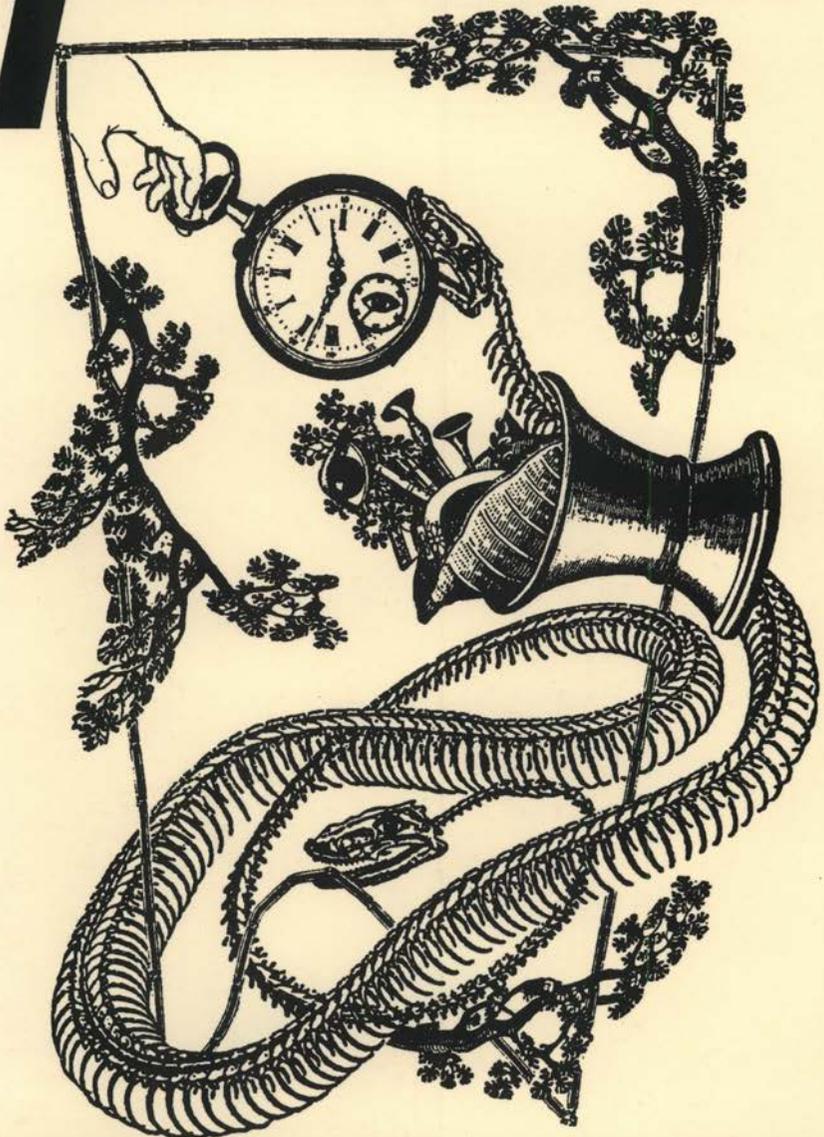


\$3.00

SPRING/SUMMER • 1994 • #9

# LUGUE



The University Of Idaho Literary Digest



Executive Editor,  
Managing Fiction Editor  
Mark Coen

Managing Poetry Editor  
Donna Rhodes

Associate Editors  
Abigail Bandurraga  
Wendy Noonan  
Karney Hatch  
Jeff McClelland  
Amy Jost

Staff Advisor/Copy Editor  
Prof. Ron McFarland

Production/Layout  
Figment Press  
J.C. Hendee  
POB 3128, Moscow, Idaho  
83843-1906

FUGUE #9  
Spring/Summer 1994  
(ISSN 1054-6014)  
UI English Dept.  
Brink Hall, Room 200  
Moscow, Idaho 83843

©1994 in the names of the individual creators. Subsidiary rights revert upon publication. Published bi-annually in Fall and Spring at the U of Idaho. Single Copy (\$3) and USA Subscriptions available at \$3.00/issue, p&h included. All payment in US funds. Unsolicited submissions encouraged (within guidelines), but FUGUE is not responsible for such under any conditions. Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of FUGUE, its staff, the U. of Idaho or its staff. Ad rates are available. Postmaster: address correction requested.

## FEATURED POET

JACK MYERS	3
GRANTED	4
OH, NO, I'M GOING TO BE LATE	5
BOTTOM HACKERS	7

## FICTION

COUNTRY HIGHWAY	
Noah Berlatsky	9
FINGER TALK	
Leslie What	18
GRACE	
Amy Nelson	25
WINKEN, BLINKEN AND NOD	
Jeff Spitter	25

## POETRY

HOW WE SAID GOODBYE	
Jim Mikoley	12
MY FATHER BLEEDS VIETNAM	
Edward Flagg	22
CLASS	
Dennis Held	23
IN MADAGASCAR WOMEN DANCE	
WITH THE BONES OF THE DEAD	
V.Q. Wallick	23
SPRING STONE PICKING	
Dennis Held	24
AURAL SEX	
Mahdy Y. Khaiyat	34
A WISH	
Mahdy Y. Khaiyat	34
PARENTS	
Holly Day	46
BURNING TIME	
Holly Day	47
MOTHS KNOW	
Donna RHodes	46
NUNCA NADA Y NADIE	
Nancy Ellis Taylor	46
STORM CLOUDS	
Errol Miller	47
STILLBORN TWIN	
Edward Johson	47
DISPARATE	
Errol Miller	48

## DEPARTMENTS

GRAFFITI	
Editorial Comments, Etc.	2
GUIDELINES	
For Submissions	47

DEPARTMENT

G R A F

EDITORIAL  
COMMENTS  
ETC.

F I T I

The idea of life being a road is a metaphor that has become pervasive in our society. Writers as diverse as Robert Frost and Paul McCartney have written about those paths we choose to take, or not take, and the long, winding roads that lead us everywhere. Bilbo Baggins equated those paths to rivers that could sweep you away the moment you stepped from your door, taking you to places and things you never thought you'd see or do. But then comparing rivers and roads would be mixing metaphors. Let's just say they were all right.

The Road of Life led me to the University of Idaho where for five years I've been resting by the wayside. Quite a few others decided to take the off ramp into Moscow and, by seeking different majors, have followed separate paths, whether less followed or not. Thanks to an English 104 instructor, I made the leap from Computer Sciences to Creative Writing, both well-worn trails but each fraught with their own pitfalls and rewards. Hiking up this rocky footpath, I encountered *Fugue* and have had the opportunity to be Trail Master for the past year. I'd like to

thank those people that blazed the trail for me and those who followed my lead, sometimes to the very precipice. Thanks goes out to Gary Williams and the English Department for giving us the chance to produce this magazine in the first place, to Ron McFarland—our staff advisor—for years of wisdom and tyranny, to Donna Rhodes for taking the burden of poetry off my back this semester, to Geoff, Amy, Wendy, Karney, and Abby for all their devotion and help, and to those who contributed their fiction and poetry to this semester's effort.

Graduation is here and the Road leads us ever onward. It seems the choices are less clear than they were for Frost. All paths appear well-trodden and it's difficult to decide which is the clear route. Like many at this time of life, I find myself standing on the corner of Walk and Don't Walk trying to determine if I should cross against the flow or stand here and wait for the Bus of Fate to pick me up for the ride.

I've never really liked buses.

No, I think it's time to take a deep breath and plug the Eagles into the Walkman. When "Life in the Fast Lane" comes on, I'll step off with a strong, purposeful stride and merge into traffic on the Information Superhighway.

Fate can catch up if it wants.

—Mark K. Coen, Exec. Ed.

## FEATURED POET

JACK

INTRODUCTION

BY

RON MCFARLAND

MYERS

Some of us knew of Jack Myers, Distinguished Visiting Writer in poetry at the University of Idaho during the fall 1993 semester, through his "Composite Portrait of Richard Hugo," entitled *A Trout in the Milk* and published by Confluence Press in 1982. I first encountered his poems in *New American Poets of the 80's*, which he coedited with Roger Weingarten in 1984. I liked what I read there, and I note in looking back over that anthology that we have coincidentally had many of those poets as DVW's here in the past several years: Stephen Dobyns, Carolyn Forché, Tess Gallagher, Daniel Halpern, Robert Hass, Edward Hirsch (as of fall '94), Sandra McPherson, Stanley Plumly, Alberto Rios, Pattiann Rogers, Carolyne Wright. I think it's a pretty impressive list, and I believe our students in creative writing have benefited enormously from the opportunity to take workshops from such poets.

Jack Myers holds a B.A. from the University of Massachusetts and an

M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. He has taught at Southern Methodist University since 1975 and has been Director of Creative Writing there since 1990. His latest collection of poems, his seventh, is *Blindsided* (1993), and he has recently edited another anthology of poetry (the 90's). He is also coeditor of *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*.

When it comes to literary matters personal taste inevitably comes into play, but having shot a few rounds of pool with him, it was impossible for me to resist "Bottom Hackers." Myers plays in tournaments in the Dallas area, so I can only assume that he very generously threw that one game I managed to take from him at Mingles last fall. The poems we are printing here are colloquial and often witty or humorous, but perhaps the most important thing I can say about them is that "they sound just like Jack Myers." We are grateful to Jack for allowing *Fugue* to publish them for the first time.

**Jack Myer**  
**GRANTED**

I don't know what it was like  
holding the waterfall of thank-you's  
my torrential body was,  
but my hand, thin as a crack of light  
around a door, remembers  
the long, voluptuous glide  
from the little question  
behind your ear  
to the low rolling moan  
when I touched you inside  
to see if you were there.  
Waiting for my flight, inside  
the muzak of no sleep,  
I close my eyes and run  
my hand over the empty seat  
where you should be and it shines,  
all smiles, it shines.

**Jack Myers**

## **OH, NO, I'M GOING TO BE LATE AGAIN**

Once on the Colombo docks  
saying goodbye to a recently married couple  
my father, jealous  
at my mother's articulate emotion,  
dove into the waters of the harbour  
and swam after the ship waving farewell.

—Michael Ondaatje

Wait a minute, my father's not really dead.  
I guess I felt like writing a eulogy,  
balanced by gripes, but I was thinking of myself,  
pretending I had died in the guise of my father  
so I could feel better, get a little perspective  
from this viscous drop of time I'm treading water in.  
So I entertained the idea—now that's a strange phrase—  
of composing my own epitaph. It'd be what people who do repetitions  
with dead weight call good for you. Good for me. Ok, how would it go?

"He was always punctual. He..." —but just then, saved by the bell,  
Mark called long distance to tell me about this ant he had been  
studying for the last hour that was lugging one of his fingernails  
across the driveway and he wanted to know what I was up to.  
I wondered if it had been ripped off, or if he had lost it  
trying to grasp something difficult,  
or if it had been neatly clipped on schedule.

"Sleep faster, we need the pillows,"  
a Yiddish proverb says. That could be on my grave  
because that's what it's been like.  
synchronizing the microwave to my watch, the right tint  
of Clearasil to my socks, back to the clock, etc.  
Our sense of time is colored by the quality of our attention.  
Acne-Aid, Oxy-10, Stridex, Retin-A.

"He left the place spotless,  
leaving only his absence behind."

"He whined a lot, to see what he felt."

"His life was prolonged and heightened  
by the sense that something was going to happen."

Heroic as the feat was, what would the ant do with the nail?  
Maybe it'd be proof to his people he had killed The Giant.  
After all, I well remember the pride I took in showing my ex-wife  
how I had killed an ant that had miraculously entered the house.  
Worker ant, carpenter ant, army ant, fire ant.  
Maybe to ants it's like some kind of super titanium chiton  
and he'd be Achilles with the fabled Fingernail Shield.

