

# *descant* 2013

Fort Worth's Journal of Fiction and Poetry  
Volume 52

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# Editors' Note: Fifty-Seven Years *descanting*

After Long Silence

Speech after long silence; it is right,  
All other lovers being estranged or dead,  
Unfriendly lamplight hid under its shade,  
The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night,  
That we *descant* and yet again *descant*  
Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song:  
Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young  
We loved each other and were ignorant.  
--William Butler Yeats

*descant*: *Fort Worth's Journal of Fiction and Poetry* first appeared in the autumn of 1956, thus making it 57 years old, a remarkable age for a small literary journal. Since the 1950s, literary journals have appeared and disappeared with surprising frequency, yet *descant* has thrived, despite budget cuts, administrative changes, and personnel reductions. Each year hundreds of writers from around the world have submitted their work to *descant*, and the journal published only what its editors selected as the best written and most engaging. For well over five decades *descant*, with singular facility, has explored the eternal themes of art and song, notwithstanding the unfriendly ravages of time and ill will.

Both proud and abashed, this year's journal, *descant* 2013, Volume 52, takes its place in the long and distinguished line of its forbears. It appears at a time of great transition and potential. After a dozen years, Dave Kuhne retired as Editor, passing the journal on to those of us dedicated to preserving its unique character and heritage. Dave's legacy is great. At a time when its existence was threatened, he took *descant* on, and his tireless spirit and dedication kept it going with little support and even less reward. All of us who care about the journal feel a great debt to Dave Kuhne.

Thankfully, there are now many who not only care and support *descant*, but who also are willing to dedicate their own time and energy to the journal, bringing in new vitality and new ideas. Of these talented people, Alex Lemon, Matthew Pitt, and Charlotte Hogg have committed themselves to making sure that *descant* will be around for another half century. Additionally, Dr. Andy Schoolmaster, Dean of the AddRan College of Liberal Arts, has generously provided financial support, which has allowed *descant* to continue to thrive. Without his ungrudging support, and without that of AddRan's former Dean, Dr. Mary Volcansek, *descant* might well have disappeared, and both TCU and Fort Worth would have had to endure a severe cultural loss.

Of those who also freely dedicated their time, talent, and energy to this year's edition are Lynda Davis and Klay Kubiack. While juggling graduate projects and degree requirements, both committed themselves to making sure that *descant* maintained its most

rigorous standards, and the current edition bears their good will and ample capacities. *descant* is further indebted to the generous support it has received from the TCU English Department, which funds the Betsy Colquitt Poetry Award, and to Ron Moore, a remarkably kind and dedicated university benefactor. For the past decade Ron has not only funded the Baskerville Publishing Poetry Award but has also continually offered to support the journal in countless ways. Thanks should also go to the staff at TCU Press, who pitched in with help and support during a year of meager personnel support. Melinda Esco, Rileigh Sanders, Kathy Walton, and Becca Allen were particularly helpful and supportive. Publication is always a collaborative venture.

This year's edition appears as a step in *descant's* transition, a process that will continue until the journal to the much greater transitions taking place in reading, writing, and publishing. The intention in this current edition, and with *descant's* future direction, is to be flexible, innovative, and adaptive while carefully preserving its continuity and heritage. As part of its transition, this year's *descant* explores the possibilities of a new cover and a new printing technique. With the skillful help of Jerry Craven publisher of Ink Brush Press, *descant* will publish in a more flexible print-on-demand (POD) format. As publishing technologies continue to develop, *descant* will continue to adapt in order to fulfill its core mission of defying silence and descanting on Art and Song.

—Dan Williams

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Jerry Craven

## Stone Salvation Barn

In the East Texas backwoods where three people could rightly be accused of being a crowd, Jack Tenner counted four buggies, five horses, and a mule, all standing close to the porch, and judging from the dust cloud up the road, there were more folk coming. Churchly folk, Jack reckoned, followers of that tent revival man who had set up his operation over in Woodville to pluck sinners right out of the deep woods and save them, sinners who liked the preacher man's brand of rant, Jack liked saying, sinners who dropped enough half dimes and pennies in the collection plate to buy the preacher-man a new buggy.

One of the buggies close to the porch looked to be new, so Jack figured the preacher himself stood behind Georgian and Darla Stone's house where he could gape at the barn. Maybe the preacher's wife came to make another drawing so she could take it to Jack's boss for another printing in *The Jasper News-Boy*.

None of the crowd was visible because of the abundance of undergrowth among the pine, oak, sweet gum, and magnolia trees around the house, especially the thicket that stood out back between the house and the barn. Georgian worked in front of his home, his tight straw hat jammed down to make his ears fold over like an angry cat. The idea of Georgian as a flickering-eared and foul-tempered cat made Jack chuckle. The cat-man had a pipe clamped between his teeth, one that gave off no smoke, and he worked in the final stages of hitching horses to his buckboard.

"Georgian," Jack said.

The man never seemed to look his way. "Jack."

"Seems like you got a passel of company."

"Ain't none of them welcome."

Darla stepped out the front door onto the abundant porch. "Jack," she said.

"Darla." Jack felt his heart beat faster. He tried not to stare at her tight cotton dress, a pink one that might have been red once, or at her blond hair that fell in ringlets past her shoulders, some tresses dangling over her breasts.

"You seen that bunch of pig-snouted, God-cursed nasty trash folk tromping around out back like a bunch of buzzard-kissing crap eaters looking for a fresh pile of manure?"

Her voice carried so much venom that Jack thought it best to hunker down. He dismounted, held the reins close in case Darla scared him so much he took a sudden notion to jump back on his roan and skedaddle. "Just got here. Ain't seen nobody but y'all."

"Theys out back, stomping down my okra."

"And the corn," Georgian said. "You wouldn't believe what those crude backwoods redbones be doing to my corn, and they claim to come in the name of God."

"They let your cattle loose?" Jack asked.

"Nope," Darla said. "But then we ain't got many."

"There's land owners around here," Jack said, "that would run them trespassers off with raising an angry voice and a shotgun, maybe firing some bird or rock salt their direction."

"I'd kiss them that done that," Darla said.

“Raising a gun ain’t my style,” Georgian said.

“Then it should be, and you know it. You ought to man up and blast away with my daddy’s shotgun at that riff-raff.”

Jack again winced at the poison in Darla’s tone, though Georgian seemed to take no notice of it.

“My boss at the newspaper wants me to look at your barn,” Jack said. “That okay with you?”

Georgian waved his hand almost in defeat. “Keep clear of the corn.”

“And the okra. For sure stay out of my okra.”

“I’m heading into Jasper for some supplies and for a talk with mister Kellie about what he prints in that newspaper of his.” Georgian climbed into the buckboard.

“Would you like me take you to the barn?” Darla asked

Some years back, Jack thought, an invite from Darla to go to a barn with her would be one he would say yes to even if such a trip could be dangerous and foolish. He watched her finger a golden curl of hair on her breast. Even today, he thought, I’ll sure as hell go with her, though the invite don’t mean what a woman’s invite to a barn ought to mean. But five years back, he remembered, when she took a fellow to a barn for the right reasons, it weren’t me she took. It was Georgian Stone.

“Coffee,” Darla said. “Last trip into town you forgot coffee, and don’t you dare forget this time, or your ass is grass.” She turned to Jack. “I’ll tell you about Zarah and Reverend LeRoy Patterson on our way to the barn.”

Darla said the preacher and his wife booked steamboat passage on the Laura from Beaumont. When they seen the barn, Darla told Jack, they went plum crazy, to hear Captain Andrew Smyth’s account of it. “But before I tell much more,” Darla said, “lemme explain about the paint.”

She led Jack beyond the house, past the corn crib, through a patch of tobacco and into a stand of woods close to the river. “Last year,” Darla said, “my garden proved a considerable producer. Watermelons. Squash. Sweetest tomatoes ever, and fine okra. Fine. That garden would have another good crop this year except for the preacher man’s skunk stupid sinners hoofing around in it—all so they can gasp and raise their hands and speak idiotic noise to sound like talking but ain’t. Stomped the onions flat, and most of the peas. Worst damage was to my okra. I got half a notion to take some pot shots at them while Georgian ain’t here to know, and may God curse him for being no real man at all.”

But her husband proved himself right smart at building, Darla admitted, something she admired in him from the first, even if he was a weird pacifist who refused to own a gun. “And who can live in these woods without no gun?” she demanded of Jack. “Least he don’t complain none that I sometimes tote my daddy’s shotgun.”

Such scorn for her husband, Jack thought, ain’t right. Still, he liked it that she and Georgian weren’t as cozy as they were back when she chose him over Jack.

Georgian’s latest project, Darla said, “one to please me, which it ain’t done, was a barn he built from the very cedar he cut down beside the river to make a place for the barn. Andrew Smyth had his boys tie them cedar logs into rafts, and he used that steamboat the Laura to shove them down river to the sawmills, along with hundreds of other logs, then he brought back first-class sawed boards to Bevilport, which Georgian hauled here to make the barn, though he claimed the boards like as not come from other logs and not the ones he cut. He’s wrong, of course, I know, cause I recognized the color of the wood as being from our trees.”

“The paint,” Jack reminded her. He feared he sounded right irritated by her liking to talk a bunch, same irritated as he used to get back when she was a bit sweet on him, before Georgian landed in Bevilport with him new to East Texas.

They picked their way around a couple of huge ant hills and a healthy patch of poison ivy on the grown-over logging road cutting through the forest toward the river. “Yeah.” Darla shot him a mean look, no doubt, Jack thought, a warning not to interfere with her telling the story.

That barn, she said, was a thing of beauty, and she wanted Georgian to paint it special. “But did he get special paint? Hell no. He come home with nothing but white-wash, something he said would be good for the boards and might help the barn stay cool on hot summer days.”

Then at least trim it in red, she told Georgian, to make it look like a proper barn.

“And he done it. He painted that barn white, then went to trimming the eaves in the prettiest red you ever seen. I warned him to stop when clouds rolled up in the south, but did he stop? Not that stubborn man. He tried to beat the rain, which proved a fool’s errand, and the rain came in a gully washer, set in like it wanted to rain forty days and forty nights.”

When it dried up enough to inspect the damage, they found one side of the barn jagged and streaky with colors, red and pink, and some splotches the color of sun-burnt skin. “That day the rain made the paint run? That’s the day when they seen it.”

“Who seen it?” Jack paused at the edge of the woods, looked across the vegetable garden at the barn. “Looks good to me,” he ventured.

“No it don’t, and don’t you say otherwise,” Darla snapped. “Besides, they seen it from the river, remember, on account of being on that steamboat. They seen the other side of the barn, where the fresh red paint did all the running across the white, mixing with it, and making a real mess. Look at that pack of jackasses over there on the river side. My okra is on that side, and that’s the side where they say God miracled a likeness of Jesus on that barn.”

Jack tried for a straight face when listening to the Reverend LeRoy Patterson describe the barn. The woman who Jack figured had to be Zarah Patterson sat nearby, her hand busy over a sheet of drawing paper, while the Reverend LeRoy held court with members of his flock of now-saved backwoods sinners: “The thorns, there, see them? That’s what first caught Zarah’s attention from way out there on the river, aboard the Laura. The crown of thorns and the blood, and there, the suffering face of Jesus—”

“I see it, Lord I see it,” one of the men cried out.

“I believe, I believe. I do,” a female voice said.

—put there by the grace of God the Father on this miracle barn to remind us of His Son’s sacrifice. He painted a blessed portrait of his son right here on Georgian Stone’s building to make this a salvation barn.”

“I don’t see it,” Jack said, not intending his observation to be an announcement, but it came out loud enough to get the attention of the preacher.

He strode over to Jack, leaving his little group waving their hands and murmuring. “Then let me show you. He’s there, clear as day, his suffering face, his bloody tears.” LeRoy took Jack’s arm.

Jack pulled away. “Grab me like that again,” Jack stifled a laugh, “and I’ll poke you in the eye.”

“Nothing can blind me to the presence of the Lord. Don’t you see it there, the

face covering most of the side of the barn? There, the thorns, there, the blood.”

“If I hold my tongue just right and squint a bunch, and lean over this way.” Jack leaned, tilted his head. “Then I see, lord I see. A barn with red and white paint streaked on it. And nope. No crown, no blood, no Jesus.”

“Let me be your eyes,” LeRoy said. “Better yet, let Zarah Grace Patterson be your eyes. Look, man, look at her drawing.”

On the way back to his horse, Darla astounded Jack by taking his arm. “Seems like I made a mistake a few years ago,” she said. “Georgian Stone ain’t the man I took him to be.”

Jack felt his pulse quicken but said nothing.

“You ought to come on in and sit a spell with me, now that Georgian has gone to town.”

“Is that a wise idea?”

“Probably not. But I’d sure as hell like to spend some time with a real man, for a change. Seems like my living with Georgian is making me into someone I don’t much like, sometimes.”

When Jack got on his horse, Darla said, “I do wish you could come up with a way to keep them crazy redbones from stomping my garden flat there around my barn.” Then she dropped her voice to a whisper, one Jack heard loud and clear: “There’ll be another time for you and me, and I pray it’s soon.”

In the newspaper office Jack told his boss the new drawing he saw Zarah Patterson working on had more details than the one Kellie published in the *Jasper News-Boy*.

“Maybe I’ll print it, too,” Kellie said.

“I told the preacher-man I had to get back to report to the editor of the paper in Jasper,” Jack said. “Which were a mistake. It made him double up his efforts to get me to see what he claimed to see, and he kept clutching my arm, jerking me this way and that with a wild look in his eye and a shrill edge to his voice so some of the redbones in his flock started giving me evil glances, maybe like they meant to do to me what they done to Darla’s okra, which was for a fact stomped into the dirt.” Jack didn’t mention how sorry he felt for Darla standing all alone at the edge of her garden while he talked to the preacher-man. She looked like an abandoned child, which seemed fitting, given that her man was no man at all for doing nothing but heading to town to argue about what got published in the newspaper.

“You did a good job today,” Kellie said. “As did I.”

He seemed a bit full of himself, Jack thought, though he liked Kellie and would never criticize him to anyone. Still, Kellie’s telling of his confrontation that day with Georgian Stone seemed to make the newspaper man puff up a bit more than usual.

Georgian had pushed into the newspaper office demanding that Kellie print a retraction to the story about Jesus on the barn. Never claimed it was true, Kellie said again and again until he tired of the tiff and told Georgian to leave. “But not before pointing to our motto hanging there on the wall,” Kellie told Jack, and later told the same tale again and again to any around town who would listen.

In Jack’s view it was a good motto, especially in the case of all the problems with the barn:

## **We Bend our Knee to None But God.**

The next *Jasper News-Boy* reported on the barn as well as on how curious folk had tromped down Darla Stone's garden, a note that pleased Jack. Kellie made no mention of Georgian in his article, though he did report that there was some open talk in town of burning the barn, rumors "this reporter" had heard in person, "rumors repeated by folk who took a dim view of witchcraft and any claims of magic because such unnatural happenings were always born of Satan and not the Lord, so—the rumormongers like repeating—the deep woods false temple with an idol on the side needed to have a torch set to it. Malicious rumors and such rogue calls for dastardly destruction of property," Kellie concluded in his news story, "are ones that everyone in the county as well as the whole state of Texas should heed, for burning a family's barn is serious business, there never being a good enough excuse for such malevolent action."

The only one in town, as far as Jack could tell, who spoke the rumors Kellie reported was the barber, a man with a loose tongue, in Jack's opinion. The barber seemed to take delight in declaring that somebody was going to get laid in the ground because of that barn. Shotguns, the barber said, and Jack had listened to him mouthing off in the middle of his comical flurry of clacking the scissors in the pointless way he did between actually using them to snip hair. Buck shot, he said, like East Texas boys took with them to shoot the Yankees. Folks get het up over notions of religion, the barber said, and they can go to shooting each other for what looks like nothing, killing over the likes of that barn even, which somebody ought to burn before the madness rises so much that death jumps out of the barrels of guns right in the streets of Jasper, and never mind the barn sits nine miles out, down by the Angelina.

Such talk seemed silly to Jack, so he discounted any threats to Darla's barn.

But the Reverend LeRoy Patterson took them as real threats after he read the paper. He showed up outside the post office where he preached a sermon to passersby outside about how it was every God-fearing man's duty to protect the scene of "the second crucifixion that God painted on the side of Georgian Stone's barn."

Jack got to the post office for the last part of the sermon, the part where LeRoy promised to place armed guards by that barn until the threat by the forces of Satan abated. Jack figured the only threat to Darla's place wasn't barn burning but loony folk—the preacher's guards as well as sight-seers—tramping down what was left of Darla's garden.

When Kellie heard about the preacher's plan, he declared Jack needed to camp out on the river by the barn to watch what transpires. "But going could be dangerous, so you have the choice to stay away. If you do go, take no arms, and in no way get involved in anything people do out there. The moon's nearly full, so you should find watching the preacher man and his troop easy to do for most of the night."

The assignment from Kellie made going easier, though Jack had already decided to spend at least one night by that barn, given that Georgian wasn't man enough to stand up for Darla. There was no way Jack would go unarmed, though he figured his shovel would be a better weapon than his shotgun. Besides, gunplay struck him as an immoral solution to any problem.

What worried him more than a gun fight was the current in the river, a swift flow from recent rains. He knew he had one chance to dock his skiff close to the barn. If he missed, the current would push him considerably down river, so he would have to hike back through the thicket, something he wanted to avoid because of ticks. For sure there

was no way he could row against the current if he overshot the area of the barn.

When Jack nosed his skiff to the bank near the barn and hopped ashore with the bow rope, he congratulated himself and his good fortune with the river. Five men were already there, four of them unloading camping gear from a raft staked to the bank. Darla stood on the rise above them, her arms akimbo and her face pinched into fury. Beside her the Reverend LeRoy Patterson waved his arms and hacked the air with his fists.

"...public property," LeRoy was saying, "and always has been. Fifty feet from any waterway, a hundred, and no matter who owns the land, people running a river have the right to come ashore to camp or for any reason they please."

"I think that ain't true." Darla turned to Jack. "And just what are you doing here?"

"Newspaper business. I'm here only to watch what folk do."

"You're welcome here," Darla said in a softer voice, "or to spend the night in our home, if you take a notion. But you other men, you ain't welcome nowhere around here. I got neighbors who say they just might up and shoot them that trespasses on my land."

"Dad burn it woman," LeRoy said. "We're here to protect this sacred barn because of having the exact likeness of Jesus painted right there, done by the hand of God himself."

"Don't say you ain't been warned. And you, Jack Tenner, you lay low if you hear shooting." She turned in a curt swirl of blond tresses and headed toward her house.

"Exact likeness," Jack muttered himself. "Exact." He took his bedroll from the boat, along with a can of beans and small tarp which he intended to sleep on. But he left the shovel out of sight in the skiff.

By the time darkness settled in and the four followers of the Reverend LeRoy built a fire from driftwood, Jack had spread his tarp a respectable distance from the saved sinners and the preacher man. He had also located a couple of huge ant hills like the ones that must have inspired the Smyths to name their place *Ant Hill Farm*. Mostly Jack stayed away from the Churchly crew, though after the sun set and the moon climbed among the tree tops, he wandered near the fire and asked LeRoy how he knew what Jesus looked like.

"Everybody knows that," LeRoy said. "Long hair, kindly face, trimmed beard, and eyes that can look into your very soul. You've seen paintings of Him hanging in most every church."

"All painted hundreds of years after he died—"

"And was resurrected."

"Okay, okay. Hundreds of years, and now nearly two thousand. So nobody knows what he looked like. That smudge you see on the barn ain't his exact likeness cause nobody knows it."

"The crown of thorns gives it away. Besides, God would not let people believe the paintings to be a likeness, not for two thousand years, unless it was true."

"Believing it makes it true." Jack spoke in a mocking tone.

"Yes. You speak wise words, my son."

"Anyone ever tell you that you're downright comical?" Jack went to his bedroll without waiting for a response.

Later in the night, after the campfire died to a glow of embers and several of LeRoy's flock filled the air with snoring, Jack retrieved the shovel from his skiff. He carried several shovels full of dirt from ant hills to spread beside each of Reverend LeRoy

Patterson's saved sinners. The sleeping preacher-man got extra shovels of ant hill dirt.

