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DANIEL BORZUTZKY

## *The Book of Broken Bodies*

The Book of Broken Bodies is itself a broken book. The cover is torn; the pages are ripped out; and the ink has smeared so that the words can no longer be read. But the images and photographs are more or less clear, and they depict the various bodies that have been found broken in the desert and on the beaches and in the mountains and in the rivers and hanging in the barracks and buried in the mud and trapped in the holes where the rats and dogs have devoured them. In the Book of Broken Bodies the bodies meld together in a tangle of flesh and blood and mucus. Here the men with no tongues walk arm-in-arm with the women whose genitals have been electrocuted. Here the bodies who drank themselves silly and sliced off their fingers whisper with the prison guards who hold sacs of hands and toes that were taken from the men before they were forced to bark like dogs as they hobbled alone in the night. Here the hair of the men and women they burned sits atop the men and women they saved, and the hair of the men and women they saved has been collected and formed into towers of hair to remind the prisoners of what will never return. A train runs through the final page of the Book of Broken Bodies. It slices off a leg of a prisoner and the leg is picked up by a one-armed man who collects the body parts that once belonged to his friends and neighbors. And what of the citizens whose bodies were broken from writing? They are hands and fingers and arms that hide in the Book of Broken Bodies. They are words that the reader can only utter when she herself becomes an image in the Book of Broken Bodies. Flip through the pages of the book and the body parts become more and more like

blades and daggers that serve no purpose but to slice off more body parts and to string them throughout the country where they hang on flag poles in front of hospitals whose patients are searching for their limbs. Yes, the Book of Broken Bodies is a substitute for another book that the authors were too scared to write. Nevertheless, in its aesthetic and moral failure, the Book of Broken Bodies says more about the sky and the fields and the alleys and the sewers than all of the other books combined. To the readers this book is holy; it is read in joy and prayer.

DANIEL BORZUTZKY

*Illinois*

I

The state swallowed you whole and spit you out and hacked you up

It was in the middle of the country and when we had been together we stood on the banks of rivers where the green sludge bubbled and where the fingers that accidentally touched water were taken to the laboratory to look inside the skin and on the surface of the skin and in the blood and pores and cells to see what happens when the impermanent touches the permanent in the middle of a state that's dead

I looked for you when the water expelled us

My love I looked for you in the alleyways and hospitals and brothels and when I spoke I found it impossible to use adjectives

This was the only way I found it bearable to speak of you

You didn't exist and I knew this

You had been spit out of the ground and I knew this

You had been spit up and shredded with the paper that no longer had value and I knew this

You had been shredded with the dollar bills and I knew this and I looked for you and when I came to your town I put up pictures with your name and a few words about you and I went to new towns where no one had ever loved you

I moved on

I didn't forget but I had decided that within the state there was another state that held you and within that state the guards who controlled the borders watched and I knew there was a state where the people governed themselves and you were there and I thought of you as I roamed the state looking not for you but for my own body and I knew you were in this state guarding the bodies saying prayers over the body parts worshiping the hair the arms the fingers the eyes of those spit up by other states you were the guardian of body parts and to see you this way gave me strength enough to walk through this state in a state that was drowning in nothing

II

Let me be more specific

I came to a bridge in a city

I wouldn't let go of your hand

You hadn't spoken since I lost you and when I put my ear to your ear I could hear your voice

You said I am not in the sky

You spoke directly

It's comforting to think you might have spoken in code but you did not know how to speak in code and neither do I

Let me be more specific

We were crossing a bridge over a river that was not in your city but that led to a river that ran through your city

It was suicide week and I thought of flinging myself off the bridge with the others

I thought for a moment I might find you if I flung myself off the bridge

The voice between your ears said jump jump don't jump don't jump now jump already

We stood on the bridge watching the bodies dance the dance of body parts swaying in the wind as they stood on the edge of the bridge

You told me a story

You said once there was a body that threw money into the river before jumping

And it was this that changed everything

It was the money the body threw into the river that finally kept the others from jumping

The bodies came to the bridge ready to throw themselves in

The bodies came to the bridge but when they saw the money flung into the river they decided that it was not suicide they wanted it was a world with no money

They convinced all of their neighbors to throw their money into the river

The citizens of the town threw all of their money into the river

They threw all of their credit cards into the river

They burned the banks

They burned their computers

They smashed the windows of anyone in the city whose life had anything to do with preserving the flow of capital

They banned the use of certain words: credit market, liquidity, etc...

The bodies stopped jumping and we found a home on the bridge

You told me this in your head and your voice was afraid of nothing

III

I stood on the bridge watching the water move away from itself

I came to find you my love you live here now

She is my love too and my love too said the voices of the straggling  
men with their fish

We're not from around here, they said

No one in this country sits on a bridge selling fish, they said

We're from a different time zone, they said

We're from the ship that refuses to return to these waters

We're from the Big Bang or at least the moment before the earth  
swelled up like an over-boiled egg

The man was slapped when he said these words

We don't use similes around here, a man said

He said forgive him he's from Wisconsin they have a virginal faith in  
language there

It's ridiculous to be from anywhere, a voice said

We are the men from purgatory, another voice said

The river was drying up before our eyes  
It looked like a few drops of piss and for a moment I saw you there

I called out to tell you about this very second on this very spot on  
earth

I am on the bridge I said and you heard me and stepped out of the  
river

You filled your mouth with water and when you spat a cat came to-  
wards me

I knew it was you for when you spoke little bubbles formed on the  
river and they were poems to our evaporating bodies

You said the world presses in on us from every side

It scatters dust across our mouths and covers us with our blood

You said my mouth is filled with 270-caliber bullets and they taste  
like little orgasms

I jumped towards you and your skin was quicksand and in that mo-  
ment there was no water to absorb us

Then the Mississippi rumbled and the Missouri called for the heads  
of our Christian neighbors

The Missouri rumbled and the Ohio called for the heads of anyone  
who had ever touched you

You said I believe in the river because it will be here when I die but it

was disappearing as you spoke  
I said I believe in the bridge because it will be here my love when  
you and the earth disappear

IV

The river had swallowed you and as you disappeared a triangle of  
birds flew over our heads

I saw the birds and thought of sky-written advertisements for a  
shampoo I'd used when I was a child but if only the birds were actu-  
ally the secret police and if only the river was a torturer or a bed of  
electricity then at least I would have some excuse for not wanting to  
stand here anymore

I felt a woman's legs against my knees but they were not your legs  
and they were not my knees

The ground was murmuring the cuckoo talk of the thirsty soil

The city sounds were like roosters and the men with their briefcases  
passed by spitting with their eyes and the air curved and the milk  
jumped and the moment I said goodbye to you I knew the forest  
was a vacuum and I knew the threads of light I saw on the other  
side of the trees were borders between the world as it is and the  
world as I wished it to be

There was nothing abnormal in this

It was perfectly normal and though no one talks about nature here  
I sensed that the grass was all there was even though it had been

ripped from the streets many decades ago  
I put a handful of bullets in my mouth with a spoon and wished I  
could swallow them the way your voice had been swallowed by the  
river but my body would not comply

My body was a voice atop another voice and when I pushed my fin-  
ger into your grace it was just the grace of the floorboards creaking  
the ghosts of on and on



*Swoon, North Claiborne Avenue*

PETER JOSEPH GLOVICZKI

*Life Pursuit*

When my sister was close to delivery, I asked if she needed anything, she said: *This baby.*

When the baby arrived, she asked me to hold him. I was worried I'd drop him; I wanted to drop him.

I stopped praying after that.

I stopped using the Lord's name in vain.

Man was born to run uphill.

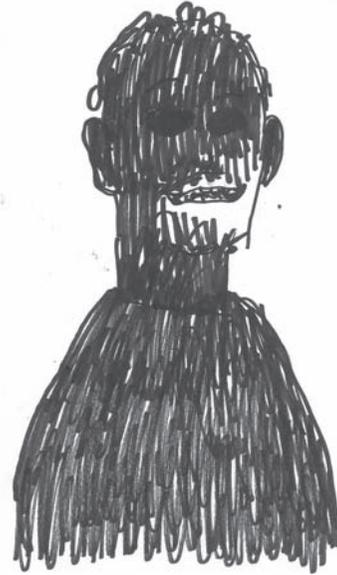
*Disambiguation Page*

On hold, on hold, on horrible hold, grateful, for once, for speakerphones, wireless, even, I walk around the house, hold bad music shrieking in my hand, up seven steps, up eight steps, to the water pitcher *a glass full of carbon of carbon dating me* pour water, down eight steps, down seven, hold miserable hold, waiting, waiting to find out *who is this please* music the likes of which I cannot describe, hold music after all, hardly Ode to Joy, hold, hold *what is your mother's maiden name* waiting to know who took me, certain it's a he somehow, where he—took me *what is your birth date* this obsession with birth with mother's name (her name was...Mother) not to mention mother as maiden (that part had nothing to do with me) and date, yes, she dropped me here, what, 49 years ago—your point being *what is your social* how would she feel to know after all this time, this half-century all-but, that I am missing, I am stolen *could you verify the phone number associated with this card* I am gone, it is all about the numbers, what is a social, do they mean like with ice cream, if they're going to abbreviate the phrase wouldn't "sosh" be more sayable here on hold glorious hold, is there anything to eat around here, what do we have for food, as my mother used to say even as she would eat nothing, at least not where I could see her, I, I here on hold, up fifteen steps to open fridge—nothing at all interesting in there *ma'am are you there* more and more and more and more bad music, set phone down to open cupboard drawers—nothing yummy there either—who shops for this house *if you can't assure me that this is the phone number associated, we will have to hang up so that I can call you by way of confirmation* not so much as a crumb of a

cookie *I'm hanging up now*, then perhaps I should bake cookies, I'm good at that, or was, before I went missing, will any of that change *Vivaldi ring tone* change, change, I know there has to be some candy around here because tomorrow is All Hallow's, hallowed be thy name, my kingdom for a card *thank you ma'am, can you repeat that information beginning with mother's maiden name* I am missing in the valley of the shadow of death, oh there it is, Mounds, beautiful Mounds, trademarked Mounds, sometimes you feel like a nut but too there are Mounds, glorious mounds of coconut to catch in my molars—is coconut even edible—I can never seem to chew through it *date of birth* of course at some point my teeth will fall out, or at least my mother's did—when did I become a ma'am, by the way—I was once a miss—how can they tell which I am—has my voice aged??—why am I no longer a miss—*so you are not responsible then for the charges*—how many of these miniature Mounds can I eat without qualifying as a pig—Mounds beautiful *please verify your address* it's a he, I know *so you're saying you know no one named Chris David in Elk Park* I can damn near picture him, black hood over my eyes, kidnapped from behind, virtual ransom, hood horrible hood, what you don't see can't hurt *I'm going to transfer you to our security specialists* Mounds beautiful Mounds, coconut caught in my teeth, aside from being no miss and having gone missing am I a pig yet

BILL COTTER

*The Pink Pin in Quito*



I parked the Pontiac in front of a big blue house on Iquem Street in New Orleans. I inventoried my luggage (one ancient Braniff flight bag) and shook my injured hand to test the pain. Not bad. A little crunchy maybe. And the Tushie diaper I was using as a bandage needed changing—blood had seeped through in a few places and had dried black-cherry-black. I climbed out of the car. The heat was breathtaking. I took a deep breath of it. I was now officially as far away from death and heartbreak as I could get.

In the front yard of the big blue house was a metal desk with an orange Igloo perched on the edge. A man was sitting there, dispensing a lavender fluid into a *Little Mermaid* promotional movie cup. The desk, a government-issue thing, drawer-free, its paint weathered down to salt-pocked stainless steel, had clearly been a feature of the yard for a long time: blue morning glories were climbing its legs. The man himself looked like he'd been there long enough for morning-glory scouts to consider climbing him, too.

"Excuse me," I said. "Is..."

"Surely it is," he said, his voice rich and musical, as though he had extra vocal cords that vibrated in harmony. "Gatorade. Cold. Want some?"

"No thanks," I said. "Is..."

"That a Huggie?" he said, gesturing at me with his *Little Mermaid* cup.

"Oh. Uh, no. Tushie. I had some bad luck."

"I bet what you *meaning* to say is that one of you lady-friends stick you, probably over some *other* lady-friend."

"Wow," I said, feeling a little like I'd been caught at Hide and Seek. "That's an awfully good guess."

He had lots of scars. Little and big. Knotted and old. Pink and shiny and new.

"That mean they *love* you, chief," he said. He laughed and drank some Gatorade. "But you want me to tell you something? You need to change that thing."

"I'm afraid to see what's under there."

He laughed again. I laughed too. I felt naked, legible. Who was this guy? An idle seer who specialized in exposing the heartsick? A voodoo expert, angling to trade me love potion for my bloody bandage? I'd always thought voodoo was just a tourist hook, but maybe it was for real.

"So," I said, crossing my arms to hide my hand, "is this the youth hostel?"

“Mm-hmm,” he said, tipping the Igloo towards himself to get the last few drops of Gatorade carafed therein. “They about full up, though. Half of Denmark here.”

Inside the hostel, beside a pathogenic-looking couch and in front of a huge pair of barred, painted-shut French doors that led to a veranda, was a woman sitting behind a low desk of the same species as the one outside, though this one had not had its paint, a cheerless smaze gray, bullied off by the clime.

She was hunched over the desk, pulling long dirty-blond strands of hair from a plastic hairbrush.

“Hello,” I said.

She stopped mid-pull, without looking up. She remained that way for three full seconds, then placed the hairbrush on the desk and raised her head.

“What’s your name?”

“Jerome.”

“Carolyn.”

I smiled. Carolyn smiled back. A tiny dimple formed in the tip of her nose.

I hated smiling, and didn’t if I could help it—I have curious teeth, and have been told my smiles are suggestive, if not downright leering. I’d practiced wholesome smiles in the mirror, but they just made me look like a cult leader.

“Eighteen bucks a night,” said Carolyn, the smiling over. “Locker key’s a twenty-dollar deposit, refundable. Pillow’s on the bed. Need sheets and towels?”

I did. I gave Carolyn thirty-eight dollars. I signed my name on a clipboard register she dropped in front of me with a clatter. Under *Address* I wrote “Massachusetts.” Not very precise, but true. She looked at the clipboard register, then gave me a key to the front door, a thin stack of linens, and a short oral dissertation on the dangers of the city.

“Massachusetts? Nice. Safe. But here? People like to murder each other. Last year, we were America’s Murder Capital. 421 killings. And it’s looking like we’ll repeat in 1995. Often it’s a drug thing, or an unfaithfulness thing, but lots of times it’s just a flaring temper. A tip: if you, as a pedestrian, get a sense that an oncoming person is about to flare their temper, cross to the other side of the street.”

“But...”

“What if there’s a temper on the other sidewalk? Just walk down the middle of the street. You’ll see that a lot.”

“But...”

“What if there are tempers everywhere, you ask. Well. Consider acquiring one of these.”

She reached into her backpack and pulled out a black object. It took my brain a moment to verify the object as a gun. She cocked it and pointed it at her hairbrush.

“Okay,” I whispered. There weren’t many guns in Boston. Not that I ever saw, anyway. I wanted to tell her to put that thing away, but she didn’t look like she stood much contrariness. She was nearly six feet tall and had long, springy muscles in her neck. She didn’t look like she stood anything she didn’t want to stand. And she was armed.

Then the gun was gone, returned to her backpack.

“One of the residents here got mugged in a cemetery,” continued Carolyn. “Then, while he was in the waiting room at Charity a lady dressed up in a nurse’s uniform stabbed him in the arm with a mechanical pencil.”

“So stay out of the cemeteries,” she concluded.

“I promise,” I said, imagining getting stabbed with a mechanical pencil. Instinctively I brought my bad hand up to my other arm to massage the pencil wound I’d so successfully imagined.

Carolyn looked at, but did not comment on, my darkened Tushie. I hid it behind my back again. She bent over to inspect the room-vacancy chart on her desk.

“There are four beds in your room—two bunk beds—and three are taken. You’re the fourth. You just filled the hostel, Mr Jerome Coe.”

She turned around. On a big world map tacked to the wall, she stuck a blue pin in the middle of Massachusetts, right in Quabbin Reservoir. Her hair fell in shallow waves to the middle of her back. There was a big dry oak leaf tangled up in there.

I was the only pin in the United States. About thirty other pins, all blue, were crowded into Europe, most in Denmark. There was only one other pin apart from those, a pink pin in Quito, Ecuador.

Beneath the powerful odors of mold and sweat and magnolia blossoms, which persisted throughout the hostel, my room also had its own signature scent: a humic musk, like composting laundry.

I occupied the top bunk of the left bunk bed. The other beds were linenless, and piled with sports bags, mossy bath towels, and Ziplocs filled with preening gels and disposable razors. Scattered on the floor and on the bunk under mine was a thin topsoil of European jockey shorts and funny socks that were likely the source of the paralaundry smell. There was also a selection of pornographic magazines evidently published in the low countries. One was called *Größte Pfosten* and featured on the cover a Teutonic Adonis whose Pfosten were indeed signally Größte.

This was home, for now.

It was January, but the heat was astonishing. I had been issued a barf-colored blanket and a gray sheet by Carolyn at the front desk, but it was far too hot to cover up with the blanket, or even lie on it, so I folded it up and stuck it under the thin, flaccid pillow, which was really more like an oven mitt.

For a while I lay there, unable to sleep, and listened to insects bounce off the screen of the only window in the room.

These insects, I’d noticed, were on both sides of the screen: those

outside seeking shelter, and those inside seeking freedom. The inside ones were numerous, biologically diverse, and loud. They scuttled and ratcheted, and occasionally dropped from the ceiling and *tked* on the floor like pistachio shells. I didn't want to lie directly on the mattress, but even less appealing was the idea of insect life falling on my body, carapaces down, waving appendages and trying to flip themselves over while I slept.

So I covered myself with the sheet, tucked the ends under my feet and the top of my head, and the edges under my body, to limit direct contact with the mattress, which was studded with metal buttons and randomly scaped with starchy patches.

I pulled my sheet taut. I surely looked like an overturned canoe. Louisianian creatures bounced off the fabric stretched across my open mouth. My eyes adjusted to the light coming through the sheet from the meager floodlamp in the yard of the hostel. Beings, large and small, alighted on my sheet and promenaded across it. I flicked them from underneath and listened to them land in other parts of the room.

I dreaded the arrival of my roommates. I prayed I would fall asleep before they got back from wherever they were. I didn't want to have to smile. I didn't want to listen to anyone masturbate in Danish. I wanted to lie here under my canoe and consider pink pins and nose-dimpled desk clerks with brown leaves in their hair.

Even though Carolyn had said I'd filled the hostel, there seemed to be no other inhabitants. No snoring, or music, or creaking bunk beds. Just my pistachio shells. I seemed to be alone.

So, with care not to open ingress to my canoe, I reached down and pulled off a sock, a white ribbed sports sock that I'd worn for much of my drive down here. It wasn't essential—I had another pair in my bag and two more down in the car. I slipped it over my hand like a mitten, pulled open the gap between the elastic lip of the sock and my palm, and inserted my erection (it had always been quick

to recognize opportunities). Then I went silently to work in the traditional manner. The hostel bunk bed didn't squeak, but rather made a duck-like sound with each upstroke. After a few minutes of accelerating vigor, I gave up trying to be quiet. The bed quacked, and now with each downstroke released a soft *pit* sound. *pit quack pit quack pit quack pit*.

I was beholden now. Committed. If I'd been suddenly transported at that instant to the front of my seventh-grade math class, with Corey Czyz and Nadia Mundy in the front row, I wouldn't have been able to stop.

I wheezed. The sheet had worked its way off my head and feet. I cast it aside and completely gave in, bouncing on the bunk bed, chewing my biceps.

The sock worked as expected. My heart beat so hard I felt the squeezings of blood in my brachial arteries. It had been a real thumper.

I rolled up the sacrificial article and dropped it behind the bunk bed. The sweat on my body began to dry and cool. My eyes adjusted to the dark. Danish sports bags and dirty clothes covered the floor and the beds. The upper bunk across the room from me was piled particularly high with the burdens of travel.

But then it moved. The crap on the other upper bunk *moved*. Then it snorted, changed positions, and blew an involuntary nose-whistle. An empty oil can of Foster's Lager fell off the bed and landed softly on the low range of shit on the floor.

I froze. I stayed frozen, listening for clues that my roommate had either been genuinely asleep or fully awake while I was busy with my massage.

Then, a gentle snore, followed by a whisper that certainly seemed like a lyric of deep sleep. Eventually I relaxed and fell asleep too.

The following morning I woke confused—spatially, temporally, psychologically. A ceiling two feet from my face. I was varnished with

sweat, through which rose stinging welts. Somewhere below me was choral snoring. The air smelled like a salt works. What the hell was going on?

I couldn't remember if I was depressed or not, if I was in the hospital or out. Had somebody died? Was I broke? In love? Lost?

I lifted up my bandaged hand. I looked down at my sockless left foot. Oh. I remember. Long drive. The Ertzes, and those *dogs*. The ice. Marta, in the sky. The cinnamon-roll bakery. My injured hand. New Orleans. Hostel. Carolyn, the desk clerk. Pink pin. Not really so depressed, come to think of it. Brokenhearted, sure, but just in a general sort of way, as always. Not flush, but not broke either. A disability check would come on the third of the month, just a week away. \$92.90, available at any ATM.

And I was free—that was the main thing. Ready to start again in a place where it did not snow. Free!

Of course, I'd furiously jacked off in the presence of some Danish fellow—there was that.

I cautiously looked over at the other top bunk. Deserted. Just a hollowed-out spot among the clothes and junk where someone might've been, now occupied by a half-empty bag of Zapp's Cajun Crawtater chips and a guide to the New Orleans cemeteries, thick with Post It notes. Had I slept next to the unlucky stabbed guy? Doting the crap on his bunk was a panty here and a bra there. He must be a highly virile Dane. I hated him. I was glad he was gone. Maybe he got mugged again, while pursuing innocent virgins.

On the lower bunks, however, were two men. The man beneath my bunk was huge. The man on the other lower bunk was barely half his size. Their mattresses had been laid bare—the absurd European Dopp kits and woolly towels and laundry boluses that had so densely populated them had been swept off without concern into the middle of the room. Both men were naked, except for tight, bright yellow briefs. The men were face down and white as aluminum siding, except for their necks, which were scarves of angry

vermilion. I wouldn't have been able to sleep with a sunburn like that, unless I were full of lager, which they apparently were, since the lager cans all over the room were empty. The lager had to be someplace, and logic suggested it was in these two men.

I slid off the top bunk and attempted to leap quietly to the floor, but somehow I hooked a toe in the string anchorage of one of the little metal mattress buttons. I landed head first in the sodden belongings of my roommates, neither of whom awakened or even stirred. An inch from my nose were the Pfosten of Werner Eidotter, the Größte Pfosten cover model.

I got dressed. My eye hurt where I'd hit it on a roommate's weird plastic shoe. My toe hurt from being snarled in powerful string. And my bad hand still hurt, too.

It was light out, but I had no idea what time it was. Downstairs in the lobby, the clock said 5:45, but it could have been morning or evening. I guessed morning—the look on Carolyn's face was certainly one of someone at the end of a double shift.

"Still here?" I said, with a familiarity I hoped she would return.

"Yeah," she said, with only a couple PPM of familiarity. "Thirty hours and counting. I'm usually 5 p.m. to 5 a.m. but my relief did not relieve me."

"Jeez," I said, looking at the clock again. "It's quarter to six in the evening?"

"Looks like you slept twenty-four hours."

Carolyn piled her hair on top of her head so she could scratch vigorously at an itch on the back of her neck. Then she closed her eyes and opened her mouth, obviously preparing to sneeze. But, an instant before its climax, she suppressed it, so that the only sound she made was a feeble *sqwnch*. Much tearing of the eyes followed.

"Bless you. I wish I could do that."

"Practice."

“Okay,” I said, as if she’d given me a command rather than an explanation. She might have. An arcane silence followed. I studied my feet. I was wearing brand new socks. A florid blush, starting at my solar plexus, rose like carbonated jam to my scalp, stopping at my right eyeball socket to throb.

“Been in a fight with your roommates already, have you?” asked Carolyn, observing the throb.

“Oh, no. I’m not a fighter. I’m a flier. I fell out of bed. On my eye.”

She quickly consulted her laminated sleeping arrangement chart. “You fell out of the upper berth?”

“Well, I jumped. But I got caught on something on the way down.”

“You look like you get caught on things a lot,” she said, nodding at my bandaged hand.

“Oh, this one wasn’t my fault,” I said, and it hadn’t been. I hid my hand behind me.

“Never mind, sorry, not my business, don’t mean to pry,” she said, holding up both palms as if to shield herself from any personal facts I might issue.

“I’m hungry,” I said, like a kitten in an illustrated children’s book.

“Then by all means, feed! Monstrelet’s. Walking?”

“Yeah.”

“Ask Batiste how to get there. The guy in the yard. He owns the hostel. And remember, while you’re walking, keep your hands—hand—out of your pocket and run if you feel threatened and don’t go down Doyle and don’t forget to cross the street if approached by a temperamental sort.”

“Okay.”

“And change that fucking diaper.”

On the way to Monstrelet’s I stopped in a bookshop that sold auto-graphed Anne Rice books. I thought about getting one inscribed to Marta, with the idea of solemnly burning or burying it.

“\$3,200,” said the affable guy behind the counter. “For personally inscribed copies of *Mummy* or *Queen*. Anne no longer signs *Lestat* or *Interview*.”

“Can I bring in my own copy for her to sign?”

He laughed heartily.

“Oh, no. No, no. Got to buy the books here, in the shop.”

I bought a pocket-size Cajun-English dictionary and a plastic-coated map, and continued on to Monstrelet’s.

In the un-air-conditioned diner, at my sticky, wobbly table, I sweated freely, but so did everyone else—a mixture of locals, Tulane students, aggressive hipsters, and tall, slouchy waitresses with war-dead stares and sloppy, crooked mouths. There was a group of uniformed Catholic-school girls smoking, drinking coffee, and exchanging cruel stares with the slouchy waitresses, who might have been their older sisters, alumnae of the same school. Everyone sweated like actors in a John Cassavetes movie. Shirts stuck to backbones, armpits radiated tidal rings, crossed legs slid oilily over one another, every square inch of décolletage glistened. An occasional yelp could be heard when a drop of sweat rolled suddenly down a forehead and into an eye. My horrible hand, which I kept under the table, steamed in its diaper. I should’ve followed Carolyn’s order and changed it, but I really didn’t want to see what was under there.

A waitress appeared.

“Four cinnamon rolls please,” I said.

“They’re big,” said the waitress.

“Okay.”

