

descant

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Poem

Paul Hostovsky

Some pronounce it *poim*.
Like it has an *oy* inside it.
The way an oyster
has an *oy* inside it. The way
all poems ought to have
a little *oy veb*
and a little *oyez!* *oyez!*
inside them,
if only just to say
Hey, listen up, there is
death in the world.

Others pronounce it *po-um*.
Like it has an *um* inside it.
A thoughtful pause. A caesura.
A possum
that got run over,
its esses elided.

Me, I always say *pome*.
Like an apple or pomme
I want to bite into
because it has an *om* inside it,
a mystic and sacred
syllable I can't wait to reach
and I have no patience
for all the diphthongs.

Origin

Kelly Nelson

Imagine the horse the brown
of molasses, that he loved milk thistle,
had been gentle with small girls. Imagine

Hilda, long dress and apron, plains
of Dakota, thirty five and her sixth child
nearly arrived. Call the horse

Atlas. Say that he wanted the warmth
of another body as he crumpled
to his knees, toppling and pinning Hilda

to the rough barn floor.
There must have been piss. And sweat.
And stink. Red seep of blood

through the straw, lungs imploded,
the husband's boots scrabbling
for foothold, the night

my grandmother was born.
She would tell us the story, say
Mother gave her life giving birth

to me, and we'd circle and we'd fawn,
such a brave orphan! How lucky
we are that you survived! But see,

I've found these papers that tell
of a baby born after she was, and then
yet another, the one who spilled out
the night Atlas fell to the floor.

Upkeep

Kelly Nelson

Out from a cloud
a broad sword drops, cleaves
roof to cellar, one wall

from the house. Night air
crowds in, fingers the faucets,
the silverware, sweeps

back the hair from our faces.
I'm ten, she's twelve,
the near constant upkeep,

push broom and shovel,
debris and leaves and drifting
snow, circling our beds

are the theft scents left
by raccoons. To speak of it,
we are shushed.

We are told, things
like this happen. We are told,
cattle should be so lucky.

Return

Kelly Nelson

People were dying and she was
busy, tearing across town,

bedside to bedside, the quick
and the lingering, the expected

and the totally out of the blue, placing
her hands on, offering prayers to and we said

when she offered, Okay,
but leave the Lord out of it.

•

They say hearing is the last sense
to go, which could be true or could be

the kindest white lie told to loved ones
like us, semi-circling

the hospice bed, listening
to this utility infielder of ministers

saying peace and light and love.
Then turning to leave, unsure she'd circle

back in time, if she'd see us
in the teary aftermath,

she added: *Expect a visitation.*
Within three days,

your mother will come back
with a message for you.

•

If the cleric meant to mess with us,
it worked. Sister 1 didn't sleep for three nights,

waiting for her message, so tired she fell
asleep in the teachers' lounge, to this day

convinced that's when Mom came back,
tried to find her but couldn't.

Sister 2 didn't hear boo for three whole
months, then dozing on the couch,

windows wide open, last tomatoes
of summer roasting in the oven,

our mother's voice finally returned:
The tomatoes are burning.

Some big fucking message,
Sister 2 thought, awake to an empty room.

•

Pray that strangers read her obituary,
Google you, call, send condolence cards with

square black and white photos tucked inside.
Her cousins open their doors, offer you

pop and tinned cookies, drive you to the overgrown
farm of your family, to the graves

of people you come from. Her school mates,
telling you stories over pretzel bites and Pepsi,

pray they still have it together enough
to remember. And, that they liked her.

Stand staring at her house so long the tenants
invite you in, let you sit in the living

room on Tuesday and again on Friday.
Read microfilm of her newsy hometown paper.

Find the story of her uncle bowling the first
strike at the new alley. Find the review

of the senior play she directed. Find your own
birth announcement beside the day's hot

lunch menu of potatoes and chicken gravy,
carrot sticks and Jell-O.

Anniversary

Kelly Nelson

The new owners painted it white
with black trim, snug tuxedo of a house
under foxtail pines and you'd think
I would find a different route,

wouldn't choose to pass this house
with its bathroom where his body
unspooled, a bullet let loose
in his brain and yet, I am singing

Sweet Caroline, pedaling up
his street, no stop sign in sight,
and I haven't jumped off of, haven't
slit open my, haven't downed

thirty five Percocet. Somewhere a rule
says real estate agents must disclose
if a house ever held a dead body.
Write a new rule. Make appraisers

detail the life that was lived there—
how he kept blue-egged chickens, brewed
beer in his garage, how he loved several
women at the same time.

Include with the listing that photo of him
smiling at a sidewalk cafe in Milan.
Life hands hardly anyone a good
last day. Give instructions to my

broker for my own open house:
tell them a woman came alive here,
found her groove here, shucked her blues,
laced her song into every green tree.

Hollywood Nails

By Jane Renaud

Bill Mackey's wife thought it entirely reasonable—obvious, even—that he should skip, or merely postpone by a couple of days, his weekly manicure appointment: it was Christmas Eve, and his hands looked fine. Moreover, Mass was at five and dinner at seven, and before then Bill's list was long. First there was the drive to Emeryville and back for discount tables, linens, and folding chairs for his daughter Allison's fledgling catering business, which was that night serving ham skewers and duck puffs to a party of seventy-five, its largest event yet. He had also promised to visit his mother at her assisted living facility in Orinda, tip the staff, and poke his head into the kitchen to verify that she'd be able to receive her Christmas tenderloin rare, having at last given in to the majority opinion that it would be better for her to stay put that evening and avoid the inevitable overstimulation provoked by a family gathering. And finally he needed to take some action—exactly what he had not yet decided—regarding the office security system. It had sounded once again in the early hours of the morning, fueling his suspicion that Martin, a nephew of his college roommate, hired as the new administrative assistant despite a perturbing request to work at least part of the week from home, was in fact now living in the staff lounge. The appointment at Hollywood Nails was at eleven and would take thirty minutes.

At ten fifty-five he pulled into his favorite spot around the back, beside the row of winter-bare apricot trees, next to Marleen's Jeep. Because of the table pick-up, he'd taken the work van instead of his SUV, and it was a tighter squeeze than usual. Branches squealed along the side panel, where the new "Mackey Total Medical" logo stretched in crisp green lettering. Bill winced and pulled the keys from the ignition, mentally adding a visit to the detailer for a buffing to his list for next week. Every detail in a sales call, before or after a deal was closed, had to be perfect in order to maintain trust. He held this to be true for all businesses, but particularly those in the medical field. This was one justification for his manicures. Clean hands suggested a clean sale, and in turn, clean diagnostics. Bill grabbed a shiny, oversized gift bag from the passenger seat and locked the van. He could see Marleen's

silhouette—or was it Wendy, or Lily?—through the frosted back window, and he paused for a moment, anticipating the simple pleasure of hands holding his own.

The bell rang as he pushed through the door and the girls shouted, as he knew they would: “Mr. Bill!” Susie was at the register, bent over the appointment book. Along the left-hand wall, Wendy was stroking a sleeping old woman’s calf in long stripes. Lily and Nu were giving French tips to a pair of twenty-somethings in yoga pants. Shirley was guiding a tired mother’s hand into a plastic bag of hot wax. At the manicure station next to them, a little girl pressed a crayon hard into a coloring book, staining Rudolph green. Marleen was paging through a *Marie Claire* by the artificial Christmas tree, Jupiter the cat at her feet.

Bill held up the gift bag. “Ho, ho, ho, no Mr. Bill today!” This was part of the weekly routine, teasing and pleasantries shouted across the floor, an efficient on-ramp to the intimacies of the manicure.

“You Santa Claus, Mr. Bill?” Lily shook a bottle of clear polish and smacked it against her thigh.

Susie stood and rested her elbows on the reception desk. “Mr. Bill is no Santa. Santa’s old.”

He slapped his belly, big in his tucked-in polo, red for Christmas. “Santa’s fat. That’s your fault.” He swung the gifts up onto the desk and fished a toffee out of the candy jar. Susie peeked inside the bag and squealed.

“Mr. Bill!” She pulled the little cardboard boxes, each tied with a different colored ribbon, out of the bag. “Which is for me?”

Bill unwrapped a second toffee. “Susie, as always, you may have any flower in the garden.”

“Christmas is no time for favorites.” Marleen closed the magazine and stood, lifting her finger in reproach. She was wearing a Santa hat. Bill grinned big. “At Christmas there are only two lists. The good list, and the bad list. Santa should know better.”

“Marleen, you’re letting these girls off for the day once I’m done, aren’t you?”

She crossed to Bill and poked his shoulder. “Maybe so, if Santa pays their salary. Hotshot Santa.”

Susie shrieked and brandished a silver bangle, pulled from the box with the yellow ribbon. Bill had gotten them wholesale from his wife’s cousin in the souvenir business, and he was proud of them. “Look, from Mr. Bill!”

The girls murmured and applauded. Even the old woman stirred from her nap to nod approval. Marleen took the bracelet from Susie and inspected it for a long moment. Then she handed it back, and turned to Bill. “You spoil us.”

“It’s a fair trade.” Bill smiled.

Marleen shook her head no, shoved her hands in her pockets, and then, surprising them both, hugged him.

“Kiss!” shouted Nu. The girls exploded in laughter.

Bill reddened, for once at a loss for a retort. Marleen released him. “Back talker!” she yelled at Nu.

“Mr. Bill is blushing!” said Wendy.

“That’s just my Christmas spirit,” he said. “Jingle, jingle.”

Marleen turned back to him. “Thank you.”

He nodded, his blush starting to fade. “Now,” he said, raising his hands, nails turned out, “Down to business.”

Marleen hesitated, then turned toward the back room. “Fern will take care of you today.”

Bill started. “Fern?”

“Fern!” she called. And Fern appeared in the doorway to the back room, holding a dustbuster, a lollipop protruding from her mouth. Bill saw again, in his mind’s eye, the figure he had glimpsed from the parking lot. It disturbed him that the shadow had belonged to her. He felt uneasy, as though he had fallen for a trick, a joke at his expense.

“You too good for me today?” he asked Marleen.

“I’m sorry, Bill. I have a wax for 11:15. You know I have to do the wax.”

Fern began to set up her station. On another day he might have offered to wait, to

make phone calls out on the front bench while Marleen handled the more delicate appointment, but on this day, on Christmas Eve, it was impossible. He lowered his voice. “Well, what about Susie? She’s free.”

Marleen frowned. “I’m sorry, Bill,” she repeated. “Susie is not free.”

“She’s standing right there.” Susie was experimenting with the bangle’s placement, attempting to push it past her elbow.

Her voice nearly inaudible now, Marleen stepped close to Bill. “Yes, but she is not free.” He raised his eyebrows. Marleen raised hers back and mouthed, “Probation.”

“Probation?” Bill spoke too loud.

Lily and Nu looked up in tandem. Marleen turned her back to them and spoke quick and low. “She filed a plantar wart.” Bill recoiled. “Very bloody.”

Fern presented a problem for Bill, a wrinkle in the otherwise smooth escape of Hollywood Nails. It was necessary for him, at fifty-seven, to maintain a steady stream of carefully negotiated banalities, at once familiar and anonymous; genuine in their construction of fellow feeling, but always at a remove. The girls knew Bill had a wife, “Mrs. Bill,” who managed the books on a part-time basis for his business and had health problems (kept quite vague) that sometimes required her to take long trips to Chicago to stay with her sister. They had signed a card for Allison when she graduated culinary school, and cheered when she followed in his steps as an entrepreneur. And they knew Bill liked romantic comedies, a fact they found funny, and often requested stories about his long-ago travels in Europe and Asia, especially his weeklong stay in Vietnam, which took place when all of them—save Marleen, his peer—had been children in that country. But he never spoke his wife’s name. He never talked about Mackey Total Medical, which had rapidly expanded over the last five years, to great success, and consumed most of his thoughts. The girls didn’t know Bill had a second daughter, Katie, still living at home, displaying with increasing certitude the signs of manic depression that plagued her mother. And they certainly didn’t know the position that Hollywood Nails occupied in Bill’s life, or its worth.

Most associated a fussiness, something feminine, an element of shameful vanity

with men who visited nail salons. These men punctured female space, and as such were assumed to hold some of that space within. This may have been true of him, to some extent. He was calm among women, and preferred the soft fabrics of his wife's wardrobe to the rough cottons of his own; when Diane was gone, he sometimes took a slip from her drawer and slept with it near his face, on his pillow. But Hollywood Nails, for Bill, was touch. He felt a tingling in his jaw when the manicure began, when Marleen or Wendy or Lily or Susie or Nu lifted his right hand and inspected his fingers, pinching his joints and running the soft pads of their thumbs across his cuticles, a focused attention of flesh on flesh. Then they would trim the obvious hangnails and rough spots with precise jerks, his dead skin piling up white at the lip of the silver clippers. He liked holding his hands still, feeling the tug of the metal, the firm grasp of another hand on his palm. He asked for his nails filed round because it required the girls to tip and turn the flat plane of his hand, rotating his wrist, cupping the swell at the base of his thumb.

Through all this he would keep up the talk, and the girls would laugh, egging him on. But for the massage he fell silent and let his eyes close as the girls pulled hard at his fingers, their balled fists slipping past the rounded tips of his nails. Then came the hot towel, sponging away the slick of the lotion, and Bill felt the tingling, which had spread now from his jaw down his spine and across the front of his chest, begin to recede, and again he began to talk. He needed to be touched. He would come every day if he could. But he needed his need to be secret.

Fern refused his banter. Her hair was long and straight with bangs that concealed her eyebrows, giving the impression of permanent indifference, a drawer left half-open. Rather than chat she ate candy uninterrupted, rolling hard bright squares from one cheek to the other and clicking them against her teeth, filling the pockets of her apron with crinkled slips of plastic and paper and exuding a faint scent of fruit. As she bent forward and back over the most callused of feet, her jeans would sometimes curve low in the back, and her t-shirt would lift, revealing the dangling, obscure base of what looked to be a very large tattoo. Though she had worked at Hollywood Nails for close to a year, her customers were nearly all walk-ins.

For a time, Bill had attributed Fern's determined silence to a language barrier; Lily's English was poor, but she still followed the cadence of his jokes, perceived a narrative arc, winked and asked "How are you?" and wished a "Happy Friday, Mr. Bill." Finally, the language thesis was refuted for good when Bill heard Marleen arguing with Fern in the back room. Fern, as was her habit when she did speak at any length, was responding to Marleen's English with Vietnamese. But then Marleen accused her, outright and quite loudly, of deliberately manipulating Wendy to avoid cleaning the store on her designated day. Fern, humiliated by a rebuke in the language the customers could understand, had responded in a torrent of English. Her speech had boiled down to a single point: if Wendy was stupid enough to take Fern's cleaning shifts, that meant only that Wendy was stupid and Fern was smart. So language did not explain why she said no more to Bill than "Square or round?" He could have stood it if she simply ignored him. But what Fern did was worse. She watched him. When he opened his eyes, after the massage, she was staring into them. When the tingle in his jaw began, he thought he detected a narrowing in her gaze. She even kept her eyes on him while she trimmed his cuticles, looking back and forth between the white half-moons of his nail beds and the helpless pleasure on his face, unmasked by silence.

But this morning, his options were clear: it was Fern, or it was a long drive to Emeryville ahead of schedule, his hands curled tight and cold and untouched around the delivery van's scaly vinyl wheel.

Bill spent the opening minutes of the manicure examining the girls' wall-hung, framed certifications, which kept his face turned right, at a ninety-degree angle to his hands; he tried to produce by distraction and disinterest the same camouflage usually supplied by his talk. The familiar tingle simmered, present but out of reach. It was worse than no touch at all, this touch that resisted surrender. He had read the certificates through three times before his neck began to ache, high up under his ear at the base of his skull, and he rolled his chin down in a circular sweep, eyes closed, and threw his thoughts forward, planning the orientation of the tables and chairs in the back of the van, considering the best route from Orinda to Saint Stephen's, wondering if Martin would be careless enough to overlook a

GoPro mounted in the office bathroom, its red light flashing through the night. It seemed to him that Fern was working more slowly than was usual, and once, he thought he heard her whisper “Mr. Bill.” But he kept his eyes shut, and when he felt her sneaker whack his leg and a sharp pain spread across his shin, he grimaced in silence. He endured the massage, and at last she pressed the hot towel against his forearms and palms, signaling the end of the service. Then, as he turned to her, prepared to be cordial and to leave a twenty dollar Christmas tip, he heard a hiss, and felt a cold mist on the backs of his hands. She was holding the bottle of Island Breeze, her finger curled over the pump.

“Damn it!” Bill bellowed, and stood fast, his chair falling backward. The smell of the spray hit his nostrils, and he felt his stomach turn. They all knew—Fern certainly knew—that he hated all the sprays, and Island Breeze the most; Mr. Bill declines the spray. Six teenage years covering the smell of his dying grandmother’s shit with Hawaiian Glade had left him repulsed by aerosol bouquets. “Damn it!” he cried again, and rushed toward the sink, leaving Fern to endure the violent reproaches of Lily and Nu, who stood at once, tiny scissors raised.

The Hollywood Nails bathroom was large and handicap equipped, tiled in powder blue, and hung with posters of Asian beaches. It was spotless but for Jupiter’s litter box in the corner, adorned with a single skinny turd. Bill had told Marleen over and again that it was these small touches that divided a middling business from a franchisable brand, but she just rolled her eyes and gestured to the register: “I do fine, Mr. Bill.” He reached under the sink for a fresh bar of soap, unwrapped it, and scrubbed his hands of Island Breeze. She had done it on purpose, he thought, to punish him for averting his face. Why did Fern hate him? Hollywood Nails was a business, and he a customer. He was doing nothing wrong.

He turned the water hot and held his palms under the flow. This was what he did at home, usually after dinner in the half-bath, in the hours before he felt it appropriate to slide under the coverlet next to Diane, who often retreated to the bedroom before sundown. Water was not hands, but it was something. He breathed out and tried to visualize his anger washing out of his skin and down into the pipes. He would speak to Marleen, he thought,

and she would understand, and the following week his appointment would be just as he needed it.

The bathroom doorknob turned, and the hinges creaked. He made a mental note to bring some WD-40 next time. "Occupado," Bill said, turning to push the door closed. But before he could reach it, before he could register what he was seeing, Fern had slipped through the door and locked it behind her.

"I'm in here," Bill said stupidly, aware it was stupid, as if Fern didn't see him, wasn't staring at him with her back to the wall, a look on her face like there was a gun in her hand. "I'm in here," he repeated, "Get out!" Still she stared at him. Bill grasped for an explanation. "I don't care about the Island Breeze. I overreacted. Now, please." Still nothing. "Did Marleen see you come in here?" But of course, Marleen was in the spa room, doing the wax.