Am I finding out that even the most minute part of us is glorious?  
Maybe I will donate my soft organs to the Dept. of Motor vehicles.  
"The man who gave his spleen  
to the girl who had no will."  
Mark had an all-day headache.  
So I told him to go out and get the Extra Strength  
Alka-seltzer, the one that's lemon-flavored,  
and he got all excited. (He knew reality travels  
at the speed of light when he saw it.)  
Now he had a mission. Something to do. Something could be cured.  
Possibly it would involve danger.  
He fantasized about loitering illegally at the 7-11,  
continually on the move down the aisles, skulking in corners  
so as not to be noticed in Stillwater, Oklahoma.  
But I knew Mark didn't have the will to get dressed and go out  
and buy antacid — Ho! Wait a minute! *Ant Acid*.  
*Formicide*. *Formicidae*: the family of ants.  
What a fabulous confabulation!  
Or is it...?  
It could be happenstance, coincidence, godsend, boon, bonanza;  
could be serendipity.  
I think I'm onto something here.  
I think something is going happen.  
Oh, no, I'm going to be late again.

**Jack Myers**  
**BOTTOM HACKERS**

Nine straight hours of pool,  
now that's what I think is dead  
and gone to heaven:  
the crack of shots, shooting  
Bloody Mary's, pepper sauce,  
ring of salt, the kill set up  
with a cue like a cross  
between a rifle and a woman,  
slab of slate,  
crack of the break,  
the smell of felt  
charging everything at Macy's,  
gimme reverse,  
the ball burns cool  
when you have the touch  
and fly 'round the spread  
talkin' 9-off-the-5-in-the-side,  
about love and money, and kisses and banks  
and combinations, a lock on the shot  
you make without thinking,  
thinking two shots ahead,  
glazing the touch,  
instinct and eye  
shaving each other  
with disembodied hands,  
a hit of smack to get you up,  
the horse knows the way  
like the chauffeurs say,  
it's all one road  
so leave yourself good,  
leave for good and grab the lady  
with the Doberman grin  
like cutlery,  
and there's your opponent  
who looks like you  
on an off day  
when you say you have it  
but you don't  
and you get it  
blanked out broke  
in the men's room  
on an eyeful of  
desperate graffiti,  
like the crash you'll have

in an hour, wrong way  
down the highway,  
shower of sparks,  
mirror snapped off,  
lip bit through,  
remember what  
you had to do  
to get back straight  
to the zonked-out quiet  
of suburbia,  
to the wife who left  
for a real life, sport,  
new start, fresh rack,  
the hope of running  
the table, the thing  
to get you back  
from feeling dead and  
what makes you so angry.

---

**SHORT STORY**

---

# COUNTRY HIGHWAY

Noah Berlatsky

---

Lincoln hit his car. He hit it hard, with both fists, on the top of the trunk. Then he hit it again. This time he left his hands where they landed, and stood, back and arms straight, staring straight ahead across the open land. He started to curse. He cursed long and continuously, his lips curling and twisting as if unable to contain the words expelled from his chest and throat like water from a high-pressure hose. He cursed his mother for moving back out to Minnesota, for saying she "just couldn't get accustomed to life here out east," cursed his son for the reckless way he drove, screeching tire stops, peeling out when he started, as if the car was some kind of toy, as if it was a game to always drive as fast as humanly possible. He cursed the car for shutting down completely just before he could coast it all the way off the highway. He cursed, and his words flared up into the stark blue summer sky and down the road and across the seemingly endless farmland without let-up or noticeable effect.

Finally, he stopped. He half-turned, glancing blackly over his shoulder and down the road, as if daring a car to come out of the horizon and just try to hit him, just try.

Deliberately, he turned his back, and braced himself. He pushed. The car rocked forward.

He pushed harder. Once he could have done it easy. He remembered waking up each morning and staring in the mirror, flexing the muscles in that arm that had scared hitters all across the state. "Take care of that arm, boy," old men would tell him on the street, and then they'd pat it, like it was theirs, and then maybe they'd nod their heads like they'd given him some special wisdom, like they'd thought of something new. "Take care of that arm," father said, "and you got it made, can see after your pa in his old age. Well, Pa had been wrong about that, too, and now Lincoln heaved at the car with arms that were getting older by the minute and that maybe couldn't throw like they used to but which could at least get that damn car off the road, roll it finally onto the shoulder, leaving him panting and sore and alone on the road.

He wiped his forehead and winced. He looked at the back of his hand. His knuckles were skinned. He restrained an urge to hit the car again. Stupid punk kid. Driving like that, day after day, every day, no wonder the car broke down. Stupid.

He stared at the car for several moments. Then he turned on his heel and started to walk up the road. He had a vague idea that he might be

able to hitch a ride into town with someone. He remembered his father saying that before he'd had kids he'd always hitched if it was too far to walk. Or else Dad'd have friends take him. Or enemies. Or acquaintances. God forbid the bastard should buy his own car, Lincoln thought.

He considered going to a farmhouse, but somehow the idea of appearing on someone's doorstep made him uncomfortable. Better to approach a car; less personal, somehow. He liked that about highways, about driving alone. Lynn said it felt strange to be cut off from everyone, but Lincoln liked being alone, with no one to nag him, no ignorant sonofabitch telling him what to do like they would at the pharmacy, telling him they wanted some prescription drug without a prescription and then shouting at him like it was his fault. He remembered riding with Lynn, away from home, from Minneapolis, with Lynn's eyes on him, his eyes on the road, and the future out there, waiting. In houses, privacy was rarer and more frantic. Less secure. People at home were more dangerous.

Lincoln stayed by the side of the road. The dirt and gravel of the shoulder was hard and dry beneath the soles of his good shoes, the shoes he always wore when driving, because no gas station attendant or fast food lackey was going to take Lincoln Lowbeck for any typical no account, no sir! He was educated. He was an educated man. His neck itched under his tie. He could feel his shirt sticking to his back.

A car was coming toward him down the highway. Lincoln stuck his thumb out. It was a thick thumb, stubby and hard against the sky. It seemed almost a miniature replica of Lincoln himself, both of them standing dense and small against the great sprawling flatness of the land. The car roared past. Lincoln

watched it go. He lowered his thumb. He spit. He walked on. Once he looked back. He could still see his car like some huge wounded animal beside the road. He loosened his tie. Several more cars passed without stopping. As the last one roared away he raised a finger instead of a thumb.

The tractor hummed and clanged as it approached him. It seemed to be moving faster than any tractor he'd seen before, yet at the same time it was far slower than the cars. He realized that it had been a very long time since he'd seen a tractor while outside of his car before. He'd always fumed when he got stuck behind one of the damn things. It was worst if you weren't the first one caught in back of them when they pulled out of some dirt path probably used since the stone age, if you were instead the tenth or the thirtieth, and were trapped behind nine or twenty-nine other cars plus the tractor, with no way to pass on the godawful two lane country roads until the hick bastard pulled slowly off the goddamn highway onto another of their little dirt roads and with forty cars now jammed bumper to bumper it took another ten minutes till you could get anywhere near the speed you should be going, by which time another of those dumb tractors was probably in front of you again.

The tractor passed and pulled onto the shoulder of the road behind him. Lincoln stared at it as it pulled to a stop. Then he started to walk toward it. Internally, he began to think about retracting everything bad he'd ever thought about tractor driver's. His legs hurt, and his feet. If I've got a blister, he thought, somebody's going to pay.

A smile with a man attached smiled at Lincoln.

"You need some help?" it asked.

Lincoln tried to speak but his throat was dry. He coughed and tried again.

"My car's stalled," he said. He gestured. "Down there."

"I'm sorry to hear that. How far back did you leave it?" said the smile, changing to a look of deep and genuine concern without for a moment ceasing to be a smile. Lincoln found himself smiling in return without meaning to, without wanting to, even though the muscles of his face felt tired and dead and numbed by his walk and even though he was still angry at somebody about his blister.

Lincoln shrugged. "I don't know—I've been walking for about...." He checked his watch. "Twenty minutes?"

"Well," the smile said. "Why don't you hop on? I was heading home to pick up some things, and I'd be more than glad to let you use our phone."

Lincoln forced his head up and his shoulders back. He straightened his tie.

"I'd sure appreciate it," he said.

The smile's name was Tom, and his daughter looked just about as scared as her father was friendly. She seemed to be just waiting for an excuse to run for the door, like squirrels look when they're watching you come at them, until you get just that close and they shoot away like you'd let off a firecracker. Lincoln set down his travel bag, which Tom had insisted they stop for, though Lincoln wanted to be on his way in a matter of hours.

"Could you get Mr. Lowbeck and me some coffee, Rachel?" Tom said.

Lincoln kept his face still.

"Or would you rather have something else?" Tom asked, stopping Rachel just as she was about to enter the kitchen.

"No," Lincoln lied. "Coffee's fine."

"Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather just have water, I think. That okay?"

"Sure," Lincoln said. Rachel looked from one of them to the other.

"Water?" she said. Her voice was faint, almost a whisper, as if it were trying to back away from its own sound.

"Water," Tom smiled, and his daughter was gone.

"Well," Lincoln said, "if you'll just point me toward your phone, I'll...."

"Look," Tom said, "why don't you sit down and relax? I'll call the mechanic shop in town for you and...."

"Thanks," Lincoln said, "but I'd just as soon call myself."

"All right," Tom said, "but I know some of the boys down there and it'll be a lot easier for me to get 'em moving than for you...."

"I'd just as soon call myself," Lincoln said.

"All right," Tom said. He pointed at the living room. "Through there. Turn right and you'll see my study. Phone and the book're on my desk. I'll be around a few more minutes if you need anything, then I've got to head out again."

"I'll be all right," Lincoln said. He started to leave. Then he turned back. He cleared his throat. "Thanks," he said. Lynn always told him that his gratitude sounded like it was coming from the grave. She said that if she'd been easier to scare and he'd thanked her she might have fainted dead away, but as it was she always felt more inclined to go for the shotgun.

But Tom just smiled. "Don't mention it," he said.

Lincoln eased himself into the chair behind the desk. For a moment he just sat there. His feet, relieved of his weight, stopped aching and began to throb. He dialed the tow truck. While he waited for an answer, he examined the desk. Like the rest of the study, it was neat, but not uncomfortably so: pens, pencils, paper, a calculator, all arranged in symmetric disorder. Lincoln imagined Tom sitting at the desk, figuring crop yields, wages,

taxes, with the shadow of that smile just turning the edges of his lips. The smile leant a kind of peacefulness to the scene, even in imagination. Lincoln's mother had always figured their taxes quietly at the dining room table, while his father hovered. Lincoln tapped his fingers on the desk. Someone on the other end picked up the phone. "Yeah?" they said.

When Rachel came into the room with his glass of water Lincoln was standing. His knuckles were white against the black phone.

"Twelve hours!" he roared. "Are you out of your mind? Get out here and get that car you... don't you dare hang up... damn!" He smashed the phone into the cradle. His hand came down hard on the desk. The pens and pencils jumped. "That stupid hick son-of-a" he said. Then he saw Rachel.

"I brought you your water?" she said. The glass trembled a little in her hand.

"Here," Lincoln said, harshly. He reached for the water with one hand. With the other he tried to push the pens and pencils back into place. His fingers struck Rachel's hand. "Oh," she said. The glass hit the floor. It shattered. The water soaked into the carpet.

"Oh," Rachel said again.

"You better get a broom," Lincoln said.

Rachel looked up from the mess on the floor and Lincoln saw her face clearly for the first time. Nice eyes, he thought.

She lowered her head again. "It's in the closet," she said.

"You'd better go get it," Lincoln said. He watched her walk out. He continued to stare at the door for several moments after she had passed through it. Then he came around the desk and started to pick the bigger shards of glass gingerly out of the carpet and place them into the waste basket. One of them cut

his hand. "Ow," he said. He dropped the piece. It didn't break. He lifted his shoe and put it down. There was a crunch. He stepped on the shards again. Then again. He stopped. He was breathing heavily. His feet burned. Rachel came back into the room. She looked at him a little strangely.

"You all right?" she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Fine." He watched her as she squatted down and began to sweep the glass into a dustpan.

"How old are you?" he said.

"Almost sixteen."

"Oh." He paused. "I've got a son your age."

"Really?" she said, but she didn't sound very interested, so Lincoln didn't bother to reply.

