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Jane McCafferty

Brother to Brother

The day he finds a rat behind a bag of potatoes in the kitchen cupboard is the day he calls his brother.

It was the second rat of his life in the house on Ratchet Street. He knew he should never have consented to live on *Ratchet* street, which one of the *wanting-life-to-be-fancier* neighbors pronounced "Ra-Chay" Street. It was not Ra-Chay Street! Please! On Ratchet Street, a porch was always collapsing, rotten wood the outward manifestation of spiritual demise. A fat child without a coat always seemed to be out on the sidewalk, scratching his head, wiping his nose on his sleeve. The loose dogs were mangy with cold grey eyes. That kind of street.

He'd lived there eight years. His brother imagined life was a dream for him. Compared to what? Wasn't that always the question. Well, compared to his brother's life in Fishtown, life was glorious. He had, for instance, someone to love named Johnny. Johnny was a decent historian and often spontaneously ordered out for Thai food. Johnny gave people nicknames. For instance, he called the man next door "Besotted" because the man had once asked him, "Did you know that God is *besotted* with you even if you are a homosexual?" Now he liked it when Johnny said, "Besotted is out there watering his garden." Or "Besotted parked his ugly car in our spot." It felt like enough, sometimes, to live with a man who had named another man "Besotted."

When he sees the rat lurking behind the bag of potatoes, he runs out of the house with the telephone, and calls his brother. He's in his striped pajamas. He wants to tell his brother that he knows how he feels. The rat terrifies him and makes him feel defeated, as he imagines his brother must feel, always. Of course

he can't use the words, "I know how you feel," because they were offensive to the brother, as they are offensive to anyone who lives in Fishtown, where despair grows like old shoes from the tree branches, where loneliness claws your bare ankles when you step out of rusty shower stalls. And if you have a window in Fishtown, it will frame sickly lightning, or tattered black clouds, and thunder often takes on the voice of the president.

You have no real memories in Fishtown, and certainly no fish. The fish have been transformed into sparring knives of shame coming up from the darkness inside you that delights in surprising you with its endless depths. It's hard to eat because of those knives! In Fishtown, your children are the children in other lands, the dying ones. You try to send them some money sometimes, but mostly you're afraid to go outside.

And so rather than "I know how you feel" he tells his brother the story.

"I was in the kitchen, you know, just trying not to have A.D.D., wondering why I'd come downstairs in the first place, and I open this cupboard, and I think to myself, potatoes. Potatoes are good. Can't argue with the goodness of potatoes. Once a friend of mine made me a nice painting of a mountain of potatoes under midnight sky. He's currently penniless but so good hearted. So I bend down and start to pick out a few nice potatoes, figuring I'd make some hashbrowns or homefries and think of my friend the penniless painter, when suddenly the bag moves a little, and I'm face to face with this big old rat, and I'm talking BIG, brother, and I jump up, and I'm shaking, you *know* how I feel about rats, and the rat jumps out of the cupboard, and starts to run across the kitchen floor, and he's like bigger than that black Buick Dad used to drive, remember, the one where we'd sit in the backseat holding on for dear life singing Jackson Five songs too loudly because he was always under the influence? So then I grabbed the phone and ran out into the rain and called you, and I don't ever want

to go back into that house again and I *would* go to a neighbor's house but nobody on Ratchet street likes me they think I'm a commie on top of being gay and if they knew I had a rat they'd say it was my own fault, they'd say it with their eyes, and besides, everyone's at work and I'm laid off and standing out here in my pajamas in the rain, so it's quite the lonely landscape."

What he means to say to is,

my brother, oh my lost brother,

can't you see that because we clung to one another in the back seat of that black Buick in 1979 when you were in a holster and a vest with a cowboy star nothing can ever be meaningless? Our father drove into a field of cows and gave the cows a speech then screamed at us because we didn't laugh. And so we laughed! He meant no harm, that damaged man. And under the vest you wore your Minnesota Vikings pajama shirt, the leaves around us were red clouds, and this is only memory, rising without reason.

Rain needles his face. To bring up their childhood would be to take his brother's hand and press it to a hot burner. The empty neighborhood gets emptier, as if one of the houses has just jumped off a cliff. His brother is breathing on the other end of the phone. He tells him he loves the sound of his breathing.

His brother says he's glad it's good for something.

You who pummeled Raymond Brockson in the back of St. Mary Magdalen's when he called me faggot for the fifth time how can you think your life means nothing? Walked me home, stopping to divide your orange and divulge your philosophy of life, your urgent analysis of Neil Young's "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere." The essence of this day runs in my veins.

He looks back at his house, and the rat is upstairs, framed in his bedroom window. It is all his fault for being a man afraid like this. Afraid of a fucking rodent! All his fault. The rat sticks his head through a hole in the screen. He stares down at him. The rat looks interested, patient. He tells the brother this is happening. He tells him it feels like a sign. He tells him please, please, stay here on earth with me, you'll find your way out of Fishtown sometime, I promise. He looks over at Besotted's house. Closed up, curtains drawn. Where is Besotted when you need him? He tells his brother, "We have this neighbor named Besotted who wears a toupee and dates a woman who is so fat she can't walk anymore. They say in America we'll all be too fat to walk in about forty years, at the rate we're going. I'm really looking forward to that. Really. It'll be nicely surreal. And it'll be the truth, right? I mean, we're already gluttons, so why not look the part? Right? Why should a country of hogs look svelte? No matter how much you work out, you're still an American hog, am I right?"

(He knows his brother feels accompanied when he talks like this.) His brother laughs a little. He is flooded with a warm feeling of gratitude for that small laughter.

The rat has squeezed its fat rat-body through the screen. It is growing. Surprise! It is changing. We all are changing. But it is changing faster than we are. It is a now a *winged* rat. That's two syllables ringing in his mind. Wing-ed. It is wasting no time. It is flying toward him in the rainy air. It is landing on his heart. Such a grip it has. How hungry it appears to be as it burrows. It is gnawing on the bones of his heart. Johnny is nowhere. The sky is racing away. He's forgotten every childhood prayer. He is sprawled on the street now. Is this how you feel in Fishtown, he asks his brother, like a rat has landed on your heart and is gnawing on the bones and won't stop, ever again, and nothing can pry it away? And his brother comes to life and says yes, sort of, you're getting closer now, you're getting closer.

Paul Perry

In the Country Where It Is Always Winter
After Pieter Breughel's *Hunters in the Snow*

I am tired of romping in this cold beauty
in a land without memory where the wind and the snow . . .
I am tired of the voluptuousness of winter.
This town is unfamiliar, not even as close as a cousin.

The sky is a disheveled grey. The same pale colour
as my brothers' eyes. What they are thinking? I don't know.
We have long since ceased to communicate.
What use? It does not stop our wanderings.

It does not help us to escape this country.
The country where it is always winter.
That these dogs are starving like the ragged souls of this town
does not surprise me. Did I say brothers?

At one time they were strangers,
but when that was, I can't say.
And the dogs too, vagabonds, strangers themselves, immune to disease.
They follow us as if we had anything for them.

You'd think they would run to the fire,
but like for us warmth of that kind is an illusion.
What kind of purgatory is it when the town's people skate on ice?
A town called temptation? If only we could stay here.

If only there were some kind of salvation in the snow.
The sound of the fire, dumb like the dreamless nights of sleep.
The children's voices I can hear, echoes in a well.
As for the swallows their immaculate twisting rends nothing.

And the dogs, the dogs, no whimpering for these mutts.
Just a slow sifting of the white ground.
Their anxious feet make the snow a poor betrayer
to the silence, a silence that rises like the dank

smell of smoke. A silence I have become used to.
Hoary and full of echoes. I want to say I left a loved one behind,
but I can't. Maybe I did, but I don't know now.
It's been so long. I imagine what she would have looked like.

But that again is another impossible task.
I can't get beyond the hands. A chilly alabaster, slender.
One last look onto the ice then.
Ice so hard I can almost dream of another life beyond its surface.

It carries our stern reflections as we descend.
Look, the trees stand with a wracked and solitary anguish.
They are like brittle black skeletons in the on-coming twilight.
And like windmills the children wave their innocent arms.

Susanna Lippóczy Rich

—First Place Essay—
Lullaby
(Cradle Song)



My Grandmother Munchy is stuffed when she dies, like the buck head snagging evil spirits by the door. See the cobwebs in his antlers? That's evidence. Munchy sits—or rather, is sat behind me—on the couch, wearing white lace fingerless gloves, her eyes propped open, her lips shaped into a smile. I am sitting at the piano—an old black coffin-sized Shoninger with its too many teeth, and, on top, the lamp, like a single burning eye. I play Munchy “Liebesträume” and “Moonlight Sonata.” We have trained me for this since I was ten years old—this scene she asks me to create—that she be stuffed when she dies. But first, go back.

“Three. I am three.” Fold my thumb toward my palm with my pinkie and work my middle three fingers from their bent bunny-ear curve to straight and proud. That is how old I am. *Három a Magyar igazság*—“Three is Hungary”—the three of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the three of the red, white, and green flag; the three of the once-united Austria, Hungary, Rumania. Someone would have asked me, *Hány éves vagy?*

“How old are you?” Hány means “how many” in English. It also means “throw up.”

I am at the piano. I sit on a telephone book on the black bench, and Munchy, her large breasts pressed into my back, grabs the sides of the bench and pushes me in. The layers of pages pinch at the backs of my knees if I shift my weight. I press my feet hard enough onto a pile of books on the floor so that it will not topple. It would not do if I toppled the books and made Munchy kneel on the floor to place them again. Just so. Now Munchy is sitting next to me, to my right, on a separate chair. This is the dining room. Behind is the long table covered with dusty lace. In front, beyond the wall, is the kitchen. I want to be in the kitchen. Not sitting by the piano.

Playing piano is not just the white keys, smooth, mysterious, perfectly next to each other, reaching so far to either side of me that even laying my chin on them and stretching out my arms, I cannot reach, reach those wonderful **bong, bong** notes at one end, or reach the *ping pings* of angels' harps at the other end. This is not just the black keys, like steps to climb, like chocolate fingers. This is Grandmother sitting beside me, waiting. She is not happy.

The score for Brahms's “Lullaby (Cradle Song)” is spread open on the narrow music shelf in front and above me. The paper is brownish, and torn at the corner where it has been touched over and over to be turned. Here I will sit until I play it right, as if I were sitting in front of a plate of seared chicken livers I must eat before I can go into the garden to play in the mud. I must sit by the keys until I can take those black notes on the page and, as if with the invisible spots of moisture from my fingertips, press them onto the keys. And then, in the magic that is the inside of a piano, a soft felt hammer will touch a string. And it will speak back to me as if I had done nothing to make the sound. I must touch and touch the keys. I must begin.

