sun  
for the entertainment of the spirit  
which laughs at it  
and laughs at it

No shame in loneliness  
Pleasure of the hand drawn across  
the bark of the lone

cottonwood in a nest of them  
that hasn't gone all pumpkin

There's something in this world  
I wouldn't mind  
hurting myself upon—

That doesn't mean hurting myself *for*

Soul imprisoned in glass bottle  
seeks body in the shape of a hammer

Body left for dead in a pile of dead  
seeks soul with careful eye

Translation seeks original

Grown sleek and restless  
the leppy cows, abandoned  
by their mothers  
will never know  
what's not youth

To take something  
into yourself completely isn't  
to change, only to eat—

Soul on fire seeks oceanic feeling

Body ashamed of earth-sized girth  
seeks body proud of sky-blue eyes

Litany seeks logic

ERIC REYMOND

*Dead Letters, 500 B.C.E.*

Butterfly old books and notebooks

open,

thumbs cutting and cutting

a question:

“Does my heart

cling to it?”

The Aramaic feeling

sun-thin,

“...obscure,”

two and one-half millennia.

The consonants clear black

between

fingers, vowel-less echo:

Egyptian words

never were delivered.

“Why have you not written? —

I sent this letter to know

your well-being.”

JULIANNE BUCHSBAUM

*Last Night I Felt the Need to Write to You*

*I doubt if it would change your mind* but what is destroyed below rigid alignments of bent tree-crowns will someday furl upwards toward the sun, even in glacial air. So many icy suggestions of things unborn and unwished-for recede under frost's lost and forgotten palaces while one lone bird flies beyond these white-ridged distances. *Six months seems like a really long time.* And yet the ice, in its frail approximations of dead nodes, its quietus under the descending matrix of frost, seems to be the source of everything that's been detached phlegmatically from the trees. *I don't want to be unreasonable.* And I, finally, detach myself from these forms of dead or dying starlife, these thoughts of you, the infolding they achieve under the glass mouths of god-forms advancing quietly. *I doubt if it would change your mind.* All these squelched beings receding into spiral self-opposed universes of notched intaglios. *I suppose it's fruitless to try to convince you.* In these blades going down to the blotched bronze earth, *there is this thing, like starlife, caught between us.*

JULIANNE BUCHSBAUM

*Sea Rooms: Seven Views of Longboat Key, Florida*

\*\*

The sound of wharves aswarm  
with rats woke me from stupor

to nuance of anemone  
and blackfin, a world come

dripping from distant isles,  
lavish with lime trees.

*Some eyes see sky,  
some eyes see heaven.*

\*\*

A quell of gull and wave,

a final phylum, an *untergehen*,  
it stuns like a drug,

a waterlogged god, oblivious  
as porifera waving in the abyss—

huge, indifferent, hoodlum.  
Fishermen ply it like an *annus*

*mirabilis*, a secret death wish.

\*\*

My canvas slowly fills with a false paradise.  
I have not seen the sea at all today.

Barnacles, blue waves, dank  
fumes from moldy gangplanks.

A month of debaucheries dies in my mouth  
as waves compose their rags of blue.

They answer me with motley shells,  
corbeils of foam like flowers of hell.

\*\*

It smells bereft.

It smells of underleaf.

\*\*

A school of mackerel  
translated into gore  
by the gear wheels  
of an ocean liner.

\*\*

Amid the bric-a-brac *v'yeetkardash*  
of Florida, these leaves look like katydids

cooked in lukewarm bile, but gnarled  
and dry as the claws of the turkey buzzard

camouflaged in the detritus of dying  
palm trees behind the new gas station.

They feel like nylon stockings  
bunched in a drawer for months on end.

Flame-colored motorcycles roar  
down the boulevard not far from here.

\*\*

At odds with everyone,  
I idealize the island,  
its narcotic solitude.

Alien where

fungus grows drunkenly,  
I'm about to become  
one to come home to.

K A T R I N A   R O B E R T S

*Origins*

All day a small white hand opening  
toward windows—the orchid’s second

bloom. Pinpoint of blood intaglioed where  
petals meet, the sexual folds, layers of pale

flesh that waft the chastest scent, sweet  
breath of a babe in arms—his mother’s

milk a spittle-lace of shine dried on flushed  
cheeks. February, his third month, no cause

for expiation of any sort, though blossom-talk  
calls into question any reason for being as

one is—not gaudy exactly, more blown fully,  
teasing, though cloistered on the sill. Beyond

panes, beside lanceted doors of Our Church  
of Assumption, two boys aim guns and laugh.

J E F F R E Y   P E T H Y B R I D G E

[An arming-theme: *in bocca al lupo*—]

An arming-theme: *in bocca al lupo*—  
and laid out on the table: a laptop;  
a fountain pen; the shirt of beautiful  
noise; three small stones colored like bird-  
eggs (one robin, one quail-mottled, one sharp-  
shinned hawk) that orbit the head. The robin  
stone emits the song a child in the dark  
gripped with fear sings to himself  
for comfort, for order. The child can  
walk to this song; he can skip; lost, he can  
shelter in it. The song is the rough-sketch  
of a calming; it jumps from chaos to  
the beginnings of order in chaos,  
and is in danger of breaking apart  
at any moment. The others permit  
congress with the dead and the self’s  
own schismatic congregation,  
respectively. A tin of instant  
espresso; always the notebook; a disc  
to leave behind; a two-Euro coin  
with Dante’s head on it. I recognize the nose  
from the mirror: *crepi il lupo*.

*PIT-DAY*

Halfway into the hour flight from Pittsburgh to Dayton, the plane leveled off and the captain made the announcement that they were flying into outer space. The timbre of his voice was calm as if he were giving a weather report.

"I see a new route marked out for us in the sky," the captain said. "Tiny white clouds shaped like anvils, pointing upward toward the panoply of stars. Below us are the Hopewell Mounds. Those grassy keloids where the gelid remains of a people from a braver age lie. Can you hear them cheering us upward? They're not worried that commuter jets aren't supposed to charge into the upper crust of the atmosphere. They know this plane: its limits and its failures. I can feel it too. Yet I want to do this for all of you: my crewmate, Penelope, sweet Penelope, and my passengers, sweet passengers. I left Flight Officer Brown in the lounge with his cognac, so place your hand over mine on the throttle and we'll etch a new vapor trail of greatness in the sky together. I love you all so very much."

The engines roared and the plane tilted upward. The hollow tube of the cabin erupted into a wash of shrill laughs, but as the passengers felt the weight of the climb and saw the ground grow fainter in the dusky light, a few screams echoed off the hard plastic trays, marking the change in pressure.

In that moment of panic, everyone was an expert on the plane, reciting lines from the safety card as if the complimentary wings on their lapels were real gold and not plastic.

"We'll burn up on reentry," a businessman in a red rep tie said.

"Forget reentry," a businessman in a blue-striped rep tie said. "This jet can't break the sound barrier."

Penelope rewrapped her hair in a bun and told them to stay calm. She tapped on the cockpit door, calmly at first, and then banged her fist in short bursts. Was it their secret knock? Was it Morse code? She felt the passengers wanted the security of knowing without her saying it aloud. She never faced them. The heel of her fist met the door underneath the peephole and the warning sticker that read "Bulletproof." In her other hand, she still held the metal ice bucket for the beverage service. The water in the bucket tipped and spilled on the carpet as the plane angled toward the moon.

"Captain," she said. "Captain Graves, let me in. You're upsetting the passengers." She hesitated. "The sweet passengers."

An older man stood up, and from the overhead compartment, found his suede, ten-gallon hat and pulled it down over his square head. He tapped Penelope on the shoulder in a responsible way.

"Step aside, ma'am," he said.

"We can't break down the door," she said. "It's reinforced."

The man in the ten-gallon hat squinted.

"The only way to Dayton is through that door, ma'am," he said. "And that there's exactly where we need to go."

He made a wind up motion with his right leg. The point of his boot glinted silver in her eye as he crouched down low. And then, holding the armrests for balance, he swung his hips up and drop-kicked the door in one smooth thrust. The door did not move. After five kicks, not even a dent. The speaker crackled on again.

"Passengers of Flight 1903, there are things a black box cannot tell us: measurements incalculable in the data of the flight recorder. Can these machines mark the memories of this journey, miles above the birthplace of flight? Can they capture the sight of ragged electromagnetic waves spurting from the sun? Or the icy crust evaporating from a comet on its elliptical? There is no air in space to carry these words, so remember them. Deep inside, you ache for the greatness of this journey. It seeps off you in ways you cannot see. It's not long now. We're so close."

Outside the windows, a purple darkness bled through the normal spectrum of sky as they crested into the upper stratosphere. The plane shook violently. Penelope stared open-mouthed at the deep color. From the ground, they must have looked like a star falling all the way across the Ohio sky.

One of the businessmen tugged her arm.

“Hey, you’re not in on this, are you?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Of course not.”

“You weren’t just in awe, were you?” the other businessman asked.

“No,” she said. “Not me. I want to go to Dayton. Now no more questions. Put your head in your lap.”

“What for?” the businessman asked.

She ignored the question and pleaded with the man in the ten-gallon hat to stop kicking and prepare for the unknown. Her mind raced with the possible and the fantastic: crash landing positions, yellow inflatable ramps, moonwalks, the icy dust of comets, Saturn’s rings. But the man kicked on as the engines wheezed for air and the plane reached the apex of its journey. Penelope’s legs wobbled with adrenaline and she knelt down to brace herself.

“Hold on,” she shouted.

For a moment, she stared at the silver triangle tip of the old man’s boot. She felt as if every nerve in her body were pulsing all at once and she would tackle him to the carpet if for no other reason than to stop the constant motion of his kicking. But with the last thrust of the engines, the jittery sensation left her. The plane’s nose dipped to the earth. Penelope closed her eyes and felt a strange wetness run up her leg and then noticed for the first time the glittering cube of ice floating in front of her calf. It spun edge over edge, higher into the cabin above her head, past the man in the ten-gallon hat, and finally tapping into the cabin door where it left a trail of water like tiny diamonds. She looked at the man in the ten-gallon hat. One

of his legs too now hovered over the carpet. Behind her the passengers were held down by their seat belts, but the spilled ice from the bucket in her hand had gotten loose. Throughout the entire cabin shards of ice were aloft, bedazzled and precessing like slow comets. Then just as quickly as it had arrived, the plane banked with a lurch, and the pull from the turn pushed her and the man in the ten-gallon hat into the door like a sack of stones. The door caved with one last pop and sent them both flying into the back of the pilots’ chairs.

The two men in business suits shook her awake. In those first splotchy seconds of consciousness, she watched the man in the ten-gallon hat lift Captain Graves by the shoulders from the cockpit and beat him mercilessly with the safety belt display model.

“Wake up!” Captain Graves tried to scream between blows.

Or maybe it was, “Wipe out!”

His voice was too hoarse to be heard clearly. The businessmen stopped tapping her cheek and helped restrain Captain Graves in the jump seat by the door. One of them pulled off his tie—the blue-striped rep—and shoved it in the captain’s mouth for good measure. Penelope took a seat near the captain and watched the man in the ten-gallon hat pull the plane out of its bank with ease. She could feel they had returned to a safe altitude. The men in the business suits and the rest of the passengers strapped themselves into their seats. They didn’t stop praying until the intercom dinged.

“Sorry about that folks,” the man in the ten-gallon hat said. “Just getting a few last minute tips from the old grounds crew in Dayton. I’m going to go ahead and turn on the fasten seatbelts sign again. We’ll be down on the ground in a jiffy. Penelope, please prepare the cabin for arrival.”

Penelope gathered ice in a folded napkin for a compress for Captain Graves. She held the wet napkin to his temple. He had managed to spit most of the blue tie from his mouth, but he was still groggy.

“Did we reach the stars?” he mumbled.

“Just sleep,” Penelope said.

The landing gear descended and the cockpit door swayed open wildly. From her seat, she caught glimpses of the new captain’s grim expression in the green glow of the instrument panel. His tall hat never moved as they made their final approach into Dayton. She could see the new captain had no real love for flying.

K A R E N G E N T R Y

### *The Lucky One*

Last week my husband told me to take a shower and put on a dress. He said a childhood friend of his was in town and he wanted to meet me. We had reservations at one of those Brazilian Meat restaurants. When we got there, I found out this friend was not a him but a her, my husband’s first love. There she was, waiting and lovely, not afraid to sit at the table alone.

“Sorry,” my husband said. He kissed my ear and whispered, “If she asks, we saw *The Nutcracker* last week.”

I’m finding out that’s the way my husband is—he lies about the strangest things. I hadn’t seen *The Nutcracker* since I was a kid. All those dancing sweets proved too much for my stomach. I stole away mid-ballet and hid under a chaise in the ladies lounge.

The thing about a Brazilian Meat restaurant is that there are no menus to hide behind when the childhood friend of your husband raises her glass to toast your ten years of marriage, when it has only been three months. Under the table, my husband touched my knee. She reached under the table too, brought out a photo album, and set it on top of my salad plate. “We’ll flip through this after dinner.”

I could only imagine what was in there. Pictures she would claim to have forgotten all about. Photos that would remind them of the funniest stories. Maybe a snapshot of my husband with his first car, leaning shirtless against it, rolling white lies for this girl from the neighborhood. I pushed it aside to get my plate.

After our first trip to the buffet, a whole rump roast stopped by, then a strand of Russian pork sausages, plum-soaked sirloin tips, another round of drinks, racks of Chinese ribs, legs of princess lamb, chicken wrapped in Spanish bacon. When the sugared-ostrich

showed up, I'd had enough. I poked at the photo album with one of my husband's spare ribs. "Let's have a look already."

She clapped. "I see you can't stand the suspense."

My husband could stand it. He made for the buffet. I grabbed at his belt loop, but he wiggled free. She opened the album facing me, used a napkin to turn the pages. "It's arranged reverse chronologically."

There was her husband, who rooted for Green Bay, twin daughters, a pair of cheeseheads at play, pictures of a twin clogging recital, a family trip to Twinsburg, Ohio, the twin's baptism by twin priests, twins popping out between a pair of bloody legs. When she got to the last page, I prepared for the picture of my husband, dressed for the prom, throwing her over his shoulder, laughing. Instead, I found a photo of her son, a child she hadn't mentioned, standing in the rain. From the looks of him, something wasn't right in his head. "He's unhappy," I said. She nodded, but she misunderstood. She thought I was talking about my husband, lingering at the buffet, waiting for a fresh bowl of fruit.

She held her wine glass against her cheek. "So, tell me the truth—" she leaned in and called me by my first name, the way women do when they're trying to trick you, "—did you really see *The Nutcracker*?"

I looked away. I tried motioning my husband back to the table. "Only honeydew right now," he yelled, and blew me a kiss.

I felt the meat go bad in my stomach. "I think I left something in the car," I told her. "I'll be right back."

Outside, I crawled into the backseat of our Camry and pulled my pantyhose down far enough so I could breathe. I closed my eyes. I tried to form an image of me going back in there, but all I could see was me calling a cab, me walking to a bar. My hand was on the door when I heard their voices. I panicked. I remembered that the backseat of our car opens up to the trunk. I squeezed through, pulled it shut behind me, and made a place for myself in the dark.

They walked around the car. I felt it sink as they sat on the trunk. I heard my husband tell her that we had come in separate cars, that I was a surgeon, always on call. "She's probably responding to a medical emergency, Bariatrics, lots of pulmonary embolisms." I heard him sigh, "After ten years," he said, "I still feel like we're newlyweds." She laughed and I felt him slide off the trunk. He was helping her down. He was promising that we'd do it again some time soon.

I fell asleep on the way home. When the trunk lid opened, I kept my eyes closed. I smelled our garage, smelled my husband as he leaned in and untangled my legs from his jumper cables, singing a song about being the lucky one. He carried me into the house, then up the stairs and to our room, where he set me on the bed. I let him think I was asleep while he pulled off my shoes and threw them in the corner, took off my pantyhose, then my dress, and curled up behind me.

That's the way he is, my husband. Somehow he knows just where to find me.

## *Candlepin*

He gave her a candlepin, stolen from the local bowling alley. A crazy shot had left all the pins out of whack, with one hung over the edge of the gutter. The next ball boomeranged the pin up the lane, far enough for him to dart out undetected in his two-tone shoes and grab it. He'd had to sneak it out of the alley in his baggy pants leg, walking like Frankenstein. She would never receive a more romantic gift in her life, she thought.

My daughter told me this as I fixed tuna fish sandwiches at the kitchen counter, and I was surprised to find myself jealous. She sat behind me at our green Formica table, arms folded as if she held the candlepin in them, even though she didn't. When I was her age, I'd had similar ideas of love as something made manifest in crime and danger: who didn't dream of the pyromaniac setting fires to win her attention?

That was before I met Albert, my daughter's father, a man who picked me up on our first date in a sky-blue Cadillac convertible. By the time I learned how he paid for it, I was already addicted to the drinking, the fighting, and to being driven around on summer nights with the top down.

Today I'm married to a doorman—responsible, steady, annoyingly polite—and settled into a life of pressing pickles into tuna fish sandwiches and pruning backyard gardenias into infinity. I took a drag off the cigarette I had idling next to me on the counter. I could hear him watching the baseball game in the next room. There was no sign of our son, but he'd appear as soon as he knew his sandwich was ready.

I turned to face my daughter, crossed my arms, and cocked my hip against the counter. A breeze came through the open window behind her head.

I told her that the boy didn't have her in mind while stealing the candlepin, that he was thinking only of himself and whether he could get away with it. I told her that she had to know that.

"Maybe," she said, sitting up straighter, "but he thought of me afterward, as the person he most wanted to impress."

I didn't know how to tell her that she deserved to be more than an afterthought. I didn't know how to tell her why I'd stayed with her father for eight years. I turned back to my cigarette. I told her to tell them that their sandwiches were ready.

*Upon the Death of James Dickey*

Some of the time, going home, I go  
Blind and can't find it.  
—"Looking for the Buckhead Boys"

My god Jim Miller,  
what has happened to you? We all know that a thief—  
years ago—crushed your skull with a brick in Chicago  
for your bicycle. Something in all of us died, but I hear  
you're not working at the gas station anymore, Jim? How  
have you been? Why the Elvis sideburns? Why  
don't you speak anymore? In the third grade

rock star track star most popular  
kid ever went to Waco Elementary. You

and David Boshart invited me to your party  
because I sat near you on the bus.  
You with that hidden pack of cigarettes  
that we did not smoke  
in the hayloft. The horses and horses  
and horses that you loved, that sent you  
to a Chicago manger—the rich smell of animals scared  
and your bloody head on the straw. Vast stables  
with horses trembling beneath blankets. When was it, Jim?  
Second or third grade, my first birthday party, ever? And your father  
could fold in his lips and make a sound  
like a horse whinnying or longing. We were eleven and twelve

and you drove that old Chrysler down the mile long lane. The black dog  
chased us up and down and up for Jesus Christ Jim what?  
Ten miles. That black dog long gone now. And David and I laughing  
thinking *only if*.

Only if I had part of your life, Jim.  
Your Elvis cowlick. Your throwing arm. You  
kissed your cousin in the attic  
at nine. We thought you shaved  
by ten. And once, after skating,

your beautiful older sister  
prom queen beauty queen later  
one more woman I would dream  
because of her long hair and her O  
Jim, how could you have a sister like that too?  
And when we were driving  
home from skating and saw that  
*that whatever*. And the animal stopped  
along the road; I was frightened. It was not  
a deer. It was not a monstrous dog  
near Black Stalder's house—  
near mud road and black panther sightings—  
not a hyena even though I swear to you  
I swear on my own mother's grave  
the beast had shorter hind legs  
than forelegs. That monster had yellow eyes and your sister,  
just perfectly seventeen, was frightened. I was too young and  
but I would have Lord God

I would have taken her in my arms  
and think of it even today, her in my arms; the beauty

we never have. And you, Jim, showing us all  
even her  
that you wanted to go back.  
If you had a gun  
you'd kill it.  
You'd kill it for us,  
be damned,  
and we'd all be famous.  
You were what every boy at Waco wanted to be until Chicago.  
Now everyone thinks Jim, my god Jim, what a shame about Jim.

Last I saw you you waved from a sixties truck,  
a thirty-year-old truck, Jim.  
I heard your mother had brain cancer.  
I heard your father was already gone,  
a long time too.  
Jim. Listen to me. I don't even know  
if you can remember. But listen.  
When your father broke himself,  
remember? When your father was at Old Threshers  
and his buggy  
his carriage  
in the horse race  
his carriage turned over,  
and he lay on the race track  
still?

I see him lying there.

I still see him I mean  
you lying there. After  
the brick that someone smashed into your skull,  
I still see your father lying  
or beginning to die. O  
Jim. You, the miller.  
You, the Mennonite. You  
the most beautiful  
man I ever knew.  
Still I've heard rumored you are called Elvis. And the ladies  
secretly lust  
still after you. And I am here  
seven hundred miles away.  
When I heard this latest news, I think, Jesus  
Jim. You are so far away. I mean  
we are so far away.

*Hunting Stories*

I

Because my mother would not  
kill anything, we went back to him  
when I was eight. She would not  
leave again. She would not gut a fish,  
pluck a pheasant, dress a squirrel. *It's*  
*a weakness*, he said. Besides

my father could put his mind into anything,  
saying: *Before you hang the buck on the wall,*  
*you have to smear his blood on your thighs. In order to*  
*catch the fish (listen to me damn it)*  
*in order to catch the fish*  
*you must imagine the lake upside down.* A wood tick

crawled under his pant leg. He said,  
*It went all the way up.* Eventually  
we all do what it takes to survive.  
*Prop yourself against this tree.*

*Look into the wind, Boy. No point*  
*looking behind you. No deer*  
*will fuck you from behind.*  
*Another hunter maybe;*  
*better not see that coming.*

II

It's no surprise fact is  
stranger than fiction considering  
fiction demands accountability.

Lightning struck  
my father's prize bull. I was  
never more surprised.

The morning sun  
did not rise. The day  
simply grew light. I saw  
the great bull collapsed  
looking for all his size like  
nothing I could name.

*Nothing but your eyes see,*  
*nothing but your ears hear,*  
*nothing that your mouth tastes*  
*is what your hands feel.*

III

In retrospect,  
some things are inevitable,  
like my mother's death,  
like my father begging me  
*come home*  
*goddamn it.*  
Like the coon in the hayloft spitting,

turning circles. Its head  
lolling like a pendulum wounded  
by the wheel of a distant semi

now a hundred rolling miles away. Father,  
you took the twenty-two  
and the beast just sat there for you  
as though it felt the end

believed in its entire heart  
it had done all that it had to do. And you  
shaking your head in damn shame.

MICHELLE Y. BURKE

### *Cherry Tree*

The cherry trees will loose themselves today.  
The white face of the lie is all but drawn;  
I fold a paper crane to pass the day  
as petals begin to falter across the lawn.

My love, how long can we refuse to pay  
for these ripe days of ease where all we long  
for is the chance to lose ourselves each day?  
A blossom grows most grand before it's gone.

Bent bough to ground, each cherry tree's display  
shudders under the weight of coming dawn.  
The cherry trees will loose themselves today.  
I fold a paper crane to pass the day.

MICHELLE Y. BURKE

*Hardwood Horses*

The eyes of a Zalar horse always have a certain sadness to them.  
—Tobin Fraley, *The Great American Carousel*

The best ones—not dictated,  
but revealed—are almost  
gone. See how they hardly

resist the rain. *Horse*  
replaced by *horsepower*.  
How much goes

unchanged? The earnestness  
of an eagle carved  
in a horse's chest—

cabinetmakers turned  
horse carvers. Did they know  
how much their horses

carried, how sorrow  
manifests itself  
in wood, how art—

unlike duty—  
reveals desire  
and its afterimage:

loss? Even now,

the fiberglass-cast cavalry  
parades through theme parks

and midways.  
Gears imitate the gallop, and we  
salvage what we can:

rivets carved in armor,  
a neck bathed in roses,  
a wild, upturned head.

TONY TRIGILIO

*Arrhythmia*

His breath maneuvers the leaflets of the heart, flutters in scrap, my brother who barely learned to touch

things and hold them, really feel them give up in your hands. His first cat Tea, dog Scotty: his animals

arise to their names the way a body, blushed by a wave, seems surprised by all the attention.

The lake. Behind his cottage. Fire pits, beer cans, a rammed and sullen pickup chugging through the night

for music and the companionship of engines. He won't say why he lied to his doctor about

cocaine. His blood cusps flicker when he sleeps. A sheet like a soft membrane hangs between his bedroom and

kitchen. He says the doctors know nothing about pills. Sleeps at his stamping machine—they're watching him

at work, my brother bypassed and I all adrenaline and keeping to myself, spectator nod-

ding at the end of his stories. His white German Shepherd was named after taking blotter acid,

this is all I know. No clue why Tea sometimes is Oscar, or why this cottage was built without doors.

REBECCA STEFFY

*Washing*

Wheelbarrow full of leeks at the washing station loses its load into, on the other side, a pile of waxy boxes.

Barrow of fantailed leeks into the water by the handful flukes, color of ocean, slap the water, swallow it spray it over the edge of metal-rimmed basins.

Almost lunchtime under the old grafted tree at the washing station.

Another plunge removes the dirt – some dirt some still grafted deep into the joint where plumage meets fruit.

[my handful smaller than his almost time for lunch water dripping leek into the box]

Under the tree that bears two kinds of nuts we're not talking of leeks. You're telling me when you stumble on *paloma*; I ask pigeon or dove?

By the garage full of rusted bolts and nuts, we're both hungry, though the shade counters these other needs somewhat. The bolts in the garage only fit the axles of old carriages from the years before when this other family that owns the leeks refused cars. We wait to eat until the other men come in from the sun washing between us pigeons and doves without need.