He tried calling the tow-truck twice in the next hour, but the man on the other end remembered him both times and just laughed and cut him off.

"Why don't you call the police?" Rachel asked. "Or just wait 'til Dad gets back. He'll help you."

"Screw the police," Lincoln said succinctly. "And I shouldn't need your old man's help to make a goddamn phone call." Then he saw her expression. "I shouldn't need his help to do that, is all," he said.

"It's not like you're special," Rachel said. "He's good to everyone. Then she said it again, with more force. "Everyone."

When Tom came home the sunlight was dying down and Lincoln was pacing back and forth on the front porch, his hands opening and closing, the thick fingers almost shaking with barely restrained violence. He stopped when he saw Tom watching him.

"You're still here?" Tom asked, though he didn't seem surprised. It would have almost have been an "I

told you so" except for the smile. The smile just took all the sting out of it.

"Yeah," Lincoln said.

"I'll talk to them first thing tomorrow," Tom said. "Those guys live for a chance to screw a city boy." He shook his head. "You should've called the police. Police chief up in Ealing's a good friend of mine. He'd of helped you out if he knew you were at my place."

"I don't bother the police," said Lincoln.

Tom laughed. "No, I guess you don't," he said. He clasped Lincoln's shoulder. "Come on, let's eat."

Rachel had already set out the meal. The table in the kitchen was so small that Lincoln felt cramped sitting on one side of it with Rachel and her father at the two ends.

"Eat up," Tom said.

"Thanks," said Lincoln. "I'm not very hungry."

Tom smiled. "Believe me, Mr. Lowbeck, you're not imposing."

"Got nothing to do with it," Lincoln said. "I'm just not hungry."

"All right" Tom said, and continued to eat in silence. Lincoln stared at his empty plate.

Eat up, Father said, don't you turn up your nose at the food your uncle has seen fit to provide us with.

Not hungry, Lincoln said.

Lincoln, his mother said.

Out of the goodness of his heart and you turn up your nose, said Father.

All right, Uncle said, it's all right.

No, said Father, it's not, come here you.

Why can't we feed ourselves why are we always....

Lincoln, his mother said.

When Tom had finished Rachel cleared the table. Lincoln watched her. She didn't look like Lynn. Lynn didn't clear tables. Sometimes she'd take the dishes off, if she felt like it, but you always knew she was taking off each one. Lynn was heavy. Not any bigger than Rachel, maybe.

But heavier. More there. More the center of wherever she was.

"So," Tom said when the two men were alone, "what do you think of Rachel?"

Lincoln started slightly. He looked up and then away. Tom's smile never wavered.

"She seems like a big help to you," Lincoln said finally.

"She is that," said Tom. He leaned back in his seat. "I'll have her make up the couch for you, all right?"

"Sure," Lincoln said.

"You got a daughter?" Tom said.

"A son."

Tom shook his head. "I've always thanked the Lord for giving me a daughter," he said. "I know a lot of people say they want sons, but I don't know. I sure wouldn't want a kid like I was."

Lincoln tried to imagine Tom being trouble to anyone.

Suddenly Tom started. "Say, you called home?"

"Nah," Lincoln said.

"But your wife," said Tom. "She'll be worried sick. Use our phone. Please I insist." He was standing now, leaning on the table, resting his weight on his fists. The table was so small that Lincoln was almost afraid Tom was going to fall into his lap.

"Lynn knows better than to worry," Lincoln said.

You idiot, Lynn said. Is it so hard to call? Why don't you ever

No reason to bother you, Lincoln said, I can take care of myself.

You idiot, Lynn said don't you ever think that

Dad's voice was slurred. ...think you could get Mom to come down to the station? he said. They picked me up for some

No, said Lincoln, and hung up.

Who was that? Mom asked.

No one, Lincoln said. The phone rang.

"Listen," Tom said. "Listen, if you think I'll let it be said about me that I prevented...."

"You're not stopping anything," Lincoln said.

"If you think...."

"You can talk all you want," Lincoln said, "but I'm not going to call," and he finally looked at Tom, as if sheer weight of stubborn defiance could overwhelm the other man's arguments.

Tom was frozen with his mouth half-opened. Lincoln suddenly realized that Tom was a funny-looking man. It was as if the smile had concealed his face, and now that it was gone Lincoln could see his host clearly for the first time. His head was just slightly too small, and his nose had obviously been broken at some time. His left eye was a touch lower than his right, making it seem as if he were perpetually tilting his head. His hands were much too large. It was unsettling. Lincoln wished he had never seen Tom like this, wished his host had remained a personified smile. Then Tom laughed, and everything was fine. Only the ghost of his momentary strangeness remained, barely visible.

"All right," said Tom, "all right. I should know better by now than to think that I can make a man do what he doesn't want to. Never do seem to learn, though." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, if it's because you don't want to use mine, maybe you could call from a pay phone tomorrow?"

"Maybe," Lincoln said. He thought about Lynn staring out the front door, cursing him, knowing he was fine but cursing him for letting that small part of her doubt. "I'll think about it," he said.

"I'd feel a lot better if you would," he said. He shook his head. "I think I'm going to be getting on to bed, now. I'll try not to wake you when I get up. If you'd like to watch some T.V., go on ahead. There's beer in the fridge."

"I don't drink," said Lincoln.

"Man of no vices," smiled Tom, and turned to go.

"Rachel's a fine girl," Lincoln found himself saying.

Tom stopped, but did not turn around.

"She takes after her mother," he said, and then he left and Lincoln heard his boots on the stairs.

Lincoln lay on the couch, staring at the ceiling, thinking about his father's vices.

How? said his father. The smell of whiskey.

I fell down, Lincoln said. His arm throbbed.

Don't lie said his father, and the hand came around and there was the floor beneath his cheek and his arm caught under him and the pain.

Stop it, Mom said.

Didn't I tell you to take care of that arm, Father said, how can you throw now, how can you throw?

My God you'll kill him, Mother said.

You shut up, said Father, haven't I told you I'll teach him a lesson when he needs it haven't I told you?

How many times have I told you to take it easy on that car? Lincoln said and he could feel the anger rushing up from his stomach, out to his knees, up to his chin, his head, his eyes, down his arms to his hands, out to his son.

Lynn standing between them, what do you think you're doing, don't you dare, so help me if you ever even think about doing that again I don't care what he did don't you dare.

The anger draining away till it rested again like a restless snake burning in the pit of his stomach, the poison in the pit of his stomach.

Lincoln closed his eyes.

Is her old man going to pay for you to get that pharmacy degree, pay to see you follow in his footsteps, Dad said, is he, you'd rely on a woman.

Come on, Lynn said. I'm not going to listen to this.

Lincoln stepped toward his father. As if you ever had any pride, he said, as if you haven't begged everything your whole life well I'm not going to be like you, Lynn's not paying a thing, her dad's not paying a thing, I've worked this summer, I'll work nights if I have to, they're giving me a scholarship for the arm, as if you ever had any pride.

Don't go, said Mom, Come on, said Lynn, You'll be dead before you see me again, said Lincoln.

Stop, said Mother, don't go.

Goodbye, said Lincoln and Lynn held his arm tight as they walked off the porch and down the drive and away and away

He woke and did not know how long he had been sleeping. The house was grey and dark and strange. He felt alone and empty, like everything outside and inside had been poured out and disappeared, vaporized, like that old woman had said, coming to the counter, "I want something that'll vaporize" repeating it over and over, and Lincoln had wondered if Lynn's dad ever had anything like this happen to him, if he'd thought of this when he'd convinced Lynn to convince Lincoln that this was the job for him. "You need a prescription before I'll give you anything," Lincoln'd said, but she just kept saying it till he had given her a glass of water in a bottle and taken her money and she had wandered out.

The room was faded. He couldn't think. He had to go to the bathroom, but he had forgotten something. He was hot. He felt charged, excited, burning, like he'd used to on the nights before a game. Standing on the mound, the batter watching him, his teammates watching him, the crowd, everyone looking at him, at him. His mind wouldn't stay on one thing, was the window-shade down, what was outside, the crickets, the bathroom but naked what if he ran

into Mom, sweating he was sweating. He threw the covers off. His fingers fumbled. His bathrobe on a chair. He stood up and felt pain jam a needle into the outside of his big toe as the thick carpet rubbed against his blister. He put the bathrobe on. Upstairs, toilet downstairs didn't work. He banged his knee on something. Cursed. Reached the stairs. He had to be careful, he mustn't wake... who? Not Dad, he would sleep through anything, the drunken.... Was he at Mother's? He knew that her downstairs....

He halted at the top of the stairs. Everything was wrong. Dad was dead, wasn't he? The funeral.... Lincoln shook his head. He turned to the door which was closest to where the bathroom was supposed to be. Then he stopped. He put his ear to the door.

"...don't feel well," said a voice. "Don't make me."

Confused sounds.

"Don't you love me? Don't you?" a second voice said, deeper than the first.

He remembered where he was. They had taken him in for the night. Who was it? Tom and his wife? The downstairs bathroom worked: it was at Mom's that it hadn't. Quietly he backed away from his hosts' bedroom door and retraced his steps down the stairs, placing his wide feet with care in the quiet house.

The next morning Rachel made him waffles. He told her not to bother, but she made them anyway. There was a note. "Tow truck should have gotten car by time you get up. Said they'll call when its ready. Shouldn't be later than 11:30. Good luck on the rest of your trip. Stop by on your next time through. Tom."

Rachel came into the room. She stood by the table.

Lincoln looked up. She shifted nervously.

"What is it?" he said finally.

"Did you ever think," she said. For a moment Lincoln thought she was done, thought that she had just wound down, standing there beside the table, and would remain forever, a statue, locked in the moment between one word and the next, trapped by the sentence trying to escape, by her own inability to speak.

"about running away from home?" she said.

Lincoln took another bite of his waffles. He swallowed.

"No," he said.

He didn't look at her.

"You must have," she said. "Living at home is"

"I didn't," he said.

"Maybe it wasn't as... for you I mean, as..."

"As what?" said Lincoln. His eyes never moved. She didn't answer. After a few minutes he began eating again. Though he did not look up, he felt her presence behind him, hovering.

He finished. She cleaned away the dishes. He turned his chair to watch her. She turned on the water in the sink. A light breeze came through the window by her head.

"Besides," he said, "what would your dad say if you ran away?" She didn't answer. "What would your mom say?"

"Mama died five years ago," she said. "She fell down the stairs and snapped her neck."

Lincoln cleared his throat. He pulled at his tie before realizing that he hadn't put one on that morning.

"I'm sorry," he said finally.

"I found her when I came home from school," Rachel said. "Her neck was bent real funny. They bent it back later on, so she looked okay in the coffin."

Lincoln watched her. He felt like his eyes were glued there, like if the house fell down and the ground opened up he would still be staring at her. He couldn't help it. The soft

hair, the curve of her waist, the long dress, and the bruise above her elbow, only visible because her blouse sleeves were rolled up to wash the dishes.

"It has to be soon because I can't," she said, without turning around. "I can't... But I'm afraid to, alone, and I don't really see anybody out here but Dad and his friends and some of the wives and they're all older and you are too but at least you're not from around here and you don't really know Dad and" She sucked in her breath hard. He thought maybe she was going to cry, but she didn't. Just that one deep breath.

"Your father's done a lot for me," Lincoln said.

"Yes," she said. "He's like that."

"Tell him I owe him."

"He doesn't want..."

"You tell him. Tell him I pay my debts."

"I won't."

"You tell him."

"All right," she said.

"I'll be on the porch," said Lincoln. "Get me when the shop calls." He didn't move.

"All right," she said again.

Lincoln watched her washing the dishes. The breeze brushed her hair.

"You're father says you take after your mother," Lincoln said.

"Does he?" she asked, and her voice was a shallow wind, a whisper from far away. Her hands were still in the sink but she had stopped washing. Her back was very flat.