In her hand, Munchy has an orange stick, like a long wide pencil with no eraser and no point. It is one of my orange Tinker Toy sticks that I push into round Tinker Toy holes to make boxes and dogs and stars. Tinker Toys paint my hands red and yellow and blue and green if I play with them too long. She is slapping this one into her palm and counting in Hungarian—slap *Egy*, slap *Ketö*, slap *Három*. Like a waltz. I can dance the waltz: step, step, step; step, step, step.

Two black keys wait right in the middle of the keyboard, right in front of me. On the left is middle *C—Tsay*. Between is *D—Day*. To the left is *E—Aee*. I hold my fingers over the keys. Spread them so they will reach toward the first notes. Lower my hands to just touch the cool slippery surface of the keys. Begin. For now, it's *la lah . . . la la lah . . . la la*. I will later sing it in English: *Lullaby, and good night, little oops* My finger slips. Start again. *La lah, lalalah . . . La, la, Ow*. Again. Start all over again. At the beginning, *Lullaby, and good, little Stop*. Look at it. Again. To the top of the page. Slap goes the stick in Munchy's hand. *Lullaby, and good Not*. This time I don't even get to the *little Pock. Rap*, says the stick on the score. Munchy is hammering my stick on the score. She is leaving orange half moons on the page. *Pock. Rap*. Get it right. *This time. Lullabyan-dgoodni...* "Too fast," she says, "Slow down. NOW."

It will be a very long time before I work through the notes on this first line of this song entitled. Get them right. If I get to the end of the first line, I must come back to the beginning of the next. If I get any note wrong, I must begin again with *Lullaby* at the top of this page. And forever, until I get to those ghost half notes at the end—with no black centers, only a stem trailing up like smoke or down like a walking stick on the bottom—those two eyes with their arched eyebrows stacked not side by side as they ought to be—will, unchanging, wait.

Munchy and I are home alone. She is the day. My mother—my mother doesn't happen during the day. She works and I do not see her. She is the night. Almost. Even at night she is out, as Munchy puts it, *doing her business*. My father lives elsewhere. He is Sundays and Christmas and Easter. Munchy is also my night.

Pay attention. Begin again. This time, I go one note at a time. I am getting it right. Every note of it. *Lull a by and good night*. **Crash.** A harp falls on Munchy's end of the piano. It is my stick cracking down on the keys. Playing wrong notes. "Stop that," she yells, to me, "Play it right."

I don't say anything. Or I won't remember if I do. All I hear is Munchy's *Stop. No. Go Back*. And then *Stop* and the strings hammered inside the black box of the piano. Then only what the stick can do—in Munchy's hand, on the score, on the angels' harp, on

"Spider fingers," Munchy says, "Make spider fingers." My fingers are naughtily small. If I do not curl a finger, the flat of it might play more than one key at a time, jam *Lullandby*, one note on top of *nightgoodlull* another. Anyhow, go back. Look at my godfather Julian's fingers in the photograph. He is a world-famous concert pianist. See how his fingers are curled. My father would come back if my godfather Julian were here. So I am supposed to become my godfather Julian, too, a world-famous concert pianist. So I cramp up my hands to make spiders that dance. My godfather Julian practiced all day. Olga Mama, his mother, beat him to the piano with a broom, swept him along, hitting his butt as if it were a big clump of dust. I am lucky that Munchy does not use a broom. Only the stick. Mine. And a short one, at that.

Munchy and I both know that she will never be a concert pianist. It is not something I actually think when I am three years old. It's just the air we breathe. As long as I will know her, she will play the same tune, the only tune that she

will know to play by heart at the piano. The Hungarian words, in translation, are *The world is beautiful because my baby loves me*. Every time we go into company, or company comes to us, or there is an abandoned piano in the corner of a church basement or in a department store, or if ever there were one on the street, she would sit at the piano and play the same tune. We will all cringe, hoping she will get to the part beyond which she forgets the orchestration. And we will be relieved. But then she will start the thing all over again, from the beginning. And she will have to sing.

She will also spend fifty more years picking out the notes of a thousand Hungarian songs she will transcribe into a handwritten book. It will be wonderful, how she will remember all the words of all the verses by heart. And she will pick out the notes mostly without looking at the keys, only on the paper. She has perfect pitch. But she will not be a concert pianist. And that's not the point—Munchy's being a concert pianist. At her age, she doesn't have the hands anymore. Go back.

Her mother had the hands. "She played like an angel," Munchy says, "The men surrounded her. She had blue, blue eyes." My eyes are brown. And by a child's logic, how could I then play like an angel? There's even a Hungarian song: "The beautiful have blue eyes." In a photograph, a woman who is supposed to be Munchy's mother in a long dress sits by a baby grand. Her mouth and eyebrows are drawn in with an eyebrow pencil that Munchy sharpens with a knife. I see her do this. *It's a photograph. It's supposed to be true*. It makes me feel helpless.

Munchy's mother in the photograph half turns back from the piano, one blob eye looking out at us, the other eye, because of the pencilling, seems to wander, really to be smeared in the effort to look toward a little girl in a tutu, on her toes. The little girl's arms are raised in a circle to frame her face—she's looking upward, to heaven, I'm sure. She seems to float on a narrow windowsill. She is supposed to be Munchy as a

little girl. My suspicion is that the woman in the real photograph was not looking at the little girl, but at another little girl in the corner with her dog. Munchy's mother had to have new eyes drawn for her to look at the ballerina. The ballerina seemed pasted in, almost like a dream bubble in a cartoon. So we're supposed to go back.

Someone in the family has to become a concert pianist, play well enough so that the little two-toed tutued girl—like a pink ballerina in a jewelry box—can grow into a more perfect music. My mother has to do her business. My Uncle Frank has to wander the streets at night praying the “Our Father” aloud while carrying a suitcase filled with rocks for God. My stepgrandfather *melozik*—works like a slave—in a steel factory so that his face almost melts off. My half-uncle Muki? He gets out of having to be a concert pianist. How he gets out of it, I don't know. He's five years older than me and he hates me because Munchy sits with me at the piano.

Sometimes he and I will play a particular song on the piano together. It never has a name. Mostly it is played on the black keys. It makes it fun (like eating mocha cake before—or instead of—supper) to be playing only the black keys. And this song we can play by crossing our left hands over our right (or the other way), and crossing our hands over each other's—we can play with our fists—just rolling them along the tops of either the double or the triple banks of black keys. No *just so* spider fingering. Muki and I play it together—he on the bass keys, I on the treble—we race each other—who can go faster and leave the other behind; go faster and make the other one stop because it hurts to have one's knuckles rap along the keys. Since I have practice at pain at the piano, I usually win.

This is not good. Muki has ways of making me pay: *Too bad, Baba!* he says in English. Munchy calls me *baba*, Hungarian for “doll.” When she says *baba* I feel special. But *Too bad, Baba! Too bad!* Muki says, and I feel wild. I win at our piano game, but it's *Too bad, Baba! Too bad!* I don't even

know what is too bad, only that it is too bad to have someone taunting me with *too bad*. It could have been anything repeated, even *Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail Mary, Hail* that I couldn't stop, no matter how much I screamed or cried to make it stop—that over-and-over of the same thing.

I am sitting with Munchy and it's the same old *lah lalalah* and I can't get up, and she won't get up until I play it all the way through—and right—every last note of it. And with passion, yet. The piece is only two paired staves long. But it stutters. If every mistaken note I played were written out, it would have filled page after turned page of the book.

Then there's my weak finger, on both hands. It is the one that my father calls *This-piggy-had-none* when I visit him. We play it in Hungarian: he wiggles each of my fingers between his own thumb and pointer finger: *This little piggy went to market. This little piggy stayed home. This little piggy had roast beef. And this little piggy had none. And this little piggy ran AAAALLthewayhome*. And then my father's hand—with the black ring on his piggy that has none and his thumb which is all black where he hammered it, which I expect will be black forever since it is now—races up my arm and to my neck where he tickles me until my neck hurts from laughing.

But just like my father who comes for me in a black car and brings me home in his black car but never gets all the way to our front door, all the way into the hallway, *AAAALLthewayhome* into the dining room where my little piggies are sitting on the edges of Munchy's piano keys—my little piggies that have none can't lift, can't be like the little piggies that have beef, the little piggies that *run AAAALLthewayhome*. Not with their having no beef nor no way to unmisbehave themselves to go home. The pinkie has to do all of the hauling for the ring finger to rise. Or it's up to the middle finger (which doesn't mean anything to me yet).

One of the tricks for making the fourth piggies do what they are supposed to do is to tie a string to them and then work the string from above, as if making a marionette walk. Tie the strings to the fingers and make them lift like spider legs. I am lucky, because I am not the only one with a weak piggy that has none. Munchy says that famous pianists had to have their fingers raised liked that. But I do not get real strings tied to them—I'm not sure why. Maybe because I work them so hard. Maybe because it would make it too easy. Anyhow, I do not want strings tied to my fingers. I am afraid of Munchy standing behind me pulling them up, while I pull on her strings to push on the keys, and inside the piano hammers not being able to reach their strings to make the right music so I can go.

I am not happy with my hands. Always they seem to do, or rather not do something Munchy wants. And she is unhappy. She can't help that she is so unhappy. Her father died when she was a little girl. And then her mother died because she caught a cold from sitting on his grave. And the Russians made Munchy leave Hungary. And she had to eat blueberries and mushrooms in the forests of Germany. And my Uncle Muki didn't have milk, only caraway soup. Because of all that Munchy has such a long nose. She cries all the time and pulls on her nose.

If only I can make her happy, then everything will be all right. She will not cry. She will not slap my stick. I want to give her my hands so that she can make them do what she wants them to do. Then she will not have to hit her palm with my stick. Then she will not have to hit the page. She will not have to hit anything.

Over time, I become an expert at first halves: one of two lines of Brahms's "Lullaby," a half page of his "Hungarian Dance." Because I'm supposed to get it right before I can move on, I only play two of the 99 *Easy Piano Classics* in the

Music for Everyone book. As I would later see, only “Lullaby” and “Hungarian Dance” are marked on the “Contents” page for me, and only later note that the first song in the book is “Oh, Susanna.” Had the book, itself, had enough of me, or *for* me?