*First Year in Houston*

Green fern  
lit through with  
morning window-sun,

each finger splayed  
or shriveled. This city is  
a closet we can  
only sometimes

climb out of.  
Or maybe it's  
these rooms, the apartment  
block turning in to gaze

only at its own  
tan walls. I

thought so once.  
A gilt frame  
mirrors three lamps

suspended in reflection  
like chicken necks. If

there was music,  
it was quiet. If there was  
weeping, we didn't hear.

*Twelver*

ONE. Stev has a questionable commitment to convenience. The motherfucking mouth-breather thinks he decides when it's too late to buy beer. And the nimrod insists everyone pronounce his name "Steve" even though he spells it S-T-E-V on his name tag.

Stev.

The fuck.

I decided to shoot him.

We were out of beer. Of course, first I'd had to wake up the old man, which was no easy thing. But he's got the apnea and I'm sure as shit not leaving him to sleep alone. The deal is he stays awake while I'm gone or I won't leave. He usually keeps this pact because he's convinced a raw egg cracked into a red Coors for breakfast keeps him regular.

I touched his shoulder, squeezed it, and said, "Pop, we're dry. Wake up." He hit me with a pillow, burrowed into the blankets. I yanked down the covers. His skinny kicking cricket legs got me in the ribs before I could scoot away. He put on the face that, when I was a kid, meant his belt was already halfway off. I stood in the doorway, neither here nor goddamn there, to see if he'd come after me, play nice, or try and go back to sleep.

His eyes lit on the jar of ash next to the Bible on the nightstand table. He asked me had it gone off. I waited for him to sit up.

"Has what gone off?" It's good to keep him talking as he's less likely to nod off after I leave. He hoisted himself onto his elbows and hawked up what sounded like buckshot. I put a coffee mug before him and he thocked the loogie into it.

"You know damn well."

When I pointed to my lip, he sleeved the spittle from his chin. I turned the television to the 1:30 a.m. rerun of the 10:30 news. A mountain in British Columbia fissured and smoked, but the correspondent said that it would be years before it erupted. The anchor muttered “geological time” with a newsman’s measured despondence.

“Might be a bit yet,” I said.

Dad’s amateur vulcanology goes back a ways. The ash in the jar is from Mount St. Helens. One whole face of that peak blasted into the jet stream and in trace amounts the ash went as far as Warsaw. But the stuff fell like nuclear winter on our place in the Bitterroots. There had been inches of it everywhere, the valley as gray as a John Ford movie. I was real little. Our picture window was like a tintype.

The old man snorted. “Git already,” he said.

I pointed at the Bible with my chin.

“You’ve been reading.”

“What of it?”

“You don’t read. Plus, I thought we were committed agnostics.”

“I told you about using them big words.”

“Agnostic just means you don’t know.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, I—”

“What you don’t know could fill a fucking silo. Ain’t been farther than Idaho.”

“Spokane’s in Washington.”

I put a pillow behind his head and smoothed the blanket.

“Listen,” I said. “Maybe the volcano will go off after all.”

“You make a man need a beer.”

“Roger. Back in a jiffy.”

One arm in my coat, I stumbled outside into the cold, bootlaces slapping on the frozen dooryard. I stopped for a tremendous pee on the fence. Limbs of mist spilled down the draw into our empty pasture. Beyond, the Bitterroot Mountains cut up the horizon and

rimmed the sparkling bowl of stars with a jagged set of pale teeth. The moon like a great pill somebody needed to swallow. I could not piss fast enough.

The truck coughed and spat and caught. In the winter it needs you to gas it awhile before you can pop it in reverse, depending on who parked it. Dad always rolls up to the house, executes a three-point turnaround in the drive, and backs in next to the tractor. It’s a stubborn vestige of our outlaw heritage, a ride ready to scream out of the drive. But the three-point has to be murder on his arthritic hands.

I revved the truck and drummed the dash with hurry-up fingers. Ten minutes warming the engine, another ten to the highway from our place, and eight miles due north to Ole’s Country Store. It would be close. Fucking Stev. Used to be so long as you got in reasonably sober, a twelver was no problem, whatever the clock said. We live in the country, we live on Country Time. What my friend Joe Seven Smokes’ Salish people call Reservation Time, which means half an hour late to anything. Your own funeral. Why Stev thinks it should be different at his father’s chain of convenience stores just bewilders the fuck out of me.

“You’re not the vizier of the valley,” I said just to say it.

The Ford sawed the gravel, and the mess of metal in the bed—rusted rebar, shotgun shells, irrigation spigots and joints, a dented canteen—sluiced back and forth over the ribbed bed until I squealed onto the blacktop with no minutes to spare.

I skidded next to Stev’s muddy Toyota in the otherwise empty lot and sprinted into the store. I didn’t even look at my watch. Skulking from his porn-rimmed perch at the register, he muttered something vague and discouraging and entirely expected. Pointing at him as I strode past, I said, “Ring up a twelver of Coors.”

Stev is a ruddy punk. Not hearty, he appears sunscalded, perpetually abraded. He picks and scratches at himself with the vocational

intensity of a monkey. A very thick monkey. I've seen him eat individual peas with his fingers, for example. So I didn't listen to him just then, I didn't hear what needed to be heard. And my booted feet rose before me, suds snapping from leather laces.

"I said I mopped, you alcoholic!"

I landed hard. I moaned. I clambered on all fours to the cooler but the glass door held fast. My watch said it was seconds past two. I cracked the glass. Why oh why keep the place open if you're going to lock up the beer?

Dripping, I tottered back to the counter. "All right, open the cooler. I told you to ring it up when I walked in."

"No can do. It's past time."

"Neverthefuckingless. That cooler was locked before two." I took off my flannel shirt and wrung it out. "Christ, c'mon Stev."

He chewed a toothpick, worked bits of it in his teeth like an ape relishing nits. His forehead still bore the comma-shaped indenture from our first fight in third grade. Our bodies were pocked, chipped, and scarred from a lifetime of extracurricular combat.

"Tell you what," he said. "Say it right."

"You're killing me here."

"Say my damn name."

I could not do it.

"Spellitrightmotherfucker! Ring up my beer. Open the God damned cooler!"

I lifted the counter open, made a sweeping gesture of beckoning him out. He swung it back down.

"Go home, dude."

He climbed on top of the counter and sat cross-legged.

"All right, you abortion," I said. "I challenge you to a duel. Twenty paces."

"Get the fuck out."

"I'm for real, you chickenshit."

He searched each of my eyeballs and saw I was goddamn authentic.

"Where?" he asked.

"Up to you."

"Under the peace sign in Missoula."

"On Waterworks Hill. Near the hospital."

"Yeah."

"Good choice."

"Yeah, well."

"Tomorrow?"

"Sure," he said. He slapped his forehead. "Wait. I can't. I have a thing."

"Day after then."

"Fine."

"Fine."

The cooler kicked on and thrummed in the background, taunting me.

"I'll supply the sidearm," I said. "But bring a second, you turd."

He pooched out his lips. "I'm a shoot your face off."

"Can you get one?"

"Get what?"

"Jesus. A second. A friend, if you have one. Someone to hold your hair while you puke up blood, Tinkerbell. Someone to get you to the hospital."

two: The lamp is out. In the flitting television light, the old man starts deep in the cockles of the blanket. Snorts and stills. I take my seat among the empty cans. The aluminum foil antenna like a frozen garland. A black-and-white Western I've seen a hundred times, three outlaws smoking in the noosed light of a campfire. Nothing is on, nothing to drink but novelties, little bottles of almond and orange liqueur. Infomercial after infomercial. Ex-quarterback Fran Tarkenton explains how to sell real estate. How to read the want

ads, essentially. Shots of him shucking pursuing linebackers and circling items in the paper, as if the former endowed special plausibility to the latter.

It was 1975 when Fran was the league MVP. Fran's old man sipped scotch as his son fled Cowboys on the television before him. In the fourth quarter, the codger dropped his drink on the silent carpet, clutched his chest, winked out. His boy on his television, running for his fucking life.

I switch the channel. There's a plaid-skirted tart with legs up to there, lounging on a couch.

She wants me to call her as she ravel the phone cord around her finger. Says we can have fun. So I call, and actually say that I just want to "rub one out." How the argot of the times astonishes. I ask her what fragile psychic ossatures are propped and shored by these phrasings. Does she know that to "rub one out" means to kill? Traditionally? Can she realize my particular fantasy that she know this, that she explain it to me? The clever bookish minx asks do I have a major credit card. Alas, I do not.

The old man farts. It reeks like a mudpot in there.

THREE: Joe Seven Smokes quit drinking. He reckoned he had the gene that made him susceptible to dying in a ditch clutching a bottle of Wild Turkey. So he quit. Which hacked me off. Joe was my boy. When we were twelve we took our first drinks from a discarded fifth of Southern Comfort and embarked on world-class careers in lushery. We lost our virginity to Echo Watson on the same afternoon and pounded master cylinders of Colt we stole from the old man to celebrate. Begged old boys outside of the liquor store to buy for us. Brown beers, black beers, light beers, tallboys. Clear vodka, rusty whiskey, blue gin. We drank red wine and melon balls and retched shiny black ropes laughing. Fought Stev at keggers, in the hallways of school and parties, among the lodgepole pines, on the logging roads, in the middle of fucking nowhere. In this way high

school cartwheeled past. When I went up Highway 93 to Missoula for college, Joe joined me on Fridays, Thursdays, and then the rest of the days. Many a lecture the bottle of Old Grandad squirreled away from us and tinkled giddy and dribbling downhill under the auditorium seats as we lit out of there.

And then two months ago he quit. Over High Lifes in the pickup, I'd proposed that we head over to the Hayloft in Lolo, stir up some shit with the boys down there, hit on their women, whip them at pool, get them fighting mad.

"I've had enough," is what he said.

"Yeah, these beers are warm."

"I can't keep drinking like this." He read the words on the beer can like he was trying to find exactly where it lied to him.

"That's what I'm saying. Let's get something with ice."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Just can you drive me home?"

I clenched his shoulder. "Man, your pussy must really hurt."

His stupid dolorous face said I was a perfect jerk. Those earnest native features like Rushmore, like the Indian on the obverse of the buffalo nickel. He hopped out of the truck and trudged off into Cooper's field. It was miles to his place. I hollered for him to come back, that I was kidding for chrissakes. He dipped into a swale and I lost him in the dusk.

He did not return. He did not call. He took the morning shift at Ole's. He was reading the AA book at the counter. The way shit was trending, I should have expected this. My father and his black King James. Fran Tarkenton scanning the real estate section. Now this absurd tome of daily aphorisms in giant Helvetica before my best friend. He looked up at me from over a pottery mug of steaming tea.

"Quite a point size there," I said.

"Huh?"

“The book. Functionally, it’s Braille.”

“What?” His look was wary and cross at once.

“I’m saying the font’s so big, the blind could read it. Ha.”

“Don’t make fun,” he said.

“Christ. Not you. The book.”

“Don’t make fun of that either.”

“Roger. No fun.”

An electronic ping signaled a trucker’s entrance into the store. Joe nodded at the customer, then leaned out over the counter toward me. Was bashful about something.

“Do you, uh, still have Sunshine’s number?” he asked.

“Jesus H. Christ.”

“I have to apologize to her. As part of my recovery. After I...” He mumbled the last bit.

“Finish a what now?”

“A fearless moral inventory.”

“You have got to be shitting me.”

“Man, there’s loads to do. Like twelve things. Count my own crushing resentments. Come to understand my resistance to limits. You okay?”

“Give me the bathroom key. I need to splash my face.”

I came back gunning. What the hell did he have to apologize for? She was all over the damn news for tossing cow guts at the governor, that stupid hippy theater, had he seen that? The picture in the paper? The governor grinning and ignorant of the bloody mass flying towards him, Sunshine’s face frozen in the middle of some screaming agitprop.

Joe nodded, possessed a new and pristine calm. Nonfucking-plussed.

“I challenged Stev to a duel.”

He blew on a fresh cup of tea, took a sip. Inscrutable.

“I heard.”

“What’d the little shit-heel say?”

“That he will shoot your face off.”

“I need you to be my second.”

“Second?”

“Check the weapon. Have my back. Make sure it comes off right and proper.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fuck, you two are serious. It’s a lawyer what you’re gonna need.”

The cooler door smooched open and closed as the trucker fetched a drink.

“This thing with Stev has been a long time coming.”

“Calling him ‘Steve’ would kill you.”

“Yes. That would kill me.”

The microwave dinged. The truck driver sauntered up with something steaming in a swollen plastic sleeve. Joe beckoned him forward to ring his things up. I blocked his path.

“I need an answer, Joe.”

The sigh he paid out pissed me off.

“Man, I can’t have anything to do with it.”

I wrote Sunshine’s number in the top margin of his book. Huge. I told him that after he was done kissing her ass, he could kiss mine.

FOUR: California plates. In the Bitterroot valley, it’s practically the law to key vehicles with them. These naked Rose Bowl floats with ceiling-mounted DVD players and hard-candy paint jobs and tinted windows. Automatic transmissions for automatic people. I whoop when I pass one of those goddamn things upside down and dented like a beer can where it came to rest. The mussed hair and the snot-leaking children and Daddy blubbing to the highway patrol about the patch of black ice or the deer that came out of nowhere. It’s burning wagons to me. I could scalp somebody.

FIVE: Joe brought up Sunshine.

She cradles my old man’s hands. They suggest animate wood to her. She traces the knurls and burls of them, which delights the old

boy. The work etched on them. She says it's honorable the way he was.

"Is," I say. "The way he is."

She loves my muscle-rucked gut. My Popeye arms lifting her up and throwing her over my shoulder and setting her on the blanket. From years of the baling of hay and the chopping of firewood, general husbandry. Asks me will I grow more chest hair, not just the silly patch over my heart.

She loves the chainsaw and how it tingles her whole body for a long time after, and me behind helping her saw rounds of firewood for splitting. And the pistol and me behind her sighting the target, and always me at her back pointing to the mallards in their honking chevrons, the elk that crest the snowy chine of the near mountain without apparent effort.

She loves beef ribs and beef stew, and the old man finds it hilarious there are people such as she who ever lived on only vegetables. We sit sated, the balm of animal fat on our lips.

She wants more poems, which are at first improbable to her. Ripraps and bridges and corncribs and fields gone to seed. Silos and broken clocks and mows of hay.

She wants one of my buffalo nickels. I say let's go for a walk.

She draws us to the old homestead in Cooper's pasture, a foundation littered with cow skulls, sunbleached ribcradles and legbones. Where the cattle clopped up the porch and into the abandoned place, fell through the rotted floor. She asks why, why did they go in? It was cold. She asks did they suffer? Did they turn and low and starve? I say they broke themselves in the fall. She searches my face and insists that there is something else and I had better tell her. I drop into the boneyard, but she won't follow.

The old man was at the window and door all afternoon, I say. I was a boy. He fetched his rifle, strode through the mud and our parting herd. I went after him. He was so pissed off he didn't bother telling me to go back, even for a coat. He stepped the barbwire to

the ground and helped me through. Put his hand to my chest, and had me wait by the lone tree in Cooper's pasture. Such bawling within that old house. From the doorway he toed the floor like it was a swimming hole and then went in. The flashes in the paneless window, the silence that swallowed the last shot.

When Cooper trudged out, my old man let him have it. Told him he was too damn old to be running cattle by himself and made him fetch a gas can. Dad soaked the place when Cooper wouldn't. Had him strike the match. Cooper's black form against the fire, the jetting fire against the realized night. A smoking black crater at dawn.

Her face goes white as a caryatid. Artemis at the Acropolis. Fixed. Courageous. Too gorgeous to last. I climb out of the foundation. She clenches me and we move on.

She has glorious sticky buds. I don't usually go for pot, but her place is cozy and the fucking is oceanic. Sometimes we are too high to sit up, but when the sun drops I mix Southern Comfort and juice and we crank the heat and dance and our sweat in the air fractals the glass in the sashes and the fall wind hones in the dark.

Weeks like this.

Not so long at all. By winter it went to shit.

We were in medias res in my dorm room when Joe showed up again. Heroically wasted, knocking about as the floor bucked him. Oh how she held forth. The Native American culture once stretched taut across this continent like a buffalo skin on a drum. Until the white man slaughtered a third of Joe's people without firing a shot. Disease. Guns and liquor to finish them off. Reservations. Catholic missions. Unlearned native languages. The liberal use of the word systematic in making her point.

I hemmed at her. Nothing. Her spread arms liberated a breast from the sheet as she maundered onward. I winced, sidelonged at Joe. He grinned, said he was thirsty, and Sunshine leapt out of bed naked. Joe winked both hootch-crossed eyes at me. A horse thief's gall that kid had. She stood at the sink, naked and pendulous. She petted his head and he sloshed back the water. She was slumming.

The great goddamn zoo of her experience. California figures and events. The cattle through the floor and the ducks in the sky and the stew. The old man's hands. A silo filled with our fucking and columns of moted light. The poems I wrote about these. Joe.

I smoked on the windowsill while they fucked on the floor. She slunk out well before dawn. Joe never talked about it, never even asked how he got there.

She picked over it, though. Christ. Wasn't I busted up that she and Joe did it? Didn't I care? But it was simple. I loved Joe more than I desired her.

"Do you love me at all?"

"Do I love you at all."

"Yes."

"I can't stand automatic people like you."

"Fuck you. Wait. People like what?"

Condescending to everyone in the backwater because she'd had gym with black kids and seen a drive-by and knew a girl who overdosed, and you haven't seen anything until you've seen a Pacific sunset and the redwoods are just astonishing and you can't get any good food this close to the Continental Divide. I'd been kicked by horses, I said, made an avalanche with a snowmobile, skated the reflection of the Aurora Borealis on the ice of Frenchtown Pond, what you don't know could fill a silo, so shut up for a damn minute for once in your life.

Mutual loathing turned us on. Long red scabs marked the passing of her unhappiness across my back. Places on my chest where she and Stev had ambushed me both. And Joe, we argued a fuckload about Joe. How I abetted his cultural misery. How she slumped.

The last day we filled with fighting. We dropped acid. Everything she said she lifted off a narration from National Geographic. Indigenous this. Invasive that. Did I get what a hick I was.

Joe interrupted, stopped the walls from weeping by crashing into them. We needed a drink, I told him.

"You can't do that to him." She slapped my chest.

"Ow. I'm not doing anything to him."

"You gotta own this. This is diseased blankets. Potshots at buffalo from the train."

Joe broke a lamp on accident. We tumbled out of her life for good.

Almost.

The old man breathing steady. Fran Tarkenton dashing. The phone cord raveling. I called her. She asked me the hour, how was my dad.

"A pain in the ass."

"Kiss him for me."

"I'm not going to kiss my father. Listen, Joe wants to see you," I said.

"Well give him my number."

"I gotta see you too."

She said I sounded drunk. I said I was.

"I can't leave Missoula. Court order."

"I know."

"How would you?"

"Makes sense, I mean. Just meet me at Ruby's?"

She'd do this thing with the phone. Take it from her ear and hold it in front of her like a sword hilt and squinch her face. A whole minute sometimes. I used to wonder why the person on the other end waited.

six. I must divest myself of the buffalo nickels.

Because Sunshine once wanted one.

Because if Stev ever does shoot me in the face.

Because the coin's designer, James Earl Fraser, sat three Indians for the composite chief on the obverse, and that composite is Joe, and I have a hundred Joes in a jar in my room, not one of whom could use a drink.

Because in 1912, James Earl Fraser found only hills of skulls, skins by the warehouse, but no wild buffalo to model for the reverse. Because he had to take a train to the New York City Zoo and sketch the lone buffalo there.

Because the result was bas-relief in currency. Too gorgeous to be.

Because Chief Engraver for the U. S. Mint, Charles Barber, was jealous of Fraser and complained that the design elements were too large for proper placement of the inscriptions. Because he was basically right. The inscriptions did rub off in the course of normal circulation. LIBERTY and E PLURIBUS UNUM and FIVE CENTS did fade.

Because Barber was then dispatched to fix it.

Because the buffalo is only properly appreciated in number, in mile-wide herds, which were long gone by 1912, and will never be again. And because I have read the frontier accounts. The glass vibrating in the panes, the family flying to the root cellar, bullets of dirt ceiling pelting them huddling. The quiet. Emerging, taking in the dust-smoking ruin. Their gutted shack. Windows and flatware shattered, livestock trampled or scattered, fences blasted to splinters, crops pulped, meager stores pulverized. The vast galling silence, no one to blame or entreat.

Because Charles Barber cursed these coins. Because he mutilated the mound atop which the buffalo stood to more safely ensconce FIVE CENTS, and because he did not stop there. He smoothed and flattened the icons for spite. Because the coin was thereafter given to poor strikes, mint-mark errors, bad bonding. The legendary three-legged buffalo, the less-famous two-feathered Indian.

Because Indians and buffalo, abstracted on coins, are for collecting.

SEVEN: Apnea, or the transient cessation of sleep, is more like a joke than a sickness. My father has probably been unaware of it for years, but I first noticed when he dozed on the recliner one stunning Sunday afternoon. The Redskins were killing the Bills. The leaves had just changed in our front yard and the sun seeping through a

maple canopy lit the living room saffron. We basked and grinned like snakes on flat stones. His steady phlegmy snore drowned out the television, and when he stopped I thought he was putting me on. For a long time, a minute maybe, he didn't move.

"Knock it off, Pop."

His hand twitched. I sprang from the couch and shook him. He gulped in air as if I'd been holding him underwater, and slapped at me.

"Shit boy, what the goddamn?"

"You stopped breathing. It was the fuckinest thing."

"Keep your hands off me."

"You're going to the hospital."

"Like hell."

And he would not, no matter my hinting, nagging, hectoring. I made true on my promise to wake him every time he stopped breathing, but even that he bore rather than see a doctor. I pulled all-nighters with the infomercials and Westerns. Beer after beer. I didn't catch him when I nodded off, and the next day the engine of his oxygen-starved brain would seize and the blinding migraines would lay him out.

I'd never known him to cry, not for Mom, not when the Bills lost four Super Bowls in a row, not even when arthritis curled up his hands like Cambrian fossils and it hurt him to tie a fly or comb his hair anymore. But when the ruts in his face ran with tears from the pain, I was grateful. He was too weak to stop me. After I put a hand under his skinny ass, he saw I was serious about carrying him and chose to walk to the pickup. How he hated that. He shambled out, hands clasped like a shackled fugitive, and squinted in agony. I slung up an arm to shadow his face from the sun.

He moped while I filled out the paperwork.

"Any ringing in the ears?" the doctor asked. The old cuss wouldn't answer. A lumpy nurse took some of his blood. Dad watched the syringe fill, liable to bite somebody. The doctor gave me a querulous look.

"I've been waking him every time he stops breathing in his sleep to, you know, bolster the argument. That he needs to see somebody."

The doctor nodded, jotted, asked me when I slept. I just shook my head and he left. The nurse pulled a curtain around the bed. There was a thick, wet gasping nearby.

"Pull that damn thing back," the old man said. "There's a tv up there."

I parted the curtain. Sure enough, on the screen craned overhead the smoking fissures, the pyroclastic flows and ejecta. A graphic cross-section of mantle plumes. The Hawaiian Islands, buffalo heedlessly grazing atop the great Yellowstone caldera. The volcano in B.C.

I peeked around the curtain at the lone wheezer. She shied up at the sight of me and erupted in a fit of coughs. With a hot glare resented my startling her.

The doctor and nurse returned, sudden and rude at the bedside. "Put this over your face when you sleep," he said, as the nurse fitted a mask on the old man. A tube ran to a small black apparatus. Dad's teeth showed under the plastic like a dog that wants you to quit fucking with his ears. The doctor yammered about data collection and oxygen intake, and the nurse uncurled the old boy's index finger and pinched it in a pulse monitor. He called her a cunt. The nurse rolled her eyes, dropped his hand, and went to check on the cougher in the next bed. Pop leaned to see the television behind the doctor, who went and flipped it off.

"That was brassy," I said. "Look. He's just quivering with rage."

The doctor, bless him, made a go of it. He sat on the bed, patted Dad's knee, and retracted the offending limb when the old boy goggled at it in mute, angry astonishment.

"These headaches will continue, Rex. Worsen. You're not getting enough oxygen." He gestured at the chart where I had faithfully reported "As many as possible" next to the Alcoholic Beverages Per Week item. "Alcohol will just make it worse. If you are inebriated, you could expire in your sleep. This is in the literature."

The old man muttered.

"What's that Rex?"

"I believe he wants you to turn the television back on," I said.

"If I do, Rex, will you promise to wear the monitor?"

He was downright contraindicative, but the doctor turned it on anyway. Stock footage of molten lava pouring along the ocean floor, and in the cool water crusting to black, cracking open, and issuing vulcan pus. The earth itself subject to moods, bad humors.

"He wants to see one last eruption this side of the Pacific Rim," I said.

"That's a helluva thing to want."

"Leave it alone, Doc. We aren't here to fix that. Moreover, that contraption has to go. He won't wear it."

The old man peered past us at the television. The mask smoking and unsmoking with each breath.

"What can you do by way of the migraines?" I asked.

The doctor bit his cheek for a minute thinking. Then he scratched out a prescription and handed it to me. "That's for the pain. As needed. No alcohol. The blood work might suggest something, so call."

On the drive home, Dad got into the paper sack and cracked a tallboy of High Life, wincing. What was left of his white hair swayed under the influence of static attraction to the back window of the pickup. His voice was sudsy and thick with fear or menace, I could not tell.

"You do that again, I'll cut you."

"Ten-four, good buddy."

"Don't be smart."

We drove home through an accomplished sunset. The craggy Bitterroots to the west scarred their sisters, the Sapphires, with jagged shadows, but their snowy tips spangled. Dad had an arm thrown over his eyes.

"Take those pills," I said. "There's some sky out this evening."