Lincoln left the room and put on his tie. Then he went outside and sat beside his travel-bag on the porch. Once he heard the phone ring. A few minutes later it rang again, for a long time. Then it stopped. Presently a tow truck pulled up with his car. A man got out. The man's remaining teeth were bent and yellowed. His smile looked shredded.

"I called twice," said the man, "but the first time some girl hung up on me and the second time I didn't get

no answer. So I just brought it over."

"Fine," said Lincoln.

"Didn't get no answer," the man said.

Lincoln paid him too much and got in the car. He thought about Father almost begging for drinking money. He thought about Rachel closing her eyes to shut out Tom's smile.

He drove through Ealing. The next town of any size was thirty miles further. When he got there, he stopped at a pay phone. The number was on the phone. He dialed.

"Police," said a voice.

Lincoln hung up. He stepped back for a moment, then picked up the receiver again. Across the street a boy was running along the sidewalk. Next to him, in the road, a younger boy was riding a bicycle. The two appeared to be racing. As Lincoln watched, the younger boy started to

pull ahead. Suddenly the older boy reached out a hand, gripped the younger boy's belt, and yanked. The bicycle swerved. The older boy shot ahead. Then the bike toppled. The younger boy struck the curb. The runner reached the end of the block and turned around, grinning. Then he saw the wreck. His mouth opened. Nothing came out. The younger boy lay half on the sidewalk and half on the street. He started to cry.

One day, Lynn said, I won't be able to stand being locked out any longer. And I'll leave you. One day soon, I think.

Lincoln placed the phone back on its hook. He walked to his car. When he hit the highway again he rolled down the window. The breeze was cool on his face. All around him the fields opened and opened, like giant hands laid out beneath the sky.

---

## Jim Mikoley HOW WE SAID GOODBYE

I recall the queer flight  
of the nonesuch bird  
how it sort of rowed  
its way between the clouds  
in yawning strokes  
the paddlewings would pull  
the bird slicing through  
the summer sky  
he would come to a complete stop  
like a hyphen in the text of blue  
then scull again  
right off the page of daylight,  
remember?

I remember  
there is no such bird.

# FINGER TALK

Leslie What

**K**oko, the talking gorilla, was on the television again that August afternoon I was at Tom's place trying to convince him to love me. Seemed I'd seen Koko on television pretty often; seemed I'd been at Tom's place more than usual, too. Tom had never been to my place, it was that type of relationship.

I was still inside my new work uniform, so I took off the detachable gorilla head in order to see the television a little better, then sat on the couch next to Tom. I had on this fake-fur gorilla suit that I'd sewn to deliver candy baskets to people's homes and offices. Koko probably didn't know it, but she was the one who gave me the idea for my business. I called myself "The Easter Gorilla." Pretty soon I planned to become the Mother's Day Gorilla and so on up to Santa Gorilla. I was hoping things would pick up because I'd only had two customers that first day.

On the television, Koko moved her fingers and that lady scientist who acted like Koko's mother translated and told the newsman that finger talk proved gorillas were intelligent.

If Koko had learned English instead of sign language, there wouldn't have been so much contro-

versy. As it was, everyone in Southern California had different ideas about what Koko was trying to say. I knew I wasn't sure, but I only knew the sign language alphabet, which I'd learned from watching Sesame Street.

Before too long Tom reached over and tried to pull down the back zipper of my suit, but the teeth had somehow gotten jammed up with fake-fur. Tom was having a heck of a time undoing that zipper. Other than that, he didn't say nothing about the fact that I was wearing the bottom three-quarters of a fake-fur gorilla suit, except, "Damn that zipper!"

"What ya think about Koko?" I asked.

"Who the fuck is Koko?" Tom said.

"You know. The talking gorilla," I said.

"Gorillas can't talk, Merillee," Tom said. He gave up on the zipper and reached for his beer from the metal keg he'd had reincarnated into a table.

Well I didn't have much to say after that, either. Only I did, I just didn't know how to say it. I had to tell Tom about what that hairy-legged lady at the clinic had called "the contents of my uterus." I had to find out about Tom's plans so I could make my plans. The thing was, I was scared Tom would break up with me once he learned about my *situation*.

Worse, I was scared Tom couldn't care less what my *situation* was.

Koko's fingers started to move like she was telling the newsman she wasn't bullshitting him. The newsman didn't understand finger talk, so he couldn't have really known if Koko was talking or just wiggling, but he argued with that lady scientist anyway. This was before call-in shows, or I might have called to say I thought Koko had said something. Instead, I thought some more about what I was gonna tell Tom.

I snuck a look his way and felt so lucky to have him as my boyfriend. Tom had dark skin the color of a well-done tan, dark eyes, dark hair, and a dark mustache that covered the top half of his lips. Tom was really cute and I was wildly in love with him, so in love, that I was blind as to how to break the news about my *situation*.

Then that lady scientist mentioned that she and Koko were gonna give a lecture at the Brea Civic Auditorium in another two hours and all of a sudden, a miracle happened. Koko looked straight through the television at me. I swear to God, she stared right at me. That lady scientist must not have seen it, but Koko told me with her fingers that she wanted to talk to me, alone.

Tom didn't notice nothing unusual, but the newsman noticed. "What's Koko doing?" he cried, "drying her fingernail polish? Why should we believe she's communicating when all she does is wiggle those hairy fingers?"

He made that lady scientist angry. "What's the matter with you?" she screamed. "Can't you see there's other intelligent life on the planet?"

That got to me and I started bawling because I was beginning to doubt that there was any intelligent life on the planet.

Well, Tom pushed me off the couch and said, "Je-sus, Merillee. Get outta here if you're gonna bawl again."

That made me bawl worse. For a minute I even thought, why am I putting up with this guy? Thing was, by the time I thought of that, I was already in my *situation*. I'd put up with Tom long enough that not putting up with Tom would have been anticlimactic.

I went into the bathroom and splashed some water on my face. I couldn't help but notice that I was starting to smell pretty ripe. The zipper was stuck fast and there was no way to get inside my suit to freshen up any better, so I gargled with Tom's mouthwash, then dribbled a little inside of the fake-fur neck. The minty odor wafted up and sort of cleared out some of the muddy feelings in my head. I made a decision to go see Koko's lecture.

I grabbed my gorilla head and left Tom's to wander around. It was really hot outside and I was sweating like Nixon at-the-hearings in that fake-fur gorilla suit. I looked like shit, smelled worse. I'd have given anything to take off my suit and just wear the shorts and tee shirt I had on underneath, but I didn't dare mess with anything until later, when I could take my time to work the zipper open. I didn't know what I'd do the next time I had to go to the bathroom. This not an ideal *situation* in more ways than one.

Still, the second I stuck out my thumb to hitch-hike, this horny guy picked me up, because I was a girl. If I'd have had a zipper in my crotch, this horny guy would have tried to fuck me right there in his car. But my zipper was in the back, pretty well hidden inside fake-fur. To look at me, you'd have no idea how to remove that gorilla suit.

"So, where are you headed?" asked this horny guy.

Not that there was any choice. If there was anyone I wanted to talk to, it was Koko. I felt like we had an understanding, or something. "Brea Civic Auditorium," I said.

"What's there?" asked this horny guy, who didn't really care. He was still staring at my crotch, looking for the zipper.

"Koko, the talking gorilla," I said.

"Oh," this guy said, like that explained *everything*. He tried to make some small talk while he drove me there, then this horny guy dropped me off at the back of a line waiting to see Koko. I was herded inside with the other latecomers and asked to stand behind the back aisle. A little kid in front of me turned and saw me holding a gorilla head. "Can I put it on?" he asked, but his mother slapped his hand and told him no.

There must have been two hundred people in that little auditorium; the place was completely packed. This prim lady who stood next door to me was wearing one of those khaki jump-suits zipped from crotch to neck. She wrinkled up her nose when she got wind of me. This prim lady clutched her zipper pull like she wasn't about to let go of it. I don't know what she thought I was gonna do, but this prim lady would have moved away, if she could have, I'm sure.

Then the moderator introduced Koko and that lady scientist. There was applause and lots of boos. I could hardly believe that I was right there with them. That lady scientist's eyes were tired, but she smiled at Koko with the look of true love. I smiled too, seeing Koko in the flesh. I'd never seen a more beautiful creature. Silky fur, nothing like my matted up gorilla suit, clear eyes like the shiny part of night. If I wasn't so penned in at the back I would have rushed up to kiss her.

"Say hello," said that lady scientist.

Koko paused like she wanted to scratch her butt but didn't want to offend her mother. I knew that feeling well, which was how come I recognized it. Koko's fingers talked and that lady scientist translated.

"Hello," Koko/lady scientist said. "I am Koko." Koko might have said, "I'm Koko," only I wasn't sure if gorillas knew about contractions or not. I remembered contractions from grade school, but I didn't really know what kind of education gorillas got. Koko's fingers talked some more, but before that lady scientist had the chance to translate, this prim lady next door to me started screaming with the gift of tongues.

Everybody turned to stare. Security guards sort of paced along the aisle edges like they were trying to get closer to this prim lady, but couldn't get through.

"Mark-devil-six-fear-angel-god-beast," this prim lady said, only in gibberish and a lot longer than the above example.

"Glossolalia," said that lady scientist.

Maybe because I was standing next to this prim lady; maybe because I was wearing the bottom three-quarters of a fake-fur gorilla suit; maybe for reasons that can only be described as cosmic, Koko looked at me like I was a kindred spirit, or something. I swear to God. Koko's fingers talked and that lady scientist put on glasses to look at who Koko was talking about. Everyone else thought Koko and that lady scientist were looking at this prim lady with the gift of tongues, but Koko and that lady scientist were not looking at her, they were looking at me.

"I understand you," said Koko/lady scientist.

"What's she saying?" asked the moderator, meaning, what's this prim lady saying?

"The lady should speak for herself," said Koko/lady scientist. I thought for a minute that maybe something got lost in that translation. I looked into Koko's eyes and I started to bawl because all at once it came to me, like in a vision. "Talk for yourself," was exactly what she'd

said. Her fingers began to fly, another miracle, as I suddenly understood every word Koko said. It was like I was Koko and Koko was me. Then Koko started to bawl and then that lady scientist started to bawl. And then I started to bawl even harder. The prim lady made the sign of the cross with her fingers and tried to back away.

Well this was just too much for me to take right then. I mean, Je-sus, this was Southern California. I had to get out of there. And the funny thing was, all these people who wouldn't move for the armed security guards took one whiff of me and let me pass.

Koko had told me in gorilla language that I had to tell Tom I was pregnant. I guess that's how gorillas handled similar *situations*. For all I knew, gorillas were animals who mated for life. It would have been hard for Koko to understand things from my perspective. Humans, especially our men, don't mate for life.

I made my way to the street and thumbed a ride to Tom's from this obviously married guy who wouldn't have minded two-timing his wife with a gorilla woman. You can tell it from their eyes, you know.

Tom was on his couch, drunk, with his pants partway unzipped. His zipper was in his crotch, like all men's zippers. He started to raise his head like he was gonna get up, but he was so drunk, he just slumped back down. "Je-sus, Merillee," Tom said. "Why'd you come back here? Get lost, crazy woman."

"Crazy?" I said. I may have smelled like a gorilla in the wild, but I wasn't crazy. What I was was in love with someone who treated me like shit and didn't know about my current *situation*. What I was was without any money for the abortion. What I was was depressed since I knew Tom didn't give a shit what I was.

I ended up handling it like this. My fingers were slow, because I didn't know sign language too good, but I spelled it out. "F-U-C-K Y-O-U," my fingers said. "A-S-S-H-O-L-E," they said, as an afterthought.

Trouble was, Tom had fallen asleep with his mouth hanging open, spit sliding down his chin. Tom didn't hear a word I said, but I felt good for having brought up the subject, anyway. Wasn't much else to do, after that. "Call me," I said and put on my gorilla head to go home. It wasn't too far, so I walked. As I would have expected, not one person bothered me. I think it was sort of obvious what kind of mood I was in by then.