The ants took longer than Jack expected to work their way into the clothes, though when they finally climbed into place, they seemed to coordinate an attack of stinging. One man yelled, then another, then another. Jack watched them: dancing white shadows in the moonlight, figures slapping themselves, some using curse words that Jack was fairly certain were inappropriate for the newly saved. Perhaps it was the Reverend LeRoy Patterson who first shouted, "ants, ants." Those words were trigger enough for the lot of them to run for the river.

Jack counted the splashes, five of them, and he went to the water's edge to watch their bobbing heads whisked down river by the swift current.

Behind him a voice said, "I watched all that." Darla stood at the edge of her garden, holding a stick. "Like as not you saved them redbones in a more real way than any preacher-man ever did."

That's no stick, Jack thought: Darla came armed with a shotgun.

"You suppose any of them drowned?" Darla asked.

"Nah. Them deep woods redbones can all swim like water rats." Jack climbed the bank to get a closer look at Darla. He thought her mighty pretty in the moonlight, though there was something about her demeanor that disturbed him.

"So all they get is ant-stung and wet." Darla sighed. "That makes them lucky, for I came to do them some real damage. But now, just thinking how close I come to doing it, I got the shakes. Oh, Jack, you saved me from doing something terrible tonight."

"The shells in your gun. Loaded with bird or salt, right?"

"Buck. I weren't in no mood to be nice."

"Buckshot," Jack whispered. Damn. He stepped back. "You're kidding me. Tell me you're kidding."

"See for yourself." She broke open the shotgun, took out a shell, and stepped close to Jack. "Here," she jammed the shell into his shirt pocket. "Them men got lucky on account of you. I got lucky on account of you."

"Does Georgian know you came out here in the night to shed some blood?" Jack backed away, heading for his skiff.

"Maybe. Maybe not—and I don't care what he thinks. Where you going now?"

"I'm leaving."

"Will you come spend the rest of the night with me in the barn? Please? I need your company real bad right now, considering what I nearly done here tonight."

"The barn?" Jack stopped, looked at the barn. "I'll be damned."

He untied the skiff, stepped into it, and let the current take the boat.

Rebeca Chapa

## Two Beds

A dusty shaft of sunlight pierces the gloom  
Alighting on two beds  
Three feet apart  
The large one for him  
And the small one for her

When did they first sleep in separate beds?  
Did they come together only to make babies  
Or did they once lie in each other's arms  
And simply love?

For me, they existed in separate worlds  
Rarely speaking  
Barely touching

She, making fresh tortillas by hand  
And shepherding a gaggle of grandchildren through snack time  
(In between stolen puffs of a Lucky Strike)  
He, in the living room watching very loud baseball  
Or rocking and staring at  
Life on Walnut Street

Now, she is dying  
Her mind wandering through some far-off garden  
Full of mossy stone dragons and rich, ruby-hued bougainvillea  
Or perhaps a mélange of familiar faces rooted in strange places  
A tenderness now lives in that gulch that seemed so dry  
It waters the cracked ground and beckons growth  
As the end draws near

He sits at her side and listens to the dentures clicking  
Raises a red plastic cup of milk to her lips  
And adjusts the small knit cap covering her head  
The one with her name written on it in black marker



What is he thinking?

Does he remember their lives in the thirties, the forties?

Does he think about the day they met

Or what life will be like without her?

She's asleep now, her mouth recklessly open

He rises, signs out and goes home to sleep

In one of two beds

## Hands

Hands were impossible. There were so many little crevices and shadows to convey. They were amazing, really, when you stopped to look at them closely. The delicate matrix of bones radiating from wrist to fingers, laced with life-giving vessels. Then there were the protuberant knuckles that disappear magically when the fingers are extended. She particularly loved the soft, ridged whorls of skin that covered each joint, like little fleshy faces beaming up at her. Nadine loved hands. But she could never draw them. For an artist interested in the human form, that was like a bad joke.

When she told people she had a degree in Art History, their reactions usually fell into two camps. There were those who raised their eyebrows and bobbed their heads with overt interest. “Really?” they would ask. “How interesting! Do you paint or work in a museum?” Then there were those people (most people) who said “*Art history?*” as though it were the most useless subject to study. “So what do you plan to do with that?”

It was a good question, she had to admit. What *was* she going to do with that? Serve coffee for the rest of her life? She wished she could go back to school. She always felt safest there, because everybody was learning. No one was really expected to know anything yet. Not like out in the real world. She wanted to take more classes with Dr. Reinhardt. He was fatherly and comfortable and tried so hard to teach her how to draw hands.

“Start with them and the whole work will come together!” he used to say, his thicket of graying eyebrows alive with excitement, and his voice booming with the slightest wisp of a German accent. “When you leave the hands until the very end, it throws the whole thing off. Focus, Ms. Croft!”

He always used her last name. It was a quaint thing and she liked the formality it conveyed. Still, she never tackled the hands first, preferring to leave them until the very end. Then she thought about them obsessively. And always, the clumsy, too-large hands ruined the finished product. Sometimes she would go overboard and deliberately draw them smaller than felt normal, hoping to hit the mark. Those times, the little hands resembled 19th-century royal portraits of creamy-faced kings with big bellies and small, pointy black shoes. Dr. Reinhardt once made her draw just hands for three days straight. She would start with the wrist and work her way down the hand toward the fingernails, drawing the sinewy charcoal lines over and over. She must have drawn dozens of hands, but none of them looked right. They looked pained and lumpy, lacking enough narrowing at the wrist, or with knuckles too far down the finger to look anatomically correct. They did not indicate movement, or even the possibility of movement.

This was strange, because all her other forms were lovely. Beautifully shaped jaw lines, feminine biceps that hinted at power, the heavy hips and calves of a mature woman, the shadowy depression of a man’s lower back. She marveled in the human figure and preferred sketching that over a billowy field of lavender, or a wooden bowl full of fresh pears. It once dawned on her that even when she read a book, it was the human interaction that really intrigued her and kept her turning the page. Lengthy descriptions of a sunset made her eyes glaze over on the page. Why was that, she sometimes wondered. Wasn’t a real artist supposed to see beauty in everything? Wasn’t a true creator able to

take the most mundane, even boring things and make them into art? Then she would remind herself that all great artists have something they spend most of their time on. Degas loved to paint lithe ballerinas through a keyhole. Picasso did the whole postmodern pieces-of-a-dream thing and Warhol had his soup cans and funky faces. She had her handleless figures.

She saw him on a Tuesday, cold and wet. She had been staring at the droplets streaking down the window when he boarded the bus. First, a caramel-skinned woman got on, carrying a brightly colored plastic bag full of groceries. Then he got on. He paid his fare and leaned down to ask a question before sitting down in one of the seats near the front of the bus. He had very short hair and his khaki pants were pressed smooth. A maroon-colored backpack sat on the floor between his feet covered in heavy, brown work boots and his earlobes were fleshy and seemed to flutter, like the flaps on an 18-wheeler. Nadine was struck by how his movements, small as they were, were cleanly executed. He held on to the armrest with his right hand.

He had a bandaged stump where his left one should have been.

The bus rumbled through the downtown streets, swaying with the day's slice of life. As the bus began approaching the museum of natural history, he slowly stood up and threw his backpack over his right shoulder. He mumbled something to the driver and got off the bus. It was already beginning its slow pull away from the curb when Nadine got up from her seat and bounded toward the driver. She hadn't planned to, but some thought or idea too fleeting for recognition propelled her out of her seat.

"Driver, sorry, but can I please get off here too?" she asked. The driver didn't look at her or answer her, but began applying the brakes in the aloof way bus drivers have.

"Thanks," she said, leaping onto the sidewalk. The doors closed with a healthy 'swoosh' and she watched the bus, appreciating its soothing hot roar as it drove off. She turned around and saw him heading up the steps to the museum. She broke into a jog and caught him.

"Excuse me, sir?" she spoke out to him, timidly but urgently enough for him to know that he was her target. He turned around.

"Yeah?" he said, his forehead crunching up as he raised his eyebrows at her. Somehow that made him look extra short, Nadine thought. He couldn't have been much more than five feet tall.

"Uh, this is going to sound really crazy, but I was wondering if maybe I could... ask you something," she said.

"Yeah, sure," he said, the crunch moving from his forehead to the corners of his green eyes. A slight smile began to flirt with the edges of his mouth.

"Oh! It's not what you think. Really!" she said, clutching her coat close to her body, a reflexive action that always came out when she felt threatened.

"What do I think?" he lobbed, the smile firmly planted now and growing roots.

"What happened to your arm?" Nadine blurted.

"Well," he said slowly, the smile fading but not leaving his face. "An old war injury, you might say." He looked down at the white gauze covering the lower part of his left arm, rotating it left to right.

"I know this is weird, but I'm an artist and I was wondering if I could sketch your arm?" Nadine said.

He paused.

"I'm an artist," she repeated.

“Yeah, you said that. You wanna draw this?” he said, thrusting his left arm towards her.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s different and I just think it would be, I don’t know. A challenge.”

“Well, yeah, it is different,” he said, smiling at her. “Should I be offended?”

“Oh, no! Not at all! And I’m sorry if this is out of the blue. I just noticed you on the bus and I thought I’d take a chance and ask you,” she said.

“I guess I can swing that,” he said. “You don’t mean right now though, right?”

“No, no, just whenever you can. If it’s better for you, I can come to your place.”

“Yeah, I’d rather not do this in public and be showin’ my stuff to the world, if you know what I mean,” he said, grinning widely. “Why don’t you write down my number and call me when you’re ready. I live in that complex near the shopping center, off Elmwood.”

“Yeah, that would be good. Maybe sometime next week, if you can,” she said, reaching into her tattered shoulder bag and fishing out a pencil and an old drugstore receipt. “Ok, what is it?”

“Seven-six-one-eight-two-two-four,” he said slowly while she scribbled.

“Great. Ok, I will call you next week,” she said. “Thank you, seriously.”

“Ok. Well, it was nice meeting you,” he said, sticking his bandaged arm out to shake Nadine’s hand. She looked at the stump, then at him, her mouth slightly open. But before she could extend her hand toward him, he lowered his arm.

“It’s just a joke. Sorry,” he said with a smile. “Amputees do that sort of shit to make ourselves laugh,” he said, extending his right hand. “Nice meeting you. So, I’ll see you next week.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” she said. “And thanks again, really.”

“Hey, no problem. Later,” he said, turning back towards the museum entrance and hitching up his backpack on his shoulder.

“Oh hey!” he yelled back at her. “What’s your name?”

“Nadine Croft,” she said. “And you?”

“Chris Latham,” he said.

“Take care, Nadine Croft,” he said, resuming his measured steps up the stairs. Nadine turned and began walking until she found an empty bench. She stared at the scrap of paper with the phone number on it. *What the hell did I just do?* she said to herself. *Stupid. He must think I’m a total idiot.*

That evening, as Nadine watched her clothes rise and fall at the laundromat, she thought about Chris Latham. What would it be like going to this guy’s place and drawing his handleless arm? She imagined what his flesh would look like under the bandage and began mentally sketching it. Over the next couple of days, she pulled out the number again. Seven-six-one-eight-two-two-four. She thought about him trying to dial a phone number with that stump. Three days later, she left work at 4 p.m. and made her way to the apartment complex off Elmwood. Dellwood Manor. It didn’t look anything like a manor, she thought. With miniature porches and cheap metal railings, it looked like a motel in where drug deals got carried out. And the basketball court between two of the buildings reminded her of the stifling areas prison inmates squeeze into to work out. Nadine climbed the stairs and looked around, all the apartments looking exactly alike except for the meager plants and cheap plastic toys that distinguished one from another.

Two-twelve. Knock-knock-knock. She heard footsteps and then the door opened.

“Hey, Picasso!” Chris said with a smile. “Come on in.” Nadine smiled and fol-

lowed him inside.

“So you found it OK?” he asked.

“Yeah, those were good directions,” she said. Nadine took her bag from her shoulder and removed her coat.

“Here, I’ll get that for you,” Chris said. After hanging the coat in the closet, he turned to her. “The grand tour won’t take but like, a minute,” he said, leading the way. “Here’s the kitchen, where I do all my own gourmet cooking,” he said with a smile. “OK, OK, you got me!” he said raising his arms in mock arrest. “Me and the Chinese delivery guy are best friends! And please follow me here, into the drawing room,” he said with a theatrical flourish of his right arm, pronouncing it ‘dror-ing.’ “Get it? Drawing room?” Nadine smiled but said nothing, watching Chris move throughout his tiny apartment with such lightness.

“Do you mind if I take the couch?” she asked. “I like to sit cross-legged while I draw.”

“Anywhere you want is fine,” he said. “Do you want a Coke or something?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.” She walked to the couch, removed her sneakers, sat down cross-legged and began rooting around in her bag.

“So how should I pose?” he asked, standing before her, hand on hip like a super-model.

“Can you bring one of those chairs from the table and just sit right here in front?” she said. “Just sit normal, like you’re sitting and talking to a friend.”

He pulled the chair over and sat down, waiting for directions.

“Go ahead and take off your bandage,” Nadine said as she sharpened a pencil and positioned her erasers on the couch next to her.

“This is freakin’ whacked,” he said with a nervous laugh as he started to unwind the bandage. “I never thought I’d be strippin’ for a painter! And just my arm too.”

Nadine watched as he began to unroll the bandage. With each slow revolution of the white, soft gauze, a little more became visible. First the upper forearm with its well-defined muscles. Then lower, with the many hairs matted down from being covered up. And finally, the edge of the world. Pink and salmon-colored waves of flesh lapping up on each other, crested by tight white lines, little mouths sewn shut. He twisted his arm back and forth, looking down at it intently.

“What do you think?” he asked her.

“It looks painful,” she said. “Does it hurt?”

“Not usually. Sometimes it itches and it drives me nuts,” he said. “Other times it feels like my hand is still there. I’ll go to reach for a beer or something and there’s just air. It’s still weird looking down at it. It grossed out my girlfriend. She couldn’t handle it.”

By now, Nadine had begun to draw. For a long time, neither of them said anything. The apartment was quiet except for the soft “shwuh-shwuh-shwuh” of pencil on paper. “So how did it happen?” she finally said, looking up from the pad briefly before starting in again. He told her about the day he was on a routine patrol, driving a Humvee on the outskirts of the desert town where he was stationed. It was hot as hell that day and really dusty. He remembered thinking about his girlfriend, Claudia, and how much she loved hot weather. The hotter, the better, especially at the beach. He’d been away from home for almost a year and a half and was scheduled to get rotated out in another two months. He was thinking about kissing Claudia when the bomb ripped through the vehicle. He was flung outside the vehicle and hit the ground with a thud.

“It was weird because the sound of the explosion was so damn loud, like something straight out of hell,” he said. “Then I couldn’t hear anything and I was just lying there on the sand. I remember feeling so small and everything was happening really slow, in complete silence almost. I must have passed out then because that’s all I remember from the scene. I woke up in the hospital and that’s when I found out my hand got blown off. I’m supposed to get the prosthetic in another month or so.”

Nadine didn’t say anything. She felt like she ought to, but what do you say to a story like that? Twenty minutes passed. Chris got up only once, to go to the bathroom and get a soda. Nadine didn’t move her body, not even to work out the tense muscles in her neck and arms and shoulders. She kept drawing different versions of what she saw. Sometimes just raw Hieronymus Bosch flesh, other times the whole arm and then a full-body version.

“You don’t talk a whole lot, do you?” Chris asked her, his head cocked to one side. Nadine stopped sketching and slowly raised her head.

“I’m...I’m usually more comfortable drawing people than talking to them,” she said.

“No, no it’s fine,” he said. “I just noticed that about you. I wasn’t trying to criticize.”

She smiled at him and dove back onto the page. Her eyes darted from him to the paper, him to the paper, in the energetic way artists have when they’re working. Finally, she stopped sketching, took a deep breath and leaned back on the couch.

“Ok. I’m done,” she said, closing her eyes as if to seal the images she just created. “Do you want to see it?”

“Hell yeah!” he said. “Chris! Immortalized!”

She handed him the large tablet. He looked down at the paper and saw himself, sitting on the chair. His head is turned to the side, as if he’s looking at something across the room, off the page. His handless left arm reclines along the back of the chair. In his right hand is a pen and a notepad is balanced on his lap. There’s a suggestion of writing on the notepad and hints of a background: a kitchen counter, a framed picture on the wall, a sweater draped over a barstool. Bits of his world, as it was today. His eyes fluttered across the drawing, taking in each line and curve.

“Wow,” he said finally, struggling to keep his emotions in check. “That’s something else.”

“Do you like it?” she asked. “I think it works.”

“Yeah, it totally works,” he said, the words getting stuck in his throat. “You’re very good. It...this really looks like me.”

He kept staring at the drawing, then swiped at his cheek quickly with the sleeve of his shirt.

“Wow,” he said, finally.

“You can have it,” she said. “It’s my way of saying thanks for letting me do this. It means more to me than you know.”

“Well, if it’s cool with you,” he said, clearing his throat. “I’ll frame it and hang it up. An original Nadine Croft!”

“I should get going,” she said, tearing the page off the tablet and handing it to him. Chris crossed the apartment to get her coat.

“I hope the prosthetic thing works out for you,” she said.

They gazed at each other, their thoughts hanging in the air like fat raindrops.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “So do I.”

Larry E. Graham

## Cowboy

James Petticomb likes to say he's Head Librarian at this branch of the library because his employees (all of whom are women) think he respects them. Of course he doesn't. He just puts on a good show. But, he says, it works. He says it doesn't take much effort. You just ask their opinion from time to time, so they think they participate in decisions. You let them talk about their husbands and their kids – all that personal stuff – and you nod your head occasionally, like you're listening. It's easy – really easy. Word gets around, and soon the people in the Personnel Office at the Main Branch downtown think you're a good manager, and they recommend you for a promotion.

Piece of cake.

But James Petticomb carries this pretense only so far. Every afternoon at five o'clock he unclips his Library Employee Identification badge, drops it onto his desk, and walks out the door without looking back. At five o'clock he ceases to be James Petticomb.

He becomes the man known as Cowboy.

\* \* \*

It's Tuesday night at the Bronco. Across the front of the building, a neon bucking horse flashes blue and red, blue and red, blue and red. Cowboy pulls his classic 1963 Chevrolet pickup (bull horns screwed to the hood, rifles in the rear window) into the parking lot. He climbs out of the cab and sets his cowboy hat on the hood. It's a big hat, too big to wear while driving. It has an eight-inch brim and a feather sticking up on one side. Nobody but Cowboy can wear such a hat at the Bronco.

He dusts off his patent leather cowboy boots, hitches up his pants, and sets the hat on his head. He cants it at a certain angle. As he walks into the place, he greets the bouncer. "Hey, Boo."

"Hey, Cowboy."

"Lotta fillies in tonight, Boo?"

The bouncer nods toward the bar. "See for yourself, Cowboy."

Smoke hangs in the air like unstirred cream in coffee. Glasses tinkle. Laughter bubbles here and there. Suddenly the fiddler, wearing a small cowboy hat with the brims rolled up, jumps off the bandstand onto the dance floor. He launches into "The Fireman" – a greeting for Cowboy.

People wave to Cowboy, who – waving back at the men, winking at the women – strolls up to the bar and sits on his stool, the one with his name embossed on the leather cover. The bartender has Cowboy's drink ready: a shot of whiskey, beer back. The bartender says, "Evening, Cowboy," and waits for Cowboy to drink. Then, when the first glasses are empty, he sets up another pair. But Cowboy always lets this round sit awhile. He only drinks two drinks per hour. He wants to stay sharp for the dancing.

He barely finishes his drink when the first woman, a lovely doe-eyed thing in a sequined vest and skin-tight Levi's, approaches. "Hi, Cowboy."

"Why hello, Miss Mary."

"I'd sure like to dance with you, Cowboy."

“And I’d like ta dance with you, Miss Mary. Would ya like ta do a line dance, or would ya like ta do a Two-Step?”

“A Two-Step, of course,” she giggles. “That way, I get to feel your muscles.”

The evening goes the way it usually goes for Cowboy. He doesn’t have to ask any of the women to dance because they ask him first – he’s such a superb dancer. He’s so smooth. He knows all the moves, and he can talk while he dances. Sometimes, he even invents dance steps, and he does the steps without missing a beat – so the woman can follow along, doing whatever steps she knows. He’s good. He’s very good.