When, at ten years old, I draw a new cover for the old music book, I pencil a grand piano with Hungarian virtuoso Franz Liszt sitting at it on a very low bench. The buttons on his coat are turned toward us, as if he were reluctant to face the music. The corner of his mouth, in profile, is so dejected, that it looks like a comma, a line that almost lops off his chin, or configures a mouth as open, ironically enough, as Münch’s “The Scream.” My Liszt is stretching his arms out like a sleepwalker toward the keyboard, but he has no fingers. And his dot eye looks bemused. His legs are contorted, as if his knees are bent all the way inward, instead of the normal outward; looking, more truly, like they belonged to someone else kneeling away from the pedals, facing out. In capital letters, I wrote the letters M U S I C on top of the page, with the wings of eighth and sixteenth notes feathering up from the vertical lines. But I digress. Go back:

I am at the piano and Munchy has given up on me for the moment, goes into the kitchen. And while she is in the kitchen stirring pig lung and hoof stew, I am to do my scales. She is listening. The easiest is the C scale—all on white keys, no lifting my fingers to or off the black. I lean to the left—careful to tighten my legs, bend my weight over the books, so I don’t topple myself and them down—and start at the bottom C that bongs like an old church bell when someone dies. C scales can be happy when Munchy does not see. It doesn’t matter when I —C— tuck my thumb under —D— my other fingers, —E— doesn’t matter when I reach my third and —F— fourth fingers —G— over my pointer —A— to move —B— to the next set of seven keys —C—. Only I have to press lightly with my thumb that can

press much harder, so no note sounds stronger than the other does and she calls out *Where is your thumb?* Press lightly so she doesn't come out to see my third and fourth fingers jumping too soon or too late, jumbling to get to the next octave. Press lightly with my thumb, so she won't know that I'm doing it wrong, will only hear my slow plod from note to note turn—in time, in response to her *faster, faster*—into a long rippling from the sad, sad bass notes to the glad in the middle, to the tiny tinkling fade of treble and then back down again, going back down again, all that going back that she loves to the beginning, to retrieve all that sad music only to have her and the piano sing—*faster, faster*—back up to heaven. And keep, too, both my hands together: my right not impatiently running ahead, while my left lags, confused, halting; or my left nipping at the heel of my right, *like a dog*, she says—the two hands not knowing or caring how the other one wants to go, and making Munchy come back into the room, with a wet towel, perhaps—with unhappiness, for sure.

When she is in the kitchen, when the cymbals of her pot lids, the thud and wack of her wooden spoon, the riot of bubbles in the pot, the slam of refrigerator make a symphony with my scales and they grow louder and louder and she no longer has a need to, nor *does* call out, no longer listens to the sounds I do or don't make—the great mouth of the piano falls open for me to crawl in on its red velvet pads. It plucks the notes on its own for which some day I would have words.

When I am ten years old, past hope for being a child prodigy, surrendered to other piano teachers and dance teachers and acting teachers, my grandmother describes, to me alone, how she is to be interred—or, rather, in retrospect, *deterred*. Although the room where she described herself sitting with arms raised, holding the dome of heaven is gone, as is the building in which it was suspended, as is she, I still go back in

memory to visit, as if, in this writing, I may play it right, at last, on a different keyboard, perhaps, but one that may soothe and satisfy her:

*Lullaby and good night, with roses bedight,
With lilies bespread baby's wee bed.*

*Lay thee down now and rest,
May thy slumber be blessed,*

*Lay thee down now and rest,
May thy slumber be blessed.*

Metta Little

Mr. Barney you will die today

Your woman she is not stoic
but she's holding herself together fine.
Her body is sleepy with valium but
nonetheless fiery. She is on
overdrive;
not all made up like your friends' women
who get all weepy and keep
locks of hair.
Russian girls are real broads
and you might be lucky to have had her,
I think.

Austin Hummell

Obsession for Ocelots

Dallas Zoo researchers, looking for ways to save
the ocelot by encouraging the endangered cats to
breed, have found a scent that drives them wild—
Calvin Klein's Obsession for Men. (CNN)

It was a rut made of musk
and a lucky guess, when some novice
at the Dallas Zoo splashed CK
onto the backs of the disappearing cats.

It had been too much to live caged
with the scent of rainforest fading,
to be fed by buckets and clocks,
the rounds of trout stripping the vim

from pursuit, the mordancy from hunger.
The sex we call animal is lost on them—
The itch for leather, the rush of handcuffs,
the transgressions of the mouth

and the drunken love of strangers.
But today they track the cologne
that draws every sex of eighth grade
through the glossy pages of heroin chic,

the same scent that draws a bulimic waist
to the oily face of a boy
tying a belt around his biceps,
the scent that tells us desire

is beyond our control, a cage worth
paying for, that what we want,
really want, is blond, starving,
and bored to extinction.

Holly Leigh

—Second Place Essay—
Cascade

All the unhurried day/Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives. —Philip Larkin

On July 4th, I ride cradled in the air, quietly blasting through space in my steel cylinder on an invisible pathway, steered by coordinates and illuminated dials. I sink into the jet engines' drone that walls off the outside, the passengers from each other, and fix on this blank, yet secure cocoon. Not unlike a hospital's intensive care unit.

Like the rasping hum of the ventilator, this steady thrum connects me to a place where oxygen takes up your whole world, where shadows walk the periphery. But pure oxygen crushes you. The vent, too much work, forces in dry harsh air and you must catch-up with every breath. In the hollow tube, I sit, empty of emotion. How blissfully easy it is to sever all earthly ties. I know a secret, stay transient, it's all about motion. In the blind logic of time-travel, I race toward Seattle. Utterly unaware of the coming terrain, I forget that beyond the balm of friendship, raw wounds open before they heal.

A sudden glare shoots across the page of my book from the plane's portal. I push up the eyelid shade and blink. Underneath me a sea of frosty peaks rolls out in frozen salute. The plane's aluminum belly skims low over miles of meringue mountains. Only black ledges break the pristine white glaze and tiny pines bristle in scattered rows. Endless snow-sheets, refracting the sun's light, scintillate diamond sparks under the cool bend of a sapphire sky.

On wild paralyzed waves, crested with snow-foam, the plane is now a silver flying fish streaking across an ancient oceanic surface. Quivering with the privilege of this spiry view, I ask the passenger in the aisle seat, "What are these?" Momentarily, his gaze lifts past the flickering green letters on his laptop screen and he grunts, "Cascades."

For years, I traveled in white sterile worlds, rolling down hospital corridors crammed with carts, hampers and looming high-tech machines in dinosaur-like poses. On one night, on one road, a carfire erased my face. After several days the burn claimed my right arm, then it took my remaining fingers. But I soared on my morphine-drip. Husky dogs pulled me on sleighs through whirling snow and in more feverish states I lived in a sandcastle.

I embarked on the most intimate journey—under the skin. A naked body, parts missing, a purple map of grafts down one leg, stripped in the shower or on the cold OR table for a room full of clothed strangers.

"You're lucky," I heard. "A reason for everything," many said. Wisdom from those who function fine, who look ordinary. I shuttled all the safe routes between doctors, rehab, and fancy prosthetic workshops. But in the wider world, I felt like a spy or some criminal always in a changing guise. No one would ever recognize me, I didn't recognize myself.

In Seattle, I walk through the airport gate and into Skye's arms. Now he is Dr. Jeff Silverstein, a biogeneticist. But the same dark wavy hair, dark eyes and the deliberate basso-low voice reassures me, as always, of a depth and a rare unflinching heart in the world. Like an echo climbing out of his lean and still gangly height, his voice sounds ancient, from beyond the grave. We met our first day freshman year at college. He is the most unhurried person I know.

Between high school and Colgate, Jeff spent nine months bicycling all fifty states. Only various disheveled poses next to all the "Welcome to . . ." signs document his odyssey.

Halfway through college, he left to cycle around Japan and perform fieldwork on his biology passion: worms.

We followed each other's journeys mostly by mail. As a biologist Skye found a niche field in Sepunkulet worms. He lectured in the States, traveled to Venezuela, then moved back to Japan. During my freefall, he kept up the correspondence. The blue airmail envelopes reached my hospital's burn unit and later the drab rehab hospital that I shuttled between for fifteen months. Skye packed his long letters with hilarious episodes on the Japanese subway where his height and shoe-size were whispered about until he alarmed his critics by answering their musings in fluent Japanese.

He took me on tours of volcanic rims and gave me worm species updates. I envied his creative compass, a wondering wanderer and was grateful for such sharing. And I embraced utterly his description of disorientation; the seizing overwhelming willingness to just let go. Insanity, he wrote, could be so voluntary, as simple as stepping off a sidewalk curb. He signed off on the fragile tissue-sheets of paper with v-shaped birds and a cloud.

I had prized this undamaged long-distance friendship and vowed not to let it lapse. I had come to catch up. Shoes off at the door, I finally meet Ahn, his Korean wife. She lays limp on the floor, victim to morning sickness that lasts all day. He wrote how they had coaxed romance from the limited vocabulary of a second language Japanese class. How they spent a steamy summer in a Chinese forest without electricity or running water and how for Skye these were the happiest months he had known.

After tutelage in Japanese fish farming, Skye and Ahn settled in Seattle, temporarily, at an isolated salmon hatchery in the fresh-water of Lake Washington. Ahn repeatedly corrected her English teacher that she did in fact live in, not on or next to, the Lake. Now their futons fit in the spartan quarters of the leftover Navy barracks. Most of my visit, Ahn retreats outside at the sight or smell of meals. We cajole her out on only one

ride but she groans grimly from the backseat, "You just want me for the carpool lane."

I quell my uncertainty on how to feel and act around Ahn, who seems shy but sounds tough. An awkward drift ensues as Skye translates between us. Alongside Seattle's reputed coffee and salmon mecca, now I glimpse the influx, the real Asian flavor here. We drive mile after mile by food markets with no ads in English. One exception, a window sign reads: Ethnic American Here.

Though we share no language and no meals (she is too queasy), my five-day visit ends with Ahn and I at a polite impasse. Culture feels less like the culprit, but I cannot gauge the quiet gulf. Is it my past ties with Skye or my disfigured presence that imposes such limits? My last morning, Skye repeats a wicked joke Ahn has just told and I smile at the hint of why they so easily fit together.

On the last day, Skye shows me Seattle's soul. We glide across Puget Sound and I meditate on the ferry's drift, the calm commute. I picture the biologist I saw on PBS, passionate about his Cephalopods, octopus and squid, dancing an underwater waltz in Puget Sound, draped in the tentacle arms of a giant squid.

Skye rolls a cigarette as we lean on the ferry rail and I relax in the company of my unwavering friend. So I am stung when he casually remarks that my face failed, at first, to look any different than on his visit after I left critical care, four years before. Only now, up close, can he see how much repair work has been done. I am sad and shocked. Over forty operations should be obvious, but the face's value is in its permanence within its gradual molding; our identity tied to its immutability. The familiar divide creeps in; he looks the same, I do not.

I am sluggish on the long misty drive up Olympic Peninsula. Rumbling log trucks whip around corners and pass by at regular intervals. I see the sentry trees uniformly lined in harvest plots and the hideous clear cuts. The fog bank presses down and I complain this is a wasted trip, the day is too murky. But Skye heads the little car rattling up Hurricane Ridge,

scolding me, you'll see, you'll see, he says. Then we cut above the cloud-line.