I got home and turned up the phone ringer to make sure I'd hear it when it rang. I had some free time before eleven, when the late news came on. I wanted to watch in case Koko was on so I could see her current thoughts about my *situation*. I hung up my gorilla head on the coat rack and worked a little oil up and down the zipper until I got it going again. I slid out from the suit and rewarded myself for the whole ordeal with a much needed trip to the bathroom. After that, I sat on the couch to look over my mail. My subscription to the *National Geographic* had just come and sure enough, there was an article about you-know-who and her mother. I started to read, half-expecting, after the day I'd had, for Koko to talk to me through the magazine.

Of course nothing happened and I got tired of reading so I turned to the television and sat around waiting for the news. I really wanted to talk to Koko.

Now in my heart of hearts I knew no gorilla, talking or not, could reach through television and talk to me. No gorilla could do that. Not even Koko. But what I knew was gonna happen and what I wanted to have happen were two separate things,

and I knew that too. Just like knowing Tom wasn't gonna call didn't keep me from wanting Tom to call. Knowing doesn't prevent you from wanting, and how well I know that, now.

See, it was more likely for Koko to reach through television and talk to me than for Tom to call me on the

telephone. For Tom to call me would have been another miracle and three miracles in one day seemed like too much to expect. Tom was never gonna call me and I knew that.

Tom couldn't have called me. Tom didn't care where the fuck I lived and what's more, the guy didn't even know my number.

---

## Edward Flagg MY FATHER BLEEDS VIETNAM

- I. He could shoulder himself and a slender boatload of Vietnamese all at once if he desired, but his vitality matured

in the bush at Can Tho, where crouched panthers were more in season than tigers slouching by moonlight, where familiar salt

nurtured a foreign earth, where the reward for a single mis-step was a moist place to sleep. Better to feed your own land when you can.

- II. He could fly without wings, his arms out, his back peopled with refugees, say, who weren't even aware that his shirtfront was stained by treetops so they could stay snug under radar.

Yet early on in a T-bird, an ungraceful kiss of wingtip to fuselage grounded him, sent him to an APC at Ap Bac (weeks after the battle), casual, dangle-legged, until a hotshot

VC peeled off a round. Then not even the stamina of a spent magazine and the stench of cordite could mend the hole punched through a buddy's forehead.

- III. Now he breathes in the thick air of Da Nang during Rocky Mountain snow storms, and speaks of lush, vivid country while sitting at home in a Denver suburb, unless other memories

crop up first: the eyes of ruthless ARVN interrogators—his allies—or the screams of their prisoner with electrodes searing her cunt, or the pleas of men who didn't know they were already dead

because they didn't have the right information; because truth dies in war; because victims know themselves; because he is an honest man; because he still remembers; my father bleeds.

**Dennis Held**  
**CLASS**

Mr. Marquardt made us square  
our corners on the way  
to the playground, marched  
us two linoleum boxes out  
from the wall, every day.  
Harold Radke yanked a random  
pony tail and Mr. Marquardt  
lifted Harold by the hair: "How  
do *you* like it?" and pressed  
his nose to the cross  
chalked on the blackboard,  
stood him with dictionaries  
at arm's length, pulling  
Harold's shoulders into pain  
I could feel Marquardt enjoy.  
I turned away, the kid anybody  
could make cry, and did,  
who hid where they  
could always find him.

**V.Q. Wallick**  
**IN MADAGASCAR WOMEN DANCE  
WITH THE BONES OF THE DEAD**

In Madagascar, Women dance with  
the bones of the dead  
as a sign of weakness.  
Mourning hard heavy hands  
heavy tears that speak disorder—  
dangerous disorder  
or unspoken power.  
In Madagascar Women dance with  
the bones of the dead  
and men say *Sign of weakness*  
And the men hope  
sign of weakness

Dennis Held  
**SPRING STONE PICKING**

I.  
till

the earth  
before planting

yields a harvest

frost wound  
spring rocks

till  
the earth  
before planting

II.  
Grandpa Held squeezed a palm  
of dirt, pitched it hard  
at the fieldstone wall.  
When it stuck, still too wet.  
When it crumbled, time  
to pick stones. All the cousins  
came out and Grandpa hitched up  
the tractor to the wooden wagon.  
We rode the lane, past the old  
pasture, onto soft fresh-turned dirt.  
Any stone bigger than a fist  
we tossed onto the splintered planks.  
The big kids dug around  
the pumpkin-sized rocks.  
Grandpa helped hoist them on,  
then toed the hole back full.  
Lunchtime we ate in the shade  
at the fenceline, surrounded  
by rock piles, and drank lemonade  
pinched with salt. At dark,  
we rode in together,  
all tired in the shoulders.  
We knew what we did  
would help run the farm,  
would help run the world.

---

**SHORT STORY**

---

# GRACE

Amy Nelson

---

The South Georgia sun was just beginning to burn the mist off the flattened patch of Enigma when Cora erupted from her dirt driveway in a thick spray of rocks and gravel. Wheeling her big, green Buick onto the artery, she headed north, humming a song that sounded in her head like a scratched record with all the ticks and pops. She couldn't remember the title, she couldn't remember the words, but her Epiphanies had used that song to drive up a wail from the people at every revival they played. That was back when Elvis was no more than a baby-faced truck driver and rock and roll still meant doing the dirty bump.

Cora paid no mind to her forgetfulness, because the rhythm was the thing, like the swing and the grind. No one ever listened to the words. They were being saved by the rhythm, the dirty bump of the Lord. No one gave up their soul for "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," ain't nobody ever even heard of Jesu. No, they gave their sweaty, chicken-fried souls to Jeeziz, pass the 'shine and don't tell preacher I'm feeling up somebody wearing a wedding band that ain't mine. That's what Cora was humming, that's what was in her head.

Adjusting her girdle, she wondered if she should have waited until she got to Atlanta to put it on. If her car had trouble, then she might have to stick out a leg to get somebody to pull over, a trick that always worked on the road. She wondered if she should have let her son Jackson drive her, like Lucy suggested yesterday, but she dismissed the thought. Lucy was always getting in on her business and Cora regretted calling her and spouting off her plans. The children didn't need to be in on this. This mission and its spoils were hers.

Fifteen miles out of town she noticed the needle creeping to empty. She rolled into a two-pump service station crouched in the gravel by the highway. She waited but no one appeared. She leaned on her horn and squinted at the station's dust caked windows for signs of life. A few minutes later, the screen door sagged open and a greasy pile of crankcase oil and rags ambled out.

"Christ on the cross, I know there's got to be a person in that heap somewheres," she muttered.

"Ain't full serve ma'am!" it yelled as it moved between the pumps. Cora rolled down her window, flinching as it leaned in close and repeated itself. "Ain't full serve."

"Well you don't expect me to pump it myself do you? I'm a paying customer." Her eyes roved past him, over the crumbling storefront.

"Looks like you need the business."

The pile of rags looked her over in much the same way. "I guess an old woman can't do it herself, no how." Cora's face flamed. A dirty squirt of tobacco juice shot from the vicinity of its mouth and spattered in the dirt. "How much ma'am?"

"I should just keep going, but as this is the only gas station for miles, I guess fill it up." Both her wrinkled hands clenched the wheel and she muttered through ground teeth. "Blind, good for nothing yard dog can't even see straight. Old, my ass. I'm getting on, but old, Jesus. If he knew who I was, he'd give me that gas for nothing."

"That'll be thirty bucks ma'am."

Cora threw a handful of bills out the window and with a denture-perfect grin floored the pedal, leaving the pile of rags and the two pumps in a hail of gravel.

*I'm leaving. I have to go. Yes, Ma. I'll take it with me Are you sure Daddo wanted me to have it? It might get lost. Don't worry. I'll be safe. Please stop crying. Cora stop, you're upsetting Ma. You're smart Cora. You can handle it. Just take care of everything until I get back. Mother, I promise—I'll come home as often as the Navy'll let me. I know they're not drafting yet, but there's a war. I'll send the both of you stuff from all over the world. I ship out tomorrow. I know it's soon. I'll be home for Christmas, if I can.*

Lucy dropped the pot on the stove and rushed to the answer the phone. A baby dangled over one arm and a toddler sticky with jelly tugged at her leg. "Hello?"

"God a'mighty Lucy, I can hear those kids clear down to the house."

Lucy turned a knob on the stove and placed a bottle of milk in the pot. "Don't cuss, Mama."

"Don't you talk back to your

Mama. I'm going to go see him."

"Who?"

"Your Uncle William. He's up in Atlanta dying and I'm gonna make the trip up there."

"Mama, you haven't seen or talked to Uncle Bill in thirty years," Lucy said slowly. "Why now?"

"Don't sound so suspicious! He's dying and it's my sisterly duty to go see him."

"When Little Bill drowned, you wouldn't let us send flowers, a card or anything, even though Daddy wanted to go to the funeral."

"That was just William's son. This is William, himself. Besides that was ten or twelve years ago."

"Try twenty."

"Whatever. I'm leaving here tomorrow at eight o'clock in the morning, sharp."

Lucy jumped off the stool. "Tomorrow?"

"Child, I was up, down and cross-ways through this state in my gospel days," the old woman said. "I can get to Atlanta just fine."

"But you never drove it!" Lucy shut her eyes and rubbed her lined forehead as visions of her mother's car crunched like faded green tinfoil in a ditch toyed with her conscience. "Let Jackson drive you up Friday. We'll all three go. I'd like to see Uncle Bill again and Jackson's never seen him."

"No, no." Cora's voice rose to a wounded octave. "I wouldn't think of bothering the busy accountant who can't even call once a week."

"Mama..." The stench of milk and melted plastic cut Lucy's plea short, and she saw she had forgotten to fill the pot with water. "I've got to go. I'll call you back."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Bye honey"

"Mama!"

*Please understand. Dana's father offered me a job, a good one. I'll write, and you can call*

*collect any time you want I know Cora's gone all the time, but she's back in town at least once a month.*

Cora missed life on the road, even the crusty, smoky diners. But there was always a party at the motel and the cheap liquor was free for girls with legs and breasts and lips that were free. Cora settled in her seat and slipped off her heels. The shoes hurt and her feet swelled through the straps, but they showed off her leg like fine artwork, she thought.

Body parts were important, especially good ones. Rounded and firm, long and shapely, solid flesh that was warm and hard in all the right places—this is what the nights were made of. Once she had even married a bass picker for his hands, but that marriage and those hands never prevented her from having fun on the road with Samaritans who cultivated a fine appreciation of her good, free body parts.

Cora had a career teeming with those kinds of men, enough to fill a book or a night, but not a life. She was spiteful when she sang and she imagined those congregations naked and writhing, swaying to the rhythm they thought would save them. And some of the preachers appreciated her spite so much, they would sway with her in private to her own rhythm, the one without words.

Yes sir, those hands did feel nice, every damn last pair of them

*Cora, I can't come home for the funeral. I'm tied up here. Both Joanna and little Bill are sick. I'm having to lay people off, and I'm across the country. I can only fly out once a year. Last time we came you snubbed us. Stop cursing me and listen. If your tour didn't take you within twenty miles of Enigma, you wouldn't be caught dead there. I love Ma, but it's just too much right now. The will? I can't be there. Cut me out*

*if that's what you want. What do you want with the pocket watch? It's not worth a whole lot. Does it really matter that much to you?*

The day burned as morning aged into afternoon. Staring down the miles, Cora concentrated on her mission. The pocket watch had been her father's. She remembered the long silver chain jingling at his hip when he walked. Daddo would tease and pull the watch from his trousers and pretend to hypnotize William and Cora, but the trick always backfired. Instead of staring straight ahead in hypnosis, the two would erupt into maniacal giggles.

But the game was always fun for Daddo.

Right before he died, Horatio Sampler would always talk about William getting the watch and laugh a big laugh. He even said he was going to engrave William's name on the back. When her husband died, Audie Sampler pressed the watch upon her son for good luck.

And Cora remembered. She remembered her brother taking that shiny watch and simply walking away from the fields and the black dirt to the open arms of the world. She stood in the swept yard of the clapboard house and watched William, angular and muscled with youth, tuck a piece of Daddo into his pocket and shrink into the wavering distance.