Cowboy exudes confidence. He must have been born on a dance floor, he’s so confident. When a woman dances with him, she can relax, let herself go. Whatever she does is okay. Cowboy is so good at dancing, and he’s such an accomplished conversationalist, that women stand in line to dance with him.

Of course, some women come to the Bronco with their husbands or their boyfriends, so they don’t stand in line to dance with Cowboy. But if their husbands or boyfriends are wise, and if the husbands or boyfriends are observant (if they see the smile playing about the corners of the woman’s mouth, if they see her eyes following Cowboy’s moves) they’ll encourage their women. “Go ahead,” they’ll say. “Dance with him.” They know it’s in their own interests: Cowboy will “warm them up,” as the saying goes. That is, as the saying goes at the Bronco, when Cowboy is there.

By ten o’clock Cowboy has danced with every woman in the place. He’s about to make his decision – about which one he’ll take home tonight – when a woman he’s never seen before strides past the bouncer and sits on the barstool reserved for him, for Cowboy.

A hush falls over the barroom. For five seconds, nobody talks, nobody laughs. No glasses tinkle. Even the band stops playing, and the dancers on the dance floor pause and stare at the woman: she’s sitting on Cowboy’s stool!

But what’s more shocking, she’s wearing a cowboy hat with a nine-inch brim and two feathers sticking up on the side. And her boots are not just patent leather, they’re patent alligator. When she leans forward to order her drink, the fringe that dangles from the front of her red cowboy shirt dances like a bullfighter’s cape.

Cowboy snorts. He paws the dance floor. He aims his eight-inch brim at the red fringe and charges.

“Ahem,” he says, standing behind the woman.

The woman glances back briefly, then returns to her drink (she’s ordered two shots of whiskey, two beers back). She indicates the empty stool next to her. “Yes, you may sit here,” she says.

But Cowboy doesn’t sit. “You ain’t from around here,” he says.

“You are correct,” says the woman.

“You ain’t never been in here before, have you, little lady.”

“You are correct again,” she says. “This seemed like a nice place to stop.”

Cowboy still doesn’t sit. He notices that the woman smells of sage, and some kind of flower.

By now the band is playing “Achy Breaky Heart,” and people are forming lines on the dance floor. They steal glances at Cowboy.

“That sage yer wearin’?” says Cowboy. “And some kinda flower?”

“It’s called Plum-Sage Blossom. I order it online.”

“It’s...it’s kinda nice.”

“Well, thank you,” she says, and for the first time, she turns to face him, to repay



his compliment with a smile. It's the brightest, purest, most genuine smile Cowboy has ever seen. Birds sing. A brook ripples in a forest, somewhere. Stars circle the firmament.

But then – with a shock – Cowboy sees the Identification badge clipped to her collar. It's a Library Employee Identification badge: she's a Personnel Officer at the Main Branch downtown.

Cowboy swallows. He breaks out in a sweat. He loses his accent.

“You...you probably wouldn't want to dance, would you? With me, I mean?”

“I might,” she says. “As soon as I finish my drink.” She notices his hat. “But you're wearing an awfully big hat.”

Self-consciously, he touches the brim of his hat.

She shakes her head, shrugs her shoulders. “I don't think we can both dance with hats like that.”

Cowboy sweeps his hat onto the bar. The woman smiles again. She turns back to her drink.

Cowboy waits for her to finish her drink. While he waits, he worries that he'll make a mistake on the dance floor, that he'll make a wrong move, that he won't be able to dance and talk at the same time. He worries that he may have hat-hair, that his deodorant may not be working, that he has something stuck in his teeth. He worries that she won't like him – or will like him and will want to go home with him right away. What if he's had too much to drink, and that doesn't work out?

He watches her knock back the second shot of whiskey. She takes a slug of beer and exhales with pleasure. She turns to greet him.

“Let's dance, mister,” she says. “I'm in the mood for fun.”

Weston Cutter

## Close Up

The day's news all utility : the state  
has killed another killer, salt trucks and plows will be darnning  
the day's commute

like a sock overused on hard slate floor,  
fabric at toe + heel thinned as eyelid skin, membranous,  
the merest film

sacrificing itself for the sake of  
the larger order : and what isn't : today is March : another  
season + I'm looking

for where into the narrative to stitch  
myself : not so much *where* as *which narrative* : today is both  
so little and too

much : war + sickness : can Dave  
legally marry Pete : the elements slosh each other like everyone  
at Curly's, 11:15

on Saturday night as the drinks leak  
into the Basal Ganglia which is to the brain as roots are to trees  
which works only

if you believe the inside of a head  
oak or elm : or take your pick : true or false : everything you forget  
is a falling red leaf :

yes or no : the lightning of living has left  
deep black burns on the inside of your mind : mine, too : it's easy  
to forget that

at 1000x zoom all living's transparent  
as overhead projector sheets full of corrected sentences and half  
-canceled equations,

easy to overlook how great the day  
that ends without dying or killing anyone while driving roads tricky  
+ unnegotiable as mercy.



there can at times be too much  
*what if* and the number of minutes  
I could watch someone I love suffer  
before becoming a weapon a gauge  
of my ultimate utility. Infinite ways  
of hurting, days we can't name  
the roads we're stuck on the side of,  
same number of ways to be  
alive. I'd like to believe I'm breathing  
a coherent philosophy. I'd like  
to think I've earned a minute  
of not wondering if it's really gold,  
the shining in my hands  
I'll soon enough part with.

Weston Cutter

## 20th century art

take an infrared to any de kooning + it's  
stick-figures beneath. rep  
resentation meaning we're all  
pulleys and gullibility. *look, trees*  
but they're brownish smudges. uncanvassed  
+sans frames they'd be remnants  
of a party at which the brownies  
were extra tender and everyone  
kept touching things. we're all  
living the same procedural CSI:  
life, hoping our days deserve a gray  
-haired detective who drinks too much  
to shake the ghosts of the cases  
he couldn't close. my body the sculpture  
unfinished, left outside  
the gallery's door, no sign  
or symbol, just the only place  
the thing fit. the string of lights hanging  
from the ceiling means progress,  
each tungsten filament a rope bridge  
to the burning past. the four sticks  
framing the blank wall a reminder  
to kiss experience no matter  
your chapped lips. *the party was  
too much* de kooning maybe said  
when st peter in the form  
of an abstract breast asked why  
the stick figures needed such color,  
curved lines. some days  
black and white, some  
days neon, the name of every piece  
pronounced the same.

Weston Cutter

## Pangea

Gray morning and I don't know how  
to spell gray, grew up seeing it  
both *gray* or *grey* but like a reef  
at a continent's front door the distinction  
between one and the other feels indistinct. My wife  
in the shower fifteen feet above me.  
Everything has at some point been wet.  
A reef is like a landmass's eyebrow or watch  
band or monocle. *Blonde*, too: sometimes *e*  
just as often sans. I live for how she moves  
down the hall, towel-turbaned and every  
-thing else uncovered as a raw map. Unsurprising  
how most *gr\_y* mornings feel  
the same: low sky, day like unwashed wool, even birds  
blended into their bushes, the withheld  
world. At thirteen my penis had  
various spellings, sometimes *toomuch* sometimes  
*notenough*. Imagine how Australia will feel  
when it discovers how many people come  
to jump away from it to its reef. My wife  
lets her hair down once it's dry and the blond  
surrounds her shoulders, a shining  
unspellable thing, her body  
one habitable city in the indecipherable world.

Weston Cutter

## Are You Experienced

the scuffed shoes of it . crumbs . how  
we'd as kids fit our lips fat  
with shredded jerky . fake  
stand-in for the chew none of us would later  
take to . preferring smoke . how easy it is to cling  
to-- . experience . narrative . as if little nits gone  
picked and un- and everything's documented . constitute  
life . like living's cake or anyotherthing baked or some  
begun - from -batter business, a matter  
of following pattern, skipping no steps . the thinness  
of story . once i kissed my wife and then lights  
off . now child . i want to believe in my days . . that  
they *mean* . the basil i nab from lowe's  
unique, one identical green pot among a dozen  
hundred others . i have to be believing  
in all of this . have to be needing to think  
it's not mere training . the thing happening is  
the thing it self . this wednesday night and traffic  
dictating the quality of how home is gotten to . once  
i breathed in . this is one of the stories of how  
i'm trying to let everything back out .

## Strange Creatures

Whistles from a passing train carried with the wind, unsettling snow from branches. The tracks lay below a steep, wooded hill, and separated Prairie Vista from miles of corn fields and open space. Jackie's home sat atop that plateau on the edge of town, overlooking vast nothingness, shielded from the tracks by pines that knifed up from the hillside.

The train came always at the same time—two in the morning, Tuesdays—but at that hour few remained awake to notice. On rare occasions when Jackie couldn't sleep, the sounds seemed sporadic and foreign. Two long whistles, one short, and another long as the freight ripped past County M-31 and past Prairie Vista.

She lived alone, mind and body as intact as seventy years would allow. The nearby train disturbed her no more than snowflakes accumulating on the windowsill. A sheet enveloped her like a tunic. Down blanket half on the floor. Pillows scattered about the room, kicked off or otherwise discarded. She slept the untroubled rest of a creature in hibernation, a burrowing rodent. Body contorted, mouth open, tongue poked out a bit, one might even think her lifeless.

Soon though, rumblings arose that could not be ignored, and she woke to crashing noises from elsewhere in the house. Someone popping open drawers and cabinets and rifling through them. Jackie stared at the glowing hands on the clock. The stove had been turned on—she could smell crumbs warming on the oven bottom. Her wrinkled feet tapped around for a pair of hospital slippers and found them. A Japanese robe hung by the door and she put it on over her nightgown, not bothering with the waistband.

When she swung open her bedroom door, it slammed against the wall and light from the kitchen went out at once and all she could hear was winter wind rushing up the hill and over the house. Jackie barreled down the hall, smacking into the bookshelf in her living room.

"Oww! I stubbed my big toe. Flick that light back on?" To whom she appealed, she didn't know—but no light was granted. "Rude!" She felt her way toward the raised kitchen, stopped at the step and said, "I'm going to turn the light on now."

"Don't you touch it." The voice was immediate, its source close enough to touch. "Don't you make a peep," the man snarled.

With this a tedious silence ensued. Jackie wondered how long it could continue and became antsy just thinking about it. "Do I not have the right to face my captor? Or is that for accusers? I haven't been out in a while."

"Lady," said the disembodied voice, "I could mess you up real bad." His tone was sincere, and she believed him.

Jackie went on all the same, sputtering, "The stove is on. Is that because you're cold? I sleep with the heat off. I think it preserves me, keeps me kicking." She saw the silhouette move for her. "The switch is right behind you," she called to allay the stranger.

But she already felt his hand against her silk robe as he grabbed the small of her back, pulling her against his frozen clothing. His breath reeked of peppermint tobacco. "You do it," he said, and held for an additional moment, for warmth or because he could.



At the thermostat beside the kitchen window, she put it to eighty and warm air blew from the vents. Her eyes adjusted while peering outside at the tops of snow-caked pines cresting at her eye-level. No lights, but a hazy moon illuminated snow on even the farthest pasture and silo and rolling hill beyond. Seventy million years ago, an asteroid struck this part of Iowa and killed everything within five hundred miles. *Five hundred miles*. Then glaciers formed and mowed down the evidence. They smoothed the little blemish and pulverized any remains, as if nothing had ever happened, as if this had never been an ancient ocean bed, as if strange creatures had never roamed this land, as if they had never existed. It would happen again, she had been told. Everything was temporary.

When she turned, the intruder was seated at the edge of a rocking chair with a throw around his shoulders, shaking. The chair, a flimsy antique, was more of a decorative piece, one from which she discouraged visitors, but she allowed it for now.

He switched on the Tiffany lamp and brought it to the floor. Cherubs swirled around on the stained-glass shade now between his legs. The opening at the top lit his face from beneath like a flashlight, and she thought he might tell a ghost story.

His appearance she deemed quite offputting. Reddish hairs grew in irregular patches from his face; a face that connoted a tough material, leathery and pock-marked, not unlike his boots. A tan jacket with upturned collar covered the beginnings of some thorny, graying tattoo on his neck. He resembled a movie cowboy, separated from the herd, battered by the elements. The laconic part he had covered.

“May I sit? That sounds funny; I live here,” she said, and sat back on the oriental sofa. “Who are you is probably the most pertinent question. New in town?”

The man appeared to boil with wrath, and stood, unfastening his belt before her. He loosened it to the next notch. Unzipping his jacket, a maroon sack fell to the floor, there either for insulation or to make him seem larger, dual-fold it could have been. Or maybe he climbed in it at night—it looked like it could fit a person.

The sunken living room was a medley of cultures obtained from various travels—statuettes, tapestries, bizarre rocks. A Tibetan Prayer Flag across the corner window. African masks ornamented the wall. It all resembled the belongings of some beatnik art teacher, though Jackie had never touched a brush but to glaze a pastry. She had been a baker.

He surveyed the room affecting disdain. His attention never left her more than a moment, as if she might any second give up the frail old lady routine, spring for the marble Buddha and bash his skull. “This is all shit,” he sighed.

When he spoke, he had a tendency of blinking, but harder than an average blink. Now and then he combined it with a tremendous swallow, and Jackie felt embarrassed to watch him.

“Well it’s no Taj Mahal,” she said. “But it’s good enough for me.” Jackie spotted her spare key on the floor. She left it in a planter beneath the awning. “I see you found my little secret. I thought it too much a cliché to leave under the mat. Or was it open?” She scratched her cheek, unsure.

“Shut up.” His voice could be altered, she noticed. So menacing when called-for that he could’ve had a career as a top-notch radio actor. She wondered if he sought out his role in life or simply played the only part on the bill. The jailbird. The back alley mugger. The marauder. Threats were his *pièce de résistance*.

He loomed over her, pacing the length of the couch on which she sat; she with her knees together, patting her lap as if within a waiting room with nothing to read.

“Where’s the alarm?” he posed, scholar of the home invasion.

“The inquisition, eh?” She sighed. “What would I need an alarm for? Where would it go?”

“I don’t know, the sheriff! I seen them do that! They know where everyone is!” He defended himself as an adolescent might, as if nothing could be worse than being made to look the fool, to look insane.

“Sheriff Brier’s deaf as a post. He forgets his siren’s on and everybody gets out of his way and he thinks they’re just being polite.” This wasn’t altogether true, but the stranger seemed like he could use a chuckle.

“Who else lives here?”

“Here? Just my lonesome.”

He quit pacing and turned with urgency. “Who’s your lonesome?”

“Hmm? Oh—” She covered her mouth to suppress a cackle. “I mean me! Just me.”

“Then why don’t you say that then? Stop goddamn laughing.”

Jackie tried—she didn’t mean to be cruel—but she couldn’t contain herself. She loved little misunderstandings. Incensed, his blinking became maniacal. He bent over and grabbed her by the neck, almost lifting her off the couch. The hand felt like a dog’s paw, rough and cracked. Blood pressure swelled her face, and her hands naturally thrashed at his grip. She had experienced utter breathlessness once before in life, a wreck in her twenties. She had experienced her head obliterating a windshield. Experienced being thrown clear into a tree. Experienced life being sucked from her body, extinguished, only to be restored entire minutes later, through medical miracle, through fluke—*that* had a certain earthshatteringness to it.

His point apparently made, he released and gave her a moment to resume a conventional color. But he went back at it again, pointing at the floor for emphasis. “Who else lives here?”

“Déjà vu,” she croaked. “*Just me*,” and rubbed her neck.

“What about a husband? Where’s he?”

“Hard to say,” she told him without looking up. “He passed away in ’98. On September first, which was also his birthday for your information.”

“If he walks out of that room, I’ll break his neck.”

“That,” Jackie said, “would be highly unlikely.”

Something must have occurred to the intruder and, under excited impulse, he rushed toward the door. “Just you? Just you?” he cried, and peered out the door’s little porthole. “Whose skis are them out there?” he demanded.

“I ski! I can get all the way from the bike path down to Olive Street in 22 minutes. I’ve been skiing every morning there’s snow for ten years.” She tried to conceal her pride, but Jackie could *really* ski. She flew past younger women on the track, and were she not so absorbed in her own rhythm, could have heard them panting in her wake, cursing her with every exhale, giving up then and there, deciding to take up snowshoeing instead.

That one motion, repeated hundreds of times, thousands, produced in her a meditative, trancelike state. She became as thoughtless as the bare cottonwoods, and the plains, and the bursting dawn horizon—an extension of the earth itself. Anything aside from that motion dissolved with the smoky breath she exhaled.

“Anyway it’s easy on my joints. But listen to me—talk talk talk. *Do you ski?*” Jackie asked.

As the stranger tore off his jacket, pine needles fell from the sleeves, scattering across the wood floor—he must have scampered up from the tracks. He began rummag-

ing through her possessions, clawing the shelves of an armoire, looking for electronics or gadgets, of which there were none, and creating a little pile about him, *his* pile, itself quite valueless. Knickknacks, an old Nikon Super 8, her crocodile skin purse. He tore through storage boxes stuffed with tissue paper—the remnants adding to a sea of paper scraps and merchandise and pine needles on the living room floor. All the while, his bulging eyes shifted back and forth between her and the goods, the goods and her, like a skittish pooch over his scraps.

A few of these items might have fetched *something* at a pawn shop down in Council Bluffs or Omaha, but one object intrigued her in its utter rinky-dinkiness. What use could he possibly have with a woman's hair clip? He, with finger-length, filthy hair that looked to have been sheared with two blunt rocks, slicked to one side with some sort of goop, covering his retreating hairline, which he mended meticulously. Aluminum too—the hair clip—not some heavy silver or gold. It did possess a certain matriarchal quality, she supposed, perhaps once her own mother's. He held it for a time with some childlike fascination, while she pretended to sleep with an eye cracked open. He clipped it onto his finger and waved it around, then he watched how it lay on his palm, lost in thought, or just lost, before clinching it in his fist.

"Who's expecting you tomorrow?" he asked through grit teeth, angered by the hair clip, something it might have said.

Jackie forgot she had been pretending to sleep and came to life right away. "Expecting me?"

"At work? In town?" He chucked the hair clip onto his pile.

"Work!" she said in disbelief. "Right, I'm supposed to be shoveling sidewalks by daybreak. No, I'm a cop—that's it. Put 'em up, Sonny!" She pointed a finger gun at his chest and fired away.

"I'm gonna kill you," slipped from his lips in breathy exhale, but he breezed past it, maybe hoping the words weren't heard or would be chalked up to just something you say. The candidness of the outburst, however, was unmistakable.

"You don't do jack shit, fine," he hurried. "Anybody coming by the house in the morning? Neighbors check on you?" Noticing her stare, he looked around and mended his hair, as if he were just making idle conversation.

"Nobody's coming," she said.

An unstifled grin parted his lips, and varying shades of yellow shone through.

While the man scoured the china cabinet for expensive cutlery, Jackie nodded off in earnest, only coming to when she felt herself tilting ever so gradually forward into an imaginary abyss. The haze of a dream lingered, and the line between real and unreal blurred, and she did not know where she was, nor how old. The scent of potpourri on the mantle conjured up that winter in Chicago from her twenties, her days of inexplicable fear. And in this second between worlds, she was back in that city, in the posh town house of a man to whom she was supposed to marry, but never did. She sat paralyzed on his overstuffed armchair, limbs weighing a thousand pounds, forced to tread as if the thing were made of water. There was an indistinct image of that fiancée, dressed in cashmere, arms high, perhaps adorning the tree, brimming with both affection and ownership of her as one might a new puppy, the fire so large and overwhelming she felt she could not get a single full breath, it forging in her a terrible desperation that demanded action, required it, her car, a tree, anything quick, anything final.

In that one instant, every thought and feeling associated with the period came

flooding back, only to dissolve a moment later upon waking. Whether it had been deep sadness or nostalgia or some incomprehensible mixture of the two, she could not be sure, and by then it was gone.

The world of the real pulled back into focus. Her captor stood on the rickety chair before her, his arms high and fumbling with something atop the armoire. He had found the motherload, it seemed—a collection of jewelry boxes she had placed up there temporarily for spring cleaning, six years prior.