Fern unbuttoned her pants. Bill rushed toward her. He grabbed her jeans and tried to yank them back up. But she clutched at his hand and thrust it down below her waist. He yelped and tried to pull away. Her fist closed around his, her eyes glassy and sharp. "Please," she said, yanking him closer. "Mr. Bill. I'm sorry. Please." Still he fought her, twisting his elbow away, aware that her fingers were bruising him, and aware that she, incredibly, was stronger. She was pressing his fingers into the spongy flesh above her sex, almost rolling them, rippling them against her skin. Despite his resistance he felt the beginnings of an erection, his pants growing tight. If she saw it she didn't respond; again she was indifferent to his passion. "Please," she repeated, and as he looked straight at her face for the first time he felt a hard knot, the size of a grape, under her skin. It moved when he touched it. She shuddered. In his mind's eye, he saw an ultrasound gliding over the mass, clear jelly between the wand and the flesh. He sold the machine for sixteen thousand dollars. He circled the knot with his fingers, and her muscles relaxed. "It's been two months like that," she said.

Gingerly, he withdrew. She released his hand, and he turned back to the sink, shielding his condition. Leaving the water cold this time, he rinsed his hands again. His erection was nearly gone. He hated that his body had done this here.

Fern watched him from the corner. Her pants still hung open. In reflection of the mirror, he saw that the tattoo on her back stretched around to her front. It appeared to be

the roots of a tree, gnarled and spidery. An ant, antennae cocked, was crawling down the longest tendril, carrying a single blade of grass. “What is it?” she said. “Will I die?”

Diane’s therapist had told him: when speaking to those in acute distress, address facts plainly, without analysis. He turned to her. “I’m sorry, Fern,” he said. “I’m not a doctor.”

Anger rippled across her face. “I know that.”

He pressed on. “I’m just a supplier. For doctors. I sell the equipment.” He took out his wallet, and gave her his card. “I’m a salesman.”

She gazed at it. She turned it over. There was nothing on the back.

“I work with a lot of doctors, though. The best. I could try to get you in to see someone good. It can be hard to get an appointment. I could help.” But he wasn’t helping. She held the card out to him, and he took it. “I’d be happy to make a few calls.”

“No,” she said. “I can’t see a doctor.”

“Why not?” asked Bill. He hated himself.

She shook her head. “I thought you would help me.” Her voice trailed off, and Bill saw that she had started to cry. “Everyone likes you so much.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You can tell me what I have. Please.”

“I don’t know.”

“God damn it,” she said. “What am I supposed to do?” She buttoned her pants.

He sprang forward, automatic, and held the door open as she passed. Over her shoulder, he saw the other girls, and he froze. They had seen Fern go in, he knew, and maybe even heard the scuffle, and had watched the red third hand of the wall clock sweeping in its wide circle, marking the time she had stayed. In the moment of his hesitation, Jupiter squeezed in, and though Bill lunged and swiped at him he was too slow. The glossy white cat rushed to his tub and squatted, a dark circle spreading across the tiny stones. Bill let the door swing shut, and pushed the round button on the knob firmly.

He did not want harm to come to Fern. He did not want sickness for Fern. Susie and Marleen were probably with her already in the back room, ferreting out the story. With

each moment he remained in the bathroom Marleen would become angrier. But he could not move himself. He stayed there still, holding his own business card.

It was a shameful thing, he thought, that in the end this appointment would change nothing. If he were a different sort of person, he might become a special friend to Fern—beyond the fundamentally decent series of calls he would make to radiologists in his immediate sphere—and take care to check in with her each week about her health and mental state. Another sort of person might take the opposite tack, and invent a bogus, household, budget-based pretext for ceasing his visits to Hollywood Nails and thus avoid further face-to-face interaction. A very different sort of person might go home and share the morning's events with his wife and ask Diane to shoulder a part of his pain. But Bill was none of these sorts of people.

He knew that for him nothing would change because he knew that the instant he emerged from the bathroom he would begin again to talk, some teasing talk about gifts and tummy trouble and his sensitive snout, and the women would listen and begin to laugh, and his words would be a shield that would follow him across the floor and past the register and out to his van, where he would turn on the radio and let other people's words fill the space around him. And then the talking would continue at the catering rental and the nursing home and the Mass, shouting "Merry Christmas!" across the nave to babies and old friends, and at the dinner at his sister's, where he would devil his nephews and their new girlfriends and lure his second daughter into a rare extended exchange with increasingly dim-witted interpretations of the homily. It wasn't as if his words covered up other, truer words he might have said. It was just that words were not the right language. Late that night, when the eating was done and the young people had gone out back to play cornhole in the courtyard and the women were cleaning up in the kitchen, Bill knew he would fall silent at last. He would sit before the television with his napping brother-in-law and chew at a rough spot on his thumb that Fern had missed, and he would tear it open, ensuring a careful, lengthy inspection by Marleen the following week.

Jupiter dragged his nails over the edge of the plastic tub. He seemed to be trying to bury his mess with the air. Bill frowned. There was a grey scoop lying next to the toilet, and

he picked it up and crouched, and raked a little heap of stones across the surface of the box. The cat watched him and purred. As he plunged the shovel back into the stones, the animal lifted on his haunches and pushed suddenly with his full weight against Bill's forearm. "Hey now," he said. But the cat, so white and so plump, stepped out of the box and pressed into Bill. And as Bill drew the flat of his palm over the crest of the cat's brow and down the back of his neck, he saw Jupiter's yellow eyes close, both lost and found, here and gone.

After the last flower is trampled

Dexter L. Booth

-for Sandra Bland

the snapped stalks of the field peer

in their direction for miles —into the eye
of the officer, the eye of the dead

black male, of the pistol on its side
reflected in liquid marbles of blood.

Soon we will return. Soon
our shouts will ring in the bowels
of white churches.

But first—
 hold my hand.
Where we step the mountains shrink back;

water is stretching up through the earth and we
 are haloed with shadows

in the rising tide— our ancestors
swim around us.

We are something.

*

On the back of this ocean, a dot of pepper, a crow
rowing in drunken circles a boat
made from the bones of brothers.

Hold my hand

until the water is darker than any death.

(Don't look away.)

After the last flower is trampled
Let's contemplate the majesty of trees:

how they stay where they first fall,
how the seeds erect themselves in spite of gravity,
oppression, doing what we cannot; growing

back into the dirt, leaves
a thousand middle fingers for the sky, the sky
that turns like a lover in the maw of a dream, grumbling

a truth: coming thunder.

*

Imagine holding your model pose
while beetles march along the bridge of you,
strange birds snap at your face
and drink the warm nectar

of your wounds; a knife sings the story
of two teenagers

into your back; ropes tied to you
and people hung
like laundry by other people.

And everything dancing.

Could you keep your hips straight
until the foot of the dead ceases

echoing, keep your arms raised
after they clip the rope?

Even if they don't?

Conversation Starters or Things I'd Never Say to You in Public Dexter L. Booth

-For R. A.

False: Napoleon didn't shoot off the nose of the Great Sphinx of Giza.
The truth is humbling: the Sufi Sheik, Sayim al-Dahr blew up the nose
because, of course, *any statue of a negro's face that large
must have been idolatrous.*

These are my thoughts on Halloween night,
two-thirds into a bottle of Syrah, 20,000 miles
from home, and dressed in zombie latex that
only came in two shades of Caucasian. All this glue
and the wounds won't stick. All this fake
blood and brown Sharpie so I can tell
everyone I am a dead black guy
resurrected by the White Man Virus,
and you'll laugh.

At the end of the night Christine's friend will
take photos on the porch, after a moment
of focusing his camera say, "I can't see you,"
to which I'll responded.

That, sir, is racist.

It is a joke. It is a Sufi Sheik-Napoleon cannon-bomb
that has nothing to do with height, the number
of men you've seduced, the fact
that our lives are just expansion
and cooling; we are

the after effect of the Big Bang.

But I digress,
it is dark, and I am drunk.
I am drunk and you, dressed
as a bride's maid, wearing six inch heels.
It is dark and we are friends
and I am inebriated enough for it to be
awkward that your breasts are
where I am used to seeing your eyes.
You, suddenly my height, and still
pleasant. So unlike Stripper Nick,

who will later say
he is going to college in CA to major
in brewing beer. Less than a year ago
he was one of two men fighting for your
bed in a bar parking lot.

And there's Fernando
who two years past
dressed as a banana
but tonight is a panda
or a Hispanic guy in black face,
all excessively sexual
depending on your B.A.C.
and sense of humor.

This of course returns
to the dark. Scientists say that
if the universe keeps growing
outward the notion of a star
will be millennial mythology.

Imagine looking up and thinking
the Earth is the only thing...

Enoch
Dexter L. Booth

The night you pointed to the mountain and said

I need to go conquer my demons

I dreamt of the Lion Man of the Hohlenstein Stadel
being licked clean by a lamb. On its tongue and between its teeth
the lamb carried the tawny fur, that dander
slick as the ivory from which it was sculpted.

I dreamt I saw your face
on the body of that lion

and I was afraid. Whenever you went on a binge
your blood sugar spiked, everyone worried
you were giving up one of your ghosts. Guilt:
a force even the body can't defend.

At church they taught you it was evil
to think carnally of a woman.
Quarter in a jar each time you masturbated—
offerings for sin. You tell me

you've met a black dominatrix in Virginia, but
you won't say you want her just for her skin,
as if she were some animal
in bed who you knew could break you.

These are things saviors do, and
you are a savior, no? Your sex brings women
back from the whore houses clean and virginal. You say

minnows and prayers for my father,

I am

my father

in this death, Amen.

The vernacular of the divine
Latin, wet and growing hard
on the tongue like nipple—flesh
puckering, prayer permanently smearing
prophecy on the poor.

I don't know your Bible, nor will I
pretend. The snake you brought down from that mountain

was dead and had three heads: one for each of your vices.
On the ride back the car was a boat. Kharon, you led us down
into Tempe and you left us: that's the story you tell,
but you say it
this way: *at least I ain't brown.*

That kind of relief is like pissing
on the back of a woman whose skin was boiled
by the sun—the accident, a half-god's failure free fall:

Something no one wants to appropriate.

After your visions of S. drowning himself in the lake you visited
Kutnah Hora, spoke with the 40,000 ghosts whose bones decorate the Chapel.

Na zdravi!

Who cares if the cup is filled with mead or blood? The ego goes down harsh,
with a burn.

Vicuña

Laura McCarty

In the Andes five hours from the road that splits in two where the quinoa blooms maroon, the blind boy falls asleep near the coal stove. His sister stands next to me as I offer her mother a safer way of cooking. In Quechuan, the mother says, “The eyes go first. Then the lungs.” A dried fetal vicuña – a good luck charm – hangs from their ceiling. I’m told it cost \$700, three years of income. Three years of not sending her children to school. The dead animal’s body spins in rhythm with the wind, faster, she says, when the luck is good. She smiles through the smoke that keeps us warm. My cell phone buzzes. “Mom, please come home.” Her daughter looks the same age as mine. I’ve been gone all winter. Three months working, three months of not keeping my child warm. I lean back into her daughter. Her chapped hands bleed the color of quinoa.

Monologue of the Abandoned Building

Eva Skrande

Though an architecture of spoons
Holds up my insomnia's embattled walls
And my dogs are dreaming of dead sunflowers,

Though I don't have much to tithé
Beside the pigeons on my buttresses,
My rails want to make pure joy possible for everyone,

To let bag ladies, as they did in the old days,
Dance on balconies in gowns
That brush the flowers on the balcony below theirs.

Though salt licks its wounds within my elevators,
And garbage tugs at the hems of my terraces
Let me have a veranda dressed in summers and springs.

Let me have storefronts that promise sandals to my tired columns
Tympanums with horses that come alive
For the onlookers below

Though my cornices want to translate bricks into the opposite of thirst
And my poor copula is the luggage of thieves
Still my dark windows dream of parties and wreaths. Listen:

Please loan my pigeons to the children who sit on my knees,
The toy boats left in the old bathtubs
To the would-be aerialist in flight between my ledges

Whole Body Warm

By Christopher Linforth

When Branko heard the trucks rumble past the apartment building, he was stealing the transistor radio his elderly mother kept by her bed. He stuck the small radio in his pocket, then stumbled through the hallway to the living room. From the second-floor window he could see the old women climbing down from the flatbeds. The women sat on little wooden stools and guarded the soiled sofas and mattresses and broken refrigerators set out on the sidewalk. Their hands clutched net bags stuffed with loaves of bread and hard fruit. Branko despised Zagreb's annual collection day and the Gypsies it brought. They reeked of the junk they hoarded. They lit trash fires to keep warm and let smoldering plastic release black soot into the air. For much of his life he had avoided Gypsies, and now they were on his street. They did not belong here. He shouted an obscenity at the women and withdrew to the kitchen to refill his cup with plum brandy.

By the afternoon he was drunk and curled up on his mother's bed. A bottle of šljivovica lay almost empty between his legs. He had not consumed this much alcohol since his return from the war. He had served in the Croatian Army as the conflict came to a close, fighting only once, in a skirmish near Bjelovar. He aimed his rifle at a squad of JNA soldiers but had missed them all. Artillery fire later scared the men away. When he checked the houses, he realized he had accidentally killed a woman, put a bullet through the back of her skull. She lay spread-eagled on the tiled floor of the kitchen, spits of brain matter on the refrigerator door. Her once-blonde hair soddened with blood.

She was around twenty. A forest-green cardigan hugged her thin torso, and her blue dress had blown up, exposing the tops of her pale thighs. Her lacy black panties were twisted into the cleft of her fleshy buttocks. She had been pretty. He had never checked her body for any identification or told anyone about her. Sometimes he took guesses as to her name: Lara, Katja, Veronika. Was she married? Had she borne children? Did anyone miss her? Each night he waited for a piece on the news noting the search for her killer. But Branko's name

never appeared. Nor did her relatives hunt him down and deliver their own justice.

As the light outside faded, his temples throbbed. He was glad his mother was visiting her sister in Koprivnica. Yesterday she had scolded him for drinking and for stealing the television set and VCR. After her outburst she had taken the bus, her silent exit from the apartment suggesting she was unlikely to return for several days. Branko had lived with his mother for almost a year, and he had no job or inclination to get one. He spent his days lounging in cafés or reading the newspaper in the library. Sometimes he trooped alone into women's clothing stores and inquired about a dress for a fictitious wife or asked the young salesgirls about the underwear they wore. In past evenings with his mother, he watched television, the volume turned up loud for her poor hearing and for him not to hear her complaints. Even after her soap operas were over, she liked to tell Branko he was useless, a part-time son. But he had ceased caring about her and her opinions a long time ago.

Branko rolled to the edge of his mother's bed and sat up. He dug through the drawer of the nightstand and plucked out two loose painkillers, swallowing them without water. Across the room on the dresser sat a glass ashtray and a framed wedding picture of his parents standing in front of the church. His father was handsome with his slicked dark hair and a pencil mustache accentuating his lopsided grin. Branko barely remembered the man. He wasn't dead, as far as Branko knew, but when he thought of his father usually the wedding picture came to mind. Not the four years his father spent with Branko and his mother, or the one memory Branko had of his father beating him until his nose and ears bled.

Branko swabbed pearls of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and slouched forward, resting his arms and head on his legs. He felt dizzy. He spat a thick glob of spittle onto the hardwood floor. His throat prickled with the rush of stomach acid, and he vomited the fried eggs he had eaten for breakfast. The pool of pallid yellow mush resembled mottled flesh.

He returned to the living room and stood at the window, using the sill to steady himself. Streetlights were fluttering on outside, casting arcs of amber across parked cars and the blacktop. A pale likeness of himself reflected in the glass: a thin man with a crew-cut and dark beard. He closed his eyes and dipped his head, pressing his forehead against the cold

glass. Not that many years ago he was considered handsome, a good catch for a prospective wife. He had a job in construction, and he had worked on the new warehouses near the airport. Often solemn, he shied away from the close friendship of the other workmen, rarely joining them in weekend drinking. Back then, he preferred sobriety. On Sundays, he attended Mass with his mother; he could recite lines of scripture, extemporize on the meaning.

The force of the wind outside rattled the pane, startling Branko, and he glanced down to the large collection of furniture near the curbstone. A hunched woman—a Gypsy—was sitting on a stool between two cars and seemed to be holding something in her hands. She wore a drab headscarf and a long gray overcoat. He rapped his knuckles on the glass and tried to think of something offensive to say. His mind clouded over. He rapped again.

The woman stood and balanced what he could now see was a sketchpad on the stool. She brushed down her overcoat and looked directly at the window. Branko wanted to shout at her, scare her away. His breath formed white circles on the glass. As he dreaded, the woman walked toward his building, grasping for the black iron railing when she reached the steps. There was something odd about her sheathed body, her stilted gait, the look she had given him. And now there was the noise of her knocking on the door. It was possible she was in pain or in need of help. Branko considered ignoring her, but he felt the neighbors might complain to his mother about another one of his women. He left the apartment and staggered down the flight of narrow stairs, pausing in the dim light of the foyer. The woman's silhouette blacked out a slice of the frosted glass entrance.

"Hello?" the woman said. "Are you there?"

"What do you want?"

"A glass of water," she said. "I'm very thirsty."

The woman's voice sounded desperate, almost demanding. Branko edged along the wall and stretched out for the latch, his hand fumbling for the bolt. "The pipes are broken."

"Please," she said. "I'm pregnant."

"Leave," he said. "I can smell you."

"I haven't drunk anything all day."

“That was foolish,” he said.

He inched over, seeing the dark blur that was the woman. She had retreated to the bottom step, her arms now folded over her chest. He cracked the door ajar. She was younger than he first suspected—somewhere in her late teens. Up close, the thinness of her face intrigued him. He liked her angular cheekbones and the small bump on the bridge of her nose. She had her nose pierced with a gold stud shaped like a bird. She was pretty enough to work in a women’s clothes store, but he sensed she did not know that. Or perhaps she did. Her wool overcoat hid the curves of her body.

She slid her hands down to her stomach. “The water is for both of us.”

“How long do you have left?”

“A month.” She unbuttoned her overcoat, revealing a cotton sweater stretched to hold her swollen belly. “My name is Ankica.”

Branko came out to the front step, keeping the tip of his boot wedged against the bottom of the door. He glanced down each side of the street. Specks of black soot drifted in front of the streetlights, swirled in the night sky. “All alone out here?”

“My brother will be back for me soon,” she said. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“It looks cold.”

“It is bearable. I’m glad there is no rain.”

Branko felt the brunt of the stiff wind, the chill in the air. If he let her in, she could tidy the place, perhaps fix him a meal. But the thought of food sickened him. Instead, she could start with alleviating his hangover. “I don’t feel well,” he said. “Can you make tea?”

“*Da.*”

Ankica slowly climbed the steps and waddled inside, and he followed her up the stairs, his eyes fixed on the thick coattail hiding her thighs and buttocks. She waited for him next to the door, and he led her through the hallway to the kitchen. The room stank of fried eggs and the pan still sat in the sink slick with oil. She set about making the tea as if she had been in the apartment before. She filled the pot with cold water and placed it on the stove. She rooted through the drawers for a clean spoon, using the only one she found to scoop the tea leaves into a porcelain teapot decorated with a Chinese pagoda and garden, a crane in

the middle of an ornamental pool. With a clumsy swipe she brushed dust off the lid, leaving tiny islands of gray where her fingers had missed.

“I feel stupid for forgetting my water,” she said.

“There’s a kiosk a few streets over.”

