

# fugue

No. 16

Fall/Winter 1997



with

Stephen Dunn & Ed McClanahan



# fugue

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Moscow, Idaho 83844-1102

**Fall/Winter 1997-98**

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## EDITOR'S NOTES


This is my last issue as Managing Editor. After two years and six issues (including a year long, double issue), I'm hanging up my hat, so to speak, and passing the mantle. I like to think that I've helped *Fugue* become something better than it was before I came to it, and I think I have (but not without a lot of help, especially from the ever present associate editors and the editorial boards of the last three issues). I can say that I am proud of what *Fugue* has become, the least of which is the perfect binding, the color cover, and overall better production values. But change isn't always positive: while things have become more organized and hierarchical, they're also a little slower because of it (we're still working on that).

But our shortcomings are just that, short, and we've become long in areas that matter, including, I believe, the quality of the prose and poetry we've been publishing (though some may disagree *pro nunc*). It is always a struggle, at least for us, to find good, if not great, *words* to place in each issue, but to also have a plan in mind, a *goal*. To simply find those gems and publish the issue on time has always been *the plan*, but I've tried to push the boundary further at least in one way by finding and publishing (some might say favoring) prose and poetry which might be termed experimental or alternative. That was part of my "vision" in regards to *Fugue*, and I hope that plan continues to be carried out, but with a new editor comes a new vision and I welcome what may be ahead. I wish the new editor and the editorial board luck.

Of course, none of the above would ever have been possible if not for the efforts of some people whom I owe an enormous debt. First is John Hendee, my predecessor and sometimes mentor in layout and production. Then there's Lance Olsen, faculty advisor

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when I came on board, who constantly pushed, pushed, and pushed me to achieve more and better. Also, Ron McFarland, the current (and original) faculty advisor, who has taught me a lot in the last year about what editing a magazine is about, as well as knowing when to let me do my job. As always, the associate editors, without whom I could never get through the pile of submissions (special thanks to Shawn, Brandon, and Matt—I always felt you shared my vision). And, finally, my wife, who supports everything I do and knows when to soothe my worried mind.

Editing *Fugue* has been an interesting and rewarding ride; I'm glad I was given the ticket. 



## THREE PAIRS

### Fog

Above the lake, a whiteness. The water itself white, not a hint of gray or blue. The mountains invisible in the distance. Everything that had been clearly observed—suddenly a matter of trust. The luminosity of absence. Almost a sullen glow. We woke to it; we had not dreamed it in. It pressed against the windows, so we opened them. In its honor, we lay on the white sheets and made love. A part of it then, in its silky grasp, we touched in order not to disappear. We used each other as evidence of where we were. Soon the sun began its slow burn. The fog pinked. A little of what others call life—the conspicuous, the rosy—made its presence felt.

### Luminescence

Not passion's sweaty radiance, or tantrum's righteous sheen. As far from incandescence as Garbo from Loren. Rather, a far-away kind of shining, a low temperature effect. The cold light of intelligence, sometimes. Stars and moon, of course, which inspire but don't burn. A meadow of fireflies, all those little seekers trying to find the opposite sex in the dark. The female flashes, the male flashes back. Exactly two seconds, and she'll respond again. An evening of connections. A dazzling luminescent calm. At another time, I'd favor fire's gorgeous predatory flame, shape-shifting as it moves, creating its own terms. ∞

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## Clothing: Men

In business, years ago, I dressed to get ahead, my gray suit saying, "I'm one of you, and kill sometimes when I don't need to eat, I understand the rules." The fop in graphics envied women their scarfs and hues. I thought he'd mistaken his century, or was this one's deliberate fool. I know now, like most of us, he dressed to be properly found. Now the white teenager in the neighborhood turns his cap backwards, just catching on, and already his black counterpart's pants are lower than anyone's ever seen. It's palpable, his alienation; no doubt he'll keep inventing the uniform. What lengths of embellishment we'll go to say who we are! So it is, with someone new, when for love or sex we strip down to our skins, that we're suddenly almost no one at all. Some of us are dangerous then, without our leather and chains. Unmade men, we must hope—for the woman's sake—that our mothers were mostly kind to us and held us and dressed us warmly for the snow.

## Clothing: Women

An entire day at stake: the high school girl's choice of soft sweater or propriety's white blouse. Or the executive's perfectly undisturbing boardroom suit in her closet next to some good-trouble she'll wear when she wants. It's a sexual decision not to be sexual, for her at least. Unlike a man, so many latitudes of display. Women understand early what all artists know: artifice can lead to the genuine. Even the woman known for her apron sometimes slips out out of it into another world, a world made possible because she put on its clothes. Mix 'n Match. A spiked belt and sensible shoes. Jeans and décolletage. Options, or why not, that ordinary cotton print mixed with nothing but herself. I've marvelled at them all. The woman who every day wears only her politics. The gum chewer and that tank-top stuck to her like an attitude. I watch them walking on the Boulevard, their guises and disguises signalling: come close, stay away, or I'm not thinking of you at all. ♪

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## Outlaw

A word with romance behind it; if he thinks of himself so named he can almost believe he's not a thug. He rides into town unnoticed, in a car these days. The law is the instrument of restriction he's habituated himself to disturb. As he sees it, the law would have a bull stop at red. It would reward the safe, those who wait—even when nothing's coming—for the light to change. The outlaw likes to elevate himself like this. He imagines songs sung about him, years after his death. Who alive, he thinks, is more alert than an outlaw? Who better knows where he is and what it takes to live another day? His definition of crime: a poor person's way of entering into his own rights. But he's only seen half the movie, remembered only the get-aways and the easy girls. He's the mistake he will make, which is why he can't see it. We would cry out and warn him, but our roles in the ancient dramas are fixed too.

## Citizen

Robespierre was called one. Lenin preferred "comrade." Kane of course was a citizen like Trump, only ironically one of us. People who follow an abstraction all the way to its deadly end or, like Trump, discover a curious sense of civics by buying and erecting, need different designations. While they reinvent the world, they'd like us to be obedient, responsible, maybe just quarrelsome enough to ask for clarification. Many nights you and I watch TV, and I keep my hand between your legs just for solace. I am the citizen of your warm and wet places, and you—oh I would not speak for you. "It's a far far better thing that I do," said one famous fictive citizen then did what he had to. And those of us who think ourselves citizens of nowhere or—almost the same—citizens of the world, what do we do when our country calls? "I ain't got nothing against them Congs," Ali said, always defining himself, and some citizens loved him and others were happy he wasn't allowed to punch anyone for years. ♪

## CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER

Editor's Note: The selections to which Mr. McClanahan refers follow this essay.

A few years ago at a local college, I did a reading in which I presented the first half or so of "Juanita and The Frog Prince," which was then a story-in-progress. During the Q&A session that followed, I remarked that I write what I like to call "redemptive fiction," wherein I lead my characters to the brink of beyond-the-pale unacceptability, trusting that I will find something in them—or better yet, that they will find something in themselves—that draws them back from the abyss.

"Good grief!" one of my questioners exploded. "How the hell are you going to redeem this two-nosed guy! He's a *monster!*"

I could only admit that I had no idea. "Freaks," I reminded him, citing Harry Crews, "are people with special considerations under God.' So I'm putting my faith in a Higher Power."

In *A Congress of Wonders*, the heroes are those characters who somehow find grace or strength in their own suffering (never mind that it's usually *comic* suffering) and thereby rise above the reader's expectations for them: In "Juanita and the Frog Prince," Juanita Sparks puts her fate in the hands of a most unpromising protector (the putative "monster" himself, as a matter of fact) and is richly rewarded for her faith; in the other two stories, Wanda Pearl Ratliff and Finch Fronk (respectively) transcend their barren, joyless lives when Wanda Pearl reveals her capacity for maternal love and Finch triumphantly discovers that celibacy has not excluded him from fatherhood.

In *The Natural Man* there's a character named Nadine "Oodles" Ockerman, an immensely overweight, immeasurably foolish Venus of Willendorf (read "Needmore") who ensconces herself on

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her front porch and attempts to entice the scornful, derisive high school boys playing basketball in the vacant lot next door.

“After a while,” I wrote at the conclusion of the passage, “miffed at unceremonious rejections and outbursts of raucous guffaws and vulgarities from the athletes, she’d flounce back in the house and slam the screen door.”

But when I looked back at what I had just written, I wasn’t very happy with it; the whole passage seemed mean-spirited, unfeeling, misogynous. My first impulse was to rewrite the entire business, and try to soften it somehow; but then I thought, No, let’s see if I can turn the tables on the bastards. So I added this line: “Lately, perhaps in the depths of a despair that none of her rude court was man enough to fathom, she’d abandoned her post altogether, and mostly stayed inside when a game was going on.”

Voila! Instant redemption!

Character is *fluid*, not static or rigid; like water, it seeks its own level. Writers make a terrible mistake when they pre-conceive their characters in such a way as to constrict the possibility of change, of growth—or, for that matter, of diminution. “A door is always open,” said Flannery O’ Connor, “to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul.” In my own work, the characters I like best are the ones who rise above *my* expectations for them. A character who can’t surprise the writer can’t surprise the reader either. Or, to put it another way, characters need to get *out* of character once in a while, just like regular folks; it keeps the old juices flowing.

In the early 1970s, around the middle of the twenty years I spent wrestling with the fictional characters in *The Natural Man*, I wrote, for *Playboy* magazine, a long, self-referential profile of an old friend of mine, Lexington, Kentucky’s legendary Little Enis, “The World’s Greatest Left-Handed Upsidedown Guitar Player”—who was also the world’s first and, to my mind, foremost Elvis impersonator. (Enis’s real name was Carlos Toadvine, or “Carlus,” as his family called him. He took his stage name from the old joke about Elvis the Pelvis and his little brother Enis . . . .)

Little Enis—as of 1976, unhappily, the late Little Enis—was notoriously, gloriously raunchy; hanging around with Enis, I used to say, was like keeping company with your own Id. (“That little son-

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of-a-buck will get laid where most men couldn't get a drink of water," a bartender once confided to me back in the '50s, when I first began following Enis around the local clubs. "I heard a couple of these old girls say he's *awful* heavy-hung. They was talking about somebody named Old Blue, and it turned out they was referring to Enis's pecker!") He was one rude, crude, lewd little dude, no question about it. Yet I adored him, and I was determined to write about him affectionately, lovingly—and, as best I could, to induce my reader to care for him as much as I did.

A tall order. How was I to render this profoundly unseemly figure in a light that would make him as appealing on paper as he was in person?

It happened that I was just then grappling with a similar problem in the dog-eared manuscript that was languishing in my desk drawer, that old story of mine that was still yearning to become *The Natural Man*. Monk McHorning, a high school basketball star who is one of the two principals in the story, had for years stubbornly resisted my best efforts to make him three-dimensional; at six-feet-five and 235 pounds, he had God's own plenty of height and breadth, but depth-wise he was the merest shadow of himself. I had conceived him—that is, I had *pre-conceived* him—as a bully and a brute, and bully and brute he defiantly remained. I was Aunt Polly to his Huck Finn, and Monk, God bless him, would *not* be civilized.

Then came Little Enis. "I yam what I yam," said Popeye the Sailor, and that was Enis; he was, emphatically and resolutely, what he was. He would say *anything*, absolutely *anything* (I once went with him to visit his old parents at their sweet little Toadvine homeplace, a small farm in Hogue Holler, Kentucky. "Now Carlus," said his mama, "the preacher's comin' to Sunday dinner this week. You ort to come and meet him." "You know, mommy," Enis said reflectively, "I shoulda been a preacher. I like fried chicken and pussy as much as anybody.") and the stories of his Bacchanalian appetites and marathon priapic exploits would curl a satyr's mustachioes. Racist and sexist epithets were as natural to his conversation as aroma is to a billygoat. To have sanitized his speech—or his life—would have been, almost literally, to steal his soul. There was nothing for it, then, but to turn the old boy loose and


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hope for the best.

Enis—my apologies in advance for this unpardonable but inevitable pun—rose to the occasion. My *Playboy* contribution about him won the magazine's Best Non-Fiction award for 1974, and changed the course of both my career and, all too briefly, Enis's. He died at 43, of too much living.

Meanwhile, I was finding that whenever I bestirred my old fiction manuscript in yet another of my sporadic efforts to revive it, my late friend Little Enis was exerting more and more influence over my portrayal of Monk McHorning. The way to do Monk justice, I was gradually discovering, was simply to *let him be himself*, to leave off judging him—through the medium of Harry Eastep, my spokesman in the novel—and begin instead to appreciate him for what he really was—a natural man.

The Monk McHorning who emerged at last inherits many personal characteristics from Little Enis. Indeed, if Enis had been six-feet-five instead of five-feet-six, and had played basketball instead of left-handed upsidedown guitar, he'd have been, as a boy, just like Monk.

There was even a role in the novel for Old Blue. He plays the Big Inch, and does the part with great panache. 

Author's Note: Portions of this little essay are adapted from "Empathy Follows Sympathy," another short essay that appeared in *The Writer* magazine (February 1984).

## SELECTIONS

From "Juanita and The Frog Prince" in *A Congress of Wonders* (1996)

Juanita Sparks, hoosegow scullery maid and orphaned niece of the jailer's wife, stands at the jail-yard clothesline with a mouthful of clothespins and an armful of wet convict underwear. She has felt like s-h-i-t all this livelong day, ever since she woke up with morning sickness for the fifth time in a row.

When she thinks about the way those old boys, Warren Harding Skidmore and Sharky Vance and Dime Logan and them, have been a-wallering her in the backseat of Warren Harding's car lately, hopping all over her like fleas on a hog-lot dog, she's about decided that this old s-e-x ain't half what it's cracked up to be. ♪

\* \* \*

From *The Natural Man* (1983)

Monk McHorning inclined toward baseness the way water seeks its own level. That, of course, was exactly what Harry liked about him.