Another sea of snow peaks props up the horizon. Skye tells me these very recent mountains stand a sheer wall to the water; they carve the edge of a continent. He apologizes for forgetting the sweaters but for thirty minutes I marvel, suck in the chilled ether of my virgin high-altitude experience.

Skye suggests a short trail walk along a sloping pine needle path. There are no railings and if you wish, you can simply step off into the cobalt sky. Mule deer with matchstick legs watch us. My balance is still shaky and I feel precarious without hands. Still, fuming over the face comments, I need to enact some defiance against my disfigured, hapless body. The brisk temperature revs me up beyond caution. Straddling a log, I slip as the soft needles roll, a red gash streaks my inner calf. Still sliding, Skye catches my stump arm and pulls me over.

The most difficult test of mountain climbing, James Salter says in his novel *Solo Faces*, is not the ascent but the coming down, the return to everyday life. I know it is both the attraction and the weight of solitude and silence of fashioning your own landscape. It remains the promise and the dread of the blank page, the empty canvas.

Ahn and Skye return for two years to a remote island in Northern Japan for research work and I struggle to assemble my new identity back in Boston. I start a graduate degree in between surgeries. For a while, hospitals offer sanctuary. Snowed with morphine, held together by stitches, wrapped in bandages, I keep up the role of professional patient that lasts for nine years. In the inner sanctum, the OR, I embrace the numbing chill and always eschew the warming blankets. Rows of gleaming silver clamps and scalpels on their sterile draped trays raise the stakes of hope. Everyone believes surgeons wield scalpels like silver wands that can shed surfaces and refine ruins.

At marinas, I have watched mates gut their catch with the sharpest of blades. This image shadows me. Swiping deftly down to red flesh, the knives leave all the flecked fish scales, a shower of pale silver confetti spangling the blood smears up and down the dock.

The worst part of any hospital stay is the suffocating confinement, the windows that do not open. I meet one surgeon, briefly, who asks me first thing when was the last I swam in the ocean? He comes from South Africa and is very kind. I cannot swim because I still wear a trach. But I am restless all the time. I travel and sometimes write about it, so the notebook I carry acts as a shield and I have an answer for people who ask what I do all day.

But from my solitary perch, the world seems searing, loud, full of sharp edges now. I confront the glassy unrelenting stare of the mirror every day, I assume I know what is and is not there, that some progress has been made. But you stop believing the nurses and interns who tell you over and over how good you look when every chart or Op-report reads: severely disfigured young woman or severe facial deformity patient in her 30's Then I deal with the daily assault of public opinion. Strangers tell me I am either tragic or inspiring or ask me if I've found Jesus. I have been mistaken for male, a panhandler, a mugger, even a mannequin.

I travel to make kaleidoscope changes to the view; dutifully record the journey, but I do not yet see the signposts or recognize the clues. In Seattle, I sought to trace my past, locate a bridge through Skye to an identity nearly wiped out. When he pried, asking how I am changed by this crippling experience, I answered in a short temper. You remain the same jerk or not that you were before, I said. I cannot verbalize how trauma and injury crystallizes a person, distills and defines everything. And how sheer essences are not enough to keep anyone afloat.

The blank page, difficult mirror, gives back only what you were.
—George Seferis, Summer Solstice, 1966

July 4th, again, for my second Seattle visit. Skye is finishing his doctorate and I am invited into the new family rhythm of five-month old Rosie, in addition to three-year-old Max, who was born in Japan. Max's portrait of his Asian inheritance shows him decked out in silk on a throne complete with a crown. Skye explains the photo is his one-hundred days picture, a leftover commemoration for when it was a feat for children to survive that long. Max is mischievous, teasing his dad with the Korean he picked up on a recent trip to Ahn's family.

Even on the holiday weekend, we drive over to the fish labs. Skye flips the lights to show me the computer monitors rigged to an alarm at home in case of glitches or a power outage. I am struck by the non-fish smell. Over the humming rush of climate-controlled water churning in cauldron-like vats, Skye names his charges: Chinook, sockeye, chum, coho, and the silver salmon.

Each fish fits a niche. I like knowing hidden inside a good-sized river, Chinook stick to the mainstream, coho find the small tributaries, sockeye spawn only in lakes. Pink salmon males grow hunchbacks and other males' jaws distort into savage-looking hooks. That they transmute so drastically amazes me. And pinks that spawn in lower streams with a quick exit to the ocean never need spots; their coloring is "bright chrome."

Varying sizes of fry, smolts, fingerlings thrash under the nets covering their tanks when we peer in, expecting food pellets. Skye nets and places several "volunteers" in a bucket. Sitting on stools by the counter, I watch him guillotine each fish spine with a razor and then pluck out popcorn-size brain lobes with tweezers. His project traces how fasting in migrating fish involves genetic wiring for clues in obesity genes in people. Skye consoles me somewhat by telling how the Japanese lab

scientists offer incense prayers and thanks for the sacrifice the research fish have made.

We visit the fish ladders built in the locks, where windows show a few fish propelling against the current in murky green water. I flinch remembering our grade school films. The early imprint of the mysterious and poignant journeys, the natural forces of Caribou migrations and salmon flinging their silver bullet bodies up the falls only to spawn and rot as birds and bears devoured their eggs and decaying carcasses in a feast.

At five o'clock on the Montauk docks, in Long Island, where I spent many summers, people milled about investigating each boat's haul. Bluefish, bluefin, flounder were the staples as were the sharks that tourists and kids insisted on prodding and kicking. I wished just once one would snap back or, in reflex, chomp on an arm.

But the stars of the dock displays were the six, eight or even thousand pound tunas that hung winched tail end up. I could never reconcile tiny tuna cans with these shimmering silver giants. No longer discarded for cat food, Japanese agents in dark suits stood ready to bid enormous sums. The iced tuna, carefully packed, flew to Japanese auctions to be bid on again. All to end in delicate sushi slices, the luscious red primped on rice, the white plates lending the contrast. Sushi and sashimi are raw perfection, a blend so sensual and barbaric, when the moist satin morsel rests on a tongue, and teeth sink softly through, flesh melts into flesh. For this aesthetic design in the high art of flesh, Asians use the term *maguro* for the food of perfection.

Like the hovering Oriental mountainscapes on scrolls or Mt. Fuji prints, Mt. Rainier's ghostly 14,000-foot presence looms like an optical illusion outside Seattle. Rainier's blue and gray-toned base blends with the sky so the snowcap floats on air. Of course, Rainier beer also emblazons the image on silver beer cans everywhere.

After my Olympic awakening last visit, I want to walk on this mountain, so temptingly close. But its sheer size distorts

the real distance. Ahn, Max and Rosie sleep for most of the three-hour drive but when we reach the switchback climb up Paradise Road, Rosie wails like a siren from the backseat, her delicate ears popping. Somehow, I feel cheated by this ascent, too easy, and when we reach above tree line the cool serenity of quiet space ends in a parking lot. Snow melts with the grime from the cars and kids hammer slush-balls from trampled areas marked fragile by small signs. A mismatch of people trek up the slippery path in shorts, saris, patent leather shoes, sandals and clogs while hikers with ski poles, boots and pick axes dangling from their packs swagger by.

Skye takes Max on his shoulders up the vertical ice-caked path. Ahn with Rosie and I halt by a bench just where the thaw reaches the walking route. Water trickles around our sneakers, the sun's warmth falls like a shawl. Ahn's English is so deft now, she dissects any unknown phrase in an attack mode. "Max came home from pre-school with the word 'stormy,' this is a word?" she gasps. We laugh and I think how this woman endures changing cultures and languages a third time.

Ahn revives me by unwrapping a lunch treat of her sushi jewels: glistening dabs of orange roe rolled with radish, fish and cucumber in seaweed rice bands. Dumplings folded like presents, the kimchi and fiery pickled peppers boost my intake of this scene, and the nod that without paved roads I could not sit atop this lucent mountain and breathe in such thin crisp air. I only wish a code of reverent silence could be instilled for natural shrines. I wish parks and zoos could be as hushed as libraries.

We head the car down for the long drive back but pull into a small lot midway down. Ahn stays with the kids but Skye leads me over a low stone bridge where a rush of water hurtles underneath. Wood pieces bank dirt steps curving down a steep but gradual path. Water roars behind a tree screen until we reach the viewing ledge where the spray smokes up like a cauldron spawning rainbows in every direction. Looking up,

the white water falls over a wide swath of rocky niches, dancing in a liquid dress and now I know cascades. Small wild roses add a faint scent but the flow drowns out even the clamoring voices. I usually pair water trickling, the playful fountain sounds, with piano keys tinkling. But this torrent spectacle is no piano tremble or Pan whispering on his reed flute but an insistent primal song of water and rock, a tidal chant, a voiceless song of descent. I scribble this haiku in later, next to a lame sketch of the waterfall in my journal notes.

*Opening their hearts
ice and water become
friends again —Teishitsu*

During college, Skye and I took Japanese Literature together because it blended my literature major with Jeff's emerging Asian interests. We read Kawabata, Basho, and Issa. We watched the stunning, silent *Woman of the Dunes*. Swept away by the calligraphy, the language challenges and Professor Azawa's charisma, Skye meshed his new love with his biology major. I focused mainly on the poetry and sake. Already then, Skye was drawing his life, designing a journey, while I just browsed, trolling along. Now I feel frozen at the age of the accident, stuck at twenty-three, unable to loosen the noose of a fearful plummet. I rely solely on books, reading and scribbled suspicions. Across depths I cannot possibly fathom, I tie buoy flags, hoping unconsciously for "epiphany tied to theme, a search."

The Fourth of July mists up the barbecue, perfect for Seattle. We grill tofu, veggie burgers and pile the plates with more sushi and wasabi. The company is split between American and Asian. Only the Korean volcanologist and I are hampered by our language limits. I both admire and resent all the worlds these people navigate in their mixed families, professions, hobbies and geography while I travel flat, prone from one operation to the next.

Ahh, the women coo over Rosie's fair skin and auburn hair, this one has a Western face, they murmur. I am intrigued by the sudden spillover here. Defined by appearance, who belongs where, a comfort in the blurring of borders—by face.

My plane departs south and rising from the flat cardboard ground we skim Rainier's crest, puckering up to the sky. "Don't be alarmed, we are not as close as we seem," says the pilot. The car-filled parking lot is a mere glint on this brooding glacial hulk that my postcard says Native Americans named Tacobet or Tahoma, The Mountain that is God. I find myself jealous of the mountain's crevasses, scarred gulfs, and snowy veins, so admired, though it hides its thumping molten heart deeply buried for now.

Inside a museum, back in Boston, an exhibit lures me by a magical promise of miniature landscapes wrought from stone. I had never heard of Chinese scholarly rocks. But here they stand or squat, silent and glossy. They depict mostly mountain forms, peaks, overhangs, mesas. Staring, absorbing these esoteric rocks you also imagine a kinship with the former owner. A subtle current of shared brooding beyond time. Suddenly you see the impact of empty spaces; clefts, grottos and bridges hold the spirit, named here as the Abodes of the Immortals. But I fall in love with the notions of asymmetry. Shapes were prized for unique jaggedness, their weather-beaten age, all the layers that lend depth.