She found herself concerned for the safety of this prowler, a child digging for unwrapped presents, the chair teetering on its rockers. “I can help. Hand those down,” she popped up.

Caught off guard, he turned back with his shoulders hunched in such a way that Jackie thought he might start barking. She moved into a spotting posture in case he lost his balance, and as she did, the man grunted and thrust a jewelry box into her outstretched hands. She swiveled the box on her palm for him to see—it contained no jewelry, only foreign coins.

Thrill lit his face as he maybe thought the coins to be lost Aztec gold or rare buffalo nickels, as opposed to coins deemed too valueless to wait in an airport’s currency exchange line. While he hunted for more treasure atop the armoire, Jackie sifted through the coins, calling them out as she went.

“Here’s a peseta, a twenty-five piece. Look at the hole in that coin. Have you ever seen such a thing?” She held it to her eye and squinted through it like a monocle.

While clear that he thought her batty, his spirit seemed buoyed by the bronze piece, worth twenty cents had the euro not rendered it obsolete. The same went for the French francs. “Is that real gold around the edge?” he asked, stepping down, boxes stacked in his hands.

“Well it’s not paint, Kiddo. Now this could be worth a buck or two.” She meant it literally. “Look, a twenty kroner!” she gasped, and got carried away. “Here’s another one. More francs! A dirham here—that’s from Morocco. Here’s ten pfennig. They call that a ‘grout’ over there. A whole bunch of yen—”

He grew agitated by her babbling, and outstretched his hand to deflect her words, as if they were burrowing into his mind where they might forever rattle. “I get it! Enough!”

Jackie stiffened, the coins in her palm, actually hurt by someone she estimated at this point to be a kind of burgeoning friend—a friend who may have intimidated her murder, but a friend nonetheless. The immutable connection between those joined by unusual circumstance.

“Don’t use that tone with me. Not when I’m trying to help you.” Her voice could be altered too. She poured the coins back into the box and shut it, staring with an air of judgment of which only the elderly are capable. Bewilderment washed over him before abashedly dropping his chin, almost in a manner suggestive of fear, of reverence, a broken horse.

Wind circled the house, hurrying over the chimney and humming like someone blowing across the mouth of a bottle. A measure of optimism withdrew from his face with each remaining box, as they contained no more than shells, letters or nothing at all—hopes putrefying into bitterness, as they likely had before, in different towns, different homes, leaving different victims, ending always the same.

The coins, however, appeared a substantial enough score for the intruder to warrant concealing them in his own shoes. He stepped a foot up on the chair and went about

tucking the coins into his boot near the ankle. When that boot reached capacity, he pulled off the other one and dumped in the remaining change. Jackie found the idea absurd, of him tramping through the snow, shoes full of coins, jingling all the way.

As he bent down to tie his bootlace is when she first saw it tucked into his jeans. His flannel shirt lifted just so much as to reveal the grip and hammer of a black .45 Colt. She gasped—it had been the same kind of gun her husband once owned. He liked to shoot at squirrels and crows from their balcony. A terrible shot, he had been, holding the thing at his waist like an old-timey gangster, as opposed to however a former University of Chicago geologist should hold a gun.

When he actually hit something for the first time, a partridge, only by ricochet, he retired the gun forever—disassembled it and laid the pieces to rest with its victim. It was silly, of course, to bury the bird, but he insisted. Watching the pudgy man dig with his hands, she knew why she loved him: this man had no pride.

They'd met already in their sixties, and together sought a vague stillness, finding it in Prairie Vista, near his hometown.

Jackie wanted to touch the .45, to hold it in her palm, to shoot it once from the hip, but she doubted the intruder would let her. Still, just seeing the gun stirred in her a certain pleasant longing and for that she was grateful.

Heat had been spewing from the vents since the stranger's arrival. Jackie's brow and upper lip glistened. "Mind if I switch that off?" she asked. Busy jamming farewell gifts into the sack, he did not respond. Tapping down the temperature, she still felt a rush of heat at her back. The stove behind her was open and set to broil where the man had left it. Slits in the oven bottom glowed deep orange, hypnotic as fire as she stood before it. What a life it must be, trudging through the snow, breaking into homes; trusting no one and fearing your shadow; trying to buy food with defunct foreign coins and baking your own numb hands over an open stove. What strength it must take to not extinguish the pilot, stick your head inside, feel the gas course your lungs, that dizziness just a precursor to your relief, the drowsiness your long-denied mercy. She remembered well the allure. A version of her survived it, despite the fearful Jackie having died forever in that car.

Peeking an eye out the kitchen, she watched him undo a couple buttons of his flannel and pull it overhead. A seriously off-white tank top beneath was sweat-through. Yellow stains streaked down from the armpits.

Under the layers, he looked leaner than expected. Wiry; skeletal almost. His arms were toned though, capable of lifting an old lady off the ground by her neck—not a résumé builder, but a talent of sorts. Construction? She could speak with Tip Henderson on the road crew, see if they needed any maintenance help this winter. A go-getter. Won't talk your ear off. Could you help him out with a pair of gloves though, Tip?

His eyes jerked up with an animalistic sense of being watched, but she just fiddled with some pots as if she were tidying up. The sack now stood three feet tall, fit to bust in every direction. Satisfied, he pulled the revolver from his belt, popped open the cylinder, and took a look. In doing so, he turned away from her, and Jackie caught sight of an upsetting blood stain on his upper back, dried and circular. Her immediate thought was that he had shot himself. "What in the world happened to your back?" she cried, stepping into plain sight.

He jammed the gun into his jean pocket and turned to hide his wound. Jackie, though, was already on her way with much to-do. She tried to turn him around, but he swatted her away and did it himself. His hand remained atop his bulging pocket at the

ready while she lifted the back of his undershirt. Slowly the shirt climbed protruding ribs and conspicuous hairs that stemmed straight out like quills. The wound itself resembled some infectious disease, colors spanning the spectrum: sickly yellow on the outskirts, which gave way to majestic swirls of red and vibrant blue like the cosmos, like a little galaxy. At its center, deep under the skin, was the black hole, a dark streak the size of a golf tee, milky infection collecting around it.

“What *is* this?”

“Splinter I guess,” he responded, with added gruff. “Get ‘em sleepin’ in the train. Can’t get to it.”

She let the shirt drop. “Well come, you should have said so!” and she marched toward the hallway. Some unintelligible protest caught in his throat and he stumbled after his prisoner.

“I’ve got a whole medicine cabinet full of doodads,” she called behind herself down the hall. She led him right into her room and cleared the bed. “Plop yourself down right here.” She patted the bed. After sizing her up, he sat on the corner. “Arms!” and she gestured for him to raise them. The shirt slid over his head as she pulled from the shoulder loops. It reeked of Crotch Rot or Swamp Butt, or some other backwoods malady.

“Lie down, on your stomach. How do you expect me to get to it while you fidget?” The audacity of the suggestion reflected on his face, but Jackie made no concessions. “Back in a jiff,” she assured him, then hurried into her adjoining bathroom. No tweezers in the cabinet—the days of primping were gone, and she had no eyebrows to speak of—but she found some in a disordered drawer, along with hydrogen peroxide and cottonballs.

As requested, the man lay on the bed face down, his arms out in front of his head. He had a pillow from the floor covering his hands, the gun bulging beneath it. “Where were you?” he asked, more whiny than authoritative.

She struggled onto bed and sat on her knees beside him. “Quiet down now while I work. This will probably sting.” He flinched as she only doused the cottonball with peroxide. “Don’t be such a milquetoast. What’s your name, Cowboy?” The only answer he provided was an audible wince as she dabbed the wound.

He slipped his left hand down to his side, leaving the other beneath the pillow.

The only source of light came from the bathroom; enough to see what she needed, no more. She got to work with the tweezers, prodding the skin lightly to determine the best course of action. “Well I’m Jackie,” she told him. “Just call me Doc. Ha. I guess I’ll call you Nicholas.” The end of the sliver resided not far under the skin, but she could not get the right angle.

“That your husband’s name?” His tone seemed now almost considerate, albeit with the rasp of ten-thousand cigarettes.

“That would be awfully strange of me.” Jackie paused. His logic was reasonable. Here lay with her the first man, the first person, in her bed since her husband’s transfer to Bethany Hospice. A different bed though—she got roped into the one where a bowling ball could bust through the ceiling and not disturb the glass of red wine atop it. “No, no. It’s just that it’s Christmas, and you must be jolly old Saint Nick. You didn’t leave the flue open I hope.” The tips of the tweezers pinched hold of the sliver and she yanked it. He shook in pain, the chunk still lodged.

“*Christmas?*” he grimaced.

“You didn’t get me anything?” Jackie dabbed the blood with another cottonball. “Christmas,” he just repeated to himself, and switched hands under the pillow, bringing his left up and his right down.

“So, have I been naughty or nice?” Jackie asked and made a fresh yank with the tweezers. A muffled shriek came from the face pressed against the bed. A career of baking confections ill-prepared her for open-back surgery, and the hunk of wood had tenacity. Tweezers proved too delicate. “This thing’s got a mind of its own, Nick. Don’t move an inch; it’s almost out.” With that, Jackie slid off the bed and sprung for the hallway.

“Where are you going?” she heard him plead. But no chase was given.

Through the kitchen, by the back door, she ransacked a toolkit consisting of her husband’s geological instruments: a mallet, hatchet with blunt end for knocking loose specimens, a couple long picks. None would do. At the bottom, she felt the pliers.

The tool looked as archaic as the hand that held it. It had traveled the world on her husband’s back, he and Jackie terrestrial detectives chasing the lure of various geological sites until he coughed up blood one morning in Athens. Life, he said, could be fickle, but rocks never were.

“Jackie?” the stranger called. She made her way back to him.

“Where did you go?” he asked when she climbed back into bed.

“I had to get something.”

“But where did you go? I thought you left.” He tried to crank his head to see her.

“I just had to get something. It will help.”

“I thought I heard the door.”

“It was only the closet.” She wiped the needle-nose pliers with peroxide.

“I thought it was the door. I thought you left. My back hurts.”

“Alright, hold still.”

He pulled his hand from under the pillow to clench the sheet, and the gun slipped behind the bed where who knows what else had accumulated over the years. The pliers were fine enough to fit within the puncture and had teeth to grip the wood. She felt herself a sort of grim miner, a prospector on the hunt. It did not come easy, but she wiggled it loose and held it to her eye.

“Is it out?” he asked. A tear dripped off the bridge of his horizontal nose.

“It’s out.” She hadn’t noticed the thin stream of blood snaking down his shoulder, soiling the bed. The pliers and artifact dropped to the floor and she dumped some peroxide on him as to flush the wound. She pressed a handful of cottonballs against the gash and held it. “Just rest for a minute, Nick. You lost a little blood.”

Beside him she lay, keeping the pressure. The rise and fall of his back became more rhythmic as his breath slowed and he could no longer fight sleep. It produced a forgotten comfort, the consistency, and she tried to tune her breathing to his. He had a special pattern—two long breaths, one short, and another long. In the absence of life, the only sounds with which he could ever attune.

Nicky Beer

## Revision

The dark anemone of hair clotting  
the drain; a thumbnail's archeology  
splintered in ravines of caulk; a dry tongue  
of scab knotted in a whorl of TP.  
Hello, little abandonments, hello.  
There should be just enough of you to make  
another me entirely by now —  
a big doll of my dead stuff, cicatrix  
grin and dandruff shadow. Or maybe not  
the creepshow I think. Perhaps clean  
and ageless, the dying already gotten  
over with. Maybe a light flag, breathing  
out in drafts, a loosened, papery tune  
humming *again again again again*.



Nicky Beer

## Unseasonable

She crouches behind the eastern hills  
and drinks up the night  
through her little blue straw.

When she has every last bauble of dark  
stored in the bag of her belly  
she yanks up the snowy skirts

of our lawns, baring  
their brown, hairy knees.  
We can barely bring ourselves to look

at the thousand damp mouths  
that cry out to the air. Surely  
this couldn't be ours.

The smell is what dirt  
shits out. The light makes  
a cruel sketch of everything.

And still, after hours  
of arranging the new shadows  
just as we like them,

we hear the birdlike scrape  
of her metal feet  
against the hills.

## '58 Dreamin'

My strangely sort of famous ex-brother-in-law's name is Frankie. He lives in the country and is what we smaller town folks call 'good people,' if by that one means both good-hearted and possibly suffering the delayed effects of having been kicked in the head by a large farm animal when he was a boy. Now, that is not in any way to suggest that Frankie lacks ingenuity, raw intelligence and a strong work ethic – he has all that and more. (Oddly, it's the *more* that is so often what leads to blank-faced stares and that awkward moment when one considers that perhaps, ultimately, we really are alone on the planet, etc.)

How else to say it? Frankie's just not like anybody else I've ever known. No, that's not quite it... Frankie's not like *anybody* that anyone else has ever known. He walks and talks like most people. He's a fundamentally very likable sort of fellow and always means well. But if left to his own devices, he will concoct scenarios that challenge the most basic assumptions regarding what and how it is to be a human being.

So with some reluctance, perhaps it's best we start here:

### The Fiddlesburg Gazette

#### Man Parks '58 Chevy Under House

I stress the above word 'perhaps' for a variety of reasons, most of which will become self-evident as we proceed. Because for all the wrong reasons, both Frankie and his house are somewhat famous and for years scientists and reporters and even tourists have been compelled to visit. Maybe it's similar in spirit to people travelling great distances to witness religious monuments or wonders of human creation... it's also possible that some of us just feel better about our own life knowing that a man chose to *drive* a '58 Chevy mostly under his house in order to provide additional foundation support, but also because in his mind it gave the house a kind of *rock and roll edge*.

What's terribly difficult about Frankie to explain to 'outsiders' is this... you find yourself in conversation with him about various things and what he's saying is often so totally beyond the bounds of human experience that the majority of your brain assumes that what Frankie's saying is not what he *actually* means... but of course it's *exactly* what he means. In that sense, there is something almost strangely magical about him. I realize this may sound a bit odd, but the fact is that when in his presence and regardless of what he's saying, doing or suggesting, there is a brief moment when whatever he's saying seems to sound like a reasonably good idea. Of course that moment always passes, but by then it's usually too late.

So to understand the above headline, you have to understand the 'construction' history of the house. When Frankie was a younger man, he decided to build his own house. To be clear, Frankie had never built a house nor did he have any real understanding of what it entailed, but he proceeded with that characteristic country boy philosophy that is perhaps best summarized this way: 'I've seen guys dumber than me do it... so why can't

I?’ In the scheme of things, I’ve come to truly appreciate this logic and have myself fully embraced its tenets and benefits, but needless to say, Frankie’s ‘house’ has and will always have certain structural and aesthetic issues.

For starters, he decided to cut some corners and ‘save some cash’ by building the house primarily on cinder blocks. But he underestimated how many blocks he would need for the foundation by about half, so the house is built upon staggered stacks of cinder blocks which are now leaning or sagging accordingly. (He had also experimented with rock piles but ultimately found that ineffective.) The net result was a series of random ‘gaps’ under the house so wide that one could literally drive a car under the house, which coincidentally was eventually what Frankie did.

So it was a couple of years back Frankie had called asking if I wanted to go fishing, and he off-handedly mentioned that he needed a little ‘help’ on one of his projects. If you know Frankie, then you know that can mean anything... absolutely anything. When I pulled up to his ramshackle house he was leaning against a mostly rusted out ’58 Chevy, a car he kept for sentimental reasons and had had for years. I parked my car in the yard because that’s where you park your car at Frankie’s place and as I walked towards him I noticed that vaguely distant and almost maniacal expression he wears just before everything starts to go sideways.

“I’m losing that corner of the house,” he said, gesturing to where the front left corner of the house was clearly leaning and sagging.

“Yeah,” I said, somehow knowing that wasn’t the end of it.

“You think I should back it in or drive it in forward?”

“Back what in?” I asked with the innocence of a child.

He lovingly patted the rusted metal roof and said: “The old Chevy.”

Note: See what I mean? This is what I’m talking about with Frankie. First instinct: *He’s joking*. Second instinct: *No he’s not*. “Drive it in where?” I asked, already feeling my face go a little numb.

“Under the house.”

“What?”

“I never drive it,” he said almost wistfully, “Seems a shame it just sits there and rusts... may as well put it to good use.”

“I don’t know if backing a car under the house to provide foundational support is putting it to good use.”

“You’re right,” he said, “I should drive it straight in, forward... engine first. That what you mean?”

“No... that’s not exactly what I mean.”

“But you’re right, the engine would take the weight. I could drive her straight in and under the corner of the house there and park the hood dead center. Course I’d have to let the air out of the tires and set some blocks under it.”

“I think I hear what you’re saying, but I’m not sure I hear what you’re saying.”

“How do you mean?”

“No, how do *you* mean?”

“I mean to park my ’58 Chevy under the corner of my house ‘cause I’ve had enough with this leaning cinder block business.”

“You mean park your car there in a temporary sort of way?”

“No... a permanent sort of way.”

“Are you sure you’ve thought this through?”

“Yeah... near as I can tell,” he says with wrinkled brow and thoughtful expres-

sion. “The corner of the house is off the ground just about the exact height of the hood... minus the air in tires. Anyway you want a thing like that snug. Know what I mean?”

“Not really, no,” I said with just a hint of desperation.

“I mean in a best-case scenario I’d have to gun it a little to really squeeze it under there... real solid like.”

“You mean... *under* the house?”

“Yeah, *under* the house.”

“As your ex-brother-in-law I’m just wondering if there’s anything I can say that might change your mind?”

“Nope. I’m pretty set on it. I actually had it in mind for a while now. I’ll need your help though,” he said in that deceptively casual way.

“Doing what?”

“Once the underside of the house and the top of the hood are snug, I’m gonna floor it pretty good and really jam her in there,” he says, unable to fully contain his enthusiasm. “So what I’m gonna do is get on the tractor and set the scoop against the other side of the house. That should balance or support it just about right so the Chevy won’t knock the house off its foundation while I’m flooring it in there. But I’m gonna need you to give the tractor a little gas when I gun it on this side of the house. This is one of those deals where you pretty much wanna get it right the first time. Know what I mean?” he asked in a purely rhetorical manner.

“Yeah... I know what you mean.” (Needless to say I most certainly had absolutely no idea what he meant or how in Frankie’s mind it seemed logical to ‘jam and park’ his old Chevy under the house in hopes of providing foundational support, but there are some things in life one can never quite comprehend. And Frankie’s ‘methods for living’ upon this earth are at best vague and of a mystery that suggests in some wondrous way that there is hope for us all.)

But now came the issue of the tractor. Needless to say this was a very, very old tractor. It had pedals and gears and driving mechanisms that were foreign to any notion of common sense. It was surrounded by weeds and as we walked towards it Frankie said, “I’ll set the tractor against the house and all you’ll have to do is gun it when I say I gun it, okay?”

“Okay... but how do I know when to *un-gun* it?” I asked, knowing that wasn’t a word but already trapped in Frankie’s world of mystic mayhem.

“Just listen for the horn. Once means *gun it*. Twice means *un-gun it*. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, somehow imagining the explanation was sufficient.

So Frankie fired up the old tractor and drove it slowly around to the back of the house as I walked steadily behind, sensing both wonder and regret. The tractor had a large kind of scoop or bucket on the front that tilted up and down. Frankie positioned the bucket so that the bottom of it rested against the house at a height of about five feet off the ground, at which point he turned and said over the loud diesel rumble of the tractor, “Climb up here I’ll show you how she works!”

With some hesitation I climbed up and sat myself on top of one of the monstrous and deeply treaded tires so I could better see exactly how Frankie was suggesting I *gun* the tractor. “Now this deal here is a little different,” Frankie was saying with a voice straining above the sound of the massive engine. “These things are all about torque and power. Get me? You just have to touch the accelerator, just a hair, is all she needs. I’m gonna pull the Chevy up on the other side of the house. You just listen for my honk. One honk – *gun it*. Two honks – *un-gun it*.” He pointed to an odd little lever off of the steering column that

was the accelerator and said, “Just touch this up here a hair and then back it right down to nothin’. You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I said, sort of blank-faced and mildly confused. So Frankie hopped down and made his way to the other side of the house when it occurred to me that he hadn’t shown me where the brakes were. It’s likely that he assumed I knew where the brakes were, or it’s possible he just didn’t anticipate me needing the brakes. As to the latter, I was naturally confused, because if I’m going to gun the tractor, if only briefly, it seems that brakes might come into play as being a part of the overall process?