Monk had the dirtiest mind and the dirtiest mouth of any man or boy in the entire recorded history of Burdock County, and he was the dirtiest ballplayer, and he knew the most dirty jokes and shot the dirtiest pool, and his billfold was always stuffed with dirty pictures and little dirty comic books and dirty doggerel: "Now I met May in the strawberry patch / And I gave her a quarter just to see her snatch . . ." He took, he gave the world to understand, no shit, offa nobody. He was big and mean and heavy-hung: "Tip yer hats to the Big Inch, boys!" he'd holler, grabbing his crotch. "He's got a head like a house cat and ribs like a hungry



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hound!" He could stick a knife or a hatchet in a tree at twenty paces; he could break wind at will and with incredible authority—the Toothless One, he called his nether spokesman when it was in good voice; he had an obscene tattoo; he French-inhaled; he could wolf-whistle between his teeth and say "Bee-e-e-er!" when he belched; he'd been drunk—once, he said, on "mackerel-snapper wine" he and some other thirsty orphans had appropriated from a nearby Catholic church; he'd even patronized a Newport whore-house: "When she seen the Big Inch, boys," he modestly averred, "she give it to me free." He was, in a word, the most *accomplished* personage who'd yet come down the pike in all the days of Harry's ladhood, and Harry thanked his lucky stars for sending him to Needmore. ♪

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From *The Natural Man* (1983)

But there was another, even more compelling reason why Oodles Ockerman was Harry's secret heart's desire. It sprang from a little incident in the vacant lot next door to the Ockermans' house.

Several years earlier, when Oodles was just setting up shop as a Lorelei, her father had erected, at his own expense, a basketball goal at one end of the lot, purposing thereby to entice the impressionable youth of Needmore out of Craycraft's Billiards, and possibly into the reach of the vaporous tentacles of Oodles's fragrant influence. At first, whenever there was action in the lot, Mr. Ockerman's corpulent darling would esconce herself on the front porch and cheer the heroics on the field of play, devouring great snowy hunks of Mrs. Ockerman's angel-food cake and quaffing whole pitchersful of lemonade, while with ecstatic little squeaks and squeals and bursts of applause like wet Chinese firecrackers she made her presence known, just in case Mr. Right chanced to be among the combatants. Any time a post-pubescent athlete chased down a loose ball over near the porch, she was liable to inquire whether he mightn't care to call a time-out and join her in a lemonade and a bite of angel food.

After a while, miffed at unceremonious rejections and out-

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bursts of raucous guffaws and vulgarities from the athletes, she'd flounce back in the house and slam the screen door. Lately, perhaps in the depths of a despair that none of her rude court was man enough to fathom, she'd abandoned her post altogether, and mostly stayed inside when a game was going on. ♪

## MEMORY

At two in the morning in the new house he lies awake staring past windows at the moon's blank face. Faintly he hears from across the hall, or imagines that he hears, the girls' breathing. The air conditioner cycles briefly on, as though routinely checking its own vital signs. Never an overtly imaginative man, nevertheless he imagines this pulse of air as a sudden vortex: envisions it spinning hungrily out into the world then abruptly recalled, gone, only the hunger left behind, perhaps. Faith remains fast asleep beside him following their nighttime litany of household costs, shopping plans, new redecoration. And how long has it been since they made love? He can't remember. Trying, he sees only her face: head thrown back, the narrow band of white that always shows at the bottom of closed eyes, her mouth straining open.

The way she looked the night Wayne died.

It was early morning then too, two or three, and he'd had to pound at the door for what seemed a terribly long time before she came down. Lights from the interstate caught in the picture window, slid across the front of the house, dropped onto her face. At last she raised a hand into the light as well, as though to push it away, saying, It's Wayne, isn't it, and he had nodded. Only later could he talk, only then was he able to tell her how the car had been found abandoned, Wayne's body a mile or so further into the woods. She hadn't said anything else, simply reached for him. Afterwards they drank dark chicory coffee out on the gallery and talked about Wayne's pension, funeral arrangements, what she would do, the girls, as the sun floated up out of the bayou like a huge bubble and cars began lining up on the highway for their long daily glides into the city.

Faith turns onto her left side, into moonlight, and the gown

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falls away from one large-nippled breast. His hand moves there, nests there, without thought, without volition, itself now entering moonlight. Soundly asleep, she backs into him and covers his hand with her own. How subtly, how imperceptibly, things change and are lost. He can remember nights of such tenderness that tears ballooned behind his eyes; recalls watching morning after morning break in the small sky of the window across her bare body, a riot of birdsong outside, the loamy, sharp smell of cypress and swamp mingling with their own there in that bed, that room.

No one had been too surprised when he and Faith took up together. They'd always been together a lot anyway, what with him and Wayne being so close, and it all just fell naturally into place. The mayor himself was best man. They'd used Wayne's insurance money to build the new house. The girls took to him quickly and within the year were calling him Daddy.

He hears a siren and wonders what Jimmie's up to out there, what might be going on. Maybe he should call in and check. Wayne used to do that. Kept a radio beside the bed. And slow nights when he couldn't sleep at all, sometimes he'd bring a bottle down to the station and sit sipping Jack Daniels till dawn, then have breakfast at Ti-Jean's and a quick shower and go on about his day's work, never the worse for wear, near as anyone could tell.

Wayne had been so happy when the girls were born. *My life finally means something*, he said. And spent his meager spare time making things for them—toy chests, walnut rocking horses, stilts—or remodeling the house, till it was like an idea that kept changing. Late one Saturday over a case of beer he and Wayne had put in a picture window he'd been talking about for months. Faith had a big meal waiting for them when they finished, everything from pot roast to homemade pickles and Karo pecan pie. Then he and Wayne stayed up most of the night drinking and went out for squirrel that morning. By then, Wayne had decided he didn't like the window where it was.

Lately whenever he looks at the older girl, at Mandy, he sees Wayne. Something in her face, hard and soft at the same time, or in those grey eyes. The way she lifts a hand to wave, barely moving it. He knows that Faith sees it too; he catches her sometimes, watching.

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Mandy's twelve and remembers her father, even talks about doing police work herself when she grows up. June thinks of *him* as her father. The two girls are as different as sisters, as two children, could be. But they are forever polite, deferential; there's about them both a gentleness he knows all too well. And even in June now he sometimes encounters Wayne suddenly peering out at him.

With Faith, their apartness, it wasn't so much a forfeiture as it was a slow, cumulative exempting: a kind of forgetting, really. Days and nights fell away unquestioned, untried, until finally even desire, the possibility of it, seemed impossibly distant, and he found himself lying here beside her night after night in the company of memories.

The past (or so he tried to console himself) is all a man ever really owns anyway.

But he still loved her, still felt for her what he'd always felt. He was sure of that. That was almost all he was sure of.

There were reasons why it happened, of course—reasons upon reasons. Everything was so complicated. Whatever you did or didn't do, started four other things going. And so finally it had just seemed easier this way, to go along, get used to it, despite the longing, despite the ache and the hollows.

Whenever life takes with one hand, it gives with the other: he'd heard that all his life. But what could ever take Wayne's place in his own life, in Faith's, in the girls'? What could possibly ever replace the love he and Faith once had? And what could even begin to fill the space left behind, the hollow, now that it was gone, if it was?

He hears the siren again and almost immediately the phone rings. He reaches for it, hoping not to wake Faith; it's Mayor Broussard, who hates to disturb him this time of night. But he's just had a call from daughter Lizette, now working the radio desk on deep nights (a hopeless attempt to keep her out of strange beds and too-familiar bars), and it seems that Jimmie's got himself drunk and is driving his squad all over town with the siren and lights and occasionally the P. A. going.

"Doesn't sound much like Jimmie," he tells the mayor.

"That's exactly why I'm calling you, Al. It's woman trouble,

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Lizette tells me. Went home this morning and found his girl'd packed it all up and left, dishes, catbox, fly rod and all. Didn't even trouble to leave him a note."

"Funny he didn't say anything to me."

"You're like that boy's father, Al; I know that. But we both know what that kind of trouble can do to a man. He's a good boy, he doesn't mean anything by it. But you'd best get on out there and pull him down before I start getting citizen complaints and have to do something."

"I will, A.C. It's taken care of—and thanks."

There's a pause.

"I've backed you from the first, Al, you know that. Everything going all right?"

"Yes sir, it is."

"How's Faith?"

"Fine as ever."

"That's real good to hear. And those girls?"

"Prettier and smarter every day, A.C."

"And more and more like Wayne, I'd be willing to bet. Listen, you all have to come out here for dinner some night soon. It's been way too long."

"We'd like that."

"Good. Good, it's settled then. You give us a call."

"Right. And thanks again, A.C."

He hangs up the phone and listens for Jimmie's siren but doesn't hear it. So he steps out the French doors onto the gallery.

He can hear the guttural call of frogs deep in the swamp. Something, a bat, a pelican, flies against the moon, already gone when he glances up. This swamp itself is a kind of memory, he thinks, looking out at the ageless, ancient stand of cypress draped in Spanish moss: a deeper one than we'll ever know.

Wakened by the phone or by conversation, Faith has been to the bathroom. She comes back now and lies on the bed in a long cotton gown green like old copper. After a moment he lies beside her. Without thinking, without intention, he turns to her and puts a hand on her breast.

"I'd like to, Al," she tells him. "For a long time I've wanted to. I was afraid."

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He moves onto her then, and into the old, familiar rhythms. Out in the streets somewhere, in *that* world, he hears the siren swing by again, Jimmie's voice a blur on the bullhorn. The telephone begins to ring, unattended, as Faith's hips rise to meet his own.

"I killed him," he tells her, feeling the shudder tear at those hips, "for you," feeling the vortex open beneath him, feeling the hollows fill, *the hunger, oblivion.* ∞

## BEACH DAYS

Like the mind opening to a chink in a wall hiding a sea,  
and beyond,  
a taste, remembering. As if the sea grew out of the light  
from a camera  
obscura, waves like horses' white manes, wind driven in  
a dream of  
hurricanes, blending island, sky and sea in my mouth—  
until I am driven  
mad like a native who can't believe there's a place called  
Nebraska,  
and now that the wall is open and I feel the old dreams,  
the wind  
on my cheeks, the sand where I lay, how can I sleep?

Here, in the spring of my life was the boy I wanted to  
keep—  
basking in the splash of sea, the surprise of salt traces  
etched  
on the bronze skin afterwards, and the foment of hearts  
beating against the beach-breast. When he left,  
I grew to love absence as the heat of fire.

Degas' mother died when he was thirteen. Later, he saw  
himself  
like a doctor who came and went, looking at the young  
dancers as if  
he were making a housecall. It's about the observer, not  
the object's drawing attention. Determined  
as genes, going back to fertile crescents with lemon  
trees, *milk*  
*and memory*, lambs bleating and the lighting of lamps.



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Miracles  
must have been new once: a sun stayed, walls tumbling,  
water from a rock—

as startling as a summer shower, fresh in greenness like a  
blade of grass  
under the nostrils. I want to taste the sea  
before I sleep. I say this because now I know  
that everything that has to do with bodies comes back  
to that first love where everything bleeds, and though  
*nothing* can bring back those hours, I am that same

person, brimming with desires, as the real dream  
unwinds,  
fast forwarding to a time when I know I will die,  
which I have never said before, not wanting  
to lose the place I leave, counting  
on you to be there.

## OVER MY DEAD

In Southern India, the end of May brought the monsoon, and with the monsoon came torrents of water, drenching the land and pelting the people. Through May and into June, the storms would move their way north, but that was some time away for the people of Delhi.

In Delhi, the air was still hot and parched, the thirsty wind ravenously sucking up perspiration. A sandstorm spun its way through the city, picking up the dirt for a quixotic dance with the thick fumes from traffic and the ammonia of cow dung. Travelers tried their best to avoid the twirling dust, rolling up windows even though it meant cutting off their only ventilation. On the rickshaws moving when the storm arose, couples huddled closer together as their drivers continued on. The drivers closed their mouths, bent their heads, and forced their way onward through the stagnant traffic. Their feet pelted the road or, on the more modern motorcycle-rickshaws, their vehicles added dark exhaust to dance with the rest of the airborne filth of the city. In Safdarjung Hospital, Urmila Bandhari waited for news on the condition of Anu, her daughter-in-law.

Urmila heard the wind screaming outside and the sand chattering at the windows and walls, trying to cajole entrance, and was thankful that they'd made it to the hospital before the storm arose. She remembered the hectic ride through the streets, how she, her husband Peanu, and her only son Vishal had ridden just behind the battered ambulance. The traffic closed in around them anyway, forcing them to weave through the cars, barely missing a wandering cow, and having a windshield smeared by the spit of a camel pulling a cart. At odd intervals, Peanu or Vishal returned the threats and curses of the other drivers, until they finally reached

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the hospital, only to wait in ignorance.

“The kitchen is a dangerous place,” Urmila said softly to her son. He turned, and she saw how red his eyes had grown. She touched his shoulder. “Do not be weak, Vishal. You will not dishonor our family. Even now.”

She watched him straighten, obeying her. Vishal had been as delinquent as any other when he was small, but Urmila quickly extracted that unwanted trait with well-chosen threats and well-hidden bruises. Such measures insured that Peanu need not involve himself in his son’s discipline problems; it was not her husband’s place to raise his son.

“The burns were so bad.” She heard the edge Vishal tried to dull in his voice as he began to speak, and as he finished. “They were everywhere.”

“A woman must take precautions in the kitchen,” Urmila returned, voice stern. She let her voice soften a moment as she continued, looking down the hallway that had swallowed Anu. “Your fears are . . . accurate, however; her carelessness will lead us to mourn her soon.” Urmila checked herself, turning her focus back to her son and stating, “We must prepare to move on.”

Vishal’s eyes narrowed slightly and his jaw clenched. Urmila watched him, gauging how well he fought the grief. She decided to say no more—he must not be reminded of the dishonor the girl brought to the family, the dishonor which led so surely to the regrettable incident which held them in the waiting room, caged and impatient. Anu was gone, and Urmila had to make her son see that, pushing him in the direction he most needed to go. She studied her son through deep, brown eyes, the narrow, penetrating gaze the only thing not covered by her shapeless sari and veil. She looked at him: aside from his current haggardness, he was admirably handsome, with classically chiseled features and a trim physique. Finding another wife would prove an easy task.

Urmila herself was still lithe for her age, however much her sari covered this fact. Her hair was just beginning to gray, but this, too, was hidden.

“Vishal Bandhari?” called a doctor, stepping into the room. Vishal stood quickly, and Urmila braced herself to control any outburst he might begin.

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“Your wife is awake and wishes to speak to you.”