Cora's life in Enigma ended after that. As soon as Bill returned from the war, she jerked free of her mother's grasp, joined the Epiphanies and left town the next weekend.

The blissful freedom lasted five years. William took a job all the way out in California working for his fiance's father and Ma panicked. She called her daughter to her, away from the road. Cora never forgave anyone for that—not Ma for being helpless, not Bill for leaving, not

Daddo for dying, not the Lord for smiling on her misery. She made sure her brother could never come home. During the flat Enigma nights trapped with her mother, Cora would preach the parable of abandonment with absent William as the prodigal. If she was shut in, he sure as hell would be shut out.

William the prodigal. William the lucky. The wrinkles in Cora's face came together and she resembled a prune. Her anger was reborn and it rose in a cloud that had over the years left a thick black residue on her soul. She would drag that last bit of the family from William if it killed him

Ma said he would get nothing and I'm going to make sure of that, she thought. She imagined his house dotted with richly decorated rooms populated with antiques and servants and in the middle of it all burned a pure silver treasure he never deserved.

Cora hoped he was awake when she got to the hospital. She wanted to make it clear exactly what she thought of him. She wanted him to ache with his loss as she marched away with his treasured watch. He would burn as she had, all the way to his grave. Let death put out his fire.

*I dreamed of him.*

*College. A doctor. A lawyer. A ballplayer. I bought him this mitt two days ago. I was going to teach him. I dreamed this was a dream. The Fourth. Parade downtown. Streamers. Hop up, Bill. grab that one. And that one for your mother. She's packing peanut butter and jelly for you and Sophia, bologna for me and Joanna.*

*Want to stand on the dock Billy? It's a lot of water. As far as we can see. it goes on forever. We have to go eat now. You can come back and stay as long as you want.*

*Joanna. where is your brother? He*

*doesn't know better. He's just a little boy. Diving. Feeling deeper. Deeper. No. College, doctor, lawyer, beggar, thief, Indian chief, anything, just alive.*

*He's not here That's not my little boy. That's not Billy. It's somebody's else's child. It can't be, it's not him.*

*No.*

The small, blue sign announcing the rest stop was a relief to Cora and her bladder. She wheeled the big car past the cement picnic tables to a shady spot under some pines. Stepping out, she straightened her dress, put on the heels, hooked her purse over one arm and headed for the rear of the welcome center

The bathroom set a new standard for disgusting. Doors hung from two of the stalls, while the third had been ripped from its hinges. An empty, forlorn towel dispenser lay on the floor and wires reached from the wall where a blower had been.

Cora ventured into a stall, ignoring the brown streaks smeared across the back of the toilet. She finished quickly and crossed to the sink to study herself in the dirty, cracked mirror.

Her painted-on eyebrows were still there in spite of the sweat. She touched at her lipstick, wiping the red away from the creases around her mouth and patted her wiry hair, pulling the faded brown curls over her gray roots. She threw back her shoulders and exhaled sharply, throwing out her chest. Not too shabby, she thought, for nearly sixty-five. She was oblivious to her surroundings. Cora's life had been filled with places like that bathroom, so many that she didn't notice them anymore. Once out the door, she hardly remembered being there and couldn't recall exactly where it was.

She bought a cold drink and walked out to her car, plopping

down sideways in the driver's seat. Dangling her square legs from the open door, she sipped, watching the various men. There were tall ones, fat ones and very well built ones, men with little hair, men with bought hair. Cora's eye roved over them all, judging and rating and finally lingering on one. Dressed in floppy dirty jeans and a plaid western shirt, he looked to be in his mid-thirties. A dingy backpack was thrown over one shoulder. He stood relaxed with a hand on his bony waist as he searched the parking lot.

Cora crossed her legs and pulled the hem of her dress over the top of her knee. She took a deep breath and called, "You need a ride?"

He turned to the direction of her voice but didn't seem to see her. She waved a hand. "Over here!"

His coarse face broke into a grin, and he walked to the car. "Well ma'am you must have been reading my mind. I do need a ride. Where you headed?"

"North to Atlanta." She fidgeted, adjusting her bra straps as he drew closer.

"I guess I can head north for a while."

"Where you going?"

"Alabama. Then maybe Louisiana. Nowheres special"

"I see." Cora's hand moved to the back of her neck and fiddled with a few stray curls. She closed her door and with her best demure smile said, "Well, get in." He walked around to the passenger side and slid into the car. As he turned to throw his pack into the backseat, Cora slid closer, resting her arm on the back of the seat. "What's your name?"

"Morgan."

"I'm Cora."

"You a married lady?"

"Oh no. Been single all my life. I used to be a singer," she said with a flirtatious smirk. "I never could bear to give all of myself to just one man."

"I guess you'd be too much for one

guy to handle." He set his back to the door and looked at his boots.

Cora moved closer. "I sang all over the South. Georgia, Alabama, Florida, all them states. I had a following in Atlanta. I still get letters." She put her hand on his knee.

Morgan sat up stiffly and crossed his arms, keeping his back to the door. "Reckon, we better get started. Got to be in Alabama by eight."

"I thought you said you had nowhere special to be?" She leaned closer, eyes half-closed. "The two of us could have a lot of fun in Atlanta."

Morgan avoided Cora's eyes, choosing instead to examine the pine bark thumping down at random on the car's hood. "I know you used to be a singer and all, and you're a real nice lady, real attractive."

Words like that were scarce now, even though they had been common when the buds were green on Cora's tree. She maintained her best sultry pose. She slipped her hand into the open neck of his shirt and let her fingers dally with the dark scrub on his chest.

"It's just that you remind me of my mother, ma'am."

*Mother?* Cora tore her hand from his shirt. Back on the circuit she was a goddess sought by congregations the size of small states. World-healing preachers wrote her fan letters begging for her voice and, at times, something far more warm, tangible and moist. She was nobody's mother. Not then, not now.

"I'll have you know I've loved and been loved from here to the Mississippi! I was banging with the best of them before you were even born!"

"That's just it."

Cora withdrew behind the wheel and stared out her window at the crowd milling about the parking lot.

"Guess the ride's off, huh?"

"I guess it is."

Looking relieved, Morgan grabbed his backpack and eased from the car

A few minutes later, Cora saw him climb into a truck driver's cab. She watched the truck pull out, watched it until it reached the end of the exit ramp and crawl to the road, watched until it disappeared into the shivering heat.

The flat, cotton-dry acres and clapboard villages gradually disappeared from the roadside, giving way to fast-food shacks, four-lanes and towns that looked like people actually lived in them and enjoyed it. The towns became cities. The cities became Atlanta, looming gray under its humid monoxide fog.

Finding the hospital wasn't difficult, and Cora parked the big Buick in a spot marked for compact cars only. Slamming the door with a flourish, she nodded to a policeman as she strode into the hospital. At the desk she cleared her throat with an insolent, gravelly hack causing a jaded receptionist to whirl in her chair.

"William K. Sampler's room, please."

The woman obediently tapped the name into a computer. Eyes frozen to the screen, she said, "He's in the ICU. Are you related?"

"Yes I am. I'm his sister. Cora Byram."

The nurse tapped some more. "All I have here are his two daughters, Mrs. Joanna Sampler-Collins and Ms. Sophia Sampler. Can I see some ID?"

Cora indignantly puffed up but held her fury upon realizing that pitching a fit at this point could slow her march, if not completely stop it. She tossed her driver's license to the desk. Glancing at it, the woman picked up the phone. Cora let her eyes pick over the hunched figures filling the hard orange chairs. She had not noticed them before.

"Sorry for the inconvenience." The woman handed over Cora's license. "Third floor. The nurse at the desk can direct you from there."

"Thank you," Cora said crisply and moved to the elevators. She began to savor the moment early, anticipating the look on William's face when she demanded her justice. In a cobwebbed back corner of her heart she hoped he would argue. God, how she wanted to fight the sassy little bastard.

The doors opened and she marched to the desk. "William K. Sampler's room please."

The nurse at the desk looked dubious. "And you are...."

"Cora Sampler Byram, his sister. I've come all the way up from Enigma to see him."

She tapped the chart with her pen. "Follow me."

Cora held herself very straight, goosebumps popping out on her arms. They pushed past two swinging doors into a large room sectioned by glass walls into smaller rooms. Just inside the doors at the head of the rooms, there was a circular desk with miniature TV screens that flickered with the images of very still lumps curled or stretched on beds. Some were covered with blanket, most protruded tubes and wires and all were very still. The nurse leaned on the counter and spoke to another nurse who was flipping through a magazine.

"This lady would like to see William Sampler."

She pointed down the corridor. "Number five."

The glint of antiseptic glass and steel and the smell of sickness deflated Cora. She took tentative steps down the corridor, squinting at numbers above the entries. She stopped at five and stood just inside the door.

In the nearly empty square room a gray woman sat in a chair under a soft, cold blue light that seemed to come from the walls. The woman's pretty, pointed features were shadowed by the pall that issued from the figure under the blankets. Pain hung in the dry, cool air and death

sat on the floor in the corner, a ruddy-faced child patiently waiting its turn. Cora wanted to suck in a deep breath, but couldn't, afraid she would take sickness into her lungs and the child's round eyes would fall on her instead of her brother.

The gray woman looked up and stood, placing a soft arm around Cora's shoulder. "You must be Aunt Cora. The nurse told me you were on your way up. I'm Joanna."

Cora said nothing and did not meet the questioning eyes. She stared at the foot of the bed, keeping the figure in it just at the threshold of vision. "I can't visit long," she muttered. She was unable to accept the figure into her sight, but neither could she shun it. It remained hovering in the periphery.

"You came such a long way. We appreciate the gesture." Joanna looked at her father and brightened a little. "You picked a good day, though. He's been stirring some this morning. We think he's having dreams about days gone by, memories. When he talks it's like he's living the memory right there in his head, like he was a young man again."

Cora's grip tightened on her purse handles. "I just need to ask him something, then I'll be on my way."

Joanna's smile faded. "I see." She moved to her father's side and touched his sunken, papery cheek. "I don't know if he can hear you, but you're welcome to try." Cora shuffled to the other side of the bed.

William was curled like a gray shrimp under the coverlet. His chest rose as if breath forced itself upon his tired lungs, lungs that inhaled and let go gratefully. His eyes, like marbles in their sockets, were covered with thin skin that reminded Cora of parchment. Delicate blue veins traced his face, continuing up and across his scalp where a few gray hairs still clung. The remainder of his body was a nearly indistinguishable cluster of bones and skin piled on the

hard white hospital bed.

Cora became conscious of her own withering body. In this dying image she saw herself and banished it to the dark places of her heart.

"William Sampler, I need to ask you something."

His lidded eyes darted toward her voice.

"Where is Daddo's pocket watch? I need to know. Ma and Daddo would want it to stay in the family, at least the part that didn't abandon us."

Joanna lifted her head to fix Cora with a hard stare. The shadow over her face deepened. "Don't harass my Daddy."

Cora snapped her eyes up to the woman.

"I've been hearing about this all my life, and I'm sick of it. If you want the damn watch, take it, but don't harass my father on his deathbed."

Cora tensed. She forgot the hospital, the room and death waiting in the corner, for William, for her. "Well, miss, if you don't give a damn about priceless family heirlooms, then it looks like protecting my family's treasures is up to me and me alone. William never did have any concern for family, and he raised his girls to be the same."

Joanna's whisper hissed like leaking air. "I was as nice as I could be to you when you walked in. I wanted to believe that you actually cared about Daddy and had forgotten this one-woman feud of yours. I've seen you once in my life, and I barely remember it, but I tried to love you because you were kin. Now you're just a stranger off the street. Just here to scrape away what's left of Daddy, to get what you can, while you can for whatever reason you got up in that twisted rat's nest. You never showed us the first iota of love or consideration, not when my brother died and not even now. Take the damn watch. It's at home. Probably in his dresser. Get the address from the nurse."

Joanna turned back to her father, shutting out her aunt forever, wiping the sight of her from past and present. In the room's blue light, the old woman was now only another floating dust mote. Cora turned on her square heel and left.