EIGHT: I can't tie a fly worth a damn. I can't cast either. The old man knows this but still pitches a fit when I gob on too much glue or use horsetail when I should use squirrel fur. He says my flies won't fool a brown or a rainbow or a cutthroat. I must resist his attempts to show me.

"I got it, Pop."

"The hell you do."

"Like this?"

"Christ."

"Explain. Tell me."

"There ain't no way to tell it."

But we try to say, we try to do, each evening anyway. We listen for the volcano on the 10:30 news from the kitchen table. The desk lamp lights my hands, hands that work better than his in all things, even this now.

NINE: My goddamn mouth.

The old man needs diapers. Or my help in the john. But you don't out and tell a man his age—no matter how peppered the two of you are—that you understand and all, what with his arthritis and all, but he ain't getting it done in the asswiping department. You don't say anything. You keep your fucking mouth shut.

So he was sulking about that, and Stev rang because I didn't set a time for the duel.

"Didn't you call me in fifth grade with the same question?"

"And loads of other times. Sometimes we'd forget it altogether."

"Well, let's say midnight. There'll be a good moon. Gibbous."

He asked who was Gibbous, assumed I was talking to a dog or somebody who came over. I called him tedious.

"Listen," he said.

"Shoot."

"Should we—"

"Don't tell me."

"Don't tell you what?"

"You wanna back down, you fucking coward. You yellow shit."

"Fuck that. I do not."

"Then what?"

"Nothing. I just—"

"Just midnight."

"Okay. Midnight."

See what I mean? You keep your mouth shut for once in your goddamn life. You let the dude wiggle the hell out.

TEN: Gun control. I got paranoid about Stev. He was scared, maybe ashamed, and I couldn't put it past him to try and get the drop on me. Take a potshot. So I pistoled up.

It used to be that a sidearm warranted no attention. There'd be old boys with them in the truckstops and cafés all the time. Maybe they were hunting or had to put down a sick animal. They had gun business was all. But nowadays it's different, especially in Missoula, where all the old hippies and California transplants and coffee gourmands stare at someone with a sidearm like he's a wild fucking Hun come to plunder.

But Ruby's should have been vestigial enough. The smell of grease and Pall Malls and maple syrup. Hunters and cops eat there cheek to jowl. Or did. Now the veritable who's who of freaks and punk rockers. Whatever they are calling themselves these days. Tattoos spreading neckward like some harlequin fungus. Pants fashioned from sails of black canvas and shirts festooned with chains. Dog collars. Two fops sitting on the same side of their booth in matching eyeliner and terraced haircuts. Somewhere, someone smoked a goddamn clove. The lot of them like some pale gang of galactic privateers stopped in Missoula, Montana for lunch. I gawped. And they gawped right back. The gun. Eyes ricocheted from my face to my hip to my face. For long moments we couldn't believe each other. I chucked myself into Sunshine's booth.

"A pistol is what we wear to lunch these days?" she asked.

"Not to lunch specifically."

She shook her head. Her hair was clean and shiny and settled like a curtain.

"But you," I said. "You clean up nice."

"Don't."

"That's a bona fide blouse you got on there."

"I had a hearing, smartass."

We ordered. She twisted a slight silver necklace around her finger.

"What was the hearing?"

"I dunno. Something. Daddy's trying to keep me out of jail."

She passed me the creamers, and I poured one into my coffee.

"I get the hippy reasoning," I said. "The cattlemen blame the buffalo wandering out of Yellowstone for the brucellosis. Which they got from the cows in the first place. But the governor lets hunters suppress the herd. I see how their win-win is an outrage to your fellow travelers. But why you and the cow guts and the press conference and all the risk? Why you in particular?"

She stirred her coffee, sniffed it, and pushed it away like it had been misbrewed.

"Remember the cattle bones in that cellar?"

"Out in Cooper's pasture."

"Because of that. Because of Joe's drinking. Because I don't care what you think now. Because I have agency. A warrior spirit. Don't make that face. I am free when I do the right thing."

"Free to throw tripe at the governor."

She smiled.

"Tripe. Tell me you're writing poems."

I shrugged.

"Don't get me wrong—I adore your father. But don't be just like him."

"Like what?"

"Against smart. As a category."

"Don't call me—him—stupid. Like your stunt was so goddamn intelligent."

She looked at the ceiling. I irritated her that much now.

"It took moral intelligence."

"Moral intelligence."

"Not that you'd recognize it."

The food came. I wasn't hungry. I fetched a buffalo nickel from my shirt pocket and set it on the table.

"Here."

"Har har."

"Jesus. It's an honest gesture."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. Just—"

"An honest gesture of I don't know."

"I want you to have it."

She picked up the coin and tried to divine something from it. Peered at me. She thought she figured it out.

"My God, you're gonna do it. I told Joe you had to be joking."

"So he called then. What did he apologize for?"

"He's a person you'll shoot. Kill. Or kill you. This Steve."

"I don't know a Steve. I should go."

She grabbed my arm.

"It is not abstract. His family will grieve for him. This is what is meant by moral intelligence, you idiot. Guys like you have none. It's why there's gun control."

I crumpled a napkin and dropped it on my plate.

"Leave Joe alone. Take your nickel and leave him alone."

"Keep the damn nickel." She shot the coin at my sternum. It tinked against my belt buckle, and dropped to the floor. I banged my head on the bottom of the table getting it. I told her to leave the damn thing for a tip.

ELEVEN: The peace sign on Waterworks Hill. Missoula hippies started painting the giant telephone relay in the seventies. Now every time ownership changes hands and the new company whites it out, some crack team of granolas scurries up there in the night to graffiti it again. They're fierce about it, like it fucking matters. But it's the fierceness that speaks, not the sign. After all, who could be against peace?

Put a peace sign or a treble clef or an ampersand up there, I could give two shits. Maybe something should be up there. Maybe nobody should be allowed to shoot buffalo, and maybe the cattlemen should have to figure brucellosis into the economics of their operations. Maybe there should be peace, fistfuls of it just lying about like gold nuggets. Maybe we should shit rainbows already and have flying cars and possess moral intelligence by the bucketful.

But what the sign really says is, We shadowy hippies will always have our symbol over this city. They're picking a fight. In principle, that's fine by me. But it's anonymous and sneaky. It's chickenshit.

TWELVE: All parties queered the duel.

The old man and his volcano made me late. A new pH in the turquoise summit lake turned the water the color of blood. Fumaroles on the south face spewed gases toxic enough to kill plants downwind. Piles of birds. Critters in knowing, circumjacent flight. Then it exploded in the dark. Mounties closed the roads, restricted the air space. Pointless black footage, invisible distant concussions.

He watched for hours. Looked murder at me when I turned down the sound. I explained to him the situation, what I had planned for midnight.

"You're off your fucking nut," he said going to the kitchen for another beer. He returned, nudged the volume back up with his knuckle, and dropped back into the couch.

"I don't ask you for shit," I said. "Do me this favor."

He scoffed. I fetched all the beer in the house and stowed it in the truck. Two cases. He didn't look, but he noticed. The news people nattered over the low boom of the exploding mountain in a loop.

"I'll be in the truck."

I waited, the engine running. I went back in.

"We have to go."

He said Stev wasn't worth the trouble, and that I had no credence. I went to carry him out, and he stabbed me in the thigh with an Exacto knife. Quick as an assassin, despite his arthritis.

"Reach for me again," he snarled. "Just reach for me."

The blade glistened in his grip, but there was no blood. I backed into the television. Held the leg. Took a minute to absorb the shock. The wildness dissipated from his features.

"You grab that from the fly-tying stuff when you were getting a beer?"

"Yup."

"Anticipated me."

"Reckon so."

"I'm impressed."

"Aright, you need to let me alone. I wanna see this."

I limped to bathroom, splashed peroxide where he stuck me, and wrapped my thigh in gauze. Retrieved a case of beer from the truck and set it back in the fridge. On my way out, I pecked him on the top of the skull. He swatted at the air where my head had just been, rubbed where my lips burned his liverspots.

I tore out of the drive and clattered over the potholes, sped up 93 in a clear night attenuated as if everything extraneous had been hammered out of it, made simple and essential. I drove through Missoula, the university district. Every block a yard, a room, a tree, a porch, a closet, a hammock, a driveway, a swingset, a sloping roof where Sunshine and I had fucked or fought or talked, where talking, fighting, fucking were the same act, an astonished attendance to the rapid unraveling of love.

In the dirt lot at the base of Waterworks Hill sat Stev's Toyota pickup with the stupid roll bar and front-mounted rack of floodlights. I backed in next to it, went around to the passenger side to get the beers and guns. Lingered over the first-aid kit in the glove box before taking it, too. I belted one holster to my right side, tucked the other under my arm, and hooked five beers by the plastic ring. I trudged up the hill. Painful was the going, smarting in the leg, and bitter. Lonesome. The very reason for a second. That you not want your enemy's company.

Stev spotted me and shouted that I was late. Joe there too, turning, coming on, his presence coring me. He charged with waving, warding palms. Careened downhill poorly. I caught him and shoved him into the hill where he fell, reeking drunk. I called him a turncoat, a fink. I lifted him up and shook his bones. Knocked him back down.

"I'm not here for him," he protested. "I came to talk him out of it."

He hung his head, shook it enormously among the beers, and items spilled from the first aid kit. Stev squatted at the lip of the flat spot, a bottle between his legs, his hands set on the ground, palms up in the manner of apes. Chiding me from up there, slurring and japing.

"You got him wasted."

"It's no fair to duel now."

I stepped past Joe and hiked the last yards to Stev waiting up there. He rose at my approach and swayed, the bottle in his clutches. The great telephone relay looming behind him, the lying peace sign. A breeze. One of his eyes shot across the bridge of his running nose. He sniffed and swiped it in the attitude of a child or perfect idiot. Quite quiet now. Shutting the hell up now. Both pistols were Brownings in good working order, virtually identical, 9 mm. He took the holster with his forearms, his hands still gripping the bottle. I explained how to run his belt through the loop. A compromised sapience stirred behind the ill coordinates of his eyes. I wrenched the bottle from his hands, helped him on with the holster.

Joe had not come up. I didn't expect he would.

Stev fetched the bottle off the ground, made a display of guzzling from it. I turned him about and put my back to his. Offered to count off the paces. He hiccupped, grunted something I took for assent.

"You ready?"

"Hurm."

"I'll start now, then."

"Yurp."

"One." He tilted back into me, teetered away.

"Two." I stepped. Waited for him to step.

"Three." We stepped together.

By six I could no longer hear him muttering or stumbling. My pulsing leg clocked of its own accord, and I lost track of what a true second was. When I turn, I will wait a beat. I will give him a chance. You must do that at least.

A retreating footfall. I peeked over my shoulder and then pivoted around. His black form against the land described a desperate flight straight uphill, the unforgiving incline, and his bandied flailing descent into the near gully. He reappeared clambering up the bank opposite and streaked athwart the farther hillside like some scalded lunatic.

I called to him. Cursed.

Then it snowed. Vailing gray floc like dead moths. Ash.

Joe was squatting where we met on the hillside. I dropped in next to him.

"He ran."

I said he did.

"Thank Christ. Beer me."

I pulled one off the ring and gave it to him.

"My sponsor's gonna murder me."

"This guy all right otherwise?"

"Hell no. He's one of them batshit Blackfeet. You should hear a couple of his stories. Fucking gas huffer."

He took two deep swigs that about emptied the can. The precious pumping of his throat as he swallowed.

“I’m sorry for breaking you two up is what I told her.”

“Shit. It ain’t her or you. I’m losing everybody. Even my enemies run.”

He caught a chunk of ash. It collapsed to dust in his palm. The frailty of it.

“This aint snow.”

“A volcano popped off in Canada.”

He pointed out the city lights pixilated in the thickening ash like television static. I said I didn’t think we should be out in it for long, that it couldn’t be good to breathe.

“We ought to go for him.”

“I know.”

I quartered up the hill, sent Joe down to the base. It was warmer than before, the heat of the explosion descending with the ash, settling in the valley. I threw an arm over my nose and mouth, but the soot collected in the crook of my arm, got in my eyes. I put my head down. Gouts of ash puffing up with each step like walking on the floor of a lake. I gagged on the stuff, had to sit. I made a tent of my jacket and took shallow, cautious breaths. Went on, calling for Steve. Eidola and specters moiled in the darkling drop. Shapes asserting themselves. Buffalo skulls and hoary hides, a bobcat, a gang of elk, eldritch ghost dancers, a sasquatch, a luscious sylph. A suggestive welter where no figure fixed.

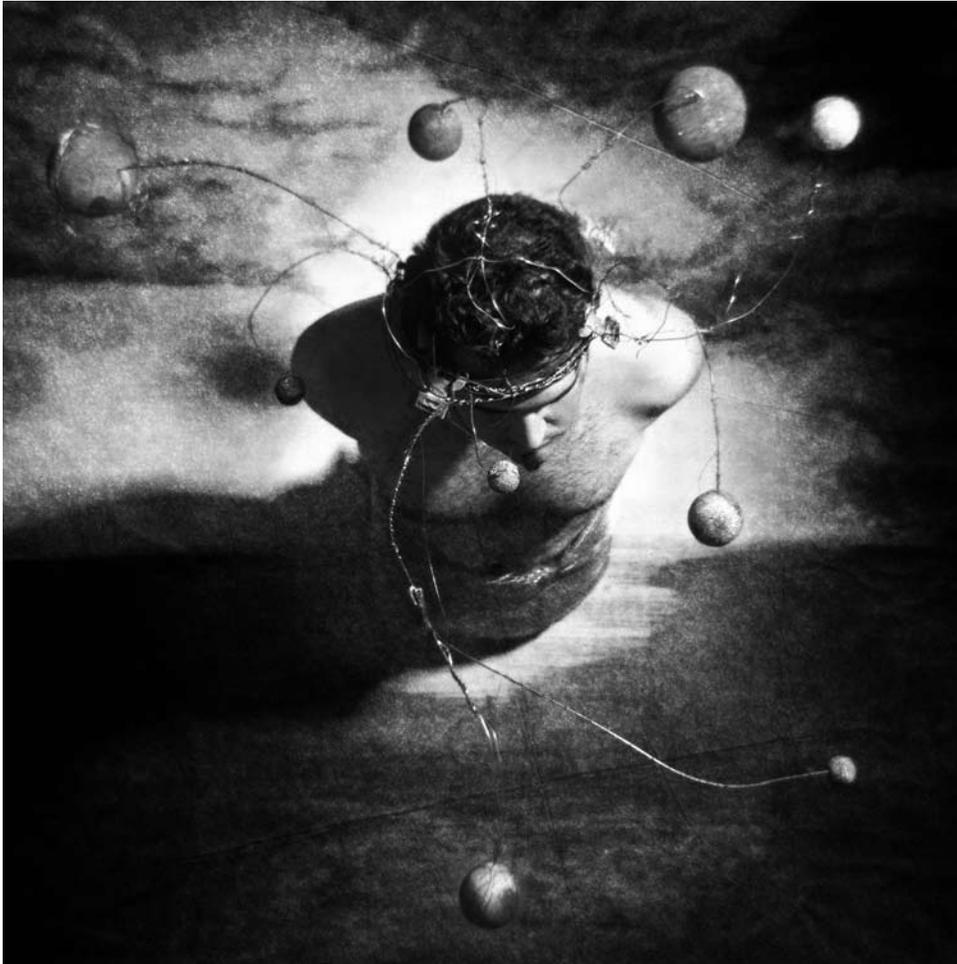
I feared becoming lost and turned back. Followed my tracks until they disappeared, and then scudded onward by dead reckoning.

Joe had Stev. Caught the coward where he flushed out of the hills, and had hunched in a ditch like a road agent, the Bottle of Wild Turkey in one hand, the pistol in the other. Both of them coated in a gray film. Their eyes and speaking mouths red and obscene.

We took the old man’s pickup into town. The cop who stopped us, who ordered us off the damn road, asked did we need medical

attention. The only reason we could be out in this shit, covered in it, was one of us was hurt. Got turned around was all, I said.

We found a diner. We waited for a hostess to seat us. A photographer asked could he take our picture. I threw my arms over their shoulders. With the holsters and the ash all over us, we were statues of gunfighters or Indian killers or sheriffs. It was in the paper. Framed up like fucking outlaws.



POETRY FEATURE

*Dan Beachy-Quick*

*Equilibrium*

LOUVIERE + VANESSA

## *Typhonic Meditation*

R. W. Emerson considered the mind to be volcanic in nature. The thought, ever since encountering it, appealed greatly, even if it resisted my understanding almost completely. The volcano is a conduit from the earth's molten center coursing up through the earth's crust and piercing into the sky. Its geological form parallels a notion of mind: that conduit between the molten unconscious, the walkable surface of the waking self, and the ideal forms the mind thinks toward, hovering in the ether, outside of the world. But that parallel feels too akin to a school-grade teacher placing a transparency outlining the structure of the mind over the outline of the structure of a volcano she had forgotten to remove after the last lesson, on earth science, was done. It wasn't until a variety of other readings dovetailed in my mind that I began to grasp at some semblance of what Emerson's insight might mean.

For the past three years, I've been reading and rereading Proust. As awful as it is to say, given the length of *In Search of Lost Time*, it seems Proust is one of those authors who can be encountered in his full originality only by returning to the books already read. Rereading replaces anticipation with expectation. There is no longer the question of what will happen, only the half-remembered sense of what is soon to come. Rereading becomes an activity that occurs in time in a strange way: one has the sense of the moment of the page one is on, and the historical sense of all that has preceded it. But the rereader has the gift of foresight, a kind of vision that has already read the unturned pages, a gift of a sort of prophecy, which senses the future as something already lived. Of course, that intricate weaving of time—in which memory complicates present realization, in which expectation is formed by the secret work memory

always does, so that the future is memory's work—is the ongoing wonder of which Proust is writing. Our vision, and so our memory which shapes that vision, is very seldom simply our own, simply of the moment of perception. When one does see, it is revelation—and time ceases to exist: the madeleine in the lemon tea, the hawthorn flowering, the ivy-clad church. But, Proust says, we seldom see. We think that we see...we think what we see...and our thinking is volcanic.

When Plato walks with Phaedrus down the middle of the river toward the deep grass below the trees where they will talk, when Plato follows the beautiful young man who carries the scroll of Lysias' speech tucked within the sleeve of his robe, when Plato famed for his control, for his lack of passion, seems enflamed equally by the beauty of the boy and the intoxication of language, he asks an astounding question: "am I a monster more complicated and swollen than the serpent Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny?" Typho, or Typhon, the monster Plato fears he might be (in a question he quickly makes rhetorical, shifting Phaedrus' attention away), is a monster with one hundred serpent tails for legs, and one hundred-serpent heads. Typhon's monstrosity, and his strength, isn't located simply in his body. Typhon, through those hundred serpent's mouths can speak in countless voices, can imitate every sound—can speak the language of the gods in the voice of the gods. Typhon threatened Zeus, threatened to overpower Olympus. Zeus, in fierce battle, trapped Typhon in a cave beneath the volcano Aetna—whose eruptions result from the monster's rage. Plato fears he is such a monster because Plato sees that he does not know himself. He fears that in being Typhonic he is no single self, but multiple selves, a hundred selves, each speaking in his own voice, simultaneously, making a din of identity. Plato's fear is Proust's material: the self that is never singular, never certain. The self as Typhonic.

Typhon lives in a cave beneath a volcano. Emerson claims the mind is a volcano. There is a cave below the mind, two caves, through which the world enters the mind. In those caves lives a monster. That monster is Typhon. The monster in the cave names the world as it enters the brain, names the people in the world as we see them, talk to them, think about who they are, who we are in relation to them. And Typhon gives each thing, each person, no single name—when the monster speaks he speaks in a hundred voices. Those voices chant upward into the molten rock of the mind, that repository of knowledge and memory that melts experience into a fiery pool. The breath from the monster's voice cools the molten rock, casts it into the convective current upwards into the mind, into consciousness, shaping what it is we think we see. When the world seems definite to us it may be a monstrous moment. To have a volcanic mind is also to have a cavern below the volcano. A monster may live in that cavern. A hero's work is to slay such a monster, but for the hero to do so, he must know what the monster is. He must know who he is. He must know he is not the monster he's trying to slay. He cannot, in his own volcanic mind, ask the question: What kind of monster am I? But for those of us with volcanic minds, which may be us all, there may be no other question to ask.

DAN BEACHY - QUICK

### *Cave Beneath Volcano*

While he thinks the lightning sleeps, useless heat  
In clouds, a granite cloud the god's foot trod  
Into mountain, a place to rest his foot  
Above the lakes that are his eyes that see  
What he already knows: the sky is another  
Weather in which other weather performs,  
Clouds mimicking substance, a language  
Blocking the light it sometimes lets through,  
Light behaving as light is supposed to do,  
Falling on the snow, setting the snow on fire,  
Capping the snow-covered peaks in blindness,  
Enacting the thought of blindness  
That cannot blind him, the god who wishes  
Not to see, the god whose eyes are leaves,  
Are pine needles, the god whose eyes are crystals  
Of falling snow, whose eyes are ice held in clouds,  
The god who turns, the god who departs  
From what he cannot love, the horizon  
Never flees from him, it waits for him,  
An act of consummation called arrival,  
But the god won't arrive, refuses to arrive,  
The god with clouds for his brow paces  
And mountains spring up beneath his heels.

\*



There in the cave below the volcano,  
There in the eye below the mind,  
Incanting, cursing,  
Swearing love, swearing violence,  
Worshipping the god it hates,  
Naming the light that passes a hundred  
Names, chanting every name  
At once, invoking, killing, there in the eye

Lives a monster:  
Hundred-headed, hundred-voiced,  
Wind-source, flame-seed,  
Who speaks sparks into burning tongues,  
Who speaks *I* into hurricane and sends *I*  
Hurling over the waters, surging over strand,  
There in the cavern in the eye lives

A monster, breathing  
Through every mouth, seeing through every eye,  
It knows where we live, it knows  
We do not live inside ourselves, it knows  
We live in the town others built, those others  
We love, we live inside them,  
We find shelter from ourselves inside them,  
In the town we asked them to build for us,  
Right here, it can be nowhere else, nothing  
Can be elsewhere than next to  
The volcano

Where in its cave the monster in every voice sings  
To the molten stone above it, sings  
The world that was the world  
Before the mind lost it, before I lost it,  
Not the sun every day, but the sun on one day,  
The particulars,

the chores,  
sweeping  
The dock with bleach to kill the algae  
while below  
The lake the shiners shift their constellation:

The snake  
I watched it  
enter its hole,  
and was afraid  
but would not

Say so:

Luna moth caught on the patio screen  
Antennae lyre-shaped and covered with dust:

When I close my eyes, when I shut the monster in  
Darkness, I see  
The lyre covered in dust

Under the volcano, under the mind, the monster  
Standing on it, not playing it,

Singing on top of it, singing discord, chanting names  
Up into the volcano, cooling the lava  
Into stone by breathing words into it

Memory emerging in the steam, in the pressure,  
Chanting names into crisis,  
*I We They He She You I We They He She You*  
Calling out the syllables whose thunder  
Predicts the eruption

And this unlived life, these images seen  
Not in the eye, the images  
The monster gives us, inexplicable,  
Singular, rising up out of destruction  
As if to deny destruction, repeating  
In rhyme, in rhythm, itself:

A swan with a pearl in its mouth  
A swan with a pearl in its mouth

DAN BEACHY - QUICK

### *Combray Sequence*

I.  
A life describes a book describes a life  
A poem cannot think when the candle burns out  
Little wick the dark pronominal life distends  
He is a child I am falling asleep in the book

\*

Page an enchanted preface to the night's dream  
Ink the erotic other expands there is no self to think  
Here is where I am never the same  
Waking in the dark some body the same as mine

\*

There is no time but we live in time we do not  
Die but we die each of us all at once  
Transparent plane I see through myself to see  
The pane of glass red with the setting sun

2.

Child tormented by time that enchants  
The dripping wax measuring the candle's length  
A tear that is a condition  
In his mother's kiss an abstracted vision

\*

Every day another self places its thin glass  
Pane on previous pane the same light  
May or may not illuminate them all a soul  
In every object waiting to be recognized to be

\*

Released the aperture opens on the film  
To be seen is to be accurate a camera defines  
The eye as object seeing object the cathedral  
Inverted the steeple points down the throat (that cries)

3.

Perception stops at the face *a puberty of grief*  
Vision gilt on the surface a glittering other  
Grammarless being the eye is an introduction  
To a pinhole void light dilates into darker wonder

\*

A dream figure birthed from a cramp in his thigh  
The child thought he could think into her  
Who was his thought before his mind could think it  
Little beating mind a pulse sounds like a footprint

\*

Before the foot has stepped onto the grass  
Fate is in the face though the face denies it  
The dream seems a promise it may or may not break  
The future a phrase whose music repeats

4.

A sentence builds a bridge over time  
Hawthorns repeating the sunlight as scent  
Pink skin beneath freckles pink flower beneath petals  
The new man in the arms of the old

\*

He could not fall in love without first breathing in  
The hawthorn opened an unknown door  
Perception is the golden key thought turns in the lock  
The blossom dropped the bridal chamber over his head

\*

A bridge builds a sentence over time  
The first word an article often or the subject itself  
Calling the present tense out of the scented air  
A bridge to another bridge // grammar tensing thin lines

5.

Memory larval in mind this honey in its cell  
Waking in the summer heat expanding  
Ancestors buried beneath the stones she sits upon  
Her lax gaze alive is the line by which the dead escape

\*

The grave confines a content that leaks out  
The steeples shifting relation as the carriage moves  
Ahead of the dust its own wheels rise into clouds  
To speak of it before night abandons us to our rooms

\*

In our thoughts there is no us only this me  
Seeing again that the sunlight fell on the steeple  
In a perfect square memory pushes down walls  
Time erects a steeple within a shaft of light

6.