Urmila bit her lip harshly to keep her cry from piercing the room at this most inconvenient news. Peanu walked beside his son while Urmila followed a few paces behind, head bowed. She had believed every contingency planned for, each alternative considered as she prepared to move Vishal’s life forward. She was thrown now, forced suddenly to deal with a problem thought solved: Anu was alive.

All Urmila saw of what was supposed to be her daughter-in-law was a body swathed in bandages. A hole opened for Anu’s mouth, and two others let an oxygen tube feed into her nostrils. An intravenous tube ran through the wrapping to the girl’s arm. The smell of all the ointments leaked through the bandages, a cloying, sweet smell like a mint sauce concentrated ten times. Urmila caught up with her husband and lightly touched Peanu’s arm, stopping him and allowing their son to walk to his wife alone.

He knelt next to the bed, scanning the covered woman. His voice shook slightly, but he managed to say her name.

Blind, bandages covering her eyes like everything else, Anu turned her head toward the noise.

“Vishal?” she began, her voice a rough, rasping sound. “Are you here?”

“Yes, Anu. Mother and Father, as well.”

Anu shivered, then stiffened. “Urmila?”

“Yes,” Vishal returned, the word as much a question as an answer.

Anu’s voice quaked as she whispered, “She did this.”

Anu, covered in darkness, began to recount her tale to the now-silent room. Through the salves and pain killers, she was only vaguely aware of her body and the throbbing pain she knew waited to course through her. Even so, Anu had only to begin her story to bring the memory railing to the forefront of her mind, horrifying in its vivid clarity.

In the kitchen of her new home, Anu was trying to prepare a meal while favoring a wrist bruised from a discussion with Vishal the day before. She still wasn’t as adept at peeling and chopping as her mother-in-law, but she was determined to learn. Her new

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husband should not find fault with her skills as a wife.

She heard Urmila call her name, and turned to her, but never got the chance to answer. There was her mother-in-law and a sudden flash of motion, then instinct slammed Anu's eyes closed. She was soaked with something. It began evaporating quickly, chilling Anu's skin. The fumes attacked her, rushing down her windpipe: she was covered in gasoline.

The chill of evaporation was replaced by an infernal heat as the gasoline came alive. A horde of tiny mouths ate at her skin. Her nerves shot a single message to her mind which was voiced in a high-pitched scream that would not stop as it carried her inarticulate expressions of agony through the burning air, but the mouths continued their ravaging assault undisturbed by the noise. Anu couldn't remember when it ended, and she still wasn't sure that the mouths wouldn't begin eating her again. She only knew that the memory melted into waking in darkness, the rest of her body felt only through a thick wall of deadened nerves.

After telling her story, she fell asleep.

An hour later she died.

The sandstorm ended just before Anu's death, and as the dirt was falling, so was the sun. To beat the sunset (a cremation in the dark was ill luck), the woman's body was quickly wrapped in the white funeral shroud without taking time to remove her bandages. The Bandhari family and Anu's bearers rushed through the traffic again, heading for the cremation grounds.

The sandalwood was piled up, light and dry from the weather, the dust that clung to it adding to the dull, light shades of brown. Anu was placed with the wood, and flame touched to the pile. The yellow-orange of the rising pyre matched the darkening shade of the setting sun. Urmila stood motionless, but her thoughts bolted wildly, until Vishal grabbed her and demanded her attention.

He stood close to her so that others couldn't hear as he said, "She did not deserve this." He paused, scavenging for the words. "She was innocent . . . and I loved her."

Urmila looked at him, gauging him as always. He was ragged, trying desperately to piece himself together, but Urmila refused

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to let him use her to assuage his grief in this manner.

“She was weak and unfit,” she began, her words hissing out. “She and her family were bringing dishonor to mine. When I married Peanu, I swore to uphold his honor, for his and mine are one now, just as his honor is linked to his family’s. I will never allow anyone to destroy the honor, the dharma”—Urmila spoke of one of the purusharthas, the goals of man—“I have built for my husband.”

“She was innocent,” Vishal insisted again, but Urmila saw the sagging in his shoulders.

“Anu was nothing less than the embodiment of all of the betrayal and shame laid upon my—your father’s—family.” Her voice razed him as Urmila added “far from innocent.”

Vishal’s voice lowered. “She was the perfect wife.”

Urmila, unseen by others, grabbed her son’s forearm and dug her nails into it fiercely. She brought herself closer to him, covering his mouth with two fingers in an ostensible gesture to silence a grieving husband who should be stolid at this time. It was this—appearance—which was most important, for appearance was what others judged you by; they would take your measure and mete out your status, and thus dharma, based upon it. For an instant, Urmila reflected on her mother and how she had taught that method and means were superfluous so long as they met with the appropriate picture in the end. Urmila learned from her mother—by subjection to those tactics—how to use the right words and bruise the tender-but-easily-hidden spots in gaining deference. She learned the way to present the obedient daughter through the shifts in her mother (her stance, demeanor, everything down to the apparent size of her mouth altered) when anyone came, when she was visible and exposed. If any wife was perfect, it was her mother, the mistress of others’ perceptions.

“No one is perfect,” Urmila told Vishal, eyes narrowing as she impressed herself upon him. “Harijan through Brahman, we are all human, and the condition of humanity is imperfect. Perfection is only attained when we transcend this state.” She lifted her fingers from his mouth, but he remained silent as she held him with her stare and finished. “A good Hindu should not need reminding of that, Vishal. Did I raise a poor Hindu?”

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“No, mother,” he answered her.

She smiled faintly, touching his shoulders, and said, “Good, I knew I had not. You are a good son, Vishal, and will bring much honor to your father’s family and your own.” A spark of tenderness played in her eyes as she finished by saying, “Do not worry; you will have another wife.”

The pyre was at its peak now, brighter than the still-sinking sun. Vishal turned to look at it, then looked back at his mother to voice a new concern.

“The doctor heard Anu’s story. He will tell the constabulary.”

“That, too, will be handled, Vishal. Think on your mourning for now,” Urmila said, watching the pyre as its fuel began to shrink and crumble in the dying blaze, and she let her thoughts return to their inner occupation.

Trials in Delhi were renowned for their slowness. Anu’s ashes had been collected and spread upon the Jumna River which would take them on to the holy river of the Ganges, and in the weeks since Anu’s death, the date was set for their pre-trial hearing—something impossibly far off. The date for any possible trial was inconceivable at this point. It was necessary to Urmila’s plans, therefore, that Peanu call and make an appointment to see the judge in charge of their case: Ranajit Saxena.

Urmila followed Peanu into the judge’s chamber, away from any eyes or ears which might frown upon the exchange she had planned, her gaze lowered and her steps shuffling in the role of submissive wife. From the sweeping glance of the room Urmila took, she judged it admittedly impressive. It was sparse but stately, with a brittle and expensive tapestry adorning one wall as the only decoration not of a functional nature. From this observation, Urmila moved to note the contrast between her husband and Saxena.

Peanu was stout, with a sizable overhang to his belly and a mouth pinched into position on his chubby face. His hair had to be oiled down to control his numerous cowlicks, a chore Urmila personally oversaw daily. Despite the dryness of the heat, Peanu always glistened slightly with sweat that enhanced the relative paleness of his light tan face.

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Ranajit Saxena sat calmly facing Urmila's husband. His hair had grayed, but his face was rugged rather than worn. His eyes were large and round in opposition to his lean body, and he stared straight into Peanu's eyes, seemingly studying the soul behind those beady pupils Urmila had known for years.

"Bride burning is heavy on the minds of the government these days," Ranajit began bluntly, leaning forward. "The media of a number of nations of the world have latched onto this as a failing of the Indian culture. The media, as it always has, is beginning to create a very severe situation of public disapproval; public opinion, in turn, will begin to affect government action. Foreign aid and relations might be jeopardized by what seems such a . . . private thing. I should hope that you are not adding to this problem, for we would be forced to judge you harshly to prove that we are not lenient in this regard." Ranajit wove his fingers together, and a crooked smirk rose on his face as he added, "And I am far from lenient to begin with."

Urmila turned her anxious attention to her husband. He licked his lips loudly, and Urmila knew that, despite the thorough coaching she had given him, Peanu could not bargain as was needed.

In a sudden shift of plans, Urmila threw herself down, prostrate, pressing her body as flat as she could on the roughly sanded wood of the floor.

"I beg your most honorable forgiveness for speaking, good judge, but I must," Urmila said in high, pleading tones; she forced herself to shiver.

"I apologize for my wife," Peanu said, worry on the edge of his voice. Good, Urmila thought, he had taken the change without breaking. Now she only hoped that the rumors about Ranajit she spent weeks collecting were grounded in enough fact to save the family from disgrace.

Peanu stuttered, attempting to continue, and for a moment Urmila worried that Ranajit would not interrupt him; she fervently wished to be able to lift her head, gauge Ranajit, regain control.

"Your apology is taken, Mr. Bandhari," Ranajit said finally, cutting off Peanu and bidding Urmila stand. She did so, quickly surveying the judge and then just as quickly looking back to the



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floor she had lain upon a moment before. She had seen Saxena's arms crossed as he was taken aback and perhaps mildly contemptuous of a woman presuming to speak to him, but in the upturning at the corners of his mouth Ranajit held a twig of respect for her humble plea.

"What do you have to say?" he asked. Although he tried to maintain it, Ranajit's stern attitude was subsiding. Urmila spoke in a rhythm of submission.

"This case involves me, most of all my family," she began. "I should, therefore, explain this misunderstood situation." She paused, waiting for an attempt to stop her, but none came, so she continued, sneaking in an evaluating glance where she could.

"The marriage of my son Vishal and Anu Ghosh was planned many years ago, and the dowry was set then. We raised the children closely, so that the marriage would be easier.

"We always thought"—here Urmila indicated herself and her husband—"that the Ghosh family was honorable. We had known them a very long time. But we found they were not who we thought we knew. Just before the marriage, they claimed to have come into economic trouble. After years of affluence, I do not believe them. They cheated us of half the agreed-upon amount of the dowry, but current Indian law gives us no legal recourse to sue for the rest of it. We, being honorable people, kept the betrothal."

Urmila swallowed, forcing the pause to seem a natural interruption, neither a conclusion nor a nervous instinct. From here, Ranajit Saxena must have no overt way to accept any situation other than the one Urmila presented, or, at the least, he must be shown the flawless shield of innocence she could build to protect her family.

"Anu was just as unworthy as her parents. She was a horrible wife, willful and incompetent. She also lied, even to herself." Urmila took her chance now, deeming it an acceptable risk, and lifted her head, her eyes coming to look just below his—as close to eye contact as she dared.

"Anu could not face her own ignorance of the dangers of the kitchen. Even as she was dying, she insisted that it was not her fault, using me as the easiest to blame."

Ranajit stared at Urmila calmly for a moment before speak-

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ing, probing.

"Sit, the both of you," the judge said, and Peanu and Urmila took places on two ornately carved wooden chairs. The chairs were well-worn, old but still presentable, and Urmila held no secret objections to them as she placed herself upon the softened wood. Ranajit looked at the couple, speaking to Urmila despite the bold, non-traditional nature of such a conversation.

"I don't know why you are telling me this now, for the trial is a long time off," he said. It was true, as they knew, in India it took years for a case to find its way into a courtroom, if ever it did. Urmila heard the question beneath the statement: What will you give to never have the trial? "I . . . apologize for my outburst before. I have been distraught as my son, Vishal, now mourns his first wife," she began, shifting the conversation to present her offer. "He is also a practical man and sees that he must find a new bride soon I can only hope to find him a truly . . . deserving wife this time."

Ranjit's round eyes widened almost imperceptibly, and he lightly licked his lips; the tension loosened significantly in the room.

"It so happens that I have a daughter—Ghazala—who is yet unmarried," he began. Urmila repressed a shiver of delight. "She is a bit older than the normal bride, but she is bright, humble, and an excellent cook. Perhaps you would consider her as your son's new wife?"

Urmila resisted the urge to rub her hands together. She allowed Peanu to bargain for the dowry, which would be substantially reduced with the circumstances involved. It was a worthy loss, however. In weeks, Saxena would be freed of a great burden, and immeasurably grateful to the Bandhari family for that. Urmila now knew that the Ghosh family would have no sum large enough to push the case forward.

The monsoon brought a downpour which soaked Delhi for three days after the marriage of Vishal and Ghazala, a hasty affair as sudden as the onset of the wet season had been. Left to themselves, the two began to define their relationship. Before the wedding, Vishal had his doubts; Ghazala was a short woman whose height was compensated for by her girth. She was wide and full,

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with short, pudgy fingers and a round face. All of these aspects seemed to Vishal the signs of an overindulged woman, one who got her way in all things. A wife, however, should expect nothing more than what her husband might will to her.

His fears were apparently unfounded. Despite everything, she proved to match his ideal. Her cooking was exquisite, with combinations to both excite and sate the palate, and when she served the food—in fact, whenever she was near him—she showed nothing but utter deference for his authority, allowing that he would decide what was best for her in all cases. He warmed inwardly, realizing that there would be no need for hidden bruises with her.

Her innate sense of his desires extended past the kitchen and into his bed. He took her often, and she acquiesced after minor resistance, challenging to make the goal more exciting. As it happened she moaned pleasantly, at a tenor and a volume which helped to urge him onward and forget the bulk of the body beneath him. When he was done with her, he would talk, and she would listen, nodding or flashing a hint of eye contact when called for. He spoke of his father's endless list of ailments and his mother's meticulous care for those problems.

"She makes separate dishes just for Father, eliminating even those spices that he's only mildly allergic to. His medications are always on time; when he's away, she will even call to make sure he takes each pill. He would forget everything without her. Once," the start of a smile sneaked onto his face at the memory, "when she was ill, he fixed his own dinner. He followed a recipe, but forgot his paprika allergy. He had hives for two days. My mother never let him near the kitchen again."

Eventually, the discussion of his mother led to revelations of his deeper feelings toward her. With Ghazala's intent attention, her more than appropriate show of concern, Vishal felt no need to hide those emotions.

"... and for all her concern for my father, she can spare none for me, the son whom she carried all those long months. My life or opinions are only important to her as they relate to my father. 'You are his son,' she always told me, 'and his dharma is strengthened or harmed just as much by your actions as by his own.'" Vishal paused at the mention of the purusharthas of social behav-

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ior so important to his mother, then quietly continued, the resentment simmering below each word. "I am a tool without my own life or honor. I am only one more device to raise the status of my mother's husband."