Before Japanese rock gardens, I learn, both the Chinese and Koreans collected glossy and rough rocks from underwater caves, mounting them on carved wood stands or even roots for meditation. By virtue of their owners' status, the rocks take on literary flair, being immortalized in poems or depicted on scrolls.

One truly tree-shaped rock, named so, was owned by a poet known as the Master of Five Willows since he lived with five willow trees in his yard. This blurring of inner and outer forms with fantasy and poetics only has me primed for pulling

back a curtain, to rake up my interior. I keep on moving, reading, seeking, shifting scenes.

*... That all the dingy hospital of snow/Dies back to ditches. . .
. busy with resurrection, sovereign waters/Confer among the
roots, causing to fall from patient memory forestfuls of grief.*

—Philip Larkin

One year later, July 1st creeps in with a hot breathy breeze, after a very late cold spring. It is a day on which you feel your pulse, your skin dampening, aware of your body as a vessel. I duck into the cool confines of a deli called The Cascades in Hudson, New York. Another humble river town coming back from the brink of ruin.

Nestled down Warren Street, the revived antiques row for tourists, The Cascades whispers to me how even a physical place can shift, be transplanted, its very idea altered. I pause, checking if I have crossed some threshold but take comfort in the echo of other Julys and this version of an East Coast cascades. An old building, they keep the old floor plan: the narrow bar, black and white tile floor, dark wood paneling. Outside, a green haze shrouds the silhouettes of the Catskill Mountains.

During two more years of surgery and now graduate school, I am assembling the raw materials to rebuild my battered self. I know now how to delve into and when to pull shut the drawstrings on pain and memory I hold like some precious bundle in a velvet purse. All my roaming elsewhere comes back as a compass. I am molded by New England air, light, friends, its restless seasons. When I look back at the worn grooves of trails I choose over and over, I see the patterns in my reading merge with places and spill into writing.

By chance, I had tossed Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm* into my bag because it was slim and light. On the bus out to Hudson Valley, I discovered this writing springboards from time spent on an island in Puget Sound facing the Cascade

Mountains that she so aptly calls, "the serrate edge of time." She stirs her words with time, events and people in this place.

This is my reason to beeline to The Cascades deli to finish Dillard. She strings her flight with an aerial artist darting daringly between the clefts of the Cascades with another plane's plummet into trees near her house. On the final pages, I read how the pilot, unhurt, pulls his seven-year-old daughter from the wreckage as the fuel ignites, scorching the girl's face. This book is like holding a mirror that talks back.

Dillard's story spirals smoothly, a throwback to her opening image, a moth's thorax roasting in her candle flame, a paean to all passions that burn within. Like hieroglyphics deciphered, the secrets in impairments, in one's own brutal truth snaps into focus. How a lurid shape contours a sense of space, of self. How nature acts, not as a prop, but as a player, a shaper. How wherever I go now, I am led by daring past my injuries. How by struggling, I map territory.

I stare at the worn paperback, half expecting it to hop off the table or go up in a poof of smoke. I followed this trail of words, chasing shiny threads for my own story, but now my skin prickles and the air sharpens for an unleashing. I wait for the next stroke; perhaps the next customer will stride in wearing silver spurs and know my name. Serendipity has sat me down in my own private coffee shop vector.

I sip by straw a long swallow from the sweating water glass. But ordinary sounds pervade the after breakfast lull: plates scrape, silverware clinks. No one else, scattered at other tables, engrossed in their newspapers or omelets, hints at any awareness of the unusual. I pay the bill.

Before the bubble bursts, I want to carry it outside. On the bright sidewalk blocks, chimes spangle dulcet sounds from front porches that follow me down to the rushing river's breadth. Today, the scene all fits, it is liquid, it flows.

David Lunde

Birthright

The four red letters, lurid
in the dark theater,
the only distraction,
a subliminal reminder
that every story
has an end. And though optimism
calls each death a birth,
still there is the disorientation,
that readjustment to the world
which exists. It is not the one
you lived in; it will not be.
You try to hold on, imagining perhaps
a repeat performance,
but when the time comes
nonetheless you exit, determined
to love the new, asking yourself
what it was you used to love
as if you didn't know.

Donald Levering

Spider

To make a joyful sound,
just let the divine spider
climb out of your mouth
and go about its business
tying knots around your life.
So you're a marionette, eventually
you'll feel yourself dancing
no matter who's pulling the strings.
Even as your divorce decree
is signed, the spider
goes on marrying you
to the corners of your household dust.
Eight legs, a ravenous mouth,
and the yen to spin silk in the shadows.
Who wouldn't sing?

**—Third Place Essay—
Body Leaping Backward**

Growing up in Massachusetts in the late sixties and early seventies, my siblings and I clamored for a swimming pool, not because we knew it as a symbol of economic status, but because it seemed like the one thing we needed to complete our lives. We had our mother, her black hair in a ropy twist, spit curls, and high-heeled pumps. We had our father, tall and handsome, mistaken in restaurants for the movie star, James Caan. We had our ultra-modern house with a laundry chute, a fireplace, a phone with a cord that sucked into a tiny hole in the wall. The house still smelled of pine when we moved in, pine the scent of hope, the essence of beginnings, of everything right. We had pizza on Friday nights, drive-in movies on Saturday nights, and our annual two-week vacation to rented cottages around New England. We went to Mass on Sundays, the girls in dresses my mother sewed, with matching shorts for my brothers, and when we walked down the aisle to a pew in the middle—the nine of us—we were neat and complete, the perfect American family.

Except for a swimming pool.

On broiling summer days, my sisters and I would languish on our front lawn looking heat-stricken in hopes that the Hobaicas, the only neighbor with an in-ground pool, might invite us over. But this ploy rarely worked. Most often, when my mother was done with her chores, the kitchen crumbless and every bedspread taut, she'd drive us to the crowded public pool to swim for an hour.

Occasionally, on nights that were too hot to sleep, I'd took out my bedroom window and see my parents, wearing only towels, tiptoeing across the street to the Hobaicas for an

evening dip. I'd stand in front of the window for a long time, trying to catch a glimpse of a silvery naked body, or hoping to snatch some exotic adult word that I could mull over—a word like *seduction* which I'd seen on a gag gift someone gave my parents, a miniature four-way street sign showing the stages of coupledness: seduction, love, marriage, divorce. I didn't realize that "divorce" was the punch line.

Or the word *abandon*, which I'd read in my father's *Time* magazine when I was eight, in an article about a mother who dropped her children off at a park and never returned. I asked my mother what *abandon* meant, but I didn't understand. "But why did she leave them?" I asked my mother. Until then I'd thought that trouble could only come from outside, like the kidnappers my aunt promised would carry me away in a huge sack if I didn't behave. That new word, *abandon*, that hollow, wide-open, vowel-filled word that made me think of band-aids and cuts, but meant left alone in a park while black night colored in the space around swings and seesaws, that word terrified me.

My mother wanted a pool, too.

On summer Sundays, my father would say, "Let's go to the beach!" My mother would pack us up, the girls in our two-piece bathing suits, flip-flops, and terry cloth beach jackets. My mother always brought a whole roast beef still warm in its Pyrex baking dish, which she lugged to the shore as if it were an eighth child. Sitting on blankets at Duxbury Beach nearly an hour drive from our house in Walpole, Massachusetts, we ate buttery, sandy roast beef sandwiches on white bread pinkened by blood and drippings.

Years later, I asked my mother why she insisted on portaging a roast to the beach. "Was it so important to have Sunday dinner?"

"That wasn't my doing," she said. "I'd be cooking a roast like every Sunday, then halfway through the day your father would get an idea in his head to go to the beach. So I packed up

the roast and took it with us.” I glimpsed the woman my mother was then, a woman happy to put her husband and children first, to accommodate and please no matter how impractical, a woman I could never be. On the way home from the beach, stuck in traffic jams in the stifling hot station wagon with seven sandy, salty, cranky kids, my mother would say, “We wouldn’t have to go through this if we had a pool.” But my father was reluctant: the danger, the expense.

One night in late spring, just before I turned twelve, my mother called my siblings and me in from playing kick-ball for one of our infrequent family meetings, the theme of which was usually “cooperation.” My mother and father sat together on the gold ottoman in the living room, a matching piece to the high-backed easy chair, in which my father read the *Boston Globe* after church each Sunday. The four oldest girls—Susan, Sally, me, and Joanne—sat on the couch, Patrick and Barbie shared the piano bench. Mikey was upstairs in his crib.

My father began: “As you know, your mother and I haven’t been getting along.”

There, at its very beginning, is where my father’s speech ends for me. I don’t remember anything he said beyond that because my mind was puzzling with “as you know.” I’d never seen my parents fight, so I didn’t know that anything was amiss. At that moment, all the distractions—the shouts of kids playing in the street, the abrasive upholstery of the couch scratching my bare thighs, the bothersome warmth of my sister’s arm brushing mine—faded to background. My eyes fixed on my father’s upper lip, which quivered as he spoke. I couldn’t stop staring; it was so strange, his lip shivering on a warm spring night. His words floated past me, though I caught one: *separation*. My stomach clenched. A tear made a slow journey down my father’s cheek, and then the rest of us wept on cue like a chorus, our last act as an intact family.

My parents’ separation in 1972, the first on the street, the first of anyone we knew, was an early statistic in what cultural critics now call “the divorce boom.” In the years to come, our

neighbors, our friends' parents, nearly half the families in town, half in the country followed suit.

"My father is moving out," I told my girlfriends in seventh grade. "I don't really care," I said. "And oh, guess what, we're getting a pool!"

I assumed that my mother's separation from my father meant that she no longer needed his permission to install a pool. Her freedom seemed like my freedom too, authority gone, at least no longer living with us, because it was very soon after my father left that my mother drained our bank accounts (the five and ten dollar deposits from birthdays, First Communion, Christmases—she asked *our* permission), borrowed two thousand dollars from her mother, and bought a cheap above-ground pool kit, which the salesman promised would collapse if installed in-ground, as was her plan. "By hook or by crook," my mother always said. "Come hell or high water."

There was no stopping my mother once she latched onto an idea. When I was in third grade, she labored for weeks on the world's most luxurious dollhouse. The house had two floors, four bedrooms, a living room, den, kitchen. She wallpapered each room with contact paper, and sewed tiny ruffled curtains. She furnished the house with couches and easy chairs, cutting forms from cardboard, then upholstering each piece. Night after night as I watched her finish the house, I begged her not to donate it to the Blessed Sacrament Annual White Elephant Bazaar.

"But Mom," I said, "Why are you going to just give it away?"