She parked on the street and eyed the house, checking the scrap of paper with the address. "West Hull," she muttered and looked at the mailbox. She looked at the house again.

It was not what she had expected, her brother's house. It was two modest stories of sedate, brown brick with fading pink shutters and a pink door. The grass and shrubbery had grown into a frantic, tangled jungle and the geraniums on the front porch were brown-edged and brittle. Dun curtains hung in all the windows shutting them off like a dead man's eyelids. A rusted tricycle was parked by the door.

Cora opened the screen door and knocked. After waiting a few seconds, she tried the doorbell. After the clicking of multiple locks, the door was opened by a bustling wren of a woman.

"Can I help you?"

"My name is Cora Sampler Byram, and I'm here to claim some of my property."

A confused look wrinkled the woman's face. "Oh yes, someone from the hospital called, said you'd probably come by. Come on in."

"I don't believe we've met."

The woman fluttered as if being snapped at by a hungry cat, nervously patting down her dress and hair. "I'm Mrs. Andersen, the neighbor. I look after the house when Joanna or Sophia can't be here."

Cora walked wordlessly into the house, sniffing as if she was trying to smell what kind of living had been going on inside.

Mrs. Andersen shut the door. "Did you say your last name was Sampler?"

Cora crossed the room, speaking to the air as she looked around. "Yes. Cora Sampler Byram. I married some years ago. I'm William's sister. I'm here to get some of my property." At the stairs she climbed to the third step and stretched trying to peer above the landing.

"I see. The lady from the hospital said something about a watch. I don't know why Joanna didn't call herself... I'm not quite sure what she meant."

"That's cause she's a no-account, scatterbrained girl," Cora muttered. "Ma'am?"

Cora moved back down to the foot of the stairs. "It's a watch I'm after," Cora said. "Our daddy left it to us and I'm to take it back with me."

"Well, you can look around. I'm not sure if I've ever seen it, so I wouldn't know where to look."

"They told me to look on his dresser."

"Come on back here, then." The little woman hustled down the hall. "We had to move Mr. Sampler to the first floor, due to his illness. It was just too difficult for the nurses to keep climbing those stairs." The busy chatter fell to the floor and died and Mrs. Andersen wasted no more of it on her dour visitor. She stopped and pointed. "In here."

"Thank you kindly." Cora's eyes fell first upon an odd pile of tubes and metal piled in the corner. "What's that?"

"Mr. Sampler's oxygen, I think. Life support."

In the back of her mind. Cora heard a child's high-pitched titter and imagined it sitting cross-legged in the corner, waiting for her to begin her treasure hunt. Cora looked no more at the pile and turned her attention to a cherry wood dresser at the end of the bed. "I guess this is where I'm supposed to look."

"That's the only other piece of furniture in this room besides the bed. Do you need any help?"

"Nope. I'll know it when I see it."

"I'll be in the den if you need me."

Mrs. Andersen resigned from her visitor with a sigh and Cora was alone.

The top of the dresser held two photographs. One was black and white showing a strong, handsome William, a graceful Dana, two young girls and a toddler that Cora guessed was Billy. She had never seen the boy. The other was in color and full of cheerful grandchildren. Other than these, the dresser was bare.

She opened the top drawer. Underwear.

The next was filled with handkerchiefs, the third with shirts. Knees complaining, she knelt using the bed for support and tried the last. Nothing.

She slammed the drawer with a curse and hastily rose, slapping the dust from her dress.

"Damn! Damn and hell! Lying, no-account girl think she can hide my rightful property from me!" Cora put her hands on her hips and ground her teeth. She turned to the closet and flung it open. The air was heavy with the odor of stale cedar and forgotten clothes. Ties and belts on hooks attached to the door banged together and crowded hangers of gray and brown suits and white shirts were packed on a rod above rows of dusty shoes. Cora saw a dark stooped figure to her right and jumped, backing into the ties and belts.

With a hand over her heart, she saw it was her own reflection in an old mirror attached to the other door. It was in two broken pieces that someone had fitted together and hung. The heavy, chipped crack cut her image in half across the chest.

"Lord have mercy, can't even get a decent mirror," she murmured. Cora had frightened herself too much to be angry so she turned back to the clothes.

Her eyes drifted up to examine the shelf, hoping to find a light. There

was no light and the shelf was dusty bare. She stood on her toes and examined the gloom where the shelf extended into the wall past the doors. At the very end was a forgotten cardboard box. Cora drug a chair over and wrestled the box down. She plumped down on the chair with the box between her feet, ripped off the top and began to riffle through it tossing out items as she came to them.

The contents were assorted junk—a transistor radio, some orphan socks, a yellowed newspaper dated 1974, an unidentifiable piece of plastic. Digging under a pile of ancient ties, she pulled out a flimsy, rusted jewelry box and opened it. Scraps of a silky, faded purple material, the type intended to make the contents look expensive, still hung inside the cover.

She had found the watch.

The chain had deteriorated with only a few links rattling around the box's bottom and the casing was rusted through. Cora fingered one of the links; it crumbled. There was no dark corrosion, just rust. The watch was not made of silver, but of some weak, faithless alloy that surrendered easily to time. The glass had been smashed long ago. She pressed her finger to its yellowed face and it ripped—it was paper, rotting paper with painted numbers. Tearing it away, Cora found no works in the back; there was no sign that there had ever been any.

Daddo's pocket watch was a dime store trinket. In its corner, the child giggled and clapped its hands.

Mother had not known; the watch was her husband's, so she had no reason to examine it closely. But Daddo had a sense of humor and an eye for toys. Cora realized that he never could have afforded a silver watch. Leaving it to his son was a joke and a lesson: *Don't put your faith in things. boy, they tend to rot.*

But the joke had soured and the lesson went unheeded. A harsh light was thrown into the dark places of Cora's soul, and what she found there frightened her.

She had been a fool to fear the merry apparition in the corner, for that was William's death. For her, death was not a child. She would not be led across the bridge, her fingers gripped by a fat little palm. Death surrounded her and she had never

paid it any mind. It swayed before her in vast congregations, it heaved and grunted above her in the shape of a man. She had been giving herself to it for years, even as she ran from it. Now it lay disintegrating in her hand.

Cora crushed the watch and let the pieces crumble to the floor.

. . .

*Thank you. Cora, I can go now. It is finished.*

---

## Mahdy Y. Khaliyat AURAL SEX

Like the sound  
Of a xylophone,  
A cavatina of raindrops  
Thrums the ear,  
Rippling the spine  
Where the primal call  
Swells and bathes  
To the tune  
Of the rain's last drop.

## Mahdy Y. Khaliyat A WISH

The bone-dry lake  
Wishes  
The rain would one day  
Return  
So that he may see what his  
Absence  
Has done.

---

**SHORT STORY**

---

# WINKEN, BLINKEN AND NOD

Jeff Spitter

---

**B**ad thoughts go through my head a lot. Sometimes terrible nightmares come that leave me shaking in the dark. I can't always tell what was real and what was dream. I'll maybe see something, like hate in a man's eyes or a bloody knife, and my mind'll chew on it and reshape it and one day it'll bust into my head like a monster. Alls I can do then is find myself a bottle and calm my nerves. But sometimes I drink too much and make things worse.

I'm the janitor at the wax museum. It's a lousy job but, like they say, it's a marriage of convenience. I work here because no one else'll hire me, and the curator keeps me on because no one else in his right mind'd work in this creepy place. I've been fixin' to quit for years, and after last night I just might do it. One thing's sure. I ain't going back there any time soon.

The museum has ten display rooms, plus the big lobby, the curator's office, the johns, and the gift shop out front. Every day I come on at six p.m., when the staff people are

all going home. The place gets lonely then and noises and echoes start up. The woodwork crackles and mice scamper around. By the time I finish the johns it's almost dark. The museum has what the curator calls "oblique lighting" and, let me tell you, it's spooky. The shadows seem to come alive.

I go on to sweep the lobby, dust shelves in the gift shop, and run the vacuum in the curator's office. Then I always stop at the janitor's closet, where I keep a bottle hid. I take a couple of long snorts because the display room floors are next and that's when my nerves start acting up.

Each display room has a different theme, like the presidents or the Civil War or the famous murderers. Some of the wolks, which is what I call the wax folks, are fine and handsome, but others give me a chill. In the Dawn of Man room the stumpy cavemen stare at me with cruel, animal eyes. Next door, the Roman emperor's watching gladiators fight with maces, and next to that is the devil judge in his red robe from the Spanish Inquisition. In the Civil War room a soldier is bleeding and moaning because his leg's blowed off. Then comes a samurai screaming and waving his sword, and savages dancing around shrunken heads, and that wild-eyed female axe murderer.

They're not real, I keep telling myself. But they *were* real. And I know their spirits live in the museum. They follow me all the way through the place and fill my head with awful pictures.

The worst room of all is the French Revolution room. It's got this guillotine up on a platform. The curator says it's the real McCoy, sent over from France in the last century. The blade is pulled up, ready to fall, and some poor sucker is on his knees with his head through the hole. An executioner in a black mask is all set to let go the rope. In my mind I can see the head popping off and rolling down the wooden chute into the bucket on the floor. There's two wax heads in the bucket with their eyes open. I looked in once and saw them, and I had nightmares for a month.

Last night something happened that must've been a dream, but I can't shake it. Seems I drank too much in the janitor's closet and got real sleepy. I shut the door, sat down on the soft mop, and dozed off. Way later, there was a loud crash that woke me up. Jeez, I wondered, did I dream that or what? My head was killing me, and bloody thoughts were making me shiver. Finally I opened the door, looked at the clock, and saw it was after midnight. What the hell, I figured, forget the rest and go home.

Then I heard voices. At night you can hear lots of sounds but not voices. Nobody but me is supposed to be in the museum after dark. I was crappin' my pants thinking about them wolk coming to life.

I peeked around the corner and heard the voices coming from the French Revolution room across the lobby. Just then someone looked out the doorway. He was a tall young man and he was wearing a white lab coat. I felt relieved to see a human being and not a wolk staggering to-

ward me, but then I wondered what this dude was up to. Seemed like he was checking to see if anyone was around.

I tiptoed across the lobby and peeked into the French Revolution room. Two men were standing at the rail in front of the guillotine, and a third man, the tall one who looked out the door, was on the platform pulling up the blade. Now I knew what woke me up.

One of the men at the rail was an older, gray-haired fella with glasses. He was also wearing a lab coat, and he had a notebook in his hand. Next to him was another young man. This one was wearing a blue and white sweatshirt, which are the colors of the college up the street. It hit me that the old fella was maybe a professor and the young ones were his students. On the floor was an empty gunnysack, a stainless steel basin with white towels in it, a bucket of water, a detergent bottle, and two big sponges. In a corner of the room the executioner was propped against the wall and his victim was laying underneath him.

The tall man on the platform gave the rope a tug, and the blade moved up and down a little. "It's heavier than it looks," he said. "Damn fine piece of work."

Then the professor and the young man in the sweatshirt started talking. When the young man turned his head, I saw his face was pale as death.

"You can change your mind, Ted," the professor told him.

"It's what I want," this Ted fella answered. His voice was so weak, I could hardly hear.

The tall man on the platform wound the rope around one leg of the guillotine. Then he jumped down, fetched a chair, and took it up on the platform with him. He stood on it and ran his finger along the blade. "Hoo-wee! She's still plenty sharp," he said.

"Are you sure it's the best way?" the professor asked Ted.

"The chemotherapy isn't working," he answered. "I'm in constant pain. This way, at least, I'll be making a contribution."

"A major contribution," said the professor.

The tall man jumped down again, lifted the stainless steel basin and water bucket onto the platform, and tossed up the detergent, sponges and gunnysack. He leaped back up and poured some of the detergent into the water. Then he looked impatiently at his watch.

"All right," the professor said in a gruff voice. "There's no reason why we shouldn't go through with it. Let's review the objective, now. We need to find out whether you know it's off, even for an instant. You should concentrate heavily on the objective right up to the final moment. Then, if you do know it's off, blink once. You probably won't have enough strength to do more than that."