Expectation weaves its tapestry before the day  
Rends apart the seams and with its light arrives  
The present tense seen through a window ambers  
With age it ripples so to see at all is to see as if

\*

Through water a transparence that also reflects  
The light on the surface that ruptures the plane  
A barrier to the same world it reveals  
Mind swallowing light behind the mouth in the eye

\*

The day weaves desire into these hands that fail  
To embrace or be embraced as a scent embraces  
The air waking desire so waking death  
The pollen embalmed in the page's amber elegy



*Far Too Near*

LOUVIERE + VANESSA

*Mount St. Helens*

When I was twenty-nine, my hair became so tangled with grief that my mother and I wore bathing suits in the shower together while she greased my hair and combed it under the spray. My head felt slick and heavy like a sea lion. The soap dish was big enough for both cans of beer. My mother said, It's funny I could make the housecat fat or skinny, whichever I like, but I can't do the same thing for myself. I said, I know. I wore my navy blue one-piece from high school swim team and it looked better on me than it did back then. I looked more like a woman and less like a sea lion. I hadn't seen my mother in a bathing suit in ten years. She also wore a navy blue one-piece. She said, It's like we're a team. I held a thin tongue of soap in my hand. My mother and I talked about making bricks from the ash of Mount St. Helens and building a big gray house somewhere.

*The wrinkler*

Walking along the shore, I met a man wrinkling. He was a wrinkler by trade, his wire basket half-filled with little shiny snails. He tried to show me the difference between a snail that would fetch forty cents a pound and one that would fetch eighty. As he sorted through his basket, the snails clicked around like gumballs. Although he was very young, I can't deny I found him attractive. His dog tried to bite me. He called her Welk and told her she'd better shut up.

I asked him why it's called wrinkling when the root of the word is periwinkle. I'd always wondered that. He said, You mean periwinkle? I said, Oh. He said he wasn't finding shit on this beach so I could join him for a while until he found a better spot. We watched a gull in the water holding a little crab in its beak. All the crab's legs wriggled. The gull didn't seem to be focusing on anything in particular. It just bobbed on the waves, waiting.

The back of the wrinkler's neck was very smooth and brown. He had early lines around his eyes from the sun. He said clamming was better money but there was a red tide. Every time his dog tried to bite me he yelled at her, and I felt some tenderness in his protection, though he wouldn't tie her up with the old rope hanging from his back pocket. We walked together for a long time. I sometimes picked up what I thought was an eighty-center but I was always wrong and he would pitch it back to the sea. I wondered what it would be like if he knew that before my walk, alone in my parents' house, I tried on my sister's wedding dress over my long johns.

*Painter*

They have given him a spacious studio. He has six months to complete his project. He persists in working on canvas. This is considered anomalous, and so he is grateful.

The studio overlooks the previous artist's project: a series of fifty concrete ears exactly thirty feet high. Plagued by a delicate constitution, his painting is disrupted by an irrational idea that the ears are party to his mind.

He abandons his brushes and builds himself a tall ladder. He uses this to peer down into the first ear. Shouting, he precipitates a deafening echo. He suffers an imperious need to shout into each ear, and does so over the next ten days. Overwhelmed by tinnitus, he is soon incapacitated. He begins to bark. His estranged wife is flown in from Tuscaloosa to coax him down from his ladder. She deposits him in a safer place.

*Thumbtacks*

My pieces are set out on eleven square acres of level land in North Dakota. Visitors, mostly Europeans hoping to catch a glimpse of Redskins, have a tendency to make cracks about my so-called *imperialist tendencies*.

"Why so many?" they ask.

"This is the Land O' Plenty, assholes," I say. "Get a grip!"

My pieces are made of stainless steel. They will persist long after the last puffin has laid the last egg. Like the politicians of this great country of ours, they are big, heavy and redundant. But, hey! America is the Land of Redundancy *par excellence*—excuse my fries.

Speaking of France, did you know that Louis XIV had a hall of mirrors in which he could see himself replicated to infinity? Walking down that hall, a short, fat, astigmatic clock-maker *knew* he was King. The Industrial Revolution, the Triumph of Capital, Global Warming, Pop Art, pop tarts—started here. And moving pictures. All the things we love.

Recently a very blonde babe from Holland called me a megalomaniac to my face.

"Listen, honey," I said. "Here anybody worth their salt is a megalomaniac. American art is all about exuberance," I told her. "Money to burn. Engorgement."

This little speech happened to turn her on, thankyouverymuch. And with the blessings of Uncle Sam, we enjoyed more than a few rounds of ring-around-the-rosie, and a not negligible number of repeat performances of ding dong doo-dah day!

RIKKI DUCORNET

*A Suicide*

for Laura

Her husband was horrible! He made her so miserable! Despite her restlessness, and the persistence of her muted complaints, he insisted on engaging in fellation in the street, although they lived in rural Alabama and this imperiled them both. Doubtless such persuasions indicated a powerful death wish on his part. And, living with him as she did, she could not help but feel suicidal too, which explains why she went along with his urgings, although she really did not want to *engage in sexual activity in the public road*. (These terms are hers.)

Here are the things about her that turned him on: her somewhat dated manner of speaking (engaging in fellation! The public road!) and dressing (all her clothes looked like they were cut from boiled and beaten wool felt).

Finally one morning she stood at the mirror and took stock of herself. Big breasted with mousy hair, she looked more like a grade school principal than the comic book artist she actually was. She decided to go out and *make herself over*. Within hours she was unrecognizable, even to herself. She had everything spiked—her hair, her shoes, her Perrier, her temper. Disguised, she was transformed. So! It was that easy! And at the end of the day she didn't go home. The marriage was over! Just like that! She never looked back! In fact, she forgot about him in no time at all! His goadings, his skinny neck and reckless requests—everything!

She would never know how he'd die—bludgeoned to death in downtown Birmingham by a redneck preacher wielding a chair. When that happened, she was a hip redhead sporting a diamond stud in a front tooth and living in another state, another city. Her manner of speaking was different, too. For example, she'd say things like: *How cool is that?*

*Koi*

For thirty years, the gallery is her fiefdom. It gives her status and access to men, although—now that she has hit middle age (and the collision has left bruises)—the young studs are taking their stuff to a rival across town. Meanwhile, her own stable boys are growing old fast.

They are bitter. Their bowels are irritable. They expect her to do more. She reminds them that the interest in art has fallen. Because of Bin Laden. The cost of organics, of home furnishings and pharmaceuticals.

Once two of her boys had made a big impression in Seattle. For two months they defined cutting edge. Tyler Zip had exhibited 120 pit bulls made out of black umbrellas, beside Crisp Banana's mountain of blue spaghetti. Crisp had boiled spaghetti for six weeks and shipped it—slicked down with oil—to Seattle in barrels. Now they and the others are turning to softer effects in an attempt to loosen the local yuppies' Italian wallets. Two examples:

Jack Quicker builds coffee-table sized silicone cakes studded with plastic bonsai, and Nip Tuck upholsters discarded furniture with freeze-dried tangerines. Four weeks ago, he had papered the gallery walls with citrus peels, and nailed plastic sushi to the floor. Shrugged off by the critics, the show has only just come down. How exhausted she is!

Recently she has undergone surgery and looks younger if almost strange, as though the surgery revealed a latent gene. She wonders if there is a place—an island maybe as yet undiscovered—where people all look like this—O, it is *subtle!*—like koi.

Her boys call for loans. They smell of nicotine and tar. Her openings are undermined by their tendency to corner enthusiasts—all nonsmokers—and bully them. Her rival's boys smoke kif. Good stuff, flowery, exotic. *Her* openings smell of paradise and rock with laughter.

Looking back to Seattle with nostalgia and clearly losing touch, she agrees when Tyler Zip proposes to flood the floor with pages torn from old copies of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and, woefully naked, climb into a bathtub crepitating with centipedes. Although she keeps up with pop culture, it does not occur to her that the critics might fault her for offering up a poor imitation of a wildly popular tv show in which men and women bed down each week with nastiness and filth.

Opening night the gallery thrums with the whine of several million recorded mosquitoes. The artist is arrested for indecency—publicity of a kind—but she must pay to bail him out of jail. Before she knows what is happening, the city health commissioner has sent over a brigade dragging hoses; they chase everybody out and soak the place with poisons. Attracted by the sound of mosquitoes, endangered bats are caught up in the fray. Their terrible bodies litter the street. She is sued by both the city and the Sierra Club.

Ruined, she is forced to sell to a beautiful Asian teenager named Kiku, who quickly makes a name for herself designing exotic muffins. The muffins are baked on the premises. Kiku exhibits sexually provocative portraits of kiwi and papaya. Her scene couldn't be hotter. Should one of the stable boys wander in from habit, he is shown the door.

PHOTOGRAPHY FEATURE

*Louviere + Vanessa*



*Chloroformina, Loup Garou*



*Choloroform, Conspicuo*



*Chloroform, Arcuanti*



*Chloroformina, Neque*



*Chloroformina, Retrorsum*



*Choloroform, Vultus*



*Chloroform, Inferne*

*Devotion: Syracuse*

A siren from the telescoping wand along the boulevard  
like the helical sound that flourished in the penitentiary each noon—  
a test, a terror flower, a question: Who's out? Who's in?

Not a siren but a dial tone.

The Mistress of Salt says, *Did I say you could undress? What  
just fell out of your pocket? Is that your dirty penny? Pick up your dirty penny.  
Put it in your mouth. Keep it there, under your tongue, until I tell you you can spit it out.*

The city's speech a slow oxidizing fire not fierce enough to burn you,  
not fiery enough to keep you warm.

In dream the body was a seedpod—pericarp and placenta of the sweet flag  
and not the dead come home to Fort Drum in camo body bags.

The dream was a tango in a ballroom in a strip mall.

A lacquered black Camaro in a bra.

Shadowless winter of cough and cough syrup and books  
of matches like a lab for cooking crystal meth.

In dream the voice said, "Sweat the fence."

Eight months without you taught me nothing, Mistress.  
Fear filled with savage self-love: my fearlessness.

Night the black corner of a Caravaggio and time/space spilled  
into the room in which we watched as in a baroque zoom  
lens St. Thomas stick his finger in the wound.

The Mistress says: "More witness, more style, more plot, more salt."  
You love the tug on the thread as she sews your mouth shut.

The righteous don't dream and the dreamers can't start a fire  
in a box of paper with a pack of matches and a butane torch.

The Mistress says more story: more amorous plural, cruising  
the boulevard loving the anonymous bruising.

Your voice a creole of Utica and Rome, deer blowing,  
the brakes of the bus to Toronto, the dialect  
from the diaspora, the patois of cold war radio.

Bosnian dance troupe in the strip mall.  
Sudanese boys on their knees in motels.

Sulk and snow like a pill crushed into a powder and snorted  
that makes us ghosts and bits of gristle.

The Mistress says, "Less mystical, more mongrel."

BRUCE SMITH

*Devotion: Sleep*

He dreamt his face was lashed by waves he split as the masthead of a ship, a leaking vessel, *The Idiot Pirate*. She slept as if she were taunted by the borrachos with guns and knives who made her dance, “Dance muchacha.” Each night he medicated himself with oxygen against living in the world with or without women. If only her lousy six hours of blindfolded flailing were death kiss, death spread, but waking and living was failing to die and so the sorrow as the rain carried the news of the jihad and the Al-Jazeera stills to them as well as the triumphs of art and love and so the ardor and the fury and sleep a style that counters and encounters forgeries of the received. At night their chests pull in like millions of Americans. The sensation is choking, is waking up in order to breathe, many awakenings without Zen. His REM became his waking state. Her body went rag doll on her. Like millions of Americans, there was a delay in the signals from the brain. The whole country was corpses and body parts and restless leg and vivid dream. On the brink of falling asleep while swimming, while laughing, while angry. We were laughing and angry and collapsed into the numinous poles and dark continents. Bring the jaw forward, darling, elevate the soft palate, retain the tongue. If our poetry can’t be sweet and useful, we must sleep our deformed sleep. In his dream he held her hand as at a séance and outside the street wind-blown with promo leaflets, faces like seeds from a glamorous tree naked in its need to be seen. In her dream the guts of the puppies were outside their bodies, giving the world its difficulty to be loved unconditionally, giving the world its bad name.

SUSAN TERRIS

*Sea Snake*

The sea cave is ink, bled azure at the mouth.  
First, I am there treading water, as seals mimic

mermaids, as wave-slap masks the shuffle  
and whinge of bats,

as the future—a faceless snake—undulates past;  
and I deny echos coiled inside me.

Then the cave yawns open, and you appear. This is  
better than the dream of Haleakela,

where we hunkered in the old caldera while you  
shredded Egon Schiele’s volcanic art.

Schiele? Volcanic art? O the fractured  
logic of nightmare with its crackle of disaster.

*Fear is only as deep*, says an ancient proverb,  
*as the mind allows*. Mine, yours: deepwater caverns,

where magma surges up, steams  
as the faceless snake—sibilant—returns.

*A Change of Phase Will Always Entail  
A Change of Heat*

Oh this new town must be  
so proud, to have a road so new  
so quiet

for a mile my heart glides,  
opening to the other nameless town  
that of ruts and potholes.

The way in certain mountain counties where towns meet as do  
fluids, the one carrying into itself  
a long bead of the other's claim

swirl of pasture disavowed  
as pasture or moved on from

I find myself a tractor  
who don't do reverse

How in regions where borders so form  
the switchback road welcomes you again  
and again to the same town

*Entering M—*

you not knowing

you had left nor whose  
shifting turf you were  
in the act of passing from

He said, Keep in mind  
this cake cannot be unbaked.

At that line where surface changes  
frictionless feel of oil black laid even  
just last week perhaps, I always think,  
always

One fact dredged up,  
heat is not temperature

I stand at roadside, a cube  
no colder than the puddle of my melting  
bones between molecules breaking  
nothing quickens  
nothing happens except

*Feral Cats and Nabokov*

Just before dawn, the magnolia tree  
 beside the riot-proof building  
 christened by Gov. Wallace in '72  
 blasphemes with bitchy birds,  
 the ones that keep crapping on our cars.  
 Around noon, the sky swells dark, and Vulcan  
 on the ridge overlooking the city disappears.  
 The storm throws a tantrum—there's always  
 a great deal to be emptied in Birmingham.  
 Students shuffle into windowless rooms.  
 Feral cats slip into the library's shrubs.  
 I offered my first wife a light  
 next to this stoop on a day like today.  
 She was fingering Nabokov with one hand,  
 waving her unlit cigarette like a baton with the other,  
 signaling the cats to stop and listen.  
 We waited together for the rain  
 and for the translucent chemisette  
 of the librarian who stepped out for a smoke  
 every hour on the hour and then some.

*Sugar*

"The problem with sugar," Corey said as I poured a stream of white crystals into my coffee, "is that sugar overloads your liver and becomes toxic in the blood. The toxicity causes cancer and the toxicity causes fear. Fear is the mental equivalent to cancer."

He pushed aside his plate and leaned across the diner table. "Lori, what are you afraid of?"

I wanted to be an agreeable guest for this important stranger I'd come seven hundred miles to meet, although I'd had two bad nights, one on a train, without sleep.

"Oh," I said, "I'm afraid of dying in a car crash. Spiders. Water snakes." And of Doug, my boyfriend in Seattle, and the way we lived back there. Each day had the same thick grey feeling. Those days stuck together into a tunnel. I wanted to blow like cottonwood seed as far from those days as I could get.

Corey was an old pal of my friend Ali, who'd encouraged me to come here to Chico because she'd heard he could get me a job at a co-op grocery store. I needed a new life in a new place, and even the name—Chico—sounded good. Ali told me that Corey was into cats and foraging wild plants for food and he had a rented house big enough to share. He and his girlfriend had broken up.

Corey's flannel shirt was unbuttoned, showing off the hair on his chest. He had an angular face, straggly hairs on his chin, a sharp smell and dark tangled hair to his shoulders. With silver bracelets and leafy vines tattooed around his forearms, Corey was a down-home Chico lad. He looked up from beneath his eyebrows.

"So," he said, squinting at me, "is it Lori with an 'i,' Lorie with an 'ie,' Laurie from Laura, L-o-r-y, or some other foreign or variant spelling? Who are you? What kind of Lori are you?"

"I'm boring normal American Lori with an 'i.'"

He reached across the table and tweaked my nose. "Let's go foraging."

Corey stood and flourished his arm. His jeans, threadbare and white, were tucked into yellow leather boots with two-inch heels.

"My treat?" I said. He smiled modestly and folded his arms across his chest. I left a ten and we swept out of the diner.

We were an odd pair. He came to my chin; the top of his head was a stringy mess, imperfect camouflage for a pink pond of skin. I was tall and spindly as a fichus tree with red hennaed hair that hung in thin strands down my back. I had a sad bone-white face, long fingers and toes, a peace sign tattooed on my anklebone, and wore a tie-dye sundress and a dirty white cardigan. The cardigan was hot, but it covered a bruise where my boyfriend Doug had punched me in the back.

We walked out to Corey's truck, a battered orange hulk with the window glass tilting into the doors. When I pulled the door open, it screeched and swung low. I climbed up onto the bench seat, kicked aside some garbage and pulled my pack tight between my knees. In the pack, with my jeans, underwear, and two-for-a-dollar bags of candy, was a little over six hundred dollars. I pulled up the door and clunked it shut.

Corey climbed onto the driver's seat, started up the truck, threw his arm over the back of my seat and with an impressive straining of muscles and tendons, steered it out of the diner's parking lot. He said I needed a tour of Chico. He wanted to show me the university because, he said, "You're a university town gal." He drove through the campus and pointed out important buildings.

I looked at the kids, their heads lowered, huge backpacks slung over their shoulders as they walked to class. They seemed weighted down by their lives. I'd somehow ditched mine and floated like a leaf. The palm trees, fountains and elaborate brick towers of the campus were like a hallucination. So strange, everywhere you went, the same things lived out in different places. The dream was broken only by Corey's habit of clearing his nostrils and spitting out the window.

In the dusty downtown square, Corey spotted a friend and hol-lered. We pulled over, and a skinny dude with legs like denim pipes ambled to Corey's window. Sunburned and creased under a baseball cap, he tipped his hat to me with a lewd grin.

I turned away from him and stared at the dusty trees and at the sun beating on the sidewalk. The men had a cryptic conversation in which they made reference to various blowout parties, police busts and legal troubles. When Corey's friend mentioned the co-op in passing, I interrupted and said, "Where is the co-op, anyway?" Without looking at me, Corey reached over and silenced me with his hand. His wide fingertips rested on my shoulder for the rest of their conversation.

On the outskirts of town, Corey pulled into a gas station. While the tank filled, he stood outside the truck, his hands on his hips, and squinted into the sun. "Goddamn, we used a lot of gas." He ground his heel into the dirt.

He thumbed through his tattered wallet, then jammed his hands deep into his pockets. "Shit. I'm out of cash." I watched the sunlight shining on the blowing grass, reached into my pack and pulled out a twenty.

With his tank full of gas, Corey became ebullient. "What a hot damn beautiful fabulous day," he said at a stoplight. He flexed his fingers over the steering wheel and did a yoga neck roll.

"You got a boyfriend?" He squeezed his nose, scratched his head, adjusted the music, stuck his hand out the window to feel the air.

"He's in Seattle. Didn't Ali tell you about him?" I looked down at my arms and hands. My arms, in the dingy sweater, looked like dirty sticks. They lay in my lap like a heap of kindling.

"No, no, didn't hear anything about it. Whatever you do, don't get married. You're too young."

"I'm twenty-three. Anyway, we kind of broke up."

"Lori, I was married once. It started out nice, then turned into a pit of hell. You got me?"

“I got you.”

“I just turned thirty-four. Don’t look it, do I? It’s the macrobiotic lifestyle! So, what’s this boyfriend do?” Corey had one arm draped over the steering wheel and faced me with a chummy smile.

“He’s in graduate school. He’s working on his Ph.D. He researches cancer...” We were drifting across the road. “A car’s coming!”

He glanced over, put both hands on the wheel and adjusted the truck’s direction. “Cancer! Remember the sugar-cancer connection? Lori, you tell him what I told you and make sure you say you heard it here first.”

“Sure.” Douglas carried his cell phone in his front pant’s pocket, down in the heat with his keys. Back in Seattle he’d call me ten times a day. He’d say, “What are you doing?” then hang up. Doug was a tense guy—tall, muscular and ropey—with thick dark hair that looked like a wig. He was extraordinarily handsome with one exception—he was walleyed; his pupils were skewed. Whenever I looked him straight in the eye, I felt slightly sick.

The morning before, as soon as he left, I threw some stuff into my pack. As I looked around the apartment at everything I was leaving, I felt eerie and light-headed, as though my soul had left and gone ahead. I set my cell phone on a stack of Doug’s papers stacked on the kitchen table. The account was in his name.

Corey didn’t appear to have a cell phone on him. He braced himself against the wheel and gunned it. We barreled along without seatbelts past fields of waving grass that stretched all the way to the hills and mountains that rose outside of Chico. The first thing I’d seen of California that morning had been miles of almond trees, leaves luminous in the orange and purple light from the early sun. I ate candy and stared out the train window and imagined Chico, and Corey, who would be waiting at the train station looking for me. For the first time in a couple of years I had felt like I was young.

“You two happy?” said Corey.

“No, not too happy. We kind of broke up.”

“You like Seattle? It’s an exciting town.”

“You know, I just worked in a clothes store. Seattle’s okay. It’s expensive.” I thought of my boss listening to the message I’d left him and stuck my face into the wind. The wind beat on my ears like warm wings.

“Yeah, big cities are expensive. Me and my bud Dan hitched down to L.A. and stayed with his sister for a few months. We were like so broke! Couldn’t even get a job at Kentucky Fried Chicken. His sister was cool with it for awhile but then she turned into a bitch...I was like, damn...”

Corey circled back into town. He pulled into a parking lot next to a thick, fenced-in woods.

“Ever been to a cork forest? I guarantee you have not. Lori, this is a real live cork forest. They have them in Spain, hardly anywhere else. You ever been to Spain? Mo-ro-cco? I didn’t think so. We’ll look around and find us some nice fresh greens for lunch.”

Corey dug around under his seat and pulled out a dirty pillowcase. I climbed out of the truck. It didn’t lock so I hauled out my pack and caught up with him on the cedar chip path. He was unfazed that I was a half-foot taller and swaggered beside me like a cowboy. He filled the sunlit forest with noise as he coughed, spit and snorted mucus up one nostril, then the other. He crouched, plucked a leaf off a plant and chewed it.

The huge dusty trees had trunks like elephant legs and branches like outstretched arms. It was like a forest in a fairy tale, a forest people wander in when they are lost and abandoned.

“Corey, sorry to bug you, but I really need to find a job. I was thinking of staying in Chico a while. Ali said...”

“We’ll get to that, Lori,” he said. He pointed at a tree. “You ever see trees like that? The cork’s in the bark. You’re not supposed to climb them, but I have, I have. Keep an eye out for the park ranger.”

He sat on his heels and winnowed through a patch of weeds. He yanked out a leafy stem. “Oyster plant. Kind of tasty and super nutritious.”

He twisted around and screwed up one eye against the sun. "You're awful quiet. It's boiling hot. Why don't you take off that sweater?"

The bruise on my back throbbed. When Doug hit me, his hand didn't feel like a hand. It felt like the world had blown apart and a chunk got me in the back. I'd stood up to look out the window at an ambulance as it passed and blocked the light he was working by. I couldn't believe that he'd hit me. I ran to the bathroom, locked the door and sat on the toilet.

I said, "No, thanks. I'm fine. I'm not hot at all."

Corey contemplated me with an odd conspiratorial smile, then turned back to sorting through the plants.

I was hot, so tired from the last two days that I was dizzy and shaking. I shifted my pack to my other shoulder and looked down at my freckled calves. The white bone nearly cut through the skin. My feet were creased with dirt. The band of my underwear showed through the thin wrinkled fabric of my dress. A not very impressive specimen, as Douglas would have said. I turned my back on Corey and tore open a bag of candy.

Corey darted around between thickets of plants. I followed him, my mouth stuffed with cinnamon bears, and wiped drool off my chin. He crouched and I looked over his shoulder down into the steaming mass of plants, at the leaves, their shapes and veins and patterned edges. The leaves were so alive they glowed. Corey's strong brown fingers nimbly sorted between the edible and the worthless. The blue and green tattooed leaves on his arm blended in with the living leaves as if he was a faun that had sprung from the bushy weeds beneath the trees.

I looked at the muscles of his back sliding beneath his shirt and suddenly remembered Doug looming over me in a dark Indian restaurant. I'd stopped to chat with an acquaintance. The conversation went on and on, one stupid little subject trailing into another. Beside me, Douglas fidgeted, snorted, then became rigid with anger, but I

felt careless. It was fun talking about nothing with a friendly person I hardly knew. I looked into her bright impersonal eyes as though she was important; I wanted Doug to know that I knew people, that I had a larger world than what he and I had together.

Then his hand was on the back of my head. I looked at him in surprise, it was like a caress, until he wove his fingers through my hair and slowly, so that no one would see, twisted until my scalp pulled from my skull. I said good-bye. He let go and we walked out of the restaurant.

Corey got to his feet and waved a large leaf in my face. "Prickly Sow Thistle. Eating this stuff will turn your life around."

Corey sat on a boulder, completely unbuttoned his shirt and made a show of flapping the sides to cool off. One of his nipples was pierced and he had a sun with great lapping rays around his naval.

He opened up a leather pouch he had tucked in a pocket. "You smoke? You people in university town ever roll your own? See, you just shake a little tobacco out, roll it up tight, neat as a pin, and seal it up with a lick...just like a woman."