Then, just as when he had angered in the days preceding, Ghazala placed a soft, cool hand upon his forearm. She smiled softly, and matched her voice to the smile as she suggested, "Perhaps now that you are married yourself, your mother will realize that she has performed her duty. There may be no more cause for worry."

Vishal allowed his new wife to soothe him, but memories of Anu always brought back his doubts.

While that new relationship grew, four streets over Peanu watched his wife's anxiety with an inner amusement. The rain chattering loudly on the windows and clacking harshly upon the ceiling, joined by the screaming wind, made it impossible for Urmila to leave. Peanu knew how it must rip at Urmila to be unable to check on the two young people, overseeing every facet of their new life.

Urmila was always into something, Peanu reflected. Never too fervently, always showing the proper respect to her betters, but she knew a number of things. Peanu let her have this vice of curiosity and manipulation. She was, to be sure, still bound to him as his wife, and although she had jeopardized them in the presence of Ranajit Saxena, the judge had forgiven them. Yet, despite the new dowry, she still worried at this new wife. Peanu smiled inwardly at his spouse, knowing that Ghazala was bound to Bandhari honor—Peanu's honor—just as Urmila. Urmila was a woman, however, and women tended to worry about the inconsequential.

Finally there came a break in the storms, and Urmila walked the busy streets to her son's home. She turned her way over the narrow roads, passing through a bazaar. People crowded and pushed, invigorated by the freedom of the storms' passing. The rain had washed much of the dust away, and even brought the heat down, but it also made the air thick and moldy. Where dry breezes used to soak up sweat, water now loosely clung to the thick curtains of air, immobile, waiting for someone to walk through and break

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the wet beads off, pulling them down.

Urmila ignored the hodgepodge of wares and the merchants trying to crowd this wealthy woman they knew too well. A good session of haggling over merchandise might just vent Urmila's pent energies, but she had other priorities this day. Finally she reached Vishal's home. A servant let her in, then went to fetch her employers. She stood in the entryway on the earthy ceramic tile surrounded by the gauze curtains in the doorways, and let her veil down. It was Ghazala who first came to meet her mother-in-law's inspecting gaze. Ghazala's eyes were small and reminded Urmila of Peanu's, but there was a severity to her expression which worried Urmila.

"I have come to visit my son and his new wife," the older woman announced to her daughter-in-law.

Ghazala remained silent until she reached Urmila, then she said in a low voice, "I know why you are here."

Urmila stepped back, dissecting the phrase and its delivery, absorbing its implications. She saw the threat in the woman, but could not best gauge how to counter it.

Before she could do so, Ghazala's stance shifted, and an air of conciliation slipped over the younger woman. Urmila studied Ghazala, noting the traces of directed aggression hiding in her manner. Then Ghazala continued with, "You have done well as a mother looking after Vishal's honor."

"Thank you," Urmila responded tentatively, having difficulty grasping her daughter-in-law's state of mind.

The presence of the contempt seemed to build slightly as Ghazala ignored Urmila's thanks, adding, "But I know that, however difficult it may be to accept, you realize Vishal is mine now. I am his wife, and I will work toward the honor of my family. It need no longer concern you."

Urmila slid her tongue over the back of her teeth, fighting the urge to clench her fists. "I am his mother," Urmila finally said, uncertain of her course for once, but she only allowed underlying wisps of defiance to creep into her voice as she suggested, "Perhaps I can help the difficult transition you must both be having. I have known Vishal far longer than you." She waited for a response: there would be time enough later to root herself into

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permanence in the home, but she must first determine how to effectively neutralize Ghazala.

Ghazala smirked, then slapped herself resoundingly and shrieked with pain, calling loudly for Vishal. Urmila, certain her daughter-in-law had gone insane, watched, dumbfounded, as her son ran into the room, asking what was wrong.

The vindictive face Ghazala wore melted as tears poured down her puffy face. Catching her breath from sobbing, Ghazala spoke.

“Your mother slapped me, Vishal. I came to greet her and she slapped me and told me I was unworthy,” Ghazala cried, throwing her arms around her husband, looking back at her mother-in-law with fear. Urmila could barely see the gloating behind the facade, it was done so well.

“Why did you say that, Mother?” Vishal shot accusingly at Urmila. “You don’t even know her well.” His voice began to shake, then quickly hardened as he asked, “Will no one ever be good enough for you?”

Urmila felt her control slipping, but she took in her son’s state and responded.

“Your new wife is using you, Vishal. You must trust me; I did not slap her.” Starting forward, Urmila stopped as she saw Ghazala’s grip flinch tighter on Vishal. “She is trying to come between us.”

“See? Look at how she is abusing me, even in front of you,” Ghazala insisted.

“Leave, Mother,” Vishal commanded. It was the first time since he was eight that he had dared. Then, she had smacked him and sent him to bed, an option no longer available.

“Now,” Vishal said. Urmila saw the hardness in his face, watched her daughter-in-law clinging to him, and Urmila knew that she had lost control.

She turned and left, refusing to glare at her daughter-in-law; such a move would only strengthen Ghazala’s argument. Striding into the street, Urmila stalked home. Just before the bazaar, the monsoon brought another torrent of rain tearing through, pelting her harshly; she didn’t change her stride. Allowing the rain to amplify her mood, Urmila raged through the bazaar as the crowd ran for the indoors and merchants pulled closed their booths in a bid to protect their merchandise.

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Urmila's sari and veil clung to her under the weight of the storm, but she continued. When she returned home, she stripped herself of her soaked clothing, peeling off the fabric that sucked at her skin, that pulled at the pores filled and seeping from her tepid garments. She wiped as much of the rain's grime from her as possible and put on clean clothing. Then she walked back out into her home, overseeing her immaculate household, triple-checking the work of the lazy gardeners and maidservants where she normally satisfied herself with double-checking. All the while, she worked on her new challenge. It was another two days before the weather allowed Urmila to send a messenger with a note to Vishal's home, an invitation to an early dinner that day, signed by his father.

When her son and daughter-in-law arrived, Urmila greeted them, her husband by her side. As she went through the required courtesies, Urmila studied Ghazala and secretly reveled. She was stating her position in those moments of greeting, pounding in the reality—she, Urmila, would always be above Ghazala, because Peanu was the head of the family, and his wife above his son's.

Later, as they prepared the dinner, Urmila continued her subjugation, ordering and criticizing. In a pristine kitchen constructed of only the best stained woods and floored with tiling Urmila herself had scrubbed clean, Urmila knew superiority. None entered her kitchen without her express permission. The massala powder must be mixed just so, with the exact proportions of ingredients that Urmila laid out, emphasizing her expertise in the kitchen.

"Stay away from that jar, Ghazala," Urmila commanded, indicating the jar of green mango pickles—mangoes seasoned with chili peppers, mustard oil, salt—which sat alone on a table in an empty corner of the kitchen, nearly enshrined. "It is only for Peanu."

"I never take what is someone else's," Ghazala returned.

"Keep making the massala powder for the chicken curry," Urmila ordered, then left to set the table before Ghazala could respond.

The two continued with their transparently-veiled attacks throughout the preparation of the meal and Urmila mentally re-

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viewed her plans to reconcile with her son. Increased displays of domination like this one were the beginning. She would also remind Ghazala that she was Vishal's second wife, an alternate choice made in a time of grief and weakness. Such reminders could never be spoken, even well-hidden, before Vishal; too many reminders of Anu and her fate could damage the new hold Urmila intended to establish. In a final jab before the meal, Urmila walked over to the forbidden jar and extracted a fat slice of green mango pickle, placing it upon Peanu's plate.

The women slipped into their roles as humble wives when they called their husbands to eat. Urmila quietly and tenderly served her husband first, then her son, herself, and finally her daughter-in-law, watching for a chink in the statuesque picture of submission as they waited for Peanu, head of the family, to take the first bite.

They ate with civility, and Urmila allowed her husband to continue talking a bit of politics with Vishal between bites of curry and green mango pickle. She listened to his remarks about the most recent humor column written by the city's traffic chief. She thought on the city as they talked: a series of eight, actually, each built alongside the other as a new group took over during its long history. Urmila refused to move aside as the seven previous centers of Delhi had done.

When the men stopped for a moment, Urmila opened her mouth to speak, but Peanu began to cough. Agitated, she turned to regard her husband, who didn't cease. The coughing escalated, racking his thick frame, and he fell to the floor in convulsions. The three remaining at the table stood, then knelt to Peanu, shaking him and calling his name. A servant called for the doctor, but by the time he arrived, Peanu had stopped, forever.

Urmila pulled at her hair and beat her head on the ground, bawling loudly as was the right of a mourning wife. She stood and wept over his last meal studying its remains. The curry was only a few bits of chicken over the rice. Slowly losing its shape to the red-brown sauce, the rice melted into a stained lump. Beside it all was the green mango pickle, the scent of which tangily overlapped the rest of the meal as the thin juices seeped into the curry, turning the edges of both juice and sauce into a greasy yellow spill



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dotted with small, brown, floating bodies that refused to dissolve. Now the tang began to reek as all of it slowly spoiled with Urmila's husband and position. Then her mourning turned into a shriek.

"You killed my husband," Urmila roared, whirling about to charge Ghazala, tears magnifying the fire that now resurfaced with the accusation. "You witch!"

Vishal caught his mother, and Ghazala widened her eyes in a surprise Urmila refused to believe.

"Mother, Father is dead and you are not well because of it. I understand," Vishal said, fighting to keep his own voice steady through his grief.

"No," Urmila screamed again. "She poisoned the green mango pickles."

"What?" Ghazala began. She paused, and Urmila could almost admire the skill with which she did so: the woman left a space just large enough to fill with her surprise, then continued before there was any room for suspicion.

"When did I do this?" Ghazala went on, indignant. "You supervised everything I did in the kitchen; you saw everything I touched. When was I near that jar? Tell me that."

"While I set the table," Urmila returned. "I was ignorant to leave you alone like I did. It was even worse because I gave you the means to fulfill your ambition." Urmila turned to Vishal. "I showed her the jar. I told her that only Peanu ate from it, and she used that to kill your father. Don't you understand? She's only after power."

"I poisoned nothing," Ghazala maintained. "Search me. Where is the poison that killed my new father? No one is so wrongly ambitious. Such actions could only destroy."

"Prove it," Urmila challenged, calming herself to better judge and counterattack her opponent. "Eat the pickle."

Ghazala hesitated a moment, looking at her husband. A tension passed between the two, clawing at the bonds so newly formed, using the old ties between mother and son—the old domination.

"Do as she says," Vishal finally said, exhaustion straining his words.

Slowly, Ghazala walked to the plate, mostly emptied before the death of the man who had been eating from it. She picked up

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the green mango pickle and there was another hesitation. Urmila watched the drop of juice that started to form on Ghazala's thumb, studied the pickle. She was sure she could see the taint slowly rising to the surface with Ghazala's hidden fear. Then the hesitation was again motion, and Ghazala popped the pickle into her mouth, chewing and swallowing quickly.

Ghazala was taken with coughing for a moment after she swallowed, and elation filled Urmila. Then the coughing stopped.

"Forgive me," Ghazala said, smiling weakly, "I don't care much for the taste." Urmila consigned herself to watch. Patience was all that was required.

They waited. People came to wrap the white shroud around Peanu, but Ghazala did not die.

"You see, mother," Vishal said, "you are only overwrought by your grief. Let Ghazala help you clean up. The pyre will be soon."

Urmila was silent her mind still working. She had seen the gloating behind those eyes, but as she slowly shuffled her way into the kitchen, Urmila finally began to doubt herself. She had spent so much of her life searching for the hidden dangers in people and situations. She was a master at shattering the surface appearances surrounding her to further analyze others and maintain herself. Had she now finally begun to create secrets in the eyes of those around her?

She moved the curtain aside to pass into the kitchen, where Ghazala was already putting things away. The older woman studied her daughter-in-law anew as she calmly returned things to their proper places. Head bowed and a look of sorrow wrinkling her face, Ghazala seemed the innocent. A part of Urmila hammered at the visage, trying to loosen it, to unlock a scarred, ugly face of betrayal, but Urmila struggled to quell this. So far as Urmila need be concerned now, Ghazala was who she appeared to be, and enough of the imagined subtleties and paranoia. Steeling herself, Urmila started forward to apologize to Ghazala as the younger woman returned the spices to their appropriate spots, lifting the light containers and sliding them back into the plain cabinet. Then the apology flashed into oblivion as Peanu's wife saw the spice Ghazala held.

"Did you put that in the massala powder?" Urmila accused,

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striding quickly over and pulling the spice container from Ghazala's hand.

"Yes," she answered.

"This is cumin. Peanu is allergic to this; he nearly died as a child when he had this." Urmila paused, her eyes lancing past the facade that she had almost accepted. Her voice lowered to a scathing whisper as she said, "You did kill him."

"It was with the other spices—"

"Liar!"

Urmila screamed for her son.

"She killed him, Vishal. She put cumin in the massala powder."

"No, Vishal," Ghazala countered, going to him in tears. "She's doing it again. She left it out with the others, and I thought it was for the massala. If the death is anyone's fault," she continued, "it is Urmila's, for her carelessness. She laid out each spice for the powder. There wasn't any clear label, how was I to know it was cumin?"

Urmila scrambled through her memory, snatching the image she needed: she had deliberately moved the cumin to the back, behind all of the other spices, when she had come across it. Desperate, Urmila clambered up onto the counter, reaching in to rifle through the spices. In her fervor, a long ragged sliver ran up under one of her fingernails, but she ignored it as she succeeded in her personal quest. Vishal and Ghazala both stared in mute astonishment as Urmila thrust her prize under their noses.

"See? Here is my cumin," she gloated. In her right hand she presented the spice she remembered placing in the back, while her left squeezed the cumin Ghazala had used.

Her daughter-in-law recovered quickly, stating simply, "Then you must have two containers of cumin. That one which you forgot in the back, and that"—Ghazala now indicated the left hand—"which you mistakenly laid out."

"Liar! I never touched the cumin. I only used it for curry for you, Vishal, when your father was away," Urmila insisted. Now she brought up her left hand, beginning to rant. "Ghazala brought this . . . ." Even as her accusations were reborn, Urmila looked into Vishal's eyes and saw the truth, just as she saw her son hold

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his wife close to him. Urmila faded into silence.