"I say he should *wink*," said the tall man. "That way, we'll be sure."

The professor thought it over. "No.

That may be impossible. One blink is best."

"I understand," Ted rasped.

The professor helped him under the rail, and then both men in white coats helped him onto the platform. The professor pulled off the wooden chute and set it aside. He climbed onto the platform, moved the chair in front of the guillotine, and sat down with the basin in his lap. Meanwhile, the tall man unwound the rope and gave it a couple of tugs.

"Right through here," he said as he raised the wooden bar with his free hand. Ted got down on his knees.

"Are you concentrating?" asked the professor.

"Yes," came a whisper.

"Remember, now, a single blink."

My stomach started to heave, and I ran like hell across the lobby and out the door. I can't remember if I heard the crash or just imagined it. You *couldn't* have heard it, I keep telling myself. You was asleep and drunk and it was all a dream. Nothing in the place is real.

## Holly Day PARENTS

mom and dad lying  
together in the next room  
in the dark pounding it out  
night after night  
"ouch! you're hurting me!"  
squeals mommy as her head bangs  
against the thin walls  
separating our rooms  
again and again and I  
used to listen quietly  
scared with my eyes closed trying  
to imagine what kind of  
horrible things my parents  
were doing and now that we  
have a bigger house with thick  
sturdy walls I wonder if  
they still go at it or if  
they've stopped  
out of boredom lacking  
an audience

## Holly Day BURNING TIME

Familiar pageantry, different setting: streetlights and gunfire  
instead of smokeclouds and bayonettes.

A billion stories burn in my head, all with the same ending, brother:  
a dead friend  
in a living man's lap.

There is honor in here, somewhere,  
being here to catch your very last words, though not understanding  
watching for that crucial moment poets scream about:  
when your eyes dramatically fade and gloss over, but that's a lie.  
They don't change  
soon enough.

There's a part of my head going mad at this moment  
catching the sight of warriors in ancient steel glittering  
behind the blackened trash cans in the alley  
feeling like Little John, crying, Robin Hood's blood  
all over my hands.

**Donna Rhodes**  
**MOTHS KNOW**

charcoal spotted wings  
at a half-open window  
of aging glass and wood,  
tries to fling himself  
into autumn blue,  
beyond scarlet  
twining leaves,  
and maples  
dappled green,  
climbs and flitters,  
climbs again,  
to sun, to blue, to soaring as moths soar,  
climbing because up means free,  
falling sometimes never  
far enough to know  
blue freedom through  
the open frame below.

**Nancy Ellis Taylor**  
**NUNCA NADA Y NADIE**

Definition  
of night alone  
yermo desolado  
even the wind  
in the arroyo  
has died  
moon and stars  
have no voices  
criatura de noche  
I wait watching  
for a wide-eyed child  
of darkness  
to take me in  
losas per agua  
Joshua trees  
tumbleweeds  
tombstones marking  
the death of water  
sussuro de esperanza  
the wind returns  
and rattles the sand  
like a field  
of tiny bones  
I remember  
my name  
and walk  
toward sunrise

**Errol Miller**  
**STORM CLOUDS**

"The strangest things happen..."  
—Elizabeth Bishop

There is more life here  
than I can endure, acting like a racer  
huffing towards the finish line, it  
is a triangle of sorts: you and me, brother  
and a dark-veiled beauty from Chicago, thinly-masked  
forget that superior notion when your father dies  
only his soggy manuscripts remaining, and falling rain.

**Edward Johnson**  
**STILLBORN TWIN**

People say something is missing  
as if they too had been entombed,  
interwoven but incomplete,  
then delicately halved,  
in a tribute to technomedicine.  
I'm sure they all applauded,  
hand pumping and back slapping  
that December day, 1967  
when my lone pulse rekindled.  
But there's no one here this morning  
as I sit at the open window  
and ignore the ringing phone  
knowing it will be for you.

**Errol Miller**  
**DISPARATE**

"And here, or there..."

—Elizabeth Bishop

Threshold children,  
they walk Tara's red clay  
so close to the county line, like  
my friend from last summer  
who went first, a dilapidated wormwood  
ark of many colors masquerading  
as the Mother-Ship, I cry  
for all of us  
stranded in earth's halfway house, I cry  
gigantic speckled tears that do not last, in  
the patent-leather shoes of patient fishermen, in  
the hearts and minds of Atlantis, something  
is moving, fermenting, ruling over us, something  
very small yet growing in intensity, like  
the sun coming up from a far country, like  
the shallow tadpole pools of Dixie, there  
is a bigger house gobbling up the little people  
not exactly "right," of course, just  
the endless blue pattern of the master-plan  
the tune of a wise old Cajun fiddler  
pampering his dying songbird.

**Edward Johnson**  
**PRIMATES**

My dad's thick fingers gripped my neck,  
Guiding me through the city zoo  
As he might a wobbly shopping cart,  
Stopping only to read aloud  
Each explanatory cage panel  
As if those fancy words were his.

In the Ape House, two chimpanzees  
Performed for us, a mating dance,  
That quickly drew a crowd of voyeurs  
Gawking as the male stalked, nearly erect,  
After the female who brandished  
A green banana: playing hard to get.

Until in the end when she succumbed,  
Mugging playfully to her onlookers,  
Her body sprawled on the concrete floor—  
Like that distant Sunday afternoon  
Peeking through the bedroom door  
To see them in my mother's single bed,

Dad's moans marked the frantic rhythm,  
His hairy backside bobbing thickly  
Between mother's round white knees—  
And before the male chimp was finished  
She peeled and ate her ripe fruit  
Much to the blushing crowd's delight.

**Sara Huffman**

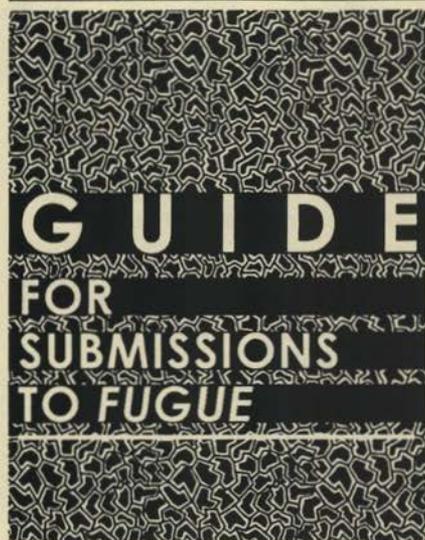
**WHY I DON'T LOVE YOU ANYMORE**

You are the objects  
that litter the shelves of my apartment.  
A brass plate from Tunisia engraved with camels  
wandering misshapen across the mail marks  
of the design. A set of three saki cups,  
cracked glaze webbing the symbol  
for good fortune. A wrought doorknob  
from the Victorian house you live in,  
a house of carved mantles and railings,  
of picture windows. A tiger conch  
striped black and the color of fire.  
An antique ringbox painted  
with fading roses, chipped and worn  
like a treasured thing. A chain  
of paper cranes, twisting,  
a myriad of colors fighting each other.  
A soapstone jewel box shaped like a ginger jar.  
If you hold it to the light  
you can see through it.

**Sara Huffman**  
**HOW TO SAY GOODBYE**

Where you are  
all things must sing.  
You are the wild music  
of young rivers. Around you  
is a nest of sonnets and sestinas,  
written in bluebird feathers  
and the voices of squirrels.  
Around you is a heather of orchestras,  
a tangle of melody. You must unwind  
the threads woven into the whisper  
of aspen. You must paint  
the subtle blush of morning into words  
as clear and sweet as water.  
You must breathe the wind into music  
that it might make the pine trees murmur.

I am the soft drumming of rain  
on concrete. I am the hollow, hungry sound  
of pouring coffee, the sharp glance  
of sunlight through a window.  
I am the whiskers of a dozing cat,  
curved stiff against soft fur. My music  
at three o'clock a.m., the derelict  
pounding of a manual typewriter,  
the hum of a refrigerator  
in a dark apartment,  
the careful silence  
of libraries.



## DEPARTMENT

# GUIDELINES

In the upper left-hand corner of the first page put your name, address, phone number, and SSN. In the upper right of the first page include approximate word count for prose or line count for poetry. Include a stamped, self-addressed #10 (long) envelope with your submission for a response. Send a copy of your ms., not the original.

Submissions should be addressed to:

FUGUE c/o  
English Dept.  
Brink Hall, Rm. 200  
University of Idaho  
Moscow, ID 838434-1102  
USA

Response time is 12 weeks. No simultaneous, reprint, or disk submissions. Pay is one contributor copy plus a variable gratuity.

• • •  
**Editorial Process:** Each submission is read by several staff members who critique it, then pass it on to the executive editor and staff advisor for final decisions.

*Fugue* is looking for a wide range of genres—the wider the better: Mainstream, Experimental, Fantasy, Mystery, Metafiction, Sudden Fiction, SF, Cultural, etc. *Fugue* is a showcase for all types of entertaining literature.

Based upon the overall critique of

### Details about the magazine:

*Fugue* is a biannual digest of multi-genre fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Issues are published at the end of the Fall and Spring semesters at the University of Idaho. Each issue contains short stories, poetry, creative nonfiction, and commentary chosen to satisfy a wide variety of tastes in literary entertainment.

The magazine is staffed by English majors presently attending the University of Idaho and is funded entirely by the UI English Dept. and support from the readership. A single issue of *Fugue* is only \$3.00 retail, US funds.

• • •  
**Submission Format:** Use proper manuscript format: typed with one-inch margins, double spaced, left-hand justified only, standard manuscript fonts (do not desktop publish your manuscript). Put last name, title word, and page number in the upper right-hand corner.

the staff, the executive editor and staff advisor will make the final decision as to what will be accepted for publication in an upcoming issue. Accepted material is published within nine months. In some cases, we may contact a contributor for a rewrite or clarification of text. Proof sheets will be provided when production scheduling allows. No major changes will be made to any text without the consultation and agreement of the author.

. . .

**☞ Stories:** These must be complete and concluded, with good characterization and plotting. Experimental formats are acceptable, but the story must be comprehensible and enjoyable to a general readership. Average word count is 3000 words, but we consider any length up to 6000. Book excerpts, chapters, and serializations will not be considered. Pay varies, according to length, between \$5 for shorter pieces to \$20 for ms. up to 6000 words.

. . .

**☞ Creative Nonfiction:** Imaginative renderings of a life experience. Pay rates are the same as for fiction.

. . .

**☞ Poems:** The modern standard is free verse, but we consider a wide range of other forms as well. All themes, from serious to whimsical, are considered without restrictions. Pay averages depending on line count from a minimum of \$3 to a maximum of \$10.

. . .

**☞ Nonfiction:** We are looking for well-constructed commentary, articles, essays, reviews, etc., written in a comprehensible style aimed at the public. Maximum of 2000 words. Pay depends on length of editorial word count with a minimum of \$5.

. . .

**☞ Fugue Staff Submissions:** As the magazine is a product of the English Department's writing pro-

gram, and is staffed primarily by individuals involved in that program, the staff is allowed to submit work for publication in the magazine. Such submissions will be read "blind" by three other staff members, then further scrutinized by the executive editor and staff advisor. The executive editor, managing editor, and staff advisor do not generally submit material for publication in *Fugue*. No special consideration will be given to any submission by a staff member of *Fugue*.

. . .

If you have further questions, send a query to the Executive Editor, FUGUE. Include a #10 SASE for a response. All queries will be answered as quickly as possible.



Jack Myers  
Sara Huffman  
Edward Johnson  
Errol Miller  
Nancy Ellis Taylor  
Donna Rhodes  
Noah Berlatsky  
Holly Day  
Jeff Spitter  
Mahdy Y. Khaiyat  
Jim Mikoley  
Leslie What  
Edward Flagg  
Dennis Held  
V.Q. Wallick  
Amy Nelson

**FUGUE**

The University of Idaho Literary Digest

Published by the English Department of the University of Idaho  
Brink Hall, Room 200  
Moscow, Idaho 83844-1102, USA