"It's for the poor," she mumbled through straight pins clamped in her perfect white teeth.

I imagined "the poor" as Vilora Raleigh, the bony-kneed girl who lived in the asbestos-shingled, dirt-drivewayed house on Bowker Street, a girl whose rotted teeth, matted yellow hair and "cooties" caused other kids to shun her. I felt sorry for Vilora, but still didn't think she deserved the dollhouse. I

thought my pleading would convince my mother of her folly. But there was the dollhouse one Saturday morning, high up on a table at the Blessed Sacrament Church White Elephant Bazaar, up for raffle. I checked on the dollhouse throughout the day (in between scouting for the white elephants, which I never found). When the raffle was drawn, I watched the parents of some little girl cart the house away. *She doesn't look poor*; I thought. Nor was she thrilled, anyone could plainly observe. She didn't see the beauty of the house, only the old appliance box it had been.

"Why should *she* get the dollhouse? *You* made it," I accused my mother, as if all that were hers should be automatically mine.

Just after school let out that year my parents separated, huge boxes of unassembled pool components were delivered to our house. We climbed on and hid behind the boxes, but there was no time to waste—summer was here! My mother hired fat, cigar chewing Leroy Jones with his backhoe to get us started. Feeling sorry for my mother, Leroy charged just thirty dollars. All the neighborhood kids gathered to watch Leroy's claw of a shovel turn our side yard into a deep pit.

At the end of the long day, wanting one more bite at the earth, Leroy miscalculated. Before we could yell a warning, the backhoe keeled into the hole. Leroy must have felt the weight shift under him subtly but wrongly because, tubby as he was, he managed to make a heroic flying leap out of the driver's seat before the backhoe landed on its side in our future pool. Now, more neighbors gathered, not just kids but the mothers, to watch a huge tow truck winch the backhoe out of the pit.

Leroy's excavation was just the entry point. The huge hill of dirt he left in our yard had to be moved, and he hadn't dug deep enough. Every day for weeks of that long hot summer, we shoveled and piled rocks like members of a chain gang. We made daily trips to the pits at the bottom of our dead-end street to dump debris, dangling our legs off the tailgate of my

mother's Buick as she cruised slowly up the street, waving to the curious (and we hoped jealous) neighbors.

Even seven-year-old Barbie was put to work, the only one tiny enough to crawl down the two-foot deep holes to galvanize a couple dozen steel posts with some gooey black stuff. "Tarbaby!" we yelled when Barbie was done. (The posts should have been coated first, but lessons come after mistakes are already made.) My mother scrubbed Barbie for hours, my bony, featherweight sister with that strange mushroom-cap haircut, rising out of a tub of opaque water like a creature from the black lagoon.

One day we were digging as usual, using frying pans to scoop soil, my mother in a pair of shorts and a bra. She began each morning respectably dressed in a sleeveless shirt, but at some point decided a bra was equal to a bathing suit top. Tanned and muscular, sweating and powdered with dirt, my mother was beautiful. Sally, who was thirteen, was inside making lunch as had become her job. Sally had little to work with in the kitchen as we were low on funds after the separation. We ate Farina for supper, or plate pancakes, the batter so thin the pancake spread like a crepe. We melted butter and sprinkled sugar and ate those flapjacks like jelly rolls. At the supermarket, my mother tucked cans of tuna in her pocketbook and packages of ham down the waistband of her pants. Except for my oldest sister Susan, we refused to stand in the checkout line when my mother paid with food stamps. We were poorer now, but we knew we were still not as poor as Vilora Raleigh.

"How come Sally gets to make sandwiches and we have to dig?" I said. "How come Sue gets to baby-sit?" That day my mother threw a shovel at me, dirt and all, which lightly grazed my thigh. It was more of a letting-go, her grip on the handle of the shovel relaxed by my lullaby of complaints. (She denies it today: "I would *not* throw a *shovel* at you!"). I was sent to my room like Br'er Rabbit to the briar patch, where I read a book,

trying to ignore the clink-clink of the frying pans ladling dirt and rocks.

Plumbers came and installed an underground pipe from the filter to the drain at the bottom of the hopper. We erected the oval aluminum shell, which was lightly grooved like a rippled potato chip, and decorated with loopy yellow and white daisies. My mother ordered sand—two tons—which was dumped in the exact spot where the hill of soil excavated by Leroy Jones had been. (I was *not* happy to see another mountain of dirt to be moved.) We had to evenly cover the bottom of the sixteen-by-thirty-two-foot pool with sand, so for days we shoveled and tamped and leveled and measured. This was called coving. The sloped sides and bottom of the six-foot-deep hopper were the most difficult to cove, as climbing in and out of the well always marred the perfect surface we'd just created. We extended a two-by-six from the low end of the pool into the hopper, and crawled down to cove the bottom.

On cool nights, while the rest of us were sleeping off the work of the day, my mother, at four in the morning, knelt in the pool with her rolling pin spreading and smoothing the sand like a giant pie crust. I imagine her insomnia was a result of the changes in her life: sleeping alone for the first time in fifteen years; her funds halved; a brood of kids to raise without the full-time help of a husband. But maybe those nights were rare moments of quiet for her, the rolling and smoothing under the moonlight a soothing meditation.

Before we could fill the pool, Massachusetts law required that we erect a six-foot high fence around its perimeter. My mother rented a post-hole digger, but her arms were too short to work it effectively. The long-handled frying pan served just as well. Using that, my mother and my brother Patrick dug as far into the earth as the length of their arms, and that was good enough. Then they sunk the fence posts. We couldn't afford to encircle the pool with expensive stockade, so we

bought four segments of space-picket for the street-facing side, and jury-rigged chicken wire around the rest, purchasing lengths of stockade one at a time for years after.

The final chore was laying-in the liner. Mr. Hobaica, who installed built-in pools for a living, had promised to help with this tricky task, though he'd warned my mother against the entire project. Periodically that summer, Mr. Hobaica had stopped by after work to check our progress, smoking a cigarette, chuckling. I didn't know the meaning of the word *condescension*, but I could feel it in the air around him.

On the filling day, all of us kids and a squadron of neighbor kids were needed to hold a share of the turquoise vinyl liner that we draped into the perfectly smooth hopper, and over the top of the three-foot-high aluminum wall. My mother sent one of us to tell Mr. Hobaica we were ready, and he said he'd be over after that inning. We turned on our hose, and slowly the water rose in the pool, inching upward as we clutched our sections of liner, like a great blue quilt cut from a bolt of sky. My mother orchestrated the filling, directing each of us to yank tight or relax. The tension of the liner increased as the water deepened. Our fingers ached from gripping the vinyl. We waited for Mr. Hobaica, as my mother stepped delicately inside the pool to pull out wrinkles and flatten puckers, trying not to leave heel-print craters in the packed sand underneath.

With the pool half-full, the wrinkles were mostly smooth, except for one thick fold. But that wasn't our biggest problem: the liner was dangerously uneven, hanging a foot over the edge of one side, but only an inch on the other. If the liner slipped from our fingers, the water would rush underneath and ruin the painstakingly smoothed sand. We'd have to drain the pool and redo much of our work. My mother ordered the majority of kids to the short side to desperately hang on to that inch of vinyl.

Mr. Hobaica finally showed up.

“The way to remove wrinkles is to reverse your vacuum cleaner and blow them out as you go along,” he said, unconcerned that this tip would have been handy hours earlier.

With the pool nearly full, there was nothing we could do about that one long wrinkle—the wrinkle my mother stared at and commented on for years, the wrinkle that, if you mention the pool today, irks her still. Mr. Hobaica lingered another twenty minutes, pronounced our pool fine, and went back to his ball game. “Fat lotta help he was,” I said.

My mother wouldn’t indulge my sentiment. “I hope you become a critic when you grow up,” she said. “You always find something to criticize.”

Immediately after we filled the pool, the water turned chartreuse. We had to shock it with chlorine, and wait patiently for three days until the water cleared. Though our eyes burned after our first swim, we were in heaven. I loved plunging into that pool, trying to compete with my brother’s daring flips off one of those big wooden wire-spools we somehow obtained from the Boston Edison company. I practiced my swim team competition dive, an unfolding of my body from its jack-knife position, stretching long and flat over the water like a shadow, seeking distance, not depth. I perfected back dives: arms over my head, spine concave, toes pointed so that my instep arched, following the motif of my legs and back and arms, like a bridge design, striving for height then depth in one move.

On weekends, Sally and I swam laps of crawl, two-hundred at a time. I was practicing for a mile race, though my laps in the pool didn’t prepare me for the choppy, dark water of Lake Sherborn where the race was held. There was no blue liner like our pool at home, the long wrinkle like a compass needle guiding me. In the cold, murky lake, I struggled along, surfacing every few strokes to set my sights on the sailboat, which marked the turning point. Halfway into the race, most of the ten swimmers from my town’s team climbed into one of the boats that trailed the bodies bobbing in the water. I continued

my slow, meandering crawl. When my knees dragged on sand at the finish line, I stood and staggered up the sloping shore like a primordial creature evolving to a higher order.

Quietly my parents "trial" separation slipped into a divorce, and my mother began to date Ed, an acquaintance of her sisters in their hometown of Highland Falls, New York, four hours away. Occasionally, my mother went to New York for the weekend, but more often, Ed came to our house. Ed was shy and nervous, so he busied himself with construction projects. He built a deck that wrapped around the deep-end of the pool, and then our half-in, half-out home-made job was almost as good as the Hobaica's in-ground pool.

Our house underwent metamorphosis too. A kitchen wall was knocked down for a breakfast bar, brown and green carpets shifted to mauve and cool blue like a mood ring (though my mood ring, as if an accurate gauge of my temperament then, always seemed to be blue). Following instructions from library books, my mother finished a room in the basement, which we called the Orange Room after the color of the indoor-outdoor carpet she laid over the concrete. She framed in walls with two-by-fours, insulated and paneled, nailed down molding. She furnished the room with bean bag chairs and black light posters, bought a hanging lamp with mini-skirted, pony-tailed go-go dancers painted on the frosted glass shade.

The Orange Room was like a grotto—had no windows so you could wake up at 3:00 p.m. and feel like it was early morning or any time, the timeless room. But that was an illusion; in the Orange Room, time hastened me into adulthood. In 1970 when I was ten, my parents forbid me to play their *Hair* soundtrack album. ("Sodomy, fellatio, cunnilingus, pederasty—father, why do these words sound so nasty? Masturbation can be fun. Join the holy orgy, Kama Sutra, everyone.") In the privacy of the Orange Room, I listened to my sister Sally's "Ten Years After" album, the song *Good Morning Little School Girl*, the screeching refrain, "I want to ball you."

“What does that mean?” I asked Sally.