Her son would not believe his mother.

Screaming, she ran from the room, throwing herself on Peanu's body, cursing Ghazala for taking her husband from her as well as her son. Soon enough, Urmila regained composure, changed her clothing, and followed the bearers with her husband's body; she, in turn, was followed by Vishal and Ghazala, who kept their distance.

Then they were at the grounds where Peanu was to leave them. The sandalwood was already stacked when they arrived. Urmila focused on it. It was darker and heavier than at Anu's cremation, clinging to itself, bits peeled off from where pieces had stuck to the pilers. The sandalwood appeared denser, reticent, seemingly unwilling to ignite for its purpose.

Only as composed as a mourning widow was allowed to be, Urmila's thoughts argued with each other as she watched Peanu's white wrappings darken when the flames finally, slowly licked upward. In his white, she saw her own, the white she must wear for the rest of her mourning—the rest of her life—and she saw more. Through the increasing heat-haze, the barely livable hut that would be erected in her son's back yard hung smugly. Her food would be only what scraps Ghazala chose to throw to her; to her grandchildren, raised by Ghazala, Urmila would become the ugly witch in white, to be feared and taunted. Ghazala would have all of the control over Vishal's destiny.

The flames consumed all of the images, demanding Urmila's attention, whispering truths she'd always known. Should her grieving mount to violence, it was on Vishal's shoulders now. He was in charge of the family and all of its decisions. If she hurt her head beating it on the ground, staining her mourning white with blood, it was his family's dishonor. However, she had worked so hard to keep that family, Peanu's family, from becoming sullied.

And then Urmila had her answer. She had worked for Peanu's honor, and for his family's, because it was his while he lived. He was gone now, and the family was Vishal's. She had sworn no vows to his honor, Ghazala had. Let her prove her claim that she could look after that honor, let her fight for dharma.

The answer scratched at her. Until now, Urmila followed

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Peanu's path, the path of the grihastha—the householder. However, there were other paths just as honorable. With Peanu gone, Urmila might choose another, the path she never quite considered before. Urmila could choose the path of the renouncer—sannyasi. Or, at least, should her choice appear sannyasi, none could question her honor.

Suti, then, was the answer: widow burning. Illegal as it was, the law that Vishal must restrain his family, even his mother, would mean that his family was guilty of the death; it was a murder in the eyes of the court. Urmila ran forward, surprising those around her and leaving them behind before they could act. She knew Vishal, and how incompetent he was to work the courts; she was certain Ghazala had too little time to learn enough of Vishal to gauge his reactions, planning and improvising as Urmila could. She heard Ghazala's scream to stop, and added her own shriek to it, climbing the scale as she leapt into the flame, her mourning white blackening. Looking upward with eyes that could no longer see, pain was matched with the elating knowledge that she, Urmila Bandhari, had regained control at last. ☪

## “DAVID”

There is some truth to the old saw  
The nose is index to the prick.  
(Cyrano was not famous for  
Knowing attar from ambergris.)

To wit: “David”: arrant pezzle  
—Even dormant a forearm thick—  
Rhymes beneath a hyrcan muzzle  
In obvious synonymy.

Rising six cubits and a span  
(Reckoned in old arithmetic),  
The boy’s a giant among men  
If accurate facsimile.

Athwart his back and chest, the sling  
That slew an ancient heretic;  
Well-defined, each sinew: well-hung,  
Each simian extremity.

The lip, the cheek, the forehead glisters;  
The visage vatic, hieratic;  
The highly burnished surface lusters  
In flawless muscularity.

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Caution flexes his dimpled knee.  
His hair is youthful rhetoric.  
From fretted brows, a vacant eye  
Gazes a blank hyperbole.

It's all too much: give me the good  
Live headstrong Philistine hick  
Any old day—but then, my God,  
What monster must Goliath be?

# TOWN

*Water, water . . .*

He had come to the diner five days running—since he'd first arrived in town. Some things had been revealed. An afternoon tea drinker nestled into the corner booth disguised hard-core porno mags with *Newsweek* covers while a wet cigar smoldered in his ashtray. A gentle-looking old man named Ed, who wore a turquoise bolo tie and black hornrims, wanted to throw all the heathen and colored trash into a huge barge, set it ablaze, and send it out to sea. Bodies burning over flashing king salmon and spiny dogfish. Flecks of cream pie flew from Ed's mouth while he held forth for the few customers turning slowly on orange stools.

He had learned some things about food. Potatoes, for instance, always come with gravy—white in the morning, black at night. Fish tastes like cold rust. Chicken fried steak is beef and can be eaten any time of the day. Texas toast is mostly air. Sandwiches have yellowing mayonnaise spread on both slices of bread. Townsfolk like to watch you eat, trying to fix you, the stranger, by the way you address your meal.

The day before, the cook at the grill behind the antique register had started calling him 'chief.' The older waitress, Linda, called him by name, which she had pried from the gregarious proprietor of his motel—The Sands. Ain't any sand around here, he'd been told when he checked in, but I'm a dreamer, you know?

During breakfast the diner was crowded with laborers and farmers and a couple local businessmen in city suits. After things quieted down the waitresses asked him questions every time they freshened his coffee cup: Watcha reading, hon? Gonna be stickin around town much longer? He felt like they were collecting evidence. He'd introduced himself to the youngest, who came to



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work each evening just as the sun split the two mountains visible through a long window next to the shake mixer—she had served him minute steak for dinner. She wore her hair in a ponytail, but kept removing the cloth-covered elastic band, stretching it over her hand and onto her forearm. The next night she slipped him a book of matches along with his change. Inside she'd written, Take me away from this place. I'm a fish out of water, running out of time. U r so handsome.

Handsome. Back in his browned out room, the TV weather man was predicting a week of rain through an astral snow when he noticed that she dotted her i's with hearts.

### *Business*

—It's a scandal.

— Scandal?

—The whole town's abuzz. Abuzz and alight. The fog came down last night like my grandmother's mildewed drapes on that morning the hearse, nursing a low tire, pulled into her steep driveway. The fog drifting over the road, where it hooks up around the packing plant, and my headlights bursting into it. I turned on the hi-beams so that I felt like I was the heart of a fire swallowing the world. Then tried the dim-eyed parking lights, and everything, the road itself, disappeared. Brief vision of my impending doom.

—You were saying.

—I am saying that when I cleared the fog, coming down off the hill, I reckoned that I saw a party of Searchers, looming on horseback, next to the long, wired-in runs where the Machowskys keep ostriches.

—They're hunting already? How old they say she is? I got tied up at the dealership this morning.

—Tied up, hmm. I know who ties you, how you come to be tied. And I know you rise before dawn, drink coffee, smoke slow cigarettes as the sun begins to bloody the frames of your dark windows, reading—what is it now—

—Peter the Great. A history of Peter the Great.

—read, yes, then pile into your Plymouth, rub together your dry, white hands having absorbed the dawn's cold from the wheel, loop that same hand around the leather headrest soon to cushion

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the head of your beloved—

—Beliked.

—And she comes to the dealership early.

—That's how it works.

—She comes to work early, with her hair done up like it's ten, twelve years ago, wearing canary, a canary sleeveless under her old man's jacket, a necklace with too-big Mexican cockleshells, tiny scratches like a language of lost women scattered over her thin, her svelte ankles. You know, it used to be the arms that got me, especially in summer offices, brown arms falling from the holes of a dress, no trace of muscle or bone, only the shape of the high-strung flesh. Now, it's different.

—That's evolution, my friend. Evolution of taste.

—Yes, to legs. I swoon and I expire. Calves, thighs, the seams that form when the knees bend while reaching down for a dropped pencil, the quadriceps quivering like a fish trying to breathe in stale water. How early? Does she arrive.

—One to one and one half hours.

—Grains of donut sugar still collected at the corners of her nervous smile. And I bet she eats all day, too, a snacker, a bag of Spanish peanuts in mid-morning leaving greasy blotches on her long fingers. A tin of kippered snacks during afternoon break while the other gals breathe smoke into the close room. And the way that food looks, held between her fingers, the arc it rides approaching the blackness. And so you drive up while the rest of us sleep. You remove your long frame from the car. Approaching, indelicately, the fuck. Where do you do it?

—Wherever she wants.

—Yes, and at first it was quick, in the half-dark cavernous showroom, right, with the fluorescents still off. And she always wanted to go to Ireland, she's thinking, she always wanted, to be held down, held down by your hands with the bristly hair sprouting from knuckles, and held in by the weather, as close as sadness, the wet clouds herded up against the plates of glass, breathing right up against her naked ribs. You started taking out one of the used cars, a big Lincoln, parking behind the drive-in, in the morning shadow of the big screen, or down on the wooded levee road that runs right into the river. She refused, did she not, when you pulled

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the tarnished silver flask from beneath the seat, and, your mouth bloated with the sweet whiskey, held it out for her.

—That was the first time she looked scared. The first time I remember her looking at all. How old is that girl he run off with?

—Fifteen.

—And him.

—Waitresses guess around thirty.

—So the Searchers are after them?

—I know what I saw. And there's a way about the day, too, this changeability, moving between a tension and a surrender. My guy Hal sold two homes this morning. I got an offer on the Peterson warehouse that's been taken over by small lizards and the tawny owls that strip them from the dusty floors. Some firm from LA wants to move in. Linen and china, for retailers up and down the river a hundred miles. Tonight, I believe we'll have rain as though it will rain forever, in which I will pause, wrapped in my dark satin robe, some torpid lover waiting inside on a too-well-worn divan. And still I feel pursued. To sell right now is to fail, to fall into a negative space, where profit is like the surface of the silty quarry lake we'd see from beneath, after diving from the cliff of landfill, brushing bottom with our heads.

—They'll find them. Before morning. A fat green twenty says they do.

—Done.

### *Farther*

Evening closed over the stretch of fallow fields and range running the width of the valley. The group of thirteen horsemen dismounted at the bank of an ancient, oxbowed stream, which lay flat on the plane of the surrounding ground. Some cattle wandered and stood in the low, dead trees sprawled brokenly over both banks. Dried manure and splintered limbs covered the ground. Nests of brown grass grew around half-buried stones. A truck rumbled over the Old Freight Road on the other side of the hill behind them, accelerating to try and make the grade. In the dusk's distance, the steeples of the town glowed in the last light.

Several men lay on their bellies, drinking from the stream like cats. Two or three walked, heads bent rigidly, in widening

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circles around a beer bottle yet unmarked by manure, dirt, or water. The oldest of them leaned against his horse, a bulky dun that nodded its thick head at two cows directly across the stream. The old man buttoned and unbuttoned the top of his leather vest, crooked fingers working fast as a seamstress. His preacher's hat rested between his shoulder blades, secured with a cord around his neck. Black boots rose up close to his knees.

—There's another bottle in the water, Horace. What do you figure?

The old man nodded.

—I figure that the Lord's work will be done. I figure that the great niece of my first brother-in-law, a man with whom I have walked to the fag ends of the earth, won't long be the possession of a foreign body, a broken soul incarnating all that can go amiss among men. I figure they turned off the road and drove down the Muilfords' cattle track. Then they come down here; he sat by the creek and drank a couple beers while she did the moonlight turn and singing one of our family songs. He smelt the death in the air down here, saw a vision of an unmerciful god rise up through the weeds and the green fish in the water.

—Which niece, Horace?

—Little Katie.

—The blonde one that works nights at the diner?

—That's the one. Misbegotten, but barely, like the sound of a lisp in church, just trying to get things straight.

The old man sucked in his breath, hard, like a man hit in the belly, opened his mouth wide, and hooted, the noise like an owl gone mad with morning light. He lifted up his hands, balled them into fists and smacked them into his torso. He began a lurching dance, bouncing stiffly from one leg to the other, as the other Searchers formed a ragged circle around him.

A crop duster, World War One relic, returning to the town's airstrip from an afternoon's work in the neighboring valley, passed low over them. The old man ceased dancing, walked to his horse and remounted. A yellow drizzle had started. He bent over the horse's trembling ears and caressed a long wound under its eye, whispering.

—I'll eviscerate that cocksucker. I'll feed you his heart, big fella.

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*Romance*

In a room of the Salome Motor Court the girl sat on a chair before a large mirror bordered with chintz gilt, holding her face in her hands. Her hair was blonde, fine, and long, her eyes grey. A few freckles spotted the skin over the points of angular cheeks. She stared into the other eyes until the rest of the face disappeared, leaving only the streaked grey, the pulsing black pupils, the red-tinged whites, and she finally slid into the body in the mirror. She looked out upon her seated figure and him, lying belly down on the bed behind her.

—Would you like to smoke some more reefer?

Already her hands felt too large for her face, made her head seem small as a doll's.

—No, thank you. When will we get to Reno?

—We can get to Reno whenever you like, tonight, tomorrow, next week. Reno's not going anywhere.

She rose from the chair and went to sit next to him on the bed. She held his hand imploringly.

—I feel like I forgot where I came from. You know what I mean? I'm just here, now, and there's no place else. Yesterday I went to school and Mrs. Kettleson grabbed my ear and pulled me out of the classroom because I'd fell asleep. Where is that?

He sat up, looking away from her.

—That's Midgeville.

—Midgeville?

—Yeah, Midgeville, the town of midges. Mrs. Kettleson lays eggs in the smelly corners of Brock Pond. She flies to school on transparent wings.

She gave him, turning to her, a funny smile.

—You don't even know her.

—Yes, but I know her type.

—Will you tell another story?

—I can't.

—Why?

—It embarrasses me. It undermines our principles.

—I'll scream and send you to jail if you don't.

He cleared his throat theatrically, touched a dime-sized bruise

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on her forehead, and sat silent for a moment.