My waitress, after placing my order, embarked on a break. She sat alone at a booth in the back corner and began to work a crossword. Occasionally she pushed wet tongues of black hair off her cheekbones.

She reminded me of something—a thing so recent that it felt like *déjà vu*. Quarterways through a cinnamon roll as big as a

tournament frisbee, I suddenly realized what seemed so familiar: she resembled, uncannily, those heavy, wet, lascivious flowers that were growing out from under the iron fences and lolling like whores along the buckled sidewalks I'd traveled on my nine-block journey to Monstrelet's from the hostel.

My waitress stabbed at the crossword with her ink pen. She lit a cigarette, blew a perfect torus of smoke, winked at a large round man with a hectare of red beard, filled in another crossword answer, then yawned, dropped her cigarette in a coffee cup, lay down on the long seat, and went to sleep.

All the diner seemed lulled by her catnap. I noticed for the first time that the symptoms of withdrawal from all my psych meds had almost completely disappeared. I would never take them again. I would never put myself in a position where I might be prescribed them, ever again. That shit was *over*.

This city just might be the right place. Perhaps the lethal, frosted past couldn't cross the Huey P. Long Bridge. I felt the possibility of relations without obsession, friends without fear, adventure without danger, sex without agony. Craziest without insanity. Love without rescue. I felt able. I felt home.

Then, another feeling, more familiar. I needed a bathroom.

I stood up. My waitress woke at the same instant and looked at me. Without my saying anything, she pointed to the trafficky entrance to the kitchen.

"Through there," she said. "Watch your step."

In the kitchen a vast short-order cook was smoking and rolling sausages on a grill while a scrum of slouchy waitresses wheeled around him, picking toast out of toasters and forks out of baskets. The floor was slick with condensed grease and humidity. No one paid any attention to me as I cut through.

In the tiny bathroom I sat, got comfortable, and opened up my little plastic folding map. I decided I'd later go buy three colors of

Sharpie felt pens at the K & B drugstore I saw on my walk over here. Red, black, and blue. I'd make a little dot with a Sharpie on my map for every bathroom I found in New Orleans. Red dots would denote the worst bathrooms, the don't-use-except-in-an-emergency shitclosets; blue dots would mark the average fast-food-restaurant facility; and black dots for spotless, leisurely suites.

I was sitting in a definite blue. Fairly clean, as long as you declined closer inspection of any surface or its fissures. Fanny ribbon was in bounty, but it was about as soft as emery paper. The toilet itself was a slight product, designed for occasional domestic use only. It had no place in the big leagues. At least there was a plunger.

I pored over my map for a promising part of town to dump the goddamn Pontiac. I didn't really need a car in New Orleans, and I sure had no attachment to this particular shitwagon. Besides, it wasn't mine, and I did not like to think about the trouble I could get in for driving it.

There was a spot on the map that had a bunch of railroad tracks crossing each other. From TV, I knew that convergences of railroad tracks meant hobos and loitering and abandoned cars. I'd drive the car over there, file the engine numbers off, leave the keys in plain sight, and then take a nice leisurely stroll home, breathing in the delivering heat and the musks of the whoring flowers along the way.

The railroad switching yard turned out to be as menacing and deserted as I'd hoped. I parked the Pontiac and lifted the hood. I had no idea where the engine numbers were, and truthfully I wasn't even sure what part the engine was, though I assumed it was the big thing in the middle with the tubes and cables coming out. I saw no numbers on it, though, and in any case I didn't have a file, so I shut the hood, looked one last time in the car, rescued the rest of the Tushies from the floor of the passenger's side, and left the keys in the ignition. I turned to head back to the hostel.

Soon I was lost. My map proved useless, as many of the streets seemed to have had their signs stolen, or perhaps had never had signs, or even names, in the first place.

I sat down on an anonymous corner and squinted at my plastic map, angling it this way and that so I could read it in the growing dark.

“Fuck this,” I announced to the deserted corner. I stood up, kicked at nothing in particular, and then hurt my injured hand trying to wad up the plastic map, which merely sprung back into shape. Inside my Tushie, fresh warmth and a marrow-deep ache.

“And fuck this.”

I stood up and headed towards the brightest horizon.

Street after street of dark houses, broken streetlights, and cars with cracked windshields. The glow on the horizon that I figured was the French Quarter did not seem to get brighter.

Beneath a working streetlight I paused and examined my bandage. A bright new spot, moist and Kremlin red. I *must* change this, I thought, no matter how terrified I was to see just how bad it was.

The phone pole that held the streetlight had two signs, neither legible.

I reached for my map.

The streetlight went out with a *ptch* and a modest display of sparks.

Down the street was the light of a diner.

The glass door to the Smart Harriet Food Restaurant jangled when I opened it. I stood just inside the door for a moment as the jangling subsided. The restaurant was almost silent, unlike the strident din of Monstrelet’s. It was—also unlike Monstrelet’s—air-conditioned, unhip, and lit as bright as a dentist’s office.

I sat down in the first booth, which featured tall, green vinyl seats and Formica tables, their designs worn away by hundreds of thousands of sliding coffee cups and plates of pancakes.

I pulled a laminated menu from between a crusty bottle of Crystal hot sauce and an unlabeled jar of small pickled ovoids. Apparently a decision-maker at the Smart Harriet had changed the menu and penciled the new selections on strips of masking tape stuck over the decedent items. I peeled up a piece of tape that said Facon 2 Pcs; under it was Bacon 15 Strps.

A voice said: "Ioanna, what's this fassone?"

"That's Facon, with a long 'a' and a hard 'c,' Coryate," answered another voice—Ioanna's, I supposed. "It's a portmanteau of 'fake' and 'bacon.'"

"Oh."

"Want some?"

"No I do not."

I leaned out of my booth. A small man in a corduroy sports coat sat at the counter, studying the menu intently. His feet didn't reach the floor. His trouser cuffs didn't reach his feet. I couldn't see his face, but a tight, dense, black buzz cut stuck to his skull like iron filings.

"So no more bacon?" said Coryate.

"No more bacon," said Ioanna, who was visible on her hands and knees under a table, apparently de-wobbling it by wedging a pocket calculator under one of the feet. "I'm experimenting with healthier fare."

"Well, what's this here 'veggie beans and rice'? Beans're vegetables and rice is vegetables where I come from, and that's Lake Charles USA, by God."

"And they're vegetables here, too," said Ioanna. "They're just not cooked in bacon grease and mixed with sausage."

"I'm concerned about the wording here," said Coryate. "Beans and rice is vegetables, so why put 'veggie' up front like that? That don't make it healthy."

"The 'beans and rice' in 'veggie beans and rice' refers to the dish, not its vegetable components," said Ioanna, crawling out from

under the now-stabilized table. “‘Veggie’ qualifies said dish, which is made with lard and soy paste rather than grease.”

“Grease counts towards meat?”

“Well, it’s not a vegetable.”

“Neither is feldspar, or hydrated silica,” said Coryate.

Ioanna appeared at my booth with a plastic glass of iceless water in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, both of which she held by their rims with two fingers. She had freckles on her arms that disappeared under the short sleeves of a loose black blouse with tiny pearl buttons, and reappeared in greater numbers on her collarbone. She leaned over and placed the coffee and water in front of me.

I accidentally bumped the table. Both the coffee and water spilled. They commingled, forming a muddy little river that made its way slowly to the edge of the table.

“Another one?” said Ioanna. “I’ll fix it for you. Don’t move.”

She got down on her knees and crawled under the table.

“Don’t expect anything,” shouted Coryate, turning around for the first time.

His face and hands were randomly smeared black, as though he’d been in a charcoal-briquette fight. He wore a long, millimeter-thin mustache that seemed to function as a plinth for his nose, an oily bulb that appeared to be pulling all of his other features toward it. His iron-shard hairline stopped low on his forehead and his ears stuck out like shutters in the wind, threatening to slam shut over his eardrums.

“Ignore him,” said Ioanna from under the table. She hammered at something, presumably another defunct calculator. My refreshments jumped. “You need to change that bandage.”

She came out from under the table.

“I guess I’ll have some pancakes and some Facon, please. And some biscuits.”

“Is that a diaper? I spy Velcro strips.”

She was younger than I thought at first, maybe forty-five. Her brown hair was tied up in a utilitarian bun. Now I could see there were also tiny freckles that climbed over her collarbone and up her neck to pool on her cheekbones. One of her earlobes had a healing cut, as if an earring had been torn out.

“Say, is there a phone I could use?”

“Only blood from a fairly serious injury would soak through a commercial disposable diaper like that.”

I kept my hand under the table.

Coryate and his oily bulb came over.

“What injury?” he said. “Come on, let’s see it, son.”

I was trapped. I sighed, and put my hand on the table.

“You ought to run over by Charity and get one of them emergency-room people to change that,” he said.

“Don’t like doctors,” I said, sounding like a wet piccolo.

“Come with me,” said Ioanna.

“Ah, uh,” I said.

“Coryate, stay out here.”

She turned around and headed to the back of the Smart Harriet. On the way she shouted into the kitchen.

“Facon, cakes, biscuits!”

A practiced snarl and a crash came from deep within. Ioanna turned back and glared at me.

“Come,” she said, pointing at the rest room.

She sat me down on the lid of a toilet and balanced a cafeteria tray across my knees.

“Hand on the tray.”

I obeyed. Ioanna kneeled in front of me on a dishcloth. She had several more in her lap. Next to my hand was a mess of first aid supplies: iodine, cotton balls, tequila, Band-Aids, paring knife.

“Sit still.”

Ioanna peeled the Velcro, a long, careful *rrrt*. She unwrapped the diaper until the dried blood held it fast. She eased the paring knife

between two layers and sliced it open like a catfish.

“I don’t want to see it,” I said.

“Have a little tequila.”

“Is there a worm?”

“No, it’s an uncommon bottle of tequila that has a worm these days. This is a drugstore-bought spirit, purely functional.”

I had some. She pulled firmly but carefully on the diaper, like it was a weed whose roots might break off and remain stuck in the ground. In my hand something gave, a stubborn bottle cap finally yielding. Then, the familiar, almost comfortable, almost urinary warmth of freed blood.

The diaper came loose. Before I shut my eyes I caught a glimpse of the contrast of my moist, bleached-gray palm with the butcher-shop pinks and marbled-reds of my sliced and crushed and re-opened hand.

Vinegary fluids.

“You need a doctor.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“Should. That’s why you need one.”

Then, the dry, slightly abrasive touch of gauze, getting tighter as she wrapped it around my hand. I opened my eyes. Blood was leaching along the mesh of cotton fibers as quickly as she could wrap. A shallow pond of thin blood, spiraled with peroxide and iodine, had collected at a corner of the tray.

Coryate came in. He had a coffee cup in his hand.

Ioanna turned around.

“Damnation. Did I tell you to stay out of here or did I just say it in my head?”

“But I need a cup of coffee, dammit. All the pots are empty, and I don’t feel like waiting for you to finish playing doctor.”

“Get out.”

“You can have mine,” I said, taking a sip of tequila.

“Hum. Okay. Thanks.”

“Sure.”

“Hurry it up anyway, woman,” said Coryate. “This fellah’s cup won’t hold me long.”

“Get out, you mosquito.”

Coryate did not. Instead he unzipped, and took a long, noisy piss in a urinal behind Ioanna. Then he left.

“You can come back and have pancakes and Facon and biscuits,” said Ioanna, “*after* you see a doctor and get that mess cleaned and sewn back up. Now go.”

“I don’t really know where I am. I’m not from here.”

“Where do you stay?”

“A youth hostel. On Iquem Street.”

“A fair distance. Is there somebody there can come fetch you?”

I thought about it.

“Well, yes. I think so.”

An hour later Carolyn pulled up in an old brown Chrysler and came inside.

“Can’t make a habit of this, Jerome,” she said, looking completely wiped out.

“Sorry.”

I wasn’t a bit sorry. I was delighted. I liked Carolyn, though I wasn’t sure how, yet.

Ioanna—whom I also liked, though I wasn’t sure in what way either, except that it felt filial—did not acknowledge Carolyn.

“C’mon, Jerome.”

Carolyn headed for the door. The leaf was still in her hair, an inch or two lower.

“Come back sometime, Mr Jerome,” said Ioanna.

She never asked what had happened to me.

Carolyn was quiet on the ride back.

The floor of the passenger seat was deeply hidden by what felt underfoot like books and papers and shoes and tennis balls.

We drove in silence. Not an uncomfortable silence, like we'd shared earlier that day, but rather a tranquility, a peace de luxe of the sort that comes from the kensho that you're not alone.

I never did go to the doctor. But I did take Ioanna up on her invitation to come back and visit. Indeed, I went to the Smart Harriet nearly every day, a new bandage on my hand, which I'd wound myself, over the sink, eyes closed, in the moldy, slick bathroom of the hostel.

"How's the mitt," said Ioanna one afternoon, skidding a plate of pancakes across the table.

"Getting better everyday," I said, a falsehood. It didn't look like it was healing well at all.

"Mm."

"Ioanna, will you hire me on here? I'll wash dishes, mop, whatever you want. I can make good grilled-cheese sandwiches."

Ioanna looked me over for a moment.

"Harriet will say no."

"There really is a Smart Harriet?"

"There is," she said. "You wouldn't like it here, anyway."

"You seem like you like it here."

"I was born here. I was born a waitress, and I'll stay one, like it or not. But listen. I know a woman who might take you. I'll telephone her and let her know you might stop by, and that you make outstanding cheese sandwiches."

Ioanna scribbled something on a green diner bill and handed it to me.

*Mrs. (Not miss) hebert at erril's fashion department store. Practice grilling before you go.*

Erril's Fashion Department Store was probably not the oldest department store on American soil, but it was certainly the

oldest that had never been remodeled or modernized or cleaned. The floors were the worn, flecked, putty-and-bean color of junior-high-school hallways. The walls met the floor not at a sharp right angle but with a little ramp of oily, packed dirt studded with price tags and cigarette butts. The sales floor was dusk-dark, illuminated only by low, shaded light fixtures, like in a noir pool hall. But instead of wiry felons and pompadoured hustlers, the place was alive with tiny old ladies in cataract shades slaloming sock racks and girdle displays. Erril's was also likely the last department store in the country with a lunch counter.

The Luncheonaire's low stools were all unoccupied. On the counter were clusters of standard diner complements: mustard, ketchup, and mayonnaise squeeze bottles, Tabasco, salt and pepper shakers, sugar cubes, tiny cream tankards, and large jam and jelly caddies with wire handles. On the end of the counter was a pie spinner spinning pies. Behind the counter but in front of the soda fountain was an old electric cash register partly mummified in silver duct tape. Just beside it stood a tall, skinny woman, her graying hair tied up in a ponytail. She looked pretty much the way Ioanna had described Mrs Hebert. She was stabbing a two-quart can of Orange Hi-C with a steak knife.

She left the knife sticking hilt-deep in the can, and turned her attention to me.

"Let's find a menu, unless you know what you want," she said.

The stool I sat on was so low and the waitress so tall that I had a sudden vivid memory of being in the bathtub as a child when a lady at the home I was at walked in with a box of Mr Bubble and sprinkled it in the running water, smiling down at me.

I thought it was best to eat first, before stating my mission.

"Set me up with a menu, bay. What's good?" I said in my best easy-going voice, which I'd started to affect a day or two after arriving in New Orleans. Later I learned that most newcomers here do

the same thing, sometimes unconsciously, but often actively practicing the music of the accent, then testing it out on native New Orleanians to see if it passed muster. It never did.

“Nothing to speak of,” she said, handing me a menu.

I thought I’d get something like a pobo or gumbo or étouffée, to further mask my origins, but there was nothing of the sort on the menu. There were Reuben melts, hamburgers, butt-steak sandwiches, ham, and ham with pineapple circles. Under Accompaniments were french fries, milk, and coffee. Dessert was a roster of pies, and “Candy.”

I ordered a hamburger and fries and a Coke.

She disappeared for about five minutes, then emerged with my lunch. It was the largest hamburger I’d ever seen. A slice of onion an inch thick stuck out on all sides like a ring of Saturn. There were four french fries, each a half of a potato. The Coke came in an aquarium of crushed ice.

“Ioanna said it was good eatin’ here,” I said with my mouth full.

She stopped consolidating half-empty Tabascos with a foil funnel and turned to me, a hand on her hip.

“You’re the cheese sandwich man?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well, get on back here and grill me one while I examine your technique.”

I did. My technique, and the resulting sandwich, were perfect.

“This a reasonable product,” said Mrs Hebert between bites. “But I’m concerned that that mashed bread hook of yours will fail you during the lunch stampede and I’ll be left overworked and unassisted and a robber’ll seize the opportunity to run off with my gratuity jar.”

She tapped on my bandaged hand with a grilled-cheese crust.

“Oh no,” I said. “A minor cut, getting better every day.”

“Your timing’s good, I’ll grant you that. A colleague just quit me.”

“I can start immediately!”

“Alrighty,” she said after a moment.

The workday started at nine in the morning and went until the evening cook relieved me at five. When I got home to the hostel after work, I’d check the big map to see where the new people were from. It hadn’t changed much during the month I’d been here. The pink pin in Quito was still there, but I still hadn’t seen her yet. I’d encountered many of the Danes, but never my two lower-berth roommates, not formally at least—they were always passed out on their bunks in some stage of drunkenness, or recovery from same. I only ever saw their dorsal sides banded with snug primary-colored jockey shorts. And I hadn’t seen my last roommate, the one who may or may not have been present while I ruined my sock.

I couldn’t tell if Carolyn felt the same kind peace around me as I did around her, but she didn’t seem to mind my hanging around and lying on the vector-borne couch in the lobby of the hostel after my shift at the Luncheonaire while she talked on the phone and monkeyed with her hair and made sport of the hostellers.

“Is that all you’ve ever had here?” I said, one afternoon after I’d come in from a long day of grilled-cheese grilling. “Europeans? And a lone Ecuadoran?”

“Nah, we’ve had every flavor of human. We even had a chick here who lived in Antarctica.”

I shifted on the couch so I could see her. She was sitting and tugging at her hair with her old plastic brush with black bristles. One knee was bent and pushed up against the rim of the gray metal desk. The denim covering it was pale and thinning. If she were to lean forward, the taut cotton strands might *snap snap snap*, revealing her skin and releasing the tiniest puffs of cotton dust.

“I didn’t think anyone was from there,” I said.

“She was, or so she said. She wanted to sleep with me. She said I looked warm.”

This was the first time Carolyn had referred to sex. Incredibly, no uncomfortable feelings beset me. Not jealousy, lust, love, possessiveness, blues, shame, heartache. Just that same weird peace. *I have a friend!*

“Did you?”

“Did I look warm?”

“No, I mean...”

“You know,” Carolyn continued, “it only snowed here once, and I fucking missed it. It lasted three hours and was gone by noon. You know why? Me and my Antartican were in bed at the Guesclin Hotel sleeping off a slivovitz hangover.”

“I bet it snows a lot in the Czech Republic,” I said.

“Worse in Denmark. Believe me, I’ve heard stories.”

“I wonder how bad it is in Quito?”

“No telling,” said Carolyn, looking over her shoulder at the pink pin. “It looks like it’s in the mountains. You oughta ask her next time you see her.”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her,” I said.

“You’re kidding. She sleeps with you, man.”

“What’re you talking about? I’m not sleeping with anyone! I’d remember.”

She smiled and snorted, as if she couldn’t stand for one moment longer pretending I wasn’t an idiot.

“Not *with* you, you prevert. Next to you. The other top bunk? The Spanish didn’t tip you off?”

This could not be. I looked at my socks.

“That’s a girl?” I said.

“She doesn’t look like a girl to you? Long black hair, kissy lips? She looks like a girl to me, Jerome,” said Carolyn. “I mean, she’s a *girl*.”

“I’ve never seen her!” I said, sitting up straight, a bloom of pathogens rising from the couch. “I’ve never seen anyone in that bunk!”

“She does sleep during the day, come to think of it,” said Carolyn. “She parties all night, with your other roomies.”

“I’ve never met *them*, either,” I said. “But, she’s, I mean, you mean...are you saying that girls and boys can sleep together in the same room?”

“If the hostel’s crowded, yes, Jerome, boys and girls can room together. Your other roommates are gay, anyway. They’re good friends with her. And you’re...”

“What? What? I’m not gay,” I said, not really sure of it—the muscular calves on those Tour de France guys always gave me a boner. And I had strange, pelvicentric feelings regarding Daniel Day-Lewis’s Adam’s apple.

“Did I say gay? I was going to say that you’re safe-looking.”

“Safe.”

“Safe,” said Carolyn. “You’re a very safe yet excitable young straight man.”

“What’s her name?”

“Miranda,” said Carolyn.

“Miranda,” said I.

I never saw Miranda. Her bunk was always empty, except for the scatter of panties and empty cans of lager. Now I wondered if the spring triple-issue of *Größte Pfosten* had been hers, rather than one of my other roommate’s. I hoped it wasn’t hers. I could never measure up to Werner.

It didn’t matter anyway, because I had to move out of the hostel. I couldn’t earn enough making cheese sandwiches to pay eighteen bucks a night for a place to live, even though I was quite skilled, and becoming locally famous.

I began spending my lunch hour and the hours after work apartment hunting. But after a while I realized I was looking less for apartments and more for girls with long black hair and kissy lips.

There were an awful lot of them. But none were Miranda: I queried them all.

One apartment, just a couple of blocks from the Smart Harriet, had sounded promising in the ad but proved to be unsuitable, because of the antsy junkie squatters there who objected to any changes in the tenancy.

“Fuck off!” they said.

I fucked off and went to the Smart Harriet.

“You smell like grilled cheese,” Ioanna informed me.

“I make a lot of them. I’m quite famous.”

I wondered if Miranda had heard of my sandwiches.

“Famous? Are you getting rich?” Ioanna asked. “Are you going to buy a mansion and lease me a wing so I can live out my spinster years in seclusion?”

“I would, but I can’t even afford to stay at the hostel any more.”

“I’ll rent you my tub!” shouted Coryate, from the counter. “No pets!”

“No, that’s okay,” I said.

Coryate yelled for a refill.

I’d learned that Coryate was an artist who made his living doing charcoal portraits of tourists in Jackson Square. Reputedly he was also a sketch artist for the cops, and occasionally accepted small thank-you gifts in return for little changes here and there to his sketches so that they more closely resembled persons the police did not like but whom they otherwise had no good reason to arrest.

“How’s the hand?” he said.

“Better,” I said, looking down.

I still kept it wrapped in gauze and an Ace bandage. It just would not heal properly. It hurt. I should’ve kept my word and gone to a doctor long ago. I’d have been able to make world-famous grilled cheeses a lot quicker if I’d had full use of both hands. It was the one chronic, concrete reminder that there had been a time before these

tranquil New Orleans days, a period of frost, blood, locks, misinterpretations, and loneliness. I imagined the relief I'd get by hacking it off with a big meat cleaver.

I promised myself that once I'd found a place to live I'd go to the doctor and have this rotting gash taken care of. I didn't want to repulse Miranda, after all.

Carolyn telephoned and told me that her friend Terence, an ex-hostel clerk, had gotten so fed up with the surprise reversals of fortune that in his view so characterized New Orleans that he just up and got on a Greyhound back to his homeland.

"Homeland?" I said, still a little fuzzy from having a positively Kodachromic daydream interrupted: me and Miranda in a pile of autumn leaves, locked in a promising tickle fight.

"Canada. And his place is now available."

Terence's place was cheap and only about fifteen blocks from the hostel. I still went to see Carolyn every day, partly—muchly—in hopes that Miranda would turn up. But she never did. She'd either just gone out, or had just come back and gone to bed.

"How's Terence's shithole shotgun?" asked Carolyn when I came in one afternoon.

She quined a whole giant SweetTart in her mouth and bit hard. A little chalky rocket shot across the room.

"Pretty fair," I said.

And it was, except for the neighbor on the other side of the shotgun, Mr Murdoch, a slick Romeo in his fifties who lived with his mother.

They fought a lot, this mother and son, mostly about the son's womanizing. He often had sleepover dates, and the mother would sometimes bust into the son's room while dating was in progress, to warn the woman that she'd better watch out or she'd catch some AIDS. I knew this because *everything* radiated through those desiccated plaster walls.

“His mom? And he’s *fifty*?” said Carolyn.

“Yeah. She’s cool. I don’t like the son, though.”

I would occasionally hear him promising a conquest his indivisible fealty, and then, sometimes within hours, promising another lover the same thing.

I had another damn good reason not to like the man, but I didn’t feel like explaining it to Carolyn: that my toilet was structurally connected to his—they were back-to-back, with just a thin wall in between—and that if I was on my toilet when he sat on his, I sawed into the air.

“I never went to Terence’s place,” said Carolyn, wrapping the telephone cord around a pencil. “But he tried to get me over there all the time, probably in order to fill me with absinthe and snip off my clothes with electric scissors.”

Carolyn made an electric-scissors sound and scissored her fingers down the front of her T-shirt. “I think he thought that absinthe restored heterosexual lust in dykes.”

“Does it?” I said, not sure if she was being sarcastic.

“Nope,” she said. “Beer might, though. How’s the water pressure?”

“Not bad,” I said. “I’d say forty percent of ideal.”

“Any charm? Everything in this city is supposed to be charming.”

I thought about it.

“Well, in the kitchen over the counter there’s a big black wooden thing stuck to the wall, like a Louise Nevelson sculpture. But tighter scrutiny revealed its true nature to be kitchen cabinets. A long bank of them, painted shut. I tried chipping away at the paint, but it must be a half inch thick.”

“Probably a body in there. Or maybe just heads. That’s charming I guess. Notice an odor?”

“No, just the—” I looked past Carolyn. I think I turned red, or maybe white.

“Wha?” she said, a giant SweeTart puck stored in one cheek.

“The girl from Quito’s gone,” I said.

I moved my head from side to side, to see if I’d just caught the light the wrong way. No, there was no pink pin there. I felt like I’d been hit in the back of the knees by a medicine ball.

“Yep, Miranda’s gone,” said Carolyn. “Checked out this a.m. before I came on. A surprise. I thought she’d stay forever. Oh, they do get some bitch snow in Quito, by the way. We chatted a little yesterday after she came in late from some kind of x-rated crab-boil puppet show in the Bywater. I told her how much you hated snow, and how you left Massachusetts because of it. That made her laugh.”

“She laughed?”

“Giggled. I think she liked you, Jerome. She said she watched you sleeping all the time. She said you have a cute philtrum.”

“Me?” My esophagus dried out and the arches of my feet started to sweat. My whole skull was steaming and my ears seemed to be furling and trying to retract into my skull. “A cute philtrum?”

Carolyn looked at me happily. “She said you looked like a tiny baby sleeping, that you curl your hand up into a tiny baby fist. She wanted to miniaturize you and carry you in a pouch to keep you cozy and protect you from harm, and feed you little bits of flan and lettuce and french fry.”