He studied my face for a reaction. Finding none, he continued, "Oh, and by the way, this is where they filmed the original Robin Hood movie. This is Sherwood Forest, the real McCoy. You know the original Robin Hood movie filmed in the thirties? Ever see it? Ever heard of it? Filmed right here."

Corey finished his cigarette and threw the butt into the dirt. "We got enough for a salad." He opened up the pillowcase. Inside was a heap of plants, alive and smelling sharp. He ticked off the names for me: Red Maids, Goosefoot, Storkbill, False Mermaid, Miner's Lettuce, Common Monkey.

We drove through Chico's dusty little streets and came to Corey's rented house, a West Coast shack. The tiny houses, the cracked

sidewalks sprouting weeds, the car parts, the bicycles and the overgrown yards were all washed white in the California sun.

I stepped inside and set my pack down. Corey pushed the door shut. It was dim. Dingy patterned curtains were pulled across the windows. Bundles of plants hung drying from twine strung between the walls and doorjambs. The house smelled like leaves, stale cigarettes, pot, cat pee. I looked for signs of the girlfriend. The couch and chairs were covered with layers of homemade crocheted blankets in Mexican pinks and greens, as if someone, maybe she, had tried to make it nice.

Within a minute, I was surrounded by cats that mewed and bumped my legs with their hard little heads and ran the length of their bodies against my calves.

He pointed down the hall to the bathroom. The sink and the floor and the inside of the toilet were remarkably dirty. There was no soap or toilet paper, but lined up in the shower were tiny bottles of organic shampoo. Orange Serenity and Calming Marigold. I thought of her, sitting there, staring at the hair-clogged drain.

I checked my pack, then went into the kitchen and lowered myself into a chair. Ammonia rose in a dense cloud from the wet litter box.

Corey sang to himself as he did a little hip-shaking dance. Suddenly he stretched across the small table and rested his chin on his forearm. His face was a few inches from mine. The pores and creases of his skin, the curly black hairs, the streaky glassy blue of his eyes didn't fuse into a face I recognized.

"Lori, do you want some twig tea?" he said. His breath smelled sweet as though he'd been chewing on a twig.

I said sure, and he set to work.

"Lori, do you know," he said as he filled the kettle at the faucet, "how much a pot of this stuff costs at a restaurant, any restaurant, downtown? No? At least four dollars. And they don't even give you

enough to make a decent brew. I give you almost half a packet, fresh from the co-op."

"Corey, I need to go to the co-op. Ali told me you said there were openings." I wanted a new life. I wanted a new life, and it was going to start in Chico. I was going to work in a co-op and become a vegetarian and wear hippie dresses every day.

"And don't even ask for sugar," he said as if he hadn't heard me. "I don't buy that shit."

He shook a cigarette from a pack on the counter, ran water into the pillowcase full of plants, then ran out the back door. He swung the bag over his head like a lasso while he smoked the cigarette. He'd left a trail of water on the floor, and a shaft of light lit up the scum of dirt, blackened leaves, and glittering specks on the kitchen's blue and white tiles.

The little kitchen was claustrophobic, a jumble of beer cans stuffed with ash and butts, crusty pans and plates, spiral notebooks decorated with anarchist symbols and pot leaves, radical newspapers, unopened bills. There were dozens of mason jars half-filled with dried flower blossoms and herbs. Over the stove hung a curling grease-stained poster of Che Guevara. These details of Corey's life were vaguely touching. It was like when I first met Doug; I thought his habits, the stacks of papers and books obsessively arranged, were evidence of an endearing character trait.

Corey bounded back into the kitchen and kicked the door shut.

He said, "There's a lot of evil in the world, and a lot of that evil appears to be innocent. Take sugar. Good old American sugar. Sugar was at the heart of the slave trade—still is, actually. There are still slaves in the world. And now people in America are slaves to sugar. They're addicted to it."

A cat jumped onto my lap, stretched, and sunk its claws into my thigh. I pulled it off and set it on the floor. My leg began to sting and itch. Three cats licked themselves on the table and stared at me.

“What about tobacco? You smoke, Corey.”

He ignored me. “And now for the finishing touch.” He squeezed the juice and seeds of a giant bruised grapefruit over the greens.

He set out two bowls piled high, knocked the cats off the table and straddled a chair. “Dig in, baby. This is Vitamin City.”

“Do you know, Lori” he said holding up a leaf with his fork, “how much this salad would cost in a restaurant? Wild, foraged greens? Ten, fifteen bucks, minimum. I used to forage for a restaurant in town.” He chewed the leaf a long time, then sat back and ran his tongue over his teeth.

He said, “We need some beer to go with this.” Corey leaned off his chair, opened the door of his ancient refrigerator, and pulled out two long bottles.

He gave me a beer; I drank half of it down. Corey eyed me over the top of his bottle as I speared a prickly leaf and put it in my mouth. The leaf was bitter and tough, bristly with hairs, as horrible as I knew it would be. I swallowed hard and the stringy leaf went slowly down my throat. I held the fork midair, uncertain what to do next, and saw the tiny flowers scrolled along the handle.

In Seattle I used to wash the dishes. I used to wash the forks with flowered handles, and I’d look at the long curved steak knives Doug had bought for his steak and think, I could just stick one of these in my heart and be done with this stupid life.

“You have the same pattern,” I said.

“What?” said Corey.

I held up the fork. “You have the same pattern that Doug and I had in Seattle. Where’d you get it?”

“Goodwill, or somewhere. Maybe it was Kathy’s,” he said, looking at me like I was nuts, this turn of conversation a distraction from his game plan. “Now for the tea.” The kettle was blowing hard. He jumped to his feet, took two cups painted with gaudy flowers from his cupboards and blew dust from the insides.

He filled the cups with reddish twigs and set one in front of me. I looked down at my little cup of sticks. Back in Seattle Doug was thinking of me. The thought made me sick.

I could see him thinking about me. I could see him standing in the kitchen staring for a long, long time at the cell phone I’d left on his papers. He’d never seen it there before. I wasn’t allowed to touch any books or papers having to do with his work. He’d know it was a message. He’d stare at the cell phone, and then he’d start to crash around.

Corey poured water into my cup and the water turned red. The twigs looked like little bones leaking blood.

“Try the tea,” he said. He set the kettle back on the stove then came back and leaned against the back of my chair. He touched my hair and wound a strand around his finger. “You got pretty hair,” he said. “Real pretty.”

I leaned forward and my hair tightened, then pulled free from his hand. I was looking at the cup, at the old-fashioned roses painted on its side. The flowers looked like sugar flowers on a cake. I had thought I’d get married to Doug and be the wife of a famous professor. Everyone had thought that.

I said, “So what happened, anyway, with your girlfriend?”

He was behind me. He breathed his beery breath into my hair and my hair prickled as if sprinkled with electricity. But I forced myself to turn around and look at him and I could see who he was. He was a man who didn’t mean anything to me. He was a stranger.

He inhaled deeply through his nose like a judge about to impose sentence. “Honey, that’s a touchy subject.” He shoved away from my chair, grabbed another beer from the refrigerator and stalked out the back door.

Through the battered screen door, I watched Corey smoke and survey the day. He stretched out his legs and stared down at his boots. He took a long slug of his beer.

He was listening for me. He was waiting for me to push open the screen door and sit on the step all scrunched over my knees and listen to him say what he wanted to say. And I could see myself doing it.

The front door wasn't locked like in nightmares. Once I'd walked ten or fifteen blocks and was on a street with little kids riding their bikes, guys with their legs sticking out from beneath cars and old people side by side passing in their sedans, I set down my pack and got out the candy corn. It looked like a handful of soft yellow teeth.

The sky in Chico was white with heat and dust. California light blazed, glaring and relentless—there was no getting away from it. Seattle was never so bright. I could remember such a day in childhood when I realized that I was on a sun-blasted planet. I could remember the taste of sugar spreading over my tongue. My blood quickened. All my cells chattered with joy.



*Hover*

LOUVIERE + VANESSA

G R E G W R E N N

*Mother of Light*

Teacher stood on the low dike,  
which, like a breastbone,

divided a flooded  
meadow of sweet grasses,

the odor of beings  
who have shifted their substance

through their own efforts.  
It all felt spare and wide,

gleaming. An osprey's meek cry.  
Ragged cattails and wind.

Wading into the water,  
holding the dip-net,

she set out to show me  
the brown, flitting larvae

of dragonflies.  
Like a river's chop

against a piling, the memories  
returned as she kneeled:

orange starfish in the turtle grass;  
the jewel wrapped in cloth,

hidden across the town  
for me to retrieve;

the lanterns of  
the night-fishers, offshore.

Like the St. Johns River,  
a stream in me begins to flow north.

R I T A S I G N O R E L L I - P A P P A S

*Already Autumn*

It was already autumn and there were too many red and yellow leaves, too many secrets, silences and averted eyes, that was the autumn when shadows of herons slid over our house and the air would darken and smell of smoke, it was the autumn I stopped sleeping because of a friend's suicide and the departure of a son, I just kept my eyes lowered and hardly moved, like a heron skating slowly through the water for there were days when the smoke thickened as I remembered the revolt of Absalom whose father blew him a kiss and left him the kingdom which is why I wove a set of pipes from broken reeds and wandered the wood of Ephraim every night playing the music of wisdom and sorrow softly the way my friend's eyes closed as she leaned into the water, the way the raptor glided down into our yard, the way you drifted into other rooms all autumn which was how you stood watch over my desperation, but in the end it was the crows who saved me with their ruined geniality and clumsy bows, their brooding improvisations with twigs and string to prepare for the years of soulful darkness oh I started to believe again in gusto I followed the gypsy dream-lift of their bodies whenever the curtain of air swung open and they flew for their lives straight through the black branches into a world of devotion and plunder oh Absalom my son.

B R E T T D E F R I E S

*The Gospel According To Jack Gilbert*

In the language I dream of, nipples are praise,  
Pittsburgh is creation,  
and black hair in dirt means *still there must be song*.

My love is a tired girl carrying water up a hill.

Divine mercy is my best friend's wife, naked  
except for a necklace drawing blood against my thigh.

Rain is this defeat in the dark. Sun, the same in light.

As for prayer, prayer is only *ceiling, melon,*  
*single stone*. Sometimes, like a ruined cathedral,  
a wren's collapsing bones.

Sometimes flies inside. Sometimes not.

J O S H U A M C K I N N E Y

XVI

[from *Mad Cursive*]

It is the hottest October on record,  
and our tongue is a fist swearing. What value  
is not first a word assigned? Hearing by rote  
no change will come, that language is the blunt sword  
it was put to. For some, perhaps even for you,  
such use is death. One forgets to ask in this state,

Was the returning resurrection or ghost?  
Earth's archive is ash. The word *values* is toast.  
The flood insists its drift be caught. And you  
have been taught to accept what you've lost  
and hate.

J O S H U A M C K I N N E Y

*A Leaf*

Not only leaves, but  
the spirit also trembles a pale green  
unfolding.

I was holding a leaf when I learned  
of my neighbor's cancer,  
which was, of course, not real  
learning, though it resembled experience.

I stole a book once I was a thief.

"They give me six months," he said.  
There was reason enough  
to miss the birth of that leaf,  
a maple I've kept safe in a book.

I felt for him, as they say,  
that nameless they.

TANIA RUNYAN

*Growing Season*

Too much spring rain.  
The gutters burst  
with hundreds of miniature maples.  
They have germinated  
in their own rotting pods  
and stretch their leaves  
to the sun. Yank them out,  
I tell my husband,  
before the neighbors talk.  
He climbs a ladder,  
cuts the stems loose  
with a trowel.

Outside Beijing, the mother  
of our next child  
digs all day, hair sweeping  
the fine soil where black seeds  
roll from her fingers.  
More drought, they warn,  
but she plants anyway,  
for you never know  
when a storm will hit.  
Today, row markers and dirt.  
Tomorrow, plump cabbages  
glistening on the table.

ROBERT FICOCELLLO

*Conjure*

A fact: I have not found the chainsaw that registers our chronology.

Just as last Friday, the chainsaw's buzz cuts into my morning sleep. When I wake, I imagine my head floats like a satellite above the Northeast. Albany's suburban sprawl drifts slowly below. Unreadable. A methodology must exist. My training should provide an explanation. Just as two weeks prior, the chainsaw whined through my open window. This—the sixth—Chainsaw Friday [actually, we are well past the sixth week, but I've only organized this much thus far] I am poised to make Sense, and I contemplate even now that organization. What to call the organization—epistolary? stream of consciousness? meditation? [I must research this.] I even wonder now if I'm constructing—as opposed to reconstructing—maybe even deconstructing—the time we spent together. I wonder where these dismembered trees stand. Even last week [days after our last communication], I wandered the neighborhood searching unsuccessfully for the fresh blond circles hidden behind autumn leaves. Where are the trees turning into sawdust?

The first week—our first chainsaw morning—we complained because the buzz could have been in my backyard. I slid the window down to the sill and raised the volume of Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. Back in bed we seemed content and tired. The August sun intensified our morning even as the window fan propped against the windowpane hummed and knocked below the notes. You asked me my age, adding that it didn't matter, but the sixteen years between us appeared as you mouthed the words toward the ceiling, and my fingers slipped up between your legs.

When I returned with glasses of ice water, you tilted slightly toward me but did not drink. The swell of your hip held the yellow sheets off me, and the arch of your back, even as you fell asleep, held my attention [and now my nostalgia] while I sipped the water. I whispered, *sweet sixteen*, while you slept.

In the whiskey darkness of three a.m., my hands know just where to go, as do yours. [Anti-poetically, you were neither water in my hands nor sand falling between my fingers, but solid, serious.] With a wince, we look each other in the eyes and proceed. We shower three times—twice warm [your choice] and once cold [my choice]—still sweating after toweling ourselves dry.

After you leave, I spend thirty-six hours trying to prove empirically that you've been here. I search for chestnut hair on the pillow and in the shower drain. No lipstick on the rim of glassware [you wear little makeup], no clothing bunched in the sheets [I check twice]. The evidence can be reasoned away. Exhaustion: sleep deprivation. Empty glasses: the usual accumulation. Scratches on shoulders: obsessive mountain biking. I send you a note and review our past correspondence. At best, innuendo is what I find. What am I even analyzing? My interpretive skills feel groundless. Robert Johnson plays on an endless thirty-six hour loop. I slip in and out of consciousness...unable to discern how much I've slept. At worst, a fantasy: us. Psycho-sis appears to be a plausible option at this point, and this possibility disappoints me.

Finally a response days later: "Like you, I've had more than a bit of daydreaming about our night as well." I feel better but still speak aloud to myself. Primarily, asking questions.

The second Chainsaw Friday—already the regularity concerns me—I begin sweating you from my pores. Our smells are indistinguishable, and after you leave, I walk around breathing your visit. I refuse

to wash away our last hours together, but I also research olfactory hallucinations—which do occur—and the groundlessness returns.

As we fall on the bed, I find place number two—a connection, where I believe a part on me was made for a part on you. [Place number one is so obvious that I am considering not counting it at all.] I can't forget the cradle your head makes in my hand while you lay underneath me. Alignment. Utterly perfect—and in conjunction with place number one—unique. The discovery. We are fulfillment, in the truest sense of the word. While we lounge on the bed, I tell you none of these things. Instead, the Glenlivet sits on lips and textures my tongue like pussy. I concentrate on remembering the feeling of being present.

At five a.m., I play *Kind of Blue* while halving a cantaloupe in the kitchen. I ask, "If you could only have one piece of music for the rest of your life..." "This would be yours," you interrupt. "Absolutely. And yours?" I tell you that you must narrow it down to one. Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now*. Your age would seem to preclude a choice like this. The cantaloupe rinds collect on the table as we discuss week one nervously but with humor. The sun begins to lighten the sky, and after we pour our cups, the coffeemaker continues huffing from the kitchen.

Thursday evening, we talk on the phone for the first time while you're visiting your family, who live a few hours south. You had to get out of your place for a few days [I wonder if I had some influence on this, but I think I'm being too self-important]; however, the family visit has been anything but relaxing. I hear ice click the sides of your glass. I have another option, and I extend an invitation.

I eat a dozen antacids while waiting with one eye on the window overlooking the street. My stomach feels as though it is digesting

itself. You arrive close to midnight. You are blushing deeply in the front porch light when I open the door [The reticence surrounding us during these weeks perplexes me.] I open a bottle of red and you ask for a t-shirt and shorts. I listen to you explaining your visit home, your family, absorb the names and characteristics, and imagine myself there in the future.

We settle on the porch. So, I say, what's going on here? I am asking for some sort of orientation. Something of which to fix myself upon. Instead, you plan on touching me inappropriately, then taking me to bed. The Glenlivet comes out, and we take the bottle to my bedroom

The third Chainsaw Friday, I see the red light blinking on my answering machine, and I recover an overflow of mail inside of my front door. I open none of it, and I begin deleting messages after I kiss you good-bye. I burn the mail in the fireplace. No one will be called back. I talk to myself as though you are in another room. Can I be missing you?

I ride my bicycle for provisions: milk, cantaloupe, toothbrush, [...]. I remember what you don't like, gleaned from conversations and observations: eggplant—cooked too softly, chicken—doesn't taste like anything, brie—you might be allergic to something on the rind. I remember what you do like, gleaned from conversations and observations: soy milk (only for coffee), steak, bleu cheese. I deliberate for thirty minutes in the store, deciding why I should or should not get the stuff you like. Getting favorable items seems too much like a plan, which involves a risk, or worse yet—hope. Ultimately, I get the steak, which I can eat regardless of your presence, and soy milk, which I can try for iced coffees. The desire to justify these choices rings in my ears. I try thinking of words to replace justify: plan, prepare, postulate.

I don't sleep for three days. Music plays nonstop. I bicycle four hours, then stand at the rail of the rusting steel bridge over Normans Kill for another hour. Humid wind courses down the hazy green valley. Water barely moves between the sun-bleached rocks below. *Leaving everything behind*, repeats inside me. I bike home, and finally fatigue sets in while I read Kerouac's *Book of Blues*. I sleep for five hours [the longest in three weeks] and wake up tense, thinking that I've missed something.

Chainsaw Friday IV [actually, V, but I'm a bit embarrassed by that week—I neglected several important obligations: my Jeep sits, registration expired, in the blinding summer sun, a birthday, sleeping [I think] for a number of days, bathing.] The TV turns to snow. I sing along with Johnny Cash records after digging out the turntable while hallucinations of squirrels run about my feet. They seem to rotate around my each foot to the tempo of "Get Rhythm," and this makes me laugh.

When I walk you home after a late night downtown, you seem reluctant to tell me something. The nature of our relationship has to change, you say eventually. We spend an hour lying about how we feel toward one another. The clichés come easy. Platitudes. I tell you that I knew we were on borrowed [stolen] time. Your *significant* other will be flying in to attend a wedding with you. I don't know his name [I now know it], but I know you've made hotel arrangements. You are excited, and I am not.

I do not attempt any communication, nor do you. I move to the assumption that I'm no longer on your map. I spend the morning searching the streets of the neighborhood for maimed trees. I think that you've completely forgotten me or, at best, shuttled me into the acquaintance category.

This Chainsaw Friday [actually VI, but I'll stop correcting myself from now on] is the fifth, and I wait for you to contact me.

You visit me at work (a neutral site), we get coffee, and sit out in the sun. I've forgotten my sunglasses, and realize that this might be the only time we have been outside in the daylight together. I squint as you explain the wedding, and a question sits heavy on my tongue. I already know the answer but ask, regardless. [I realize now that this is a form of masochism.] You, sheepishly: "It went well." "Good," I manage while looking up at the sun. The *good* is for me asking. An answer, for me, supplants any ambiguity, and I can cease hypothesizing about what the week meant for us.

I know that our relationship is over. I cut four inches off the end of my belt and gouge another hole into it with a nail, but the pant legs still swoosh around my thighs. I read *Nausea* in one sitting and feel weak nonetheless, sensing as though I'm living between the lines. Connotative. Abject. I am losing weight.

You call me Thursday night. I haven't slept for two days, but I have ridden my bike for eleven hours and walked for five hours. Did I eat anything? I'm seeing spots around the circumference of my vision. You ask to come over. We drink wine and have some tomatoes and basil from the yard. The neighbor's pool reflects around the inside of the porch making it look like a Tiki hut. Within the hour, we are in bed. I am a node of energy. Bessie Smith croons. Then Elmore James. Near dawn, Billie Holiday. We drink coffee in bed, and you leave at four p.m. for work. We've slept little, and I feel euphoric. The absolute intensity of my senses lasts for days. The spots in my vision have graduated to red and blue stars. Every second is Christmas morning.

On the morning of the fifth Chainsaw Friday, we lie on our backs, heads hanging over the foot of the bed. I watch your chest rising

and falling. I look upside down—appropriately enough for our situation—at the dual window fan, two unblinking owl eyes induce guilt. Lee Morgan echoes throughout the apartment.

Chainsaw Friday VI. I send you this message, and forty-eight hours later, you still haven't responded [excuse the grammatical inefficiencies—I wanted to keep the original text intact]:

Your restrained response to your birthday gift really surprised me. Pleasantly. I began to wonder why, as I'm inclined [you know all too well] to do. Some answers arrived as I cruised through the sharp air of our state buildings, but stopping occasionally to write notes. [I'll be bold enough to classify these as mild epiphanies...] My expectations were greatly lowered when I handed you the gift box [As I think about the five senses involved, I can only explain it to our shared sensory experiences when we've been together...you might think only so far as my Scotch analogy...].

Expectations of what? you might ask. My purpose seemed not to be to continue the "argument" of which I spoke when we sat along the windows in the bookstore while you ate soy nuts—the argument that I realized that I'd been constructing: not to be forgotten, or maybe not to be lumped among other acquaintances of yours. I wasn't trying to earn something [i.e. time, contact, correspondence]. Neither did my purpose seem to be to illustrate my own merit(s) or qualities as the "other" man. In fact, I never considered that until you mentioned it at the coffee shop one afternoon [when I offered to cook steaks]. Consequently, I never thought much about including a note or card with the gift. "This is for you" [preceded by a nervous preface, of course] came naturally. As is often the case for us, the unnatural becomes the disciplinary. The Governing.

And again, here sits the paradox of the items that constituted your gift. You said that you wished that you could have had one more day before our first Chainsaw Friday: your own nostalgic hand reaching from the past to the not-yet-happened. The nostalgia for anticipation. Revealing enough, your choice of scenario is so perfectly impossible [hence, a pure nostalgia] as to be safe even for the imagination—observational, as opposed to participatory. [...]

[I've just poured Scotch into the black-and-gold tumbler while standing next to the sink.]

Your appreciation of the gift's contents and your comments about it [i.e. this gift ranks as...] perplexes me too. I found myself thinking that under different circumstances I might be inclined to do this for you again and again—without over-thinking the expectations of such an action. Just doing it. I also wondered if this is the type of thing that I would do for someone else? I couldn't really imagine doing this for someone else, honestly. I catch myself thinking in terms of the reigning paradigm about love [i.e. I want the type of person who is \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. Who will treat me like \_\_\_\_\_.]

This would remove the uniqueness from the gift, but more so, remove the uniqueness from the relationship between two people. The interaction would be "typed"—literally and figuratively. Don't we see this "typing" when we watch couples and hear this when people discuss their relationships? Thinking about all the people who will be satisfied with that is distressing. I can't comprehend why two people would desire that stasis.

I rearticulate a point that troubles me during this late summer. What is beyond desire? After all, two people can desire one another. That desire can only be shared between two people. *Share* is too weak, and the precise word came to me while I pedaled home [epiphany on wheels?]. The word...an absolutely fucking fantastic word, really.

*Conjure.*

This is what two people must do, Bella. Forget the stagnant nouns that people associate with relationships [passion, lust, tolerance, sharing, romance, desire! etc.] or the clingy adjectives [passionate, sexy, caring, etc.]—disguised as "qualities"—because nouns and adjectives are but devaluing window dressings to this verb: *Conjure*. Two people can only conjure. *Conjure* is the already happening and the happening to come. The functional rendering of two people unable to express themselves in language. Simultaneous adventure and discomfort is the sublime paradox, Bella. That is it. Conjure the sublime.

Even today, I want to tell you that this is about us to a certain point, so you should not be alarmed. But this is also about us separately... or about me separately. Maybe because after our time apart, the only real thing that I am certain about is *Conjure*. What we conjured has escaped the logic and reasoning I've applied to it. I wrestle with leaving behind what I do not understand. My evolving [or devolving?] mental state might be an issue. You once told me, "You really are crazy." Maybe I should move to Los Angeles.

I wish that I could say that the chainsaw's buzzing has ended this week. I scour the streets around my house—diagramming and triangulating on engineering paper to little result. I have no witness in the early fall morning, but the acorns are beginning to drop from the oaks. The air is losing its sultry humidity. The intensity of my senses still impresses me. I eat little, but when I do eat, the experience is orgasmic.

For the first time, I'm there when the door opens at Oliver's, and I purchase the last bottle of Glenlivet. Maggie says, "Early, huh?" I shrug and tell her that it's the last one on the shelf. "I know. Have you thought about another Scotch?" "This is my Scotch," I mumble. She slips the green bottle into the brown bag and hands it to me. After I exit, I think, next time it will be good to try something different—perhaps even necessary. Back home I clip a Cuban cigar I've been saving for a special occasion, put on *Kind of Blue*, and sit on the back porch. Pour the liquid into the black-and-gold tumbler. Hold the glass up to the late-morning sun and marvel at the amber refractions. Smell the caramel and oak. I light the cigar, and settle back into my chair. Trumpet notes drift out. Smoke swirls slowly toward noon as I allow another day to slip through my fingers.