“Hey Frankie!” I yelled out, one sort of last desperate effort to inquire about the brakes. And I thought about jumping down and running over there but I could hear him pulling up to the house and knew that at any moment he might honk the horn signaling me to ‘gun the tractor’ and I’d never forgive myself if he knocked the house off its cinder block foundation because I hadn’t met him with an equal and opposite tractor force.

But the potential effectiveness of the plan began to break down almost immediately. For one, Frankie’s Chevy doesn’t have a muffler... it doesn’t have anything. He cut the rusted muffler and exhaust out some years ago and left a rusty straight pipe trailing straight back from a beefy old engine. So from the other side of the house I heard the booming, thunderous and ear-trembling roar... a sound so loud that one reacts to it initially in terms of self-preservation and either reaches for ear protectors or quickly moves away from the vehicle. It’s not simply the loudest car you’ve ever heard, it’s so loud that you’re first fully formed thought is that it’s going to blow up, just explode... *so you better run.*

Mind you I’m sitting on top of a sixty-year-old rumbling and rattling diesel tractor that by any definition other than Frankie’s ’58 Chevy is uniquely loud and so it was by some miracle that I heard Frankie honk the horn, signaling me to *lightly* touch the tractors accelerator.

(Frankie later informed me his approach to the house had been exactly as imagined. He pulled the front end of the Chevy up right where the hood started to scrape and drag as it met the underside of the house. He said that at this moment he paused and determined to the best of his ability just how much power he would need to further drive the car under the house and thereby secure the foundation, at which point he honked the horn and jammed down on the accelerator. The nose of the Chevy burrowed down as it drove hard under the house while the back tires spun, whipping dirt and grass as black and blue smoke poured out from underneath the car. In Frankie’s mind... everything was unfolding perfectly.)

And it’s important to understand that the remaining details of the scene happened very, very quickly and were augmented by that sweet momentary sense of panic and doom. So that at the sound of the Chevy’s horn I perhaps not so *lightly* touched the accelerator and heard the tractor engine roar to life and felt the trembling resistance of the tractor trying to push back a house that was being momentarily pushed and driven on the other side by a madman behind the wheel of a deafening ’58 Chevy.

I don’t remember at what precise moment my mind realized that the tractor was entering the house, that the heavy iron bucket was methodically pushing itself through the wall of the house and into the dining room area and in fact pushing the dining room table and chairs across the room and gently smashing them against the opposing wall... but as to the question of why I didn’t stop the tractor before or at least as it began driving into the house, the most honest answer is both *I don’t know* and *I was very confused.*

You see the tractor had four pedals on the ‘floor’ and only one of which was

the brake, so when I first realized that the tractor was starting to drive into the house I instinctively went for the brakes which on every other car in the world would have been either the pedal on the left or the second pedal from the left if the car were a manual transmission. A couple of problems immediately presented themselves with this initial brake theory; for starters, a tractor is not a car... it's a tractor. And so the second pedal from the left was not the brake, it was the bucket control which powerfully rotated the iron bucket upwards revealing its hard metal edge which quite easily tore through the wall which allowed the tractor to quite naturally 'follow the bucket' into the living room, etc.

By the time I realized that I had not found the brake and instead remembered Frankie's suggestion that I just back off the accelerator, it was obviously too late as the bucket, the metal arms that supported the bucket and the nose of the tractor were now safely inside the house. And so in retrospect we had obviously not entirely thought the plan through... namely clarifying exactly where the brakes were. I pulled the accelerator back down which not only stopped the forward progression but shut the engine off, which in retrospect was probably what Frankie meant by *un-gun* it.

With obvious reluctance, I hopped down, walked around the house and witnessed Frankie still sitting behind the wheel of his old Chevy. The front end of the car was now completely buried under the house. Smoke drifted through the air as Frankie turned towards me with a wild-eyed sense of accomplishment, gave me the thumbs up sign and said, "That's rock and roll baby! That is *Rock and Roll!*" And it was then that I realized due to the deafening roar of his exhaust he had not heard the tractor entering his living room on the other side of the house.

And so there was a brief moment as I stood there observing him with that joyful grin of his that I thought, 'It's not too late... you could just get in your truck and start driving and you'd be miles down the road before he realized that a portion of his tractor was in the living room.' But I looked at the contented expression upon Frankie's face and I thought if ever there were a guy who could take a thing like that in stride, it would be Frankie. So as he climbed out of the Chevy, I said, almost casually, "Might have had a little problem on my end."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"Well... the wall sort of gave way when I was gunning it."

"How do you mean *gave way*?"

"Well, the long and short of it is that a good portion of the tractor is in the living room now."

"But otherwise everything worked out okay over there?" he asked.

"Yeah... otherwise."

"Good enough. I'll patch that up good as new. The main thing is we got the foundation secured and I don't have to mess with any more of these cinder blocks."

"Good... well glad to have been of help."

"Couldn't have done it without you. Truth is, I was thinking of running a deck off that side of the house. Looks like you just got the project started for me. Can't thank you enough."

And to this day (as if I wasn't there to witness the actual event) Frankie will occasionally point to the '58 Chevy parked mostly under his house and say, "They don't make 'em like they used to, that's no joke. That old Chevy's holdin' up a corner of my house and she's rock solid, fair weather or foul. And that my friend... is *rock and roll!*"

Adam Clay

## Elegant Comparison

With the trees falling off the leaves,  
the unworldliness

of the moment means less and less

until it means more and more, perhaps  
like an undeserved term

of endearment  
more deserved than the rest. How do you manage

to maintain such a smeared

poker face in the mind of what remains?  
Most mirages exist,

urge us on, and then resist no longer.  
Your stage-left is not my stage-left,

though we're in the business

of the overly obvious: like a squirrel  
in a trash can, like a past-tense

past-due, or like a sensible sense of being.

Adam Clay

## Commonwealth

1.

A barn's blue roof clashes with the sky

as *Red River Shore* carries us through  
this part of Kentucky, a place  
pioneered not so long ago though

not far enough. The fragmented white fence

along Leestown Road  
makes me recall

our obligation to one another—the history

of sadness is too short for words,  
but for a breath's worth—  
and if we're lucky—there might still be time.



2.

I recall Lake Superior—all stretching  
far out toward the horizon

and all so uncertain.  
Never have I felt

so out of place. There are houses and barns lining  
the highway. People live here, but  
why does it make so much more sense?

The greenness? The horses? Music  
on the edge of every leaf?

I don't know what we'll do  
for the next fifty  
years, but a year up close

seems so distant from the next. I'm  
glad to consider time and the way

its design distracts the eye  
from what's really on the plate

and then, of course, what's on the plate.

The bluegrass points up  
to a sky so dark it might as well

be a chalkboard dull to the world  
around it, yet so accepting  
of the words it's crafted to hold.

Adam Clay

## Thankful

Surrounded by eggshell, the city  
dulls to our gladness

and we dull to the idea of selfness.  
There I am: aging in your eyes,

which is okay like falling over a waterfall  
is okay. I'm not sure what

could be buried in the backyard,  
but there's room for

a room—or at least the belongings  
from a room. You and I have both

desired a sense of strangeness  
for ages, but each time a voice appears

from the inside, it's exactly  
as expected. My view of the world

precedes the world and I know  
how stubborn the world can be,

demanding to be realized  
in more than one way.

Adam Clay

## One Possible Outcome

It was funny when the grasshopper cried,  
but some other things happened too.

The sky folded around you like a blanket  
making your face less fabled

and more of a casual shade  
of mood. True, the tick-tock of days

will make any one of us believe  
in something better just around

the veer of a corner or at the solid stop  
an intersection brings to the world,

but what if we're wrong and the grasshopper  
never finds its mother and the last single

stitch of truth in this world we've so carefully  
made for ourselves breaks wide open? Then,

will we see the world for what it really is  
or will we manage a new way of being,

a place so dependent on memorized photographs  
that speaking between ourselves

must be something that happens  
through the sharp glare of a Kentucky fog?

Adam Clay

## Draped Around the Nothingness of Days

Who is to the left or right?

The fields covered farther  
than your eye (with horses) becoming horses

themselves, like movement in the direction

of a new form of punctuation, a cymbal  
ringing like a stunted ceremony of boredom

And for the brief lapse of time, the trash  
takes itself out, our believing begins

to be a thing all to itself, by itself. The sea cliffs  
are missing their sea, but you

know where this place is, no dream,  
no way of believing pretended out of itself

into the bright-windowed lights. What you'd like  
independent of your likefullness seems

so void of worry and so full of wildness.  
The animals you've heard all night

refuse to leave the woods, though the borders  
are what light likes best. A new language

retreats slowly and quietly from itself.

## Homeland

I'm not really sure why they call this place a casino. You can buy cigarettes and food yet there is no gambling. As I took the place in, I noticed no one had paid any attention to me walking through the door, which was odd because I usually get at least a "hi" or a nod from someone. No one was eating or milling about. No one was at the cigarette counter stocking up on smokes. I could have robbed the place, as empty as the floor was of people. Everyone was glued to a large, blaring, flat-screen TV, perched high in a corner back by the food counter. I saw Sally, the head cook, had the remote in her hand. Sally hated TV. Everyone, even Jim, the manager, was neck-bent, gawking at the pretty news anchor in Albuquerque telling them all something very serious had happened. I heard bits and pieces as I slowly walked over to see what folks were so enamored with. I heard her say "improvised explosive device." Wait...what? IED? Those were Iraq words, war words. I heard her say "approximately thirty miles north of the Mexican border." Huh. That's about where we are. Oh shit. I heard her say the words "pig," "beer bottles," and "middle-aged lady." I approached the small group. A young cowboy type had walked up behind me. I turned to see if I knew him as he blurted, "Hey, what's going on?"

"Shhhh!" they all shushed in almost perfect unison, none of them turning to look at us. I listened with them, becoming one of them, craning my neck to see around the wide-brimmed, sun-shielding sea of hats, my lemming face tilted up toward the glowing flat-screen.

"Again, there are reports of a crude improvised explosive device that has detonated and killed a middle-aged Caucasian woman approximately thirty miles north of the border of Mexico near Interstate 10 at Sun Valley, exit number 102." Whaaaat? Not wanting to be shushed like cowboy, I kept my outbursts in my head. My heart began to beat hard and fast. That's here, exit 102. My mom lives here. I felt my stomach roller-coaster. "No other injuries have been reported at this time, but police have issued a statement that those people who live in or around that area are encouraged to stay at home and only go out if they have a true emergency. State police, county sheriffs, and border patrol agents are on scene." On scene? On what scene? I didn't see a scene. The pretty lady continued, not allowing much room for my thoughts. "A task force with bomb-sniffing dogs has been dispatched to comb the surrounding desert for the possibility of more explosives that could be in the area. Authorities say this may be the work of Mexican drug and human-trafficking rings." Mother of fucking God. "Activity of these crime rings has widely increased in the southern region of the state in the past few months. Channel 7 will keep you abreast of this situation as it changes and as information is provided to us on the subject. In other news..."

Shocked, some of the folks in the small crowd began to turn and look at each other in disbelief. They all loosened a bit and slowly removed themselves from the group. One of the employees turned to go to her station behind the cigarette counter. Jim turned toward the kitchen, and most of the other people cleared out pretty quickly. "Jim!" I called out, but he was too far gone around the corner. I sighed and decided to leave. I didn't really know anyone but Jim and Sally. Ugh, forget it. I figured I'd catch up with them later. My only thought now was to get home and check on Mom.

I jumped in the truck and headed out. There were state police cars and border patrol trucks at each side of the overpass. I got about half a mile on the dirt road to the east of our place, but there was a border patrol truck parked sideways blocking all passage. There were several empty horse trailers. Fresh manure lined the edges of the road. A New Mexico state police woman was leaning against a patrol car, focused on her phone. I thought about asking her what happened. On second thought I buzzed the window back up as flies, drawn by the ripe leavings of the horses, began to infiltrate the cab. I U-turned in the road. I decided I'd take the feeder road and head down Wilcox, which was five miles out of the way, but was the only other way to get to our property. Heat rose from under my chin and flushed my face. I pushed on the air-conditioner button. I needed to get cool, and I needed to get to Mom. I grabbed my phone and held it low so the other cops on the road couldn't see me messing with it while I was driving. I dialed. No answer. I dialed again... fourth ring, fifth ring. Mom, pick up. She always picked up the phone. I made the turn onto Wilcox and sped over the ruts left behind by the recent monsoons, leaving a jet-engine-like plume swirled in my wake. These dirt roads aren't marked with speed limits, so I took my truck as fast as I could over the dust and loose rocks. I loved to go fast, but this time it was urgent, I had purpose, my eyes scanning for free-range cattle who often lie about in the cool ditches inches from the road.

I approached our fenced-in five acres out in the middle of nowhere and slowed as I neared the gate. I hit the button on the automatic opener. Everything came to a screeching halt as I waited. The gate received the signal and bounced into motion but frustrated me as it moved at a glacial pace. I could do nothing but wait. I looked around. The beautiful bright red, white, and blue of the flag snapped in the wind atop its twenty foot pole. A road runner popped up on the fence, eyed me, then made its way quickly down the dust-kicked dirt road I'd just come down. Tank, Mom's German shepherd, trotted out to meet me. I sighed. My muscles fell off my bones in relaxation as I saw Mom walk out the front door and call to him. He turned on command and trotted back to her. He was her dog, for sure. He protected her and she was always so worried that he would make a false move and end up under the tire of a vehicle. That would not only crush him, that would crush her.

I waved at her as I rolled forward. She had her head down, petting Tank, who was now leaning up against her legs with all his weight. I looked in my rearview mirror, about to push the button to close the gate, and noticed a Luna County sheriff car behind me. I pulled my truck around the large garage and parked under the carport Mom had put up, just for me, to shield my truck from the intense New Mexico sun. There was a sudden and welcome change in temperature as I pulled into the shade. It was a still 88° F, yet a shiver shot across me as I got out and waded through the deep gravel up to where the sheriff was already talking to Mom. He was just at the beginning of telling her about the incident that had happened only a few miles from here.

"Ma'am, I'm Officer Contreras."

"Hello, Officer, I'm Jane Putnam. Is everything all right?"

"Well, ma'am, you have a daughter, Robin?" He asked.

"Yeah, that's me." I piped up.

Mom nodded. "Yes, yes, Robin is my daughter. Is everything all right, Officer?"

"No, ma'am. No, it isn't," he said softly.

"What's the problem, sir?" Mom asked, her head gently tilting to the side.

"Yeah, what's the problem" My voice thready, at least an octave higher than usual.

"It appears Robin was picking up some beer bottles over on Victoria Road," the

officer began to explain.

“Oh yes, I asked her to do that. Someone had spelled out the word ‘pig’ in the sand using empty brown beer bottles.” She was shaking her head as she told him.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mom continued, “We both took offense to it, and we didn’t want to drive by and look at that anymore, so I gave Robin a plastic bag and asked her to pick those up on her way by. She was supposed to bring them back here so we could take them over to the dump the next time we go.”

“Yes, ma’am. Well, please, ma’am, will you please take a seat there?” he asked kindly.

“Oh? O...kay.” She looked a bit put out, perplexed. I’d seen that look before. But she did as she was asked and sat down on one of the little café chairs that are out on her porch.

“Ma’am, your daughter was killed in an explosion. Apparently underneath the bottles was a pressure-operated IED... a sort of bomb.”

“What, what? An IED? I know what an IED is. Robin... was in... Iraq.” she whispered.

“Wait a minute!” I shouted and took a few steps toward him. “Look, guy, you’re crazy-mistaken here. You’ve got the wrong person. I’m okay!” I hollered, noticing a scratchiness to my voice I had never heard before.

“Hey!” I screamed, frustrated. I turned to looked at Mom. She wasn’t hearing me. They weren’t hearing me. I was paralyzed with fear and confusion.

My mother sat. Her chest caved, the air escaping her lungs, as she absorbed the information from Officer Contreras. Her face drained of all color. Where does color from someone’s face go in situations like these? Tank was the first to move, padding over to me. He stood for a moment. I patted his head and neck. He panted, mouth agape against the warm desert air. With a sharp intake of breath, Tank took his cue to circle back to Mom. I took a step closer too, but something had shifted. Tank released a long, low, whispering growl. Mom took it as Tank growling at Contreras, but I knew it was intended for me. I reached out to put my hand on her soft shoulder. Tank pushed out a booming guttural bark. Not fierce exactly, more worried and almost scared. Startling all of us, we jumped in unison. Mom tried to calm him as Contreras took a step back.

“Okay, hey, I’m just the messenger here; I know you’re upset too, my friend.” He paused a moment. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I’m sorry for your loss.” The sheriff stood still, not wanting to upset Tank anymore. He stood for what seemed a long time, sweating in the heat, squinting in the sun. “Is there anyone I can call for you, a friend or relative I can have come over here and sit with you?”

As a hundred-mile stare settled on her face, she quietly replied. “No. There’s no one.”

A silence came over the desert. The wind stopped, the birds stopped, the free-range cattle quit their cud and gave a moment’s respect, if not for me, for my mother’s grief. I sat down in the other café chair and waited.

I sat there on the porch, on that little chair, and looked out over my homeland. Each sunrise taking me by surprise, moment by moment, as the days rolled in and out of sight at the speed of light.

Kyle McCord

## I Am Writing This for You, America

I should be used  
to it by now,  
the sound  
my dress shoes make.  
Like I am  
in a movie  
where the Nazis  
will probably succeed  
in their horrible plans.  
I am in some sad bar  
where the music  
overwhelms everything.  
It's like a flock of birds  
which rises loudly  
and drops over and over.  
This bar slowly  
disables its own waitstaff.  
Their voices are huge.  
You don't know if I'm  
even talking to you,  
but I am, everyone.  
If you want rain enough,  
silence begins to sound  
just like it.  
In winter, the heels  
of the shoes feel heavier.  
My body weighs less  
than its inhibitions.  
I don't know that for sure,  
but maybe I do.  
Honestly, maybe these shoes  
have some magnetism  
of which I know nothing.  
I'd like to begin a film  
to document the sound  
our shoes make,  
the dumbbell weight  
of our soles.



Kyle McCord

## I Want to Be a Good Person

After the afterparty, Karl kept going on  
about his anxiety over evil twins.

It's sort of a moot issue

I pointed out

because since Karl's

not all that good,

his evil twin's not all that evil.

It's a bit of a misnomer, I said.

Like chili or dry cleaning.

Sure, if we're to assume

the evil twin is evil

in direct proportion

to its double's goodness,

Caitlin said finishing a cracker.

Wouldn't an identical twin

be identical in terms of murderous

proclivity? I protested.

It was increasingly clear

that I was unclear

on how twins worked,

how reciprocity worked.

Increasingly,

I felt deeply unsure

whose party this was,

if this was the right

Mountain Berry Ridge Road.

Or if this was Evil

Mountain Berry Ridge Road,

maybe I was being cued to leave.

Or this could be a cue

for the intervention to begin,

if I am the evil twin, I thought.

I put down the sacrificial knife

for just a moment and puzzled

over this. Someone coughed

into their hand in a conspicuous way.

It was clear we weren't making

any headway. I wanted to get better,

but I wasn't getting any better.

I was getting more evil by the minute.

Kyle McCord

## El Salvador

At first it's just the idea of visiting  
the haunted hotel, but soon enough  
you're calling for rate information  
in broken Spanish.  
Soon enough you're imagining  
the key in the ignition,  
gas in the tank, the Pepsi bottles  
like progress markers,  
like buoys bobbing out at sea.  
You can't reckon with  
the supernatural  
in positive terms.  
I mean what would  
I want to say to a ghost?  
What's worth saying  
to a world years alien to you?  
My day begins as light on a garden  
and ends with toothpicks  
in small cubes of food.  
Care for the self begins  
in the small objects I select  
for my own benefit, Melissa.  
The gingerbread candle,  
the toothbrush with its head  
made who knows how.  
I cover it with microscopic shells  
smeared into a paste.  
Have you watched someone you love  
do this some morning?  
I've seen people cry for art.  
It isn't beautiful,  
watching someone hurt,  
Melissa, even the martyrs.  
But you went looking for your ghosts,  
so why should you be surprised?  
Finding them in the pages of notes,  
after the carousel-colored lights

near the parking lot.  
You can't argue with entities  
you can't touch  
with what is gone.  
You can't hear  
the grackles parsing  
their feathers from the window.  
What it might mean,  
you can't be sure.  
You're a small drop  
sliding down  
the most massive stone.