Ankica raised her eyes to the window above the sink, appearing to see through the silvery grime on the pane, perhaps seeing a curl of smoke from one of the trash fires below. “I don’t know the neighborhood. Besides, I can’t leave the furniture alone for long,” she said. “There are thieves everywhere.” As she waited for the water to boil, she washed the frying pan. She wiped the counter and opened the cabinets, rearranging cans of tomatoes and meat soups and paper bags of maize flour and dried beans.

“You don’t have much to eat,” she said.

“Don’t snoop,” he said, as he sat at the kitchen table. “Just make the tea.”

Ankica closed the cabinets and picked up the pot from the stove. She removed the lid of the teapot and poured in the boiling water. A white column of steam rose, rolling over her face. She replaced the lid and set the teapot on the table. She sat opposite him and unfurled her headscarf, leaving it looped around her neck. Her straight black hair fell to her shoulders, and she pushed several loose strands behind her ears. Surprised by how different she looked, Branko couldn’t tell she was a Gypsy, and his mind stalled in thinking of what to say. In fact, he decided, it was better to say nothing. He stretched out his legs in front of him and leaned his back into the chair. It felt good to have a woman near him. For years his mother had made the tea, each time using the same teapot—the one she had received as a wedding present. She loved the intricate design and the bright cobalt pigment. He had never cared for the teapot or the Chinese. With Ankica the simple ceremony felt different, and he asked her to pour the tea. She filled both cups, and a fruity scent lifted into the air.

Branko raised his cup and sipped the dark liquid. “This is good,” he said.

“Very hot,” she said. “Don’t burn your tongue.”

“I enjoy the heat,” he replied. “Why did you get that done to your nose?”

Ankica touched her gold stud. “I don’t know. For fun. For looks. Does it suit me?”

“Depends on what the bird is?”

“A dove of some sort.”

Branko felt a shooting pain in his head and he rubbed his temples.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, a little.” Branko pushed himself up and left the kitchen to avoid a revelation of his discomfort. He went to his mother’s bedroom for his bottle of šljivovica. Immediately, he could smell his vomit from earlier in the day. He tucked the bottle under his arm, and he grabbed the picture of his parents, disinterred it from the frame, and squashed the photograph into the congealed egg-mush. His mother was going to be angry, but he felt justified in eliminating any remaining sense of goodwill. He closed the door and hurried to the kitchen, swilling the brandy around in happiness that there was some left. After unscrewing the top, he sniffed the glass lip, then poured a dash of brandy into his tea. “Would you like some?”

“I don’t want to raise a drunk.”

“He will hardly feel...Is it a he?”

“The choice is in God’s hands.”

“I know it’s a boy,” he said. “I can tell by your bump.”

“I prayed for a girl.” She ran her hand over her belly. “She’s kicking,” she said. “Do you want to feel?”

He came around the table and stooped beside her, laying his palm flat above her navel. Her skin felt smooth and tight, and he sensed the fetus flexing inside of her. “Is it painful?”

“Sometimes.”

“One day I would like a son.”

“Do you have a wife?”

He drew back his hand and wiped his palm on the side of his jeans. “What sort of question is that?”

“One that gets to the heart of things.”

“You’re smarter than I thought.”

“I can read. I went to school.”

Branko guessed Ankica couldn’t be older than seventeen; and he imagined her sit-

ting in the classroom, attentive to her teacher's words. Her pregnancy had probably forced her to quit. "Was school a waste of time?" he asked. "It was for me."

"Some of the students bullied me."

"We were told Gypsies can't be trusted."

"So was I," she said. "And we hate that word. We're Roma."

"I learned 'Gypsy' from my father."

"I expected as much," said Ankica. "But names do matter, then and now." She selected a red apple from the fruit bowl and held it in front of her, rotating her wrist, checking the skin for bruises. "Art was my favorite class. I painted still lifes: fruit, statues, books. One time we had a model. An old man who complained the whole time. My friends couldn't look at his body. But I thought it was beautiful." She pushed the teapot against the wall and tilted her head to study the design. Her finger traced one edge of the pagoda and shifted across to the crane in the pool. She positioned the apple to the side of the teapot's spout and leaned a folded letter against the handle. "This arrangement could work."

"Don't touch the letter," he said. "I don't think it's mine."

Ankica expelled a sharp laugh. "You're unsure?"

"My mother died a few weeks ago."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That's God for you." He picked up his cup and carried it to the basin. "He took my father, too." He poured away his tea, then glimpsed to see if she detected his lies. An allegiance to truth, in any religious sense, had seldom bothered him since his Army days. There was freedom in being alone in the world, in escaping others' constraints and rules. He felt she understood this, or would as time passed. "I've been thinking about a move to the coast," he went on. "Zadar or Šibenik."

"That's a big change," she said. "This is such a nice place."

"Where do you live?"

"In Savica-Šanci."

"With your husband?"

"With my family."

“They will look after your baby?”

“I will.” She glanced over to the darkened hallway. “I must get back. Others will steal the furniture.”

“You should stay here,” he said, “and draw me something. A still life?” From the telephone stand, he took the notepad and a chewed pencil stub and thrust them in front of her. Ankica eyed the drawing materials and seemed to consider his request.

“I should go,” she said.

“I can watch the furniture.”

“No. It is my responsibility.”

“It’s men’s work.”

“Not for Roma.”

“Let me show you something.” He stepped backward, beckoning her with his finger. As she rose to her feet, he went into the hallway and through to the living room. He heard her footfalls on the hardwood and the rhythm of them pleased him. He stood by the yellow sofa printed with large flowers. “I have a sofa for you,” he said, “and a wool blanket.”

“My brother is expecting to see me.”

“I’ll explain the situation to him,” he said. “It’s better for everyone if you remain here.”

She sat on the edge of the sofa, not touching the blanket. He wondered if she could smell his scent on the fabric or on the cushions. He slept there each night, but he abstained from telling her that. Or that he lay there naked. She opened her mouth to say something, but she appeared to change her mind. She looked tired, in pain. Her sweater had ridden up, exposing a web of veins on her stomach.

Branko turned away and pulled on his pea coat and cloth cap. “Sleep, if you want,” he said. His neutral tone camouflaged his wish for her to stay, but he knew she had limited options, his warm apartment an easy choice over the cold outside. He slipped out of the apartment and went down the stairs. On the front steps of the building, he sucked in the sharp air and surveyed the street. There was no sign of the other Gypsies, and Ankica’s junk pile appeared to be the last one. Patches of ice glinted in the road, and he could feel the

strength of the wind. Before long, a gust blew her sketchpad off the stool and into a half-size refrigerator with no door.

He marched over to the stool. The icy breeze chilled the tip of his nose, his fingers. He rubbed his hands together, wishing he had brought his *šljivovica* and one of his sex magazines. His guard duty reminded him of his time in the Army, his friends, the dirty jokes they told, the shared cigarettes, the hatred for the JNA. Several of them had boasted of killing Serbs—or, at least, of desiring to—describing how they shot off limbs, leaving bloodied torsos; and booby-trapping Red Cross packages with explosives; and crushing young men underneath the treads of a tank. Branko would listen, avoiding talk of the woman he had killed, a fellow Croat. They might have hanged him. Or offered him a drink.

After a while the seat hurt his backside. He stood and stretched his legs. The sketchpad caught his eye and he gathered up the loose pages from atop the glass shelf of the refrigerator and stacked them on the coffee table. He circled the rest of the junk pile: a French dresser with a burnished mirror, two floor lamps, and four boxes of bric-a-brac. All of it seemed worthless. Perhaps the household clutter would be sold to the old men at the flea market, or a family moving to Zagreb. His mother's television set and VCR had barely netted him enough for a good dinner and his bottle of brandy. Perhaps the Gypsies kept the stuff for themselves.

He returned to the stool and brought out the radio from his pocket. He turned the dial, tuning through the static to discover the tinny sound of a newscaster reporting on the rebuilding of Karlovac. He shook the radio and pressed the speaker to his ear. Cheap, he realized, and Russian-made. He wouldn't get much for it. He placed the radio on top of the coffee table as a present for Ankica, and his attention drifted to the sketchpad. He flipped through several blank pages until he came across a half-finished drawing. The penciled outline revealed the face of a baby, its tiny naked chest, blank spots for the missing hands and feet. He crossed his legs and balanced the sketchpad on his thigh. He slid out the pencil from the spiral binding and shaded the swaddling, to give the body shape, then drew the hands and feet poking out. He thought of how to make it clear the baby was a boy, but he

felt stumped beyond drawing genitalia. To the side of the face, he jotted down boys' names, all he could think of in the moment.

Unsatisfied with the drawing, he stole inside to show Ankica his work and ask her opinion on the possible names. She was asleep on the sofa, turned so that her face sank into the cushion, a blanket over her legs. The angle of her body reminded him of the woman in Bjelovar, the towel he had draped over her head, the prayer he had neglected to say.

He stood over Ankica and touched the vast swell of her belly and listened to the faint rasp of her breathing. She looked small and too young to have a child. She was an art student, a girl without a husband or boyfriend. Only a brother. And a family in a poor neighborhood. She was not that different from the woman he had killed. Branko propped the sketchpad against the arm of the sofa and retired to the stool in the street, thinking about the woman's mind spread across the refrigerator, her memories disembodied from her soft flesh—her remains merely a collection of limbs tacked to a torso.

What had happened to her once he had left? Everyone had forgotten her—he knew this as he dozed. His mind captured by the night.

Bright beams of white light roused Branko. A silver Mercedes sped by and the driver shouted: "*Prljav Ciganka.*" Branko laughed at the man's mistake, but then he felt offense at the slur. He wasn't a Gypsy. He searched for a retort, but when he had thought of one the car turned at the intersection, leaving only a blur of red taillights.

After that it was peaceful. The trash fires were extinguished, the black soot no longer a threat. A few stars glimmered above the rows of houses, streetlight bleeding out the rest. But one object shone in the sky. Venus, he surmised, a planet brighter than almost everything else. He tried to trace the other stars, the constellations that were up there, now invisible. He could feel the heaviness of the air in his lungs. He could see his own breath, the clouds of white gas. Part of him wanted to go back inside and drink one last glass of his plum brandy, and offer a shot to Ankica. He would ask her to his bed and hold her until she felt safe. Her whole body warm. In the morning he would bathe her, scrub her body of its odor. Perhaps they would make love. It might ease the birth of her baby. She might still feel

pleasure. Once the baby was born she might ask him to stay with her and become the child's father. They would live in his mother's apartment. His mother would have to leave and live with her sister. He would force her to go—a change of locks, her possessions sold. Nothing would prevent the relationship with Ankica and her son. They would make a life together, the three of them. He would encourage her to be an artist, to paint objects and people. Anything she wanted. And he would sell her still lifes at the flea market. They would fetch a good price. In time, he would quit drinking and lusting after teenage girls. He would hate Gypsies less. When they were much older, he would tell her about the woman in Bjelovar. Confess all of his sins. She would hold him close, wrap her thin arms around his body, and forgive him. They had a son now, and it was all that mattered.

Super Deal

By Terence Kuch

“A way a lone a last a loved a long” – James Joyce, *Finnegan’s Wake*

Nina tries to remember if baking soda is in aisle 10b or 11a. She looks down at her cart. OK so far: apples, lettuce, broccoli, whole-grain bread. And chocolate-chip cookie dough (for snacking right out of the tube) and doughnuts and candied macadamias. Shouldn’t buy those; she bites her lip. Fit and healthy, want to stay that way. Work out every day. Well, at least twice a week when she can. Lift dumbbells, the soft plastic-coated five-pound kind that aren’t too demanding; but anyway it’s a start, isn’t it? And she’s fit and healthy, right? And trim, more or less. And still young—barely.

This evening, shopping at the SuperDeal market, Nina is preoccupied, feeling sorry for herself because the only attractive male in her office has just been transferred to another city. He’d been about to ask her out, she’s sure. Afraid of an office romance, perhaps; something might go wrong and then what? Nina is uneasy at the thought of an office romance, too; but suitable men don’t grow on trees, and she’ll take what she can get. Someone to be with, go with to nice fun places, share quiet times and loud times.

Embedded within these thoughts, and trying to select from among fifteen brands of extra virgin olive oil, she almost runs into a cart going the opposite way. She looks up and sees a man. Not bad. A good smile as he pulls his cart to one side and motions her past.

Turning into 8a a few minutes later, she glimpses him coming toward her, far down the aisle. She could accidentally run into him again, right? With a tinge of excitement, Nina rearranges her cart with lettuce and broccoli on top, cookie dough and nuts and doughnuts underneath. Near the end of the aisle she finds their carts once again head-on.

“Hi!” she says, flashing her dentist-warranted smile. “Great running into you again.”

The man laughs and glances at her cart, then up to her face. “We keep meeting,” he says, “like spies about to hand over secret oranges. But I’m out of ideas; any recommendations?” It takes a second for Nina to realize he’s asking her about food, not about the fruits

of espionage. His own cart bears few items, mostly ground beef, grapes, and canned green beans. Not a cookie in sight.

She thinks of saying “Don’t get the frozen pizza,” but that would reveal that she’d had the frozen pizza once or twice or more, that desperate choice of lonely people. “Oh,” she stalls for time, “they have some fresh arugula here, for a change.” She immediately regrets saying that, but oh well, too late. What if he’s an arugula-freak and wants to discuss that strange stuff she’s never tasted? So much for trying to sound sophisticated.

“Thanks,” he says, moving past her, “I’ll look for it.”

What’s that? Ah; the arugula, not the frozen pizza. “No problem!” she calls after him, trying to keep beseeching out of her voice.

In 11a (baking soda) there he was. And 12a. And 12b. Crossing and recrossing, meeting again, frozen foods, frozen smiles, their growing embarrassment, uneasy remarks about food, peering into each other’s carts to think of something to say, thinking too late that might be too personal, food-snooping being uncool, intrusive, worse.

What if he asks her to recommend a wine—a wine that would go well with arugula? At a small private dinner party with candles? What could she possibly say? Her total wine experience consists of saying, “No thanks, I’d rather have a lite.”

With some relief, she sees him enter a checkout lane as she enters another. Enough tension for now. He finishes first and disappears into the parking lot. Soon, she does the same.

Back home, Nina rehearses in her mind a glorious meeting, the sweeping off of feet, the intimate arugula, the closeness, the wonderful closeness, the glowing skin.... She, a temple priestess fresh from engagements in Rome, he, the conquering Caesar. Then—she sighs and has a doughnut. Three.

Later that evening she decides she just can’t live with herself without trying to see him again. Today was Wednesday. If she were to shop in that very same market, in exactly one week, at about the same time of day, then perhaps...

Hal drives home slowly. Why hadn’t he had the nerve to say something to that woman, like

“there’s a coffee bar here at SuperDeal; how about a cup?” He’d made successful pickups before. Not very many, for sure, but—well, at least one, although that hadn’t turned out so well. But this woman—”this woman” or “that woman” because he didn’t know her name—a little pudgy, hair not glamorous, rather short for him (her build, that is, not her hair), possibly a little older than he is, older than she looks, older than 29, that catastrophic condition. But Hal is no GQ coverguy himself, he has to admit.

Hal is annoyed with himself. Next week, he thinks, and looks at his smug wrist-watch that knows everything about time. Wednesday. Next Wednesday at about—hmm—seven p.m. Yes.

That evening, Hal attends his local community association meeting, where he is a junior member of the Board, facing owners who wouldn’t be there if they didn’t have some problem that the Board was “willfully and irresponsibly failing to disclose to the membership.” Silently, Hal agrees with most of their complaints, but has little influence over the Board as a whole, which is led—dictated to—by a secretive and mendacious Madame President.

As Angry Owner Number Three drones his latest tirade, Hal’s mind wanders. Would the woman from SuperDeal be as bossy as Madame President? Not at first. They never were, at first. But she had healthy food in her basket, didn’t she? That might be a good sign, although Hal couldn’t think why.

For the next week, both Nina and Hal perform the usual duties of their trades: she, a physician’s assistant whose major responsibility is the sale of marginally imperative surgery, Hal an I.T. analyst. Occasionally, each thinks of the other. “That Woman,” with capital T and W, and “Mark,” the name Nina has assigned to the man in honor of a football hero she almost met once.

As Wednesday approaches, both Nina and Hal are nervous. Just an off-chance he/she will be there; probably an hour later, or two hours earlier; is married just not wearing a ring; has alarming secrets; has four noisy children and several dogs; is a petty thief who was expelled from high school and had to settle for a GED. Or—is a wealthy heiress, or the

daughter of a senator. And he— managing partner of a fabulously successful investment firm, or won an Olympic medal in something that demanded both gentleness and strength. And so on.

Both Nina and Hal have last minute hesitations, decide they might not go to SuperDeal at all. But they need groceries, right? And if they run into the other, it could be just “Hi!” and go their ways. No risk in that, is there? Would be nice to see him/her again, wouldn’t it? Or maybe not so much.

This time, Nina and Hal meet just inside the door of the SuperDeal. She has wheeled a cart in from outside the store; he is standing near a stack of hand-baskets. She is glad to see him, but thinks he could have been subtler. He knows what he wants, she thinks, and doesn’t seem in any hurry to buy groceries today.

He immediately suggests coffee at the SuperDeal café. She is disappointed at his abruptness. He is amazed that he has the courage to make this proposal, even after practicing it for several days. They order coffee. He offers to pay but she says no, thank you, she will pay for her own.

He talks about his work: major goals, many successes. Just black. He knows not to complain to her about his job, but would like to, because he hates it. She makes jokes about old people who believe everything she says, how insurance claims are documented, sometimes inventively, for which she takes excessive credit. Just sweetener, please. She implies that she is clever and a little naughty. Both of these observations are true, even though she is not aware that they’re true.

They talk about what they thought of each other, that first near-collision and then the second. He doesn’t reveal his doubts, because that would spoil the moment. She doesn’t reveal her fears to him, not to sound desperate. She wants to sound, in fact, as if he had been selected from a zoo of panting suitors. Each wonders when they will go to bed together, and how that will be. Warm feelings creep into their minds.

He asks her out. They have one date, then several. They grow accustomed to each other. They talk about many subjects, then repeat them. Each considers the other a pretty good catch; not exactly what they had in mind, but what the hell.

By now they've had sex enough times that they're out of ideas.

He moves in with her. He doesn't change his socks often enough, which is the occasion for their first big fight. It ends with laughter and bedding, and a promise to wear clean socks each and every day.

They marry. Hal faithfully changes his socks, always with an underscore of resentment.

In a few years, lying to each other, which they think of as "being considerate," has become a habit. It has been this way since the hidden cookie dough and the first dirty sock. Each pleasures him/herself away from the other, saying to him/herself that it's to avoid imposing on him/herself. Lord save us if we impose!, for as the Lord said, that is not Nice.

Just another sweating man, she thinks once, why did I bother? And he, just another female, why did I propose to her? For indeed he did propose, and she accepted, on the condition that they wouldn't have children for a few years. He accepted that condition, silently adding "if ever."