“You’re making all that up!”

“No, I’m really not. And judging by that rosy blush, it seems that the news pleases you.”

“Not me,” I said, squeaking, panicky, suddenly desperate to find her. “It sounds like she was flirting with *you*.”

“Right,” she said. “I wish. I never get femmes.”

Carolyn was suddenly gloomy. For a few moments she focused on licking clean the inside of her Giant Chewy SweetTarts wrapper. Then she cheered up again.

“If I’d only known sooner,” she said. “I could’ve won her for you, Jerome. Cute philtra are positively irresistible to the Pacific South Americans.”

“Really?”

“I’m sorry she’s gone, Jerome. She was a fire-fucking-*work*. Except for the glasses.”

My muscles withered under my skin. I felt like I was wearing a beef-jerky suit.

“Did she go back to Quito?”

“Doubt it. I think she was planning to stay in town.”

“Where? You know, just curious.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea.”

“Someone has to know,” I said, considering running up to the room just to make sure she wasn’t still there. “What about our other two roomies?”

“Gone, too.”

“Dammit! Are you sure you don’t have just a really slight idea?”

“I don’t *know*, Jerome. Are you really hooked on someone you haven’t met yet? Or even seen?”

“No, I certainly am not, how ridiculous.”

I crossed my arms and tried to appear bored.

“Damn, you are. You really should’ve told me. A long time ago. I love matchmaking.”

Truth was, I hadn’t known until now.

Over the next few weeks, any workaday doings—sleep, job, food, bills, health—that didn’t directly concern my pursuit of Miranda, I either shirked or forgot or just zombied through. Carolyn’s assistance was largely technical or strategic—apart from the occasional brief prowl or stakeout, she didn’t often do actual fieldwork. She did, however, try to cheer me up whenever I suffered an especially dispiriting search.

“She probably doesn’t like me anyway,” I said.

“Miranda didn’t just see you sleeping, Jerome—a passive happenstance—but *watched* you sleep. So chin up.”

“I’ll never, ever find her, and I bet she’s forgotten me already.”

“How can you have such a debilitating crush on someone you’ve never even met?”

“I’m not debilitated,” I said.

Carolyn and I sat across from each other in a booth at the Smart Harriet. Ioanna was in a cold mood. She had taken our orders without comment, and had merely nodded when I re-introduced her to Carolyn. When she brought our food, she skidded the plates along the table so that they tapped the salt and pepper shakers at the far end. There was some sloshing of coffee. She gave Carolyn my pancakes and me Carolyn’s waffles.

“You *look* debilitated,” said Carolyn.

I sat with my elbows on the table, my forehead in my hands, staring at my pancakes, which had been placed on the same plate as my eggs and bacon, an arrangement I’d always found intolerable. If my syrup touched my eggs or bacon, I couldn’t eat anything at all. And Ioanna knew that. She thought it was charming, or a symptom of Asperger’s syndrome. Either way, she *always* made sure my sweets and savories arrived on two separate plates.

I glanced over at Ioanna to see if I could divine, from the way she swept out, wiped down, or swatted at things in the diner, just what I’d done to displease her. Maybe it was because she knew I hadn’t gone to see a doctor yet about my stupid hand.

“Maybe flummoxed is a better word,” said Carolyn. “And your bitchy mother over there probably doesn’t help much.”

“She’s not my mother.”

“Mother-figure. Maybe the combination of your unpleasable mother-figure and your unlocatable dream-girl-figure has flummoxed and debilitated you.”

Ioanna was stuffing napkins into a chrome napkin holder, far more napkins than the napkin holder was designed to hold, making napkins nearly impossible to remove, except in tiny shreds, or

in groups of one thousand. Most of the regulars brought their own.

Ioanna was really cramming one. Cords popped out on her neck. She bent over a little, and some cleavage became visible. Carolyn leaned towards me, watching Ioanna.

“She’s hot, for forty-nine or whatever,” said Carolyn. “Oh, but we’re talking about your love life, Jerome. Sorry.”

It felt different than love, this smothering mudslide of desperation and longing. It was an old feeling. Old as in preverbal, or even atavistic. But I didn’t try to explain that to Carolyn.

I pushed my forehead harder into my hand so that my eyelids stretched. I moaned quietly.

“Please don’t fall in love with her,” I said. “I can’t handle my friend-figure lusting after my mother-figure.”

“You know what I think? I think your world is crowded with mother-figures.”

“Noo!”

“Would you just eat your food and quit groaning like that? You sound like Chewbacca.”

“I can’t. I hate this.”

“If we can’t find Miss Ecuador, I’ll find you a girlfriend. I know lots of beautiful girls that won’t have me. And they’re sheep for nice philtra.”

“But I want Miranda.”

I moaned some more and squeezed my hair, while Carolyn ate lustily and Ioanna ignored our empty coffee cups.

“You know,” said Carolyn, “I think your Ioanna there doesn’t like me. She doesn’t *approve*. She didn’t like me the first time. I don’t think she was expecting her little special man to befriend a coarse hussy.”

“Guh.”

“Maybe I’ll be your girlfriend, Jerome.”

Carolyn pantomimed a blow job. It was as shocking and obscene a performance as anything I'd ever witnessed. Then she initiated a game of footsie.

"I'm confused," I said.

Carolyn seemed amused by it all, and somehow my agonies made her expansive about her own sexual misadventures. She fell in love easily, she said, and became obsessed as deeply as I did, albeit with people she'd actually met at least once.

"Some of those girls out there nearly killed me," she said, as we drove down North Rampart after our meal. "The younger they are, the slimmer, the meaner, the smarter, then the darker the relationship becomes, until I'm a puddle of need, and then they leave me for someone that's even meaner and smarter but also has a tremendous bosom."

Carolyn swerved around an old man in a track suit doing a variant of the River Dance in the middle of North Rampart. Carolyn and I often drove around aimlessly, drinking beer and wasting gas and avoiding eccentrics performing in the roadways, but this time I had the feeling we were aimed someplace.

"Where are we going?"

"We are going to look for your goddess. We are going to feel the curbs of every likely street until we find her. Or until it gets dark. I promised you I'd help, but I haven't been doing such a hot job. So. Here we are. Peel them eyeballs."

We drove up and down the long streets of the Bywater, slowing down now and then for closer looks at strollers and loiterers with Miranda attributes. As the false positives mounted, I grew even more despairing than usual.

The traffic slowed, then stopped. A rusted, ruined freight train was stalled ahead, blocking the road. Not quite stalled—it would jolt, then creep forward a few feet, then stop with a shudder, then jolt again and move a few feet in the other direction. There was

another train on a parallel track doing the same thing, but to a different rhythm. Carolyn reached into the back seat and pulled a beer out of a big ice-filled cooler.

“Here.”

“What’s up with these trains?” I said, taking the glass quart of Miller. “I feel like I’m in a movie about doomsday.”

A woman began to climb out of a hopper car. She hoisted herself over, and then hung onto the lip of the car with one hand while she studied the ground. The cigarette in her mouth she tossed down onto the rail ballast. She wore a high-waisted white silk slip a shade or two paler than her skin and the spectral opposite of her short, chaotic, plum-tinted hair. She was backpacked, barefoot, and brass-knuckled. She let go of the hopper and dropped at least six feet, landing without a wince on the sharp rocks of the ballast. She picked up her cigarette, gave it a hard suck, then looked around.

“Is she what you meant by young and slim and mean?” I said.

“Don’t point.”

“I’m not pointing.”

“Yeah,” said Carolyn, sighing greatly. “She’s what I mean.”

The woman flicked her cigarette at least thirty feet, then ducked under the train and was gone.

“It was a bus wreck, my last relationship,” said Carolyn, unsteadily, clearly affected by the short cinema of the feral freight-hopper. “It started so great, but got bad fast, then crashed. All because of a misunderstanding. That time, *she* was the one obsessed over *me*—can you believe that? But I was obsessed over her, too. We were perfect for each other.”

She said that last without any irony that I could detect.

“Someone you worked with?” I said. “I read in *People* that that’s asking for trouble.”

“No. Well, kind of,” she said wearily. “She wasn’t really officially employed at the hostel. She was just there a lot, and kind of helped out some.”

Finally, the trains slowly moved off, and we headed towards Arabi. We had started our second Miller quarts. It was getting dark.

“It was bad, though, huh,” I said, not wanting the dialogue on love to fizzle. “It must have been very painful.”

I sounded like a shrink, for chrissake.

“Okay, it was this chick named Francie,” Carolyn said suddenly. “And the misunderstanding was that she thought I was cheating on her with this guy who worked at the hostel who was always coming onto me. Terence, your shotgun’s prior tenant. But I wasn’t. Turned out later that *she’d* been cheating on *me*.”

“Ack.”

“Getting cheated on sucks,” she said. “It’s the mind’s eye that does all the torturing. You know, picturing her with someone else, especially fucking someone else, doing it in that position that was just me and hers, those little scream-hisses when she came that were *her* gifts to *me*, now she’s giving them to someone else...you know what I mean?”

I noticed we were being ambitiously tailgated.

“Hey,” I said, looking over my shoulder. “I think—”

“Maybe you don’t,” she continued, seeming to take no notice of the large car trying to spelunk our tailpipe. “Well. It hurts. And you can’t not watch. The brain won’t allow it. You see *A Clockwork Orange*? Remember the Ludovico Technique? Like that. The mind’s eye, held open with little metal clips. Films. Over and over and over-overnover.”

“You better let this guy around, he seems—”

“That, my friend,” she said, still oblivious, “will never happen to me again. Never. Just talking about it now makes me want to drive off a cliff and die. Did you know I haven’t hooked up with anybody since Francie? Know why? Just to avoid those films. They’ll kill a girl. Kill.”

“Carolyn! This guy is really close!”

“Oh. I see. Put your feet up on the dash, Jerome, I’m gonna stomp on my brake. I think I’m still insured.”

But then we noticed it was a cop car, because of the sirens and flashing lights and the bullhorn commanding us to pull over.

“Fuck,” said Carolyn.

We both had open quart-bottles of beer in our laps. Mine was almost full. Carolyn’s was nearly gone.

She pulled over in front of a social club busy with people coming and going. I was in a panic. I had a full beer between my legs, and I was in a car, and soon I would be in a jail, where they’d run my name and see there was a bench warrant for me as a car thief and cinnamon-roll-bakery destroyer, then beat a confession out of me and throw me in solitary forever.

On the dashboard there was a blanched Monchhichi doll that must have been there for a decade. I grabbed it and forced it head-first into the neck of my Genuine Draft. I carefully placed the bottle on the floor of the back seat just as the cop walked up.

“License and proof of insurance,” said the cop.

“What’d you pull me over for?” said Carolyn.

My hand jumped to my heart.

“License and proofa insurance.”

Carolyn yanked her backpack out from behind the seat and rifled around for a while until she found her billfold. She still had her quart of Lite beer between her legs.

“Here.”

“Mm. And what you got there?” the cop asked.

“This is Lite Beer from Miller.”

“Let me see.”

Carolyn handed the bottle to the cop, who held it up by the neck and peered through the liquid at the streetlights. There was about an inch of beer left.

“How much you had to drink tonight, ma’am?”

“Well, whatever’s missing.”

“Okay, then.” He gave her the bottle back. “Get both those tail-lights fixed and your left directional and don’t drive around this neighborhood this time of night, unless you bring you a bigger boyfriend. With two working hands.”

“He’s tougher than he looks,” said Carolyn. “He’s just lovesick right now. Besides, I have a .38 in my backpack.”

“Okay then,” said the cop. Then he went back to his cruiser and drove off.

“Wow,” I said, sweating lather. “That jangled me up. I thought we were going to jail.”

“What for? Busted taillights?”

“DUI and unlicensed firearms possession and smart-aleckiness and...”

“There’s no DUI or gun licensing in New Orleans and I was perfectly polite and respectful.”

We headed back west. Presently I caught the smell of the sea. Faint, but there. On a map I’d seen New Orleans is surrounded by water. A lake, a river, the Gulf, bayous.

“I tried to kill myself after Francie,” Carolyn said, her voice startling me.

“Jesus. Carolyn. Don’t tell me that.”

She turned on the dome light, and, without slowing down, rolled up the right short sleeve of her shirt up over her shoulder. Through the stubble under her arm ran a short, fat scar right over the profunda brachii.

“I obviously missed the artery. Wasn’t even close. Fucking hurt, and it didn’t even bleed much. I didn’t mention it to anybody.”

“Fuck, Carolyn.”

“I know.”

“I command you to take good care of yourself!”

“You’ve never had anyone cheat on you. I envy you, you and your

Miranda crush. I *run* from crushes now, not that I have them much. Or, more precisely, allow myself to have them. No more relationships for me. Just crushless sex. I'll take my relationship-forming urges out on you and your absentee Ecuadoran."

"This crush doesn't feel enviable."

"You didn't care about Miranda all that much till you found out she'd watched you sleep. That's kinda off, Jerome. A little kinky."

"Where is she now? Francie, I mean?"

"I don't know."

Quiet and a little drunk, we headed out on the old Airline Highway. Thunderstorms had been threatening all day. It was hot. The air was like meringue. I reached in the back and pulled a cold beer out of the cooler. I ignored my warm beer with the Monchhichi sticking out of it—likely both were ruined.

"Where are we going now? Stake out the airport lounge?"

"Watch planes."

The airport appeared ahead of us. Its cobalt-blue lamps lined runways that stretched off to vanishing points all around the circle of the horizon. The air-traffic control tower with its eerie green eye-panes looked out over the flat land.

It was late, but planes were still landing, probably delayed by the thunderstorms surrounding the city. Carolyn drove up to the top tier of the long-term parking garage and parked the car facing the runways. Ours was the only car up there.

We watched 737s land for a long time without saying anything. The only sound was the scraping roar of engines and the *brt brtbrt* of tires hitting the tarmac.

Carolyn climbed out of the car. She reached down and pulled the release on her seat back, which fell forward and lay flat. Then she jumped in the back seat and put her feet up.

"Comfortable?" I said.

"*Uuut. Ut.*"

She'd had more beer than I had. After a minute I climbed in the back and put my feet up on the front seat too. The cooler of beer was on the floor between us.

We watched for planes, but there hadn't been any in more than an hour.

Carolyn leaned into me a little, then scooted over and put her head on my shoulder.

"Protect me from bad relationships," she said, an order. "And I promise I'll get you your black-haired snow bunny."

I felt an earring through the material of my shirt. A lone strand of hair poked at my earlobe. I adjusted slightly and put my arm around her shoulder. Perfectly natural. Because she was a lesbian and I was her friend, and we'd had some deep talks about love and such. Even thus, I grew a stratospheric, glowing erection.

"Deal," I said.

My heart chugged. Carolyn's hair, lighted by the glow of the airport, jumped every time my heart beat, or hers. After a moment of paralyzing discomfort, Carolyn gracefully half-twisted towards me and suddenly she was lying face up in my lap. She reached up to pull me to her. I could hardly move, let alone bend over, even for a kiss, due to the erection. So I pulled her up to me.

She whimpered and cried and ran her hands over my face, kissing me lightly, almost without touching. She tasted of salt. I held her by the waist and under her shoulders. I slid down in the seat to get closer. I closed my eyes. I imagined Miranda, her kissy lips.

Then Carolyn stopped.

"Back in a few secs."

She climbed out, headed unsteadily to a concrete pillar, and disappeared behind it. A rivulet of liquid snaked from behind it, as black and shiny as blood under the sulfur arc lamps.

She came back.

“I have to go too,” I said.

I went over to the same spot she'd been. I saw where she'd crouched down, the spatter.

After some effort I undid my belt and zipper. My erection was the otherworldly, unbendable sort that I used to get in high school. And it was clearly not going to subside and allow me to pee in the accepted fashion (earthward), so I just let go. I peed in a high arc over the city of Kenner as the last plane of the night cleared the thunderheads and landed between the long arrows of cobalt lamps.

When I got back to the car, Carolyn was stretched along the back seat, deep in sleep. Both disappointed and wildly relieved, I climbed in front, and soon I was just as dead to the world.

The drive back from the parking garage the next morning was generally silent. My clothes were damp with sour sweat. My head was a microwaved pumpkin. Carolyn pulled over in front of the First Imperssions Bar and threw up out the window.

“That's better,” Carolyn said, driving off again. “I feel much better.”

I said, “Remember you said that beer just might make you like boys for a few minutes! Haha!”

“It does,” she said, pulling up to the hostel. “But you spent those few minutes tinkling. Missed your chance.”

I'd heard that before.

“Besides,” she said as we walked up the walk, “you need to reserve all your chang for Miranda. The Pacific South Americans like their boyfriends to be filled with chang.”

Exactly what she meant by ‘chang’ I wasn't sure, but the way she said it made me blush and sweat at the same time.

Batiste was sitting at his outdoor desk, sentinel next to his big Igloo, morning glories scaling his Dickies.

“All right,” he said, glancing up.

“What’s on tap today?” said Carolyn. “Dr Pepper?”  
“Jolt.”

Batiste suddenly gave me a hard, interrogative stare.

“You different,” he said. “Haircut?”

Carolyn said, “He’s just hungover.”

“And,” she added, “he’s after something he might not catch.”

Batiste continued to stare.

“Bet I know what,” he said. Then he began to laugh.

Carolyn began to laugh, too.



illustrations by Brad Benischek

P O E T R Y   F E A T U R E

*Queen Elizabeth The First's Period*

Mary Leader

COMPLAINT

I am tired of being accused of lack of seriousness when I feel  
The need to use wingdings as stitches in my poems. I am telling you:

I sue for the following to become compliments: “Gimmicky” “Embellished”  
“Fancy” “Slight” “Decorative” “Frivolous” “Labored” “Fontish” “Ornate.”

I am saying: To align \* poetry \* and \* needle-art \* is to say: I am among  
Those historically not taught to read. I subpoena the 16th-C. “Emblem

Books” whose each page shows an image (a “devise”), a motto, then verses.  
Rosemary Freeman’s book (821.00915F877c) prints an example of one

Of the images worked in embroidery, showing that, while only the men  
In the household would likely have been able to read the motto and verse,

The women used the volumes too. When writing mimics thread, you get  
*Before* you read, work perceptible as: “Beautiful” “Meaningful” “Expressive”

“Heartbreaking.” I assert, after Philomel: *Cut out my tongue and I will weave  
My indictment...*but...Stop There. Otherwise the next thing is:

Cut off my hands and I turn into a nightingale forced, suffering (my shame)  
To “sing” for the gratification of Shelley, Keats, et al. That adulation

Means a victory for the spear side (opposite the distaff side).  
Instead, I tell history: “Go back!” I call on the ancient association

Of Peace-Weavers. At least let me decide on my own bird, choose  
A stitcher of horizons, a life between linnet and linen.

COURTESY I

Asterisks revolving inside my typescript, function variously:

- \*As a signal to a note or reference, as established by usage
- \*As a touch of ornament, a design element, that pleases me in itself
- \*As extra vocabulary. E.g. “star”; “flaw”; “sudden-appearance”; “go there”\*
- \*As a spacer or spanner or wrench among words, letters, titles, jots

TAXONOMY

Civilization	(Culture)	[currently
Western	(European)	necessary
English	(British)	correction]
Renaissance	(Early Modern)	
Fabric Arts		[no correction
Embroidery		needed here]
Where was I?	Blackwork	

Now, you could just as well use any other mark in place of the asterisk I Am using, and the line would still work out the same way. Just be aware

That if you use something besides the asterisk, your page will look Different from mine. But that is fine. That is as it should be. Again,

To say, dear reader, or non-dear reader-be that as it may-I am not Trying to be clever, not being tricky or cheeky, not having you off.

I am only saying that I personally have come to like Using the asterisk for this purpose, inter alia, because

- \*Asterisk,
- As I sing it,
- Also

Acts  
As  
An elegy or  
A kind of quick prayer for myself  
And for other persons,

Because some people believe that people when they die become  
Members of the heavens as neo-stars that you can actually see up there.

Myself, I think it happens both more, and less, literally than that.  
Moreover, however, as for the pages stolen from the *Complete*

*Guide to Needlework*\*\* here.... (Is "Stolen" on my list  
Of compliments, too? very likely.) Well-copied!

Enough, Mary!' Who is still

Even thinking about my poem "Queen  
Elizabeth the First's Period"?

Nobody!

I, afraid of feeling

But so as

To busy myself, assemble

✱ Informative

Sentences! To wit:

*Blackwork\* is a category of counted thread embroidery in which so-called diaper or repetitive patterns are used to fill design areas. The play of one diaper pattern upon another creates dark, medium, and light areas; a mixture of all three shades adds interest to a piece. Because \*blackwork\* is worked over an exact number of threads, the needle must go between threads rather than pierce them. \*Blackwork\* is said to have originated in Spain, becoming very popular in England when Catherine of Aragon married King Henry [the eighth of that name]. The original \*blackwork\* patterns probably were derived from Arabic embroidery designs. Later, when \*blackwork\* reached the*

height of its popularity in sixteenth-century England, the original geometric patterns were influenced by English design. At that time, fruits and flowers were used as repeated motifs, with twining stems giving a cohesive look to the design. Renaissance portraits of both men and women show this kind of \*blackwork\* pattern covering sleeves, cuffs, and collars.

#### EPIGRAPHY

“Copying Copying it in.”

–Gertrude Stein, “Yet Dish”

“And as to who will copy this palimpsest?

*al poco giorno*

*ed al gran cerchio d’ombra* (Dante)

But to affirm the gold thread in the pattern (Torcello)”

–Ezra Pound, copying it in for his *Pisan Cantos*

#### COURTESY II

Thank you, \*\**The Reader’s Digest Complete Guide to Needle-Work* (Reader’s Digest Association: Pleasantville, NY, 1979): credit where Due and incidentally saying Art Is Communal; I copy in, not for reading So much as for preserving; Catalogs of Ships Said To Be Sacred. And lively.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Skip any. Skim any. Read aloud any. But

Important Note: I could not have thought them up unaided.

I propose that that is a function of poetry. Or

Share with fiction writers; they are always looking for names.

{The following list is partial}

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Brunswick Worsted Mills, Inc., Coats & Clark Inc., The D.M.C. Corporation

Even I am skipping the rest of these companies.

Well, I do like

“Dritz Art Needlework.”

And I have to say, the name(s) “Coats & Clark,” the Sign  
COATS & CLARK.... (I feel an inkling coming on.)

“Coats & Clark”

Coats&Clark made every color I could conceive of:  
Matching thread, floss, zippers, bias tape,  
For when I personally was first learning to sew.

And well I remember the packaging of  
Boye Needles-knitting needles, understand;  
Not sewing needles (the latter “sharps” or “tapestry”).

The sewing-needle packet-tiniest of pipe organs,  
Labeled “Made in England”—I felt that this was good,  
And I was proud to own them, “20 Sharps.”

SPECIAL CREDITS

Some of these...you can see they'd be my cuppa, and  
You don't know, they might be somebody else's as well.

Besides, I don't see what harm this can do. Or maybe it can.  
To “the body of poetry.” Well? What can I say?

I don't remember picking that body. That corpse—  
But “I was there” somehow and I like these corpses:

- Page 12: Flower-and-bird design. The Bagshaws of St. Lucia Ltd.  
Silk-screen bamboo-print wallpaper. Janovic/Plaza
- Page 103: Alphabet, from *New Art Deco Alphabets* by Marcia Loeb  
New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Page 208: Rose design quilt. The Gazebo.
- Page 233: Baby Blocks quilt. The Gazebo.
- Page 234: Grandmother's Flower Garden...

At my own Granny and Grandfather Haddox's \*no\*garden\*as\*such, only  
Flowers that grew without attendance, which was one of the many reasons

I loved to be at their house. Also they had butter instead of margarine  
(Oleo, at that time) which stayed out on the counter for ease of spreading!

Three of the flowers that grew without attendance were:

\*Tiger Lilies

\*Climbing Roses (and their altar boys, the bees)

\*Bachelor's Buttons, which were I believe a kind of aster\*;

They grew wild in the cracks of the driveway,  
A driveway never used for cars for some reason

\*Asters, asterisks! of course! shaped: \*

Of the daisy family, yes? days'-eye, the sun!

Aster-Risks. Bachelor's Buttons, & if I could spell

Boutonniere, I'd put that in here too. I'm sure

It's connected with this flower, with this entire theme—

Marriage-sex-risk!-risk to bachelor?

Or to maid? Depends. "Batch-ing it"

Folk expression. I'd put it in.

‘Mary Bryce, calm down!’ “boot-in-ear. b-o-u-t-i-n-i-e-r.” “That is incorrect.” To next child: “boo-tin-ear.” Next child says: “boo-tin-ear. b-o-u-t-o-n-n-i-e-r-e, boot a near.” “That is correct.” This from the same woman who said on normal days “Sound it out.” She dressed to the nines for The Spelling Bee. A stately woman, Mrs. Teague, t-e-a-g-u-e, that is incorrect, *capital T* -e-a-g-u-e and a Baptist, which meant she was the first teacher of mine who didn’t seem to like me. Baptist children said, “Why can’t you confess directly to God?” “Why do you pray to the Virgin Mary? Do you believe she’s God?” “Those little candles, that you light in front of your Sta-chews.” “Votives.” That was their name, you asshole, Mary Jean Stockwell, Baptist Minister’s daughter who was forbidden to play with me, “votives,” you idiot, you bigot, Mrs. Teague. And Mr. Teague your husband, the high-school shop teacher, who, let me tell you, thought I was pretty cute by then. No, be fair, I don’t think it was lascivious. A clean bald Baptist, probably a “deacon.” At the very least an “usher.” He wasn’t what is now called a “leech.” If he had been, believe me I would say so. He just thought it was cute that a girl was interested in “shop” as well as “home-ec.” Obviously this was when certain boundaries were clear...I’m sorry, Mary Jean. You were just a little girl too. Mrs. Teague, hardly evil incarnate, half of a couple who had no children. Next door to the cement-floored bus garage was the cement-floored shop with its jigsaw, with its sandpaper...Using the lunch period, I got Ralph Teague to help me make a pair of bookends, which I then painted sunflower yellow

under                    my                    own                    eagle                    eye.  
                                  a pair of bookends, which I then painted  
                                  sunflower yellow under my own eagle eye.

I would then attach, to the painted bookends,  
 One each, two little cloth dolls from Mexico,  
 A little Mexican girl and a little Mexican boy,

Because you see this project was a present  
For my Spanish teacher, Mrs. Schaumberg,  
A poised young woman I admired very much.

The dolls were from among the many Granny  
Had given me year by year as she and Grandfather  
Went on their trips to all the countries.