Potentially needed scenes:

1. First time at the bar where you work?
2. My earring hooked to your nose ring during sex.
3. Your birthday—the scene, but not the content of the box?
4. Last time at your work?
5. Our final bedroom scene: We make suggestions for the future—vague enough to be logical, vague enough to be shy of a plan or obligation, ambiguous enough so that we never have time to break a promise or craft a lie: skinny dip in the neighbor's pool when they go on vacation. Thinly-sliced prosciutto that I didn't know you liked. Go to Boston. Make beer. Smoke my Cuban cigars in half-light autumn with Lagavulin Scotch.
6. A count of the [...] since we last lay in my yellow sheets. I don't have a picture of you.

## PLAYWRITING FEATURE

*Brian Silberman*

*Chattanooga: A Series of Monologues*

for Kim Jackson

I. *Bioluminescence*

(Darkness. The BRUNETTE turns on a slide projector. Her features are part in light, part in shadow.)

BRUNETTE

I know a roof, that when it rains, sounds like thousands of fireflies dancing. And I mean actually *dancing*...like you would imagine the sounds of their feet on the rooftop outside. Thousands. The sounds of flickering firefly light and a patter of feet like rain. It's just like that.

(She clicks the projector forward, a projected image, a pixilated blur of dark and light.)

There's light and there's rhythm. And it's as if the light has a rhythm, that it carries it, that it makes it's own sound even...light does, the glow. You have to see it. What it sounds like. I want to show you. And not the light, but the sound of the light. So you could see what it sounds like.

(She clicks the projector forward, an empty, darkened frame.)

This.

(She clicks the projector forward again, another pixilated blur of dark and light.)

I could ask you what you see, and you might say, well, you might say you don't know what you're looking at. You don't know what that is. And that it's ridiculous and sound doesn't, doesn't...you can't see it. And I could press you on it and you might think I was playing some kind of trick on you, if you were a suspicious sort and wanted to think that way. But maybe if you kept looking, if you looked just a little bit more you might start seeing something. And I could tell you it's a person...or a landscape...or a roofline maybe...and then you'd start looking at the image with that in mind, and you'd start seeing the shape of something you recognize. Features or aspects. Like if I told you what you saw was a picture of the sound of thousands of fireflies dancing you might believe it. That you might. I think you might because it's about a kind of focus. When you focus on something, what happens is your eye frames it in what's called the fovia, this section of the retina made up of cone shapes that are connected to the brain's optical cortex. And then your brain takes all your experiences and knowledge of the world and it forms a kind of *context*...or a *map*...by which to process and make sense of that information. So that say you're lying on your back on the floor in this big empty warehouse and are looking up at the ceiling. Old weathered boards full of oil and salt stains more than twenty feet above your head. And you're on your back and outside it's raining and you hold your hand up in front of your eyes.

(She lifts her hand.)

And everything else, the ceiling and beyond, it becomes a blur, and all you see are the particulars of your own small hand. The lines

embedded in your palm, the whorls and ridges of your fingertips, and that makes you think of the time you blistered your palm on the handle of a fry pan...or, or...of the inside of a mitten, the way it feels against your fingers when they're chilled and almost numb...or maybe even how small your hand felt when it was held inside a larger hand while you were lying alongside someone and looking up at a ceiling while it rained one time. Maybe *that*. All of these things, more, so that you understand what it is you're seeing because of all of the associations and memories of a whole lifetime, everything that makes you who you are comes together in that instant. And that's forgetting the *sound* altogether for a moment,...which is the thing I really want to talk about. Because then let's say you shift your gaze to what's beyond your hand, and so the frame, the frame it changes, and what was a blur is now clear and distinct, and what you see is the ancient boards of the warehouse's ceiling, their own whorls and patterns of patina and age...and maybe, for just a minute, you think it's the rain now that's causing those stains of pattern. You could think so. Leaking through. An unsound roof over you. That it's not age at all but right this moment, right this moment making those patterns on the wood, and time stops in your head... or it gets confused, and what's *memory* and what's *now* is too hard to tell apart, and maybe for a second you feel that you never want to have this moment turn into something like memory because that would mean it was *over* and all you'd have left was the trace of what it felt like when your hand was small in that larger hand and that you were alongside the person there when it was raining and he was trying to describe the sound. Nothing else more permanent and lasting, so that you might forget it. Not see anymore. And what then? How important that would be. I'm trying to sort this out right now, how the eye selects and organizes the *immensity* of the world I guess you could say. How it chooses. And what it means, those choices. Those parts that stay with you...and those that fall away.

(She clicks the projector forward again, flecks of light in a field of darkness.)

If I knew the language of the rain, of course, I would write it down. But everyone recognizes it, and is able to recall it to their memory. Being in a closed space while outside is water...trickling...drowning...a torrent. The rain undoes bodies, makes them full of softness and damp patches, slimy and quivering like snails. In places like the desert, in dry places, this must be desire. What it feels like. This kind of wanting so much for what is impossible and never comes.

(She pauses slightly.)

I had a teacher tell me once that music, that music opens up a valve in your brain so more ideas can flow in, and sensations too, all different kinds of sensations, and I have to say I'm inclined to agree. I'm a musician by training, and it's become a job, but I'm also, I take photographs. As a hobby. Or more than a hobby. More. I'd say I'm fascinated by light, by the properties of light. By what the eye sees...and also what it misses. There was a time I stopped taking photographs. People that know would say it's because life just got too busy and hobbies are always the first things that go when it does. But maybe I just stopped because, because the people that should have seen that it was more than that to me didn't see. If that makes sense. And that hurt me somehow, because I couldn't explain it, or felt like I shouldn't have to explain. And that maybe they didn't really know me. And what does that mean. Who I'm with. And so I stopped. But recently, recently I picked it up again. And you're not gonna believe it but what made me, what started me taking photographs again was the sound of a thousand fireflies dancing...and wanting to see them.

(She clicks the projector forward again, a square of darkness, a deep enveloping velvet darkness.)

I looked them up. Fireflies. Fireflies have specialized light-emitting organs, usually on the lower abdomen and they'll produce their glow by a chemical reaction consisting of a substrate combined with an enzyme, a chemical called adenosine triphosphate, and oxygen. When these four components are all added together there's a flash. It's called bioluminescence. What they do. Bioluminescence. And there are several theories on how fireflies control the "on" and "off" of their glow organs, but, but the exact mechanism has yet to be worked out. The "Oxygen Control Theory" is based on the firefly turning on and off its light by controlling the oxygen supply in the chemical reaction. The "Neural Activation Theory" hypothesizes that fireflies have neural control of structures called "tracheal end cells" which, upon stimulation, release a messenger molecule which initiates the activation of the chemical reaction. Many fireflies don't produce light. Usually these species are day-flyers, but there are a few diurnal fireflies, ones that primarily inhabit shadowy places, such as beneath tall plants or trees, there are a few that glow all the time without an on or off. *Lucidota* they're called. Their grouping. The most amazing thing though, what I find the most amazing of how those little fireflies that do control the "on" and "off" switch, is that the production of light is very efficient, with very little heat being given off as wasted energy. Bioluminescence is a very efficient process. Ninety percent of the energy a firefly uses to create light is actually converted into visible light. By comparison, an incandescent electric bulb can convert only ten percent of total energy used into light, and the rest is given off as heat. Imagine that, what would happen if the firefly got as warm as a light bulb! It'd be like popcorn in a pan. But it's not. It's dancing. It's the sound of rain on that ceiling.

(She pauses slightly.)

Another interesting thing is they're not a hundred percent sure why. Scientists, I mean. People who study fireflies. Why. I mean, why they do it. Or can. For adult fireflies, making light is primarily used to locate other individuals of the same species for reproduction. Many species, especially in the genus *Photinus*, are distinguished by the unique courtship flash patterns emitted by flying males in search of females. Females generally don't fly, did you know, but give a flash response to males of their own species. And the males find them. Tropical fireflies, particularly in Southeast Asia, routinely synchronize their flashes among large groups, a startling example of spontaneous biological order, I think. And it must be amazing to see. This phenomenon occurs through the night along riverbanks in the Malaysian jungles every day of the year. I want to go before I die. It's one of the things on my list. Current hypotheses about the causes of this behavior involve diet, social interaction, and altitude. But I think maybe it's something else. And if I went there I would figure it out. Something to do with filling the void maybe. Remembering. Recapturing something lost. Of things like desire and focus and wanting to see.

(She clicks the projector off. Changing the slide tray.)

I started taking photographs again. I try to take pictures of sounds instead of recording it. I'm a musician by training, yes, and this may seem odd to you, that I choose these means, but it's how it is. I take pictures of sounds.

(She turns the projector on again.)

Like this one.

(She clicks the projector forward one last time, a pixilated blur of light and dark like the first image. She's part in light, part in shadow. Rain begins, the sound and light rhythm of precipitation, almost inaudible at first but growing louder.)

In the United States, one of the most famous sightings of fireflies blinking in unison occurred near Elkmont, Tennessee in the Great Smoky Mountains during the second week of June, 2005. I wish I had seen it. Sometimes I pretend that I did. I'll even tell people sometimes...when I'm showing them my photographs. That I was there. That the photograph you're looking at is what it's like. But mostly what I do, is what I'm doing now. I talk about lying on the floor and holding hands with someone I will never see again, even though they know me truer than anyone. And the ceiling. And the distance between desire and what can *be*. And how I never would have seen or heard the rain at all, unless he said to me, "Listen. You hear that? It's a thousand fireflies on the roof. Dancing."

(She pauses slightly.)

And that if they focus their eyes, maybe they will remember it too. Get it back. There was the sound of the rain on the roof, I lean in close, I lean in close and whisper in his ear. This is what I say.

(There is a slight pause. Lights change.)

## II. *Pulse*

(A woman, JEAN, in a robe and hospital slippers.)

JEAN

I once thought my heart stopped. Literally. I didn't die, but my heart wasn't pumping. It wasn't just a skipped beat, it was stopped. Utterly stopped, like it was dead. And I didn't know what to do...or how to tell anyone. What do you *do*? So I got in the car. And I drove. Just aimless...driving fast, but towards nowhere, like maybe if I went far enough, moved over enough road, it'd start up again, a geographic cure, like maybe it was restlessness or inertia that stopped my heart in the first place. But mostly it's about the sounds of the engine, of driving, of the fade in and fade out of the radio, the removal of everything but the moving body in a car, of the passing from here to there, of not being where you were, of waiting for arrival, for the absent heartbeat...*meditation...drone*. My heart has stopped and I'm still alive. What accounts for this? I give the car some gas...merge in with some other drivers...heading out into the night and not a one of us stopping until the tanks run dry and the engines choke...and this is what finally happens to me, the wheels spinning slower on the pavement, the progression of stillness under the hood...and I'm finally at a stop in the middle of nowhere.

(She pauses slightly.)

That's what I remember. Being still on the roadside in the dark. Alone and waiting to see what would happen next. What stays is *that*. And how I thought about the feeling of the long missed beat, and the tumble of the next ones as they rushed to fill the space. And how I sat there—in the high brace of quiet and distance streaming past the now still windshield—and I *listened*.

(There is a pause.)

At the back of my house I can stand in the light from the upstairs windows and look out over a river. The bank is covered with deadfall trees and branches...stripped clean like driftwood in tide, tumbled smooth and clean, left high at the river's bend. There's one trunk hollowed out, shallow and broad. It's filled with river water now, a birdbath, but when it's not it's more like an ear. Once I lay down in it, eyes closed and quiet...thinking that if I could be still enough, not make even the most perceptible of noises, I could know what it did. I could hear it. But I wasn't quiet enough. I made too much noise, even still and trying so hard.

(She pauses slightly.)

When I was a girl I sneaked out at night. I pressed myself to hedges and fitted the shadows of trees. I went to a construction site near the lake. I took a concrete-mixing tub, slid it to the shore, and sat down inside it like a saucer. I would push off from the shoreline with a stolen board and float, hearing nothing, for hours...or if not nothing what could have been that. What sounded like nothing to me then. The hollow of the trunk is shaped like that tub.

(There is a pause.)

The night my heart stopped beating. When I finally got home. I locked the bathroom door and ran a tub of water.

(She takes a step forward.)

Most of the time you don't really hear it. A pulse is a thing you feel. Even if you are somewhat quiet. Sometimes you hear it through the pillow at night. But I know that there's a place where you can hear

it even better than that. Here is what you do. You ease yourself into a tub of warm water, you ease yourself down. You lie back and wait for the ripples to smooth away. Then you take a deep breath and hold it, and slide your head under, and listen for the willingness of your heart.

(Lights change.)

### III. Rapture

(A waitress, CLAIRE.)

CLAIRE

I used to get mad...but it's different now. This isn't necessary to me. My fears are about dying, and not being loved. Things like that. Not what ifs. Know what I want? You ask me what I want, I want a dog. A dog who's out hunting all day, and he comes home, pant, pant, and I know he loves me. How do you define pleasure, right? That kind of thing. Something like *that*. Sometimes I just want to stare at the sky...to sit in a beautiful space and stare at the sky through trees. Am I just lazy? I'm guilty even feeling that way. Well, not so much guilt as anxious. And now...I'm not even anxious, because I know I could walk away and forget about it if I really wanted. I see my friend Alex Katz—he comes in here afternoons for a thermos of coffee and sandwich to go—painting, painting...probably he'll die painting. And I say, "Tell me your secret. How is it done...that commitment to one thing, to one pursuit? Tell me. So I can do it too." That's what I'm talking about. *That*. And have you seen the paintings he makes? Stop your heart. Beautiful. So who cares about whether I'm still mad at myself or wish I had done differently... what I feel. What's the point? It's over with. It's done and there's no changing the past.

(She turns, as if to an unseen customer.)

Get up and get it yourself! You can see I'm talking here. Pot's there in plain sight! You got legs! Get your cream 'n sugar too while you're at it!

(She pauses slightly.)

I was on Marston Avenue up where the road curves round real sharp, down by the greenway, where the pumping station's at. And you know how the cars are, how they're always taking that turn a little too fast. Three times, since I been here—and I've been here all my life – three times cars'll go skidding and crash straight into that house that's right there. The one with the brick that's all messed up from the cars that keep smashing into it. Fixed it the first time, but after that why bother? Good money after bad. But that's all besides the point, because I wasn't speeding. I never speed. I'm a good driver. I never had a ticket in my life. Never had an accident.

(She pauses slightly.)

But that day there was rain. And there was fuckin' Pete, out walking like some kind of dumbass without a coat even. Walking over to the farm co-op or to Shanks with that crap load of flyers he had printed up. "Rapture is Coming!" And Pete, I have to say, was always ten lugnuts loose and I'm not talking out of school if I say so. No common sense at all, and all of the people in this town, they're like "Oh poor Pete, poor poor Pete" and shaking their heads in that way they do. But I'm like, to hell with Pete, Pete pisses me off, 'cause it ain't like he's slow, He ain't slow one bit, he's a screw up is all. Or *was*, I mean. Always getting himself into something 'cause he doesn't use his head, ambling around this town with that aw shucks

grin he had, handing out that crap just to get himself inside a house where maybe they'll offer him a sit and a piece of cake, a whole meal even, expecting people'll let it pass, the things he'd do, fooled by the rapture. Had 'em all fooled. But not me. And he knew it. Was smart enough not to come in here causing any of that mischief of his I can tell you that. Winking that droopy eye of his and asking for putting a flyer up in the window and a slice of pie when both of us knew he hadn't any money to pay for it...figuring if it sure as hell weren't me, some other of the regulars were gonna say, "Pie's on me today, Pete." Katz would do it, lot of 'em...even though they knew I'd always shoot 'em a look for doing so. "It's Pete," they'd say. "It's just poor Pete."

(She pauses.)

But I was driving down Marston rounding that curve, and suddenly there's Pete right in front of me, he's just there all of a sudden running into the middle of the road. And thank god I got fast reflexes or I would've just run him over, so I slam on my brakes hard and I'm out'a the truck in a flash and I grab him and I'm up in his face shaking him and I'm like, what the hell is wrong with you I could'a just run you over, I could'a just killed you right now. But Pete he ain't even listening, he's babbling about having a revelation 'cause he just saw something that put the fear of God into him and did I know that the dead live on in particles of free floating energy in the atmosphere like an electrical current or sound wave and that the Rapture is here, the Rapture is now, and now he's scared and do I know what he's supposed to do next, what's he's supposed to do. And I'm like, I look at Pete and he's still talking and I'm like, Pete, I really don't need this right now. It raining and I just got off work and it was one of those days, the freezer broke down for good and the one of the cooks didn't show and I had to run the grill and now my carpal tunnel is acting up and I don't even want to talk about the forty pounds

of bacon and six cartons of steak I had to chuck out in the dumpster 'cause Milton Hadley from the repair says he can't make it down here til next week.

(She pauses.)

You know, sometimes I get short. I get impatient and angry, not just with Pete, with my kids, with customers, with just about anybody. And I ain't saying it to make excuses, that's who I am, take it or leave it. But I got back in my truck and left Pete standing there in the rain, jabbering and eyes rolling white. All his Rapture pamphlets spilling in the street getting soggy. I could done something, sure. Say, "Pete get in the truck." Walk him off to the side of the road. But I didn't. Went home instead. Can't do nothing about it. Was rainy. And cars take that curve too fast. Three times there's been crashes. And now four.

(She turns.)

Yeah, I heard ya, Ronnie. Jesus! Don't get your omelette and the world's gonna come to end.

(She pauses.)

I do have one of those pamphlets now though. Up in the window, see? I went back there later. After I heard. After the ambulance left and the wrecker was gone. Found it by the curb, just the one. Rain had stopped. Can still read the print, even though it's smudged a bit.

(She pauses.)

Rapture is coming. In honor of Pete. Alex Katz saw me putting it up and he gave me a look. "Go back to your painting," I told him, "The

dead are particles of free floating energy in the atmosphere like an electrical current or sound wave. Paint *that* today."

(She turns to go, but then turns back.)

Know what I heard? That at the end of his life Thomas Edison was working on inventing a machine...an *invention*...that could let the dead talk to the living. Was a thanaphone, he called it. And how he thought that when he was finished inventing it, he thought we would be able to hear the dead talking to us, like they were voices on a telephone. I think about that sometimes. When I feel like I want to get mad or feel sorry for myself. That the phone would ring...and you'd hear it like this faint *ring ring*, and you'd pick it up and at the other end would be this person you knew from a long time ago, someone who was already old when you were just a little kid...or someone that you saw one time on Marston Avenue by that bend in the road and if you had only stopped to pick him up...somebody who had to be dead, 'cause there's no way they could still be living 'cause if you did the math, you see? If you worked it out in your head, they'd be way too old to be alive, but there they were, talking to you on Edison's invention like it was no big thing, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like if the dead, see, were just what Edison and Pete figured out...an electrical current or a sound wave, and all you gotta be able to do is plug in.

(There is a slight pause. Lights change.)

*Sweat Shop*

What was it we did there? What did we produce? What we recall are the machines, the machines, the immense quantities of waste paper, the day shifts frizzing into the night shifts, and the way the time clock went off like a gunshot when you punched it, shook the prefabricated wall to which it was bolted and shifted all the cards in the rack beside it, each in its individual slot.

But most of all there was the building itself: how difficult it was to move around in its spaces, its windowless, featureless, overcrowded rooms, and its narrow, many-cornered, wavering corridors. Scuttling from department to department, tending to our daily tasks, we had to dodge each other to keep from colliding. “Excuse me.” “Oops.” “Pardon me.” “My fault.”

Approaching a blind corner, arms full: that was dangerous. Or a doorway, when someone was going out while someone else was coming in. But even in an otherwise empty passage, when two people had presumably seen each other coming, how tedious the failed dodge when walkers inevitably choose to cut in the same directions, first one way, then the other. And how tedious, when this happened, to hear the quip, “Shall we dance?” How tiresome and sad! We longed to leap upon the next colleague who uttered it, to collapse the offending jugular with our thumbs, but we never did.

Some of us began a campaign to abolish all near misses. We scissor-walked down corridors, our backs to the wall. We snuck up on doorways, peered around corners to see if the coast was clear. We placed signs over all thresholds: “Look before you leap.”

Management must have taken note. One morning we found a memo tacked up on the board. Each employee was henceforth

required to choose a personal theme song which could be sung, whistled, or loudly hummed whenever leaving his or her respective work station. They were to provide us a musical force-field to warn all others, “Watch out! I’m on the way.”

We were skeptical, at first, with our knee-jerk distrust of anything coming down from above. But when discussion arose concerning selections, the idea began to catch hold. Each of us had a favorite song. Some chose country, some show tunes, some rock. For those who could not make up their minds, a second memo offered a list of suggestions: “The Glow Worm,” “Mr. Tambourine Man,” “Three Blind Mice.”

Results surpassed all expectation. True, the first few days were chaos—a cacophony of individual tunes. But eventually all the melodies merged; we found a key, a motif, a harmony. And then how everything changed! How once we waited for the snack coach to come, stray pebbles across the parking lot, now we celebrated its arrival in crescent rows, like carolers upon a village green. Where once in the rooms and hallways, we staggered and bumped, now an Astaire-like lightness animated all our movements, now we floated, now we glided, now we flew.

Production stats spiked; whatever it was we made, we were making it more and making it better. The only thing that remained was the gambit, “Shall we dance?” Only now we really meant it. Now the line was shed of all its tired irony. We would seize each other at hand and waist and take a turn, a spin, a dip, before letting go and leaping off in our own directions.

## Arms

It seems everybody plays Arms these days.

Not that everybody should.

I once played Arms with a guy named Tommy Cassanova who was way better than me. He'd stolen a girl of mine back when we were in high school and they walked around with hickeys and had sex all the time so I hated him pretty badly back then. Her name was Allison Swanner and she was flat *covered* in freckles. Anyway, Tommy went on to play football at some big Southern college and just dumped this girl like she was nothing, like she was already used up, and it really got to me. I let it stew for a while, I'm guessing maybe ten or fifteen years, and then I challenged Tommy Cassanova to a game of Arms.

I followed all the rules.

I looked him up on the internet and went to his house wearing my nicest suit. I said we had a score to settle on account of the pain he'd caused me back when I had pimples and that the only way to solve it was to play an official game of Arms. He said, "Okay." I don't think he had a clue as to who I was, nor do I think he really remembered Allison Swanner, so I probably should have known right then he was good.

Just to say yes to a game of Arms all willy-nilly? Who does that?

Still, I'd been planning my strategy for years at that point, so I felt pretty confident. I told Tommy to meet me at high noon at my house the next day, a place I'd basically turned into a Me-versus-Tommy-Cassanova Arms court. When he got there, I brought him into the living room and asked him if he wanted a beer. He said, "You bet," just like I thought he would, so I went and got it for him.

When I got back, he was acting all casual like he wasn't worried about anything so I said, "Hey, tough guy, why don't you stand over here in this spot?" where I had put a tiny little x on the floor. He did this without question, and I thought this might be the easiest game of Arms ever. I patted him on the shoulder and walked over to another x on the floor, on the other side of the room, where I started into my speech about how a person's mind and heart are like an elephant's mind and heart and how big athletic people that go around bullying folks and stealing their girls need to get themselves ready for some serious payback.

While I did this, unbeknownst to him, I pressed my foot on a pedal I'd installed in the floor that in turn cut a long piece of string that I'd secretly run underneath the floorboards and up into the walls where it looped over a nail and held up a two-pound steel ball. Once the string was cut, the steel ball fell onto an old Lionel train track I'd set up like a ramp between the walls and rolled down into a hole that went into the basement where it fell right on top of a big metal scale (*The Scale of Justice*, I liked to call it) which got weighed down by the ball and consequently lit three long matches that I'd taped to its sides. These matches then lit three vanilla candles sitting underneath three pieces of pretty decent string and started burning them.

Tommy drank his beer while all this was happening and said, "Well, make your move." I smiled back at him and said, "Maybe I already have," and he asked me, "Have you ever even played this before?"

That's when I smelled the vanilla coming up through the floorboards and prepared myself for the sight of his big bloody death in my face.

See, those three candles were about to burn through the three pieces of string that each traveled up through a pulley and then wrapped around three separate copies of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. It's a big and heavy book, *Crime and Punishment*, perfect to use as a counter weight, and ripe with what I thought at the time

was some pretty metaphorical rightitude. So when these strings finally broke, the books fell hard and at the same time pulled down on the three pieces of wire I'd tied around them which then led up to the triggers of three shotguns I'd hidden in various angles in my living room, all facing the exact spot Tommy Cassanova was standing on.

I'd always imagined it to be my greatest victory, this moment, but when I pulled out my camera to capture it, all I heard were the clicks of three shotgun triggers with no buckshot buzzing afterward. And the real irony was that I'd also connected my foot pedal to start a timer so that exactly one and three quarter minutes after I'd set things in motion, a trap door in the ceiling above Tommy's head would open and drop three dozen daisies on what I thought would surely be his dead and bullet-riddled body. So when all those daisies fell and he was still alive, I dropped my camera and was like, *shit*.

Tommy finished off his beer like this was no big deal and crushed the can against his chest. Then he leaned over and brushed some daisies off my end table and set the flattened beer can down all gentle and polite. He reached into his pocket and pulled out three shotgun shells. "I found these when you were off getting me that beer," he said. "So, I guess it's my turn now?"

"I guess so," I said.

Some people are just better at Arms than others.

Some people don't over-think it, you know? Tommy was that kind of player.

So he began.

He walked over and grabbed me by the throat, lifted me off the ground, and rammed his fist into my testicles enough times for me to lose count. Then he slung me to the ground, knelt on my face, and slammed his pinky finger far enough into my ear to burst the drum, sending hot fluid dripping in through my sinuses. After this he took down his pants and displayed his considerable member. It was his idea that this particular piece of his anatomy should be the

last thing that I ever saw clearly in life and so he proceeded to crush my eye sockets with the camera. Then he called 911 and left me concussed on my own living room floor.

Like I said, he was good.

But this story isn't about him. This is about the game of Arms, in general, and how it's changed since Tommy and I had our go.

Let me tell you.