Kyle McCord

## Single

On first examination  
it might seem like a fine idea  
to visit the zoo  
if everyone else on earth  
is has died.  
Pet all the animals  
safety and decorum  
stopped you from petting before.  
Stroll the aviary  
with its flurries of plumage  
as the bewildered animals  
flock around you.  
But it's hot at the zoo,  
and parking is terrible.  
The animals don't need  
your words.  
Popcorn tastes better  
than any idea you've ever had.  
Think about that.  
No one can tell you  
if you are a good person  
or the worst apple in the bag.  
You're the apple bag  
with one apple  
after the season is over—  
all that is left.  
It's ok, though.  
You'd heard zebras  
are harder to ride  
than wild horses.  
When you find a saddle  
and stirrups in an caretaker's shack,  
when the heat gives up  
its weight on your birthday shirt,  
it's your lucky day.  
Everything you ever  
wanted is at your fingertips.  
You aren't so much alone  
when you don't think about it,  
yet so deeply so  
when you do.

**Bruce Bond**

## **Art Lande**

Take this cat's cradle, this lullaby,  
these hands that weave into one another  
a singular music, a pocket sky,  
each thread a gravity, each finger a star.  
Come, it says, come closer, like a boy  
drawn into a fugue of fireflies  
to be the silence of their inner voice.  
Boughs break. Mobiles fall. A mother lays  
her sweet terror to sleep. Some pianos  
have so much night in them they field a host  
of tinier pianos. The music knows:  
there is no heaven without emptiness,  
no emptiness without a note, no note  
without the little death that it lets go.

**Bruce Bond**

## **Beethoven's Ear Horn**

If an ear could play the trumpet, it would,  
no doubt, be you, an instrumental thing  
held out like a beggar's cup, a word  
gone speechless with so much listening.  
You never did work out that well. Still  
you tried, as he did, concert after concert,  
to blow the lamentations of the will  
to lament, to give a heartbeat to the heart.  
And though you were useless, as flowers are,  
bowed in their vase on a black piano,  
we know you. We listen a little more  
knowing you. In the body where it goes  
still, a pounding that does not. In the ear,  
a sound that makes no sound, and then it does.

**Bruce Bond**

## **Dahmer**

All his life he was looking for someone  
to see what he had done, and thus undone,  
to watch him dismantle a boy's crown  
and let the lamplight in. If hatred is sin,  
he hated sin. If only he could pluck  
depravity's eye from its head, he would.  
He did. Eye after eye. Deflowered, fucked,  
the little tunnels stared without a word.  
To play God, he learned, was to play alone,  
to talk to no one through the open halo.  
What did he hope to find there, what glow,  
warm and fading; what paradise he lost,  
so deep, dark, utterly abandoned, he cut  
a dead boy from his dying to redeem it.

## What Have You Got to Lose?

Nathan stares at the woman sitting across from him at the table in the tavern he has chosen over the phone, being reasonably sure nobody there would know him. "Please," he says. "Repeat, please."

"I said, she still loves you...your wife."

"I have no wife."

"Ex then...you know who I meant. You just don't want to believe me."

"I don't know you. What's to believe?"

"You don't know? You haven't guessed?"

Late thirties, pretty, plumpish woman with hair up, sandals and jeans, Carolina Panther sweater, long, hanging earrings. Nathan shakes his head. "We've met?"

"Not exactly. But I called you up once long before yesterday. You were in your home then, married. Eight years, eight years ago. Does that time mean anything to you?"

Nathan takes a long chug of beer, looks at the woman anew. "Eight years...ah, yes it does. Long time ago...So... that was you?"

"Yes." Her eyes drop to the glass of beer before her but she does not lift it to drink.

"And now you are suddenly back in my life and exactly why, can you tell me that?"

"I've been trying to. Day before yesterday. Your...ex. She came into my shop because Lucille's where she usually goes was closed. Re-modeling. I run a beauty shop."

"That's not an answer. I asked why. Why would you call me again now to tell me this?"

"Don't you see? Can't you imagine I feel guilt about maybe breaking up your home, causing you to lose your son."

"Don't be melodramatic. I haven't lost my son. I've got visiting rights. Monica still lives in town...My God, you... of all people."

"You hate me, don't you."

"I don't know you. One phone call to tell me something I should have known... did know actually."

"No! You're not saying you knew about your wife and Scotty?"

"Should have known. Ah, Scotty. Yes, the name comes back to me. In one of our counseling sessions afterwards Monica referred to him by name, accidentally I'm sure. It popped out. 'Scotty. The man who owns me body and soul.' That's what she said."

"What a creepy thing for her to say with you sitting there."

"Speaking of creepy things to say there's your phone call. All that stuff that she told Scotty and then Scotty told you. What kind of woman tells a cuckold over the phone what his wife said to her husband? And seems to believe it, all of it."

"Cuckold? I don't know that word."

"A husband whose wife is sleeping with another man. Or men."

"What are you talking about that I said to you?"

"Old history now, best to forget it... But I was thinking about the part where my wife told your husband that I couldn't get it up any more..."



“Oh. That was me trying to make you mad enough to clamp down on her, keep her away from Scotty.”

“How is good old Scotty now, anyway? Still maintaining a woman on the side?”

“I wouldn’t know. I kicked him out years ago. Monica. She wasn’t the only one. One of many. I guess he’s, what did you say, ‘maintaining’ a woman or several on the side. That word. ‘Maintaining.’ The way you used it reminds me of your movie reviews.”

“You read my movie reviews?”

“Oh, yes. Faithfully. Since way back, before any of this business between my husband and your wife started. Right up to this week. I guess I’m a fan. I love movies.”

“And what I have to say about them. You like that?”

“Well...I don’t always understand exactly what you’re saying and sometimes... sometimes I like the movies you don’t like and vice versa, you know. I like the language... see, sorry, I’m trying not to laugh... Well it’s because I keep a dictionary around so I can get what you’re saying. And that picture of you besides the review, it hasn’t changed in years, since before all our ...troubles.”

“Badly out of date, I’m afraid. I’ve asked them for an update but they are afraid it would scare away readers.”

“Oh come on now, it’s not that bad. You do look a little older now but you’re still a charmer.”

“Evil ways take their toll.”

“You date a lot?”

“I try to be—what was it you said?—a charmer. Whenever I can and whoever I’m with.”

The woman smiled. “Would you say you’ve been trying to charm me?”

“Point taken. I’m sure I’ve not been charming tonight. It’s just...I’m still in shock about seeing you like this. Putting a face on that voice long ago over the phone. Do you remember the first thing you said when I asked who is this?”

“No. Something bad. I had a couple of drinks to get up the nerve to call your number. I knew she wouldn’t be home because I knew she was with Scotty.”

“You said ‘I’m the wife of the man who’s been fucking your wife for three years. I want you to keep the bitch away from him.’”

“I believe you. I don’t usually talk like that. I’m sorry. But I was frightened. Scotty was a cheater, a bum, but he was all I had. I was frightened. Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

Nathan laughs. “You don’t think this conversation is personal enough?”

“No. I mean, something, like, about your life today.”

Nathan leans back in the booth, shrugs. “No. I don’t mind.”

“Are you seriously involved with anyone now? I mean romantically involved?”

“No. I guess that’s the short answer. I’m seriously involved in playing the field but sometimes I think the field is playing me. Dating. What we mean by that, it gets old after a while. But I’m a player. And by the way, that business about me being impotent. There never was anything to that. I could smell betrayal all over her, that was my problem. The penis is an involuntary muscle.”

“I know men are sensitive about that. O.K. Last question. Do you still love her?”

“Her? Who her? You mean Monica, god no. Let me tell you something. You did me a great favor. You woke me up, made me face directly something I sensed was going on but was determined not to believe about her until the night you called. With all that information that fit all so well. The week they spent at Wrightsville Beach two years ago

–she told me she wanted to be strictly alone, not even a girlfriend, just one week. I never did believe it but I couldn't totally accept it as a lie either. You had everything down, even to the exact dates..."

... "I could tell. When I told you about that over the phone...I could tell that you gave up resisting and believed me."

... "Anyway you did me a favor. And Monica did me a favor when she wouldn't give up her married lover and try to make our marriage work. The two of you set me free. I've never looked back. Not once. Being single, well, it's not all it's cracked up to be. But it's not the hell I went through living with a woman who made a lie out of our life together. I don't hate you. I'm grateful actually. I just don't understand why you felt you had to call me up now."

"That's because you didn't see her in my shop. What she said, how she cried. The beauty shop, that's a woman's world. We talk to each other more openly than just anywhere. But she went on about it, how empty her life was, what a terrible mistake she had made back then, how you were the only one she ever really loved."

"The only one she's ever loved is herself. How did you know that was her? Had you met her?"

"I go to the movies you say are good. I went to those local summer theater things she was always in back then. If I didn't know what I knew, I would have thought you would be the perfect couple. Two...artists I guess you'd say."

"I wouldn't say. But you think she didn't know you...who you were?"

"How would she know me? We live in different worlds."

"Think. Here's a woman who had been with your husband three years –that's how long the affair was, three years isn't that right? You imagine in all that time, when they traded information about you and me, Scotty never dropped your name and what you do for a living?"

"I never thought about it that way. But why would she come to me of all people to put on an act? And why put on an act in the first place if it wasn't true how she feels about you?"

"You've already noted she's an actress. And a very good one when she wants to be, better in real life than on the stage as it turns out. As to why she chose you, look at us, we two. We're sitting here together now and I think that's just as she planned."

"But why would she lie about loving you still?"

"Oh, that's quintessential Monica. She's been dumped by someone or she's just between someones. She's low. In one of her eating frenzies. When she's low she looks for a man, any man, to make her feel desirable again. I happened to cross her mind. It's like her to want to know if she could just reach out and get me back. She wouldn't really want me but that wouldn't keep her from trying out her temptress role again. Rattle an old cage, see if the animal can be stirred, if her power over men is still supreme."

"There's one of those words again. Quintessential. Was that the word?"

"Sorry...Lord, I don't even know your name."

"Alma. And you're not tempted, not even a teeny bit, by what she's doing?"

"Alma, I'd walk over hot coals to stay away from those long, deadly coils. It's almost more than I can bear to be in her company for the few minutes it takes to pick up and return my kid."

Alma stays silent for some moments, sipping her beer. "You're right, we are here together, aren't we, talking, having our brews. Do you remember when you suggested over the phone that time long ago that we should get together?"

“Get together? Us?”

“You wanted my name and phone number. You said maybe we ought to get together and talk about what’s going on.”

“I wanted to find out who you were so I could find out who he was. In my confused mind, I thought that I ought to know enough to put a private detective on him.”

“OK. But here we are a few years later, together, Nathan. Don’t you think this is, like, a date? Maybe fate?”

“No. Not a date. A little adventure maybe. What’s it like being you, Alma? How do you like being single again?”

“I’m glad to be rid of Scotty if that’s what you mean. I’ve got two married sisters who live in Fayetteville and they have kids and I’m part of that family. That’s about it...I don’t appeal to you –is it because of all I said way back then, over the phone?”

“I didn’t say anything about you not appealing to me. I just said this wasn’t exactly a date.”

Alma goes into her pocketbook, comes out with a card, turns it over on the table, pulls out a ball-point pen, and writes something on it. “Don’t tear it up,” she says, “least where I can see you doing it. If the lonelies ever get bad enough give me a call. Maybe we could have a real date then. What do you have to lose?”

Nathan takes the card and holds it in his hand as she walks out of the tavern. He keeps his eye on her as she opens the door and disappears into the night but she does not turn her head to look back at him. He reads the telephone number on the card and turns it over to read Alma’s Beauty Spot on the front. He crumbles the card and drops it on the table. He stands up and then sits back down and finishes the beer he has been drinking. After a few minutes, he stands up again, picks up the check on the table, and takes out his wallet. He looks at the card crumbled on the table, reaches out for it, smooths it and puts it in his wallet. Then he takes a twenty out of his billfold and walks over to the cashier’s stand to pay.

Ryo Yamaguchi

## The Refusal of Suitors

Let me tell you a different story.  
In it, I am a merchant.  
In it, I am the sleepy provincial nights.

When I was a teenager my mother  
brought me to a physician—  
afternoons then were like rain falling on a lake,

nights like magnesium fire—  
and he said I would forever be  
my own worst enemy, and that I should live

my life inside of this fact.  
This is a story about lions and hyenas;  
this is a story about the stony core.

In it, I am the joie de vivre in a foodless town;  
I am the magician's vacation.  
*Right back at you,*

the archipelago spells out, Demerol  
hum of the cargo plane. When  
I was between marriages, I took the better part

of a spring and rafted down the Rio Negro,  
let my bare torso itch in the foliage so badly  
the logistics began to thin into an alcohol,

a repetition of nights  
unraveling like noise,  
like a husband that is only abstractly dead.

I have seen the videotape.  
In it, he is cast in green light, a bag over his head.  
He skates beyond promise.

When you are the one waiting for the return,  
the world seems more professional, the world  
seems to be

your fault.

Ryo Yamaguchi

## Economy

Let's say it is an even exchange, living with these useless blossoms,  
dying as an inevitability, the turnpike that glitters  
through the desert. I wave the last of the order forms in the air,  
the moment indented, a manner of worship, dragging  
the world into code. Later there is the airplane ornamented with fever  
and the sunlight crushing the landscape below  
into its million darling captivities.

Ryo Yamaguchi

## Tarriance

The dog was made of wood and burlap, a disarming  
facsimile, his fiber-dead nose credible, how I let myself  
be pointed. These are the bright dots of my stability;  
to be sworn; to narrow the sonata toward a deadline.  
When I wake you up I set the papers next to your  
irregular body. The past can be a story about the weather  
or the sickness, looking through it, scrutinizing the destination.  
When we ramp onto the expressway it is  
as though I had never been separate from the world,  
simply a charge in the kingdom of action.  
You rub your hands against your joints and talk slowly.  
The city was just a notion, the movie just an argument.  
I am learned insofar as I know exactly how to equivocate.  
We bank hard left around the museum. The bassoons  
set out a three minute stay. Here the myths  
bounce probabilistically within the interior of the taxi cab,  
the trees along the lakefront urging their new green on.  
My love, it is a kind of salary. You talk slowly and every word  
is one that I know, the room gently knocking.

Ryo Yamaguchi

## De Rigueur

Decided on the yellow one, said goodbye to this day  
through which I have fidgeted  
and let the airplanes come crashing in the parking lots

around me. A priori I am surprised. I  
tongue the copper-tasting sore at the corner of my mouth  
and watch the pelicans nest in the turrets.

Say something beautiful, press it through  
this petroleum screen. Looking down I notice  
my parts still exist, suspended

in the humidity.  
The seconds pivot against tiny cycles  
of hunger; seaward, your necklace hangs in the wind.

The head is absolutely impossible. Say what you said  
again; saccade, carriage return,  
for all the pennies in the swimming pool

that shimmer beneath our feet.

Ryo Yamaguchi

## First Camera

I will try; I will not try. However we orient  
ourselves on this bench—lit and so  
adhered, articulated as chaff, from then on a duplicate.  
I will break a passing train  
into its constituent seconds—doing or not doing  
out here in my jacket and gloves. The cigarette takes hold  
of my legs; the blanket stinks of rain. I am the captured bell,  
the married glass; I am remade in the bed of a flare.  
Witness, it is a *kind*. People are laughing nervously.  
No one wants to be the first.



Ryo Yamaguchi

## In the Style

I will have been preceded, terraced in green to my clavicle and  
yet still without the lasting object I would mount against  
this unfastened world. Where should I lay my stunning appropriations?  
The glazier holds the match between his teeth. This is 32nd street. This  
is the drug-addled aubade. Not everything has to be beautiful, says  
the documentarian. I watch him fillet it, shuttling back and forth  
over the man setting fire to his luggage. I visit this place often in hopes  
it will become true. A palette meant to evoke action, a route meant  
to complicate the escape. All week I've been dropping notes from the finale,  
waking up farther and farther north. There must be, the book reads,  
a better title. Lift me up into the raftered lights and from there let me  
burn in. Traipse with me through the lilies. Cockpit glare; ureal cologne.  
Steady and ready, sun-blackened and capital-hard, moon-scored  
and memory-won.

Jane St. Clair

## How the Gangstas Helped Jenny Balance Her Chakras

Jenny's kindergarten with its blue rocking horse, ABC tablets, tiny desks with oversized pencils, and Mother's Day presents made from popsicle sticks has all the timelessness of a snow globe. It is a Zen place you enter and leave, but all the time it remains the same like a stable household with Evangelical parents.

The first bell rang.

"Okay, children, clean off your space, and pack up your backpacks," Jenny said.

The loudspeaker sounds: it is Principal North.

"Teachers! Teachers!" He was saying in his dingdong school voice. "Don't forget the meeting after school, teachers."

If Principal North were five years old, he would be a mean little boy. He would always be mouthing off, Jenny decides.

The final bell rang and Jenny's class sprang forward in a wild release of animal energy --baby mammals set free.

Jenny sat at her desk to center herself. She did not want to face Principal North without first balancing her chakras and yet no matter what she did, her chakras were always out of balance. Her body was all upper chakras, all spirit and thought with little root or sexual energy, which is why Principal North could intimidate her.

Principal North's raspy voice came over the speaker again.

"Teachers, teachers, we are waiting."

The Royal We, an occupational hazard. We don't hurt others. We don't use bad language. We respect other peoples' spaces. Jenny herself used the Royal We all day long, but she hated it when Principal North did. Who did he think he was, calling meetings all the time? Surely Principal North did not have the right to call meetings willy-nilly. Surely this was clearly a violation of something.

When Jenny got to the teachers' lounge, she saw something was wrong. For one thing, there was no meeting. Oh dear, what can the matter be?

Principal North was sitting behind his big desk, looking down over half-glasses, peering down at her with his ugly owl face with sharp beak nose

"Ms. Castle," he began.

"Yes, sir?"

"Ms. Castle, as you know, the state of Arizona is facing a fiscal crisis. Painful cuts have to be made ..."

His voice cut into her heart chakra and it started bleeding. He was going to fire her. London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down. What the hell was he saying? Put on your listening ears.

"... As you know, this year's kindergarten class has shrunk because fewer families are migrating from Mexico. Fewer families are coming to seek employment in the wake of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression ...."

It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown. It's the Great Pumpkin, come to eat you up. Principal North is sending me home. Johnny over the ocean, Johnny over the sea,

Principal North is gonna get rid of me.

"... Forcing the consolidation of your A.M. and P.M. classes with those of Ms. Sharkey -- Ms. Castle, are you listening to what I'm saying?"

"Mr. North, please don't fire me," Jenny cried. "My mother and I can't manage without this job. You can't fire me, Mr. North--"

Jenny was ready to get down and beg, but a cold wind from the North sent icy chills through her body, freezing her mid-sentence. His face was cold and frozen, and he was not going to warm up to her plight.

"Ms. Castle, compose yourself," he said. "Please don't tell me a story about the care of the elderly. I need you to pack up your personal items and close Room 202. The parents have already been notified by e-mail that you will no longer be their teacher."

"I'll come back tomorrow and pack up."

"I prefer a clean break, Ms. Castle. Please clean up your space. I have a take-home packet for you, outlining your severance package from the state of Arizona."

Severance, like a guillotine. Off with your head! You are just one of his many wives at Chavez School so take your fate like a queen. The Queen of Hearts with 40,000 men gave a salute and then marched back again.

"Please don't send me away," Jenny pleaded.

Principal North stood up.

"You're being inappropriate, Ms. Castle. The state of Arizona thanks you for your service."

He made a swooping motion like a predatory bird stirring up a mouse before he swoops down to eat it.