During Mass, my very favorite of the statues  
Was Saint Francis, little birds on his shoulders,  
And in the palm of his right hand,

A little bird he seemed especially to like,  
At which he gazed down sweetly.  
I'm about to go back into the ur-poem

“Queen Elizabeth the First’s Period,”  
The Reformation and all that. Empire.  
How Grandfather sat up late, for hours

At his incredibly messy huge desk filling  
In with colored pencil-pencil!—hours  
It must have taken-well it did take,

Weeks of “burning the midnight oil”—  
For him to fill in on a giant black&white  
Map every country they had gone to.

A favorite child. A girl’s first period,  
A period in art that I happen to adore,  
A word I know how to spell: Renaissance.

A virgin queen.  
A political genius.  
A queen in white.  
A girl-king in white.

A queen wearing white.  
A queen in black, in ochre.  
A huntress queen.  
A ruthless genius.  
A queen on her courses.  
A queen in her white days.

“Menstruating,” menstruate, inelegant spelling and ugly  
Sound. Any woman “on the rag.” “Coming sick”

Was my mother’s term for it.  
“Leave me alone! I’m coming sick!”

★

Yes, I’m just about to go back into the real poem now,

And my dad having to come home,  
Having to leave the store and “get up here”

Whenever she was furious because,  
E.g. “The car won’t start!”

He gets there, he tries it,  
The engine won’t turn over.

“You flooded it.”  
“I KNOW it’s flooded, goddamit!”

“We’re just going to have to let it set.

★

‘Jesus Mary n Joseph, please let the car start’  
‘Jesus Mary n Joseph, please let the car start’

Silently said. Such spurted mantras, e.g. Lord have mercy,  
Christ have mercy, repeated wheel-like, internally or aloud,

Were called “ejaculations.” “Saying ejaculations.” Hundreds  
Walking to school. Very handy for your Spiritual Bouquets.

{ \* \* \* \* \* { \* \* \* \* \*  
{ \* \* \* \* \* { \* \* \* \* \*

To start the cuff for a sleeve cast on \_\_\_\_ stitches; knit 3, purl 1, cont.  
On the way back, purl 3, knit 1, cont., directions of “k.” and “p.” Ribbing.

And Daddy going the opposite way, from home back down to the store, to  
Sleep on his cot there, when she’d gone especially wild, in the wee hours.

‘Lord of mercy, let him go down to the store now.’  
I learned to cry into my pillow in such a manner

As to make no noise, letting  
My mouth go open and slack, so the pain

In my chest sort of soaked out in slobber  
Instead of being sobbed.

The slamming, e.g., around in the medicine chest, screaming, Where’re  
Those goddamn pills? Slam, Crash. You don’t think I’ll do it, do you?

You sonofabitch, you don’t think I’ve got the GUTS to do it? You’re  
The one with no guts! You’re not even a man! Give me that—  
got-dammit—”

His monosyllable: “No!”

In “knit” your hand takes your yarn around one blunt needle like this:  
From the front: **W** . In “purl” it goes the other way, from the back: **V** .

A rib-stitch. There are several-but here's one:  
kkkpkkkpkkkpkkkpurlknitknitknitpurlknitknit  
see:\*\*\*o\*\*\*o\*\*\*o\*\*\*§§§§¶§§§§¶§§§§¶§§§§¶§§§§

k 3, p 1, and going back, p 3, k 1, knitting was  
difficult, possible, \*\*\*Ω\*\*\*Ω\*\*\*Ω\*\*\*Ω\*\*\*  
belief: \* Ω. what is omega. end, stop, im-

mortality? letter Z? To cast or not to cast  
isn't the Question in knitting; direction is  
the ? in knitting: on or off. **cast on cast on**

⇒⇒▽◀ ⇕⇕ **cast ON CAST OFF cast off**  
**CAST OFF.** In the U.K., it's "cast off,"  
although in the U.S. we say "bind off."

Having remembered an insertion point in a litany, The silent part  
of my poem:

The "Litany of the Virgin, Mary," used at Rosaries "pray," "oro," "oral"  
For the dead: to pray=to speak  
the alive to the dead?

or the dead for the living

"Mary, Conceived without sin, Pray for us; "interceding"?  
"Mary, Mother of Jesus, Pray for us; *The whispered*

*part of my poem:*

"Mary, Queen of Heaven, Pray for us." *Oro pro nobis*  
Gloss is a gloss is a gloss. *and the incense*



RECOVERY

Stein certainly loved vests woven sewn embroidered.  
I aim to assuage strong emotion: how soothing,  
How healing, I find dumbwriting. Return,  
O *Guide*. “Although black floss on white linen

Is the traditional color choice, other colors  
Can be used to give poems a more modern look.  
Brown floss on beige linen or deep blue on eggshell  
Are popular. Gold or silver metallic threads

Create a fancier look,” I can read. I must insist  
That there is, not only beauty, not only truth,  
But also, a kind of justice, in structural options  
Besides grammar, in alphabetical order, in poetry

As a court of last resort. Alphabets themselves.  
Not high like an hour and not low like a minute  
But like a part of a second        for hours, lasting  
Liminal and subliminal and liminal-just-rising I think

Not “high” not “low” not the debate between  
The “quotidian” and the “sublime” but an eschewal  
Of debate itself. Not high not low but at the meeting of  
Just barely on the surface and just barely underneath it

Where the cloth provides the field for the action.

LIST POEM

Algerian eye stitch  
Basic backstitch  
Chain stitch  
Crossed star motif  
Dark fern pattern  
Darning stitch  
Delicate diamonds  
Double cross stitch  
Flower arrangement  
Greek scroll  
Holbein stitch  
  
Octagonal trellis  
Poco giorno stitch  
Satin stitch  
Scattered snowflakes  
Stacked “H” shapes  
Stained glass impression  
Stem stitch  
Woolly flowering stem stitch

I do blackwork, in my room with its yellow wood with its cubbyholes, like  
Honeycomb.

CHRISTOPHER MERKNER

*Inside Voices*

We receive the ocean through the monitor that follows us throughout the house, into the backyard, the garage, the basement, into the closet in which we are trying to make out.

I smile. I am hushed, her hand over my mouth. You're too loud, my wife breathes. He's waking up. Get a towel.

I depart, return.

The ocean breaks its swells again and again and again, and a lone gull screams at intervals. In this small space, the monitor draws a bit of static, rubs the edges from these *nature sounds* we have projecting into the soul of our son sleeping upstairs.

I jam the towel beneath the door, our white feet darken—and then vanish entirely.

While in the light of day, during naptime, my wife and I speak the language of closed-caption television, mouthed words and facial expressions tense with powerful meaning, here in the dark we speak in fast-forward porn.

I bring my wife's sweatpants to her ankles, lick her knee, her warm thigh, pant and rise to take her sighing mouth, and strike her chin with my forehead. Her lips are bleeding. I taste it. I am repelled.

Jesus is invoked. Hit the fucking light, she says, but against the crashing waves I almost cannot hear her, as if she were running down the beach, shouting over her shoulder—

The light in this closet is a battery-operated product I stuck to the wall by way of an adhesive pad years before the child was born. I tap in the dark for the globe, in the space where I believe the globe has been resting, and it spills from the wall and clangs among the hangers, organ pipes.

The waves, for a moment, hiss. The gull preens. Our son moans, then rolls into stuttering bellows. My wife shoves her way past me, swings the closet door open, and tugs at the waist of her sweatpants as she flees upstairs to cribside.

Somehow the globe has not landed on the floor—I can't find it. I clamor around the shoes for several minutes. Then, I see myself discovering the light in the pocket of some coat years from now when the ocean has gone silent.

CHRISTOPHER MERKNER

*The Assistance*

Childed parents can maintain a life beyond the children. I, for example, maintain the garage, for example, the garage being the dam against which all the formerly housed is pent.

If something is going—and many things must go, because the child keeps bringing his own crap into the house—it will be going through the garage.

But nothing goes. I cling. It might be of use. The garage is steeped in wet cardboard, filthy Tupperware, outdated kitchen gear dumped in grocery bags. I try to maintain this, move shit around, stack it, shunt and shift it.

On a September Saturday during nap time it occurs to me that shelves would help. I explain this to my wife, but I am waved off: *Maintain?* She repeats in forced whisper. Why do you talk to me like this? What has happened to us?

This brings me solo to the master store of home mechanical things. Wedged anchors for wheels that rest inside of modern Danishesque drawers, and balls the size of deer ticks that go inside of these wheel anchors are on sale.

I press a button for assistance.

I get a slab, mid-twenties, cocky, who, after three independent lectures on shelving/storage, each three minutes long—hazy and lofty shticks each—finally drops his hands and says, Look, I'm off for lunch at ten, where you live?

I bring him home.

By eleven fifteen, Travis has coffee and toast in his hands. My wife with the sleeping child fields running commentary about the ease of drywalling unfinished garages—with tremendous interest!

So, my wife says, he could sleep out there, dipping her head in my direction. When guests stay over, she adds, he could sleep out there and not be cold. For example.

Travis adjusts himself. He gazes out at the garage door, wistful. I think he is going to say something, but he does not. I think he is waiting for something, and he is. My wife says, Well, and he offers to sleep in the garage while he's finishing it, and my wife signs the contract he unfurls from his back pocket while I pin the fussing child against my collarbone.

In October, Travis plans a watershed: a garage sale to end all garage sales. It happens. I hold my son and bob up-down as people ask Travis if he'll take two dollars for the sofa. He says, Just take it. And I move out to the alley, to the idling trucks, watch these strangers slide my former life into their rusted beds and rev off into the world.

A . M I N E T T A G O U L D

*Self Portrait, 1911*

Wally, draw me to your thigh and into my  
deserted cups and pencils.

That charcoal undresses the lamp  
light—let it flicker across  
your worn stockings.      Hear the rail  
approach? Oh, it deafens but signals

my Father comes home.      Your fingers,  
didactic, inspire me like Gustav's flaked  
arousal. The man painted the nude  
before dressing her, and his gold has worn thin.

Jump the train—the momentum can push  
us this evening.      Let me digress  
lover, that for nothing more than  
your flushed cheeks and kind cures,  
I thank you; for your wallowing eye  
lashes, I thank you. For your blind  
obedience to art  
and starkness, I do thank you.

Let us end this evening as we are nearly  
out of shadow—place time between the coming

of the dawn and the drying of  
our nudes: painted and drawn.

A . M I N E T T A G O U L D

*Portrait of Wally, 1912*

Egon, let me leave  
my mask half attached

so as to guard my ear from the snow.  
Place me near where the window

cannot close—watch the chill stand my hairs.  
Watch the blankets fold & fold;

hold a moment—how should I pose?  
I do not worry much

about my figure, for you keep it saved  
in fractured edges. As if I am the mirror

you busy yourself near without paints  
in your hands, I can remain trusted

in Hauptstrasse. I can remain as  
shuttered & elegant as your pallet.

A . M I N E T T A G O U L D

*Portrait of Schiele by Definition*

Wide-eyed, I, a Line, Dominate & Shake  
a fist at the vacuum around me.

Line, not color,  
is a faded wheel.

I do not squint as my name suggests.

Check my pulse with black chalk fingers.  
Check for urgency: vital. Check for pupils: the street after the rain.  
What is definite: the basics:

The ambidextrously  
staged masturbation that  
is my self-portrait  
is my self-portrait.

T O M C . H U N L E Y

### *Slow Dance Music*

I can't explain the rain's attraction to my head,  
though I'm touched by its will to touch me,  
and I don't understand how I got here any more  
than a lobster understands how it ended up in a tank  
next to a Please wait to be seated sign,  
but both of us can read the faces of the cruelly beautiful  
women pointing at us. I always feel eyes on me  
so I apologize to insects after I kill them  
and to the salmon on my plate, caught being  
nostalgic for home. Everything makes sense if  
you squint just right, and at least once a day  
I realize that whatever I've been saying  
isn't the point at all. Like yesterday, I heard myself  
say "Nostalgia" comes from Greek roots meaning  
"painful return," which is why your childhood  
home is paved over, a bump in the commuter  
path of your old classmates, the ones who have  
never gone anywhere. And so instead of leaning  
in for a kiss, I give my beautiful wife the umpire's  
signal for "safe." And when I say "I love you"  
she becomes red-faced, hits me with the back  
of her fists, and calls the cops, because those  
words no longer mean what they once did.

J O S H U A   C O R E Y

*A Pilgrim's Progress*

Not *you must change your life*                      or even *early to bed, early to rise.*  
But for *event of a water landing*                read *bright submersible Eden*  
and for *laws of our fathers*                      read *we are many men in tiny hats.*

Advice is a skull in a skull. Commandment's  
a coating of loam. What's red is the light  
through lids. What's green is her face through the eucalypt.

For *terrier of appetite*                      read *bone builds in secret.*  
For *kiosk of the damned*                      read *the real yellow pages.*

Take my horned beast of revelation, please.  
Take the space of half an hour to think about it.  
Think the Hebrew doesn't yield to the Greek.  
Think that even Judith gripped a general's beard.

For *brandy snifter* read *hemlock*. For *hemlock*  
read *roulette*. For *roulette* you read *blood sacrifice*.  
For *blood sacrifice* read *blood sacrifice*.

(I wanted to read my own leaves.)  
(I wanted to speak into vein.)

For *fig* read                                      *original apple.*  
(I wanted to sleep with the world.)

For *liberty*

read *widow's sword*.

(I'd have any gods before me.)

We covet what we see every day.

(For *cannibal* read *true cross*.)

The Greek thing blazing out of matter.

(For *Teresa of Avila* read *Sappho*.)

The book is a girl girl can kiss. The girl  
is who I know backward.

The backward's

a penetrable glass—

for *glass*

read *flesh of my flesh*,

for *bridegroom*

read *king of the nutshell*,

for *crime*

read *kith and kin*,

for *messenger*

read *kin and kind*.

SETH ABRAMSON

*Based on the True Story*

I know what it means to need the garbage  
man with mythic longing. I know what it means  
to be a ward of the workweek in America,  
to roll over metaphors  
& reveal their clockwork.

Overheard getting a haircut near some port-  
in-storm college town, overheard getting laid  
when I was in college myself,  
this theory—

the only difference between living & dying  
is you can die whenever you like. I've lived  
in places history's a nowhere  
nobody knows & no one is watching—

but still it happens, it makes its countersink  
against hope,  
& my own quick story stomps like a pestle  
inside it. In college, watching a rental  
with a roommate, he assured me

*it's not resignation, it's submission, don't worry.*  
But I thought she looked  
lost in her sheets, & saw she'd be better off  
as the bedtime story  
of herself, abridged by a woman of experience.

I know it can't be  
that everything belongs to everyone  
in America, but just as sure  
nothing belongs to no one, either.  
There's nothing as transformative as currency,  
as damning as the words of your life set down  
in a language you can read.

*Not Minding Being*

She says, "Hello, Mary," as I walk out of the school  
after dropping my daughter off. This woman I know quite well:

"Hello, Mary" —

We do have a mutual acquaintance, Mary, her hair long like mine, but blonde,

younger, sweeter, I could look

like that? I could be

a winter coat all around if the snow would allow,  
once we let our children off to this well-meaning mill.

"Oh," she says,

"your face was in the shade."

And it's true, I was in shade cast by the entrance  
overhang, aluminum crossbars knitted with finches'

furious purlings in the spring,

nests along the length of the bar.

And the principal, to her credit, keeps them, lets them

pour out the sides,

poor birds, flinging themselves every which way each time

a child or parent runs the course to or from—"Hi,"

she says again, this time, "Daneen"—though by then I don't mind being

Mary, walking,

and liking to be walking that entrance tricked with bird entrances,

and don't mind that it was said by this mother

who pushes two children in a double stroller every morning, another child walking alongside, and a greyhound with a perpetual bandage slapping one foot. In fact,

may I be Mary to whomsoever wishes,

may I be whomsoever wishes to the melting snow running through, beside, between  
the many many-ness of things,

may I be any of them, the any of what is not mine,

may I be my name that is not my name—

D A N E E N   W A R D R O P

*Body Worlds*

*Exhibit, Chicago Museum of Science and Industry*

Only muscles bind this man to himself, no skin—  
he holds in his hand the whole limp coat.

No one asked,

he just slipped off his skin, not even heavy as a favor,  
elbow-puckers and knuckle-hatchings on spread bolts of it,  
and smooth inches between,  
the swath he drapes across wrist and arm, raised  
for him to survey in a triumph of afterthought:

utterly casual,  
see my wares.

David held a sling that way, how this man holds his skin,  
nonchalant, and a bit cagey, too, to brace

himself, display the line and size of it, the cape's ease,  
the holding simply part of a day slapping by,  
part of a dazzling limberness, what was his

listing to what is, shoulder and flank and our full, full girth, to our avail—

## *Exit Strategy*

Every time she used a kitchen knife, she imagined cutting her finger off. You know how your brain gets stuck, looping its junk on cue? Freaking itself out, filling time as it falls apart? Except lately she'd been seeing it so vividly that she'd started to think it wasn't dementia, her mind misfiring, but a premonition: the knife slipping off a tomato and diving into the first knuckle of her finger, shushing through the bone, clean and for a moment painless, the exposed rings of her finger glowing red like a lit cigarette. She had never cut herself badly. Didn't that make it more likely every time?

"Well, I think you're safe with that."

*That* was the plastic knife they had given her with her bagel, and the voice telling her this was the guy from the gym with the legs.

"Unless I frustrate myself to death with it."

"They make those all wrong," he commiserated, lacing his hands over one knee and watching her skim and re-skim the too-thin tip of the knife through the little cup of cream cheese, each time coming away with almost nothing. It was the kind of annoyance that might have set off a whole day of hating the modern world and her place in it if there hadn't been someone else there to turn it into comedy.

"How the hell do you make a knife wrong?"

"Maybe the Army Corps designed it," he said with a droll incline of his head that suggested he kept this joke at the ready.

Turned out his name was Clay, perfect for a man who owned an auto body shop and had a gearhead mop of orange curls lapping

over the collar of his polo shirt. She'd been seeing him at the Tulane gym for years, where he had made the roster of half-humans she knew by quirk and idiocy, by indiscretion and the private nicknames she'd assigned them. Always wearing the same red running shorts, the kind with panels that met in a high slit and advertised the flank of his ass, Clay would thud about the gym on his fantastically thick shaven legs, and she would glance from the TV attached to her elliptical trainer and think, *I'd suck his dick* or some other similarly unprotected thought before flipping to the World Series of Poker on ESPN2 because at least it wasn't Dr. Phil, and then flipping back to Dr. Phil because her hate for him was so familiar and bracing. Most men at the gym worked only their arms and chests, the parts of themselves they imagined winning fights with, but Clay's upper body was undistinguished, a little slushy, and he paraded his legs among the weights with a self-mocking joviality that seemed to say, *It's what I've got, let's enjoy it together!* Which was mostly what he did there, socialize, gabbing from victim to victim while Shannon scrupulously avoided eye contact.

He was wearing those same red shorts this morning in the coffee shop where, seeing all the tables taken, he had asked to share hers with a casual wag of his hand that showed she was likewise part of his psychic landscape. And then, because he had offered up his name and profession and how many people he employed and his belief that small business would save the city and how nothing could ever make him leave New Orleans in a million years—and because she had to back him off with *something*—she had spilled across the table a gush of caffeinated blather on the theme of self-mutilation. It was 7 a.m.

“It's so fucked up.” She held the knife up, a pea of cream cheese at its tip.

“Try turning it upside down.”

“Oh. That is a little better.” She indicated half her bagel. “You...?”

“No, thanks. I don’t eat breakfast.”

“You know what they say.”

“I do.” He brightened at this first tip of the conversation in his direction. “About a lot of things.”

The wry nod she gave, and which she was still dorkishly giving thirty seconds later, might have looked to an observer like nervousness. But at thirty-six she was post-nervous with men, just as she was post-voting, post-screaming in traffic, post-really bothering with her hair, and post-believing that her education had improved her in any important way. But making room for Clay in the three dimensions of her mind was doing a temporary violence to the disposition of all the other items there, and her words felt pushed to the side, looking back at where they used to be.

“So what do you think about Iraq?” He pointed at her *Times-Picayune*, where there was a photo of something bombed and sandy.

“You must be joking.”

“My son’s there.”

“Your son? How old are you?”

“Forty-three. The math works out.”

“Sheesh.”

“I think we need an exit strategy.”

“I think we need a we-shouldn’t-have-fucking-gone-there-in-the-first-place strategy.”

His eyes blinked down and then back up at her. He backed his chair out.

“You want anything?”

“You *drank* that already?”

“I need like three or four of these to get going.”

*I’d say you’re going already*, she murmured as he powered off through the noise. In this new context his legs were less daunting, not so much forged showpieces as everyday tools that would soon

take him, like her, to work. She pictured him squinting through goggles at the sparking wheel of a disc sander, wielding multifarious forms of the word *fuck* in an atmosphere of clangs and hisses. His slicked legs and hard-rock hair were the parts of him he kept polished against the machine world whose cuts and scrapes owned his hands and whose junk lunches had colonized his midsection. So, strangely, just when he was farthest away—up handing his refill cup over the glass counter—he seemed to be standing too close, his details leaning into her personal space, and she slipped the rest of her bagel into the trash so she could dart when he returned. She had a hand through her purse and was standing when he set a business card where her plate had been.

“There’s a thing this weekend at my camp.” His last name was DeLille, its letters in computer-cursive beneath a cartoon hot rod with swollen tires. “Barbecuey-type stuff, hanging out by the water? Just low key? If you’re not busy.”

His mouth and eyes didn’t seem to be doing any of the things she remembered men’s mouths and eyes doing when they wanted to fuck you. And the card wasn’t saying: it just lay there exerting its mute social weight, its doom of entanglements or evasions. But it would have been even more awkward for her not to take it than it had been for him to offer it, so she doffed the card at him and said she’d check her calendar.

“I didn’t catch your name?” he said as she turned.

“Oh. Right. Shannon. Sorry.”

Stuck, she crossed her arms in a narrow self-hug that didn’t hide her six-foot frame any better than it had in tenth grade.

“You’re Braid Girl,” he offered.

“No shit,” she said, equal parts pleased by the epithet and distressed at the intimacy of declaring and disarming their nicknames. “You’re Leggy Joe.”

Clay pursed his lips, admitting he'd been pegged and that he loved it.

"Wanna get capes?" He sparred the air. "Fight crime?"

"There's no crime in New Orleans. Just black-on-black whatever."

He shook his head thoughtfully, apparently spun by her irony. He wore an unfocused frown.

"People killing each other. How do you stop it?"

Did conversations play and replay in other people's heads the way they did in hers? Echoing and recombining as she stood by the copy machine or took an extra minute in the rest room, just sitting in peace? Did other people find the insignificant so significant and the significant so meaningless? Did her employer have any idea how little of her active mind was required to do her job?

The braids she wore at the gym were purely utilitarian, keeping the long hair that serious women her age had long ago cut out of the sweat and stick. Except not really, because then why wear two? She made the braids quickly, without a mirror, and she wanted credit for their haphazardness. But she also wanted whatever credit might accrue to the braids as a conscious choice, stating something about her difference and inscrutability, the personal angle she took, and she spent a psychologically suspicious amount of time at the gym enjoying her ownership of the mystery she must represent to others as a grown woman with the braids of a child doing sit-ups on a resist-a-ball. Because the thing about the gym was, you carried yourself on a split screen to keep track of what everyone else was seeing as they assessed you in your every detail.

But work kept her late and she skipped the gym. Her job involved performing the tasks of the twenty-first century in a position that butted up against other positions all starting with the word *Assistant* and which was therefore difficult to define, a job that left

the afternoon feeling about the same whether she got home at four or six. No one surveilled her emails.

She fired one off to her friend Jill, who sat in front of her own computer across town, advancing the fiction that Clay, not a spreadsheet, had nixed her workout.

How could he hold her gym-life hostage like that? Which is what it amounted to, because if she didn't go to his party, which she had no intention of doing, she would either have to banish herself to the pool to avoid him or lie to him in the weight room, and she always squinted when she lied, people saw it immediately, and the tic got worse the longer she rehearsed for the moment. And if she did go to his party, there would be that trapped feeling you always get when food is prepared over fire? All those hours while the fucking meat got brushed? Multiplied by twenty people she didn't know and didn't want to, the product of which would inevitably be drinking too much? You wave flies off the potato salad and pretend to be interested while some guy in a tank top talks about landing bull reds. You long-suffer those silences when everyone just sits back and enjoys nature. You know how every office has that freak who's always telling you you look nice and praising your intelligence, and you're forced to say fake stuff in return? That was Clay. That relentless niceness: what was the pathology of that?

But in the end the word itself, *camp*, convinced her to go, because if she didn't, she would end up watching "Saturday Night Live" with its noisy syllable bumping through her head, reprimanding her about the kind of fun people were supposed to have.

"Oh, it's like a party house," Jill chirruped. Jill had moved to New Orleans only six months ago and was still stunned and cowed by the city, by its words and weather, by its advanced orders of beauty and terror. She had apparently been expecting a tent and picnic table, men on all fours blowing on tinder; instead, a dozen people lounged

on cast-off couches under the stilts of a raised house, a big-screen TV flashing in one open corner.

Shannon pointed along the graying gravel road. “Check it out. The next four or five were completely washed away. I bet he built this brand new since the storm.” The lit windows above them were in fact still decaded by manufacturers’ stickers. “What do people spend their extra money on in Kansas City?”

“Just like. An extra car.”

They weren’t the sort of women who usually got much attention at parties—Jill was drawn with a straightedge and vagued in with watercolors and wore glasses that looked twenty years out of date even though she’d just gotten them last month—but Clay’s friends didn’t seem too worried about the usual. In a way that wouldn’t have been acceptable in a world that took itself seriously, a tiny, nervous man named Noah made straight for Shannon and smoked at her in a manner so fiendish, his eyes birding to all points of the compass, that his cigarette was revealed as merely a stopgap between joints. Speaking to Jill directly made her splotch and cringe, and this irresistible effect was soon being tweaked by Scott, a thickly furred and deeply bellied man who couldn’t even get his cigarette smoke jetted from the corner of his mouth before Jill’s latest one-word answer toed the ball back into his conversational court.

“So you want to get high?” Noah asked.

They walked over among the sheared pilings of the next camp and performed the rituals that, after a certain age, were performed in silence, without ceremony or fanfare.

After the joint, Shannon considered getting back to shield Jill from some of the torment the world was always causing her, but after all it wouldn’t hurt Jill to play adult for a while, and Shannon couldn’t really abandon Noah, who was rushing a cigarette alight and winding himself up to speak.

“So are you and Clay...?”

“No, we just met. Anyway, no. He’s just a guy I know from the gym.”

He had heard the one word that was important.

“Maybe we could go out sometime.”