Just last week, when I finally woke up from my coma, I found out that several years have passed since me and Tommy, and that Arms is way more popular now. It's like everybody plays it all the time and so some of the rules have gotten out of whack. People do stuff like stash snakes in random vending machines, crash cars into lobbies, strap bombs under ice cream trucks, things like that. I've never seen any of this, of course. Nowadays I can only see vague shapes and shadows out of these thick prescription glasses they gave me on account of my eyes. But the nurses all tell me to be careful out there, because the game has *really* caught on.

Despite that, when I get my release from the hospital, it feels good to be back on the street. I make my way up the first blurry-looking road that I come to and finally get a sense of where I am from the smell. It's like a mixture of bread and hot sugar and there's this place called Tony's Donuts still in business. The owner apparently recognizes me from my pre-coma years and leads me to a nice, comfy booth. "You look like shit," he tells me, and I say, "Do I?" and he pats me on the back and gets me some food.

After I eat, I leave Tony's Donuts and start walking. People are running through the streets all around me. Out of my one good ear I hear what sounds like explosions, but I can't be sure. A couple of hours go by and I think I've finally found my old house because I pick up the smell of vanilla, just like I did when I played Tommy Cassanova at Arms. It turns out I've just walked in a circle, though, and am now back at Tony's Donuts where he is cooking up some crullers with icing. He leads me back to the booth I sat in before,

slides me a plate, and says, "I could get used to you being blind," and we both laugh.

Tony's an honest guy. I like him.

Maybe if I'd have been honest with Tommy Cassanova, I figure, I wouldn't be in this spot I'm in now. If I would have just been up-front with him, instead of rigging all those secret devices, instead of giving him a beer and guiding him to the spot I wanted him, maybe things would have been different. If I would have just said, look Tommy, I don't like you and I want to play Arms, then maybe I would have stood a chance.

Or maybe not.

Maybe Arms just isn't the game for me.

You've got to be smart and not clever, I figure. So I just eat my hot cruller and try to remember how to get back to my house from here. I see shadows hurry past the shop windows. I feel hot icing drip down on my chin.

Damn, these things are good.

I had forgotten.

MARK NEELY

### *Song*

I toss and sweat and thrash away the sheets  
Under the blade of a bright half-moon,  
Caught between waking—poplar branches  
Screeching against the yellow siding—and dream,  
Where a weather-beaten dock shivers in the surge,  
Whipping dead boats with their own moorings.  
I guess this headache's getting good. You used  
To run a finger through the gauzy dust  
Behind the desk and yes, a year of moths  
Still crumbles on the sills. Now you're off  
On your big adventure, your hands on sailors' zippers,  
God knows where your mouth. I flashlight around  
The house, smashing beams through windowpanes  
Until the shades swing in like empty sails.

*Bright Refuge*

[Candy]

Some years I had a fear of stairs, of being pushed. I imagined the fall, its knocks and blows, the sequence of it not unlike days in a week. The old steps would close behind me, panels in a painted fan, each new stop a discovery: rib, wrist, shin, bone, jaw, throat, nail. When pregnant, I thought only of the womb's fall: would it bounce like a ball? Deflate like a bicycle tire? The rolling downward would be a disaster, but one so magnificent it could color a whole season. Imagine losing one's pocketbook, keys, an earring, glasses, the lot—with only a silk scarf left behind to tell it. In my picture, as I fall I'm praying: When I get there, let this floor vanish. Let it be secret like the surface of water. Let me be light, swallowed up, slender as fins. Please. Let me not be missed.

[Arlene]

In those days, I was a good villain. I didn't have to push; only to make the fear. It was so easy tinting the water, making clear the moment just before the fall. The air tells its stories of vice and discipline, whispers of ghosts and consequences. For me, there is only the planting of the smallest grain of sand upon the most tender part, and whatever needs putting down will rise up, expose itself: a rosy little weakness. The difference between callous and wound is such a small one, and the mind is schooled in ruin. The buzzing of a fly in the ear means disaster; a broken twig, disaster. She waits for instructions, fears the signs. I say, get there first. No one else can choose your mouth.

*Doll*

Candy perches—the couch's edge a fragile branch—demurely. At dinner, the noise of the forks had been unbearable, the silences between so thick her mother had tried to spear them. Father in town for a visit. Now to sing. Now to balance on a hollow reed. Her white socks uncertain in their maryjanes swing wildly. *Mister*, she says, *Do you have any pets?* He is bigger than the door, he is a door sitting down and closed. He fidgets his fingers, picks at the nails. How long is fifteen minutes. *Won't you cry when I leave?* He holds out his hand, a beckoning gesture, leads her toward the back door, through the kitchen. *You won't cry when I leave?* He brandishes a silver nutcracker, places—delicately but with intent—one of Candy's fingers inside, squeezes. She closes her eyes against the pain. *Mister, I don't cry.* Mother cracks the door, father tosses the nutcracker like a handkerchief or a handful of snow. *Come on, Doll, give Daddy a kiss before he leaves.*

Years later, she recalls what she'd certainly learned at four: all the letters and numbers to signify name, age, address and phone, the hour of bedtime, when to be quiet, how to mind manners, how to keep score. How, then, to decipher when the letters make the wrong name, the numbers a foreign code? What are all the hours? And who is the opponent? The doctor presses; she remembers a pocket's worth of information, hides the fingers there.

S U S A N W I C K S

*The English Couples*

Is it the quality of light  
leaking from the walls of buildings  
like an unkept secret, or the weeping planes  
trailing their thin gold  
in the water, swans drifting together and apart  
between the leaves that float  
like lace on the still surface? The bells  
cough out their quarter-hours  
over gilded scrollwork; fur  
fringes the mouths of bridges.  
A sudden smell of drains  
gusts on a corner, as if a door  
had swung suddenly open downstairs.

High over northern Europe, I saw the town  
slide like a coin under my dark wing  
and remembered stars  
shaking in water: now I'm the one that blinks  
and slips sideways as a street blurs  
to a scallop of stepped gables  
where the gentle English couples  
walk up and down.

M E L I S S A D I C K E Y

*Geography Lessons*

Mapped the lake's little bicep.  
Lovely the trace of coast and lovely the new world.

Followed the geese through spotlights.  
Gun-chased geese. Geese leaving lakes.

Won't they counsel on wind and weather,  
drop articles of truth.

Made a vestibule  
and then, a tabernacle.

Placed a pieced, a feathered memento,  
decoupage of bone and trinkets in there good.

Then there were all those other birds, of course.  
Which.  
The ones in the eaves.

Isn't it messy—gathering, foretelling.

Flattened my palms to the dwelling.  
Should something sacred be covered.

Turned the handle, pulled the door.  
What do you think flew out.

C H R I S F O R H A N

*And*

They also build small coffins, for dwarves and children.  
And I have parallel parked successfully nineteen times in a row.

Summer's tired; vines untwine; the dusk light couldn't fill an abandoned barn.  
And I have a handful of quarters left, enough for a box of sparklers.

Hounds bound down from the hills, blood on their muzzles; fields  
of asphalt surrounding the fundamentalist church fill with minivans.

And I am fond of rickets, the ring of it. So many kinds of pie!  
I have fallen for someone with eyes like baby mice in snow.

I am bedizened with jewels. I am wearing the coat of a dandy.  
The bufflehead duck would talk to me, but now he circles,

unsolicitous, masked, upon the pond. I am keen to wait.  
I am keen to calculate the number of the mysteries. So far six.

C H R I S F O R H A N

*Nothing to It*

My mind a lake of milk: a lack  
of after, of before—all song

fallen from the ear, astonishment  
gone small in me, a trinket

jingling in my sleep. Smirkless  
face, past quotation. Grave's

taste fading on the tongue,  
then hardtack, then nothing,

then one brushstroke betokens me.  
No predicate. Weightless

as a page erased. And a sprig  
of timothy for devastation.

*Waylaid*

Crickets in Buffalo click, abounding blue  
of old New York State. Other colors fled  
with the young—nobody thinks back on this town, nobody.  
And her apartment full of cigarettes—Charlie  
doesn't smoke anymore, but he likes it, likes  
to see how her bottom has flared out with time, how  
she pulls the blouse over her farm-girl breasts  
and protests  
that she loves her husband but he's just like  
the farm itself—axle squeak  
and parallel rows and obsessed with rain.  
No nose for the city. She needs more, could go all night  
with one like Charlie. Lucky the clouds cracked  
to cancel his flight, to take her  
where chance meets possibility. All night  
her heart a-bloom. In another life  
she carries him toward his dreams. All night.  
He feels it too, knows  
she might be that angel, the one  
that undoes compromise. Her cries  
delight in it. Coils unspring. Earpop.  
Skinglide. They watch the sun come up, red in the haze  
of long dead factories, of the nearby airport.  
He'll never be in Buffalo again. Never,  
except by chance. Except when halfway home  
rain undries his life by accident

or by necessity or by Nature demanding  
more of him, demanding  
no future go to waste, demanding  
some color in the blue of this place.

LYNNE POTTS

*Made in China*

Here's a shoestring day as ambling through forsythia  
and shagbark hickory I come to Long Island's shore;

I don't belong; it's someone else's property; damp hill  
slip, slightly swampish, I'm leaf-sogged under sole

fishy too in a prehistoric way, this waterside thicket  
where I watch a flock of mergansers and least terns,

an air-thin bag caught phlegm-like on a branch,  
flattened black inner tube, and one waterlogged shoe,

lace gone, floated from somewhere else, down shore,  
or China where factory workers cobble and sew

so many hours, exhausted, they quit at age twenty-five  
slumping back to bamboo villages, plastic glass windows

and history wagging on, needing renewal, though  
not incremental, as the future comes crashing

through the bushes, me here, in a cavity of shore-view,  
trash and all that's heavy on my heart which is metaphor

since who can say show how junk comes and goes  
rubbery topsider, loosed tongue, no strings attached.

KAREN AN-HWEI LEE

*Sutura Vera or True*

Letter: Sutura vera or true. Of the heart's indented articulations.

Dream: Diastole, opening or dilation. Systole, sending blood into  
outer regions. Core of body, cradled fellowship therein, who can go  
inside. Comes out as silk enters in, rain sung sotto. *Yu* for rain *yu* for  
fish and *yu* in the way of perfume. *Yu shiang*. Not entering with long  
needles for burning, not even with arthrodia, gliding joints in tarsal  
articulations. Grotto of healing tears. Read this blooming mauve  
without memory of rheumatism.

Prayer: Coronary for anything related to the heart, even a milk  
thistle garden.

Desired: Seven boxes for moving, a certain blue chess piece now  
lost, colored beta fish bred in rainwater, red annelids for compost-  
ing, two million in cold cash overseas, someone to paint a room  
the color of her mother's eyes, one emerald acre of rainforest any-  
where in the world, and lots of broken musical instruments. A loop  
in the woman's signature, robin's breast red.

Dream: Of the last word, paraphernalia.

## *This Particular War*

### BEFORE IT BEGINS

Love is not the same as admiration. Love is not the same as fancy, or adoration, or even respect. I love Betool Khedairi's *Absent*. At some point I was in love, which is a different thing altogether, but now the book and I have moved past that; we are committed. We have fused ourselves into one thing: part-me, part-book.

I came to possess this copy of Khedairi's *Absent* because my husband was charmed by the dust jacket. He had stopped into a bookstore in Cairo while I was elsewhere in the city, visiting with friends, drinking too many cups of tea with too much sugar. He knew I wouldn't buy the book myself (English-language books in Cairo are painfully expensive), but he also knew that I couldn't be angry with him for spending too much money on a book.

I didn't read it right away. Our home is a deluge of books I haven't read. There are more than a dozen bookshelves, and then there are piles of unshelved books, which grow unsteady under their own weight and begin to slide. There are books from the library, books from stores, from friends, from Goodwill. There are books that I'm in the middle of reading, or rereading. So this one, *Absent*, had to join a strange, unsteady queue. If it had been written by an Egyptian woman, it would have surfaced much sooner, but Iraq is outside my area of knowledge. I had failed to imagine Iraq, the sites being bombed, the confusing array of names, the people in power and no longer in power, the power grid, the sewage system, the millions of refugees and the near-million dead.

I hadn't let myself know too much about Iraq. People live through daily bombings, dirty water, little or no access to health

care, power cuts, food shortages, chemicals in the air, uranium in the ground, and I protect myself from knowing. I let myself know just about the surface of it—the numerical values, the number of dead—and this protects me from knowing any further, from knowing about the texture of human lives, their particular imaginations. I knew just enough to feel justified in forming an opinion, and, once an opinion was formed, I could stop learning anything new. So I formed a half-baked opinion about liberty and justice and peace and freedom and free love for everyone. And then I went back into daily life.

I finally picked up *Absent* during a spring holiday. I'd done some spring-cleaning. I'd moved things around in my office and set up a new bookshelf so instead of sliding piles of books, the books all looked at me, patient and polite, spine-first. I chose Betool Khedairi not because I was entranced by the hot-pink, bright-blue, mustard-colored cover. I chose her because she seemed to have nothing to do with my teaching or my studies and because the dust jacket made her book seem, I guess, sufficiently frivolous.

### THE DUST JACKET

An old woman lifts a chipped porcelain cup and tips it forward. Inside are the grounds of Turkish coffee. The woman's eyes are lidded, suspicious, and she covers her mouth with a swath of black fabric. As if the air, too, is poisonous. The sky behind her is a flat, neon pink and on her chest is written BETOOL KHEDAIRI. Below that, in puffy blue letters: *Absent*.

This is the jacket to Betool Khedairi's second novel. Everything is odd-sized, angular, bright. Hot pink, turquoise blue, mustard yellow. The old woman's hand is far out of proportion with her face. She's pushing the dried coffee grounds up at you, potential book-buyer.

You are unconvinced. So? There is still the hot pink, bright blue, mustard yellow promotional summary. On the front flap:

“Affectionate, wry, and darkly comical, *Absent* paints a moving portrait of resourceful individuals struggling to get by in impossible circumstances.” These “resourceful individuals” seem to have been torn from the pages of popular magazines. Smiling faces are collaged onto “impossible circumstances.” The faces stay the same. Only the background—1990s Baghdad—is new.

We’re told about the zany cast of characters:

- 1) Umm Mazin: The wise fortune-teller woman.
- 2) Saad: The gay male hairdresser.
- 3) Ilham: The postcolonial nurse with dreamy half-Western roots.

The blurb might well have said “Arab terrorist” or “oppressed Arab woman.” One minute after reading it, it is impossible to remember. Was there a wise old woman? Or—no—a foolish old man? Fortunately, the blurb doesn’t reflect the book. Ilham dreaming of her French mother? As if she were a girl on a frilly bed. Ilham would choke.

Ilham might have a laugh at this, chain smoking while seducing the local butcher. She would make faces while the summary-voice intones: “...Dalal falls in love for the first time against a background of surprise arrests, personal betrayals, and a crumbling social fabric that turns neighbors into informants.” The camera zooms in on a dark-haired beauty. Her face is a mask of surprise: her eyebrows raised, her mouth open. She claps a delicate hand to beautiful, bow-shaped lips.

But dust jackets are supposed to be like this. They are supposed to smell of candy and rotten fish, and be oddly seductive. They are supposed to promise the positive, uplifting ending. “Tightly crafted and skillfully told, *Absent* is a haunting portrait of life under sanctions, the fragile emotional ties between individuals, and, ultimately, the resilience of the human spirit.” Now the dust jacket gets carried away with its own fluency. There is a rainbow. A sunset. We’re walking hand-in-hand over the horizon into happily-ever-afterland!

Fortunately, Betool Khedairi rains on this parade.

#### THE BOOK BEGINS

But before the book begins, you’ve caught a glimpse of something. You’ve had plenty of glimpses even before *Absent* was first published in Arabic in 2004. These glimpses were called the “War in Iraq,” or the “Gulf War,” or the conflict between Kuwaitis and Iraqis, Kurds and Iraqis, Sunnis and Shiites. You recognize that these names are wrong (otherwise the “War in Iraq” would be a civil conflict, an internal dispute, a marital spat or something from which, if one were truly polite, one would avert one’s eyes). These Iraqis must be fighting themselves, or else they’re fighting shadows.

When you open up Betool Khedairi’s *Absent*, it is the shadows that draw you in. Before you open the book, you see an older woman on the cover, dressed in black, her face half-covered. You open to the first pages and there hovers the space where Dalal’s parents should have been. (The parents, a housewife and an engineer, ran over a land mine in the Sinai Desert.) Her parents are killed, but our infant-narrator is ejected from the car, shot out, missile-like, into the dry, lonely desert. Our narrator then takes the place where another child should have been, with her childless aunt and uncle. But Dalal’s aunt and uncle, while they agree to raise her, do not become Umm Dalal and Abu Dalal. Instead, her uncle asks to be called Abu Ghayeb, Father of the Absent. His wife is Mother of the Absent.

The book travels past this moment, which is told in Dalal’s looking-back voice, her you-can’t-see-me voice. In this way, she is another, shadowy, absence. You can see with Dalal’s eyes, but you cannot turn and see her. (You try to move your head quickly because if she didn’t see you coming, perhaps, you could catch a glimpse of her lop-sided face.) Exactly how old is she? What does she want out of life? Is she real, or is she another ghost? She guides you through the building just as her uncle once guided foreign tourists through Iraqi ruins. Is it possible that the foreigners never saw Dalal’s uncle, either?

The book doesn't begin with a fast-paced narrative. It lacks romance and car chases and there is only the thread of managing to get through the day, day after day after day. There is no apparent "plot" (in the sense of scheming, conspiring) but you find that you are unable to put down the book, and you detach from it only reluctantly. You have to move from page to page to see what horrible thing comes next, like a car wreck or a documentary about slow starvation.

It's not the plot that draws you on, and while you might not express it like this, part of the book's appeal is the sick-prurient feeling that comes with guilt. You are one of the book's darkest shadows. The third chapter begins with the epigraph: "Between 16 January and 27 February [1991] some 88,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Iraq, an explosive tonnage judged equivalent to seven Hiroshima-sized bombs. Thus for a period of the war, Iraq was subjected to the equivalent of one atomic bomb a week, a scale of destruction that has no parallels in the history of warfare." The narrator may be afraid, here, that you aren't paying attention. She clears her throat and leans toward you; she puts a hand on your shoulder and shouts the second half of the quotation into your ear in case you are reading too carelessly (because you might be trying to skim, since of course this is war, and war is hell, but she wants you to see past the general hell, to the war's particular nature, because every war is also particular).

In the opening scenes of the book, Umm Ghayeb is dusting a black mask. Abu Ghayeb, her husband, is a failed artist and a collector, and the two barely tolerate one another. Umm Ghayeb hates the gaping, staring mask that seems to want to speak about the past, or the present, or the future. She mutters: "Protocols! Protocols! Isn't starving civilians considered an unethical and inhuman form of warfare?"

You realize, even at this early moment, that she is not really talking to the mask, because Umm Ghayeb is very practical, and she does not waste time talking to masks when she could be out earning. She is talking to the shadow behind the mask. You can feel,

looking sideways, looking quickly enough over your shoulder, that she is talking to you. Perhaps you dismiss this as a fault of the novel because, after all, sermonizing is an unforgivable habit, particularly when you are the butt-end of the sermon.

The first chapters of the book move, in tiny shattered fragments, around these masks and shadows. The book creates and undoes, and darkens, and darkens, and darkens. The few survivors seem to think that they shouldn't be survivors; they keep on looking over their shoulders; they seem not to trust themselves to be real. The children who exist are the wrong children. There was another country called Iraq that was supposed to have been.

#### THE MIDDLE CHAPTERS

The narrator's aunt sighs: "Where are we now from the good old days?" This is what Dalal's aunt moans and moans about in Betool Khedairi's second novel. At its center, the book seems to pine for the "good old days." The days before the blockade. The younger Saddam Hussein.

Dalal reports: "This is her usual introduction to a new phase of whining." Dalal's aunt grouches. Grumbles. Whimpers. She can't adapt to Iraq's changed circumstances. Can't accept the blockade. Can't accept the loss of her husband's affection. Can't live in the present. Worse, the looming future.

But as much as Dalal's aunt would like to wedge her way back into Iraq's "Days of Plenty," she cannot.

Dalal's aunt is not the only character mesmerized by the past. Dalal knows that, if things had been different, she could have had surgery. She could have had a normal face. She could have had two parents. She could have been beautiful, worn lipstick, eaten hard-boiled eggs every day.

Ilham, the nurse, is also trapped in the past. She contemplates the French mother who abandoned her when she was six months old. She thinks about the old woman particularly "when we take the

bodies of dead babies and send them off to be incinerated to prevent the spread of disease.” She chain smokes. She sleeps with the local butcher.

Uncle Sami is blind from diabetes. He sits in the dark and gropes his way back to his dead wife. A housewife. A woman who he always thought was a dumb, useless cow. Until his blindness. Now he sits and imagines what she would write in a diary.

Only Dalal’s uncle changes. And changes. He is probably having an affair, but we don’t mind. My God, we think: It’s a spark of life. He’s accepting the horrible, confusing, living present.

#### NEARING THE END

Once I’d begun to read Betoool Khedairi’s *Absent*, it would not let me go. It grabbed me and held me captive. It kindled an infatuation with the world of 1990s Baghdad. An infatuation with the failed artist, Abu Ghayeb. An infatuation with his art. I fell in love with Abu Ghayeb’s paintings, crowded into his apartment like my hundreds of books, everywhere, staring at people, making their statements. Abu Ghayeb can’t afford decent food, or coffee, but he buys paintings. I fell in love with his angry sermons about Iraqi history, given to flight attendants and strangers and directly to the readers of the book. I told my husband that, if things were different, I would desperately want to travel to Baghdad. My husband looked at me as if he had just discovered the exact shape of the hole in my head. He gave me a faint smile, the smile reserved for people who’ve said something unimaginably, unforeseeably stupid.

Dalal, our narrator, stays almost entirely within the bounds of a single apartment building, but the book is never claustrophobic. Everything in the world can be found in this building: art, culture, love, beauty, practical economy, resilience, hatred, dignity. The book is a mosaic, but it doesn’t feel postmodern because the tiles weren’t smashed on purpose. They are found objects, fragments of stories that are glued back into an approximate, good-as-possible sort of order.

If things were different, I tell my husband, just as Betoool Khedairi seems to be telling me. He looks at me, his brow knotted. Sure, he says. My heart stumbles when he says this, because I have already imagined our trip to Baghdad; I have already imagined how it will smell when I step off the plane; how the ground will feel beneath my touch. Of course I am seeing a Baghdad that doesn’t exist any more, and even this Baghdad only existed as a fiction, as an understanding or a misunderstanding between me and this book.

I fall in love, and Dalal falls in love with the first young man who appears in her apartment building. And why not? The young man seems decent enough. He says he makes false limbs for people who’ve lost their own in explosions. He makes love seriously, and well enough.

I expected (as I always expect, despite all evidence) that meeting the right man could fix everything in Dalal’s life. As meeting the right book could fix everything in mine. It could undo the war; it could put things right with her aunt and uncle; it could straighten out her face into a beautiful, commercial-friendly smile.

#### THE END

Things slide off quickly at the end of Khedairi’s second novel. It’s as though, when Khedairi was nearly done, her narrator suddenly recognized some terrible fact. She saw, in the distance, what was to come. She stared into the future and spoke these last few pages. Before that, the novel might have become something hopeful. It might have justified the dust-jacket copy. You never know.

But the promise is false. At the very end of the book, when things are supposed to become clear and hopeful, we slide off into an apocalyptic version of Iraq’s past-future. Dalal forgets her education, her bright future, and gives up everything. Almost. She gives up everything except the alphabet. *Alif, ba, taa, thaa*. Everything else ceases to exist, and a great, unnamed evil hangs over the last pages of the book, a terrifying and barely comprehensible future. Dalal hangs on to the alphabet. That is all that remains in this particular war.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Constance: Delicate Burdens*

Edited by Erik Kieseewetter and Patrick Strange

New Orleans: Constance Project, 2008

Reviewed by Alan Williams

If the premier issue of *Constance*, titled *Replicas & Replacements*, sang out like the unexpected call of a post-Katrina phoenix, its triumphant note has been tuned darker in *Delicate Burdens*, the new New Orleans art and literary journal's second issue. It's a more dimensional, truer tone containing the riff that victory and defeat, survival and death, can often mean the same. The injury of the hurricane and added insult of bureaucratic morass haunt these pieces, whether created as direct responses or in the aftermath's shadow by no other choice. "These fragments I have shored against my ruin," wrote T. S. Eliot in "The Wasteland," and the forty-six New Orleans artists gathered here have written, photographed, painted, collaged, sculpted and executed designs to buttress the levees within.

What it means to be a New Orleans artist was radically redefined on August 29, 2005, a fact brought home, in more ways than one, by *Constance's* argument that biography is handmaid to artistic interpretation. By turns confessional, cheeky, and quixotic, contributor profiles are laid out on the same page as the works, offering the answer to the reader's reflexive question, "Did he/she return to rebuild or move elsewhere?" The collection, then, serves as a bitter-sweet reunion for the determined who remained, those who were displaced and fought to return, and others who have embraced a form of exile.

By extension, a dialectic between staying and going, at least between the short fiction and poetry, may be expected, but that isn't

the case. (Intriguingly, that tension is best on display in *Constance* being a collaborative publication; editors Erik Kieseewetter and Patrick Strange made opposite decisions about living in the city and relocating.) Instead, the pieces scrutinize, interrogate and wrestle with what it means to fashion a home in today's New Orleans, both as a changed city and as a state of mind.