—Okay—this is an oldie. When I was a child I found I could turn myself into animals. See, I was a young voyeur. On summer afternoons when I was supposed to be picking raspberries with the gypsy children that lived on the fringe of our land, I would sneak back inside the house, upstairs, and lay my ear flat on the thin door of my older brother's bedroom, imagining myself in a strange motel, listening for the song of love, knotted and raspy and raw as it was, that the oafish boy somehow managed to wring from an epicene rich girl fooled by his amateur poetry. One day my brother was put off, for the lass refused to engage until she read him a poem she'd found on an old scrap of toilet paper. She recited, 'If I were a dog, I'd run fast over the forest floor, barking for joy and chasing the whippoorwills into the trees.' My brother laughed a brittle little laugh, and I knew my whole body would ache from the strain of the silent lean if I waited for him to revive his chances after that foolish response. I retired to my own lair. Whereupon, straying from the solitary reverie involving the usual characters—i.e., a pale naked girl splayed like a child on my brother's dirty bed—I fell instead to strangely considering my life as the dog in the girl's poem. I fell so far, in fact, that my next moment of self-consciousness occurred when a junky pickup missing its radiator grill gave me a nasty honk as I rolled joyously in some dead smell buried in the high weeds at the edge of the highway. Around this time I passed into what my cheerfully heathen family called my 'Catholic phase.' Near the end of the summer I insisted that my parents send me to a local parish school. I made my demand before them at the dinner table with my arms stoutly crossed, purple rosary beads and wooden crucifix twined too obviously around my wrist. Across the room, I caught my reflection in the hutch's mirror. The skin on my face had darkened, greyed, and, by gently biting the interior flesh of my cheeks, I had pulled my face taut over my cheekbones. With my thin shoulders drawn up high and my bony fingers laid weblike over my elbows, my small ears pointed like the corners of linen, I looked just like a bat hanging in the shallow darkness. While my mother was laughing, asking me if I was fond—sexually intrigued with nuns, I felt my teeth grow into the folds of my cheek. My eyes elongated in a squint

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that pulled on the crown of my head. The bones of my arms telescoped and bent. I felt like my whole body was being swallowed by the inhalation of one breath, becoming very small and light, able to fit within the lines of the mirror. The dinner table disappeared. I was hanging upside down from shadowy beams transecting a rectory. Two sisters, their habits swaying below me, walked away from one another down a line of candles, lighting each as they went. Blood all pooling at the top of my head, I thought about Catholic school and punishment at the hands of chaste women, stories of wooden rulers and bare skin. I thought of Anselm, the gypsy boy who had been born with one eye, finding a hedge apple that morning and holding it up to the light as though trying to see through its warty heft, then pressing it down onto the empty, brown socket on his face. The dark air around me rippled—I felt the sound of the hiss of the wick as it was struck into flame. I tried to talk to the nuns, to tell them who I was, the names of books that I'd read, to tell them that I was a boy from forever, that I wanted a smack from the ruler, but the words in my brain spat out a squeak. I dropped from the beam, out of the shadows, and swept low over the candles, brushing the flames with my wings. The sisters' look of terror gave me pleasure, strange, as I had never been a brutal or cruel child. I flew out an open window into the light darkness of the summer evening. Yellow storm clouds collected on the far horizon. The warm air swelled under my hairy belly and I drifted high on a draft. I passed over a group of horsemen clustered at the edge of a dying stream. I glided over the last lights of the motel and diner that sat on the fringe of the darkened town until I saw my own house. Inside, my mother was laughing, telling my brother who had come sullenly down to dinner that I had demanded to become a Catholic and then suddenly turned into a bat. I never went home again.

She had hooked one slender, ringed finger from each hand through two belt loops of his jeans. Her fingernails, painted Mediterranean Coral, scratched slightly around his navel.

—How did you get so crazy?

—I'm not crazy.

—You're crazy as a loon. The first night I seen you, when you came to the diner, that night I had a dream that you were a ghost.

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You came and sat in my room and watched me sleep while I was dreaming of you and then you picked me up like a girl and put me in the back seat of my daddy's black Studebaker. And then you drove me to the ocean. Remember, I don't eat fish or anything else that comes from water. I mean you drove me to the ocean while I was dreaming that you were doing it. I was asleep in the dream, right? That's how you talk.

—See, now I'm embarrassed.

She turned her head sideways, moving it beneath his chin, came up at his face slowly, her lips parted. When she kissed him, it felt like steam was rising from his throat, curling around his thick tongue. She tried to look into his eyes, but he was staring out through the stained curtains again, watching the headlights move through the rain on the highway, watching the Motel sign blink its alluring offer, 'Vacancy.'

. . . *everywhere*

I've always gone too far. Mine eyes, they've seen the glory of the naked one defined. That's just what I mean, that excess. Bizarre, she said, and scuttled back to sleep. Bizarre—once a statement of effort, a thrust at defining some character of beauty. Now, if you get sent to the hospital, the word's followed by "delusional," "aphasic," other words that lead down fluorescent corridors. Shut up. Shut up and think, as the script instructs me to say to myself now. And all I can think of are the times when dreams are dazzling stories looping through you as you sleep. Those times you settle your head onto a pillow into which the scent of lost love has been so deeply impressed that it never disappears completely. Have a heart, she said, rolling coldly over. But this one sleeping beside me now has never even been to the hospital, has cried warm tears over her grandpa's awful grave. Now, I dream only of rain in greens and greys. I stand in an unknown street and gape at the sidewalks of living faces with eyes painted on while yellow step-vans full of fresh dry cleaning or boxes of frozen fish splash warm, cinder-filled water onto my back. I dream about wanting to be swept away by a flood, to roll with sturgeon and tree limbs through the locks. Have a heart, she said, as I turned away. I have so much to tell you, I whisper. But please god, seriously, offer me a light. Set



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something down outside this cold motel window besides a greasy cafe across the highway and an empty motel swimming pool. I can't take her back. I know, should never have even set foot in a town, know better than to stop anywhere but the blank spaces. I tried justice too, to justify, at least, going through the lists of historical and literary figures and their pubescent wives. To no avail. I'm bored and growing sullen with this particular travail. Perhaps she'll find out I'm nothing. Dear diary, my fingers once again have the inimitable odor of cigarettes, my brow flecked with the grit of driving too long in a day. Ah, but this life's candy. I took a baby, and I must persevere.

### *Pulpit*

Brothers and sisters, we cannot forever cast off the danger of the night! Walk into a wet, groaning forest, a darkened garage, the low door of an abandoned mill, and cross again the threshold to the hell that ever lingers in our ancient minds! Yes, when the old man finally hitches his steed to a dripping pine behind our lodging, will we be prepared? When the ring of men closes round our room, when we are lost out on the road, asleep in our saggy clothes, the reading light still spread like faith around us, there's no way, there will be no time to prepare for a final abduction. My children, even as the radio hisses static, even as a shower head drips onto a rotting bathmat, as the Pakistani proprietress fumbles with her slippers to stagger up and let in the anxious cat, we are surrounded by night. Silence! A velvet cord is pulled, a curtain drops or rises, the room is crowded with men in long, dirty leather coats, beads of rain on their curling mustaches, long knives swinging against pelvises. Soon, the carpet will be covered with dark footprints. You who have transgressed, each of you know this is exactly what you have lived for. When the end finally begins, it's like eating a fleshy eel or a white honeycomb of tripe for the first time. And maybe, maybe it is just a clumsy fear of the unknown, maybe that's all. To be led away at gunpoint by the shadow having gained substance will seem no more strange than chewing once the thing's been put in your mouth, will it? To be led away at gunpoint, to be led from your room, out into the night, to be blindfolded and tied onto a shivering horse behind some wet

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Searcher stinking with old sweat and cattle. Listen. You know you've broken some rule, even if it didn't exist before you crossed its seamless border. The lord's truth, there is always a strand of guilt somewhere, like a prehistoric plant waving in the depths of a warm sea, waiting to be given a means of expression, and we know that not a one of us is clean.

### *Breakfast*

—Lubricated. The eggs and potatoes are lubricated. The coffee is boiled with smelts and the sweet rolls come in on creaky wagons. Our newspaper, carelessly left out in the rain, bleeds down the wet front page. Butter knives clink on chipped saucers. The diner is abuzz, again, and we will all be satisfied. Having come out the other side, I find that the tension, the anxiety of an unresolved scandal was perhaps preferable.

—Hand me that sports page.

—The New York Giants fall again, lose two to Pittsburgh, continuing their late spring slump. The Polo Grounds sway in riot.

—Well? What about it. The buzz.

—The buzz? And you, the morning is yet young, lingering close to the razor edge of rising. What of your trysting?

—That's all over. I know when to knock off. So pay up.

—Yes, but all yesterday's sundry deals fell through. The Californians grew fearful of floods and local recession, went for a space on the Missouri. A home was found infested with millions of silverfish. The buyer's mother was struck by the boom of a crane that swung through an office window in Chicago—he took it as a sign to keep renting. Where do they go, lost transactions? The estate becomes less and less real. My warehouses and ranches shimmer and disappear.

—Where's the girl?

—The girl has been sent to be detoxified, debriefed. Taken away by ambulance, the lights rolling red along Route Four, rain darkening the green glass behind which she lies, tear streaked, trying to stay awake and prolong her blue ecstasy of grief. The dank motel smell still in her shirt, she wraps her arms about herself, unbalanced, nearly sliding to the floor when the driver passes over the railyard without so much as slowing.

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—And him?

—A strange business. Arkadia Townsend, humble servant of the lord, threw on her raincoat, probably about the time you lifted Peter the Great from his slumber, and went to the corrals to hay off her skittish Arabians. The horses stood together at the back fence, steam rising from their soaked, bur-laden grey coats, heads down in the raspberry patch Arkadia has meant to fence off for ten years now. Fie, fie on you transgressive nags, she said, in her hoarse musty voice. Parting their rumps, the corpse was discovered in all its illustrious stillness. The knees bent up and canted to one side in the famous death-on-the-farm posture, still fully clothed, thinning hair matted to slug-colored scalp, clasping a blank birth certificate.

—The Searchers. Their old railroad days method.

—His heart was torn out, like gloves removed from a box. Arkadia apparently fainted dead away. Her husband found her lying across him, her ear pushed inside the hole just above his ivory sternum, the horses nuzzling her pockets for carrots. Everyone is convinced that his death, the failure of his profligacy, is much more rewarding than the scandal. Yet I say the scandal can not be diminished, for from it this fine thing was spun. By the time Sheriff Cowl swayed through the diner doors, come for his biscuits and gravy, the sun had cracked through the clouds. The buzz in here swirled into a funnel and came out as rapture—but for the swiveling creak of the sheriff on his stool, the whole place was silent. He rose, finally, looking out over us, cleared his throat and said, Y'all heard the one about the nun and the fish? And just like that, everyone got back to breakfast. ♪

# THE WAY IN FROM THE SUBURBS

“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, they rest from their labors,  
and their works follow after them.” (Rev. 14:13)

## 1. November in D. C.

The gas-fed “candle” will not burn  
In St. Ann’s of Tenleytown,  
For all I’ve paid my quarters.  
Some other pathway in I need  
Through the brief days of brown leaves  
And stubble, along these traces of the dead,  
A stairway down the heartbeats into some  
Deep way of blood and pulse,  
Inside of the inside.  
There I’ll forge a way toward prayer for you,  
My dear one dead,  
Mother-in-law, mother more to me.

If I toss a grappling hook  
Back into the years with you,  
Some twitch of elemental touch begins.  
Yet I know your gentleness will need great quiet  
To discern.  
An owl hoots as I sit and listen inward—  
Bird of your spirit—  
So round and open were your gray-green eyes  
In their folds of skin in perfect almond shape.  
Not a seance I want, but a oneness with the mingled  
notes  
Of you.

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Once at the other solstice  
And half a world away  
We sat with coffee by your patio lilac bush,  
You speaking your bell-tones of soft high German.  
A bee lit on the skin of your wrist.  
Motionless we stayed a ponderous long time  
While it cleaned its forelegs of pollen,  
Turned antennae north and south,  
And finally flew off.  
“She didn’t sting me,” you said, “And I didn’t kill her.”  
Forbearance, and recovery of spirit—  
Your own soft spoken versions of them— stretched  
Beneath the laughs that bubbled out  
While you bounced around the living room  
To offer treats.  
I seek to feel them now,  
The very ones, and thus  
I pray for you,  
Though dead.

Or rather, with you.  
For why should the blessed dead need any prayers of  
mine?  
A muddy pond of perplexity  
Is all my offering mind can be, and yet  
I crave to bring you some efflux of me  
That might attend and complement  
The recursiveness of your happy state—  
I crave to ask if you would say my name  
As you always did when you opened the door

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And drew me in,  
And set the kettle on to sing.

*Dies irae?* No, that passed you by  
In afterlife, I'm sure.  
You'd had enough of wrath and tears  
In two world wars,  
Refugee flight, hunger, loss of all belongings,  
Hitching rides on trucks,  
Children dragging at both hands,  
Brother's death and father's,  
Husband's temper fits and anguish landing on you—  
Years of scrambling for a lunch  
Of seagull eggs and small potatoes gleaned  
After harvest.  
Forbearance, and recovery of spirit,  
Laughter even, somehow yet you found.  
*Recordare, Jesu pie*—'Remember  
That we are the reason for your earth sojourn—  
*Ne me perdas illa die*—do not lose us'  
In the night where we might not find  
A way  
To touch hands of mind and air,  
Beyond the end of tears.

## 2. Place-Time Unposted

*Louischen, Dein Kaffee, bitte sehr, und Marzipan,  
Es ist nicht wie Du denkst—  
Take marzipan, and coffee, dear,  
It's not how you think among us here*

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Of the inside in—  
Joy nodes in the humming we are, no two alike.  
The all around that we are, it hums,  
It sings, it curves down rounding,  
Endless outspread—each of us glittering an unrepeated  
color.  
On the roll of the curving star clouds we billow,  
On the curl of the rolling neutrinos we zip twitch—  
Our black-float light place surges nowhere, allwhere.  
We are the swirl of the ‘yes’ and the ‘you’ and the ‘we  
together,’  
Down inside in.  
Out again always we surge to the green of a burgeoning,  
More out to a knock down rock,  
Yet further out to a black cold lump, interstellar,  
Outmost out to a bound heart dead.  
Then again begins the surge back in,  
Through darkness hovering and still,  
Through light to a pull down pulse,  
We in the one,  
We each one,  
Each point all light,  
All place no place,  
Down to the shimmering inmost in,  
Tight bundle rounding,  
Beaming it—for instance—your way,  
Love.  
You adjoin us near  
On the space-time valulines, the near side end side  
Of reality rhomboid.  
In the air we touch your cheek,

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In your eyelids we float,  
In droplets falling breast to toes  
We lathe you.  
In Danzig I felt these touches from the other side,  
My grandmother's breath on my cheek, mint sweet  
As she took care to be  
While she fed me her last noodles  
In the Kaiser's time,  
In my eyelids my father's back in a window lit,  
Image that warm-washed down me in soft bath water.