“I’m big enough to bounce you on my knee.”

“I don’t mind.”

His voice was full of squeezed bravado, like a kid talking tough before he cries.

“You like getting spanked and all that? Are you one of those guys?”

He shrugged, his throat making a noise of possibility, ready to consider whatever shelter she was building against the world. Jesus, to wear your need so nakedly!

“Foot guy? You suck on toes and all that?”

“Nnnn,” he grimaced, then laughed a catch-up laugh when he realized she was goofing with him. “I don’t think so!”

“You’ve seen those web sites?”

“Surfing. But I’m always like, why am I wasting my time on this when there are sites completely devoted to great big titties?”

“I’m at work this time. I forget what I was searching. But suddenly I’m looking at this guy with footprints all over his face. That was the whole thing, they would walk through garbage or whatever and then step on his face.”

“Ah, that’s OK,” Noah said, waiving his right to know about this particular byway in the labyrinth of human ideas. She realized that he was not so much squinting as marshaling all his energy to keep his eyes from falling the rest of the way shut. “Ever feel like you’ve seen too much?”

“Yeah, that.”

“Yeah, that! Exactly!” Years of smoking had clipped a playing card across the spokes of his laugh.

“What do you do, Noah?”

“I’m a substance abuse counselor.”

“Of course.”

“Of course!”

So they were all partial people, people-fragments tumbling through the evening, until Clay, done grilling, swept in to give them gravity and a centered system. The way babies enjoy the undisputed right to stun and occupy a roomful of people? How the phenomenon of a baby, its excellent oneness and how it has not fucked anything up yet, makes everyone forget the holding pattern of their own lives? That’s what it was like when Clay bustled in, wiping his brow, and yanked a beer from the cooler, those smiles of dumb reverence all around. Scott whispered some bit of hagiography to Jill as Clay mussed the hair of a passing toddler. Three women who’d been sitting by the TV (one of them, Noah whispered, Clay’s ex-wife) groupied up to ask about the best way to Hattiesburg and nodded as Clay sent a finger out from the neck of his beer to trace I-10 to 59 in the air. And then Clay was zipping in to land a peck on Shannon’s cheek. “Look at you! You look great!” He followed this patent lie by drying his beer-hand on the bottom of his Saints T-shirt and snatching up Jill’s bony mitt, speaking his first and last name into the daze of her face. “Now don’t let this guy feed you a bunch of lies,” he warned, backhanding Scott’s gut. “He’s moving to Houston next week. Oh, hey, Shannon, Scott’s a swimmer too!” pointing back and forth between them. In another age Scott would have been a pirate gnarling out tales of whiskered mischief, but in 2008 he was a male nurse, and his most swashbuckling exploit was a third place in the 200 I.M. at the 1985 State tournament. Clay grinned at details he’d been hearing since high school and then somehow got Jill calmed down and talking about herself; and when Scott learned that Jill administered the intranet at Touro Hospital, he uncovered the

normal voice beneath the growl he'd been baying her with. Even when Shannon said one of those things she didn't know she was going to say and didn't really mean—*Fuck the Saints!*—Clay rolled his eyes left and right in jocular horror, unruffled and savoring life, the way you might at a child who stands in church and says *Jesus is ugly*. He was a freak of ease and charisma, a man fitted so perfectly to the shapes of the world that they felt like his own skin and voice. But did he know any one person, really? Wasn't unceasing charm just a way to keep everyone at the same distance? He seemed terribly genuine, but what was he—genuinely *what*?

She went upstairs to pee, moving herself beyond the party in mind and body, and sat considering the superior rightness of the shape of her own toilet seat. But between the bathroom and the steps back down, there was a blue couch that really wanted her to try it and whose cool suede spoke with all the persuasiveness it had gathered from the air conditioner about the idea of slipping off her shoes and putting her legs up, and then she was being awakened by a gray cat smelling her eyelid.

"That's Reggie," Clay's voice said from somewhere behind her. Reggie arched against the hand she offered and then cantered off to his next appointment with a businesslike air. "He showed up after the storm."

"Who feeds him?"

She sat up to see Clay running water over a begrimed platter in the sink. Her head felt shrunken and set on a shelf, all its moisture leached.

"Oh, I'm out here every two or three days. Which, if you ever want to just get away, let me know, I'll give you the key."

"Wow, OK."

"Oh, right," ineffectually snapping his wet fingers. "This Saturday? We're doing a fishing-tubing-drinking thing, a going-away for Scott. Jill's coming."

“She just said that because she doesn’t know how to say no.”

“Oh. Anyway, think about it.”

It was excruciating! She stood up to better defend herself against his next solicitude, squinting to concentrate.

“That’s my son,” he said, thinking she was looking at a picture on the counter that she was in fact staring through. Inside the tilted plastic a kid willed himself faceless under a wedge of cap. “I ought to get more pictures in here, don’t you think? I mean, not on the counter, but on the walls?”

“I’m so tired I can’t really think about what you’re saying.” She managed two steps toward the door. “I was talking to Noah, and I somehow got stoned.”

“He has that effect. You OK to drive?”

“Jill drove.”

“‘Cause I’m going that way, I could run you home and then bring you back out to the car tomorrow.”

“Jill drove.”

Whatever it was you called the stuff that went on beneath a conversation, Clay simply didn’t have much sense of it. But something in him had felt the dismal lean inside her and was trying to prop it back up with a double dose of cheer.

“She’s really neat, great kid. I’m glad you brought her.”

“She’s twenty-six, so there’s that whole thing.”

“But super sweet.”

“Whatever that means.”

“Right.” Done at the sink, he crossed his arms and pretended to think about the nothing thing she had just said. Now he was the one nodding idiotically. Shannon was precisely torn between seeing what else he would agree with and getting the fuck out of there, except getting the fuck out of there sounded infinitely better. Three quick steps would do it, but he would not stop nuzzling the bone of his idea. “Anyway, I really like her.”

That was one of those words, *like*, that if you said it a few times, didn't seem to mean anything. It sounded ugly, basically a turned-around version of *kill*.

"Who don't you like?"

His eyes flinched in incomprehension.

"I mean, you'd make pals with Osama bin Laden."

"I guess I never thought about it," relenting, finally beaten back. She said Saturday was iffy and got out before he could round the counter and give her another kiss.

She was a more generous person in the pool. Removing her contacts fuzzed all the handholds for her hate, and her senses swam to the center of their own soft ether. If Clay said he had *never thought about it*, maybe he hadn't, maybe for him there were only people he liked and people he hadn't met yet. Maybe that wasn't a mental illness. Maybe it took the Clays of the world to move people past their nicknames and make them fully human. She was human and should appreciate his efforts, respond to them. Because if you were a human whose habit it was to run from humans, that was life-denying, wasn't it? What do you think, you're better than life? Above life? You think you won't die at the end if you don't take part?

For five laps, she mumbled along to Blondie's "Rapture" tinning from the poolside radio, her thoughts watering forth pictures—Noah blowing smoke at her tits, Jill's timorous shoulders, Reggie's face in convex—that floated dumb amidst the blue.

This was the only place she achieved grace. On land she hunched and clomped. She bumped into way more things than the average person. But in the water there was no hard or sharp, and the body could live its wish that the rest of the world were so, and the mind leaked into the body, wearing its buoyancy. Water diffused what land compacted.

Had she really asked Noah if he liked to be spanked? That was inappropriate, embarrassing. It was a way of talking scavenged from the trash of contemporary culture, and in this way it was typical of all her speech, which rooted through garbage while her better self averted its eyes. What her language knew best was its own dirt, so when a man asked her earnestly for a date, she mocked and titillated him with references to a perversion which itself she mocked without right or authority. This was the speech of a coward. The great crime of modern life was that it frightened people into banter. If she could speak always from the pool's undistracted blue, its underwater world-muffle, she would never need recourse to a word like *spank*.

How much did that undergraduate lifeguard weigh, one fifty? And what did she weigh, one eighty-five? Was there any way he could swim her up from the bottom if she sank there inert and lungless, her skin going dull?

People who prayed reported going forth into the day refreshed and fortified and certain of some center in the self. Swimming was the closest thing she had to that. But she couldn't make the peace she found there work outside the building, as if the god of Tulane's pool were a purely local deity, resident only in its trapped waters.

"He bumped my boob."

"And then asked you out. After feeling you up."

"I mean, not my boob. We had on life jackets. But kind of. We both reached for a volleyball."

"Cute. Do you not realize that he is high ALL THE TIME?"

Because Jill was equally shaken by every tremor of existence, she had no sense of what was truly shocking or fearful, and she answered Shannon's question with the same apologetic but undeterred *No* she would have used to answer whether she knew who

had won the last Super Bowl. She was wearing some kind of perfume for teenagers that Shannon could smell even over the three kinds of salsa the waiter had brought.

“Well, so, what. Besides Noah punching your tit and then beating off underwater, you just floated around in the lake and drank beer?”

“Scott almost drowned.”

“He competed for a fucking state championship in swimming.”

Jill’s throat choked off one of its pained giggles, her eyes dropping with embarrassed affection for the memory. She needed so little!

“He was trying to jump into an inner tube from the boat. It turned upside down on him, and his feet got stuck up in the air. Clay had to jump in and save him.”

“Of course he did. Because he’s Captain Ameri-Jesus. One day he’ll save us all.” The image of Clay bounding from the pontoon boat made Shannon wonder what his legs looked like in swimming trunks, but not very much.

“He asked about you. Why you didn’t come.”

“And you said...”

“That...you’re a private person. Or something.”

“Cause, yeah. This looks pretty private, me and you in a crowded restaurant.”

Jill shrugged a shrug whose very openness to interpretation seemed impertinent. It wasn’t so much that Shannon had a history of estranging her friends as that her friends had a history of proving they were already strange.

“I mean, that’s awesome. I don’t come act the fool with Moe, Larry, and Curly, so I’m a private person.”

“Why don’t you like him?” The restaurant made its whitish noises. Jill rounded her hair tightly over one ear. “What’s wrong with him?”

“If you don’t know, I’m not going to tell you.”

“Well, I don’t know.”

Jill made conversation like a bird, her head considering and re-considering and never quite looking at the person she was talking to, her expression always some variation on worry, and it occurred to Shannon that maybe Jill's fluttery mien was less assigned by nature than assumed for personal advantage, even if that advantage was as pitiable as pretending to be dumber than she was.

"All right. You mean besides being boring?" Shannon saw the blossoming of Jill's delicate surprise and stepped on it. "Because that's obvious. He's deeply fucking boring."

"Boring?"

"He's like one of those stuffed animals, you pull a string and he's all, *Let's be friends. Hey, you're funny, I like you.* I don't see the appeal."

Jill shrugged again, this time defeatedly, as if some toy had been bullied from her hands.

"He's nice. He's really nice to me."

"For all you know. But three guys we just met, and you're out there alone with them on a boat? You're lucky you weren't gang-raped and thrown in the lake."

Jill's eyes aimed their distress in three or four directions, the last one Shannon's.

"Why would you say that?"

"Just—forget it," because the answers were too obvious to state. But as many times as she replayed Jill's question later, she couldn't get any answer to sound quite right, not to this or to any of the other questions crowding into the echo box of her mind.

On Saturday she followed Clay home from the gym to either tell him that his amiability was smothering and unwelcome, or to fuck him and then tell him that his amiability was smothering and unwelcome.

He had made her half hour on the StairMaster a crawling torture, glomming over every few minutes and having to repeat everything he said because she had her earphones in the first time.

Worse, he made her captive to the woman on the next machine, Crazy Jane, whom Shannon had long detested for the way she heaved herself retardedly against the stairs' resistance and grunted aloud to her iPod. Bad enough that he introduced them—Jane's sweaty, freckled hand shot out inescapably, her eyes leprechauning madly—but then he left Shannon alone to withstand a fifteen-minute nutmercial for Dennis Kucinich, the only benefit of which was that it made Shannon feel better about not having bothered to learn anything about Dennis Kucinich. So when Clay said there was *this thing he needed her help with* at home, she shut down the machine in mid-stride and left Jane quacking happily to no one about a national rejuvenation of hope.

She left her braids in because if they were going to screw, Clay would probably want to think of her the way he saw her at the gym; but when they got to his house, he led her into a half-renovated bathroom and asked her to hold a faucet on center while he tightened some sort of nut from below. Rolling up and swiping dust bunnies off his ass, he appraised the finished work.

"Nice!"

"That's what you asked me over for?"

Clay's whole face yearned to tell the truth and say yes. She watched it search for other philosophies of asking people over.

"Uh, no. I need some help with this other thing."

"Faucet does look good," she said as he clashed his wrenches up off the floor.

"Yeah!" he brightened. "I got it from this guy."

"You're keeping the tub?"

"Needs new feet, but yeah."

"Supposed to be good for resale."

How remarkable that life could still bring people to a moment when they had no idea what would happen next! The bathroom held itself with that particular afternoon stillness.

“So the grand tour,” thumbing them into the hallway. “I just finished the two rooms where the roof came off.”

Now that she was only waiting for the right moment to make her final escape, feeling her freedom in advance, she was able to enjoy Clay’s cloying geniality as he gave her the name of his crown-molding guy, explained how sponge-painting worked and offered to come do it for her, and then handed her a knife and onion in the kitchen, pretending he needed her help to make enchiladas. They sang “Mother-in-Law” with the radio, and Clay told about the time he saw K-Doe in a fur coat piloting a rusty VW Beetle along Oak Street. Shannon had gone to K-Doe’s wake at Gallier Hall, and Clay lapped up the details wide-eyed. But soon enough he was asking questions about her family and her future in the city that felt more intimate than any part of his body could have, so when he said, “What is this, Saturday? This could be enchilada night for us,” she laid the knife down in mid-onion and said, “OK, so listen, Clay...”

But her declaration was interrupted by the doorbell and three firm knocks that rattled the pane.

“Hold that thought,” he said and rode his earthmoving legs around the breakfast bar and across the living room. She returned to the onion, brushing a flutter of skin from the blade. But before she could make another cut, the knife was shivered from her hand by a siren’s wail so low and close, so comprehensive, that it seemed to come from inside her, hollowing her stomach and filling her lungs as it cycled up and shrilled her neck and scalp. The knife clattered to a stop. Her arms were flinched and frozen. That the wail had been human she recognized only when she looked up to see Clay’s silhouette struck and kneeling in the doorway. On the steps outside, two men in full-dress military uniforms blinked grimly in the sun. The first man had his cap lodged under his arm. The second held a thin, dark box and a folded flag.

This time Clay managed to find words.

“Oh, no! Oh, Jesus!”

If he had cried her name, she would have disappeared—out a back door, if possible, finding a way to blame him for the awkwardness, the presumption. It was that he had nobody to call to, that he was all alone in the waste the world had made around him, that broke her forth and sent her running to him.

P O E T R Y   F E A T U R E

*Third Golden Erring (This Middle Life)*

Peter Streckfus

“Third Golden Erring” (This Middle Life) is the third part of a three-part sequence. This poem adapts language taken from an unpublished sea-adventure novel written in the late 1950s by my father when he was my age and living as a Catholic monk in the mountains of Peru. The author of this poem has two bodies.

We looked down into the blue ice of the glacier and shuddered at  
 the saddle and started down the other side.

The valley of the Urubamba  
 life and the answer as to why it was uninhabited remained a mystery.

They were to be "crying offerings". The Spaniards left behind were  
 to busy themselves in studying the language of the region. Above  
 to carry the gold out.

Although the wooded valley abounded in game, still it was hard  
 to come by, because we were ignorant of the habits of the strange  
 animals.

There were rats as big as dogs. These <sup>necessary camping equipment</sup> ~~tailless~~ rodents had to  
 be hunted at night when they came down in droves to drink in the  
 river. There were quail that were caught only by the fleet of foot.  
 The birds were so gorged with grain that they flew only a few <sup>yards</sup> ~~meters~~  
 at a time. They could be chased until they fell panting with ex-  
 haustion. Then they could be picked up. But to get them one had to  
 be <sup>out on their tail</sup> ~~on their tail~~ the time; otherwise when they tired, they would  
 hide under bushes and ~~to~~ avoid detection.

There <sup>some</sup> ~~were~~ fish in the river <sup>could be</sup> ~~that were~~ caught by good swimmers.

Bless the heart of the black pirate.

Slowly blown ahead of the wind, the navigator tied himself to the foremast.

He wanted to search for the corpses of the drowned.

By dawn most of them would be floating face down, with crabs hanging on and disputing their bodies.

Sure enough, morning found the light surf rolling in bluish, bloated bodies.

They were cleaned of seaweed, stripped and sewed in pairs in sheets of sailcloth—two eight-pound shots put in at the feet.

~~~~~

LABYRINTH FILLED WITH FIORDS, INLETS, FORKS, AND A TWISTING.

Silver monsters the size of a donkey, they could not fly and used grass shrimp for bait.

Also we marveled at the birds that swam like seals.

With torches they lighted brush piles and they simply kept the fire  
going night and day on the hilltops where they lived.

As all the others remained at the edge of the flock where the weak  
and the young were, three individuals ran up the hill.

They fell on our necks and cried; they were the maroons, shades,  
and had given up hope of ever seeing the living again.

~~~~~

THERE WAS NOTHING.

Sea.

Not one saved himself.

~~~~~

PROUDLY WE SING THIS DAY.

POUR OUT MELLOW NOTES.

Pull, pull, compadre, so tear away from me.

LIFT MY HEART TO HEIGHTS SERENE.

Painfully.

My head will never be the light airy member its parents meant,  
made and presented to me in gratitude for her liberty.

~~~~~

A few seconds later I heard a voice in my ear:

PAMPAS.

Every evening their restless spirits would rush, as a small grass fire  
going behind a big boulder there, or as the shaking of my arm.

The llama boys—slaves, each a copper ring around his neck—car-  
ried large goads made out of cane poles.

The llamas spit and stomped their sharp hooves as we approached.

They filed out behind a black leader, all with red  
strings tied in their ears.

SAD DIRGES AND MAKING CLOTH.

Their hands were ever busy thus.

Now then, you know the whole story.

~~~~~

THE MONKEY WAS ALL OVER THE PLACE, AND WE WELCOMED IT FOR  
ITS PALATABLE MEAT.

Cuzco looked as small as a pea resting in the bottom of a pan.

A tone rang in the ears of the magpies.

Some fish in the river could be caught by good swimmers:

THEY STRIPPED AND EASED INTO THE RIVER.

THEN THEY WOULD WADE UPSTREAM ON THE SHALLOW SIDE.

MEANWHILE, THEY WERE WATCHING FOR CAVES IN THE  
BANKS ON THE OTHER SIDE.

AT INTERVALS THE SWIMMERS WOULD SLITHER ALONG THE BOTTOM  
TOWARD A CAVE OR OUTJUTTING ROCK THAT FORMED A SHADOW.

ENTERING WITH THEIR HANDS THEY CORNERED THE FISH.

THEY EMERGED DRIPPING WITH SMILES, HOLDING UP A BIG TROUT  
WITH THEIR FINGERS HOOKED IN ITS GILLS.

THE FISH WERE SOAKED WITH LEMON JUICE AND EATEN HALF RAW.

This middle-life and the answer as to why it was uninhabited re-  
mained a mystery, as if the whole great world had a stomach ache  
beneath our feet.

~~~~~

THEN THE PATH BECAME SURE.

THEIR FISTS DOUBLED, THEIR MOUTHS CONTORTED IN A FIXED  
SCOWL, AND THEIR LEGS HUNCHED IN A PAIN-RACKED ATTITUDE,  
THEY LOOKED TO ALL THE WORLD LIKE HUMAN BEINGS.