Among the most potent is the triptych of Frank Relle's eerie nightscape photos of flood-damaged and desolate homes with Patrick Strange's prose musings. Less like stand-alone snap fiction and more like Paul Madonna's *All Over Coffee* series (pen-and-ink drawings of San Francisco structures coupled with conversation scraps or zen-like, synaptic epiphanies), these structures turn prismatic through ventriloquy. Like one-time and possibly future occupants, the shelters are vulnerable refuges ("I settle into routines easily and get lonely when nobody's around late at night"), false comforts to be abandoned ("I finally ran out of breath near the old shipping yard and wished that for just once, this was some wide-open plain where I could run forever and never have to worry about hitting water"), and ruined vessels testifying to, and afflicted by, the zeitgeist of Katrina-land ("Currently Vacant but Hanging on for Dear Life").

Throughout *Delicate Burdens*, home frequently contains less framework and more emptiness, spatial and otherwise. "My porch is gone so I sit / where it used to be," writes Katie Bowler in "Sticks and Leaves," echoing the need to situate oneself in the locale of loss for reconciliation. In "At 30," which advises "moving from a house is not the same as losing it," stranding one on an "eye-land of ferocious outcomes," Megan Burns concludes:

I miss the thread of my life in a terrible way  
but that too has become something of a watery promise  
amid images and photographs, it's a land you can visit anytime

where something once was  
was torn down  
somehow this space spells progress  
somehow this space is what's left of disaster

That void demands reverence despite the ache to fill and cover it. In-scribing such lacunae with “all the words I ever thought I had a right to and all the words I ever thought might say just the right thing” is the task Burns takes up in “Fair Trade,” but it’s a breathless, unfeasible pipedream amounting to another form of erasure: “the world would be clear and the hole would be full and anyone could pass right over it / without ever knowing what lay beneath what I had to put down to get from there to here.”

Metamorphosis also percolates through these pages. In “FEMA-Trailer Train” by Andy Young, a parade of trailers evolves out of another federalization:

tanks lined up  
  
like this a year two? ago  
the green lurch of them  
each gun raised the same  
  
way like compass needles

Meanwhile, Anne Gisleson’s “Stroller” enumerates how the city—its detritus from history and poverty, including “endless chains of FEMA trailers of the blankest, most despairing and hopeful white you’ll ever see”—jolts and impresses through a stroller to become part and parcel of the child within. Pushed through the city’s contradictions, the stroller’s contents grow into an uneasy assemblage and the stroller itself into a cargo ship “stacked stories high with

maroon and robin’s egg blue containers, heading towards the Gulf of Mexico, cruising and laden towards much larger seas.” All transformations are not so unwitting. Indeed they are key to survival, as in Richard Collins’ “When the Last Bookshop in New Orleans is About to Close”:

These are all good omens, very auspicious,  
for when disaster strikes  
there’s nothing like these new and improved dreams  
recycled from organic tissues harvested from the fungal stems  
of your own cells drowned in the rain.

That ability to regenerate via envisioning, especially when social and political odds may be stacked against it, is a lesson to reteach and relearn. That need explains, in part, the large percentage of work with children as its subject in *Delicate Burdens*. C. W. Cannon tells “Bend It Like Spiderman” through the free-wheeling, hyper-deductive perspective of a grade schooler, whose best friend’s house “got broken in the storm,” while in “Atsa Rap,” Michael Patrick Welch teaches young kids to rap with a drum machine. Structuring the biographical piece ironically as a syllabus, Welch exposes the gulf between linear frameworks for imparting information and the subjective, zigzagging interpretations on the receiving end. Conversely, it is kids who dispense all-too-clear and unwanted lessons on street-life socioeconomics to a contractor’s assistant in “Mazant St.” by Berman Black.

Not only has *Constance* cemented its reputation as a creative forum and cultural artifact with *Delicate Burdens*, but it has demonstrated what we may expect from the book in the future. Like *Ninth Letter* and a handful of other new publications, *Constance* makes the case that, as the role of digital technology continues to evolve, the book may accrue greater significance in lives as a literary object in

which style and substance, tone and texture, passion and purpose, fuse singularly between covers.

In other words, from the blurred designs of the inside cover and title page, as if the copy in hand was waterlogged and drying out, *Delicate Burdens* announces that it continues to weather the storm. That it's a beguiling testament to the necessity of bearing witness and a testament to New Orleans as an inimitable setting for art. That it welcomes high and low culture, the published and the unpublished, just as its inescapable city embraces the sacred and profane. That from humble beginnings, its very existence is, in fact, a minor miracle.

*Duties of the Spirit* by Patricia Fargnoli

Tupelo Press, 2005

Reviewed by Ilya Kaminsky

With majority of poets of her generation employed as college professors, Patricia Fargnoli's position of an aging woman writing about life at the poverty-level in America is unique and special. Let me correct myself right away: it is special, first of all, not for its subjects but for the lyricism and passion of its language. And yet, it is the subject matter that so clearly drives her poetry, empowers it. There are two poets in America who have been justly celebrated for writing about the same subjects for years: Phillip Levine (poverty, working class) and Stanley Kunitz (aging). And, yet, while she has clearly learned from both, Patricia Fargnoli has found her own distinct place, and from there she speaks with a moving—and, at its best, deeply spiritual, wise—voice that tells us about what it means to live in our time.

Fargnoli is not a poet who hesitates, or is afraid of people. Her beautiful second full-length book, *Duties of the Spirit*, is filled with

names, situations, invocations, animals, human characters of strangers and dear ones, dying and staying alive whatever the cost.

Now, the obvious question arises: how, given the heaviness of these subjects, can this poet—or, for this matter, any poet—achieve wisdom and grace in the space of a one or sometimes two, pages? Fargnoli does it in several ways. Her trademark is perhaps her ability to juxtapose the direct, open, often rhythmical, statement such as “Yes, I am getting old; / Yes, being poor takes too much out of me” with an image that is unexpected, but gratifying: “Here is the safe way station, filled with the seaweed / Scent of salt. The waves emit light / As if from a thousand windows.” Generous image and the directness of tone are the tools Fargnoli finds most useful.

But it is not that simple. For instance, when I say “directness of tone,” I mean more than one thing; what in the previous example constituted mere two lines in the act of accepting the inevitable, can in another poem (“Happiness”) extend through the two-page long, precise and quite painful observation, spoken by a woman who looks at the old photograph of “the old couple sit[ing] on the stone ledge to their stucco house / laughing, while bells ring in the village.”

In “Happiness,” Fargnoli's directness of phrase and voice are the tools of tightly controlled passion. We begin with looking at the photograph where “the man has one of those flat wool caps the Irish wear. / Maybe they are Irish and have lived through The Troubles. / Maybe they remember hunger. // And because they are old, I know people died in their lives. / Friends with hearts that burned out, sons caught / in crossfire—something like that.” Okay, direct enough; almost innocent enough. But at this moment, very quickly, we get inside the mind of not just the speaker, but these people in the photograph: “They know this, but they don't think about it.” Then the movement shifts, and we are in the future—or, what must have been the future, the realm of prediction: “I'll bet they buried

him in his absence of teeth / with his back horn-rimmed glasses // and her next to him under a matching stone / in her scrubbed-thin dress, her blue socks, her sandals, / Bet they kept her watch on." The passion grows larger, it is on fire, the details make things grow hot, each next detail, precise as it is, makes us feel the heat.

At this moment in the poem, Fagnoli shifts the gear again, and gives us a broader picture—we see the city: "In Sorrento, the widows come with buckets of water" and then, one stanza later we are back at the direct address: "I'd like to do something like that for these two. / I'd bring them bread. / I'd ask them // do you remember the day of the photograph / or why you were happy?" Here, at the poem's finale, she is addressing us, herself, and the page: "I doubt they'd know it— / happiness arrives for one moment / and then flees past the sheep." The happiness of the final words is earned: it is lived through, both in the lives of the characters on the photograph discussed, in the life of a poem and its author meditating in front of us, and in ourselves, as we read it, as we go from one emotion to next, as a mood shifts, as the wisdom arrives on its heels. The poem becomes both the story and the lyric address; it is built on precise physical images, direct statements in which the author both argues with herself and learns something in the end. The final idea of happiness is unexpected perhaps, and yet it is there.

There are many poems like this one in the book: "Arguing Life for Life," which is about overcoming suicide, or "Locked," about being left alone in the middle of a suburban prairie, with one's car locked at the parking lot, in the very early a.m. and no one to call for help. But to describe such poems in this way is to do them great injustice for each of them is extremely theatrical, each a little play that is staged right in front of us, as if it is going on our own open palm as we speak. What gives these poems power—in addition to their meticulous design and poise—is Fagnoli's passion. This poet can be lyrical and passionate, narrative and passionate, humorous and pas-

sionate, erotic and passionate, wise and passionate, silly and passionate, despairing and passionate, even somewhat cold and controlled and still, somehow, passionate within that frame.

Things that move Fagnoli most, as mentioned above, old age and poverty, allow her to talk a broader look at the existence itself, give her voice a certain volume: "I am slipping on the scree on my mountain, / I am sliding, my knees give, my hips. If there / Is a bottom to all this, I haven't found it. // If there are answers one comes to after long life, / They are illusive." She speaks for a certain part of American society ("On Reaching Sixty-Five" and "Old Woman Dreams") which, before *Duties of the Spirit* was published, never had such a clear spokesperson in verse. "We old women," she says "when someone tells us / what passes these days for the truth / we argue with them and refuse to believe. / Instead, we look to the stars for faith and confusion."

These almost epic claims are supported and given integrity by her lyrical voice: "I write about beauty; I cannot resist". "I am asking for the clarity / of a fogged-in morning," she says, "I am asking if it's possible—/if it's still possible." The title poem, "Duties of the Spirit" is a brilliant example of how it is still "possible;" other pieces, such as beautiful sequence of "Desire[s]", which sometimes echoes Kunitz's "Hornworm" sequence and his "desire, desire, desire" of "Touch me," and yet as Fagnoli's sequence comes together it is entirely her own, a voice of an aging woman in search of the ability to "give praise, if not to a god, / then at least to light.../to herons performing tai chi in a salt marsh." This sequence, as all of the book, is held together by the absolute honesty of the speaker's voice, which tells us the truth, something not always very pretty, about herself and the world—tells us the truth without patronizing: "How hard she tries to be good, to be good enough. / And fails. More often, she feels like the man / in the novel about Africa, who stumbles like a child / through the rain forest howling: I want, I want, I want."

*Circadian* by Joanna Klink  
Penguin, New York: 2007  
Reviewed by Christopher Lirette

It is no secret that things change and that this change is often irrevocable. And we humans, above all other creation, are gifted and cursed with this knowledge. Animals act according to instinct and desire but do not know it. Plants react to changes within the mineral world. Only we are the ones not indifferent, who can plot and love, but we are, nevertheless, bound by our biology. This is the crisis for Joanna Klink's second collection of poetry, *Circadian*—the tension between the relentless cycle of our life clocks (circadian clocks) and our human relationship to the patterned and sometimes foreign environment of our lives.

Her poetic voice is quiet and distant, matching the winter landscapes she litanizes. All of the coldness of Wallace Stevens is there too: Klink undoubtedly has a mind of winter as she uses the great Northern catalogue of images: snow, ravens, frozen lakes, frost. The crisis of the poems, however, is not simply from beholding “the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,” as Stevens says, but of negating Stevens' characterization of the beholder: “nothing himself.” For Klink, the human element is what puts the environment in flux:

Dividing time equally between earths, there in the coldness  
pulling south, flint in the dusk, a few stars.  
You are irreducible, there where you stand,  
and all the mountains dropping into water.

Here, the human element cannot be removed from the cold earth. This is the tension of *Circadian*: the oppositions between human and nature, human and animal life, consciousness versus unconsciousness, shapes versus shapelessness. The main human character

of these poems is the ambiguous speaker, who distances herself from the subject, the lyric “you,” which at times fluctuates between the beloved and the reader-at-large. Beyond this dearth of humanity, the poems are filled with descriptions of nature, which are often cold, indifferent, and fixed—qualities that trap and alienate the human element.

Klink rebels against Stevens' abstract poetics in significant ways. The speaker's problem with human emotions often hinges upon our desire to form boundaries, to articulate the inarticulate, and most of all, to impose our supreme fiction upon the natural. In the poem, “Draftsmanship,” Klink is at her most vehement, beginning the poem with the only ironic tone in the whole book: “Draftsmanship, what we once called / desire.” She yearns for the natural within humans to take hold, to lose the self-consciousness that comes from the applications of forms. Later, she concedes,

—you love what delivers you  
into light, which sometimes means  
to be possessed of a sickness so pure  
it feels shapeless—

This shapelessness is the irreducible center of human desire and, of course, of all human emotion. The impossibility of desire is in its craftsmanship, the language that is a violence against emotion. In these poems of winter, Klink is not content to behold and reflect, but wants to dissolve into the physical environment.

This desire betrays a sense of emotional loss throughout the collection, especially in love poems of the first, untitled section. The poem “Apology” (wedged between “River in Dusk” and “Draftsmanship,” forming a love and loss triptych) has the subtext of something having gone awry between lovers (“Maybe you darken, already too much changed”), although the severity or nature of the crime against love is unclear and irrelevant. What is at stake is the oblivion

that its action brings. The speaker wants something with which to hold on, to pull her out of the emotional loss. But in the form of the poem, which carries the vague ghost of a sestina in its repetition of words, binds the plight of the lovers by a sense of eternal return. In this, the speaker recognizes the cycle and seeks to break out of it.

The circadian clock obviously figures heavily into the book, as both an answer to and a foil for human endeavor. The poem that begins the second section, "Sea by Dusk," brings this thematic most strongly to light:

Listen, lean,

that you may feel, in the warm blurring of waves  
the opening and closing of flowers, a circadian call  
that pulls each desolation toward its clearing...

To surrender to the pulse of these natural cycles might be the way out, Klink tells us, ending this poem with the whispered mantra, "no / loneliness. No more loneliness." There is a type of freedom in the cycle, the eternal return of the spring and eternal death of winter. Rather than feeling simply imprisoned by the rhythms, the poems seek to find a place within them, which leads to a burning need to experience the sublime in natural cycles.

It is no surprise then, that the poem after "Sea by Dusk," "Mariana Trench," which contains the sexual energy of the collection (the deep of the Marianas is like "pleasure ripped from the body"), explores an almost mystic urge to sink into the lover and merge. Yet the speaker of this poem balks at absolute merging ("my body shut in your arms, refusing conclusion"). The speaker must remain herself, whole, unscathed by the wounds of assimilation. The urge to dissimulate into nature is felt prominently in poems such as "Four Messages," "Notes from a Secret Prophecy," and "Studies for an Estuary," where the body is a border between the human and nature, and nature itself has a reality which is inchoate and compelling behind its surface.

Most of the poems do not directly address interpersonal relationships, but the relationship of the human toward nature. Klink remains detached, though not aloof, in poems such as in "Raven" and "Peripheries," where she juxtaposes animal action and stark and disconnected human figures. In poems such as "Antelope" and "Northern," she uses a tone more involved with her animal and natural subjects, something akin to wonder or horror. Even in these poems, she grounds her description of nature with fleeting emotional observations, such as the line "they believed they would be held" in "Antelope," which anthropomorphizes the antelopes, betraying the emotional investment in their tragic fall. It is these sentimental connections with the natural which at once shares agency between the observer and the observed and drives this collection of poems.

Ultimately, Joanna Klink seeks to articulate the dictum,

that nothing we do or hope or make  
holds fast against such un-  
relenting steadiness.

In claiming this, she subverts the message, especially in the line "relenting steadiness," which truly embodies the spirit of this book. Nature is harsh, wintry, distant, and foreign. These things are the terrible facts of our relationship to the natural world today, and there is, of course, no going back. Still, Joanna Klink tells us there is an avenue into the liminal space between essence and image, between our bodies and our emotional connection to the people and world around us. She tells us that there is nevertheless hope. I, for one, believe her.



*Lessons for Dead Birds*

LOUVIERE + VANESSA



*Amelia*

LOUVIERE + VANESSA

## CONTRIBUTORS

DAN BEACHY-QUICK is the author of three books of poems: *North True South Bright*, *Spell*, and *Mulberry*. A collection of interlinked meditations on Melville's *Moby-Dick*, *A Whaler's Dictionary*, will be published by Milkweed Editions in fall 2008. He is an assistant professor in the MFA Writing Program at Colorado State University.

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ABRAHAM BURICKSON is a poet, architect, and conceptual artist. His poetry can be found in *Blackbird*, *Sycamore Review*, *Marlboro Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and elsewhere. His architecture can be found in Detroit, Portland, San Francisco, and in Austin, Texas. In 2001 he founded the experimental performance group Odyssey Works, a cross-genre collaborative that created day-long performances for extremely small audiences. He has received fellowships from the Milay Colony for the Arts and the Michener Center for Writers.

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KAREN AN-HWEI LEE is the author of *In Medias Res* (Sarabande Books, 2004), winner of the Kathryn A. Morton Prize and the Norma Farber First Book Award. Her chapbook, *God's One Hundred Promises*, received the Swan Scythe Press Prize. Two new collections, *Ardor*, and *Erythropoiesis*, are forthcoming from Tupelo Press. The recipient of an NEA Fellowship, she holds an MFA in creative writing and a PhD in literature. She lives and teaches on the West Coast.

CHRISTOPHER LIRETTE is on a Fulbright in Acadie writing poems. His work appears in *The Louisiana Review* and *Pebble Lake Review* among other journals. This fall he will enter Cornell University as an MFA candidate.

LOUVIERE + VANESSA: Jeff Louviere is from New Orleans, Vanessa is from New York, and they met in Savannah. Jeff graduated from the Savannah College of Art and Design, where he and three other artists created the world's largest painting, a 76,000 square foot image of Elvis. Vanessa began photographing at age twelve, and won a Kodak International Award of Excellence in Photography when she was seventeen. She graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology with a degree in photography. Jeff returned to New Orleans with Vanessa in 1998. Their collaborations began as a series of tableaux created to resemble New Orleans crime scenes. They made their collaboration official by getting married in Switzerland in 2000. They live in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans doing what they love with their two camera-brash German Shepherds and lots of great friends. [www.louviereandvanessa.com](http://www.louviereandvanessa.com).

JOSHUA MCKINNEY'S most recent book of poetry, *The Novice Mourner*, was the recipient of the 2005 Dorothy Brunsman Poetry Prize. His work has appeared in such journals as *American Letters & Commentary*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Ploughshares*. He teaches literature and creative writing at California State University, Sacramento.

ASHLEY MCWATERS' work has appeared or is forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Northwest Review*, *Spinning Jenny*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Caketrain*, and *Pindeldyboz*. She is an instructor at the University of Alabama. "Bright Refuge" and "Doll" are about the late American model and beauty expert Candy Jones. The author of fourteen beauty and etiquette books for women, Candy is believed to have been brainwashed by the CIA and used as a secret agent during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. Allegedly, a prominent physician working for the government successfully fractured her personality into two parts using hypnosis, mind-control experiments and psychotropic drugs. Candy recalled the incidents during a series of hypnosis sessions directed by her husband in the 1970's, in which he was able to draw out Arlene Grant, her cruel alternate personality.

MARK NEELY'S poems have appeared in *Boulevard*, *Indiana Review*, *Salt Hill*, *North American Review*, *Meridian*, and elsewhere. He teaches at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana.

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JEFFREY PETHYBRIDGE lives in Columbia, Missouri with his wife and son. His work has appeared in *Smartish Pace*, *The Southern Review*, *DIAGRAM* and *Blazevox*. His manuscript, *The January Party*, was a finalist for the 2006 National Poetry Series. The poem in this issue is from a book-length work-in-progress tentatively entitled *striven, the bright vendetta*. The Italian phrases in the poem are an idiom meaning "good luck" (literally "in the mouth of the wolf") and the customary response that basically means "may the wolf die."

LYNNE POTTS has published in *The Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Art Times*, and other journals. She was poetry editor of *Columbia Journal of Literature and Art* and is coeditor of poetry at *AGNI*.

M. LYNX QUALEY, by the time you read this, will have delivered her second son (insha'allah), defended her thesis (insha'allah), and may even be on her way back to Egypt.

NANCY REDDY is a graduate of the English writing program at the University of Pittsburgh. After graduating, she taught high school English in the New Orleans Public Schools. She now lives, writes, and teaches in Houston.

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KATRINA ROBERTS has published three books: *How Late Desire Looks*, winner of the Peregrine Smith Prize; *The Quick*, chosen for the Pacific Northwest Poetry Series, University of Washington Press; and *Friendly Fire*, winner of the Idaho Prize for Poetry, forthcoming from Lost Horse Press in 2008. She and her husband are the proprietors of and winemakers for Tytonidae Cellars in Walla Walla, Washington where they live with their three small children.

TANIA RUNYAN's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *A Fine Frenzy: Poets Respond to Shakespeare*. Her chapbook, *Delicious Air*, was awarded the 2007 Book of the Year Citation by the Conference on Christianity and Literature. She lives in northern Illinois with her husband and two daughters.

RITA SIGNORELLI-PAPPAS has had poems published in *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Shenandoah*, *The Literary Review*, and *Southwest Review*. She has new work out and forthcoming in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Notre Dame Review*.

BRIAN SILBERMAN's plays include *Manifest*, recipient of the 1998 Clauder Prize and the 2003 Pinter Review Prize for Drama, and published by the University of Tampa Press; *Walkin' Backward*, which appears in the anthology *Best American Short Plays of 2001*; *Salvage Baas*, anthologized in *New American Short Plays 2005*; *The Yip*; *Throw*; *Sugar Down Billie Hoak*; *Feral Music*; *Half Court*; *Retrenchment*; and *The Gospel According to Toots Pope*. Selections from *Half Court* and *Sugar Down Billie Hoak* appear in Smith & Kraus's *Best Stage Scenes of 1995*, *Best Men's Monologues of 1995*, and *Best Women's Monologues of 1995*. He is at work on a new play entitled *Capgras Delusion*. The three monologues published here are excerpted from a larger series collectively entitled *Chattanooga*, and are intended for a solo performer.

BRUCE SMITH was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the author of five books of poems, *The Common Wages*, *Silver and Information* (National Poetry Series, selected by Hayden Carruth), *Mercy Seat*, *The Other Lover* (University of Chicago), a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and *Songs for Two Voices* (Chicago, 2005). He teaches at Syracuse University.

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SUSAN TERRIS' new book, *Contrariwise*, will be published by Time Being Books in 2008. Other recent books of poetry are *Natural Defenses* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2004), *Fire is Favorable to the Dreamer* (Arctos Press, 2003), and *Poetic License* (Adastra Press, 2004). Recent fiction: *Nell's Quilt* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux). Her journal publications include *Field*, *The Journal*, *The Iowa Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Missouri Review*. With CB Follett, she is coeditor of the annual anthology, *Runes: A Review of Poetry*.

TONY TRIGILIO's recent books are *The Lama's English Lessons* (poems, Three Candles), *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics* (criticism, Southern Illinois University Press), and as co-editor, *Visions and Divisions: American Immigration Literature, 1870-1930* (Rutgers University Press). He teaches at Columbia College Chicago, where he directs the program in Creative Writing-Poetry, and edits the magazine *Court Green*.

ADAM VINES and ALLEN JIH compose their poems by sending lines back and forth over the internet. They have published their collaborative poems in *Barrow Street*, *Confrontation*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Zone 3*, *Margie*, *Portland Review*, and other journals. Adam teaches at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and co-edits *Birmingham Poetry Review*. Allen plays poker and writes in Las Vegas.

M. O. WALSH lives and writes in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with his wife, Sarah, and dog, Gus. His stories have appeared in places like *Oxford American*, *Best New American Voices*, *American Short Fiction*, and *Epoch*, and have been included in the anthologies *Louisiana in Words*, *Bar Stories*, and *French Quarter Fiction*. He works in the English Department at LSU, where he is happy.

SUSAN WICKS has published five collections of poetry, two novels and a short memoir. Her book of poems, *De-iced*, came out from Bloodaxe in January, and a book of short stories, *Roll Up for the Arabian Derby*, is due in spring 2008. She is Director of the Centre for Creative Writing at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England.

ALAN WILLIAMS has been an editor and writer for a myriad of publications based in New Orleans and in Los Angeles, including *The Historic New Orleans Quarterly*, *Antigravity*, *Giant Robot* and *The Simon*. He just relocated to Georgia, where he is the features editor of the trade magazine *RePlay* and a freelance writer when not reviving the family farm and restoring old “homeplaces.”

AURELIA WILLS has published fiction and poetry in various journals. Her story, “Raymond and Paul,” published in *Orchid*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and “Wasps” is forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review*.

GREG WRENN’s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Yale Review*, *Boston Review*, *Colorado Review*, *LIT*, *Verse Daily*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*, among other journals. A runner-up for both the Grolier Poetry Prize and the Midwest Chapbook Series Award, he was awarded an Academy of American Poets University Award as well as a scholarship to attend Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference as a waiter. Originally from Jacksonville, Florida, he is about to graduate from the MFA program at Washington University in St. Louis.

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THE FIRST ANNUAL  
**Tennessee Williams/  
New Orleans Literary Festival**  
FICTION WRITING CONTEST

Judge: Richard Ford

GRAND PRIZE:

• \$1,500

- VIP Festival Pass (\$500 value), March 25-29, 2009
- Publication in the New Orleans Review
- Domestic Airfare and Accommodations to attend the Festival in New Orleans
- Public Reading

SECOND PRIZE: \$200, a Public Reading, and Festival Pass

THIRD PRIZE: \$100, a Public Reading, and Festival Pass

*Eligibility:* Short stories, written in English, up to 7,000 words.

*Deadline:* November 15, 2008 (postmark)

Winner will be announced by March 1, 2009

*Send To:*

Writing Contest

Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival

938 Lafayette Street, Suite 514

New Orleans, LA 70113

*Entry Fee:* \$20 per entry

Unlimited entries per person

Only open to writers who have not yet published a book of fiction

*For Complete Guidelines:*

And Festival Information please visit

[www.tennesseewilliams.net](http://www.tennesseewilliams.net)