The state of Arizona conveniently supplied her with a cardboard box big enough for her umbrella, her library books, her lunchbox, and the many other things she had collected during her twelve years here. No goodbyes to her class, no gold watch, no farewell party at Applebee's. Just a few minutes ago, this room had seemed so safe.

How thankless, how heartless this place had turned out to be, Jenny thought as she walked out to the parking lot. A big ugly black crow with yellow-rimmed eyes and oversized feet was scratching the top of her car. He startled her and she dropped her box, shattering the case for her laptop.

When Jenny got to their apartment, she left the box in her car to give herself the option of telling her mother the bad news later. Maybe she would never tell her.

"Is that you, Jennifer Lee? You're late, and I made fish. You can't hold fish. Better company wait for the fish than the fish wait for company."

Her mother swung her wheelchair into the hall where Jenny was standing, and then she scrutinized Jenny's face with all the intensity of a surgeon making a diagnosis.

"Why are you crying? You're not pregnant, are you, Jennifer Lee?"

"No."

"You got fired! Oh God no, you got fired! What are we going to do? We can't make it on my government check. You got fired, didn't you, Jennifer Lee?"

"Yes."

The wolf is at the door. Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? The Big Bad Wolf? We are. We're afraid of the Big Bad Wolf. Her mother's mouth was hanging open. Her mother had great big teeth, very long teeth like the kind whales need to filter baleen. She had enormous teeth.

"I'll find another job, Ma."

"You know what the unemployment rate is? In the state of Arizona? Everyone's

out of work. I know people out of work for years and years and years. You go in there and eat that fish you ruined. I'm going to my room."

Thanks, mom, for the self-esteem, Jenny thought as she opened up her laptop. Her mother wheeled herself back into the room again.

"What are you doing, Jennifer Lee?"

"I'm going on Craigslist to look for a job."

"You don't even bother to eat what I made for you. It's time you thought of others, young lady."

Looking at jobs made Jenny's head worse. Exec Asst. Courier for busy real estate office. Junior accountant for CPA firm. Paralegal. Medical billing coordinator. Rich men, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, Injun chief. At that moment nothing made any sense. Waddle goes your gait and hollow are your hose, noodle goes your pate and purple is your nose.

The next morning Jenny awoke to find her mother nodding off in her wheelchair. She had been saying her beads and storming heaven the whole night through.

"Where you going, Jennifer Lee?"

"I have a job interview," she replied, and that was technically true. A new call center had opened on the south side of Tucson, and anyone could just go down there and apply. Applying for that job would be movement, it would be looking up at the sky. Let's go fly a kite up through the atmosphere, oh, let's go fly a kite.

Jenny took Campbell Avenue because she was afraid to drive on the highway. She actually hated driving in general, but she really hated driving on the highway with all those cars going 80 mph with no shoulder on the road, not keeping intervals between them, flipping off timid drivers, honking their horns, urging slow drivers to go forward when they didn't want to. So go ahead and try but you can't make me, you're not the boss of me.

The neighborhoods changed three times: from uptight suburban with careful lawns, omnipresent Walgreen's stores and intermittent Starbucks to Anglo-industrial to Mexican barrio. This neighborhood was so much more chaotic than the suburban one of Jenny's childhood where her parents had once painted the basement floor. A bright white.

It was seven in the morning and not a creature was stirring in the Mexican barrio. She drove by a church and then a steeple, but Jenny did not see any people. Debris, beer bottles and other remnants scudded on the street, left over from parties the night before.

Her destination was a run-down building with its starkness unrelieved by landscaping, except for one dying cactus near the entrance. The cactus looked dangerous to Jenny. Some little kid will get hurt when it keels over.

The call center had no reception area, no welcoming person, just a sign handwritten both in Spanish and English that said, "Apply for jobs" with an arrow pointing to the elevator.

Jenny felt trapped when the elevator door shut. The elevator was a box with long wooden slats. It was a trap. It was dark in there. Ding dong bell. Pussy's in the well. Pussy's trapped and soon will drown. Who threw her in? Swarmy Principal North. The doors opened. Jenny followed another sign also with an arrow to a large waiting room, where perhaps thirty people were sitting. A Hispanic woman sat behind a window like a bookie.

"Hello," Jenny began, but the woman cut her off. She heard it before, she'd heard it fifty times that morning. Blah, blah, blah. Bart Simpson tuning out Principal Skinner.

"Fill out the form, bring it back, and they'll call your name."

Jenny took a seat on a plastic bench that looked as if it had come from a vintage automobile or diner. The man next to her had a do-rag wrapped around his head and wore a Grateful Dead T-shirt. He looked like a street person who might carry a sign, "Nam vet will work for food." On her other side was a 300-pound woman, acting jovial to compensate for the fact that the recession had sucked out her soul. She kept talking and making Jenny nervous with her "we are the world" attitude.

"So I says to him, we can all get by if we just tighten our belts, and we'll never never give up, because we're all in this together, after all. Do you want a doughnut?" She had little dark chocolate doughnuts the size of her palm, which she ate one by one in big single gulps. Jenny felt trapped in a lifeboat with a chatty gorilla.

The only place on Jenny's application that made her hesitate was "Reason for leaving last job." She wrote: "The state of Arizona lacks resources."

Jenny waited another hour until the receptionist announced, "Jennifer Castle, Carlo Rodriguez, and José Cruz - follow me. The rest of you go home. If we don't telephone you by four o'clock, we won't call you. Please wait six weeks before you apply here again."

The Grateful Dead shirt and the fat woman exchanged looks. They would not wait around for any phone calls because they all knew there was not going to be any.

Jennifer and the two other chosen followed the receptionist out into the hall and then into a huge room. The room was the size of the multipurpose room at Chavez School, which was both gymnasium and cafeteria. This room was extremely noisy and filled with perhaps 250 people at equal intervals at long tables, like guests at a banquet. Between each person was a small plastic divider that provided no real privacy. Everyone was talking at once, either into a handheld telephone receiver or a headset with a speaker and earphones. Some were sitting, some were standing, and others were pacing around, but everyone was talking at once. Their voices made a hodgepodge like cackling birds on a wire. Listen to the mockingbirds, coo coo. Listen to the mockingbirds, coo coo. Use your indoor voices, children.

The receptionist led the three chosen ones into a large office enclosed in glass walls. Inside was a large desk, a computer screen, charts with inked-in numbers, and a Stephen Covey poster that said, "The Eighth Habit: From Effectiveness To Greatness." The man in the leather chair had his back to them, and now he waved the receptionist off without looking at her. Jenny looked at Carlos, who was ready to spit nails, and then at José, who was digging his heels into the celery green shag rug that had not been raked since the 1970s.

The man in the leather chair spoke in obscenities, then he swung around and Jenny felt sick. His face and body were much like Principal North's, and he had the same big ugly yellow predatory eyes. How do you handle a hungry man? You fly away home. Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home.

"You three will start immediately," he said. "Carlo, report to Station 71. José, Station 72."

The two men filed out, leaving this lean and hungry man to leer at Jenny, to pounce on her and take her into his mouth, like a warm morsel of carrion.

"Kindergarten teacher, eh?" Then he made a noise somewhere between a snort and a laugh, like a bad sneeze. "Yo, teacher, show me my ABCs." Snort-laugh. "I like that you dressed up for me. This place could use some class. Report to Val."

Jenny wanted to quit before she started. Mostly she wanted a magic mushroom to make her smaller. Eat me and make me small. Principal North had been bad enough as an

asexual monster. Principal North plus sex drives meant only one thing. Run and hide. Run and hide. And grow smaller. Very much smaller. Itsy bitsy, if possible.

Her new boss was an older woman beaten up by anorexia, cigarettes, and alcohol. Val was skinny and short, wearing green capris and a tight white tee shirt that showed her rib cage. The clothes made her look like a coltish child who needed a head transplant. Val's table had 16 stations, all filled with young Latino men in gangster pants worn below their butt cracks.

"You won't make it here in heels," Val said in a smoky voice that belonged in a biker bar. "If you don't get here early, you won't get a chair or a headset. This is the script we're doing. The machine makes your calls. When they pick up, you read your script. If their answering machine picks up, you read the script on page three. Got it?"

"I think so," Jenny said, realizing that her training was over. Get in there and fly, Dumbo. You don't need no magic feather.

"I can listen in on your calls and I will. They can tape record your calls and they do. The big boss can listen into your calls and he will. You need to keep them on the line for 45 seconds. If they hang up before that, it counts against you. And we will send you home if you get too many hangups. When they answer, you press down on your timer. That way you keep track of your screw ups."

Val handed Jenny a tiny blue apparatus that looked like a pedometer.

"Any questions?"

"What time do we go home?" Jenny asked.

"Look, Missy," Val snapped, "You come here looking like you're keeping up with the Kardashians and we give you a job that 50 people want and instead of kissing my ass, you want to know what time you go home. Are you for real?"

"It's just that I didn't tell my mother that I was here--"

"You can call yo' mama on your own time. You're on the clock like everybody else."

Jenny retreated to her station and picked up her phone. All she had was a receiver connected to a wire that led somewhere. She couldn't tell where the wire connected and that gave her the creeps. She could be talking to Edward the Vampire, for all she knew. It was hard to coordinate the timer in her left hand and yet hold the receiver in her right ear. The man in the next station was Hispanic with Popeye arms covered with tattoos, and a shirt with a design like reptile and knife tattoos. He looked at her sympathetically, as if he had a tear in his eye for her, and then Jenny realized it was a tattoo tear. Jenny smiled as he gave Val the finger, all the while talking into his phone.

Before she could even read the script, a voice in her ear said, "Hello. Hello. Is anyone there?"

"Hello," Jenny read. "How are you today? I'm calling with a life-changing offer from Old Reliable Insurance Company. Would you--"

Click.

Jenny hadn't set the timer, but she knew the call was less than 45 seconds. The call would count against her. She would get sent to the office, and that was the last thing she wanted. To go to that office. With that horrible man.

"Hello."

This time it was a male voice.

"Hello, how are you today? I'm calling with a life-changing offer from Old Reliable Insurance Company."

"Already got some, so bug off!"

Jenny scanned her script but she could not find what you were supposed to say when someone says “bug off,” so she just started over.

“Hello, how are you today? I’m calling with a life-changing offer from Old Reliable Insurance Company.”

“I don’t talk to machines.”

“No, I’m not a machine. No, I’m real.”

Jenny’s voice was breaking apart in frustration. Her seat partner was signaling to look behind her, where Val was watching her every move.

“I’m calling with a life-changing offer...”

The man hung up, and Val started yelling at her.

“Look here, you never go off script. You stick to the paper. ¿Entendido?”

A loud buzzer pierced Jenny’s ears -- a shrill, ear-busting blast like a fire drill bell. The employees in the room put down their headsets and rushed to the exits.

“Take your break,” Val said. “And see me afterwards. After you call your momma.”

Jenny stood and tried to center herself, but the chakras above her head were taking over, filling her mind with negative self-talk. How could you be so stupid? How could you screw things up? She tried to connect with her powerful yellow center but she was all anxiety. Lions and tigers and bears, oh no. Lions and tigers and bears.

“Yo, amiga -” said her seat partner. “Don’t let that bitch get you.”

Jenny just shook her head.

“Yo, who’s that bitch in your life? She ain’t nobody.”

“I suck at this job.”

“It takes a while to get a groove. It takes a while to get up to forty-five. You need some tricks. You cough. Talk real slow. Shit like that.”

“I have to call my mother.”

“You want to use my cell?”

Jenny shook her head again.

“If you got to pee, you better go. You can’t pee for another three hours.”

“I’m fine,” Jenny said.

“I got to piss,” he replied. “I’m Gato.”

“Jenny.”

After Gato left, Jenny called her mother, who was predictably upset.

“Telephone solicitation? What am I supposed to tell people? That my daughter, a college graduate, is a telephone solicitor? Do you deliberately go out of your way to hurt your mother? What’s that awful noise?”

The fire drill buzzer was sounding again. The room was again filling with employees and the din of their voices. Gato came back and handed her a tiny chocolate doughnut.

Jenny ended the call with her mother because some other woman was already talking into Jenny’s right ear.

“Porcelli residence,” she insisted. “Porcelli residence.”

“Hello, how are you today? I’m calling with a life-changing offer from--”

Click.

Gato touched her shoulder as if to signal to her to listen.

“Hello,” he said in a voice that voice glowed with red warmth and then with white heat. With sexual heat from the lower chakras. A voice with dash and intensity and romance --mew, mew, Banderas in Puss in Boots.

“Hello, my lady. How are you today?” Gato winked at Jenny.

Jenny nodded and then she tried it.

“Hello,” Jenny said in an alley cat voice. Meow. Purr, purr.

“Hello yourself. How are you yourself?”

“I’m so good.” And I wanna be loved by you.

Gato made his eyelids low like Pepe le Pew.

Jenny kept breathing into the phone and purring.

“I bet you are good,” the man said.

“I am good.” Poop poop da doo.

She had taken many so long pauses and deep breaths that fifty seconds had gone by. She held up her timer to Gato and he did a thumbs up. Val was standing behind her and nodding too, making Jenny feel like a kid flanked by proud parents after she had just managed to ride a tricycle.

By lunchtime, Jenny’s head hurt so badly that she could hardly focus her eyes on the script. The noon buzzer was a dynamite blast in her head. Her feet hurt, especially her toes that had been thrust forward into high heels all morning.

“Yo, Jenny, meet my homies,” Gato said as he led her into one of several lunchrooms filled with people and vending machines.

“All their food is shit,” Gato said. “The microwaves don’t work so don’t buy a burrito. Don’t buy any of this shit. It’ll make you puke.”

Old vending food was staring back at Jenny from little cages, like wrinkled up old prisoners. Pease porridge cold, pease porridge in the pot, nine days old.

“You get longer times, and you’ll make more money,” Gato told Jenny.

“How much are we making now?” Jenny asked.

“They start you at seven sixty-five an hour -except I’m getting eleven fifteen.”

“That’s ‘cause Val thinks he’s hot,” said Gato’s girlfriend. Elena had curly red hair pulled partly into a top knot, and her face with thick black eyeliner and lips lined in maroon and painted scarlet.

“Don’t let that ho get to you,” Elena said. “Who’s she in your life? Who’s that ho?”

Their Spanlish was not that great, but they were so very nice. Diversity is nice. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight. It’s all so very nice.

By closing time, Jenny’s head was beyond repair, as smashed up as Humpty Dumpty’s skull. Val hung a laminated ID tag around her neck, a commendatory medal for lasting one whole day here. Courage, cowardly lion.

Jenny was walking toward the exit when the big boss signaled her. He was standing by the door of his office, a big fat spider outside his web.

“I need to talk to you.”

Won’t you come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly.

“You promised to teach me my ABCs,” the big boss said. “And I want to be teacher’s pet.”

Jenny, Jenny Dumpling, boil her in the pot. Sugar her and butter her, and eat her while she’s hot.

“I have to go home.” Jenny’s voice sounded high and breathy like a scared Minnie Mouse.

“When’s your next shift?”

“Six A.M.”

“Tell mama you have to stay after school tomorrow,” he said, smiling his swamy smile. Jennifer nodded and ran as fast as she could. The big fat spider frightened Miss



Muffet away.

Outside in the parking lot the Arizona sky was on fire in orange, red and turquoise streaks, reminding her that there is more to life than Telestate Call Center. Gato and four of his homies were standing next to identical black motorcycles that flashed like black patent leather, swirling with reflections of color from the sunset. In their black leather jackets and black helmets streaked with red arrows, they looked like fierce birds.

"How'd you do with that effing Fresca?" Gato asked.

"I told him I couldn't go out with him tonight," Jenny said.

"He come near you again, and I beat the shit out of him."

Gato lowered his helmet over his face, and pumped his bike so it roared and shook the ground. He and the others zoomed out in an elegant formation on to the highway. All they needed were long red lances and they would be ferocious black knights, all pride and invulnerability.

"They got the power, don't they?" Elena observed.

Elena looked as strong as an Aztec goddess, a woman strong enough to pair with a black knight.

"Did the big boss hit on you?"

"I told him I needed to get home to my mother. She's in a wheelchair."

Elena touched her heart with her fist.

"I feel you," she said. "My brother's in a chair. Some gangsta put a bullet in his spine. Except in his case, it was a good thing. He'd be dead by now if he didn't get shot. Tell the bastard to fuck off."

"Look," Elena said, her eyes flashing like motorcycle lights, "I told him to fuck off or I'd sic my homies on him, and he's left me alone ever since. You need attitude. Throw your shoulders back and stick out your ass. Look the fucker in the eyes and let him know you got the power. You want to go clubbing? I know some where they serve Anglos."

"I better get back to my mother," Jenny said.

"Oh - you said that already," Elena replied. "You know what? You're sweet. That means you're going to get shit on."

Elena spontaneously hugged her, and then they parted into their cars. Jenny almost took the highway home, but the entrance ramp intimidated her. She switched on her radio, and the theme from James Bond came on, and it was full of yellow chakra power. It was music for a puma stalking the desert at night, moving on stealth cat pads, full of yellow power. The cat with the golden arm.

Jenny had looked forward all day to a hot bath without shoes, but when she saw her mother's face, distraught and swollen from hours of crying, she was sorry she came home.

"I spent all day storming heaven for you," her mother greeted her. "That awful job can't pay much and it's ruining everything I sacrificed for -- your education, your advancement-- this is how I'm rewarded."

"Mom, please. I'm tired."

"Promise me you'll call Principal North. Tell me you'll try to get your job back."

Jenny felt some strange energy radiating from her solar plexus, a strange yellow glowing light that was empowering her.

"I'm not going to call him," she said. "In some ways I like my new job better."

Something in Jenny's tone made her mother back off, and it worked in an effortless way. Ding dong, the witch is dead, the wicked witch is dead.

The next morning Jennie tried to leave the apartment before her mother could

see her, but the older woman was ready for her.

“Jenny, look at you -like a waitress in those jeans. You look common.”

Jenny ignored her mother and simply left the house. She punched in ten minutes early, but most of the chairs were already taken. Gato was waving at her, and she realized he had saved her both a chair and a hands-free headset.

“Yo, Jenny, you look hot,” he said.

“Your jeans should show off your butt more,” Elena said. She was wearing jeans that had rhinestones in key places, and her blouse sparkled with circular blings in two key places. The effect was similar to wearing Christmas lights on the nipples and derriere, a raw display of female sexuality on a woman who could pick and choose her mates.

The buzzer sounded and Jenny put on a headset. The first caller was already on the line.

“Hello. How are you? I’m calling from--”

The woman’s voice was groggy, and then angry.

“Do you know what time it is, bitch? Where do you get off calling at five in the morning to sell insurance? Huh?”

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Can’t you get a better job? You sound smart. Can’t you get something better? What are you --some flunkie?”

Gato looked at Jenny’s broken face and grabbed her headset.

“Look, bitch, go fuck yourself,” he said into her phone. Few beats. “No, my supervisor can’t talk right now, but if he could, he’d say fuck you, asshole.”

He handed the headset back to Jenny, who was shaking and trembling.

“That’s how you handle assholes,” Gato said. “They dis you, you dis them back.”

“But I need this job.”

“You don’t need nothing that bad.”

“What if Val is listening?”

“What if? What if? What if it rains in Nogales? I don’t give a shit and you don’t either. No fear, amiga. We live life with no fear.”

New strength filled Jenny’s body, emanating from her yellow power chakra, swelling and glowing with golden energy like an Aztec sun god, and now red blood energy was spinning in her lowest chakra, pulsating like a strong heart thumping and empowering her cat body. She-Ra, She-Ra, Princess of Power. Guadalupe, Queen of Heaven, radiating an aura of ever-widening power full of sharp arrow points of radiant light. All hail the Queen of feminine power.

Gato nodded. “You don’t let me or anything else take it away from you.”

That day Jenny’s stats went up. That day she was the third-highest in the company in sales and long calls. She went out to her car and revved the engine, delighting in the sound of speed. She opened all the windows, floored the pedal, and peeled down the ramp to the superhighway. The road was wide and clear, and she was doing 90 miles an hour. She was a Wagnerian power Princess, a tall and big wailing soprano with a spear as long as her body, and her arms full of trophies from the day’s triumphant hunt. Tiger Tiger burning bright, in the darkness of the night, and ain’t nobody gonna put me down again.