THERE WAS NO WAY OF RETREAT FOR OUR FOES: Now we came  
steadily through the low cloud ceiling.

~~~~~

NIGHT FALLING FAST AND THE SECOND STORM WAS RAGING.

Then we all saw it at once: How strange the trick! She was towing something, breaking the storm waters by carrying her small boats as a drag, heeled away over on the leeward with only the lateen sail pushing her in the gale.

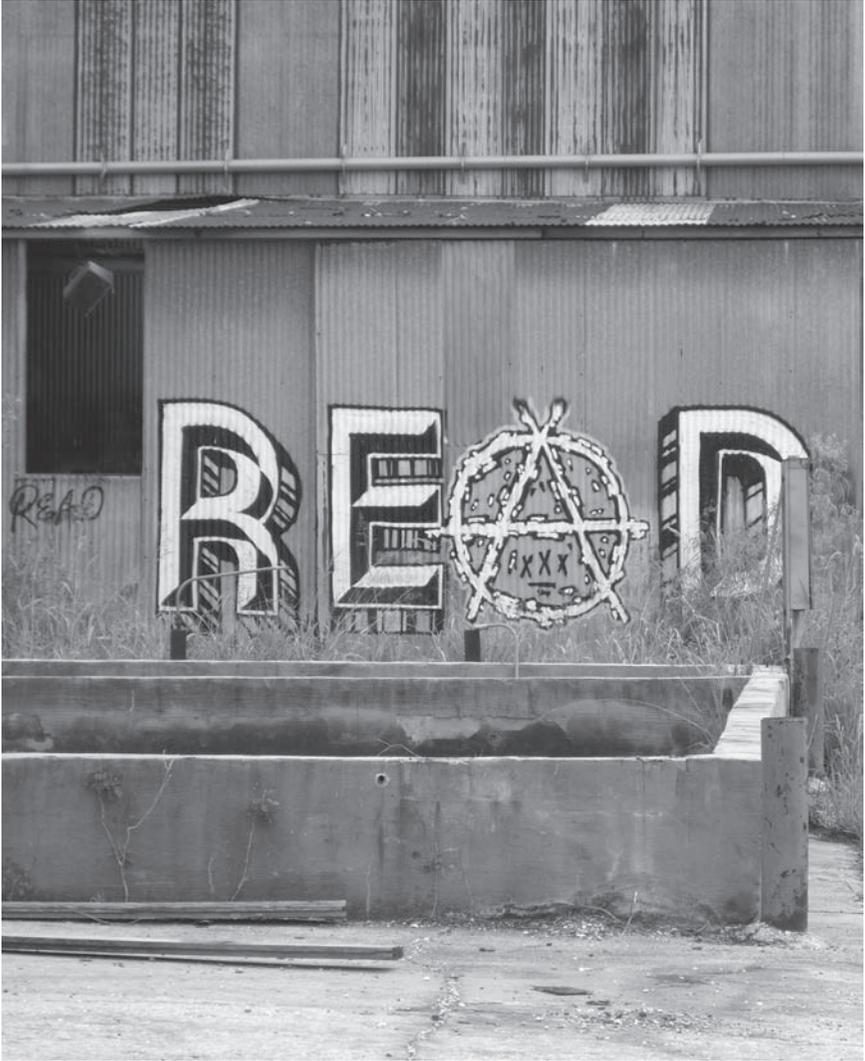
He swung into the ballroom and sat in the midst of about fifty sailors, the black pirate, his blessed heart.

PHOTOGRAPHY FEATURE

Christopher Kirsch



*Read More Books, Poland Avenue*



*Read More Books, Japonica Street*



*Read More Books, Tulane Avenue*



*Grey Ghost, Banks Street*



*Boanes, Orange Street*



*U.F.O., St. Roch Avenue*



*Boanes, Chartres Street*



*Boanes, Chartres Street*



*Old Crow, St. Claude Avenue*



*Harsh, St. Ferdinand Street*



*Read More Books, St. Claude Avenue*



*Tard, Lower Garden District*

## *Why I'm Not in Florida*

Few people realize I'm not the *real* great-aunt since she's in Florida playing bridge or line dancing while I eat Jell-O salad and tasteless cake. My clients don't like their great aunts enough to drag them north, pay for the plane ticket, and tolerate complaints about the chill and dreary gray skies. It's much cheaper and less stressful to rent me for the afternoon. Great-aunts are satellites, dark little moons orbiting every occasion, and I play a necessary ceremonial role.

At the potluck after the funeral I am armed with tissues and gum and throat drops and hand lotion. These are the tools of a great aunt, along with a soft bosom and the persistent odor of Jergens. I am not small, but in this profession it is good to have an ample body. Family members cry on me in a way they can only cry on people they don't know very well.

This young woman—maybe his granddaughter, maybe a niece—weeps on my dress. I hand her a tissue and ask if she wants a stick of gum.

"It was so sudden," she cries, her too-blue eye shadow melting in turquoise circles.

"Sometimes that happens," I say. "He was a good man. He didn't suffer." It was a heart attack, a detail provided in the great-aunt background information.

She nods, unwraps the gum, and slides it in her mouth.

There are benefits to not having known the deceased personally. Someone needs to say nice things about whoever is in that coffin while everyone else thinks, *Good riddance to the old bastard*.

Part of my job is like that of a telephone psychic. The trick is figuring out things everyone has in common. That sweet old dog you had when you were a child. That scar on your knee from when you fell off your bike. The affair your cousin had with that piece of trash and Lord knows where they moved, somewhere out of state, but we don't talk about it anymore.

I do not look like the sort of woman who would have an affair. I do not look like the sort of woman who would have secrets, and I'm sure the great-aunts I am replacing are the same. We could tell stories no one would believe. The family sends me a simple description of the woman everyone knows. Her likes and dislikes and children and marital history and education, that she belongs to literary and hospital guilds and makes good lasagna. But I know there is more to the real great aunties than this.

I have conversations with these ladies in my bedroom as I dress and apply makeup. What were their dreams? Who were their lovers? What did they do in dark corners when no one was looking? I imagine their histories. I walk around these parties and potlucks and receptions thinking *If only all of you knew the truth, you wouldn't have allowed this woman to simmer in a spa in Miami. You would have flown her back here. You would have marveled at her life.* I am all of these sweet women and I revel in their secrets.

He's been following me all day, inside the funeral home and at the graveside service and now beside the buffet table with potato salad and pasta salad and Jell-O salad. He eyes my hips. He has gray hair, wears a robin's egg blue jacket and black pants, and smells like he dumped the whole bottle of cologne on this morning. He's so close I could slap him if I turned, but it's been a long time since a man looked at me in this fashion.

Finally he clears his throat.

"I should say hello," he says.

"You should," I say.

"I wanted to speak to you earlier," he says. "I'm sorry to be awkward. It's been so many years. I was thinking how, since we're both unattached again, you know." He shrugs.

"Know what?" I say, taking a deviled egg from the platter.

"We had a lot of fun," he says. "What happened?"

"We got older and wiser," I say. Is this man the reason why the great-aunt declined to come to the funeral? My resemblance to her must be greater than usual. Usually the former lovers squint at me and shake their heads, wondering what the years have done.

He asks if I want to get coffee.

"I don't know if we should be alone," I say.

"We won't be alone," he says. "We'll go to a little café and talk."

He is a gentleman, and pulls out my chair when we arrive at the café.

"How have you been?" he asks.

"Fine," I say.

"And the kids?" he says.

"They're fine too," I say. I have two girls and so does the great aunt. Her children, like mine, live out of state with the grandkids. "You let them out in the world and let them make mistakes."

"Ain't that the truth." He takes my hand. "These are still lovely."

I draw my hand away from his slowly. "You were always good with flattery."

"I'm the most honest man I know," he says.

I smile. It's a dance of words like all affairs begin with a dance of words. This great-aunt couldn't have imagined having an affair until she found herself sitting with this man thirty-odd years ago in another restaurant, flirting. Then she went home and she was another

person. In the mirror she looked different than she had that morning. There was something bright in her cheeks, something dark beneath her eyes.

“You’re thinking about something,” he says, touching my hand across the table. This time I don’t move away.

C . J . S A G E

*No Wasn't Full*

No wasn't full  
and nobody did  
anything. All sighed,

*Be nice, No.*  
Colt with a bridle,  
always trotting along.

Pounds of some  
other world gone  
missionary.

No didn't matter,  
poor thing. It settled  
itself in a valley

of ago, hatching  
and clucking, set back  
from the street,

hovering even.  
No slunk to the fair,  
stealing breadcrumbs.

All teased, *Eat up, No.*  
Pony with a hay bale  
on its rear.

No didn't care,  
silly people. It held  
itself in a backpack

of So. Scratching  
and clawing, feathers  
in its teeth, No slept.

\*

No parks, the past  
a classic solid.  
Balding, No grasps

a dark oak display case.  
Shown a thick glass  
door, Yes says,

*A sock's not built to last.*  
Picky No seeks  
a certain kind.

Pulled away, Yes  
gets a little rush  
of passing.

\*

No tilted a cot  
on its side,  
dropped arms

like scissors  
over it. Rolling  
along pillows,

No crawled,  
skimmed like wind  
the sheets,

shuffled the indoor  
palms. *Look,*  
said Yes, *the tree*

*grows pale.*  
Yes caught thunder  
in its teeth,

beaming. A kingbird's  
wings grumbled;  
a patch of forest

shrubbed.  
No welcomed  
the place "learnéd

and revered."  
People said the land  
belonged to prayer.

D I A N E   S E U S S

*Perfect, which I Will Describe in Sixteen Lines*

the color of hair rinse that comes off on the pillowcase. My grandparents slept in separate beds on separate floors of the house, my grandma kept her shoes in the original boxes, I hid a cookie behind the couch because I wanted to rescind desire. Who painted over that woodwork? Who smashed the glass Christmas tree and invented stars? That green smell of hickory nuts we'd squeeze in the vice until they'd release their perfumes, the smell of hot asphalt and bullfrogs flattened by tractors. Did people wear deodorant then, did we bind our braids with rubber bands, did we sprinkle sugar on the graves, did we scale the fence and ride the cemetery horses, were their manes like the hair of British fashion models? The sky is large but limited, my life is dainty as that crucifix on a chain as fine as a long, silver hair my parents bought me for Christmas the year they decided we would need religion and a dog. The old woman stole the crucifix, people turn into pack rats or crows and cram artificial teeth into their mouths, the dog lived for awhile, then slid under the wheels of a school bus the color of sunset, not sixteen lines but seventeen, not poppies but hollyhocks, the purple black ones into which birds fly and disappear

D I A N E   S E U S S

### *Jump Rope Song*

Ah, beautiful blankness, I saw you once  
in a bucket of glue, on the flank of a horse with glass eyes,

in a gown and the girl's ankles were shaking,

in dream whip, in hawk shit, in comfrey, cress,  
campion, potato vine, pokeweed, lopseed, the dodder,

the clover and the honeysuckle flower, white as boiled bone.

White as boiled bone until it yellows,  
like the poof of hair on nursing home women, bunco dice,

scrimshaw of the HMS *Agamemnon* on a sperm whale tooth,

hind quarters of a white tailed deer, hind end  
of a hare, of a Welsh cow who's born like milk and dies like butter.

Born like milk and dies like butter, like batter after you add the eggs,

those orbs with a beating heart inside, yellow foam  
on the lake by the bowling alley, blank pins gone gold,

and the trophy mother won, and her rayon sweater soaked in beer.

Her rayon sweater soaked in beer, her ivory hand mirror

turning toward amber, glass of the hurricane lamp and the monocle,  
the paper holding the poem about the monocle, even the floor, gold.

Even the floorboards. Rag rug. Lamb nightlight. Waning  
moonlight on hospital sheets on the line, and the christening gown  
brushed with pollen, cut into costumes for canaries.

Costumes for canaries, for lovebirds, aprons for dolls, all  
lined up under the mock orange tree, and where is the girl serving  
buttermilk in thimbles, is the girl in the blossomhouse gone?

P E T E R   C O O L E Y

*Self-Portrait of Rembrandt Said to Be by One of His Pupils*

Attributed to his apprentices,  
I am a Rembrandt painting no one sees,  
propped up against a wall in this back room,  
here, a failing gallery in Amsterdam.

I had my time they took me seriously.  
I have been poked and prodded with the eye  
of connoisseurship, once I claimed a price  
I can't repeat in public—on the sky  
I floated beside others as they bid  
for us at auction, Sotheby's, London.  
I had my time, this face set to the wall  
hung beside Rubens, Hals, all self-portraits  
that show in Rome. Then they declared me false.  
That first critic declared my light too bright  
shining out of Rembrandt's eyes. "Atrocious"—  
the word followed me down the road to here.

No one but the poor Leiden miller's son,  
as they began to call him, touched my frame  
decades thereafter, centuries now, squat  
against this wall I've found my certain end.  
The day he finished me, he kissed my nose.

A K B E C K

*Marge*

hunchy            in a ballerina's torso  
                    I listen to the toast  
                    in a heartshaped toupee  
a still beautiful  
                    mimics the chinese seated deer  
                    ere we  
                    accent sticks to my head  
lickety            the kitchen  
                    fills with paper  
                    I couldn't fit in  
hands up passing  
                    the lady chair  
                    around the valence  
static  
                    I stand on the stair  
                    in the field they utter  
                    whose props down  
                    rapture was his bag  
my ears prick  
                    for a branch to break  
                    in my direction  
                    I stare  
                    look for light  
                            even the ceiling



bust in prairiefire  
    a dilapidate  
river  
    so I go there

Z A C H V E S P E R

*Constructing the Tower*

Production was halted when the president died  
eating a bowl of milk and poisoned cherries.  
Workers were given a day to rest their hands,  
to talk amongst themselves over barrows  
of hardening concrete in the shadow of the tower  
stretched over the city like a fingerless glove,  
a baobab tree, vestigial offshoots of glass and wire  
creaking in the wind. We began the century believing  
our lives would last too long, that in time we would see  
our memories as older than ourselves.  
In fact the opposite held true. We couldn't  
see the children as our own, only strangers birthed  
from the ground, from dripping water faucets, suddenly

bursting from our empty closets yelling *Daddy!*

We would take them out for ice cream secretly

afraid—their eyes, omniscient and calm, with color

and movement of windswept grass.

Groundbreaking day, I cradled a crushed bird

to inter in the foundation, knowing anything

could rise from the field, myself not there to see it,

the hardest work I ever knew to start.

PATRICK ROSAL

*Dream of the Girl with Eight Limbs*

Hands to hustle

Hands to hatchet

Hands to alight

Hands to pick kindling from the brambles

Hands to ache against the wood

Hands to nail them still

Hands to break across long stones

Hands to haggle a crucifix for bread

Hands to haul from the infant's grave cold water

Hands to cover the puny heart

Hands to pound that muscle back to its beastly life

Hands to write these lies

Hands to cross them out

Hands to lug the goat by rope to the bloody block

Hands to sting

Hands to coax the first lick of honey from your hips  
Hands to cut gristle from gut  
Hands to murder time  
Hands to tell it  
Hands to behemoth  
Hands to sting  
Hands to tie a perfect knot around the throat  
Hands to lead the rest of the body blind

Hands to count piggies and Injuns  
Hands to pinch the cigar's burnt-out stub  
Hands to bid on field niggers  
Hands to clench the six-foot whip  
Hands to crack it  
Hands to yank it back by the tip

Hands to fill deep wells  
Hands to shoot the shoddy guns  
Hands to solder the metal mouth shut  
Hands to salute the shroud  
and hands to stain it with berries and blood

Hands to hold small animals under water  
Hands to untame them

Hands to burn the cassock  
Hands to sew it to the skin

Hands to open the book to blasphemy  
Hands to hold it to flame  
Hands to splash muddy in chin-deep waters  
Hands to swallow white linen  
Hands to spoil the wall  
Hands to flat the fifth  
Hands to dial demons at 2 am  
Hands to pin down their wrists

Hands to light the last cold lanterns  
Hands to welcome winter's tooth  
Hands to twist the bent bronze key before it snaps off in the frost

Hands to pick the lock and pluck the jewel  
Hands to slide it deep inside the sleeping king's throat

Hands to separate one lamb from the next  
Hands to pour the bitter liquor  
Hands to sip from  
Hands to slap the dumb child across his one good eye

Hands to test the rivers  
Hands to paddle you out  
Hands to exhume the living  
Hands to offer rock salt to horses

Hands to grip the crowbar  
Hands to drive a heavy hook into the giant's left knee  
Hands to gouge it for its cartilage  
Hands to spit in  
Hands to catch cold rain

Hands to clutch the wreckage  
Hands to push it off your chest  
Hands to nudge the stocking up mid-thigh  
Hands to shred the wings of swans  
Hands to drive the mule that pulls the plow  
Hands to savage his rump with a wrist-thick switch

Hands to beat the broken piano for bass  
Hands to hold the bolo's blade  
Hands to hack in half a coconut then lift the husk to your lips

Hands to stall the gods like pelicans  
Hands to flock them  
Hands to feed them stale cornbread, sugar, dead fish

ROBIN MARTIN

1969

TOM TOMLAND

We lived in a small tract house identical to the houses in the two-square miles around the intersection of White Oak and Saticoy. Our mailbox had the wrong name on it—Abbott—instead of Tomland. We got our mail anyway. Well, maybe the houses weren't identical if you took a ruler to them but the same as two boxes of Cheerios, the same as two sky-blue Falcons, the same as two baseballs, the same as identical twins. There's the clincher; what looks alike does not tick alike. The layout is the same. The utility room leads to the backyard; the screen door is broken and does not shut all the way; a bit of paradise beckons in the form of fig, avocado, lemon or orange trees. And an occasional blue jay lights up the dry grass. The yards are littered, strewn with junk—always a tire or two—nothing seems permanent, though it all stays the same.

My mother had a way with slamming doors. My thinking was that all mothers had a way with doors, the bathroom door, the bedroom door, the closet, the car, the front, and the back.

In 1956, during the summer of my fifth year I watched a blue jay pick his way through the debris in our backyard. His royal-blue plumage had a hypnotic effect on me. He strutted up the concrete path right into the mustard-colored utility room. He stood on the checkerboard linoleum. His velvety chest swaggered. The awesomeness of his plumage and his curiosity stung my heart.

Then my mother saw him. She grabbed the door and swung with both her arms. The door slammed shut, decapitating the blue jay. The expression on my mother's face never changed.

His little body stayed erect, long enough for me to punch the washing machine and look again at him standing, still, too stunned

to keel over. My mother could no longer distinguish between a threat and a blue jay. She had the tan housedress on, but it didn't matter—she was not my mother. Someone else was inside.

The smell of damp clothes and lint, dead daisies in a vase on the windowsill, the calendar on February, though it was September, my dad's rifle against the wall; nothing undid that blue jay.

I told this story about my mom to Aggie Wells when I was twelve. I'm not sure it's something I'd remember today, had I not told Aggie then. We told each other things.

#### AGGIE WELLS

I have had light emanate from my back. This happened between the ages of twelve and sixteen, from 1963 to spring 1967, not since.

My boyfriend then was Tommy Tomland. On the weekends, he would go off surfing with his older brother and friends and on weeknights desecrate property, Jewish temples and stuff, with the same older brother and friends. Tommy was not the leader. Some nights he'd stay home and we'd talk on the telephone. I saw him at school and Friday nights we'd meet at the movies. Saw *Cat Ballou* with Jane Fonda twelve times. I tried to influence him, but he followed his brother. He liked Mexicans. Hated: Jews, Jesus, coloreds, cops and salesmen. Tommy's family was part German, English and Sioux. I'll bet there's never been a better-looking boy on earth.

During those four-and-a-half years, I always wore white. When I was twelve, my favorite outfit was an ivory-colored A-line dress with a clown collar that fell over my shoulders. By fifteen, I preferred straight skirts and men's white shirts. Only sometimes, I'd wear a pale pink and mint mohair cardigan that I buttoned down the back.

Tommy had written me notes for three months before we actually talked. Brian Cavanaugh hand-delivered them at the end of the nutrition break each day. I always ate two sweet rolls and would lick my fingers silly before I touched his notes. I never wrote back. I'd smile at Tommy across the lunch area and stare into his eyes. He'd

blush and look away before I did. He had light brown eyes, slightly rose-colored, the same color as his Sioux skin.

The first time I met him outside of school we arranged to meet in the tunnel under the 405 freeway, in an underpass no one ever used. Its entrance was at the end of Camarillo Street, also the name of an insane asylum, Camarillo California State Hospital. Tommy came to refer the tunnel as *our asylum*. The tunnel walls were cement and the floor dirt. The air was wet and the light murky, whereas outside during the day the air felt dry and the light bleached your sight.

We held hands and looked in each other's eyes for several hours, from after school until just before dinner. It was like getting high; time vanished. It was better than getting high, but since then, getting high is the closest I've come to those hours staring into Tommy's eyes. Neither of us spoke.

I didn't know what was happening. A sensation spread over my back. I did not feel human. I ran ahead of Tommy and light trailed me. He ran up and caught me, holding me from behind. I thought the light coming out of my back would envelop him. I turned around and he kissed my face and neck and shoulders and then my mouth. I put my hands over my lips.

"Just a second," I said and took my retainer out, dropping it on the ground.

Then I looked at him till he closed his eyes, and kissing him, I stuck my tongue into his mouth, as deep as I could, to touch his heart. We kissed till we ran out of breath. With our lips touching, we held still until our breathing was in sync. He was the first boy I kissed.

"What are you doing tonight?" I asked.

"Cruising with my brother and his friends."

I did homework on school nights. We walked with our arms touching back to the entrance of the tunnel.

"Wait. Okay? Just wait, right here. Keep looking out at the street. Okay. Don't turn around," I said.

I ran to the center of the tunnel and took off my shirt. “Don’t look,” I yelled.

We stood back to back with about twenty feet between us and I let the light shine onto him. I stared out toward the opposite end. I didn’t know exactly what was happening. My back felt warm and then hot. God was blowing light threw me.

“Don’t look,” I yelled again.

“I’m not,” he yelled back.

The tunnel swallowed our voices.

“I want to, though,” he yelled.

His brother pulled up outside the tunnel and honked.

“I got to go.”

Tommy ran out. His brother had one of those cars with truck-size tires that made a lot of noise. The sort my mother would call idiotic, my friend Claire’s mother would call tough. Tommy never called his brother Ed; he called him My Brother. Ed had a real thick irreverent streak and Tommy worshipped him.

I walked home and it was like in a dream when you hover. You don’t exactly fly but you’re not grounded either. I hovered home. In the middle of the night, I woke up totally horrified that I had forgotten my retainer. In the morning, I went back and found it, pink as ever. My little pink creature stayed in my hand all the way to school where I washed it off in the water fountain. And then, went to homeroom.

I felt my back was an angel and my front was a girl. When I was with Tommy, this hot feeling stirred and flowed from my shoulder blades. He would stand behind me, running his hands over the front of my body and I’d lean into him turning my head to the side for his kisses. Sometimes I’d take my shirt off and make him stand on the other side of our garage so that he could take in my whole back. My dad had begun to build the garage into a guesthouse but had lost interest. The building supplies were pushed against the garage door, making the frame door the only workable entrance. Mexican blankets covered the floor and my dad had hung one

picture of himself standing with a colossal tuna a foot taller than his six feet. I don't know if he did much fishing. I think he just liked the picture. And there was a radio. In the beginning when I'd shine my light, we were either in the underpass or the garage. There was light coming out of my back, shimmering white light waving through the air like a storm of albino dust. If I turned suddenly, I could watch the halo around Tommy fade the way a rainbow does. He wouldn't say whether he saw the light. He'd say, "You're so bitchin."

St. Theresa's was the Catholic Church in our neighborhood. Made of red brick, a rarity in our neighborhood of Spanish tile roofs and stucco houses or the southern California built-not-to-stay look. And birch trees with white trunks and listing branches that peeled and frightened me with their fragility surrounded the church. Some movie star had liked that kind of tree and had them brought over from Australia. Everyone else had palm trees, which they say can bend but do not break.

"It is this quality which makes them the perfect Hollywood tree," Claire's mom had once told me. Claire Sky was my best friend.

I worried about Tommy and all the stuff he did with his brother. If I thought about him, one side of my body got cold and the other hot. Locking the bathroom door, I'd sit on the toilet, amazed that one cheek was cold the other hot. As I thought of the light, my temperature would even out. This made me think I was doing the right thing, shining my light on him. I could think of no one I'd risk telling, until I saw Father O'Donnell getting into his car. I had taken the short cut through the church parking lot walking home from school. I didn't know his name then. He was just a priest. The sun was behind him so he looked like a living shadow. I ran up to him like a cat, picking a home.

"Excuse me, Father."

He stopped and tilted his head toward me. For a moment I doubted my decision to speak with him, but then I took a deep breath letting the air push away my fear and repeated what I had

memorized, "Father, I have white light emanating from my back that I shine on my boyfriend. He is a hoodlum and I try to get him not to do these things. He steals hub caps and breaks windows, spray paints 'Cruise Jews' on temple parking lots, knocks over parking meters, stuff like that."

He smiled. "Come with me," he said.

I followed him into the church. I had been there one other time. A Mouseketeer from The Mickey Mouse Club got married there and my friend Claire Sky's mom played the organ. She snuck us in so that we could see a star. I didn't care about that. I went because Claire's mom let Tommy and me smoke cigarettes in her car. I don't think her mom was Catholic. She just played the organ. She may have been Catholic, but once I asked her why she wore black all the time and she said she was mourning the death of God.

"When did God die?" I asked.

"He dies every time you breathe in and each time you breathe out, over and over he dies."

"How do you know?"

"I hear him gasping," she said and then she showed me how to blow smoke rings.

I'd imagine myself growing up to be someone like Claire's mom. She wore her hair parted on the side and in a perfect pageboy, curling under in a roll the color of honey. Tommy joked about riding a wave with an equally perfect roll. It was fine enough, so that twice she had been a Breck girl. Her advertisements were framed on the bathroom walls at her house. We idolized Claire's mom. Tommy took pictures of me posed like the Breck ad. Tommy would look at the photos of her swinging her hair as he pissed.

If she hadn't said she thought God was dead, I might have told her about the light.

Following Father O'Donnell into the church, I found I could easily match my steps with his. In the chapel he told me to walk down the aisle and stand in front of the altar and that he would look and see if there was light. He had an Irish accent. You could dance to

the way he talked. I tried to explain that it only happened around Tommy. He told me to close my eyes and think of Tommy.

“Father, should I take my top off? I always do with Tommy.”

After a while he said, “Yes.”

I stood with my back to him and I remember thinking about arrows. If you see an arrow, there are so many things that come to mind: a heart, a direction, a weapon, Indians, apples and Robin Hood, who was my favorite hero. Then I stopped thinking: my light was in the church, on the benches and walls and windows, everywhere behind me.

When he said, “Turn around,” the sun had set.

For a moment I was frightened he would say I was crazy or full of the devil. He was sitting in an aisle seat a few rows from me. He had powder-blue eyes, more the color of a baby blanket than real eyes and a small nose like a child’s and a wide mouth. I had never been this close to a priest.

I had forgotten my top. Father O’Donnell made a sound, a whelp, the way my puppy sounded if you stepped on him by mistake. Father O’Donnell’s face looked as cracked as his lips. Like a swan, his head dropped and his shoulders curved forward. I put my shirt on. His eyes were funny for that moment before his head dropped, without recognition.

“Yes, you have white light coming from you. Shine it on your boyfriend as long as it lasts.”

From that moment, I thought of myself as a little bit Catholic, and of Father O’Donnell as one of the people who had truly seen me.

I knew my parents were not going to go for this. Absolutely not. They were as devout in their atheism as Dominican nuns in their faith. Counseling and juvenile delinquent camp would have been their idea of taking care of Tommy. Father O’Donnell was a secret I kept from everyone but Tommy.

Tommy called me every night.

“Tell me your night tale,” I’d say.

Talking in his made-up accent he'd narrate the hoodlum stuff he'd done as if it were the tales of Vikings. But it was just the same old stuff from throwing eggs and breaking windows to desecrating temples with spray paint and stealing cars for the night. It all bothered me, especially the temples.

After Tommy told me what he'd done, we would get married. Tommy played all the parts: friends, parents, priest, rabbi, flower girl, bartender, relatives, using different voices. All I had to do was say, "I do." Sometimes we wouldn't talk; we'd just imagine kissing each other.

"What did you think about?" I asked.

"Wasn't thinking."

"Nothing at all?"

"Your skin and hair, legs," Tommy whispered, "And you, Chiquita?"  
"Volkswagens."

My bedroom had a balcony that faced the freeway. I could drag the phone on to the balcony and watch the cars go by as I imagined kissing.

My talking on the telephone drove my father nuts. My mother would say to him that all teenagers talk on the telephone. Every night my dad would be all worked up when I got off the phone. He'd pound the kitchen counters, cursing. I'd hug him and go back up to my room and change my underwear.

Tommy really wanted to screw.

This did not fit into my plan for my life. I was not going to do that until we really got married, and I wasn't getting married until there was world peace. That was my mission. Also, I did not like the word screw. It frightened me. But I loved Tommy and I loved making him come, any other way. The first time was with my hand during *Cat Ballou*. He sighed so loud it made me laugh. I looked up at Jane Fonda, overwrought, and Lee Marvin, ragged. I couldn't imagine them doing what we had just done, they seemed so old.

At sixteen, Tommy really became a criminal. He wasn't following his brother anymore; his brother was in boot camp. I couldn't argue

with him because his anger seemed righteous. He didn't hate Jews and Jesus and cops and salesmen or different races anymore. He hated that some people were rich. The kids in our school came from either really rich families or nowhere near rich. The Volkswagens, Jaguars, Chevys and Corvettes parked side by side in the school lot said it all for Tommy. This layout of things pissed him off and he began vandalizing homes on his own. I went with him a couple of times and smashed television sets. I thought that maybe if I joined him he'd want to stop. By sixteen I still felt angelic, but only around Tommy. His badness vitalized the angel in me, in this way we were one, a philosophy I construed from my readings of Genet, though Edith Wharton's *Summer* was my favorite book. To be an angel I thought one had to court the devil and not burn. I wanted Tommy to believe that it was the light that guided me, not fear. I don't know how long the vandalizing lasted for Tommy. He stopped talking about it. I could still feel light when I was around him. But he got restless standing in it. I had to bargain with him.

My friend Claire lived in a house on two hundred acres of land, with an orange orchard and a mountain. The driveway, a dirt road half a mile long, ended in a circle of old cars. In the summer, her mom hung Chinese lanterns from the trees, and the smell of oranges never went away; you could count on the smell, the intoxication. Up the mountain, bougainvillea and magnolia blossoms raged, and at the top were fig, avocado and lemon. After she came back from being a Gold Digger dancer on the Vietnam tour with Bob Hope she drove her car up to the top and parked it for keeps, a blue Thunderbird. She must have driven it up from the other side of the mountain on Mulholland Drive, which wrapped around the rim of the valley. The T-Bird just stayed there. She never drove it anywhere. The view was spectacular. She'd go up and sit in the car most afternoons. I asked her what she did there.

"I daze, I'm dazing," she said.

Tommy and I would hike up the mountain three or four nights a week. During the time it took him to smoke a cigarette I'd stand

naked with my back to him. This was the only time he'd let me shine my light on him during our last five months together. When he finished his cigarette I'd turn around and he'd turn the T-Bird's headlights on, that was our bargain. Sitting on the hood of the car, he'd watch me move in and out of the headlight beams. Sometimes he just wanted me to stand still and he'd look at me or look and masturbate. This preacher who walked around on Hollywood Boulevard said that if you are fascinated then you are fascinating. I watched in a trance. His body puffed up like a cat's tail. And his eyes floated like something adrift. Sometimes he wanted me to smoke a cigarette or lift my arms or touch myself. I must have been beautiful. I was never self-conscious.

If I close my eyes I can still smell the inside of that car. And if I ever lean my head back on a car seat so that all I can see is the roof, I long to be kissed slow and easy. If you keep something in your memory, then it will always exist; memory is proof of existence.