It is now ten years later. Nina and Hal have survived the seven-year itch, though barely; hardly remember it any more. Each has had an affair they almost confessed to the other. It was just that once. It was only one—two—three meetings, then it was over. I never really loved him/her. I prefer you. I chose you. You are my wife/husband/mate for life, as the better animals mate for life, as the gods do except those of Greece and Rome but we don't believe in those gods anymore.

They visit a marriage counselor once, each almost expressing their doubts and frustrations with the other. The counselor calls them "a well-adjusted couple," but gives them advice that doesn't sound, to them, really necessary, and what does she know about them, anyway?

For years now they have gone to the SuperDeal together, although mostly they order online from SuperDealCom.com these days, and wait for the delivery boy. Both find him attractive. Nina thinks he's really too young, that's a shame. Could she be some kind of cougar, she wonders with alarm. Hal thinks that he shouldn't have these feelings toward a

male. I should have these thoughts only when I am pleasuring myself in Nina, he observes, and when she responds. He attempts to forget, and manages to be in another room when the groceries are delivered.

Nina is pretending to enjoy sex with Hal because that's what her mother taught her to do. Hal is OK, really; a good provider, although he complains all the time about his job, and he always wants it the same way in bed, but she puts up with it because she'd rather not have him going to those other women who are so easy to find and pay for. He might bring some disease home. I, however, she thinks: I am more discreet. Those men, the first of which was quite a jolt to my life, they'd never had an affair before. They told me so.

Another decade passes. There have been occasional separations, but these haven't "worked out" as each tells the other, and they get back together. They did eventually, late in life for that sort of thing, have one child, a boy named Arthur. Arthur hates his name, of course, as who wouldn't? He scrapes by in high school, gets into trouble a few times, but the consensus is "he's really a good boy, you know. Lots of promise, if he'd only..."

After high school, Arthur plays bass in a group that is doomed to fail because only the lead guitarist is any good, but no one mentions that to Arthur. Days, he works in a warehouse and hopes to become foreman, an ambition that does eventually come true, and Arthur becomes (to everyone's surprise, including his own) a success at it.

Hal has a heart attack, but recovers. Nina knows too much about the firm she works for, and is very generously pensioned.

One day, Nina suggests a game of "meeting in the aisle" for old times' sake. Hal agrees, to be agreeable.

They go back to the SuperDeal one more time.

They meet, as planned, in aisle 4a, both their carts containing items from Nina's original shopping list, and a birthday cake for Arthur. But at the last second, on a desperate impulse, Nina has grabbed a very large jar of candied macadamia nuts and put it right on top. Hal notices this, but says nothing. Finally, when they have nearly finished shopping, Nina tells him that the candied nuts were there in her cart the day they met, but she hid

them. They've been with us, she says, all along, all these years. And other things, too.

Hal feels a weight lifted from his shoulders. He doesn't feel so bad now about his own secrets. He thinks he might even tell her about them. Someday. Hesitantly, Hal reaches for Nina's hand. They caress, right in front of the hot and cold cereals. She cries.

A female onlooker is about to say "How sweet of them—at their age!" But she sees her husband's frown and says nothing.

Summer Camp

Susanna Brougham

When you were in Vietnam
I was in Christianity. While you
perspired, enduring trenches
of mosquito bites, flares that weren't
July Fourth fireworks, I sang

hymns of victory at breakfast,
I sheltered in a cozier tent.
As you questioned and tried not
to question your country, while
obeying, I took cover in junipers

during a game of hide-and-seek,
respite from lesson time. Did any
peace find you? At the campfire
on Sunday night, as you crouched
in Asia, camp counselors erected

a lakeside cross, saying our sins
added to the weight Jesus bore
on Calvary. They piled towels
and bags onto Counselor Bob,
who leaned against the cross,

groaned—to make guilt feel real.
Yes, I sinned, hated to hurt Jesus,
but I knew the flannelgraph story—
he'd bounce back, like Counselor Bob,
who soon joined us for s'mores. Minus

our sin, would Jesus be hero of a story?
I didn't know you then—you, bearing
terrible equipment, primed to die for sins
known or not, heroically or not, as we
slept in New England darkness and prayer.

Iceblink

Susanna Brougham

My night vision is pixelating—
myriad luminous motes
escape heaven, delicately drift

whitening these flat fields,
this stopped pond—round like
a communion wafer you could skate on.

The priestly spruces
cloaked. Wind
shudders their glimmer.

Like some quirky chakra,
the northern lights
pray toward me.

The birch grove a confessional.
Everything in me I say
skyward, my words
at the boiling point of cold.

In this night monastery
the heart ghost-writes its wishes
and illuminates them painstakingly.

I will gaze into freeze
until sun breaks the sky and
winter unclenches.

An Orchestra

George Eklund

An orchestra needs two conductors
And eight French horns,
The wind in its wild self
Breathing and disappearing
With its cousin, the light,
Abstract as a thought.

The windy dark maims us
In the night window
Up the arms
To the eye flesh.

What are my elements,
The figures I cannot touch?
A literate mark
Asks for everything.

What are the elements beyond prayer,
Beyond my idiocy and memory of fish?

The mind creates itself
At the edges of things
We cannot hold,

The elements loaded upon
Those burning vehicles
Driven by blue violinists.

Maria Better Than Nothing

Robin Scofield

That's what they called her, Juana Marie,
the last survivor of one
California Indian tribe, the Nicoleño.

Left on San Nicolas Island by
herself for 20 years,
she forgot others whom

the Franciscans had transported
into disease and slavery,
their missions of charity.

Found two decades
later, quite by accident,
dressed in bird skins,

singing bird songs,
after not hearing
words or people,

she forgot she was
not a bird. She forgot
words, not sound,

not birds, not clothes.
She forgot language,
not song, not art.

It's Not Even Past

By Jeannette Brown

Jamie's cell phone lies on the grass, fully charged. She's waiting for the call from the nursing home three blocks east, confirming that her daddy, known across Texas as Big Jim, is finally dead. He has been dying for over a week, and looking forward to it for years, or at least since her mother died. He was a West Texas rancher, had run cattle and bred horses, raised cotton and feed crops, himself a dying man from a dying breed. Corporations now own most of the surrounding land. Agri-business they call it.

Her daddy is the final link to her life in Silver Falls. An only child, she'll be able to make all the decisions and execute them without the bickering her current husband went through with his adult siblings when his parents died. For her, there will be no quarreling over the relics accumulated during a lifetime. Good riddance to Big Jim's collection of pocketknives and shelves full of Elmer Kelton novels, his roomful of ranching ledgers and records, his collection of spurs.

Jamie stays at the Wildflower Bed & Breakfast during her visits. She is always the only guest. Mrs. Albertson doesn't mind Jamie making herself at home.

This is very possibly her last night in her hometown. When Big Jim finally dies, she will go back to Dallas and return only for the day of the funeral. She can hardly believe it: goodbye to her childhood, to the embarrassment of adolescence, to her catastrophic marriage to Brady Joe Phillips who could not leave this town. Most importantly, goodbye to her failure to live up to Big Jim's expectations. Silver Falls and its people are constant reminders of what could have been.

There are 553 Silver Falls residents now, about a quarter of the population from when she was growing up. Back then, she could go bowling or skating or see a movie or shop for clothes and several lines of cosmetics. Now the town is served by a hardware store, a dime store, and two diners. And the funeral home.

Jamie pulls the first frosty bottle of beer from her small cooler, leaving five to last the rest of the evening. She has dragged an Adirondack chair from the veranda of the B&B

across the newly watered lawn, causing a mist to rise up and trap the dust in the air. She's placed the chair to face the sun balancing on the West Texas horizon. In the distance, dust floats on the darkening air, wafting up when the occasional car passes or a stray dog wanders by. The streetlights aren't on yet, so the sleepy little town looks as if it's just nodding off.

Actually, the town looks exactly as it did forty-four years ago, when Jamie graduated from high school with twenty-six other people. Most of them had boarded a Greyhound to celebrate their theoretical emancipation on the beach at Galveston. Two of those twenty-six had died in Vietnam; a few of them had just drifted away, never to be heard from again. Several of them still live here, raising families just as they had been raised, except for the addition of televisions and computers in every room. She has not called any of them on this trip back to Silver Falls, has not let them know that she is in town and available for catching up. Years ago, she realized she and her local classmates no longer had anything in common. Their talk of hip replacements or their grandchildren's Pee Wee League scores or their beef with the new high school football coach caused tears of boredom to leak from her eyes. No, it was better to just sit and watch the sun sink and enjoy the icy cold beer running down her throat.

Relaxed, almost languid after a tense day of holding her breath, Jamie hopes her daddy will stop his. At 89, there is not much left for him to do, to think, to say. In fact, there is not much left of him, just blue veins showing through papery skin stretched across long bones. They are through with each other, her with needing a father, him with needing her to be a son. All that is left is the wait, and she can do that.

Dusk is turning to dark. She can't read her watch now, but she can locate the cooler and uncap a beer without looking.

"Evenin'," says a male voice.

Startled, she snorts beer through her nose. She hadn't heard anyone approach through the soft, damp grass. Raising her hand to her brow as if to salute, she peers through the dusk, but cannot locate the source of the voice. "Evening." She hopes she sounds discouraging. She does not want company.

"I'm Ernesto Rubio. I'm the gardener here. Are you a guest?"

Ernesto Rubio. Mexican. “Do you garden in the dark, Mr. Rubio?”

“No, ma’am. I was just going over some landscaping ideas with Mrs. Albertson and saw you as I was leaving. Saw your silhouette, anyway. The streetlights will be on any minute. Are you okay out here? Do you need anything?”

For you to go away. “No, thank you.”

“I can suggest a good cafe if you haven’t had supper.”

Jamie suspects he’ll offer to go along with her, to annoy her while she chokes down another chicken-fried steak with mashed potatoes, both laden with white gravy, chased by a gigantic tumbler of sweet tea.

“No, I’ve eaten. Thanks.” Actually, she’d had a corny dog and fries, along with a vow to begin a no-carb diet as soon as the funeral is over.

A sickening yellow floods her vision as the streetlights flash on. Now she can see him, see his jeans, his starched white shirt, his black cowboy hat. He takes the hat off and she can see his square face, his eyes black against the night. Not half bad, but maybe half her age. That puts him in the 30-to-35-year range.

He squats on his haunches. “See, I made the lights come on for you.” His wide grin shows white teeth against his dark skin.

In the light, he should be able to see his mistake, the age difference, but he is looking at her beer, noticing the cooler at her feet. She isn’t about to offer him one, especially after she drove twenty miles to the county line to buy it. “Would you like a beer?”

“Yes, thank you, ma’am.” He takes the beer and the opener. “Modelo. That’s from the Mother Country, you know. It’s better than Corona.”

“Really?” She wishes the nursing home would call or maybe her husband, but he’s a long shot. Theirs is not a “how was your day?” kind of relationship. Soon, if her instincts are correct, it may become even less than that. She’s sad, but not broken-hearted. After all, Lloyd is her third. Jamie is as disappointed in marriage as Big Jim is in her.

“Did you grow up in Silver Falls?” Ernesto says, jarring her back to the present.

She hesitates, debating whether to insult him or answer a few polite questions and let the conversation die of its own volition. After her eyes adjust to the streetlight’s glow, she

sees the lines in Ernesto's face. Either he's not as young as she thought or he's spent many hours in the sun. "Born here. Left when I was twenty-one."

He looks like someone in a Diego Rivera mural, but his eyes are intense. "I grew up over in Sweetwater. I run the Co-op here, and help Mrs. Albertson with the gardening. She can't do for herself anymore."

Jamie takes a long swig, emptying her beer. Well, the introductions are out of the way. Three more beers and a couple of hours and then she'll sleep, but she can hardly open another beer without offering him one. "*Una mas?*" She holds the open cooler toward him. He takes a bottle and lifts it in a one-sided toast. If her daddy could see her now, he would finally cardiac arrest. Before she learned to count, before she knew her ABCs, she knew better than to associate with Mexicans. She didn't remember any exact warnings; the message was in her oatmeal and hung out with the wash and in between the pages of her Bible: do not mingle with Mexicans. It did not matter if they were born in the U.S. or in France; if they were of Mexican descent, they were Mexicans. *Not our kind*. Her daddy would flip right into his grave if he knew. She smiles at the idea and uncaps a beer.

"Your mom and dad still here?" The square of his hat-hair echoes the shape of his face.

"Yeah, Daddy's just down the street."

"But you're here at the Wildflower?" He tilts his head like a curious little bird.

"He doesn't have room for me." Ernesto's only crime is being friendly. There is no need to cut him off at the knees. Besides, in with all her lessons on racism, she was taught to be polite, especially to those less fortunate than she, which certainly included Mexicans. "Daddy's at the nursing home."

"Well, I hope he's feeling okay."

"He's dying. He may already be dead."

"You sound pretty angry. Are you mad that you're losing him?"

Losing him? She lost him over forty years ago, about the same time she found herself and ran away from Brady Joe Phillips and Silver Falls. No regrets. "He was a good daddy. Taught me how to ride. He put me on a horse when I was three-and-a half years old.

I can still hear Mother yelling for him to get me off. That's when I knew I'd be Daddy's girl."

"So you were a tomboy?"

"Couldn't be anything else. He had me riding and roping, I even helped with the branding when I was a teenager." All the other women were in the kitchen cooking beans and steak, and she'd be out helping make bulls into steers. And getting her ass pinched by cowboys who thought she belonged in the kitchen, too. "I was an only child. Still am. He wanted a boy."

"Lucky you. I'm one of five. The middle one. Brothers north and south of me."

With his husky laugh, he sounds genuinely happy. "No one noticed me until I was grown, left, and came back for a visit."

Siblings would have been a good distraction for her daddy who insisted on picking out her horses, her cars, and, eventually, her first husband. She had blamed her mother for not interceding until she herself was married, and understood the complexity of subtle bullying.

They have finally run out of small talk. Jamie is curiously energized from the beer or the company, she can't tell which. Maybe it's just the waiting. How could anyone take so long to let go? She lets the bottom of her beer bottle swim in its condensation on the wide arm of the Adirondack. The angle of the chair makes her feel like a pocketknife about to be folded into repose.

Ernesto's eyes widen and he smiles as if all the pieces of the puzzle have come together for him. "You must be Big Jim's daughter. I'm sorry about your dad. He's a fine man."

Of course he'd know who she was. Even at this late date, she's still a celebrity, still an anomaly in Silver Falls. And everyone in town would agree that Big Jim was "a fine man." Jamie is silent, waiting for Ernesto to realize that he's out of his league, in the presence of royalty; to back away, hat in hand, the way people around here always have.

"Say, some of us are meeting at Mac's parking lot to make a liquor run. Want me to bring you *mas cervezas*? I owe you a couple. Or, here's a better idea. Come with us." He stands, as if answering a signal only he can hear.

Mac's parking lot. She spent many a summer's evening there, sliding into and out

of cars to flirt or make plans for swimming or the drive-in. Mac's Grocery was unfortunately situated across the street from the funeral home, so the teenagers had to be especially quiet when there was a body. To be noisy was disrespectful, even if nobody over there could hear anything anymore. Jamie imagines that the nursing home and the funeral home will be the last businesses standing when the rest of the town finally dies and blows away.

"No, thanks. I'll finish that last one and go to bed." She's shocked that he assumes they will socialize. Of course, in a big city, the line is not so clearly drawn, and people cross it routinely. Actually, she has crossed the line, first with a married Lebanese man and then a dalliance with a black man. But no matter how her philosophy and ethics have evolved, here, back home, the old rules still hold.

His hat is back on. He is smoothing out the wrinkles in his jeans and smiling down at her. "Really, come on. You'll be fine. We'll drive to the line, drink a few beers on the way back, and then it'll be sleepy time. Okay?" He holds his hand out to help her to her feet.

"No, thanks. I really couldn't." She puts her hand in his as she stands, feeling the worn calluses of a man who works hard. Light headed and lighthearted, she lets him lead her toward his pickup parked beneath the streetlight.

Her cell phone glistens in the grass beside her empty chair.

The Isolation
Ian Randall Wilson

I'm a man

who has
 smiled
 himself

into
a cave

Situs Invertus

Charles Harper Webb

This foggy night-air feels soggy enough
to sip. No wonder his hibachi huddles,
cold as yesterday's tofu. "It'll work later,"

he assures the woman of his latest
dreams. But when she slips his kisses,
hissing, "Steaks, *then* sex. You've got it

backwards, as per ushe," panic attacks.
Because his insides are reversed—heart
on the right, gall bladder on the left (one

in 25,000 are born this way)—did he try
to light the match with kindling, as he's tried
to open doors on the hinge side? Did he hope

to cook the steaks by freezing them?
His health is great, despite the schematic
tattooed for emergencies onto his chest; still,

it's a fight to write memos readable without
a mirror, and not to drive on the English side.
Oh, the jobs he's lost by showing up on weekends,

taking week-days off! All his life,
he's marched to a different plumber, rowed
with one igloo out of the water, been one taco

short of a full house. He's spoken English
backwards, and called it Japanese.
Now he sees his guest's departing hips

through a fog that reeks of *Nuits de Paris*.
Soon he's choking on fragrances so sweet
that he despairs, which feels like ecstasy.

Plushophilia

Charles Harper Webb

Just as in Asphyxiophilia, where someone
partially hangs him(her?)self, pushing
toward the near-death point where loss

of oxygen brings giddiness and (it's said)
an orgasm addictive as cocaine,
plushophiles—dressed as lustful Mickeys,

Daffys, Plutos—strain to reach the precise
spot where *cute* and *cuddly* thrust
forward into *hot*. Is that so strange?

Aren't *penis* and *vagina* weird as their names?
Compare Nature, that screams, *Transmit*
your genes, then get out of the way,

with the plushophile stroking his (her)
paramour—skin smooth as velvet because it *is*
velvet; face designed to be adorable,

not by God or evolution, but the holy wish
to make a buck. See how the bassinet
of innocence floats overhead, even as “I

love you Donald / Goofy / Pooh,” morphs
into squeaky beds and grownup moans,
the sexual parts doing their usual swelling,

flowing, expelling—the soul extending airy
paws toward, if not its mate, at least
a snuggly place to be alone.

For a Friend About to Give Notice

Garret Keizer

You may find the poems come harder
once you're retired.

Now you're writing one a day
and have been for years,
and for years I've been amazed
at your output.

But the Muse has been known
to take pity on a laboring man,
to favor him with a flash
of thigh as he barrows wet cement
past her high veranda.

Living with her everyday
is a different affair.

She will expect you
to set your own alarm
and rise to it without complaint,
bring her coffee and a cruller,
and pay attendance in ways
you can scarcely imagine.

She will bear you children,
daughters all
as lovely as herself
and every one will need a dowry.

Featured Artist, Sherry Abbasi

Biographical Note

Sherry Abbasi is an artist and educator who can be found stuck in traffic somewhere between Dallas and Denton, TX. She graduated with a BFA in Visual Art Studies, and currently teaches art in Keller, TX.

“I have a passion for art and inquire about it constantly. Learning is what I value most, and when I learn I want to pass that knowledge on to students and peers. We can always better ourselves by trying to understand others. I try to teach my students that an open mind is the best kind and the best way to fail is to not try.”