In tenth grade, Ronny Conway and I first had sex in the Orange Room, fantasized about hitchhiking to California, and wrote our wedding date on the wall, August, 1980, which would have been two years after high school graduation (we were practical dreamers). On Friday nights, if my mother was working, after my father picked up my younger siblings, Ronny and I skinny-dipped in our pool, gliding towards each other in the still, cool water, buoyant in each other’s arms, weightless as our consciences.

The pool never imploded as the experts had predicted. My mother’s intuitive sense of physics—the ability of water to hold its own against solid ground—triumphed. Pascal’s law: external pressure applied to a fluid at rest is uniformly transmitted. Though my mother, like Pascal, maintained faith in a higher power too. “I used to lie in bed at night and listen to that pool creaking,” she told me. “I envisioned the sides caving in and all that water rushing down in the Farrell’s yard. I’d pray it would hold.”

After most of my siblings moved away and my mother was busy working full-time, the pool was neglected. The water turned green then brown, the lining sagged and slipped bottomward like my grandmother’s baggy stockings. My mother said she regretted using our savings for the pool. “When I saw you all had no money for college, I felt bad,” she told me.

“We loved that pool,” I said.

The pool was more than a respite on hot summer days. That pool—built of our sweat and muscle and desire—demonstrated to me what a single woman not even five-feet tall in the world, a woman with a high school education and seven kids could accomplish.

A decade after I left my childhood home in Massachusetts, on a Christmas visit I saw the “For Sale” sign staked into our front lawn. My youngest brother, Mikey, was

turning eighteen that year, which, according to my parents' divorce decree, was when the house would be sold. Somehow I didn't believe the house I grew up in would actually be sold. I thought perhaps one of my siblings would buy it, or maybe several of us would band together to rescue the house. I flew back to Michigan where I'd moved after college and forgot about the house.

That spring, my mother had a yard sale. Even to my siblings who lived in Massachusetts, the sale was little advertised. Susan, who lived an hour away, learned of the sale the night before. "By the time I got there almost everything was gone, so I quickly grabbed the fondue pot," she told me. We laughed. She's never used the pot, but she keeps it all the same. That fondue pot, like a magic genie lamp, summons a vision: our dining room table laden with dips and breads, and squares of meat we skewered and plunged into clear, boiling oil. A fondue for dinner was adventure enough to make the whole day juicy with anticipation when I was a girl, was all it took for happiness. (I can still taste my mother's béarnaise sauce.) When my mother went back to work after the divorce, there wasn't time for such frivolity. By the time Mikey was eight, often alone after school, he was cooking himself cans of Campbell's soup, thick and pasty. Nobody told him he was supposed to add water.

After the yard sale, my mother and Mikey rented a Bobcat front-end loader for two hundred dollars and plowed everything that remained into the hopper of the pool, including the pool itself—the wobbly aluminum walls, the filter, the liner, the rotting deck. They covered this huge grave with three truckloads of fill and fifteen yards of topsoil, smoothed it over and sprinkled grass seed.

Shortly after, on a warm August day in 1988, my mother, my father, and a realtor met to close on the house. I imagine my mother sitting at the breakfast bar looking out the window at Harry Siegler's lawn on the day of the closing. Nearly every Easter and Thanksgiving before my parents divorced, as

my family sat around the dining room table, my mother would say, "There's Harry Siegler mowing his lawn." She'd shake her head. "Something is not right in that house."

My mother speculated that Harry was escaping his wife Doris, who never wore anything other than snap-down house dresses, and who we thought strange because she didn't drive. It's true, Harry Siegler was always puttering in his yard, that is until one summer when a blight of some kind destroyed huge patches of grass and Harry's yard became an eyesore. His lawn stayed bald and patchy for years, the way I like to imagine it was still on the day my mother and father sold our house.

After they closed the deal, my mother and my father stood in the driveway and hugged each other, and cried. With his half of the sale money, my father and his new wife bought a brand new house, and with her half my mother bought a condominium, which in Massachusetts in the late eighties was about all she could afford. All the units were exactly alike, except the interior color schemes were either beige or blue. Mikey called the place Beige Number Nine.

The following Christmas, when I visited my mother at Beige Number Nine, she gave me a manila envelope stuffed with family photos—she'd cut up the group shots, so they were mostly pictures of myself—and a cardboard box which contained the remains of my childhood: a small red diary, four photo albums, some college texts, my high school yearbook, and a walking stick I brought home from California when I was eighteen, my handwritten note still taped to it: "Do not ever throw this stick away."

I was amazed that my childhood could be reduced to one cardboard box. I began to wonder what my mother had bulldozed into the pool. Was my sixth-grade love letter from John Lippolis in there, the one that began, "I'm sorry I threw the football at you?" My black patent-leather Mary Janes from fifth grade, with the square toe and oversized buckle that made me feel like a pilgrim? I loved those shoes so much that I

cried when I left one at my grandmother's in New York. "Mom. *Please*. Make Nanny send it." Years after I lost it, my grandmother mailed me the shoe. When I opened the box, I couldn't remember why I was so attached to those stupid loafers, but I kept it. I wanted that shoe to teach me something, to remind me how to be excited about a thing as simple and inconsequential as a shoe, how to be as happy and as hopeful as I was before I became a teenager, before my parents divorced.

What else went into that hole, that hopper that for so many years was filled with clear, cold water that I smashed into, water that broke the fall of my body leaping backward? My mother's wedding gown, which I only saw once as a child, then never again because she made it disappear after her divorce? Gifts we made for Mother's or Father's Day: rock paper weights, ceramic pencil holders? An entire set of Funk and Wagnall's encyclopedias—Aardvark to Zululand? Stuff we had when we were teenagers: clogs, the psychedelic go-go girl lamp, cheerleading skirts? The notebooks I wrote in as I failed Mrs. Drane's geometry class in tenth grade, my teensy tiny words crawling across the page like centipedes? And my single swimming trophy—that must be in the hole, otherwise, where is it?

Ten years after my childhood home was sold, my two younger sisters, Joanne and Barbie, ran into each other in front of the house. Neither of them lived in Walpole anymore. Both had detoured from wherever they were going at the same moment to drive by the house. What were they looking for? What were they hoping to see? I moved back to New England after nine years in Michigan, but have yet to visit the house I grew up in. I don't want to go back. I don't want to see the chocolate-brown clapboard painted pumpkin or sage by the new owners. Or the weeping willows, no taller than my mother when she planted them, grown into enormous trees. Rooms added on like bastards. I don't want to see the patch of grass in

the side yard where no six-foot picket fence guards a wobbly aluminum pool.

My brother-in-law, Matt, an authority on antique glass, has taken me bottle digging with him. Once, Matt and I drove in his pickup to an old church in Scituate, Massachusetts, and trespassed into the woods behind the church. "We'll dig here," Matt said. He pointed to a spot as random as any other, but to his trained eye, a slight rise of the earth, a mossy rock pile told of a century-old dumping ground. A few minutes later, my shovel clinked against glass. Matt and I clawed the dirt, unearthing pieces of china, crescent-shaped bone dishes and cracked dinner plates, bottles and jars. I found a small ceramic doll only two inches high, unsmiling and armless.

"That's turn of the century," Matt said. "You can see the seams from the wooden mold." He pointed to barely discernible specks on the doll's torso. "Worth about ten bucks."

"She's beautiful," I said, falling in love with the doll.

Later when Matt and I were washing the bottles, I lost the doll. I kept searching my coat pockets, our bag of bottles. "Where's Dolly?" My family laughed at me, Matt felt somehow responsible, and for months after, years even, I kept getting various forms of Dolly for Christmas and my birthday: tiny plastic babies, other ceramic dolls Matt found, silly joke dolls meant to make me look foolish for acting foolish over a doll. But that doll made history true for me, made a child from circa 1895 real the way the Shroud of Turin proved Jesus real for some people. The doll was proof, and proof is necessary for upholding beliefs, for knowing ourselves, reconciling ourselves with our pasts.

Over the years since my parents sold the house I grew up in, I've had recurring dreams of digging in the side yard where my mother buried everything. In my dreams, I am always interrupted by a light that clicks on, or someone calling me, the fear I will be caught searching for my past, mining someone else's property.

Angie Weaver

Beyond Articulation

Shorn apprentice of the thin profession, I am lost.
Leave me by your slack continent of ardent lashes, freed.
You're merging your words, you used to say

with a rotund robin inflection—cluck, cluck, cluck:
are-tick-you-late—just the tip of the tongue slips
out/in like hints. *You aren't coffee or cream. See?*

Suspended: raised above the grass, uncowlike,
with a bent toward, a propensity for, an inclination to,
wait on it, you will be fulfilled. Over, over

your envelope's scripts clasp, pending.
Wonderful bright, not the high IQ kind, but splendid.
Imagine swirls, the gristle of cement and loam

pushed into water with an apparently unrelated hoe,
like bricks sucking up eggshell paint, thirsting
to be artificial, the next sextant horizon again.

New surface tension spreads beyond the frostbelt
as walls hover in your sleep and render melted rifts.
I wanted great lists of blends, words in the sand.

Joust

We played basketball that summer. All the time. We played at Ben Richards' house, three-on-three, and stopped after each game to drink soda and smoke Mrs. Richards' cigarettes. They were called Kool Menthols. We thought they were gross but smoked them anyhow.

We played basketball in the heat. The heat had a name but wouldn't tell us what it was. And it was all around us. In our clothes. In our hair. In our jump shots. So we had a right to know its name.

We played basketball in the wind. We blew smoke rings and lied about trying marijuana. We lied about drinking alcohol.

Giant trees towered over the town. They towered over us like wise men wondering. The heat hung on the trees like sweaters, sweaters tight in the arms. The trees sucked at the air and swam in the wind.

We were little creatures on the floor of a deep ocean. The trees were ferns rooted in the ocean floor, swaying in the hot depths. The top of the sky was the sea surface. The open blue was the world of air. We were as deep down as we could get, and that was fine.

We lived in houses that were alive with the spirits of former residents. Everybody leaves something behind. And on those days, the houses were beacons of shade, dark and cool, vibrating with phantoms. Our houses were dazzling coral caves on the ocean floor.

On the wraparound porches of our dazzling coral caves, cats stood at the edges and looked into the bushes. They looked into the bushes for birds they could kill and eat. Their whis-

kers grew by the day, and when they fell out, we'd find them everywhere. Their whiskers were little tusks.

The phones rang and echoed through the halls of our coral caves. The sound of the phones ringing was amazing.

We smoked and drank soda and started another game. We took off our shirts. The trees multiplied as the heat increased.

From down the street came the crazy parade harumph of the town ice cream truck. We'd heard it from a distance all day, zooming around town, sounding lost, playing its tart and angry jingles. But now it had found us, and it came to a stop in the street.

It had four big ears shaped like megaphones. It moved up and down like a muscle car, trying to get our attention, but we didn't care. We smoked. We drank. We played on.