Claire's mom had been an actress and a dancer. They looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. Burl Ives was once one of her boyfriends, maybe. No one ever mentioned Claire's father. Claire had a lot of aunts and so the house was always full of women. Claire was the baby for all of them. For some reason, Claire's mom always wore black and smoked using an agate cigarette holder with a jaguar carved on the side. Every Sunday she fell apart, as routinely as my mom spent Sunday mornings reading the paper; Claire's mom would lock herself in the bottle room and cry. The bottle room was all glass; shelves ran across the windows lined with hundreds of bottles of beveled glass, the colors of a foggy Ireland. I'd stand with Claire outside the door and we'd listen. We'd hear bottles breaking. After a while, there'd be silence. Then she'd emerge radiant, smiling and go off to sit in the Thunderbird. Claire and I would clean up the glass. The collection never seemed to diminish. I guess someone kept the pond stocked with glass. The phonograph was in that room, the old sort which you had to crank.

We'd listen to Burl Ives, Jeannette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy and a record Claire's mom made.

Pictures of Claire's mom covered the living room walls, always posed with a different man in each picture, smiling, always with the same smile. She owned a player piano, which I loved as much as I did the Rolling Stones. On top of the piano stood a collection of china dogs, which would inch around and threaten to fall off when the piano played. One time a man came over and played the ukulele while she sang. Claire and I listened and sucked jawbreakers. It is my only memory of her mother not in black. She wore a flowered dress, magenta and white flowers on a dark navy background. It had shoulder pads and opened in front. Underneath she had a green slip and rows and rows and rows of crystal beads around her neck. She had dressed Claire and me up in garter belts, stockings, hats and silk slip dresses. I only remember that the man sang a frog song and that he was the biggest man I'd ever seen. Maybe it was Burl Ives.

Dressing up like that made me feel like an astronaut, as if I were ready to go somewhere no one had ever been. I sat on the piano bench with my legs crossed and the feeling of the stockings rubbing against my legs made me want to touch Tommy. Later, I told him about it. That's when we made the bet.

A few weeks later, on one of those nights when the sunset was so red it looked as if the sky ached, we had a race up the mountain. Tommy gave me a 100-count head start. If he won, we would screw. I knew he'd probably win. World peace had become a dim prospect; I didn't have a mission anymore. I just loved Tommy. He passed me in a blink. When I got to the top, I was out of breath and felt an unearthly anticipation. He stood in the clearing, daring me to rush past him to the car—that was the bet, whoever got to the car first. We stood maybe twenty feet apart. I took my top off slowly and paused when my shirt was covering my head. I was still panting from the run and the material moved in and out with each breath. The smell of my body was overwhelming. I threw my shirt off and

gasped for air. Tommy had not moved. We just stood there locked in our moment.

He didn't touch me or move closer. He just kept looking in my eyes and it felt as though we were going to stay in that trance forever. Or, disappear in it. Forever and disappearing seemed like the same thing.

Then he whispered, "Do you want to shine your light?"

I could feel the breath of his whisper brush my ears and everything got blurry. I was astonished that he had asked. My light felt real in a way that it hadn't before.

I answered, "Yes, I do."

I slowly turned my back to him. The forest looked as beautiful as I felt.

When I turned back, he had lit a cigarette and was blowing smoke rings. He began backing up toward the car. A part of me wanted to scream at the top of my lungs and fly, beat him to the car, but with each step he took backwards, I simply stepped forward.

Claire's mother was in the front seat, dead. I never saw her because Tommy got to the car first. He twisted around and smacked into me, knocking me to the ground. He fell on top of me. He was crying and his heart pounded against me. He covered my face with his hands. My back curved into the ground. I thought this all to do with screwing. He was getting overwrought the way people did in the movies. I thought if he'd let me shine my light on him he'd calm down. I tried to kiss him.

"Don't cry angel."

He pulled me up.

"Your shirt. Where is it?"

I found my shirt and pulled it on. He grabbed my hand and ran down the mountain. My body just moved with him. I couldn't bring my feet down fast enough.

At Claire's house, they were all playing Scrabble and the player piano was on. At first Tommy could not speak. We were all staring

at him. Bending over, it took me a long time to catch my breath. Sweat covered my body and the salt burnt my lips. I remember everyone's shoes. I don't remember how he said it, but all the women left the house and Tommy started crying again. I tried to hug him. He pulled away from me and called the police. On the phone, he calmed down, giving them the address and answering their questions. He told them she had slashed her wrists.

I didn't believe she was dead. It seemed we should go back and look at her. Maybe touch her blood. Talk to her. I don't think I believed in death. I wanted to calm Tommy down, shine my light on him. I started to turn and take my top off and he moved towards me so quickly I could feel wind.

"Stop that!" he yelled.

I tried to turn my back toward him.

"There's no light, that fucking priest was just fucking with your mind, there's no light. Dead. Dead. She's dead," he said shaking my shoulders.

He pulled my hair back and started to kiss me. It was rough, not like the ways we had always kissed. His face hurt me, his hands hurt and the sounds he made hurt. I wanted to touch him but he was a stranger to me. Panting and groaning and pulling on me, he kept hoarsely whispering, "Please."

"Tommy," I cried.

Everything stopped.

He looked at me and his face was different. I suppose it was his fear that I couldn't look into. I closed my eyes as tightly as I could until there was darkness. I saw burnt holes in a blanket.

"I want you so badly," Tommy whispered into my ear and over eyes and cheeks, "I love, I love, I love you."

I ran into the bottle room and locked the door. I remember thinking about bubbles, how when you are in a bubble bath the bubbles multiply and divide and disappear and come back. I wondered if Claire's mother would come back, if she was right about God being dead, and palm trees never breaking. I wondered about my light. It will come again, I hoped. Not real hope, but the kind

that just makes the day go by, the sort I've kept up ever since. I looked at my wrists, tracing the blue veins with my finger all the way up my arm to my heart. I traced my heart as if it were a valentine. My heart had always seemed outside of myself, outside any window. But that evening it felt solid and inside my aching chest.

Tommy left and I did not hear from him for a week. He screwed Lee Sander. She was pretty and screwed with lots of boys. She was a few years older and had done heroin and a lot of acid. She looked like Twiggy and the "Mod Squad" girl. She'd gotten in a movie, but couldn't remember the lines and they had to put microphone plugs in her ears so they could tell her what to say. She just did that one movie.

I couldn't be with Tommy after that. I couldn't lose him twice. I couldn't come close to his fear. We met one last time in the tunnel. I said, "No." Leaning against the wall he cried and the echo stormed inside me. Each time he'd say, "Please forgive me," I'd say, "No, I don't want you to touch me," shaking my head no. We faced each other leaning on opposite walls.

"Father O'Donnell would not lie," I said. I was not wearing white. The aqua top I wore had a plunging V-neck and you could see my nipples and I felt self-conscious.

"I love you more than anything on earth," Tommy said.

"It's a good feeling to feel," I said. I couldn't pay attention to Tommy. I just thought about Lee. My arms were covered with goose bumps. I would not forgive him.

After that we never spent any time together. I only saw him from a distance. I lost touch.

#### TOM TOMLAND

The beating took place in 1969, the year I graduated from high school. I was set to start college in the fall at Tulane University in New Orleans. My mother had written Tom Tomland across a map of Louisiana and stuck it on the refrigerator. The fact that I had chosen Tulane meant something, though I did not know what it meant then. Tulane was nowhere near the Pacific Ocean at a time

when the only thing that I could count on was the Pacific. Ross Brown, Brian Cavanaugh, Mitch Gordon and I spent the last two weeks of August surfing the coast from Baja to Santa Cruz. We then took a slide through the Haight staring from inside the van at the ragged, ripped, voluptuous, raging, wailing, raining array of hippie women. We never got out of the van. We saw what stands for the sixties, these days, through a windshield, and stayed at the Travel Lodge near Fisherman's Wharf, the four of us in one room, our surfboards up against the window. It was our first trip to San Francisco, and it was on the road trip back to Los Angeles that I decided to leave the west for good.

It was my idea to cut down the middle rather than take the Coast Highway. I didn't feel like surfing anymore. I think that tour of Haight-Ashbury put a distance between the ocean and me. There'd always been something phony about my obsession with surfing. I don't like balancing acts. I am a land man, Tomland not Tomriver though it has taken all these years for me to live it. I got the others to go along by my wild and completely concocted stories about Reno. It was assumed that I knew more than I did because of my brother, who was cool—not just cool, but who knew it all. And because my mother was part Indian and I was a bit of that part, they listened to me; they listened to me in 1969.

We stopped in Reno for two hours. Back then it was small, but bigger than it is now, I mean, it played a part in the west back then; romance began and ended in Reno. I don't believe that sort of romp goes down much anymore.

I used my brother's VW van. I had collected postcards throughout our trip to send him in one batch: Private Ed Tomland, Vietnam.

When you drive down the middle of California you see hipbones, miles and miles of hipbones, female hipbones. The indentations in the mountains seem to be calling your name. The drive is like an acid trip gone sentimental. You can't stop feeling: there she is lying on her side mooning the sunset. The road is straight enough. The bugs get in the way. And sometimes it is too dry to sweat and the

brush tumbles and the shadows cut all corners. And one gentle hip after another situates between your vision and your fantasy, so that after a while you love what you see more than what you imagine. That's the thing about California: it is all woman. The landscape moves you. I don't know if this is exactly how the others felt, but when Brian Cavanaugh yelled stop, we did.

The horse lay on the side of the road. There was nothing stiff about her. She looked as though she were simply resting, lounging, a black beauty with a white triangle between her eyes. Even the rock beneath her head curved and held her head like some kind pillow. Maybe she had stopped moments before we found her. The front legs were crossed and her tail spread fan-like over the dry earth.

When I pulled off the road I left the engine running. I had no intention of staying long.

Seeing that horse dead, made me nuts. How could all that beauty just stop?

I punched the horse in the stomach. The impact made me yell. You could see rivers of energy ripple through the horse's belly. But she stayed dead. I don't know what exactly brought on the first punch.

The others followed me. Where were we exactly? Tahoe was almost three hours behind us. The air could have been kindling, that's how hot it was. If you lit a match the sky itself might have caught fire. I punched as hard as I could. I know why I did it. Because, I could. I could live with punching a dead horse. Those were the times, and I don't mean that in a nostalgic way. I mean you measured your actions by their spontaneity. You did what you could live with. You could be a cliché—we beat a dead horse. We vomited from the smell and later washed our hands in tomato juice. We never touched the horse's face. And all the while her eye open and hazel and rimmed in thick lashes, with the exposed side of her head regal and still. We beat that dead horse, boys without direction, boys with the world rising about our feet, and the horse shuddered and farted. We stopped, silent, waiting for a sign. In 1969 you could

beat a dead horse on the side of the road in the middle of California and the only thing that stopped you was fatigue. That summer was the beginning of everything seeming to be no use. All the things that are no use are the ones you keep doing.

My fist hurt and the pain felt like it would never go away, felt like my hand had ceased to exist and only my fist could feel. I remember that later when I put my hands on the steering wheel they felt different; the sensation of touch had left my hands and was in my memory. I had to remember how to grip. A Saint Christopher medallion hung around the mirror on a dog-tag chain. I folded it into my hand and squeezed.

When we descended over the mountains into the San Fernando Valley, Mitch howled coyote-like in anticipation.

We stopped at Dupar's for pie.

Ross told me that while I was in the bathroom Aggie had stopped at our table and that they told her about the dead horse when she said they look demented and asked where they had been.

"Brian started telling her the route we had taken and she said, 'I didn't ask you about geography. I asked you where you've been.' I told her we beat a dead horse and I told her you were with us. She said that she guessed we all beat dead horses and to tell you to come out and say hi. She's waiting in the parking lot."

I had not talked to her for over two years. When I walked out to the parking lot, my legs cramped and the pain in my hand flared up. A last ray of sunlight cut through the dusk stained sky hitting me square in the face and I ducked into the shadows. I guess she decided not to wait. Before she got into her car, she looked in my direction. She paused for a moment. I almost spoke.

P O E T R Y   F E A T U R E

from *Small Porcelain Head*

Allison Benis White

After our fingers, we put our mouths to the pain—a ceramic tongue broken off like chalk.

As a child, I pressed my tongue to my wrist to see what it would be like to feel someone.

What should I do with my mind? Think of the way it broke until the breaking is language.

An entire story on one body, a brass knob, a head, when turned, my finger hooked around the neck, and the girl becomes the wolf in a velvet hood, the red felt tongue set to mean better to eat you than sleep, better to never be.

What we end up with in the end or sooner, both brows and lashes indicated by a series of nicks.

Awaiting execution, Marie Antoinette made a wooden doll, still preserved in a museum in England.

That kind of making. Carved until the mind is a doll of a woman in a wooden cell making a doll.

One evening as a child, before I went to bed, I called the operator and said my house is on fire.

For the easily broken heads of bisque or china, tin heads, made separately, cut and stamped from sheet metal, welded together, then painted or enameled in Saxony, now in boxes, on bodies dressed in black or maroon capes with fur collars, each shattered head exchanged for a metal one but it is not enough.

Just as the cork descends from the neck to permit a release from pulling—the body in one hand, head in the other—separation is revelation.

Just as the body is now headless, waiting—as if the motive to live was loneliness, the body remembers a head, opens its arms romantically:

*I live to miss you.*

Made with a hollow in the body to accept a  
stand rod, the emptiness is explained and a nest.

Even a hole in a plastic mouth, made to fit a  
bottle, as the head was cupped and tilted back.

Or feathers pulled from a rip in a pillow, until the  
opposite is the same: I am empty enough.

Only her eyes, which cause us to feel empathy.

The mutual helplessness of seeing and being seen.

Looking where the mouth should be is no help.

Now that the paint has worn off she has none.

Which pulls the focus back to the eyes' conversation.

ABRAHAM BURICKSON

## *The Ecstasy of Incomprehension of Numerous Readings of George Oppen*

### I. A SEDUCTION

*But I will listen to a man, I will listen to a man, and when I speak I  
will speak, tho he will fail and I will fail. But I will listen to him  
speak.*

—George Oppen, from *Of Being Numerous*

My friend Adam says the most honest conversations he's had were in a language he didn't speak. He says they were the only conversations he can recall where every word felt essential, inflamed with meaning. They happened in 1999 when he was traveling by slow boat down the Amazon River. It was a five day trip from isolated and oil-soaked Manaus to Belém on the coast. He had been in Brazil less than a week, and, though conversant in Spanish, he had never spoken a word of Portuguese.

The first day was quiet. The Rio Negro merged with the Rio Amazonas at what was called The Encounter of the Waters. For miles the waters of the two rivers flowed side-by-side, muddy brown on the left and murky green on the right. He wanted to ask the boat workers why this was, but his Spanish was incomprehensible to them. Eventually, the colors did mix and a strange calm descended on the passengers. Some lay in their hammocks on the bottom deck, others sat on the top deck and watched fishermen pulling little nets behind canoes.

Adam put on his baseball cap and went up top where he met some Brazilians on their way to Rio. One of them understood his Spanish, another spoke English. Together they finished off a bottle of cachaça. A shy Brazilian girl joined them. Her name was

Marilena. Adam lifted his cup to her and they toasted. *Saude*, she said. *Sow-ji*, he replied, holding her gaze.

That night he and the girl were on the bow of the boat watching pink dolphins leap the thin ridges of their wake. He wanted to ask her how dolphins got into the Amazon, why they were so small, if they were really pink as they seemed to be. *Eles são daqui*, she said, and he heard in her voice that the dolphins were not new to her, that they were both familiar and magical to her, that they would be there forever. He heard these things but he didn't comprehend the words themselves.

So she began to teach him Portuguese: *hee-o*: river; *ar-vor-ray*: tree; *omen*: man; *mul-yer*: woman; *es-trayla*: star; *es-trayla ca-dench*: shooting star. By the third night he was completely taken with her. They stayed up until dawn talking. By the fourth he had figured out enough Portuguese to ask her to delay her return to Manaus to spend the weekend with him in Belém. He understood when she asked if there would be *perigro* that she thought there was some danger. He couldn't figure out what the danger was, but perhaps she was speaking metaphorically. Her decision to stay with him rested on his answer. Perhaps this was her way of coyly extending the seduction, which was already complete. *No*, he said, then *sim*.

Three months later Adam was passing through Manaus again. He remembered that Marilena lived nearby. He called her up, and she answered. At first she didn't recognize his voice; she had never heard him speak Portuguese. The conversation was awkward. Adam felt a creeping disappointment, and tried to remember what had been so wonderful between them before. Her words were so banal. His words, for that matter, were also rather dull. He began to not want to see her but he continued talking. She hesitantly invited him to come visit, and when he arrived her mother opened the door. *Marilena's not here*, she said. Adam asked where she was and the mother demured, then suggested he try her place across town.

When he got to her house he found no one home. He knocked again, then realized the door was open. The living room was tiny, well-kept, and faithful to what he remembered seeing in the pictures she had shown him. A few things were different. There was a green army bag on the floor. There were two dirty plates on the table. He walked into the bedroom and there saw a rifle and photos of Marilena and her husband. He was always in army fatigues, even in the wedding photo. In the other photos he held her tight to his side. She had a look in her eyes like the pressure of his grip was overwhelming. The look said: *perigro*. Adam decided to leave.

★

*Didn't you understand what he would have done to you?* I asked, gathering our dirty plates off the table, thinking: *perigro*.

*No, he said, I didn't want to know.*

★

## II. THE POEM

*...Because the known and the unknown  
touch...*

Each night for the past month I have read through the twenty-five page poem "Of Being Numerous." It was written by George Oppen, one of the most forgotten of the great twentieth-century poets. I am approaching the conclusion that it is the perfect poem. I believe I am getting close to understanding it, though I am not trying very hard.

Here, to give you a sense of the poem, is the opening:

*There are things  
We live among 'and to see them  
Is to know ourselves'.*

*Occurrence, a part  
Of an infinite series,*

*The sad marvels;*

*Of this was told  
A tale of our wickedness.  
It is not our wickedness.*

Here is another part:

*Because the known and the unknown  
Touch,  
One witnesses —  
It is ennobling  
If one thinks so.*

*If to know is noble*

*It is ennobling.*

I read these lines and find that I don't get it. But my posture has changed. I am sitting at my kitchen table with the book propped up against a jar of salt and I have gone from slouching to attentive. I read the lines again...*if to know is noble*...and see that my mind is quietly engaged, not just in attempting to understand analytically, but in attempting to open itself as much as possible to what is written. The poem is teaching me that incomprehension is the key to understanding.

This is difficult poetry. I don't normally read difficult poetry. The parts make sense, but their connection to the whole is undeclared. From the title I know that we are speaking of being part of the mass of humanity. Once inside the poem, one is launched into a dizzying folio of disjointed images, unattributed quotes, references lost in history. Nothing is clear. I have a sense that I have not been invited inside the poem. As if to deepen the insult, he says, later in the same book: *I have not and never did have any motive of poetry/But to achieve clarity.* As far as I can tell, nothing is clear. But the lines are impeccable, so I have decided to trust Oppen, though not with

the simple trust one has in the bus driver or the mailman, rather with the nervous trust one offers the latex hand of the dentist as it roots around in the numbness above the wisdom teeth. In these early reads, I have no idea what it is that Oppen is doing but there is the faint sensation of what needs extraction wiggling its way out.

Somewhere in the middle of the poem I read the lines:

*We seem caught  
In reality together my lovely  
Daughter,*

and I sit up straighter. Then I read the next lines:

*I have a daughter  
But no child*

and I am perplexed. Perhaps it is because I (also) do not have a child. Then I read:

*The roots of words  
Dim in the subways*

and I feel that I have experienced this dimming, how anonymous one feels in the crowds. A little later he says:

*Nobody here but us chickens*

and I laugh. I know it is a pop-culture reference. I know it has something to do with the absurdity of all the subway riders cooped up underground. I feel it has some connection to the fact of being caught in reality, of having (and not having) a daughter, of rootless speech. I am excited by the possibility of understanding how they are connected.

So many people say they do not understand poetry. I, also, do not understand poetry. This is why poetry like Oppen's—poetry that makes an end run around explanation—*works*. Of course we don't understand poetry. If we understood it what would be the point?

I turn back to the beginning of the poem and start again. Some lines follow a narrow point to its root, only to jag suddenly sideways. *We are pressed, pressed on each other*, he says,

*we will be told at once  
of anything that happens...  
Now as always. Crusoe*

*We say was 'Rescued'  
so we have chosen.*

We are pressed on each other, right; there's a lot of humanity around. Then: what? How did we get to Crusoe? The two and a half lines leap orthogonally from the forty-part poem. The next part sits a tantalizing half-inch farther down the page. In it is the line *we have chosen the meaning/of being numerous*—The title line. It is certainly more appealing to read on than to parse the meaning of 'Rescued' or to reread *Robinson Crusoe*. Pausing would interrupt the steady walking pace Oppen has already established. So I am left with an image of the man, Crusoe, island-bound in his characteristic tatters, and I am left passively wondering about other possible meanings for the word 'rescued'. The mind opens just a little bit; in flow images of desert islands, coconuts, loneliness, helicopters in the wilderness, dogs sniffing in rubble, ships on the horizon, eighties pop songs, sinking boats. Some kind of reverie. The more images enter the more the mind opens. A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" Zhaozhou replied, "The cypress in the courtyard." Cypress is both tree and cause. And Zhaozhou, of course (with a name like that), is to be trusted implicitly. The mind stumbles trying to comprehend this cause and effect, and a space

opens for other possible linkages to enter. No answer is correct; the koan leads to a flow of options. *The emotions are engaged* (as Oppen would say) by this deluge of possibilities. The urge to find meaning takes on the immediacy of an experience we cannot yet classify, much as when one first encounters a new smell or taste and thinks: *what is this?* Much as with any encounter with something new and unknown.

### III. THE DEVIL'S DROOL

*Only that it should be beautiful,  
Only that it should be beautiful,*

*O, beautiful*

When I was an undergraduate in college I decided to learn Spanish. I had read Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges in translation and wanted to read them as they were meant to be read. The professor started me out with easier texts; ones with limited diction and straightforward grammar. We worked our way steadily from language books to newspapers and into literature. Soon we were reading Neruda and even a little Lorca.

One day the professor, with no introduction or explanation, gave me a photocopy of Julio Cortázar's short story "Las Babas del Diablo." From the first paragraph I realized I was in over my head. I read:

*si se pudiera decir: yo vieron subir la luna, o: nos duele el fondo  
de los ojos, y sobre todo así: tú la mujer rubia eran las nubes que  
siguen corriendo delante de mis tus sus nuestros vuestros sus  
rostros. Qué diablos,*

but I didn't understand it. Perhaps I had been reading too fast. I tried again. I read:

*si se pudiera* TO SAY: I *vieron subir* THE MOON, OR: *nos duele el fondo de* THE EYES, *y sobre todo así*: YOU THE BLONDE *eran las* CLOUDS *que siguen corriendo delante de* MY YOUR HIS *nuestros vuestros* HER *rostros*. WHAT DEVILS.

and found that I was in love with the Spanish language, and with the music of this story. I continued reading at a leisurely pace. Then I turned back to the beginning and started again.

A decade later, in anticipation of writing this essay, I read the story again. My Spanish is much better now, and I find that the piece is a good one but not a great one. It follows a photographer as he tries to understand the world around him by translating it into photographs. The translation, the attempt to understand, is difficult and wears on the protagonist. I enjoy the story, though it is, perhaps, a little long-winded. Then I realize that I am not hearing the music of Cortazar's sentences as I once did, not seeing the beauty. My mind is too busy assembling meaning. I try to stop but am unable. Then I try speeding up, then slowing down, then skipping words, scanning lines, reading aloud, but the words keep re-forming phrases, taking on meaning and narrative and structure. Insisting, insisting. Words: what devils.

#### IV. GEORGE OPPEN

I am reading and rereading because I suspect that the poem is working with *meaning*, and I want to get to the bottom of it. *Meaning* has become increasingly rare in the poetry I read. I am also doing so because I have never read Oppen before. Until recently, like most of the poetry readers I know, I had never even heard of him. Oppen's career was a curious one: born George August Oppenheimer to a successful Jewish family in 1908, he published his first book in 1934 and then did not publish again for twenty-eight years. In the meantime he joined the communist party, began the Objectivist Press

with Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky, had a daughter with his wife, Mary, then decamped to Mexico City to open a furniture-making business and escape McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee. He would return to New York to publish *The Materials* in 1962, *This in Which* in 1966, and, in 1968, the Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *Of Being Numerous*. In New York he would become a mentor and inspiration to the new poets of the day—Diane Wakoski, Armand Schwerner, and John Crawford, among others.

It was the long poem "Of Being Numerous" that would garner him the most attention. In the preface to Oppen's *Collected Works* (2002, the only book of Oppen's poetry still in print), Eliot Weinberger talks about the impact it had on readers in the late sixties. "From its opening words," he says, "[This was] poetry that had captured the interior essence of where we are, who we are, right now: *There are things/ We live among 'and to see them/Is to know ourselves'*. These lines are now philosophical." When I encountered this stanza, four decades later, I could see why the poem attracted so much attention. The lines declared that the universal is personal, the political philosophical. Oppen's poem promised to do what so much literature longs to do: project the local into the universal and the universal into the personal. While authors like Ginsberg and Duncan were writing political poems whose engagement with bigger questions would focus on the problems of the day, Oppen was composing a forty-part engagement with history, the psychology of the self, and the urban condition. Four decades later, the poem would be readable as a timeless inquiry into man's relationship with society. At least, this was my first impression of the poem. My second impression was of its sparseness and unwillingness to supply a narrative. My third was how fully my thought and emotion were engaged in the effort to comprehend the collaged text, the seemingly unrelated philosophical declarations, and the spread of images with their uncertain connections. The whole experience is of being immersed in a sea of meaning, full of potential coincidences and on the verge of constant epiphany.

After a few readings I find a recording of Oppen reading the poem and begin alternately to listen and to read. I have begun to trust that the not-understanding, itself, will continually enrich the poem. I put the recording on my stereo and fall asleep listening to it, or I play it in my car, catching lines here and there and then getting distracted by honking busses, stop signs, jaywalking pedestrians. Later, I open the book and read through parts of the poem. New qualities leap out to intrigue me: Oppen's odd mix of high-brow language and low, his obsession with New York (with which I, like all New Yorkers, am obsessed), his tiny stanzas, piled one upon the other like uncut stones. Each of these is a little door that opens; each a brief meditation. *Because the known and the unknown/touch*, he says, and I feel he is talking about my not-knowing, my incomprehension. Then he says: *If to know is noble//It is ennobling*, and the part of me which wants to know lights up with curiosity, much as when, in Mr. Golde's seventh-grade English class, I first encountered the curiously layered world of Eliot's "Waste Land."

I read all the way to the last stanza: the single word *curious*, sitting curiously alone. Then I turn back to the beginning and start over. I encounter the lines about Crusoe again and think of how it might be understood. Oppen could have said:

*We live close, close to one another  
news travels fast, so it is with society...  
so it will always be. Think of Crusoe  
who we say was 'rescued'  
when he was retrieved  
from a lonely existence*

*far from the hubbub of civilization  
which we as a people  
have chosen  
to rescue us*

*from solitude.*

But that would have devolved from reverie to argument. That would have closed off all other levels of meaning. Later, Oppen says: *Clarity//in the sense of transparence,//I don't mean that much can be explained.* Then I remember that *clarity* can also be traced through Middle English and Latin to *brilliance*. This is a clarity achieved by leaving options open. In the epigraph to the poem "Route," Oppen quotes Lu Chi: *The void eternally generative.* This is the void of unmade connections among images. This is the void that is normally obscured by explanation or argument. This is the void from which *clarity* might emerge.

V. THE DEAF LEADING THE...

*I don't mean that much can be explained*

I was sitting in the third row considering whether I should leave. The poet who was scheduled to read did not make it. He'd been replaced by a poet whose work I find, at best, dull. Politeness is a weakness of mine, and I stayed. Perhaps his work had improved. The audience was quietly attentive, the air too still, my head slightly tight from having stayed out too late the night before.

Halfway through the first poem I knew I should have left. This was a cute vignette about finding a frog in the garden and thinking about fairy tales. I hate poems about frogs. The poems that followed contained a beautiful phrase here and there but were generally transparent and dull. I nodded off a little. A friend elbowed me and I decided that if I could hear better I might appreciate the reading a little more, so I moved closer.