In her reverie Jenny got off at the wrong exit and found herself in a barrio. Ordinarily she would’ve been afraid in this neighborhood but that night, nothing scared her. A pair of black shiny boots in a shop window caught her eye. They had nails and shiny silver studs, and they were fierce boots to wear with a Star Trek outfit and a ray gun. Jenny bought the boots, as well as a pair of jeans trimmed with rhinestones on the butt,

and a black shiny shirt with silver skulls and cross bones. When she looked in the mirror, something was still missing, so she pinned her hair up with a Jersey bump-it, and put on a pair of dangling J-Lo earrings, and then she was transformed. Transformed fiercely. Transformed and more than meets the eye. Robots waging battle against evil deceptors! Fiercely transformed.

The next morning when her mother saw Jenny's new clothes, she filled with as much horror as if Jenny had transformed into a giant cockroach.

"I forbid you to go out looking like that," she said.

Jenny smacked her lips with fire red lipstick and went to the door.

"I may be late tonight," she said. "My homies and I are going clubbing." And frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn what you think.

At the call center, Elena smiled at Jenny's new look.

"You've got nice ta tas," Elena said. "You know, boobs. Nice ta tas."

Gato smiled. "Nice ta tas and nice culo. Hey, hey, you cha cha chulo."

Val can't get to me today, Jenny thought. The rude callers can't get to me and nothing can take me down.

In fact, when one caller sneered, "I never talk to low life like you," Jenny shot back, "That's not very nice. In my experience, people with class are nice to everyone the same."

"Yo, yo, cha cha cha chulo." Gato grinned at her.

The big boss came to her station just before it was about time to go home. He looked Jenny over slowly. Oh where have you been, Jenny Girl, Jenny Girl? You're supposed to be a young thing who cannot leave her mother.

"What happened?" he complained, as if she were a broken piece of art. "What is it with you? Huh? Answer me. Tomorrow I want you to come here looking like you did before."

For a moment Jenny felt too frightened to speak. Gato was silently encouraging her. Fly, Dumbo, fly. You don't need no magic red feather. You don't need no magic cha cha clothes. Just do it. Do it, Dumbo.

"As far as I know there's no dress code here," Jenny said.

Val gasped, as if in shock. As if the earth tilted off course. As if someone violated the natural order, and now evolution would have to start over in the Garden of Eden.

Jenny stood defiant, as if she were holding a radish/specter in her hand. As God is my witness, I'm going to live through this and when it's all over, I'll never be hungry again. If I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill, or as God is my witness, I'll find some other crappy job. Go ahead and fire me. You dirty Fresca.

"When we go out, I need you to look the way I like," the big boss said.

"We won't be going out," Jenny said.

She was humiliating him in front of his inferiors and she thought he would fire her then and there, but instead he shrugged as if she did not and could not assume any importance in his life.

"I got fifty better-looking women in the waiting room," he said, shaking her off like a cockroach. Yet when he made his way back to his office and leather throne, it was a retreat.

"You get fired tomorrow," Elena said.

"You're probably right," Jenny agreed.

"It's not worth being a professional Mexican for them," Gato said. "It ain't worth being no ass-kissing culo."

That night the three of them went clubbing, and they ate nachos and drank tequila in a club noisy with salsa music. After a few drinks, Elena made Jenny go out on the dance floor with her.

"You don't do like that," Elena said. "Salsa is low - it's way down here in the hips - shake it, shake that culo, shake that booty -- like this - zumba, zumba, zumba --"

The tequila had loosened every muscle of Jenny's body and every brain nerve ending in her head. She shook her hips, putting one up higher and rocking it back and forth, her fingers and arms in the air, waving them like a proud flamenco dancer with a giant feather headdress. She danced - yellow yellow chakra, red red chakra, orange orange chakra, red red, yellow yellow, orange orange. She danced proud and low - a peacock with a tail shaking and making cha cha sounds her potential mate would understand. Marian the librarian, you are no more, 'Cos Jenny's found her inner whore.

That night her mother waited up for her. Keeping the home fires burning. Storming heaven with prayers. Smelling tequila on her daughter's breath.

"Jennifer Lee," she said, "what's happened you? To my little girl?" The little girl, who when she was good, she was so very very good, but now she's bad and just horrid.

"Jennifer Lee," her mother began in a softer way, "let's let bygones be bygones. For I have wonderful news. Principal North called today." She was practically smacking her lips with glee. "The PTA at the school -- the PTA wants to divert funds they raised for playground equipment - they want to divert those funds and pay your salary. The parents want you back. You can come back tomorrow."

Jenny's green heart chakra swelled because people cared about her after all. Someone appreciated her twelve years of taking care of other people's children, wiping their little noses, and making little popsicle gifts.

"He said you could call him any time. Anytime tonight. No matter how late."

Her mother opened her hand, and inside was a wad of paper with Principal North's secret number, the one you could use any time of day or night to access the Great All-Knowing Wizard of Chavez School. Just click your heels and go home to Room 202.

Her mother handed her the phone and the paper, pleading with tearful eyes. Use the force, Dorothy, and click your heels. You've had the power all along, my darling.

Principal North answered his telephone immediately. That day Jenny had made hundreds of phone calls so this one was just another phone call, another voice, and the voice was not even special anymore. He was just another uptight Anglo full of rules and silly fears with his chakras out of balance.

"Mr. North, I understand you have something to say to me," Jenny said.

"Please call me Jack," he said.

Little Jack sitting in a corner, eating his humble pie. Put in your thumb, and then put your little foot in it. Don't cry, Little Jack.

"Yes, Jack, what is it? What do you want?"

"I have a matter to take up with you." Oh dear, what can his matter be? Old Jenny's been gone all day Sunday and Saturday. And all his horses and all his men cannot put Jenny back together again.

"You sound different, Ms. Castle."

"Indeed I am."

Indeed she is, even though she said yes. She said yes, I will return. Yes.

Goodnight, my dears, for the story's done, and now we'll say farewell to everyone. Cha cha cha.

Nate Slawson

## 8 (from “The Suburbs I”)

I find a cassette tape marked NEW FRIENDS.

I put the cassette in the tape recorder & press play.

An unending hiss streams out of the tiny speaker.

I am making you a copy, Sam. I am labeling it MY LIFE.

This is the modern definition of intimacy.

Nate Slawson

## 12 (from “The Suburbs I”)

What kind of despair do you like best?

I’ll show you mine if you show me your downstairs TV set.

I am not well, Sam. In a word: not-like-a-person.

This is the late 90s in a nutshell.

It’s days like this when the future feels further & further away.

Nate Slawson

## 16 (from “The Suburbs I”)

I declare my candidacy for the Committee on Edible Undergarments.

My platform is decidedly anti-Marzipan.

For love, I am re-wiring your stereo to convert all your records

into blackberry bushes. How devastated should I be by your night-

blooming face? This is the future, Sam, & we are fucking machines.

Nate Slawson

## 1 (from “The Suburbs II”)

Emptiness is not a feeling. I declare my enormous nervous heart and call it stupid fucking bliss. My failures are nocturnal, like my twenties. I was perfectly solar system, dragging myself in circles. This was before the rapture. This was before argyle. I wanted a new birth certificate that read *Louisiana Purchase*.



Nate Slawson

## 7 (from “The Suburbs II”)

The hereafter is where all the girls are singing from the citrus center of their blossoms. We hit the ground, sunning our eyelids one at a time. Beyond the sun, a hereafter. Here you are very young and not yet epic. Love makes love taste better than pork sausage, better than the stars exploding in your astronaut blood. Here I cross my scarecrow and hope to burn.

Nate Slawson

## Crush (I)

Walking toward the light I pass you  
an accurate note regarding my feelings

Come home with me

We will wear enormous white  
sunglasses in the bedroom

We will feed each other  
like baby birds  
vomiting our love

into each other's mouths

Nate Slawson

## Crush (II)

The outside light is mostly rabbit  
and reminds me of the skyline  
of grain silos

The atmosphere is a million blue dots  
on my white summer pants

Sometimes I undress in the automobile  
showroom and cotton candy  
my sweetness

I am holding a sickness in  
my arms and talking to winter

calling it *the girl most likely to*

Free you with the things we'll put down; all the wadded paper in your hands those little  
birds from morning awake

Too late too late and the *cha cha cha* in the background

Ficus second to the rubber trees brings your father back to life

Something behind me 10 paces

The spreading middle of my back, scouting bread crumbs

We had already been in the house together before we made it

There had been birthday mail, something woven into the rug of Nomads, our hair falling  
absently into it, flowering among the wet

Nothing should complicate this

The dead tree slowly came full with buds, the shoots sick with starlight, hovering

It was here we arranged the stones; the sight of all this was the memory of its taste on  
my tongue from years before

You gave me credit

We began to say things and also to feel complexly about spare rooms. I felt certain I had  
bathed you in everything secret

They said we could only do one thing at a time

I recognized myself in the water, where my grip on daily practices creates interesting trouble

As when Ms. Hay said *if you don't do the Bedoin solo I'll kill myself*

About his stale smoke, all those chairs, the wooden puffs in mushroom in the first place

I began dreaming in houses, lured to sleep looking for hardwood tongue and grooves to match

Now also the smoke on your coat

## Cleavers

You you my dear profit, my place where I stay in my pajamas while cars pass  
Get it done repot those roots  
School let out the older kids having the idea to fight with snow  
A 4000 year old society in Tennessee in caves before any images of war or weapons  
Can I call the owl an owl, without hesitation  
We don't really know what these things mean or if there's a story forming but we know that Antiques Road Show  
Ben was a bean he had a wife called Dean, a pole he putzed  
Maybe fresh air will help I carry my *la la la* along  
So you're telling me I can't even say this reminds me of an owl in my walled garden  
Heart of papier mâché  
and very nice light bulbs I spent all that night breathing

## Installation\_3

My house is broken with breaking I mean I don't know where anything goes  
Those field mice swooped up by red-tailed hawks  
Were they swirling in the snow in open windows teach me how to be  
In her letter she said she was always getting better but the bleeding  
I'm TOAST under my feet of prints with those toes of mine splayed out here more in terms of opposition than sponges  
Sometimes it comes out my lips get stuck pursing you could be here slow dancing  
Samba eludes me as do discrepancies geographically in tango  
Imagine then the depths just on the surface; I dry loafahed my arms and hours later looked like I had been cutting  
I will be an old woman laughing at your readiness  
It is love that makes it lighter the body ahead of your attention  
In a green field a red ball; on a snowy sidewalk a man moving *cherrmp cherrmp* with crutches  
The earth that sheath why the coconut lamp  
Would that there was a way out of space/time if it was cold we slid without salt  
A woman in a green field dressed in lilacs twirling a lasso I heard the story  
Chestnut horse squirrely but there's storm there's laundry's inside my license expiring  
Tap women on the porch watching tap the abandoned houses thanks greed  
Start before you feel you are ready or highly choreographed  
Outcomes reveal work over time, wax builds, melts, accumulates what you want  
So much pouting in revolution so much left out  
Bastards, canyons and traditional crafts the father also not living in walled gardens  
Let me just tell you now there's no goal honey no desire for communal experience

Always socks so much to be done inside  
Viola head and shoulder I could sleep and sleep in postures we call pretzel  
Maybe fresh dill will help the tenor or the step up to board the tiny train  
In the parking lot one carriage for unpacking o that night  
Couldn't be photographed couldn't be bothered  
Nah you can't see what he is passing on to you *bah dahi*

*dah dum*

Laressa Dickey

## Between/2

She clutches a bouquet in her left hand. Left foot leaves the floor, twists behind the right one, black pump falling off. Her body tipped, eyes like saucers and head tilting to the ceiling. Rusty nails of her hair hanging loose. The dress drops low between her breasts, white lace flirting with the walls around her. The flowers fairly ordinary and below them, a round stool she avoids. Even when I couldn't speak, I drew my legs up on the bed. The token lamp and the bells of the nearby church. She dances because I kiss her, my body above the room, my missing arms outside the door, my torso twisting, a horse throwing its head. In the most inopportune way, I cross my legs. We drink and drink even when we cannot speak.



Laressa Dickey

## Excerpts: “From Dream of Flying”

[11]

There's a boy in the red house but he doesn't answer. Harmonica, you bet you can hear him. Coax this tick out or a pill you place in your heart and ask it to catch fire. Sling wood. The tractor goes round the pile; we sift wet birch from light. Dissolves. These people have placed their bodies in the ground. One so hot while another's pulse widens making *ooooo* sounds out of pinched mouth. Let me tell you the wind spread their dreams around like spores.

[22]

He made a mean face when she actually cooked something he liked the taste of. *Grunt*. Shall we go? Son of a bitch, the first dirty word I liked the taste of in my own mouth, man's word, pure as iron spit. Of course, we'll walk and learn to make lists and document our education. Didn't you raise someone you lately recognize in your ancestor pile? The world comes calling before we have a bridge to cross. Trackless ocean, leaving home the same everywhere.

Scores of geese go and the open sky holds.

## Contributors

**Nicky Beer** is the author of *The Diminishing House* (Carnegie Mellon UP, 2010), winner of the 2010 Colorado Book Award for Poetry, and *The Octopus Game* (forthcoming from Carnegie Mellon in 2015). Her awards include a literature fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Ruth Lilly Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. She is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Denver.

**Bruce Bond**, is the author of nine published books of poetry, most recently *Choir of the Wells* (Etruscan, 2013), *The Visible* (LSU, 2012), *Peal* (Etruscan, 2009), and *Blind Rain* (LSU, 2008). In addition he has two other books forthcoming: *The Other Sky* (poems in collaboration with the painter Aron Wiesenfeld, intro by Stephen Dunn, Etruscan Press) and *For the Lost Cathedral* (LSU Press). Presently he is a Regents Professor of English at the University of North Texas and Poetry Editor for *American Literary Review*.

**Rebeca Chapa** is a former newspaper journalist from Texas who has been living in Northern Virginia and working in Washington, DC since 2009. She enjoys crafting short stories and poetry, whilst hacking away at several novel ideas at a time. When she's not being a legal marketer at her day job, she enjoys amateur photography, traveling (or planning to travel) around the world, cooking at home and, of course, reading.

**Adam Clay** is the author of *A Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World* (Milkweed Editions, 2012) and *The Wash* (Parlor Press, 2006). A third book of poems, *Stranger*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Iowa Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and elsewhere. He co-edits *TYPO Magazine* and lives in Kentucky.

**Jerry Craven** has taught for seven universities in three countries. Currently he serves as press director for Lamar University Press and Ink Brush Press, and he is editor-in-chief for the literary quarterly *AmarilloBay.org*. He has 26 published books; the most recent are *Saving a Songbird* (memoir, 2012), *Tiger, Tiger* (short fiction, 2012), and *The Wild Part* (a novel, 2013). Upcoming from TCU Press in 2014 will be *Women of Thunder* (a sequel to *The Wild Part*). He lives with his wife, Sherry, in Jasper, Texas.

**Weston Cutter** is from Minnesota and is the author of *All Black Everything and You'd Be a Stranger, Too*.

**Laressa Dickey** is the author of four chapbooks from MIEL books, including *A Piece of Information About His Invisibility*. Her poems have appeared in *Cerise Press*, *U City Review*, *inter|rupture*, *Newfound* and are forthcoming in *Aufgabe*, *Quarterly West*, and *American Letters & Commentary*. A chapbook entitled [apparatus for manufacturing sunset] is also forthcoming from dancing girl press. ([www.laressadickey.com](http://www.laressadickey.com)).

**Larry E Graham** lives in Sacramento, Ca. He is a former newspaper reporter and civil servant. His stories have appeared in *Straylight*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *The Listening Eye*, and *Susurrus*. His current project is a short story cycle about people living in a rooming house.

**Nick Lane** writes fiction in a café in California surrounded by screenwriters and various good-looking people presumed to be actors. His satirical website is [unscrupled.com](http://unscrupled.com).

**Bleuzette La Feir** was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico and is a graduate of the University of New Mexico with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater. Now living in the once fertile free-range cattle country of southern New Mexico, she finds topics close to home to write about. Poetry and short stories are her usual outlets, but she occasionally works on creative nonfiction and biographical pieces. Her work has appeared in *Blood Lotus*, *Blue Lake Review*, *decomp*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, and *Forge*. She has contributed to [Velvetparkmedia.com](http://Velvetparkmedia.com). Bleuzette's flash fiction piece "Bangs" was nominated for the Best of the Net 2012 anthology. [www.bleuzette.com](http://www.bleuzette.com)

**Kyle McCord** is the author of three books of poetry, including *Sympathy from the Devil* (Gold Wake Press 2013). He has work featured in *Boston Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, *TriQuarterly*, *Verse* and elsewhere. He's the 2012 recipient of the Baltic Writing Residency. Along with Wendy Xu, he co-edits *iO: A Journal of New American Poetry*, and he is lead content editor for *LitBridge*. He teaches at the University of North Texas in Denton, TX.

**Salem Pflueger** has written two novels, chapters of which have been published in several literary journals and he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for the short story "Michigan Spring." He is currently working on his third novel.

**R. C. Smith** is actually Robert C. Smith, although he masqueraded as Bob Smith for many years as a newspaperman in North Carolina and Virginia. Tired of being misidentified –or worse, correctly identified by someone he owed money to – he went to the initialized identity he clings to now. He moved from writing non-fiction books as Bob Smith (*The Closed Their Schools* in 1965) to R.C. Smith (*A Case about Amy* in 1996). He has been writing fiction exclusively since 2008. He has also written reviews of jazz, classical and folk music, movies, and general (he hoped) interest. He worked for years for an anti-poverty non-profit agency, and he taught Journalism at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He and his wife have three children and seven grandchildren and currently reside in Jamestown, North Carolina.

**Jane St. Clair** grew up in Chicago, and graduated from Northwestern University. She has been a staff member of the TV show *Sesame Street*, and a reporter/photographer for several newspapers, including the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. She is the author of 21 children's books and a novel entitled *Walk Me to Midnight* published in 2008 by a small Christian press. Her short stories have appeared in literary magazines like the *Clockwatch Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *QWF*, and *Thema*, as well as anthologies from the University of Nebraska Press, *Main Street Rag Publications*, and several more. She lives with her family in Tucson, Arizona.

**Nate Slawson** is the author of *Panic Attack, USA* (YesYes Books, 2011) and two chap-books, including *The Tiny Jukebox* (H\_NGM\_N Books). He lives in Chicago and is the publisher/designer of *THE NEW MEGAPHONE*.

**Ryo Yamaguchi's** poems have appeared recently in *The Iowa Review*, *The Journal*, *Cant Journal*, and the *Birmingham Poetry Review*, among others. He works and lives in Chicago. Please visit him at [plotsandoaths.com](http://plotsandoaths.com).

Cover Art:

**Noah Simblist**, an Associate Professor of Art at Southern Methodist University, works as a writer, curator, and artist, with a primary focus on the relationship between art, architecture, and politics in Israel-Palestine. His curatorial projects include "Yuri's Office" by Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation at Fort Worth Contemporary Arts, "Out of Place" at Lora Reynolds Gallery, and "Tamy Ben Tor" at Testsite, and "Queer State(s)" at the Visual Arts Center. He was also on the curatorial team for the 2013 Texas Biennial. Writing projects include: "Setting Sail: The Aesthetics of Politics on the Gaza Flotilla" for *Art Papers*; interviews with Khaled Hourani, Omer Fast, Jill Magid, Walead Beshty, and Nicholas Schaffhausen; "Trouble in Paradise: The Erasure of Memory" at Canada Park for *Pidgin Magazine*; "The Art of Forgetfulness, the Trauma of Memory: Yael Bartana and Artur Zmijewski" for *Transmission Annual*; and a feature about the work of Dor Guez for *ARTPULSE*.

# *descant 2013*

**Winner of the  
Frank O' Connor Award for Short Fiction**  
Jerry Craven for "The Stone Salvation Barn"

**Winner of the  
Gary Wilson Short Fiction Award**  
Salem Pflueger for "'58 Dreamin'"

**Winner of the  
Betsy Colquitt Poetry Award**  
Nicky Beer for "Revision"

**Winner of the  
Baskerville Publishers Poetry Award**  
Adam Clay for "Elegant Comparison"

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