“My art varies to many degrees. I like to try my hand at many things without thought of whether it’s good or bad. I find inspiration in instances of science and nature around me. I also find that personal experience plays a big role, whether I want it to or not. If you want to reach out to me about a current piece, potential commission, or complain about I-35, feel free to reach me at my website, www.sherryabbasi.com.”

Statement on the Works

Front Cover: “Haiku”

Haiku was an attempt. It was a strange dive I took into the abstract world. It engulfed me in oceans of color and nothing else. It changed constantly and it changed me too. It was several other paintings before we finally agreed to meet at this point. It was light and cheerful. I was light and cheerful. It was dark and melancholy. I needed a nap. We fell halfway in between. We both needed that dichotomy. I was at a change in my life and I never liked works that told me how to feel anyway. I needed to create a piece for once that did not have a direction. I hoped for it to create questions instead of answers. I enjoy the conversations that come up when this piece is discussed. They are never the same.

Back Cover: “Rainbow”

Rainbow was the complete opposite. I knew exactly what direction I wanted to go in and that’s how the painting turned out. Sort of.

I started this piece when I began teaching. The only map I had was that I wanted to have a conversation with my students about what an abstract rainbow would look like. What form would it take on? What order would the colors be in? When I began painting I knew the exact answers but it was more puzzling as I ventured in. If orange was placed with red everything will be harmonious and flow together. If I put green next to red, we’ll have a competition for attention. This enjoyable process was more “art” to me than the actual end result. I think that’s the point of this art thing anyway.

Ophelia

By Richard Wirick

Far out in the middle of the Lake, maybe halfway to Canada, to Thessalon, the wind blows the waves even higher than it does out over the open sea. Their tops of froth bend into whitened crystal in the frozen air, then crash like glass, thousands of broken windows falling into the unrisen water. Freighters, Jack knew, had gone down under their waves for two centuries, the crew waiting silently to die, curdling into ice themselves, in an instant, as the bow drilled down slowly and then much more quickly into oblivion.

“What the hell were they thinking?” his father said. *The Plain Dealer* was spread out over the breakfast table as Jack looked over his shoulder and saw pictures of the plane, a B-25, that the ROTC students had tricked out for skydiving and painted with an Indians logo on the tail fin.

The crew and passengers were in school at Case Western, aeronautical engineering students. Many were fraternity brothers, but some were women, girls really, girlfriends, or ones wanting to be paired off so badly as to have done this. The details were being sorted out.

The plane had taken off from Burke Lakefront Airport, the new-built landing field for business jets that stretched along the Cleveland waterfront like a dangling arm when seen from the air. The pilot had maybe fifty, maybe a hundred hours of flight time in a military rig like this. The investigation had only begun, the paper said. But the kid had gotten it off the ground, clicked the lights on with his hand console, and had correctly retracted the gear and leveled off at about six thousand feet.

What happened next was that the plane lost its coordinates, went over a cloud cover, and when the parachutists started jumping out into the winter night, each one bundled into a white down suit with twelve-inch body beacons, big as clocks, they thought they were over a group of football fields in the Elyria flatlands. This was the flight plan their thin captain had described to them.

But the plane had followed the shore westward without instruments, VFR only, and

then turned north out over the lake and followed the island lights of Put-in-Bay that pointed not to Detroit but across the vast, dark inland sea to Ontario. When they went off the wire they were jumping into dense, boxlike cloudbanks packed against the miles of bridges and cargo inlets. Some were only a couple of hundred yards from the beach when they landed, but all of them drowned. The ones who hit chop water had floated ashore, bloated from days of drifting, their faces clustered with moon-bright hoar frost in the newspaper photographs.

The rest, maybe seven or eight, went down over water that was shallower, that froze in the days after they entered its silence. They were still frozen, only a few feet under, and fire trucks went out each night with drills and floodlights to do the slow, grisly work of bringing the bodies up.

Jack wanted to go out there, and told his mother. She forbade it absolutely, which meant he'd have to make up something that Friday night about staying at the MacMorrises. Besides, his parents had fought that night, which always made escapes easier. His mother had come home smiling and weeping, with Jack's sister, the soccer player. His mother explained how the team, having never won against Fredericktown, put it through on a three second penalty kick, causing the ecstatic coach to drop to his knees—crowd roaring—and propose to his girlfriend right there on the field. "The whole shebang," she said, still choking back tears. "He had the ring and everything and her hands just *flew* up into the air."

"Women love that shit," his father said. "I'd have quit when I was ahead and got out when the gettin' was good. Now the man is positively bitched." His mother and sister immediately left for dinner at HoJos, leaving Jack and his father to fumble with TV dinners using the still novel phenomena of a microwave oven. She'd really only walked out on him like this once before, when he monopolized the downstairs toilet as he sometimes did on weekend mornings, his labors taking him half an hour, forty-five minutes, getting through the entire Sunday *Plain Dealer*, *The Sunday Toledo Blade*, the twenty-four section *Columbus Dispatch*, and sometimes even the weekend edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. He had always urinated with the door slightly ajar, but everything about number two was immensely secret and required a degree of planning that their mother could only compare to Normandy. If Jack

and his sister made too much noise or dared to knock on the door, he would roar at them. “I’m trying to accomplish something in here,” he would say. “For GODSAKE I’m trying to accomplish something.”

After they were done burning their hands on the tinfoil, and his father had fallen asleep on the couch watching *Bonanza*, Jack went to Albers and bought two heavy-duty flashlights, the large yellow ones whose batteries looked like squares. He put a thermos and sandwiches in his old scout backpack and rode to the 71 ramp on his bicycle, chaining it to a tree behind the dairy signs. The trucker who picked him up was tobacco stained, tobacco-smelling, the rest of the air of the cab filled with the odor of wet wool and piss. Far in the back, where the driver would sleep on long hauls, a dog yawned and sometimes opened its eyes when a pair of headlights approached.

The hitch was routine, like he liked them. No drunk or perverted drivers. Very little conversation. The ride was a magnet pointed forward, running along the rail-hard pull of his curiosity. He was off to inhabit the Underworld, to see what form the shades had assumed. He would move, unseen, among them, and then return to the world of the living.

The driver had let him out on Euclid, and Jack knew his way down the streets of East Harbor to what in summer was a long band of lee water, bright as a knife, stinging your eyes if you looked at it without sunglasses. Now it was piled with dirty snow and tire tracks, like a floodlit construction site. Out past the high beach lights he saw the tiny mounds of slush around the bodies that the trucks were still drilling for. Yellow police tape wound around the barrels they had set up to stop people from coming down. Jack hid behind a phone pole. When the rescue squad went into the long, thin coroner’s truck for coffee, he dipped under the tape and crossed to the first of the squared-out worksites. He hadn’t worn boots, or even shoes with cleated soles. He slipped and banged his knee, cursing silently, crawling on all fours until the pain faded and the night air, heavy with barge smoke and blown soot, began to bite.

He came up to a wall of ice, took a light out and switched it on. The mounds the drill had heaped up had their own strange patterns of melting—an ornate undercutting,

like lace in a glass church altar. It had snowed lightly the night before and the new striations of white, their liquefaction and evaporation, had shown him how snow too rots at its own slow arctic pace, its ridges crawling with bubbles of meltwater and sand, suspended like dust motes in a shaft of light.

He was stalling. He knew he was stalling. He had only seen the dead in their coffins at family funerals, the ancient grandmothers made up with hats and odd perched glasses or lanyards of their Eastern Star, mothers of World War II and Korean sons. They smelled the same. The smell of the human dead, like old dresses, hung low in the air and entered the curtains until the banks of flowers crowded in with their reassuring, life-affirming perfumes.

But these were going to be, Jack knew, the real dead, the unadorned. The dead before hands had touched them and made them more as they were when they passed him on the street. Real people who fell to the ground in unthinkable terror, their last panicked looks, twisting themselves up like inchworms on a trellis, lifting back from what they thought would be the welcoming ground. He thought of his own life now, a sort of sprung, uncoiled clock, his own, his incredibly own, that he must not let drop.

He leaned over and shone one of the lights into the open square. When he brushed away the snow the girl was looking sideways, her profile etched with a string of blood that ran from the top of her helmet down over her shoulders. Her hair was cut short. She'd been trying to close her eyes, but one shone honey yellow under the half-lid, like a bud splitting out of a rubbery bulb. One arm was under her, the other stretched out, pointing, reaching. Her limbs went in too many directions for their bones, all of them, not to be completely broken.

There were voices in the truck, coughing. A cigarette cough.

Jack crawled to the second square. He used both lights this time. It was another girl, looking almost like the first, maybe a twin. She had the same spun-sugar curls cut short and bending up out of a watch cap. She looked intact and dusty—as though she'd never hit water or ice, sleeping in a camp bunk the heedless sleep of the young—and out of her parka pocket had fallen three flattened cans of Strohs, the local beer, their tops pushed up against her side like nursing kittens. Around her was a circle of other broken, scattered gear, light

lenses and pull rings. Jack remembered photos of bog women necklaced with the outlines of their own vertebrae.

Another dig was joined to hers, a coffin-angled shaft whose right end held the body of a man, face up, rigid with wonder at what he'd come to. There was a compass in one of his gloves. Jack read that falling people cling to objects, tightly, desperately, as if they were part of the solid thing they fell from or had looked back to, lastly, before deciding to let go. His eyes were sleeping, his lashes long as a woman's tipped with beads of perfect ice. But his neck was broken, much longer than it should have been and razored red like a bird's about to be butchered. Like a hanged man.

"Hey kid."

The voice sounded out of a megaphone, but the speaker was talking to somebody else and couldn't see Jack. He flattened himself, breathed slower with his mouth in a circle so his breath wouldn't cloud.

"Back of the tape," the voice said again. But the man was looking to the east, up near the plank bridge that went out to the breakwater, where people had been chased—some arrested—in the preceding days.

The last one he could get to before having to crawl had the highest berms, but seemed the newest, its snow crisp-topped, untarnished. But it was high and freezing fast, and Jack had to gouge a dent in its side so he could mount both lights downward.

The girl looked as young as Jack, fourteen, and the ice was clear as a window she watched him from. She was a redhead, and there was no struggle or pain in her face, her eyes brimming up as though grateful, amazed. Like many of the northeast county Irish she had freckles. Her top suit snaps were open and the trail of brown dots swarmed fawnlike down her neck and into the ravaged parka. The lee water had to have been moving when she sank, her hair spinning on the surface in an orange circle and then, like a night-blooming flower, closing back on itself as the water hardened. He'd just read Ophelia's speech in Ackerman's class and he imagined her calling to him. *There's fennel for you, columbines. I was not wearier where I lay. Come live inside me, said the wasserfrau.*

Jack got up. She'd been a vision too much to take in. He imagined her alive, stand-

ing before him with her eyes closed, a little pulse in the lids, cheeks creaseless, smooth as a buckskin slipper, silky and mountain-scented. A bubble-gum tongue. Deep and mannish speech that came from behind her head. Jack tasted blood in his mouth when he got up, and maybe his lips *were* that chapped and cracking. Or maybe his teeth just seeped this water of death, the final metallic taste of fatality.

“Son.” There was a hand on his shoulder. He’d forgotten he had stood up and could be seen.

“This is a crime scene and we warned you twice.” One deputy stood back a ways and shone the light straight into his face. The one who had tapped him pulled him up and reached for the handcuffs on his belt.

“Come on,” Jack said. “I’m writing a story on this for the high school paper. Like everybody else.”

“You, my friend, are a little *shit*. We told you twice to get back and you slithered around like a fuckin’ *grave robber*.”

Jack opened his mouth, preparing a plea. But the man was right.

“Every one of you little fuckers, every night. It doesn’t take much to fall into this shit and end up like one of these college boys.” The deputy said the last two words with sour contempt. He had a tattoo on his arm, the Marine anchor and globe. Above it, in a fading half circle, was the green-blue ink of the word *Da Nang*.

“We could throw you in the can but give us your parents’ number and we’ll let them pick you up. We’ve got a mobile unit phone and we can call right now. You sit over there and wait at the Amtrak stop. No fucking funny business.”

The deputy with the long flashlight nodded. “You go to the vending machines? You get up and take a leak? We shoot you. Stuff you under the ice. Like we did that kid last night.”

The first deputy lowered his voice. “Because you’re wasting our time. Got it, Mr. Grave Robber?” He ran the nail of his thumb along the checkered stock of his revolver.

The Cleveland PD were bad enough, Jack knew. They’d been quick with the tear gas at demonstrations. But the Cuyahoga County Sheriffs were the dregs, PD aspirants who

couldn't make it into the Academy. His father, usually kindly disposed to law enforcement, hated them, called them Barney Fifes. "Those boys," he said. "You fire a bullet through their head and it wouldn't hit a vital organ." He'd told Jack always to answer them "Yes, sir; No, sir."

Just then their captain came out of the coroner trailer and said the precinct jail was full and that people couldn't be left unwatched, and that people who'd been found out looking that night were being driven down to Summit County, to a holding cell in the big jail there converted from a Goodyear factory.

Not arrested. But it was where his mother would have to pick him up. Akron. The Rubber Bowl. The town of her birth.

Jack looked up at the sky, starless, empty of constellations, the patterns and names he had come to love. Something about the blackness of the lake and air, their indiscernible border, suddenly angered him—their broad unconscious strength, their serene unawareness of him, of the jumpers, of anyone. Farther out, beyond the bar, a freighter of ore cut north to Buffalo.

In the back of the sheriff's car he watched the lights of the interstate, the broadcast trucks coming up from the Columbus and Wheeling TV stations. The faces came back to him in a group, wide and light-colored as planets through a telescope—that same still, beautiful flatness, bright, unmoving in the melting tombs.

He felt, in that moment, that he would never die. And in the years that followed, when he was lifted into the air in the seat of a plane, he felt himself full of the fierce and reckless, fastened-together, together-dreaming and drunken jumpers. He imagined himself beside them in the starless dark, swaying, turning the canvas straps of the great chute's rudders, this way, that way. Maybe taking them, as they had taken themselves, to the end of the world. But maybe also, with just the right turns, this way, that way, steering them to some unseen, waiting island of safety, where they would drop and roll, jerk their harnesses and straps around the flattening chutes, and stand up, and open their eyes.

The Mannequin Poems: She Who Is Plastic Is Sealed

Karen Faris

I

She Who Is Plastic Is Sealed

Sometimes the sun is in my eyes
or my arms are full
or maybe it's my heart over brimming
sharp and urgent
like lemon zest
or bees buzzing
itching to pollinate
in thick pools of dripping honey:
it's a kind of listening from within,
a swimming in the water's stream
a barefooted walk
in the dewy grass of the universe
that makes me forget
to cart her wherever I go
the one with perfect skin
done hair and heels to die for—
But as soon as I step out
get wet in the rain
burnt in the blaze of a mid-day sun,
I am reminded
by the others
who have not been carried away
I am undone.

The Mannequin Poems: It's Been a Perfectly Pleasant Arrangement
Karen Faris

II

It's Been a Perfectly Pleasant Arrangement

My mannequin has a contract
but I do not.
My mannequin will walk
in white and shrill shoes
but I will not.
My mannequin will take a name
I do not recognize nor own
plus I'm bad at spelling
so what do I do with that?
My mannequin never worries
about love or being loved
she has been formed for just these things
but me, the me of me to end all me's
I worry all the time
I will be found out
cast out
served eviction papers
having voided the contract
with my invisible ink
which you appear to be able to see.

Biopsy

Peter Marcus

Her scalpel cuts away
four millimeters of flesh

for the diagnostic lab
to gauge if my cells are

injurious or well.
I'm instructed *to call*

for the results next week.
Either cheerful news

or a preface to hair loss
and debilitating queasiness.

She's removed one dot-
sized mole. An odd

brown punctuation mark.
I'd wrongly surmised

my dermatologist took
and in return, gave

nothing back. When
in fact she bartered

this soft rind for
a scar.

How to Raise a Child

By Ana Menéndez

It was midnight. She lay in bed for a moment before realizing that she had woken to thunder. Another flash and, seconds later, the concussion. Boom, boom, boom. Her husband lay asleep beside her. She made room in the bed. Any moment Max would come running in, screaming for Mommy. How her husband hated it, told her the boy needed to toughen up. Don't baby. But he's my baby. Born so little that he barely weighed more than four sticks of butter. And that first year like a catch in her throat. Not knowing what would happen to Max, so fragile for this tough world.

That first year, he cried all the time, as if he had dragged a great sadness across the void. Where did it come from? Where did he come from? Get some sleep, her husband had said. He'd passed his hand over her forehead and held her. He looked so old. She guessed that she too looked old, but she never passed a mirror that first year without turning away. Ashamed. As if it had been her fault. She lay awake at night. Twelve o'clock, one, two. Morning like a foreign country. But the first day rose and Max lived. And another. And another. She dared to plan. Her boy a man.

Now he was five years old. Five years! How long they seemed and how short. How far away their fears and how close. She lay awake listening to the thunder. She burrowed closer to her husband, preparing the space for her son. Inside, it was warm. Outside, lightning lit up the disordered world. Pale trees bent by the wind, leaves flattened. As if in fear, she thought. Hanging on. The whole world always just hanging on. The heavens pouring forth both sunshine and destruction. Hope and fear without end.

It was midnight. Any moment Max would come in screaming for Mommy. And she would hold his hard little body to her. Feel the strong, wild heartbeat that persisted. Through joy, through fear. Relentlessly beating its defiance. Boom, boom, boom.

Ever After

By Toni Jensen

Once upon, a girl set out for a time, into the forest on foot. The breadcrumbs had gone missing, so she wandered, trail-less. Her cape did not tie properly, and she was sick of the thing, how it fell first off one shoulder, then the next. Her basket did not hold the solution to the cape problem. But she held the basket, and she wandered beneath tall trees alongside the river.

You were picturing bread and grandmothers. You should stop that. You were picturing a red cape, the palest face under a bright hood. You should stop that, too.

The wolves lope the meadow then meander alongside the girl. The girl has never before seen a meandering wolf, and when she says so, the wolf says, I'm not lost. No one eats anyone else. Not yet. The wolf wears the cape better than did the girl. She does not remember offering it up.

The wolf becomes her husband. The girl does not remember the ceremony. Do you, John Smith? Do you, Rebecca? She remembers herself first as Matoka, as Amonute. You are remembering her as Pocahontas. You should stop that, too.

When the river arrives, the wolf says, You're a bridge. And he crosses and crosses and crosses. He does not hear the water. He does not look down. He does not remember the girl.

Toil

Inez Tan

Five grams of salt can determine
whether the loaf lives or if I've ruined it. Not

all work is delight. I had a dream once

that a man was standing over me with a stone
he would use to crack

my hips, and just as his hands released it

I turned into a cloud of fishes
and swam free. Out of danger

came knowledge; out of fear, inspiration –

but I awoke on ripped flour sacks
cold and clenched like a fist. Everything has

to be weighed and weighed again.