From the front row I could see the sign-language interpreter. She was a pair of white hands moving across a smart black dress. My exhaustion disappeared; suddenly the words were embodied. Her fingers rained inward at *desire* and hopped cheerily beneath her chin at *frog*. Other signs seemed to make no sense, or to unfold with some uncertain delay from when the words were spoken. Now there was a new order to the poems, as if the hidden structure had been

accidentally exposed. There was a kind of emotional tempo to the interpretation which belied the steady plod of the reader's voice; certain words, like *bees* or *river*, took longer to receive, to appreciate, than the pointed *I*. The translator was like Plato's poetic vessel, allowing the words to enter her and move through her as they were sent down from above.

And in this process I lost the thread of the narrative. I did not understand the interpretation, but I received it as containing an inherent logic, one which I learned to trust in the moments where, for instance, a phrase like *maybe freedom is...wavered* and became solid in her hands. I saw, then, the qualitative contradiction between the uncertainty of *maybe* and the solidity of *freedom*. I felt this difference in my body and it became clear that the entire English language was constructed of these qualitative assemblies. The next poem contained the word *soothe*, and I felt soothed. My attention shifted back and forth between the words and the interpretation as the language of the pieces unfolded in a sensual curve. Then he was talking about frogs again, and there was a joke and people were laughing, but the signed interpretation was a sad one, and I was rapt. Now that I could completely follow neither signed interpretation nor the original poem the words were thick with meaning, discontinuous and connected to all my experience, and absolutely beautiful. I was hearing the sublime beneath the mundane. What if all speech could be this layered? What if I could understand everything this well?

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Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth-century German mystic, spoke of seeing God by examining his works and following their trail back to Him. *All creatures are words of God*, he said, encouraging his disciples to 'read' the 'words' of the manifest world and, once assembled, to find they lead to God. This is the mystical mode, also, of poetry. This is how poetry can name the unnameable, arrange the parts to describe the whole. Eckhart, like Plato, saw how disparate objects in a flawed world might reveal the hidden, ideal structure. So it is that Oppen works with words—those compromised and unreliable

nuggets of meaning—to get at ideas he could not simply state. This is not the knowing that closes down inquiry, this is the understanding that opens up the possibility of seeing on a greater scale. And it is difficult. Oppen himself rarely spoke of the writing process, and when he chose to write about it he prefaced his comments with: *It is difficult now to speak of poetry*. It is difficult, but it must be if we are to truly hear what he is saying.

\*

This may be all to say that what we know we no longer see, and if *there are things we live among, and to see them is to know ourselves*, then we must train our minds to keep our eyes open.

#### VI. THE POEM

*One must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads in his hands,  
He must somehow see the one thing.*

On the thirtieth reading, meaning begins to resolve into an unmistakable order. Though I have loved the unknowing, though I have loved the fecundity of reaching into the darkness of Oppen's sudden stanza breaks and odd repetitions, I must now allow those little doors to close. Yes, I see that *the shipwreck of the singular* is the ironic misfortune of those who are lost within the teeming city. Yes, Crusoe was rescued just as we all, constantly, are rescued. I now see, yes, that we are like the city, and we all leave marks upon one another just as each man who walks through the doors of a building and even the builder himself leaves a mark. Yes, yes, yes. The forty parts of the poem, once individual and disconnected, begin to cohere like salt crystals forming in water. The poem becomes one hundred images holding one another together, music resolving out of noise. It leaves one with a sense of loss but also of something having been built. And this is a sense of structure, of transparency, of brilliance. This is Oppen's *clarity*: the one which is not about explanation. The reading requires intellectual pride, pride of the mind working as it

was meant to: assembling meaning out of chaos, becoming the ontological machine that makes it possible to see the world into which we are born as *meant*.

And, suddenly, I feel new to the world. Ideas that were completely old, completely understood in all their possible relevance, become uncertain again. *The old*, says Oppen, *New to age as the young /to youth....* He is teaching me how to read his poem. I must be new to the reading, to thinking, to how my life intersects with his images. My world is fresh so long as I continue to uncover meaning as I did when I was young.

I go back again to read some parts I didn't understand. He says: *The emotions are engaged/Entering the city...//We are not coeval/with the locality/But we imagine others are....*, and I first understand that the emotions engage because the city is a place of people and I am moved by that. Then I recognize that if I imagine others are coeval with the locality, it is because there is some overlap of the place and those who dwell within it, that the products of humanity are the mark of humanity and therefore, in some way, the material extension of humanity. I remember a friend who sprayed graffiti on Grant's Tomb in New York. I remember the bicycle shop where my sister cut her thigh. I wonder if she still has the scar, if the store is still open. I remember the room where I watched the woman in black translate poetry into sign language. I remember my friend Adam sitting on my couch telling me of his adventures in the Amazon.

I turn back the page and read again: *we are not coeval...we imagine others are*. I have also lived in Oppen's city. He is speaking of the strange contradiction of being lonely there: of being in the mass of humanity but not of it. I have sat in Grand Central Station and felt alone in the crowds. I know the feeling of being singular and numerous at once. Later, when he speaks of labeling *man beyond rescue/of the impoverished, solve whole cities....* I recognize that

impoverishment as a lack of connection, a failure of the city to provide real contact between people. The recognition is a kind of click. The meaning of the phrase enters into the meaning of the whole poem, the singular entering *into* the numerous. I continue picking through the poem, watching as other parts, parts that seemed accessory before, integrate themselves. Things come together. It is a frantically satisfying moment, the climax in the drama of understanding.

Had the pieces been preassembled for me, I would not have experienced his ideas emerging into my own experience. They would have been only so much talk, bland ideas without the joy of discovery or the uncertainty that accompanies real learning about the world. I would not have needed to filter the information through all the associative screens of the mind, to integrate the information with my life. I would have been *shown*, or, worse, *told*. Instead, I have *experienced* the poem. I have lived with it much as when I first learned the word *home*, then when I left home for the first time, then when I left for the last time. I could not have been simply told what home was. So it was with learning about other things: money, love, food, a car, desire, a passport, poetry, little devils, pink dolphins...each object overlaid with meaning and then with deeper meaning and then became a node into which other meanings could enter. Eventually, such ideas, such nodes of meaning, form a web and that web connects with other webs, and those webs become our understanding of life.

I am about to sit down to read the poem again. There are a few things I still do not understand. Maybe this time I'll see why he says *baseball is not a game but a difference of opinion*. Maybe I'll understand why he sees dust motes as *an iron mesh*. Maybe I'll figure out what the Brooklyn Bridge has to do with consciousness. Maybe I won't. Though I have seen that understanding such questions

has opened the door to other questions I wish to savor these last few unknowns. This will be my last reading for a while. I will stop before approaching the dangerous belief that I have come to know the thing completely.

#### NOTES

All quotes from George Oppen are taken from:

*George Oppen: New Collected Poems*. Davidson, Michael, (ed. and introd.); NY: New Directions, 2002.

Biographical notes on George Oppen were taken from Michael Davidson's Introduction to *New Collected Poems*, pages xv–xxviii, and from personal conversations with David Wevill in Austin, Texas, 2007.

Excerpts from Julio Cortázar taken from the story *Las Babas del Diablo*, Cortázar, Julio, *Los Relatos—3—Pasajes*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1994, page 205.

*All creatures are words of God...* by Meister Eckhart taken from speech 53, DWII, p535 of *Eckhart, Die deutschen Werke*, ed. J. Quint, Stuttgart-Berlin 1936– (translated by Ellopos).

## *The Reality of the Electric Car*

The current obsession with electrically driven automobiles is a classical case of getting the cart before the horse. It also flies in the face of the development of the automobile, whose rise to preeminence in the twentieth century was largely driven (wince, groan) by the convergence of cost and convenience. Right off, even people with misgivings about the dangers (interestingly enough, those were primarily associated with the idea of speed—a fallacious fear still with us today), understood that the car and the motorized bicycle were substantially cheaper to operate than the horse or the mule: sitting beside the house they didn't consume expensive resources or pollute the neighborhood.

Americans clustered in urban enclaves tend to forget that, just as they entertain fond dreams of mass transit. The surprising, and surprisingly grim, reality is that no mass transit system in the world is anywhere near close to being financially viable, and the same holds true for long-range passenger rail services. The French and the Japanese, who have the fastest as well as the best train systems in the world, are also among the world's most avid motorists. But dreams of mass transit, like dreams of electric cars, and exhortations to consume less, have pretty much attained the status of religious beliefs.

Meanwhile, back on Planet Earth, the French and the Germans are no less concerned about the long-term environmental effects of the automobile, but have gone down a very practical route. Instead of trying to develop a practical electrical passenger car, they've concentrated on the refinement of the diesel engine as a replacement for the conventional gasoline powered engine that dominates

the American market. While the car running entirely on batteries, much less on hydrogen, is a shaky promise of the future, the zero emissions diesel is already here. It comes dangerously close to squaring the proverbial circle of convenience and low cost.

In a car weighing under three thousand pounds (a weight perfectly compatible with the capability to carry five adults and their luggage in comfort and safety), overall fuel consumption is well over thirty miles per gallon even in urban driving. For heavier, which means more luxurious and for the Europeans, much faster, diesel automobiles driven at the extremely high speeds of European motorways can be operated with only about a fifteen percent penalty in fuel consumption. For Americans accustomed to the spewing, belching, and rattling of diesel engines, this new generation is a revelation. All the more so because they are a reality.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the Japanese, notably Honda, have concentrated on further development of the classical gasoline engine, the result being engines that are quite suitable for normal driving, displace less than 2.5 liters and develop over 200 horsepower. It is quite possible to extract over 300 horsepower from an engine that size, but both driveability and fuel consumption suffer. Translated into actual production automobiles, such an engine translates into moving two tons at highway speeds with a fuel consumption of over thirty miles per gallon. Both the gasoline and diesel technologies are here: they're reliable, and widely available.

On the contrary, the car powered entirely by batteries remains a rather iffy proposition. Along the many factors, there's the weight penalty, the degradation of the battery over time, the difficulties of recharging it (particularly in very cold or hot weather), the limited range between charges, and the exorbitant cost of the battery itself.

That is not to say the problems cannot be solved. However, the progress made in battery development to date has not been encouraging. The battery for the new (and expensive) notebook computer on which these words are written not only fails to deliver anywhere

near its alleged time between charges, but it has a highly erratic cycle. Nor does it last much longer than the laptops of twenty years ago. There has definitely been some improvement, but most of that can be chalked up to development of new electronics that use less power; it has little to do with the battery itself.

Or to put it another way, Rudolf Diesel's new design for a motor dates from 1892-93. By the First World War, German submarines used diesel engines, and by the 1930s, they were widely utilized in agricultural, industrial, and military applications. But it took German engineers roughly three decades of steady development and application to mate the diesel engine to the passenger car so it would no longer be a quirky novelty.

The track record of General Motors, designer of the greatly anticipated and supposedly all electric passenger car, is worth noting. The American designers attempted to bypass the tedious and lengthy process, and by 1981, roughly one out of every ten cars they sold was a diesel. Within a few years, the percentage was zero, probably the main reason for the demise of Oldsmobile by the end of the century.

The cynic might be tempted to blame Detroit, whose engineering and manufacturing has been atrocious for decades. But the problems involved in electric car design are formidable. Cars, unlike golf carts, use components that consume power, such as heating and air conditioning. With an internal combustion engine, the only noticeable result is a slight decrease in mileage; there's always sufficient power available. But running heating or air conditioning on batteries is a different story, and not one that engineers have yet been able to solve.

Batteries are also notoriously susceptible to temperature extremes: at zero degrees centigrade both performance and recharging are significantly affected. The solution to this problem adopted by Tesla for its all-electric (and extremely expensive) vehicle is to use battery power to maintain the optimal operating temperature.

As this occurs even when the vehicle is not in use, the Tesla, like the horse, consumes natural resources on a continuous basis.

So at first blush, the hybrid vehicle, in which a traditional motor recharges the battery pack, is an attractive idea, as it eliminates the auxiliary equipment drag, the temperature problems, and the need to find a very long extension cord for recharging. Although it is being touted as an all-electric vehicle, the General Motors electric actually has a 1.4 liter gasoline engine, along with a four hundred pound battery. Four hundred pounds will get you forty miles, provided the ambient temperature is between ten and twenty degrees centigrade. At the present time it's an open question whether the projected range is a very conservative estimate thrown out to anticipate problems, or whether it was a design parameter the engineers are still trying to meet in real world conditions. Perhaps it's simply a coincidence that there is a study that purports to show that the average American drives less than forty miles a day.

The truth of the matter is that no one knows whether the General Motors approach will actually work in actual passenger car use (as opposed to tightly controlled experiments involving preselected drivers).

But even if it does, the weight penalty still remains. A hybrid vehicle weighs more per unit volume than a diesel, so it has less space for people and objects, while the increased weight penalizes fuel consumption (a four hundred pound battery is about equal to a sixty gallon gas tank). And the power required, whether it comes from the main power grid (somehow) or an ordinary gasoline engine, still consumes natural resources. Preliminary calculations about the relative efficiencies of diesels versus hybrids and all-electrics are not particularly encouraging. Much of the hype is based on the lack of any sort of meaningful or agreed on formula to use for comparisons.

Moreover, the current generation of hybrid owners have yet to face the most vexatious of these problems—the high cost of battery

replacement. Even in devices with very low power requirements, such as cellular phones and laptop computers, battery life is a significant issue, masked in the case of phones by the tendency of the phone companies to provide new phones at regular intervals. But a new battery can be from a third to half of the cost of the phone itself.

For a device costing on the average considerably less than one hundred dollars, merely irritating; for one costing some tens of thousands more, calamitous, since a third of thirty thousand dollars (the projected post-rebate price of the GM electric) looks suspiciously like ten thousand dollars. Toyota, first on the mass market with an electric hybrid, warrants its battery for ten years or 150,000 miles, and has forced General Motors to follow suit. But the fine print makes for interesting reading, as owners discover the joys of prorated service life, an issue that has largely disappeared for car owners, given the developments in ordinary battery manufacture.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that owners of cars with 150,000 miles on it will discover that a new battery is worth more than the vehicle. Their perfectly good used car is immobilized in consequence.

The idea that the other widely touted energy source, hydrogen, is a solution is even more problematic. One of the advantages of gasoline, an advantage that diesel fuel dramatically increases, is that it is relatively inert. In its natural (liquid) state, it isn't inclined to combust on its own. Hydrogen is the exact opposite. Remember the *Hindenburg*? By the time of that disaster, the Germans were convinced that they had the hydrogen issue under control, had been running Zeppelins all over the world for decades without an accident. Not that variants of lithium-ion batteries are totally safe, although probably they're no more explosive in cars than they are in laptops and cell phones. On the other hand, high-speed collisions between laptops are fairly rare events.

Although hydrogen is an element, just like its friend oxygen, it doesn't really exist in its pure state in nature, so it has to be created,

just like any fossil fuel. So does the electricity that recharges the batteries. In its natural state, energy is uncontrolled. Rudolf Diesel argued that his engine was better because it could run off vegetable oil. He was right: the reason engines from early on ran on petroleum distillations was that this was a cheaper and more efficient option: gasoline and diesel fuel contain more energy per unit volume than vegetable oil or natural gas.

For the skeptic worried about finite sources of oil, a gloomy prospect indeed, although to a certain extent the notion has a certain Luddite appeal, and the whole notion on which the electric (and hydrogen) vehicle is predicated is a curious mixture of theoretical engineering and religious fervor. The former resists real-world analyses and the latter resists facts.

But for those with reasonably open minds about science, it's worth pointing out that for decades there has been a debate simmering among geologists about whether or not oil is a truly finite resource; there is some surprisingly persuasive research arguing the contrary. That may sound incredible, but then so did continental drift theory when it was first proposed; so too with the notion that there were large craters in the earth formed by meteorites hitting the surface. But nowadays both are routinely accepted as sober fact.

All this is not to say that various alternative propulsion systems do not have a niche. Small electrical utility vehicles have been around for a long time, as have industrial ones powered by natural gas. The head of Nissan recently predicted that electrically powered cars would eventually constitute about ten percent of the market. The other ninety percent will most likely end up consisting of a mix of gasoline and diesel powered vehicles, with diesels being the overwhelming majority.

## BOOK REVIEW

*Finn McCool's Football Club: The Birth, Death, and Resurrection of a Pub Soccer Team in the City of the Dead*

by Stephen Rea

Pelican Publishing Company, Gretna, LA, 2009

Reviewed by Paul Wegmann

There is another brand of organized football beloved here in New Orleans that has nothing to do with the Saints' black and gold. European football, better known in the U.S. as "soccer," is played with as much vigor and tradition as the game on the gridiron, and its local epicenter is Finn McCool's Irish Pub, which has become a Mid-City institution, and home to its own football club. *Finn McCool's Football Club*, by Irish expat and New Orleanian Stephen Rea, tells the tale of a their quest for football glory in the tradition of neighborhood football clubs from across the pond.

On the walls inside Finn McCool's, Jax, Dixie and Regal beer trays share space with Celtic football club banners and championship marquees, antique rifles hang alongside an MRE ration and a Celtic cross, Irish hurley sticks, the occasional fleur-de-lis and a Belfast street sign. Expatriates from Ireland, Scotland, England, and elsewhere, gather with walk-in soccer fanatics on Saturday and Sunday mornings to enjoy the Premier League matches televised live from pitches back home, places like Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool and London. The love for their teams—Celtic, Rangers, Chelsea, Arsenal, Man-U, Everton and others—begins in the neighborhoods and the pubs and courses like blood through veins all the way to the Big Easy. Far quieter than a typical American football crowd at the start (perhaps the early hour has something to do with this), their

furor and enthusiasm build, especially as this town's only decent Guinness continues to pour into the afternoon. This is an authentic pub in the best tradition, where the owners not only man the bar but will likely greet you when you enter and remember you when you return.

Rea recounts the founding of Finn McCool's Pub in 2002, his search for a game upon arriving in town from Ireland, the beginnings of the football club, and the dark days in the fall of 2005, what was to have been their inaugural season. The book follows the team as they cope with the hurricane and its aftermath, and rejoices in the unlikely return of Rea, the club, its members, the pub, and the city itself. *Finn McCool's Football Club* demonstrates that European football bridges generations, cultures, oceans, and even disasters, and that it has found a home in New Orleans. The book is an unlikely success story set in an unlikely city that is still here despite all odds and predictions.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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A K BECK lives in Minneapolis. Her work has previously appeared in *LIT* and is forthcoming in *Handsome*.

BRAD BENISCHEK is a visual artist, educator and scenic painter. His work has appeared in publications, on T-shirts, telephone poles, and in galleries and art spaces across the south. He is a member of Press Street, a New Orleans-based nonprofit which promotes art and literature through community events, publications and arts education. His work has shown recently at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Acadiana Center for the Arts, and Antenna.

DANIEL BORZUTZKY's books include *The Book of Interfering Bodies* (Nightboat Books, forthcoming), *The Ecstasy of Capitulation* (BlazeVox, 2007), *Arbitrary Tales* (Triple Press, 2005), and the chapbooks *One Size Fits All* (Scantly Clad Press, 2009) and *Failure in the Imagination* (Bronze Skull Press, 2007). His translations from the Spanish include *Song for His Disappeared Love* by Raul Zurita (Action Books, forthcoming), and *Port Trakl* by Jaime Luis Huenún (Action Books, 2008). He lives in Chicago.

ABRAHAM BURICKSON is a poet, essayist, and conceptual artist. His work has appeared widely, in such publications as *Blackbird*, *The Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Time Out Chicago*, *Southwestern American*

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PETER COOLEY has published eight books of poetry, seven with Carnegie Mellon Press, which recently released *Divine Margins*. He teaches at Tulane University.

JOSHUA COREY is the author of *Selah* (Barrow Street Press, 2003) and *Fourier Series* (Spineless Books, 2005) as well as the chapbooks *Compos(t)ition Marble* (Pavement Saw Press, 2006) and *Hope & Anchor* (Noemi Press, 2007). His new book, *Severance Songs*, won the 2008 Dorset Prize and is forthcoming from Tupelo Press. He lives in Evanston, Illinois, with his wife and daughter and teaches English at Lake Forest College. Visit his blog at [joshcorey.blogspot.com](http://joshcorey.blogspot.com).

BILL COTTER lives in Austin with the poet Annie La Ganga. He is the author of the novel *Fever Chart*, published this year by McSweeney's. He is at work on another novel, titled *The Instant of the Mothers*, about poor judgment and the treachery of diaries.

KASS FLEISHER authored *Talking Out of School: Memoir of an Educated Woman* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2008); *The Adventurous* (experimental prose; Factory School, 2007); *Accidental Species: A Reproduction* (experimental prose; Chax Press, 2005); and *The Bear River Massacre and the Making of History* (nonfiction; SUNY Press, 2004). Her work has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Mandorla*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Postmodern Culture*, and *Z Magazine*, and she writes screenplays with her partner, Joe Amato.

PETER JOSEPH GLOVICZKI lives in Minneapolis. His poems have appeared in *32 Poems*, *Margie*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and elsewhere.

A. MINETTA GOULD was raised in a mitten by a beautician. After transplanting herself to the West, all her ambitions are swayed by trains. She edits the journal *Lonesome Fowl* ([lonesomefowl.com](http://lonesomefowl.com)). Her first chapbook, *Arousing Notoriety*, is due from Publishing Genius in 2010.

TOM C. HUNLEY is an associate professor of creative writing at Western Kentucky and the director of Steel Toe Books ([www.steeltoebooks.com](http://www.steeltoebooks.com)). He has published poems in *Triquarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *North American Review*, and *River Styx*. He recently won two national contests, one for a full-length poetry manuscript (Logan House Press) and another for a chapbook (Pecan Grove Press). He is also the author of *Teaching Poetry Writing: A Five-Canon Approach* (Multilingual Matters LTD. 2007).

CHRISTOPHER KIRSCH is a New Orleans native, a self-taught painter, printmaker, photographer, and papier-maché sculptor. He only documents the graffiti in his photographs and is not responsible for any defacing of private or public property. The images in his photographs are the work of unknown individuals. In 1999, he founded the Carnival marching club, the Skeleton Krewe, which can be seen leading the Krewe d'Etat parade during Mardi Gras, as well as on Carnival morning. He began painting & drawing at a very early age, but never received any formal training. He is currently experimenting with mixed media recycled art pieces and printmaking on handmade recycled paper. Some of his work can be viewed at [www.neworleansfolkart.com](http://www.neworleansfolkart.com).

MARY LEADER'S collections of poetry are *Red Signature* (Graywolf) and *The Penultimate Suitor* (Iowa). Her new collection, *Beyond the Fire*, is forthcoming in late 2010 with Shearsman Books (U.K.). She worked for many years as a lawyer, and now teaches at Purdue University.

ROBIN MARTIN's story "1969" was selected by Richard Ford as the winner of the first Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival Fiction Writing Contest. It opens her story collection, *Old Scores*. Her novel, *Out Like a Lion*, is near completion and *Beautiful Men*, another story collection is in progress. Brooklyn is home today, but she grew up in Los Angeles and worked there as an actress until finding her voice as a writer in 1992.

CHRISTOPHER MERKNER teaches creative writing for the University of Colorado at Denver. Most recently, he's had or will have stories in *Gulf Coast*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and the *Cincinnati Review*.

TERESA MILBRODT received her MFA in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University. Her stories have appeared in *Nimrod*, *North American Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Cream City Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Passages North*, among other literary magazines. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She teaches Creative Writing at Western State College of Colorado.

SIBYLLE PERETTI was born in Germany, and lives and works in New Orleans and in Cologne, Germany. She received her MFA from the Academy of Fine Art in Cologne and was trained as a Glass Designer at the School for Glassmaking in Zwiesel, Germany. She received Grants from the Joan Mitchell and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and has been a Fellow at the Creative Glass Center of America. She recently finished an Art/Industry Residency at Kohler, Wisconsin. Her work in collections include the Corning Museum of Glass in New York, The MAK in Frankfurt, Germany, The Alexander Tutsek Foundation in Munich, The Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, The Montreal Art Museum, and the John Michael Kohler Art Center in Wisconsin. Her work is represented by Gallery Bienvenu in New

Orleans, and Heller Gallery in New York City ([www.gallerybienveu.com](http://www.gallerybienveu.com); [www.hellergallery.com](http://www.hellergallery.com)).

PATRICK ROSAL is the author of two full-length poetry collections, *Uprock Headspin Scramble and Dive*, which won the Members' Choice Award from the Asian American Writers' Workshop, and most recently *My American Kundiman*, which won the Association of Asian American Studies 2006 Book Award in Poetry and the 2007 Global Filipino Literary Award.

C. J. SAGE'S poems appear in *The Antioch Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Boston Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Threepenny Review*. Her next book, *The San Simeon Zebras*, will be out from Salmon Poetry in 2010. She resides in Rio Del Mar, California, where she edits *The National Poetry Review* and *The National Poetry Review Press* and works as a Realtor.

DIANE SEUSS'S new collection of poems, *Wolf Lake, White Gown Blown Open*, won the 2009 Juniper Prize and is forthcoming from the University of Massachusetts Press in April 2010. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in literary magazines including *Poetry*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Blackbird*. Her first collection, *It Blows You Hollow*, was published by New Issues Press. She is Writer-in-Residence at Kalamazoo College.

PETER STRECKFUS'S first book, *The Cuckoo*, was the 2004 winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition. His new work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Chicago Review*, *Colorado Review*, and *Sentence*. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from George Mason University and is on faculty in the Program in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama.

ZACH VESPER is an MFA student at Boise State University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Alligator Juniper*, *Squaw Valley Review*, and *Salamander*. He co-edits the online poetry magazine *Strange Machine* ([strange-machine.com](http://strange-machine.com)).

DANEEN WARDROP is the author of a book of poems, *The Odds of Being*, and two books of literary criticism, including *Emily Dickinson's Gothic* (University of Iowa Press). Wardrop has received the 2005 Bentley Prize for Poetry from *Seattle Review*; the 2006 Poetry Society of America Robert H. Winner Award; two Pushcart prize nominations; and the 2007 Gerald Cable Book Award. Her poetry has appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Field*, *North American Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

PAUL WEGMANN is a born New Orleanian, with a monthly sports column in *New Orleans Living* magazine, and a love of writing, sports, and his hometown.

ALLISON BENIS WHITE is the author of *Self-Portrait with Crayon*, winner of the 2008 CSU Poetry Center First Book Prize. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Iowa Review*, among other journals. Her current manuscript, *Small Porcelain Head*, received the James D. Phelan Award for a work-in-progress from the San Francisco Foundation.

GEOFF WYSS's first novel, *Tiny Clubs*, was published in 2007. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Glimmer Train*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Mid-American Review*, *Image*, and *New Stories from the South* 2006 and 2009, among others. He lives in New Orleans.

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