But in Zopot we talked of other things,  
In our sand baskets  
Chill on the beach—  
Or walking downvillage for gooseberry torts with cream  
And the Danish coffee.  
Guenther Grass might have talked of them,  
Strange man, that messer of his own nest—  
We didn't think well of him in Danzig.  
Now *t'siuss*, my dear, go well and safely,  
All your way home.

### 3. Bird of Her Spirit

Thanks to you for the company, Uhu,  
Owl who glides by my window  
Almost brushing the pane,  
Flight angled for the roof overhang  
Where you will nest and brood, come spring.



# FAT

The woman's body was vast, soft and white. Folds of skin formed around the straps of her brassiere, a complicated, heavily stitched and structured affair. She wore baggy white nylon standard-issue waist-high panties. She was a great white thing in the locker room. All around her, taut youthful skin wriggled into the Lycra uniform of the health club.

Disco music throbbed from speakers and reverberated in the tile room. Mirrors on every side made the room seem riotous, though the women in it were quiet. They painstakingly avoided looking at each other directly, although by exercising her peripheral vision, Rene could see the fat woman bending over her gym bag. Next to her, a slim blonde in thong underwear and no bra had taken off her dress and put it on a hanger, taken off her slip, carefully folded it and tucked it in her gym bag, taken off her pantyhose and folded them before putting them in her bag. Now she was slathering lotion on her body, but the fat woman appeared oblivious to the contrast between her enormous softness and the blonde's taut curves; nor did she notice that other women in the locker room were sneaking looks. And she could not know that in those they found peculiar solace. There is little so reassuring to a woman as another who is less attractive, and fat was particularly comforting.

Rene sat on a bench lacing up a pair of perfectly white aerobic shoes. Looking up a moment, she caught sight of the woman in the mirror and paused to watch her pull black pantyhose over legs laced with broken capillaries. Inexplicably, tears sprung to Rene's eyes and she looked away.

The fat woman's pantyhose were semi-sheer, and she next pulled on an old-fashioned black scoop-neck short-sleeved leotard.

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ment to accommodate her bulk, or did she squeeze herself into an average sized apartment? Had she been a fat little girl, tormented by children in the schoolyard, or had the fat come on in layers in response to the disappointments of adulthood?

Once, Rene put a pillow under a sundress and tried to imagine herself as fat as the fat woman. But even when she squinted her eyes and puffed out her cheeks, she still just looked like a thin woman with a pillow under her dress. She couldn't emulate the head-to-toe layer, couldn't fake fat elbows and knees, fat shoulders and fingers, a fat back with ripples like breasts cascading down it.

When Rene got depressed or tense or worried, food lost all appeal to her. It became an irritating necessity of life, an intrusion into her brooding. She knew this could not be so for the fat woman. Sometimes when Rene was served a plate of food, she would look at it and it would suddenly appear to be pre-digested, like the regurgitation of someone else's meal. The fat woman, she felt certain, never saw food as disgusting. It was always wonderful, always good, and unlike many of the things Rene craved most—love and success and profound contentment—it was simple to attain. Rene found gratification, in everything from her job to sex, elusive, if not impossible. What would it be like to have a desire so easily met?

One day, Rene decided to follow the fat woman home. It was a spontaneous decision, made in the locker room as she pulled on a sweatsuit over her shiny black workout clothes. She noticed that the fat woman was nearly dressed and ready to go herself, and so she decided, without thinking long or hard about it, that she would see for herself what she could about how the fat woman lived. Perhaps there was a secret there somewhere. Perhaps, Rene thought, somewhere deep in the back of her mind, her own little body had a fat woman waiting to get out. Perhaps there was something she could learn.

They rode the elevator down together in silence. As they left the building, Rene turned in the opposite direction, walked a few steps, put on a pantomime of, "Oh, gee, what am I doing?" and turned around to walk in the same direction as the fat woman, about 50 feet behind her.

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It was an effort for Rene to walk at the same pace as the fat woman, who walked only about ten feet for every twenty that Rene could normally cover. Rene dawdled as best she could, looking in store windows, stopping to untie and retie her sneakers, checking her watch and scrabbling around in her gym bag as if to find something small and crucial.

She noticed that the fat woman did not stop and look in boutique windows as Rene might do along the same route, but kept her eyes straight ahead, lurching along with a strange sort of rolling walk, her thighs rubbing, her arms swinging out from her sides.

As Rene finished tying her shoelace for the third time in as many blocks, she noticed that the fat woman had paused outside a store. She peered in the window, appeared to think a moment, then walked in.

As Rene approached the building, she was hit by the smell of cinnamon, butter and sugar wafting from the open door. It was a bakery, its window full of tarts and cakes and plump brown breads. Rene pretended to look at shoes in a shop next door until the fat woman came out with a greasy white paper bag.

As she walked, the woman reached into the bag and pulled out a chocolate-dipped pastry. She ate it quickly. Rene could see the faces of people walking towards them registering disgust at the sight of the fat woman engaged in the very activity that had brought her to such a level of social unacceptableness.

There was a small park across the avenue, and the fat woman crossed over and entered through wrought iron gates. Rene crossed behind her, then lingered outside the gates to see what the woman would do next. The fat woman stood a moment, looking around her, then picked an empty bench in the sun and settled her large bulk onto it before opening up the bag again and pulling out another pastry.

This one she ate slowly, savoring it, licking chocolate from her fingers and seeming to roll each bite around in her mouth, like a connoisseur with wine, before swallowing it. Rene thought she had never seen anyone enjoy anything quite as much. She watched as the fat woman ate three more, each one more slowly and with equal relish. Then she stood up, crumpling the empty

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bag and tossing it into a nearby trash can, and crossed through the park and out another gate. Rene trailed behind her.

The neighborhood on the other side of the park was more residential, with tree-lined streets and attractive, well-maintained brownstones. The fat woman's gait didn't slow or speed up, but she trundled along as steadily as a tractor. When she came to a neat brownstone with a tree out front and flower boxes in the first floor windows, she heaved herself up the steps of the stoop. She paused to rest a moment at the top, though it had only been about ten steps, and then opened the door and disappeared inside.

Rene waited a minute before turning and walking slowly home. She paused outside the bakery that the fat woman had gone into and looked at the pastries in the window, but felt no desire to go in. Even the smell that followed a customer out the door didn't tempt her. Her attention drifted to a boutique next door and a dark red dress with a low back. She briefly considered going in and trying it on, but decided that she would have no place to wear it and so just continued on her way.

After that first time, Rene followed the fat woman frequently. The first couple of times, she just did it because they happened to be leaving around the same time. Then she started planning her own workouts according to the fat woman's schedule. The fat woman's route didn't change, nor did her routine of stopping at the bakery and then in the park. The only thing that did change were the treats she bought herself. The second time Rene followed her, the indulgence was three large, gooey cinnamon buns. She didn't eat these on the street but saved them all for the park bench. It was a sight, Rene thought, watching this grown woman—this enormous grown woman—getting honey on her face, licking her fingers, getting crumbs stuck in her hair. After she was done, the fat woman rummaged in the large, shapeless black purse she always carried until she found a Wash 'n' Dry with which she carefully cleaned her face and her hands. She pulled out a brush and brushed her hair. Then she sat quietly a few minutes after she was done, basking, Rene thought, in an afterglow.

Another time, Rene was amazed to see the fat woman come out of the bakery with an entire pumpernickel. There was a deli

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down the block, into which the fat woman went, and came back out with a paper bag. On the park bench, she opened the bag and pulled out a small jar of peanut butter. She tore off a chunk of bread and with it scooped up a dollop of peanut butter. She ate the entire loaf of bread in this fashion. Then she carefully screwed the lid back on the peanut butter and stashed it in her purse. Rene wondered if it was full of food left over from other snacks.

Rene began to enjoy the stops in the park and sometimes, while the fat woman was in the bakery, she would dash into the deli and buy herself a pint of orange juice to drink while she waited for the fat woman to finish eating. Once, Rene got so pleasantly involved watching a group of little girls jumping rope nearby, she didn't notice that the fat woman had finished her half-dozen jelly donuts and started out of the park. Rene had to run to catch up. After the snack break, the fat woman would continue her trundle home, never stopping anywhere else. Once she ran into someone she knew, a young woman of average size and attractiveness, but Rene couldn't get close enough to hear their conversation. At any rate, it didn't last very long before they said their good-byes and walked off in opposite directions. Perhaps the woman was embarrassed to be seen talking to the fat woman in public, Rene thought. She thought she might be, as though people might find her fat by association, or perhaps unable to find normal friends.

A far more curious thing happened a week later. After the park stop (two glazed donuts and a chocolate chip cookie), the fat woman ran into a man she knew on the street. Not just a man, a beautiful man—one of the most beautiful men Rene had ever seen. He wasn't fat at all. Just the opposite—he was quite slender with a halo of mahogany-colored curly hair and honey-colored skin.

He and the fat woman greeted each other familiarly and fell into pace together comfortably. The beautiful man slowed his step to her lurching gait, and they talked as they walked together. At the fat woman's building, they climbed the stairs together. The fat woman unlocked the door and the beautiful man held it open for her and then followed her in. The door slammed behind them, leaving Rene fairly dizzy with curiosity on the sidewalk half a block away.

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But Rene learned nothing about the fat woman. She never struck up a conversation with her because she didn't know quite what to say, and the fat woman always seemed particularly intent on getting in and out of the locker room as efficiently as possible. Rene didn't blame her. The gym didn't seem like a place for fat people. There was barely room between the benches and the lockers for the fat woman, and Rene wondered what it could be like for the fat woman to see herself reflected hundreds of times in the mirrors that covered nearly every wall. Most of the women in the locker room watched themselves in the mirrors out of the corners of their eyes as they moved around. Their self scrutiny was intense as they dressed and put their make-up on after their workouts. Rene never saw the fat woman pause in front of a mirror.

Yet the fat woman didn't hide her body in shame either, the way some women did, scurrying into private dressing rooms to change, emerging swathed in enormous t-shirts. The fat woman seemed neither proud nor ashamed of her appearance. She seemed to treat it as inevitable as daybreak.

Rene envied this. She tried not looking in the mirror at all one day at the gym, but before long her eyes were irresistibly drawn to her own image. She couldn't bear to not look. The mirror held the world's most important information: who she was. Without that reflection of herself, Rene lost track of her own outline.

The air had the crisp edge of fall one day when Rene was following the fat woman home. On this day, the woman bought three jelly donuts and stopped into the deli for a cup of hot chocolate to wash them down. It was chilly in the park and there weren't many people around, but the fat woman sat on a bench and ate her treats slowly and with as much pleasure as Rene had witnessed that first day. Rene was shivering a little by the time the fat woman finished and resumed her walk back home. But this time, when she got to the top of the stairs at her building, she didn't go in. Instead, she turned around and looked straight at Rene, who stood a few doors down.

"Well," said the fat woman. "This is where I live. Is that what you want to know?"

Rene turned red.

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"Y-you must be mistaken . . ." she stammered.

"You've been following me," said the fat woman.

"No . . ." said Rene.

"Yes, you have. I've seen you. Lots of times. I figured you'd get bored eventually, but I must be more interesting than I thought."

Rene said nothing, could think of nothing to say that might save her from the situation.

"So, what is it?" the fat woman asked. "Did you think I'd live in the zoo? A piano crate? Does it surprise you that I live here?" She gestured towards the pretty brownstone.

"No," said Rene, still flustered. "Of course not. I just . . ."

"You just were curious about the cow, is that it?"

"No," said Rene. "No. I mean, yes, I was curious. But you're not a cow . . ." Her voice trailed off, knowing that she could only sound like a liar or a flatterer if she took the sentence further.

"Well," said the fat woman. "You might as well come inside. You'll be amazed by my furniture."

"Really," said Rene "I don't . . ."

But the fat woman already had the door open. "Come on, then."

After the sunshine of the street, the building hallway was dark. It smelled of onions and cats and perfume, a sort of warm, homey hodgepodge of smells. Rene slipped in, and the fat woman let the door slam behind them, then started hoisting herself up the stairs to the second floor.

"Fortunately, I only live one flight up," she said between huffs and puffs. "Otherwise, I might lose weight."

Rene had to take one step at a time and pause between each in order to stay behind the fat woman. She had never imagined how much effort could be in such a simple thing as going upstairs. She felt even more respect for the fat woman's efforts at the gym.

"You'd think after going to the gym for six months, this would get easier," said the fat woman, pausing at the top to catch her breath. "Maybe if I played Pointer Sisters at maximum volume as I climbed, it would be easier."

Rene laughed, but she wished the woman would stop talking about her size. It seemed inappropriate. Fat was something to be ignored or circumvented delicately, like an awkward moment. For

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the fat woman to talk about it was to invite Rene to mention it and that, of course, would be the height of rudeness.

The fat woman had her keys out and was opening the door to a front apartment. As she opened it, two gray tabby cats—not particularly fat, Rene noted irrationally—dashed out, then followed the fat woman back in, twining around her ankles.

Rene hung back in the hallway, feeling awkward.

“Well?” said the fat woman. “Are you coming in?”

She was standing by the door, holding it open, expectantly. There was nothing for Rene to do but go in.

The door opened directly into a small hallway, and Rene followed the fat woman into the kitchen right off of it. The house smelled not unpleasantly of the morning’s breakfast. French toast, Rene thought. The kitchen was small—the fat woman and Rene and two cats just about filled all available space—and extremely tidy. The cabinets were bright white trimmed with cherry red. The floor was red. Cheerful blue and white checked towels hung by the sink, and on the counter was a row of clear glass canisters filled with macaroni, tea bags, cat food, and sugar cookies. On a shelf above the counter was a collection of ceramic salt and pepper shakers shaped like dice and cows in hats and palm trees. In one corner of the room was a small table with a red and white cloth; on it was a sugar bowl shaped like a little cottage, and alongside it were two blue ladder back chairs.

The fat woman opened the jar of cat food and poured some into the cats’ dishes. They set upon it immediately, purring loudly. Then the fat woman opened the refrigerator and pulled out a glass pitcher decorated with multicolor polka-dots and full of an unnaturally red liquid.