Throw Yourself Down from Here

Inez Tan

Saying no always
is a yes to something else. Even light
– scattered, continuous – cannot
be a nectarine snug in the plucking
and remain light. Every cat you know
will kill. All bananas are clones of
the same banana. Who can help us when
we're failing as extras because we're thinking
too hard about our casual walks, deep
conversations, punches that will never land? Not I,
said the big bad voice. If you
believe you will be given more than
you can bear, what could anyone say
to comfort you? You must know
that each tree in the forest grows only so
tall by taunting thunder.

The Source of the Darkness Was Unconfirmed

Inez Tan

but I know / it was me / for in old stories I / was told / that there had once been plagues
over all the land / water was blood / fish swollen / rotting white / frogs slimy in the stoves
/ and kneading troughs / flung in heaps / gnats in the hair and livestock / you could hear
them climbing into / your ear canal / flies too / crops became powder / death collected the
livestock / boils seething / seeping blistering / thunder and hail and lightning / and locusts
obliterating every color but their own / and then at last darkness / and I loved darkness /
and carried it within myself / because in darkness I was alone / and could spin / my own
stories / in darkness / anyone could be unmade / my darkness / is here again / I see nothing /
and remember everything

Drowsy Read

Paul Sohar

a grasshopper lands
on a gently curving page of the open book
and stands maybe injured unable to take off again
but then I see it as a broken green bicycle
clumsily collapsed on itself
unable to get up and move on
and the book grows to match its dimensions
even while I still hold it
until it outgrows my hands
and closes falling as a good book should
at the end of the story when
the grasshopper hops on the bicycle
and rides off beyond the gold-speckled spine.

The Invisible Man Smoking a Cigarette Cody Todd

The nine-ball and the six,
just placed together after the
investigator breaks the rack,
just looking at me, just the cue-ball
like a moon, and with
a moon's violence, just imagine
the investigator with
the cue to his chest—close and stiff,
like a cigar store Indian,
but this time, just don't ask me
about any killings,
the investigator requests,
I've had enough of the killings, just
my life is predisposed
to uncovering
uncleanly facts about each killing,
just like a statue reading the newspaper,
the patient investigator
waits for his turn,
not a sentence, not
anything printed on the page,
just this ridiculous story I've hatched
in case I'm carried away
for questioning, just the anatomy
of a narrative
that provides false witness
and only needs one
listener to remain true: about
a girl, how the light,
unscathed, hits the eight ball cold
and dead, like starlight? Something
about the cracking jingle
of billiard balls breaking into
each other? About him,
the investigator, I know
he favors punishment
over mercy but not
over luck. He tries to blend in
with the wall behind him, just
like the four-ball's concealment,
against the table's felt, just like the black cranes
in the plum trees at twilight,
invisible, they just cease
to exist.

The Shaving

Cody Todd

That skull in the painting
is not impermanence,
or Et in Arcadia ego,
amidst the viscera of heat lightning

on the pasture. These skies
in an afternoon storm, how the trees
look penciled-in and tremble
without fright. Acrylic drip

of clouds closing in, and all the rage
a cow ever knows
is the audible clang
of its slow bell. Two ants scurry

to drag their companion on a gurney
of shaved coconut I must have dropped
during lunch. Durable
yet quivering lines,

the barbwire fence. Ridgeline,
far west, standing still.
The rain is warm as a finger-flick on my neck.
Home is always twice as far

as the storm. Grass sways. Animals vanish.
Earlier, I read about death row
and razors. An assassin from the Brown
Palace murders, how they shaved him

beyond his control
because they feared
his suicide. To dignify a killer
with a face similar

to his infant self—as the skin clings
to his skull after electrocution,
in the painting, is both
cosmetic and utilitarian.

Hamlet as Rhinestone Cowboy

Cody Todd

In a parking-lot made of dust and stones at *Yorrick-Deuce's*,
y'all kiss as still as cacti hidden in your ex-
husband's front seat. His ghost hovers the mechanical-
bull, a jostling and delirious animal, injured and convinced

it'll mate before death. The moon is
carved of ivory, and appears to hover like a drowned girl
on the lake from afar. I think in terms of ghost, in terms
of the given ghost of Waylon Jennings, projected from

your blouse, and a frightened boy understands
the difference between it and night. Mother,
I'm not here to forget you, I'm here to recall
the sound of the echo no one
will hear. Your ex-husband's ear, a disturbance
amidst the butterflies in the field. The world awakens
to the gun, the gut-rot, and one shot left, floating on a lake.

Everything gained and lost; my revenge has its cost.

Shame on, and I love, *The things we used to say and do.*

Frontier
Cody Todd

for David Saint John

Nostalgia for trains. The apnea
of arrival and departure. The landscape
washed away by rain

as the windows slide forward.
Through a mountain it goes, where we hunt
bison on the other side.

The rail of gold. The boxcars are aquariums.
Step on us, you government, and see
our wrath. David, I pull you out

of a burning bush and help you brush off
the leaves. No bullet in your belly, thank God,
and no arrows in your back.

Like those bandits that fled to Mexico,
penniless, we watch that train disappear
like a whale into the ocean.

Fractured Memory

By Claire Day

He focuses on the mouth, trying to make sense of the sounds, but there are only lips opening, closing in twists and turns, stretching across the teeth, pursing in tight lines. Long-legged and sinewy, he leans forward from the couch, searching for something recognizable, a tiny piece of certainty to cling to.

Now the mouth draws closer, the face blocks all else from his view. Blue eyes look into his. “Dad, do you understand what we’re saying about tomorrow?”

Suddenly the focus becomes sharper.

“Lisa, when did you get here?” he says, stressing the *you*.

Her lips close, her head snaps back in a small recoil. “Dad,” she says, “I—”

“It’s OK, Lisa.” There’s a voice beside him, strong and low like his own.

“David, you are here too.” The words are wrapped in pleasure. “Dad, this is Lisa’s apartment. We’ve been staying here all weekend.”

“Really?” He can’t think of what else to say. He turns his head and looks around. Well, it’s certainly not his place. There’s a carved African head on the mantel, the silk wall hanging he and Mary brought back from their China vacation. Its blues and yellows stand out against the orange wall.

“Of course,” he says. “Strange how things look different sometimes. You have a nice apartment, Lisa.” He turns back to his children, sees something he thinks is relief in their eyes, wonders what preceded it. “You’ve come a long way, son, just for a weekend. That’s nice of you.”

David bites his lower lip.

“Is something wrong? Have I forgotten someone’s birthday?” Even with a frown his skin is remarkably smooth for his seventy-six years.

Lisa runs long fingers through her bangs. Dark strands lift and fall against her forehead. “No, Dad, there’s nothing to worry about.” She sits down beside him and kisses his cheek.

“Your mother remembered all the important dates,” he says. “You know me. Memory like a sieve.”

He hears Lisa’s sudden intake of breath and the last of the blur clears. He remembers yesterday, his apartment at the “residence” as the kids call it, although all three of them know it’s a home for old people. He was sitting in his favorite recliner, watching them package things into boxes: books, framed photographs, clothes. Through a doorway he could see Lisa in the bathroom, inspecting each toiletry item before dropping it into a plastic bag.

“I can do that,” he said. “At least let me pack my own toothbrush.”

“Don’t want to forget anything.” There was a forced cheeriness in her voice, in both his children’s voices actually. He knew they meant well, but the condescension still rankled.

He straightens up and touches Lisa’s hand. “I’ll miss you,” he says. “Australia’s a long way.”

“I’ll miss you too, but I’ll be back before you know it.” There’s a lift to her voice he remembers from when she was a teenager going out to see her friends.

David’s head is bowed in concentration. He’s pushing back the cuticles on his fingers, one by one. The tension in the air is slight but perceptible. Mary used to say it was his own sensitivity that first attracted her to him.

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine,” he says. “I could have stayed in Beverly, you know. I was okay there.”

“No, Dad. You need one of us close by.”

Sometimes, listening to David, the pitch, the tone, is like listening to himself. They even have the same thatches of hair, and David’s is showing early hints of grey, just as his did in his late forties. So far he’s kept most of it, but who knows for how much longer? Age and change, they’re inseparable, he thinks, and now he has to deal with another move, another home. He leans back against the couch. “I’m tired,” he says. “I think I’ll go to bed.”

“I’ll get your pills. Big day tomorrow.” Lisa’s lips smile, but her eyes are misty as she leans across to kiss his head.

Lying in the spare bedroom, he lifts his right hand to his lips, kisses his fingertips and reaches out to press them against the photograph on the night stand. “That goes with me,” he’d said when David had started to pack it in a box. Now he touches the lips, outlines the edge of the face, as he does every night. “Good night, Mary,” he whispers. His voice slows with approaching sleep.

There’s no night-light, but Lisa has left the door ajar. A yellow glow curls around the opening together with the mournful strains of Pachelbel, the indistinct murmur of his children’s voices. Nice seeing them together, he thinks. Their mother would be proud of how they’ve turned out.

He’s feeling himself sinking further into sleep when raised voices suddenly snap him back to awareness.

“...two years...a long time in his life.” Some of the words are indistinct, but David’s anger is clear.

“...give up this chance?”

“...self-centered...”

“...seeing him twice a week, not you...” Lisa’s voice is shrill.

“...not fair....”

“...OK for you to move... but not for me.”

“...You’ll wake him.”

Their voices drop to murmurs, but he knows they are still arguing, and it’s about him. He should get up and intervene. They mustn’t fall out like this. The last thing he wants is to be a trouble to anyone. He wills himself to sit up, but his body doesn’t want to move. His eyes stay tightly shut as each breath pulls him further into sleep.

There’s a strange woman at the breakfast table. Her face is framed by long, grey hair tumbling from a purple beret. Large eyes look at him with familiarity. He’s supposed to know her.

“Remember me?” she says, clasping a paper cup in both hands. The aroma of coffee fills the kitchenette. “I’m a friend of Lisa’s. We’ve met a few times.”

“Don’t,” says David quietly from his chair between them.

“It’s OK.” She smiles at David, but he looks down at his bowl of cereal. “I just thought I’d stop by to wish you well in your move.”

“Thank you,” he says, and reaches for his toast, then pauses, hand in midair, and looks at Lisa. “I could have buttered it myself.”

“Sorry, Dad. I just wanted to spoil you a bit.” Lisa pats his arm and a small snort escapes from David’s mouth. Oh yes, the shouting last night. These two have to make it up before they go their separate ways.

“I came with Lisa to see you in your—” the woman pauses, “—in your apartment, sometimes. Do you remember the travel magazines?” She’s sipping coffee but her eyes don’t leave his face.

“Really,” he says, and looks to the window behind her head. The sky is grey with early winter.

“Anyway, I just thought I’d stop by before I get busy at the office.”

“Anything new on the horizon?” Lisa’s voice lifts with a forced cheeriness. He doesn’t like the sound.

“Argentina. I’m going to scout out a tour once the new assistant is fully trained.”

“It sounds interesting,” he says. “I hope you have a good time.”

“Well, it’s work, but I have to admit, I love it.”

“That’s nice,” he says. “I used to travel with my wife when I was younger.”

David pushes his dish away. It’s almost full. “We have to finish packing. I can see you out.” His chair scrapes the floor as he stands up.

He frowns at his son’s abruptness and pats his arm as if to calm him. An awkward silence fills the room.

The woman drains her cup and places it on the table. “Of course. I mustn’t hold you up.” She comes around to his side of the table and gives him a quick hug, but his shoulders tense against her arms. He’s never been demonstrative. “Enjoy your new place,” she

says. “I envy you all that sunshine.” She steps back and searches his face. He can’t think of anything to say. “Your papers are ready at the office,” she says to Lisa.

“We’ll go over everything this afternoon.” And then she’s gone, but the aroma of coffee lingers in the air.

A low murmur of voices drifts in from the hallway, dishes clatter as Lisa loads the machine. He watches the seconds tick by on the wall clock, repeating the same orbit over and over.

“David’s gone a long time,” he says. “Who is that woman?”

“Oh, just a friend I work with. My boss, I suppose.” He wishes Lisa would use her real voice, not this fake cheerful one.

“Shouldn’t you go and see her off too?”

“No, that’s fine. Let David do it.” The edge in her voice precludes him from saying any more. He loves his children, but why do they have to make life so difficult?

The clattering stops and Lisa’s arms encircle his shoulders from behind. There’s the pressure of her lips on his head. “Sorry, Dad. I didn’t mean to be sharp like that. Good job you know me.”

“Yes,” he says. But he’s not sure he does.

He’d forgotten how busy Logan can be: so many people rushing in all directions; glass walls; bright lights; and not one piece of quietness. “I’ll miss the ocean,” he says, “my morning walks on the sands.”

“I didn’t know—” David begins, but Lisa nudges him, and the two exchange a look he can’t read. They’ve been doing it all weekend. Best not to ask, but why do they have to turn his life upside down?

“There’s plenty of ocean where we’re going,” David says.

“Really?”

“California, remember?”

“Of course I remember. Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’ll like it there, Pops.” Lisa’s all bundled up like an artist’s palette: red cape,

turquoise muffler and a bright orange hat. “You’ll see the grandchildren too.”

He smiles and nods, but the *Pops* bothers him. He hasn’t heard it since she got her first license and wanted to borrow his car.

David pushes back his coat cuff and looks at his watch. His collar is still turned up against the outside wind. “Time we were going to the gate.”

“OK. Then I should leave.” Lisa is already buttoning up her cape, rearranging her scarf so that it covers her neck fully.

“What?” David’s angry tone again. Can’t they try to be nice to each other, if only for his sake?

“I hate goodbyes. They make me cry.” She gives him, a long, hard hug and cups his face in her hands. “I’ll write and send photos,” she says, but she doesn’t smile.

“Yes,” he says, and kisses her on each cheek.

David gives her a stiff hug and mumbles something he can’t hear.

He rubs his eyes as he watches her walk away, her steps fast and bouncy. He’s never noticed the bounce before. At the exit she turns, blows a kiss, and waves with both hands. The doors slide open, and she’s gone.

He raises the blind and peers through the window beside him, hoping to see the first streaks of dawn, but there is only blackness. Since childhood he’s never liked the dark, the sense of suffocation it brings. Every room in his home has night-lights of soft yellow. He shivers and tugs at the blind, but he can’t pull it back down.

“I’ll do that.” A hand reaches across him and yanks it into place. He turns his head and sees a middle-aged man sitting next to him.

“Excuse me,” he says. “That’s my wife’s seat.”

The stranger’s smile folds into a frown. “It’s okay. I just went to get a drink of water while you were asleep.” He holds a small bottle aloft, as if to prove his point.

“It’s not OK. She’s just gone to the toilet.”

The man sighs and rubs a finger along his lower lip. “Dad, it’s me, David. This is my seat.”

“I’m going to find my wife. She’ll sort this out.” He grabs the clasps of the seat-belt, but he can’t make them come apart. The straps feel tight around his waist, the metal cold against his fingers. “How do you open this thing?” he says, while his hands tug again and again.

And then the man’s hand is over his, long fingers stilling him. “Calm down, Dad. Here, have a drink of water.”

“I don’t know you,” he cries, pushing the bottle away so suddenly that a small stream of liquid fountains up over the edge. “Leave me alone.”

“Do you need anything, sir?” A woman in some kind of uniform is hovering over them.

“This man’s sitting in my wife’s seat. He won’t go away.”

“Sir, this is the gentleman’s seat.” Her smile is like a mask.

“No, no. I’ve never seen him before.” He tugs at the belt again. The engine is louder now, its throb pulsating all the way inside his head. “Please get me out of this belt.”

“Everything’s fine, thank you. He’s just out of routine right now.” The man’s voice is deep and oddly familiar.

“My wife,” he says, trying to push his body out of the restraint. “Can you get her, please? She’s in the toilet.”

But the woman ignores him. “I’ll be in the galley if you need me,” she says to the stranger, and she’s gone.

The man leans into his space and peers at him. “Listen to me, please.” His voice is quiet and flat. “I’m your son, David. I’m bringing you home to live near me.”

He leans away, but the cabin wall and window bound him on the other side. “You’re not David. He lives in—,” but he can’t remember the name. “It’s a long way away.”

“California.” The stranger nods. “That’s where we’re going. It is a long way.”

The plane lurches heavily and he grabs the arm rests. “My wife,” he says. “I want Mary. Where is she?”

“She’s not here. I’m with you, not her.” There’s a hint of annoyance in the voice now. The stranger shakes his head. Reflected highlights ripple in the thick hair.

He knows that hair, those eyes, and yes, the strangeness of the face is fading. “David,” he says slowly. “You’re here. You’re not going away, are you?”

David’s shoulders drop and he smiles. “Of course not. I’m staying right here.”

“Where are we going again?”

“San Francisco, remember?”

“Really? Your mother would have loved that. She always wanted to drive over the big bridge.” He unclenches his fists from the armrests and taps the side of his head. “She’s still alive up here. Always will be. But I do miss her.”

Even as he says the words, he starts to feel uneasy; there’s something that he can’t quite get hold of, something he should remember. He closes his eyes and thinks of her, thinks of the photograph by his bed: the silver frame; her smile; the vase of tulips beside her, a mass of pink and purple and yellow. The flowers, the colors, that’s all he can think of now: those gaudy tulips the photographer had placed beside her. “They have no fragrance,” she’d said. “Pity you don’t have roses.”

And then it comes to him. “The roses,” he says and opens his eyes, “I forgot the roses.”

“What roses?” David sounds irritated.

“The roses for her grave. We didn’t take any. I didn’t say goodbye.”

Clinking sounds drift over from the galley. And then David’s words, low and deliberate. “We were busy. There was a lot to do.”

“But it’s your mother. I should have said goodbye.”

Again that slow pace. “She’s fine. Wherever she is, she’ll understand.”

“No, it’s wrong.” His voice is rising now. “Every week I take her favorite flowers. I should have said goodbye.”

“We’ll call and ask Lisa to take care of it. There’s time before she leaves.”

“That’s not good enough. She’s my wife. It’s my job.” He knows he’s shouting, but can’t stop.

A long pause this time. David’s eyes are scanning his face as if inspecting him. He takes a breath. “No Dad, it isn’t now, it never was.”

“What are you talking about? I go to the cemetery every week to change the flowers. Every single week so she won’t feel forgotten.”

David’s watching him again. What does he want?

“Please, don’t get upset like this. It’s not good for you.”

“What about her? Who’ll take care of her grave now? How could I do this to her?”

He blinks hard. Mustn’t cry, not in front of his son.

“Dad, stop this.” David looks down at his hands, takes a deep breath and looks up again. “There is no grave,” he says.

“David! She’s your mother. How can you say that?” His voice is loud, but he doesn’t care.

“Dad, are you listening?”

If he nods, maybe he’ll leave him alone.

But the lips are still moving. “There’s something I want to tell you. Please try to listen as carefully as you can.”

He nods again and turns his head, but there’s only the window blind on one side, and the bulkhead in front of him. Nowhere to escape the voice that won’t stop.

“The grave, the roses, it’s all a dream you keep having. She’s—Dad, are you listening?”

He turns and searches David’s face, looks for some kind of connection. But he doesn’t know his son any more.

“She never died. Do you understand? She’s not dead.”

“No,” he says, a single word filled with as much conviction as he can muster.

“She didn’t want...She wasn’t ready...” David bites his lower lip. “She thought you’d be happier in the residence.”

“Who is this person?” His hands clench the armrests so tightly that the knuckles turn white. “Who are you talking about?”

“Mom. Your wife. Mary. Are you listening, Dad? Do you understand what I’m telling you?” The words come out slowly, carefully, deliberately. “She runs the travel agency

with Lisa, the one the two of you started together. Lisa is going to open another office in Australia.”

“No!” He shakes his head, thinks of the flowers: a dozen, always a dozen mixed red and white; thinks of the gravestone in the cemetery near the ocean.

“Dad, please try to follow what I’m saying. Mom’s alive. She took care of you for a while. She doesn’t forget you. She asks Lisa about you...the time...she tried...too... couldn’t...”

The words are fading. Where is Mary? Why is she taking so long? Soon there are only lips moving, sounds that have no meaning. And over it all, the constant throb of the engine burrowing inside his head.

Denial

Alison Stone

Not often. Not much. Not that inde-
cent thing. Not you. The witness lied.
(Your convoluted alibis. Your plea deal.)
Erasures and revisions lead
to an Egyptian river town. There, facts alien
to your desires drown. Eager deni-
zen, you spoon sky into a bowl and dine
on cloudiness, sink down, lean
back, soothed by the smudged line
connecting *want* and *is*. (Your idle
swimmer's arms. Your wings of lead.)

Sisyphus

Alison Stone

Everyone knows the boulder,
the torture of eternal, pointless pushing,
then the inevitable downhill roll.
Few remember the reason – Death
tricked, fifty extra years to savor
olive bread beneath the Tuscan sun,
fifty cakes whose flames
were his to snuff.

For a chance at six more months,
my mother offered her body
to the surgeon's knife, made her chest
a port for the delivery of drugs
that left her dizzy, bone-thin.

We call cancer patients brave,
but really it's the dumb animal drive
to live in spite of anything, even life
reduced to a schedule of painkillers
and broth. When we imagine Sisyphus,

looking almost alive as his muscles knot
with strain, each foot pushing off the dirt,
we realize that the rock's bulk
and the ache in his broad back are reminders
of the virile man he was, and also that he's
free to return in memory to boyhood games
or his wife's soft skin. (He must have consciousness;
without it, there's no point to punishment).

If my mother had angered the gods,
or at least the deity she believed in,
would she have been sentenced
to an infinite, repetitive task? Her post-death body
strong enough to accomplish it, her mind still hers –
perhaps remembering her honeymoon, or smiling
at our private jokes. Maybe hearing
news about her grandchildren from a new shade.

Instead, my honest mother
lived unselfishly, followed rules,
and is gone.

Endymion

Alison Stone

Life can't compete.
Why trade lush dreams
for labor, moon-kisses
for the frustrations and fading
of ordinary love?
Neighbors see me spellbound,
sprawled. They click their tongues,
sigh, *Shame* and *Such a handsome boy*.
My weeping parents beg priests
and physicians for a cure.
They don't understand
I'm care-less. Free. Cool
soil soft against my skin. All
striving gone. Every night the silver
lady with her hands of light.

Purchase

Bruce Bond

Come spring again I lay my hands on the ivories,
and the wounded beast in them begins to move.

TVs flash in the storefront of the human heart,
and the mall's ten thousand eyes open, close,

and open once again. In the new era of supply
and demand, supply is the body, demand

a soul alone scrolling the faces of the young.
Supply is the hammer, the wire, the pin, the felt,

demand the song piped into the empty spaces.
A particle of me must like it. How small I feel.

They say the tunes that sell pianos never leave you,
that they seem familiar the very first time.

Your fingers fall into the shadows of the keys
that make the music, and the sound takes the shape

of an elephant and then the wound and then
no place at all. In the new story, I say, *please,*

sell me some new thing. If only I were smaller.
If I unlocked the black lacquer of the keyboard

lid and found the chord I did not know I lost.
Long ago I played piano for the dog.

He laid exhausted beneath a bed of strings like this,
closed his eyes, and sobbed. I was never sure

if he enjoyed it, if he was scared, warned, aroused.
It seemed then he had no choice. That much is clear.

Some nights I am looking for him still. The music
leaves the great casket of my older instrument,

and I wander through the new pianos, listening
to the children howl, *This one, no, this one. This.*

Bomb

Bruce Bond

My first picture of the bomb was a fist
and then a flower, and we were told

it would protect us, and we should not
fight, but if we did, it did not matter

who started it, we were all in trouble,
one fist as good as any other, passed

from father to child to child, and when
the flowers arrived for my mother,

it meant something was wrong and then
beautiful, or hard, or whatever else

we did not mention over dinner, heads
bowed in silence before the open vase.

The Aquarium

By Brad Eddy

The board spoke to me. The checkered squares, the castled king, the wall of pawns and outposted bishops, all of them screamed in one bloodthirsty chorus, *Attack, attack*. So I did. I pushed my knight into the fray, setting off a chain reaction of sacked pieces that would leave my opponent's king exposed, his chances of survival nonexistent. Across from me, Phil Campbell groaned and looked across the room at Marcy Draper, a former cheerleader who'd broken her foot in cheer practice and now wasted her sleek beauty in the basement with the chess team. So far, she was still grappling with the basics, but she had a knack for draws and the occasional win, especially over kids like Phil who lacked focus. During games, Marcy would bite her lip and stroke her long arms. She claimed it was cold in our basement classroom—and it was—but mostly, it revved up our motors and caused a distraction, which led to blundered queens and rooks missing from the chessboards. It was a better strategy than most.

Now, Phil stared and our chess coach, Ms. Hanley, walked over to our desk and smashed a meter stick on Phil's side, inches from his stubby fingers.

"Pay attention," she said. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. Lack of focus. Lack of *desire*."

"I have no lack of desire," Phil said as Ms. Hanley walked to the front of the room to issue another riot act.

Our first tournament had been an embarrassment. I'd won my matches, but the rest of the team had performed poorly, surprised by unconventional openings and mired in obvious traps. Ms. Hanley claimed she was sick of our friendly backslapping, of the smiling and handshaking after getting demolished.

"Stop pussyfooting around," she said. "Being nice doesn't get you anywhere. Got it?"

The class nodded.

“Now,” she said. “On to the Sicilian. The Dragon Variation.”

Ms. Hanley moved pieces up and down the chalkboard. She’d used strips of tape to make a grid, then had the shop teacher carve out wooden pieces with magnets attached so she could simulate games. I scribbled notes, thrilled at the aggressive opening, while others popped gum and stared at the clock. Occasionally she asked questions that I alone answered, and I watched her shoulders sag, her posture wilt like an autumn flower ready to be plucked from the earth.

“Fine,” she said and waved her hand in disgust. “Practice is over.”

The team boxed their pieces and put on their coats. Outside, it was rainy. The sky was dark and I watched dead leaves swirl through the tiny windows at the top of the classroom wall. I heard Emily Thompkins and Phil talk about a ping-pong party at someone’s house later. It was happening, but no one knew where, and they guessed at the locations—abandoned houses, beneath the deck of the public library, maybe right here in the school. Ping-pong was code for make out sessions—even I knew that—and I went up to the lobby to wait for my father to pull up in his old truck, an old Ford that sounded like an amateur bomb about to detonate.

I stared at *100 Famous Chess Games*—a book I revisited like a holy text, the prophets all chess geniuses whose miracles were great escapes and epic comebacks. Most evenings, I would lean over the pages of the book, staring at the diagrams, deciphering the trick like a child squinting as the magician pulled the rabbit from his hat. It was the closest thing to a moment of peace I got. But now Marcy was padding around on her pink cast, punching numbers into the payphone and slamming the receiver down on the cradle.

“Hey, Kid,” she said.

“Max,” I said.

“Can you give me a ride to this thing?”

I thought of Marcy riding in the center of my father’s dusty pick up. It was grimy and covered with soda cans and candy bar wrappers. Still, the idea of her sandwiched next to me washed the slicing chess pieces out of my mind.

“Probably,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “It’s either that or tie a trash bag to my cast.”

Marcy paced, and I stared at my book, imagining her next to me until my father pulled up.

“That?” she said. “Are you homeless or something?”

“He has his own business,” I said. “Auto body.”

After I said it, I realized it made no sense.

“Why doesn’t he fix his own truck?” she said.

We wrapped brown paper towels around Marcy’s cast. She grabbed her crutches—she used them only for longer destinations—and we crossed the patio to my father’s truck. He was listening to Smokey Robinson and singing in a pitchy imitation of a falsetto.

“Who’s your friend?” he asked.

I waited for Marcy to introduce herself, and when she didn’t, I said she was on the chess team and needed a ride. We waited a few seconds until Marcy nodded at the door.

“It’ll be easier if you got in first,” she said. “Since I’m getting out next.”

My father sang for the three-block ride, and suddenly I was aware of his gray stubble, the grime on his nails, my own goofy shoes that my parents had found on clearance at an outlet on the edge of civilization. When my father pulled up to the house, he leaned over me and whistled. It was a three story colonial, the kind of place he often said would cost more to heat than it would be worth to own.

“You live here?” he asked.

“No,” Marcy said and got out. “Thanks for the ride.”

We watched her crutch to the door, turn the knob, and walk in. I could tell from the lights and the figures flashing in front of the window that the party was underway. My chest panged, and I knew I’d hear whispers about it on Monday morning, that it would be all anyone could talk about. Here it was, happening right now, and already it existed in the past tense.

“What happened to her leg?” my father asked.

“She broke it in cheer practice,” I said.

“See,” my father said and lurched us forward. “That’s why I’m glad you play chess.”

That summer, my father’s auto body business had hit hard times. A couple of drunk teenagers had rammed a car headfirst into a tree, and the town mourned by showing renewed reverence for stop signs. Police ticketed, and traffic slowed to a crawl. Even the deer kept off the roads. Our cupboards filled with generic cereal and my parents bickered over the water bill and the price of paper towels. Just before my thirteenth birthday in June, my mother sent me to stay with my grandparents in West Virginia, so I’d not hear the evening phone calls from creditors and she and my father would have sufficient privacy for the knock-down arguments I’d heard only strained bits of while I sat in my room looking over my chess books. In West Virginia, spent most of the summer in a daze, waking late and walking to the library. I breathed the mountain air and felt like a chained watch nestled in a time capsule, protected from the outside world and waiting to be dug up and doted on. I wasn’t lonely. I was insulated.

When I returned to school in August, it was like I’d been gone for years. Summer camps had turned everyone into lean and tanned statues. Boys had obtained shoulders and peach fuzz, and girls had developed breasts, turning into wide-hipped goddesses who looked like models in perfume ads. I barely recognized anyone. I’d missed parties, fights, and drama on street corners or the public pool. Friends I’d had for years refused to look at me, and I sidled next to knots of kids as they talked about games of spin the bottle and speckled bikini tops floating on the surface of the water. Life had passed me by. Now, I was an extra in the lives of more evolved kids, and I expected to pass in obscurity as forgotten and invisible as a statue of some long forgotten hero.

But one afternoon, I was walking the halls and saw kids staring at chessboards in Ms. Hanley’s basement classroom. I didn’t knock. I was desperate, and so I walked in, and for the first time all year, people looked at me. The team was a laughingstock—a place for kids who couldn’t make any other team—and so they were happy to have me. I sat in those first few practices, taking notes and soaking up the theory for a game I’d always enjoyed but never taken seriously. As it turned out, I had an affinity for the chess and found it rewarded

my tendencies to worry and overthink things. I checked out library books and memorized openings. In less than a month, I'd become the best player on the team, and when Ms. Hanley asked the class questions, when she diagrammed traps on the chalkboard, only I could sniff them out. She patted my shoulder, declared me a prodigy.

By the time tournament play began, I'd become a dynamo. So far I had yet to lose a match, and if I could keep it up, I'd win the section title. If I could manage that, I'd have my name emblazoned on a plaque in the trophy case, right next to the real athletes, to the kids who went off to closets at parties and pulled each other into the defunct projection room at school. If nothing else, this seemed like the kind of thing that would transform a kid like me, that might promote a lowly pawn into something better—maybe not a queen, maybe not even a rook—but at least a knight, something minor and pesky, something you had to acknowledge when he walked past you.

On Monday, rumors swirled about what had happened at the party. Melissa Meeks' parents had gone to a play in Pittsburgh and spent the night, leaving their home an unchaperoned oasis. Kids holed themselves up in the bedrooms and made out under the dining room table. Melissa still hadn't returned to school, and we took this as a sign that the event had been amazing, that she was paying for the thrill by being grounded even from school. According to the rumors, Marcy had gone off with some high school kid whose girlfriend had shown up and tried to break down the door with a lamp. It was all anyone could talk about.

"Wish I'd been there," Phil said. He was folding a paper football, since it was what the tall, chiseled kids on the football team did.

"My dad and I gave Marcy a ride," I said.

Phil stared at me like I'd just told him I had a video of the whole thing.

"Why didn't you go?" he asked.

Phil was the closest thing I had to a best friend, which was sad for both of us. Puberty had hit him in waves, giving him stubble on his chin but no shoulders or forearms. He was short and slightly pudgy kid who compensated for his lumpy body by always slouching and wearing clothes a size too large, giving him the appearance of grown man zapped with

a shrink ray. He lacked focus and common sense, and I often found myself explaining the obvious to him.

“I wasn’t invited,” I said.

“Nobody was invited!” he said. “If you heard about it, you were invited.” Phil shook his head and looked up at the buzzing florescent light. Mostly, he talked about girls and occasionally drew pictures of their figures, comparing noses, elbows, and waists as if shopping for a used car.

“You could have fooled around with Marcy, I bet.”

“She wouldn’t have,” I said.

“Did you hear what she did with Brandon Markins in the art room?” he asked. “You could see the imprint of her butt on the glass of the aquarium. Mr. Lesako had to clean it off with Windex while all the kids in third period watched.”

“That didn’t happen,” I said. “I’m in third period.”

“No offense, but you wouldn’t notice an ass print if it bit your face off.”

For the rest of the day, the image stuck in my head like the blunder of a major piece. I thought of Marcy’s rump against the glass, the fish behind it scattered in the light of the aquarium. Twice, teachers called my name and asked me questions, and I was lost. I wasn’t used to their angry glares, of being the one who failed to give his attention. At chess practice, even Ms. Hanley seemed exhausted from all her browbeating, and she ordered us to play bullet games, taking at most thirty seconds per move, then switching opponents.

“It’s Monday, after all,” she said. “Work on your people skills.”

My game was off. I still won, but I took no thrill in it. I lacked the elegant sacrifices I often strove to achieve. I stared around the room, looking out the window, waiting for something. Near the end of practice, Marcy sat across from me, and pushed her pawn forward.

“How was the party?” I asked.

She squinted her eyes at me, giving me the kind of look that made me think she was visualizing the destruction of my larynx.

“Never mind,” I said.

“Let’s just play chess,” she said. “Your favorite thing.”

Despite the fact that she hadn’t bothered to learn any opening theory or basic middle game strategy, Marcy was a good player. She stacked her pieces well, forming walls of pawns and supporting her minor pieces with rooks. It was like a finely designed cheerleading pyramid, all of it sustained by the strong backs of the larger pieces on the bottom. Still, I broke it up with sacrifices. Marcy sighed and started making mistakes, hazarding her queen to the center, which I nabbed.

“I don’t even like this game,” she said. She licked her lips and leaned forward, exposing her cleavage, of which I allowed myself only a fleeting glance. She bit the end of a fingernail, cleared her throat, and just when I allowed my eyes to meet hers, she snagged my queen off the edge of the board in a sleight of hand so smooth I nearly missed it.

“You can’t do that,” I said.

“Do what?”

She looked at me, then around the room. Everyone else was moving pieces forward and back with no aggression. It was a dance, a staged and contrived exchange of squares, just kids playing dolls with wooden pieces.

“You stole my queen right off the board,” I said. “It’s in your hand.”

Marcy smiled and held up the queen, examining it for a second.

“Here’s how much everyone cares about chess,” she said, and threw it—a perfect, graceful arch—out the open door where the queen bounced down the dark hallway. A few heads turned, but no one said anything. Ms. Hanley was bent over her desk, slashing her red pen through hastily completed homework assignments.

“Go get it,” I said.

“That,” she said, “is the best idea you’ve ever had.”

Marcy stood and limped out of the room. Even with a heavy cast, she managed to walk out in a huff, and I watched heads turn, the eyes move toward her as she vanished down the hallway, long past where the queen could have possibly rolled.

The next day, I told Ms. Hanley about Marcy and my missing queen, and she only sighed and

opened her drawer.

“Guess who doesn’t have time for this kind of thing?” she asked.

“You,” I said.

“You know this,” she said, and handed me a brick eraser, pink with worn edges and smelling faintly of watermelon, “and yet you tell me these things anyway.”

For the rest of the week, I used the brick eraser as my queen. I felt foolish moving it around the board, and suddenly the game looked silly, like a collection of random items assigned strange values. At our next tournament, I traded queens early just to get it off the board. Still, I did well, earning wins and draws. In the final match of the tournament, I played a blond-haired girl, a transfer student from Sweden who everyone revered for her accent. I allowed her to decimate my right flank, and I watched as Ms. Hanley began to sweat before flinging a mating pattern on her with my rook and paired bishops. The girl shook her head, then stood and offered her hand.

“Pretty cocky,” Ms. Hanley said afterwards. Still, I could tell from the curl in her lip that she was impressed.

We bussed home, then waited for rides at school. There was another party at someone else’s house, and kids pushed and prodded each other, hoping for details none of us had been given. Most of the team walked to Scott’s Delight for ice cream and burgers, but this did not interest me. They could take their consolation prizes, but I’d rather not be in the game at all. Instead, I waited for my father to show, looking over my scorecards, diagramming my own games while Marcy padded around.

“Do you need another ride?” I asked. My heart battered around my chest. This time, I told myself, I’d follow her in.

Marcy shook her head. “I’m not wanted. Some drama you don’t need to know about.”

I felt my chances vanish, and I thought of my queen nabbed off the board. Just like the party with kids grinding on each other, it was out there, and I was missing it.

“Where’s my queen?” I said.

“What?”

“You threw it down the hallway and never brought it back.”

Marcy looked at me for a long time, then shrugged. “I’ll show you,” she said. “But don’t get any ideas. Don’t think you’re going to be putting your hand down my pants.”

It was nearly five, and almost everyone had left the school. We walked the halls, hearing the echo of the janitor’s cart rolled down the hallway, or the sound of a sneaker as we crossed the gymnasium. Inside, I knew better-looking kids with superior genetics were working on their game, attaining greater coordination than I could ever hope to attain. Still, I followed Marcy down the dark hallway, past the test scores and posters pinned to the corkboard on the walls, and into the art room. In the back, the light from the aquarium filled the room, casting long shadows everywhere.

“There it is,” she said, and pointed.

The tank must have been five feet tall by eight feet wide, a chunk of ocean staring back at us while we drew figurines and molded copper plates in class. Our art teacher, Mr. Lesako, had installed it earlier that year, and for a few weeks, kids tapped on the glass or pressed their faces to it, until eventually it became just another part of the background. By that point, we barely noticed it, but as I approached I saw that down amongst the gravel, along with the oxidized castle and a sunken ship, were scattered white and black chess pieces.