“Kool-Aid?” she asked Rene.

Rene smiled. “I haven’t had Kool-Aid since I was a kid.” She could smell it from across the small room, sweet and, somehow, red. Cheerful. Comforting.

The fat woman frowned. “I know. Grownups don’t drink Kool-Aid. But unless you want water or milk, it’s all I have. You don’t have to have any.”

“No, I’d love some,” said Rene. “Really. I used to love Kool-Aid.”



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The fat woman took out two tall glasses, polka-dotted like the pitcher, filled them with ice and Kool-Aid, and handed one to Rene before easing herself into one of the chairs. Rene took a sip of her drink. She didn't remember it being so sweet. It made her teeth ache. The fat woman took a long swallow from her glass and motioned Rene to sit in the other chair. Rene put her gym bag on the floor and sat.

"So," said the fat woman. An awkward pause followed.

"My name is Rene," Rene offered.

"And you're here because . . . ?" the fat woman asked.

Rene looked down. "I don't know, really. Because you invited me?"

"Well, you must have something on your mind. I've seen you watching me at the gym, too. I assume it has something to do with my size. I can't imagine what else about me you would find so fascinating."

"I suppose that has something to do with it," Rene almost whispered.

"That and what else?"

Rene was silent a moment. "I suppose that has everything to do with it," she said finally.

The fat woman put her glass down heavily and sighed with what sounded like impatience.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I'm fat. I'm very, very fat. Probably the fattest person you've ever met. Certainly the fattest person at the gym. I am enormous. Immense. A very wide load. What would you like me to do about it?"

Rene was silent.

"What's it . . . like?" she asked finally.

It was the fat woman's turn to be silent. Then she shrugged.

"I don't know. The usual. People look at you as if you eat your young. Nobody wants to sit next to you on the bus. Everybody tries to tell you what to eat. Shopping is a pain in the ass. So what? Basically, what it's like is that on the inside, I'm me, and on the outside I'm this enormous thing. So most of the time I ignore the thing and pay attention to the inside." She took another swallow of Kool-Aid. "The outside shouldn't drink Kool-Aid," she said. "But the inside likes it and says fuck all of you who think I shouldn't

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"No. Now he's a bank teller. It's a stupid job, but he seems to like it. I'd rather he worked in a bookstore."

"Will you get married?"

"Maybe." The fat woman was quiet a moment. "Maybe not." Rene heard the shower.

"Were you always fat?" she asked quietly.

"Always," said the fat woman, with what sounded like satisfaction in her voice. "From the time I was old enough to eat solid food. My first words were Pop Tart."

Rene smiled.

"I was always fat," the fat woman continued, "and I never wanted to be. I tried every damn diet I could find. Once, when I was in high school, I went on a carrot diet. I got carotene poisoning and turned orange. Another time, my mother decided I would go on a liquid diet. Mother was quite slim. Really lovely. She's dead now." The fat woman shrugged. "Anyway, she put me on this liquid diet. I did it for about a week and then passed out in math class. They gave me a note to go home. I went to McDonald's and ate four Big Macs . . . with fries . . . and chocolate shakes. Two of them." The fat woman smiled as if at a pleasant memory. "I was hopeless at dieting. That's why when I turned 30, I said fuck it. No more. I wanted to see how fat I could get." She laughed a little. "Pretty damn fat."

"And that's when you met Alex?"

"No, we were already dating. Actually, when we met, I was almost as thin as I had ever been. Even so, I was pretty fat. But he liked me anyway. I guess that's one reason I was able to swear off dieting. I mean, who needs to be thin when you've got love? Isn't that what everyone wants to be thin for? Isn't that what you want to be thin for? You got a boyfriend?"

Rene was startled. "Me? No, not right now."

"So you figure if you get tight buns and perky boobs, you're gonna find love, right?"

"I don't know," said Rene. "I never really thought about it like that."

"Maybe you don't think about it, but that's what it's about. What do you need buns of steel for otherwise? Hell, you can't see them. They're for other people to look at."

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"But it's healthy."

"Yeah, right. Self-deprivation, vanity, bulimia, low self-esteem. Great stuff."

"I'm not . . ."

"So anyway," the fat woman interrupted Rene. "You heard the term fat and happy? That's what happened to me. I got happy. I got fatter and fatter. And I still have Alex. This incredibly beautiful man is here with me."

She hoisted herself out of the chair, waddled across the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. She pulled out the Kool-Aid, topped off Rene's barely touched glass and refilled her own.

"Me," she said, as she put the pitcher back in the refrigerator. "Not some skinny nine-year-old-boy ass." She smiled and slapped her own formidable rear end. "Me."

Suddenly, the smile dropped from her face, and she looked at Rene as if she had forgotten she was there.

"You probably think he's just some kind of a sicko chubby chaser."

Rene didn't know what she thought. She wanted to believe that the beautiful man loved the fat woman, but that went against what she had always understood about life. And she wanted to believe that the fat woman was as satisfied with herself as she appeared, but Rene couldn't even come close to imagining that. She didn't know a single woman, not one, who was satisfied with herself. How could it be that this woman—a grotesquerie by nearly anyone's definition—was content? It was not possible in Rene's world. But in this tidy little apartment, the fat woman got the beautiful man and didn't need the mirror to know herself.

The fat woman walked past Rene out of the kitchen, her hip brushing Rene's shoulder as she passed. Its softness surprised Rene—she had imagined the woman's body as being as firmly packed as the uncomfortable wingback chair in the rarely used living room of her parents' house. The chair was overstuffed, the fabric was slippery. When she was a little girl, trying to behave for her parents' company, it was all Rene could do to keep from sliding off the chair's fat, unyielding cushion. As nice as the chair looked, it was horribly uncomfortable to sit on. But the woman's body felt more like the water balloons she and her brother used

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to throw at each other during summer holidays at their grandparents' house. Rene had liked to hold her water-filled balloons for a while; she liked the way they felt, the smooth skin outside, all soft and wobbly. She wanted to reach out and touch the fat woman again, but she only got up and followed her out of the kitchen and into the living room.

The living room, too, was tidy and prettily decorated. There was a dark green couch covered with plump pillows, a thick natural-colored rug, a huge vase in one corner holding an arrangement of dried grasses. Through two big windows, the late afternoon light created patterns on the honey-colored hardwood floor. The fat woman stood in the middle of the room. Rene stood by the doorway. And through a doorway on the other side of the room walked Alex. He had changed into jeans and a black t-shirt and his hair hung in damp ringlets around his face.

Both Rene and the fat woman turned and looked at him as he walked in. He smiled a little uncomfortably.

"Rene is a sociologist," said the fat woman.

"Oh?" said Alex, clearly confused.

"We met at the gym. She was curious about me."

Rene and Alex looked at the fat woman but said nothing.

"She wondered what it was like to be so fat."

Rene felt herself flush and Alex looked at the floor.

"She thinks you must be some kind of nut to want me."

"No," said Rene.

The fat woman looked at her sharply.

"You do. I know you do."

"How do you know?" Rene felt herself getting hot.

"Because everybody does. Hell, sometimes I do. You just don't see beautiful men with fat women. It's just not done. We're freaks."

"Hey," said Alex, mildly.

"What do you know?" Rene asked, her voice strangled in her frustration with the fat woman's surliness. "What do you know about me and what I think? You don't know. At least I admitted I don't understand you. At least I'm interested to know. You just decide. You just decide what other people think."

"I know. I know what everybody thinks because I see it in their faces every day. I don't notice you following any of the thong

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bimbos home from the gym. No, you followed me because I'm the freak."

"Sweetheart . . ." Alex said, but the fat woman waved impatiently and silenced him.

"But not everybody thinks I'm disgusting. Alex doesn't care that I'm fat. He sees right through it, right through it. He loved me when I weighed 100 pounds less; he'd love me if I weighed 100 pounds more. He just loves me, no matter what. Right Alex? You don't care how I look, do you? You don't even see the fat anymore. You don't even notice, do you?" Rene and the fat woman looked at Alex, who looked up like a startled deer.

One beat of silence dragged on to two and then three. It seemed to suck all the air from the room. The color drained from the fat woman's face. A sort of chaos cut loose in Rene's head, and she felt dizzy, as if the room was tipping right and left.

"I . . ." said Alex, his eyes still locked with the fat woman's.

The very air in the room seemed poised for something terrible, and Rene felt afraid.

"You can leave now," the fat woman said very quietly, her eyes not leaving Alex's face.

Rene and Alex looked at each other, unsure about who was being dismissed. The fat woman looked at Rene.

"You. You can leave now." She turned back to Alex.

Rene backed up slowly.

"Get out," said the fat woman quietly, through clenched teeth.

Rene turned and left the room, and slipped out of the apartment, closing the door quietly behind her. She stood in the hallway a moment, but heard nothing from the apartment, so she went down the stairs and out onto the building stoop.

She felt strangely relieved, lighthearted, happy. The streets were golden in the late afternoon sun. Rene stood at the top of the stairs and looked around her. She wanted to shout, she wanted to announce to the people hurrying home from work in the fading light that the world might get back on its axis after all. She practically capered down the steps and was turning up the street when she heard a voice from above.

"HEY!" The fat woman was calling out her window at Rene.

Rene stopped and looked up.

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“YOU LEFT YOUR SWEATY CLOTHES,” the fat woman yelled, hurling Rene’s gym bag out the window. It landed on the sidewalk in front of the building. Rene picked it up without comment, slung it over her shoulder and turned to walk away.

“HEY!” the fat woman hollered.

Rene turned and looked again.

“MY NAME IS JANE!” the fat woman yelled, and then she disappeared, slamming the window shut. ∞

# HOW TO FALL IN LOVE WITH COUNTRY MUSIC

it creeps into your life  
like fungus  
like cold sores  
like your old high school girlfriend  
suddenly appearing  
at the doorstep  
missing half of her teeth  
and claiming to be the mother  
of two of your children

it simply wears on you  
the twang of the steel guitar  
grating against your better judgement  
always the sad voice recreating  
a life of divorcees and pick-up trucks  
and bar fights and driving the lone road  
to Omaha  
and the more you listen  
the easier it is to believe  
your mother really *did* run off with the mailman  
and you *were* fired for pissing on the boss's desk  
and the woman you love  
loves your best friend's  
dad

[stanza break]

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you don't fall in love with country music  
it falls in love with you or rather  
it breaks down one small section of the brain  
and you become helpless  
to the urge to wear a cowboy hat  
to learn the Texas two-step  
to buy a gunrack  
and all along  
the music is telling you  
just how lonely you are  
and damn  
    if it's not true



## BOOKWORM

J.P. was near the end of the novel when the words ran out.

He'd reached the place where the private eye had his back against the wall; wounded, maybe mortally, gun out of lead, treacherous footing along a catwalk in a deserted explosives factory. He was heading into ambush or resolution, his sweat becoming J.P.'s, his heart rate J.P.'s, when suddenly at the bottom of the page, the words stopped in the middle of a sentence. *Just as his foot came down on*

"What's this!" J.P. screamed.

He leaped up from the sofa, flinging both arms in the air, feet dancing madly on the floor, then collapsed in half, with his hands dangling down at his knees. He was making huffing sounds.

To a stranger who might be watching this performance, Kate considered from the doorway, J.P. would appear to be doing exercises, something aerobic, maybe ergometric.

Damn! damn! damn! that would teach him never to buy another book at a yard sale. Out of print. Out of luck. The last page missing! Gone!

"Oh that," said Kate. "I tore it out."

"You're always reading novels," she added, as if that explained everything.

He went rigid, frozen, a monument to stone itself. Only his mouth moved. "Where Is That Page Now?"

"Page and a half, technically," she said. "I ate it."

Her face seemed blurry, he thought; a little inky around the mouth.

"You didn't happen to read it first?"

She smiled, tapped the side of her head. "All in here." Then

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she said, "*Slippery.*"

"What?"

"That's the first word, top of the next page."

She wiped her mouth.

"'Slippery' what?" he screamed.

"We'll have to save the next word for tomorrow," said Kate.

Her body twitched slightly, suppressing a burp. She held out her arms. "Come here to me, darling. Each day will bring a new word. How happy we'll be together."

"Help me," he cried. "Please help me."

"Always," she said. "I'm here because you need me."

Something dark had begun to seep out along her smile, pooling in the corners of her mouth. He watched her lick her lips to clean them, but she couldn't stop the thin flow of dark shapes, tiny, delicate as print, as they spilled over the edge of her bottom lip and began to dribble down her chin. ∞

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# CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

**Sophia Dembling**, an award-winning travel writer, has been anthologized in three books of travel writing, including *Traveler's Tales: A Woman's World*.

**Sally Doud** teaches fiction at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA.

**Stephen Dunn** teaches at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey. His tenth book of poems, *Loosestrife*, was published in 1996. He taught as Distinguished Visiting Writer of Poetry at the University of Idaho in the fall of 1997.

**Allison M. Eby** writes to us from Beaverton, Oregon.

**David George** hails from Sacramento, California.

**Paula Goldman's** work has appeared in *The North American Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, and *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry*. New poems are forthcoming in *G. W. Review* and *Iowa Woman*.

**Marcus Hersh** was fiction editor of the University of Montana's *Cutbank* magazine. This is his first publication.

**David James** works as a Dean of Academic and Student Services for Oakland Community College in Michigan. His most recent chapbook, *Do Not Give Dogs What Is Holy*, was published by March Street Press.

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**Jim Kacian's** third book, *Six Directions: Haiku of the Local Ecology*, was published in September by La Alameda Press in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is proprietor of Red Moon Press.

**Jason Kimble**, a self-described "poor grad student," recently migrated to Wichita, Kansas.

**Ed McClanahan**, a former Merry Prankster, lives in Lexington, Kentucky. His fiction includes *The Natural Man* (1983) and *A Congress of Wonders* (1996). He taught as Distinguished Visiting Writer of Fiction at the University of Idaho in the fall of 1997.

**Jim Sallis'** most recent books are the novels *Black Hornet* and *Renderings*. Shorter works regularly appear in *The Georgia Review*, *Omni*, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

**Louise Schleiner** teaches Renaissance literature and directs the graduate program in English at Washington State University.

**Mel Smothers** is a graduate student in the University of Idaho Art department. You may view more of his work at <[www.uidaho.edu/~smoth1623](http://www.uidaho.edu/~smoth1623)>.



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