“Why would you do that?” I said.

“I liked to watch things float down there,” she said. “Give me a quarter?”

She said it like a question, and so I handed it over. She climbed onto the counter and dropped the coin in. Fish scattered to the edges of the glass as the coin twirled in the yellow light. It landed soft as a feather, and I noticed other debris, a couple buttons, a set of keys, a yellow pencil, and a yo-yo.

“I come down here a lot, and when I do I like to toss something,” she said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “At least it’s something nice to look at.”

The fish returned to their patterns, the mollies and tetras sticking together, the cherry barbs and swordtails spinning through water. Marcy grabbed a thin brush from an adjacent desk and dropped it in next. Again, the fish scattered.

“You’re scaring them,” I said.

“They don’t care,” she snapped. “And don’t tell me what I’m doing. People would like you better if you just shut up most of the time.”

“I barely say anything,” I said.

“Yeah, but when you do, it’s usually wrong.”

We stared at the fish. Marcy inched toward me. I could have slid my hand into hers, but I thought of what she’d said about unwanted advances, aggression just for the sake of taking territory. I couldn’t manage it, at least, not here in a world full of real consequences.

“At that party,” she said. “This older guy got all mad about my cast. He said it was ugly, and it kept thumping the side of the floor when I walked. I ended up leaving and walking home.”

“I heard something else happened,” I said.

“That, too,” she said. “But jealous girls is pretty normal.” She picked her foot up and dropped it a couple times on the tile floor. It was loud and without grace, the opposite of life inside the tank. “It’ll be off soon.”

I had the distinct feeling that there was a right thing to say, a brilliant move or sacrifice, but I also knew whatever came out of my mouth would be a blunder. This, I thought, must be what it’s like to play a real master, to know that whatever you did, however right it felt in the moment, would be turned back on you, making you feel like a fool.

“I should go,” I said. “Want a ride home?”

“I’m going to stay,” she said, and smiled at me.

I said goodbye, but turned and looked at her one last time when I’d reached the doorway. I could see her ghostly reflection in the glass as she bent into the light of the aquarium.

When I walked outside, my father was waiting. He’d shaved and turned down the radio, reducing the embarrassment I’d have felt by at least five percent.

“Where’s your cute little buddy?”

“Inside,” I said. “With the fish.”

My father shook his head. “Don’t tell me that’s next after chess,” he said.

That Friday, our vice principal announced my name over the intercom, right after the football stars, the cross-country runners, and the mathletes. I looked around the classroom, at kids passing notes and copying homework. Donny Martin, a long-faced kid with black and yellow teeth, chiseled something into his desk with the pointed tip of a metal ruler. My name had vanished into the ether with the rest of the morning announcements, and no one had noticed my second of glory. I knew then that a plaque with my name would bring me nothing, and I sat there feeling sequestered like a lone piece of junk sunk to the bottom of the tank.

At practice, Ms. Hanley asked me to the front of the room and ordered everyone to stand and applaud. I watched them in the files behind their desks—these meek souls, all pawns who wanted to be something else. Only Marcy, who stood in the back had a chance. In the next few weeks, they’d cut off her cast, and I knew she’d spring forth like a butterfly relieved of its cocoon, flying back to the cheer squad and a better life.

It was a clear day—a rarity for our tiny town—that evening, and the rest of the team went out to the patio to soak up the November sun and consider their options as winter closed in. I waited in the lobby with no idea where to go or what to do. After a few minutes, I realized Marcy was looking at me, and like always, I had no idea what to say.

“It’s not raining,” I said.

“Right,” she said, and grabbed her crutches and went out the door.

That evening, I barely touched my chess set. I did push-ups and squats in my room, hoping to attain bulk, to transform overnight into someone else. My parents fought about the electric bill and my father’s low prices, the breaks he gave insurance companies. I listened to them discuss which car to sell—my father’s pick up or my mom’s sedan, both of which were beaters with high miles. I tried to set up my chess set at my desk, but the game had lost its magic. The eraser looked foolish on the board, and I thought of Marcy, her face lit up as she looked at all the things she’d dropped into the water.

While my parents argued, I slipped to the den and flipped through the phone book.

I found Marcy's number and dialed. After a few rings a woman with a husky voice answered.

"Is Marcy there?" I asked.

"May I take a message?"

"I don't think so," I said.

The woman cleared her throat. I started to sweat, like I often did when I pressed my advantage too far and almost lost everything.

"Honey," the lady said. "She went to Becky what's-her-face's house. McMasters? McMillian? You know?"

"I do know," I said, and hung up.

It wasn't difficult to convince my parents to let me go. I could tell by the way my mother paced the floor that a fight was imminent, and that if nothing else, they'd send me to the store to pick up the cheapest thing they could think of—maybe sugar or a wooden spoon or a Peppermint Pattie. I put my hands behind my back, looked at the floor, and laid it out. My mother brightened at the idea, nodding and smiling like I'd delivered wonderful news.

"Socialize," she said. "This is good for you. Jack, why don't you drive him?"

My father hummed blues songs along with the radio as we crossed town. The rain had begun, and old wiper blades streaked the windshield, a rubber strand trailing and making a harsh, whining sound. We stopped for several seconds at stop signs, making a show of our willingness to obey the basic laws of traffic. I knew my father was in no hurry, that more trouble was waiting for him at home.

"Things have been tough," he said. "I'm sure you've noticed."

"I have," I said.

"But remember, first the rain and then the snow," he said. "Cars will start skidding off the road soon."

My father rubbed his thumb and finger together, his sign for prosperity.

"It's the way the world works," he said. "Things can't stay boring too long."

We cruised down High Street and turned right onto Rich Hill, then meandered toward the stunning houses near the collage. We pulled in front of Becky McMillian's house

and looked up at the towering Victorian. Mrs. McMillian had been my fourth grade teacher, and I remembered driving here with my mother to give her homemade chocolates and cookies at the end of the year. Inside, I could see the lights on upstairs and the feeling that something festive was already underway.

“Well,” my father said. “You’ve got some rich friends. When do you think you’ll need to be picked up?”

“I’ll call,” I said.

I stood on the sidewalk while my father pulled away. I watched his noisy truck make its way out of the neighborhood, back to the main drag with the defunct movie theater and general store that refused to go under despite empty shelves and sparse business. Without my father to offer me an escape, I had cornered myself. I had no option but to walk up to the door. For a second, I considered knocking, maybe even ringing the doorbell, but the kind of kid I wanted to be didn’t do such things. He wasn’t polite, didn’t state facts in the face of emotional confessions. He just turned the knob and walked inside, looking for whoever it was he wanted.

For You (when you find my hair on your floor):
Alexis Trevino

If you tattooed my skin, would it make a difference?

You'll always be stained there,
like the red wine on my tongue
that night in February
when you called me your best friend,

or the spilled paint on my white walls,
when it was easier to put words on canvases
instead of in our mouths,

and the smudged eyeliner
on your white sheets
from tired days at the gallery
and nights of rain,

or the smell of your favorite beer
buried deep in the fibers of my favorite dress,
the dress you undressed me in
the first time we slept together,

and the nail polish
accidentally brushed
onto my pink lacey underwear
the weekend we didn't leave the apartment
for three days because it was cold
and the only warm place we could find
was under each other's skin.

What I'm trying to say is:
If you leave right now,
I could never wash you away.

For you (Genetics Part. 1):
Alexis Trevino

1.
When my father met my mother,
it was mid-October at a party,
a cloud of Fleetwood Mac
playing on repeat around her,
the fringed edges of her dress,
the wind of blue chiffon,
catching the words in his throat.

Even back then,
she sparkled like a star.
No, not like a star,
he says, but the ocean,
overwhelming and encompassing,
sometimes hard to swallow,
and everything I need on days
when her hands can't reach
over 3000 landlocked miles,
when the sun isn't beating down
hard enough and I can't get the scent
of her lemon perfume out of my hair.

2.
You are not an ocean
and there are plenty of clouds,
but you are always in focus.

When things are hazy,
I find myself moving towards you.
The tides in your wavering voice
pull me closer.

When I am home,
I visit the ocean and put my feet
in the water.

I think this is the easiest way
to bring you, you and your
your cucumber after shave,
back to me.

For You (when distance is more than geography):
Alexis Trevino

Sam changed his coffee order
three weeks and two days ago.

He corrected me when I ordered,
instinctually, for the both of us,
after a year of reflexive knowing.

“You hate plain coffee,”
I cautioned,
as if there were a stranger
sitting across from me
in his maroon sweater.

(He wore that sweater early on,
when there were still butterflies
and parts of us left unknown.)

Sometimes I think I am losing him,
he is always here,
but I can't reach him.

Instead of climbing over the space,
the silence and stunted conversation,
I read my notes from class out loud to him,
about the Sony contact lenses
that record everything you see
and save it until you need it played back.

He thinks this is creepy,
that the people I study
who track every moment of their lives
are wasting their time,
that the Quantified Self cannot capture a life,
that forgetting is essential to the human condition.

But I am terrified of forgetting (forgetting
and the ocean and all of its vastness).

I've kept a journal since I was eight
and became afraid of letting go,
of not being able to recall the color of the sky

when my parents renewed their vows
or what I had for breakfast on the day
my brother left for school,
miles and miles away.

In the ocean and its vastness,
along with your new coffee order,
that maroon sweater,
and thousands of dead butterflies,
is a time where I won't remember
the bridge of his nose.

Even now,
when my head is on Sam's chest
and I don't recognize the beat of his heart
because it has suddenly slowed,

I wish I could have that erratic rhythm played back.

For You (Genetics Part. 2): Alexis Trevino

1.

If you ask him,
my father will describe
meeting my mother,
not like coming up for air,
but drowning,
like letting himself
be completely submerged.

When they met,
in nineteen eighty-nine,
they let themselves
spill into the fault lines.

I grew up watching them kiss,
watching them attempt
to fill the crevices.

2.

Remember last New Year's?
I went to a party,
took a pill I didn't recognize,
called you from the bathroom floor,
a bottle bubbling in my hand,
while I tied my hair back and
leaned over the porcelain.

Remember last summer?
I drank a pitcher of
a German beer I can't pronounce,
and told you about growing up
tying my hair back and
leaning over porcelain.

You used to be able to hear me,
even underwater.

3.

I can still see the tremor in my parents' hands,
the effects of the California earthquake
still splintering the air in between them,
but they can't pull it out with tweezers.

4.

Sometimes I wish
I could keep things for myself,
Is that the problem?

Sometimes I think you could drown
an entire ocean with me inside it.

Sometimes I think I would let you,
is that the problem?

5.

I have a habit of googling famous love letters
to feel the distance in my fingertips
between me and them, me and you.

I cry thinking about
all of the ways we could've
missed each other and
all of the ways we should've
missed each other.

Is that the problem?

6.

How do you define intimacy?
How do you define unconditional?
Are ours the same?

Can you see the cracks too?

For You (when you can't find enough words):
Alexis Trevino

1.

In January, I pulled you through the MET,
pointing out objects we'd furnish our home with,
sinking into a future we weren't sure existed yet.

I told you, this is church for me.

2.

I got in trouble at the gallery I work at downtown
for wasting an two hours and an entire pack of post-its
attempting to memorialize your naked body on paper,
like a line drawing I couldn't quite figure out,
a Matisse I yearned to trace with my bare hands.

I got in trouble at the gallery I work at downtown
when I invited you to an opening and we drank one two
three bottles of the wine I was supposed to be serving.
We left, giggling, bubbling, stumbling into a cab,
crashing into each other, like glaciers or dark matter,
my heels catching on the cobblestone.

3.

Last May,
I convinced you to go with me to the Whitney,
after a week of crying for home,
certain I needed to see the Basquiat
to become whole again,
to remember the pressure
of my mother's touch on my skin.

We stopped for sangria,
in the middle of West Village,
the cherry blossoms blooming around us.
I showed up to my next class,
a buzz in my blood and a blush on my face,
the feeling of home closer than ever,
and told my nonfiction professor I was in love.

4.

I read once, out loud to you,
that Twombly sometimes drew in the dark,
his pencil coiling around the canvas,
unsure of what comes next,

hoping to hide years of learning,
of practice.

Is there a word for that?
Sanding down the past,
blurring the edges,
trying to forget?
Did you know then,
that we, too,
are doing this blind?

5.
There's a Rauschenberg print
hanging in the foyer of my house
three thousand miles away.

It's my mother's.

She touches it with two fingers,
every time she leaves the house,
a cycle I never understood
until I found myself digging for you,
habitually, in the middle of the night,
under a sea of blankets and across covers,
to make sure you're still there.

How do you define intimacy?
How do you define unconditional?
Are ours the same?

Can you see the cracks too?

Between the Heron and the Wren

Adam Clay

—*after Roethke*

This year like a wave built up
but never striking the body,
there's a newfound senselessness
for words bent without directed
purpose. Every image enters the mind
for a reason later: the fennel spread
across the yard now bent
in the frost must mean more
than only its demise. Or maybe
an image ought to stop there
in this month, the last of
the Year of the Monkey,
the year where the moon swung
closer to us than it had in years,
though its nearness would mean
most likely little to the naked eye.
I went outside anyhow, hoping
to be stunned by something larger
than myself. I don't remember the moon
that night—it seemed unremarkable,
but I do remember how my mind
turned to gravel that night in sleep
for only the sake of undercurrents
brought up to eye level, for only
the sake of the spider web unseen
until I had walked straight through it.

Devotion to Eternity in a Temporary World

Adam Clay

What can the dove resist
If our bodies were born

From fragmented stars?
If even in the simplicity

Of each breath we could
Resist the inevitable cord

Cut to release self
From the self, then what

To say of the inhabited
Bodies we briefly exist

Within? I read of human
Shields, of bodies torn

Beyond recognition.
To recognize means “to

Accept (a person
Or thing) *as or to be*

Something,” but what if
It could be as simple as

Seeing one’s own eyes
In another person’s

Skull? What space
We inhabit so surely

Can never be our own.

The Art that We Are

Adam Clay

—after *Alice Notley*

I like the thought of an afterlife
void of feelings, all types of sadness
gone missing, perhaps swept
to some strange otherworld for
shaded abstractions, stunted ideas,
the slightest of thoughts, and untested
concepts. *It's nice to be stuck in traffic*,
is not a sentence you hear often,
but near death, I imagine one would
be grateful for those thirty minutes
stalled an hour or so out of that city
you'll never see again in this life.
An experience without feeling or
a feeling without experience?
I choose neither. I fashion each
fleeting thought into a tiny lead boat.

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Christopher Linforth is the author of the story collection of *When You Find Us We Will Be Gone*. He has published stories in *Notre Dame Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Day One*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and other literary journals.

Peter Marcus is author of the book *Dark Square*. Individual poems appear in *The Antioch Review*, *Boulevard*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Nimrod*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Ploughshares*, *RATTLE*, *The Southern Review*, *Spillway*, *UPSTREAM* and *Witness*.

Laura McCarty's work has appeared in the *GW Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Jelly Bucket*, and is forthcoming in the *St. Petersburg Review*. She co-authored and published her first book of poetry, *My Mother, My Daughter, My Sister, My Self*.

Ana Menéndez was born in Los Angeles, the daughter of Cuban exiles. She is the author of four books of fiction, *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*, which was a 2001 New York Times Notable book of the year and whose title story won a Pushcart Prize, *Loving Che* (2004), *The Last War* (2009), and *Adios, Happy Homeland!* Her work has appeared in a variety of publications including *Vogue*, *Bomb Magazine*, *Poets & Writers* and *Gourmet Magazine*.

Kelly Nelson is an anthropologist and poet who teaches Interdisciplinary Studies at Arizona State University. She's the author of two chapbooks and teaches ekphrastic and found poetry classes at her local library.

Jane Renaud is a freelance television producer. This is her first published story.

Robin Scofield author of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* and *Sunflower Cantos* (Mouthfeel Press), has poems appearing in *The LummoX Anthology*, *The About Place Journal*, and *The Cimarron Review*. She is poetry editor for *BorderSenses*.

Eva Skrande's poems have appeared in *Clockwise Cat*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Cortland Review*, *APR*, and *Alaska Quarterly*. Her first book, *My Mother's Cuba*, was selected by Andrew Hudgins for the River City Poetry Series. A chapbook, *The Gates of the Somnambulist*, was selected by Tom Lux and published by Jeanne Duvall Editions. She lives in Houston, Texas.

Paul Sohar has published fifteen books in translation. His own poetry collections are *Homing Poems* (Iniquity, 2006) and *The Wayward Orchard*. His work appears in such journals as *Agni*, *Gargoyle*, *Kenyon Review*, *Rattle*, *Pedestal*, *Poetry Salzburg*, and *Seneca Review*.

Alison Stone's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poet Lore*, and many other journals and anthologies. She was awarded *New York Quarterly's* Madeline Sadin Award and *Poetry's* Frederick Boch Prize. Her first book, *They Sing at Midnight*, was published by Many Mountains Moving Press. She had two collections published in 2014: *Dangerous Enough* (Presa Press) and the chapbook *Borrowed Logic* (Dancing Girl Press). Her newest book is *Ordinary Magic*.

Inez Tan is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry at the University of Irvine, California. Her writing has appeared in *Rattle*, *dusie*, *Softblow*, *Singapore Poetry*, and others. She also holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Michigan.

Cody Todd was a poet & the author of *Graffiti Signatures* (2013, Main Street Rag) & *To Frankenstein, My Father* (2007, Proem Press). He passed away in 2016.

Alexis Trevino is currently a student at NYU studying Communications and Creative Writing and constantly finding himself fighting the urge to return to the waves and sun of California.

Charles Harper Webb's latest book, *Brain Camp*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2015. *A Million MEAs Are Not Enough*, a collection of essays on contemporary American poetry, was published in 2016 by Red Hen Press. Recipient of grants from the Whiting and Guggenheim foundations, Webb teaches at California State University, Long Beach.

Ian Randall Wilson's first collection is *Ruthless Heaven* (Finishing Line Press). He has previously published two chapbooks, *Theme of the Parabola* and *The Wilson Poems*. His fiction and poetry have appeared *The Gettysburg Review* and *Alaska Quarterly Review*. By day, he is an executive at Sony Pictures Entertainment.

Richard Wirick is the author of two collections of stories, *One Hundred Siberian Postcards* (2006) and *Kicking In* (2010), as well as the novel *The Devil's Water* (2014). *Postcards* was a London Times Notable Book of 2006 and was nominated for the 2007 PEN/Bingham Prize for best first work by an American author. His book of essays, *Hat of Candles*, is forthcoming in 2018. He practices law in Los Angeles, where he lives with his family.

Award Winners — *descant* 2017

Frank O'Connor Award for Short Fiction (\$500)

Brad Eddy for “The Aquarium”

Gary Wilson Short Fiction Award (\$250)

Toni Jensen for “Ever After”

Betsy Colquitt Poetry Award (\$500)

Kelly Nelson for “Anniversary”

Baskerville Publishers Poetry Award (\$250)

Alexis Trevino for “For You (when you find my hair on your floor)”