From the opposite direction of the ice cream truck came the sound of rock and roll. It was a big blue station wagon full of our older brothers. They had been drinking and smoking at the club. They had been rat-tailing girls at the pool. They had been telling very tall tales. And now they wanted more. They wanted a fight. So they'd come to joust with the ice cream truck.

They were pirates singing sea chanteys. They yelled lyrics from songs, singing you shook me all night long, oh yes you did girl, you really know you did, girl. We laughed at them, but laughter was a form of respect. The trees paid them no mind. The heat was busy.

The ice cream truck knew what was up. It had dealt with punks before. The ice cream truck was an ally of our parents, who spent their days on another part of the ocean floor, where the plants reached higher towards the sea surface. In that other watery place, our parents were busy with the business of running the ocean, and had entrusted the ice cream truck to maintain the peace. Because later, they wanted to emerge from their commuter trains to find a scene of tranquility. They wanted to emerge into the dissipating sunshine of a

summer evening and find that nothing had changed. Our parents knew what the ice cream truck knew, that we had pillage in our hearts, that given the chance we would rip the town to shreds.

We looked up as the wind began to gust. The wind ignored everyone, tried to mind its own business, but the heat would have none of it. The heat was a bully. It stuck to the wind with malice. It crashed into the trees and made the wise men wither.

The wind twisted and turned and flailed, trying to shake the heat, but the heat was in a mood, and dug its talons in without mercy, riding the wind like a cowboy rides a bucking bronco. We were innocent bystanders, playing our games, sipping our soda, smoking our cigarettes. We were innocent, but at the wrong place at the wrong time. And so the heat whipped across our faces, it warmed up our sodas, it blew cigarette ashes in our eyes, it covered us in sweat as proof of its dominion, it frazzled the cats with their faces in the holly bushes and made their whiskers fall out. Our parents could not have imagined any of this.

The ice cream truck began to bounce in a more belligerent manner. We heard the contents shake inside it. All those Snow Cones and Lollapaloozas and Toasted Almond bars. They kept us wholesome. They kept us in line. They kept us cornfed in a town without corn.

Our brothers knew the joust would be no cake walk. The opponent was righteous and wily. The opponent had a proven track record. And so, as we resumed another three-on-three, our brothers jumped out of the car and began touching all the trees. Well, first they rat-tailed us, and then they stole the ball away, and then they made us make outrageous untrue statements to get the ball back. But after that they started touching the trees. And as they touched each tree they said something holy, like the Lord's Prayer, or the Ave Maria, or more lyrics about girls shaking them all night long. We dribbled and

passed and shot and threw elbows. We were feeling pretty good about everything, and our brothers were getting cocky.

Then the girls showed up.

The girls drove up in a green convertible which echoed rock and roll down the street. It sounded like the same song our brothers played, but when we stopped playing ball and listened closely, the subject matter was different. And the singer wasn't screaming. He was singing about meeting a gin-soaked bar-room queen in Memphis. We thought the lyrics were stupid.

But the girls loved the lyrics. They sang them up into the sky, up from the ocean floor. They were mermaids at the bottom of their graduating class. They were drunk and smiled without a care. They beeped the car horn to the rhythm. Their heads moved slowly back and forth and their hair was shiny and limp. Their skin was greasy and shiny and perfect. Ben Richards tried to do a lay-up with a cigarette in his hand and burned himself.

The girls showing up disrupted our brothers from the task at hand. They hadn't counted on an audience. They thought they'd be doing this in peace. But the girls got out of the convertible and weren't wearing a lot. Just bikini tops and cut-offs and sandals, sandals they released into the warring wind with a liquid goose step. They pushed each other around and sat on the lawn, which ran the length of the street that would be used for jousting. They leaned on their hands or lay on their backs and took in the sunshine. The trees used the hot wind to dip down a little closer. The trees were like dirty old wise men wondering.

Our brothers didn't talk to the girls, tried and failed to ignore them. They touched all the trees and said holy things and the girls mocked them. But we knew everyone was getting along.

The firehorn went off.

The firehorn in our town was broken. It would go off

when there wasn't any fire to be found. It would flange and distort and hiccup. It sounded like the Devil Himself. The ice cream truck had been waiting for the firehorn, for the firehorn was a bent referee. It was intent on psyching our brothers out, and they reeled at its squall and yelled and cursed. We clutched at our cigarettes and gulped our soda until the firehorn quit its blubbering. The girls did not seem to notice the evil sound.

From a house across the street, from an open window, from a massive open window, three heads peered out. The heads of little boys, maybe five or six. They were attentive and still. A kind of logic was being passed down.

As our brothers continued touching the trees and being holy about it, and the girls continued to giggle and rub their legs together like crickets, someone began to play an acoustic guitar, play one chord from an unseen location. This chord was lush and beautiful and everywhere at once. It was thick, scented hair. It cut right through the heat and gave the heat a taste of its own medicine. I heard it as I went up for a shot and chucked an airball. The girls began to dance. And whoever was playing the chord continued without a break, strumming it over and over and driving the heat mad.

Dogs barked down the street behind invisible fencing. We heard their yipping as they hit electrical charges at the end of fine green lawns. Their confusion upset no one. The cats across the street puffed their tails, though, and the scorpion heat stung their noses.

We stopped playing basketball and sat down on the lawn, keeping a respectable distance from the girls, who were dancing in a circle and singing as loud as they could, singing about hon-kay-tonkh wih-men. We teethed grass and smoked cigarettes while our brothers finished touching the trees like they were Bibles. Then they nodded at each other and walked through the long-suffering wind over to the car. The chord strummed and tried to break the trees free of their sweaters, but the heat held on. The heat was a body having its arm twisted

back. It screamed a defiant scream, roasting us. The firehorn started up again. It groaned its sad, demonic swell, and waited.

The car and the ice cream truck were barely a stone's throw away. The joust would be over in a flash. It would be over before we could say Jack Daniels. After, we would go back to playing basketball. We would begin to think about evening. We would eat dinner and meet later for trouble. But for now, we paid attention. We whispered about things colliding. We tried to understand the forces at work. The girls kept dancing.

Our brothers got in the car and began hooting and hollering. The ice cream truck played its vicious song and revved its engine hard. The little kids in the window leaned their heads out further. The magic chord flooded the world. Dogs howled against their situation. The wind broke free of the heat and shook the trees. White whiskers filled the lawn like snow.

The sun perched high in the sky, and did not care what time it was.

We watched like Roman princes in a coliseum. The trees were elders and emperors. The heat howled and would not break. The joust was on.

One of the girls cracked a joke, and the others doubled over, hysterical. Their laughter drowned in the pealing scream of the engines.

Sheila Sinead McGuinness

Georgic

After the harvest of organs, of long bones,
we praise the god who gleans his power
from pharmacy, electricity, from planting—
not green in fertile bottoms, but meat
in caverns, blood-rich and sinewed.

When a Lazarus rises from death, rides the river,
we praise, for a graft will flower, will fruit.
When withered leaves no longer breathe, when frost
stops sap, and ice cleaves bark and pulp,
who would call the cold wind Executioner?

Heron, Bittern, Shrike

Within hours of leaving the river,
caddis flies clutter the asphalt.
Driver #1 proceeds westerly,
the eyewitness says, lost
to frogs lying geothermal
along the Lochsa's oxbow.
A gold coupe, spewing & rusted.
This surface ripples as heron dagger trout,
rise through shrouds of steaming air
to utter their *craw*. How long
until, infested by beetle, the lodgepole's
lichened half gives way, splits
and cracks like bursts from a duckblind?
Driver #2 follows, a pick-up alongside
at seventy, eighty, muffler loud as a rip saw.
A bittern lifts its foot, slender—the wind—
settles on the reedbed stubble, aligning
its stripes with winter-hollowed stalks.
The velvet of last year's cattails
frayed, the bittern swaying. Off the ramp,
the sin of metal on metal
unseen by shrike still on leafless aspen,
arrives the coupe, back-ended. #1
by the shirt, what animal
would not gnaw, #2 by the throat,
ligament and bone to free itself,
Got a piece? Shrike down to duff,
snatching gun, impales

a shrew on hawthorn,
wheels & shots &
hedging the river, one,
two, three,
hedging tomorrow, o
he temples himself.

I Am Calling You

Arnie put down the phone and went straight to the bedroom. It was where the wedding photo and marriage certificate hung side by side, the first frame containing roses from Vera's wedding corsage pressed beneath the glass, the second crushing the withered rag of his boutonniere. Arnold Gunther and Vera McIntyre, May 22, 1944. Arnold Gunther, second lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, about to be shipped to a second tour of duty, this one in the South Pacific, and Vera McIntyre, Irish and Catholic and just promoted to teller at the Skokie First National Bank. Vera McIntyre in a light blue suit and toeless pumps, leaning back against his uniformed chest. Vera Gunther, wife, mother, liar.

"She's dead," he'd said to the woman on the phone. "Vera died in January."

"Oh, what a shame," the woman said. He hadn't gotten her name, or why she wanted Vera, but she sounded too high-toned for a telephone solicitor.

"Breast cancer," he added, in case the woman was someone Vera knew from way back. "She licked it once, but a year ago it came back again."

"I'm so sorry," the woman said, "and Jeanne will be so disappointed."

"Jeanne?" he said, "Jeanne who?" And that was his big mistake. That was the moment he could have hung up and gone back to the sports page on the tray in the den and not be standing here in the bedroom staring at his wedding picture and panting like a dog with emphysema.

"Jeanne Manning," the woman said. "Vera's daughter."

“Sorry,” Arnie said, “You got yourself the wrong Gunther. We only had but the one girl, LuAnn. The other two were boys.”

“Oh, I think I have the right one,” the woman said with a little laugh. “Jeanne will be delighted to know she has siblings, but she’ll be crushed about her mom.”

“No,” Arnie said, the irritation rising in his voice. “You didn’t hear me. We only had the one daughter. And we don’t know anybody named Manning.”

“Look,” the woman said, “I’m sorry if this comes as a shock to you, but I’m just trying to help a friend here. Jeanne was an only child, and her parents—her adopted ones—are both gone. I don’t get paid for doing this, you know; I just do it—I help people find their birth parents. I’ve found seven so far, and Jeanne makes eight. I could probably make a living doing this if I wanted to, but I don’t even ask for expenses. I’m just trying to do my part to . . .”

“Look yourself!” Arnie said. “I don’t know what kind of stunt you’re trying to pull, but this has nothing to do with me or Vera.”

“Vera McIntyre,” the woman said quickly, spitting out the words like buckshot into a skillet. “Born January 2, 1921, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Gave birth to a baby girl on June 7, 1942, at St. Luke’s Hospital in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The child was turned over to Catholic Charities for adoption two days after birth. The adoption was finalized on December 18, 19 . . .”

“That’s bullshit!” Arnie said, cutting her off. “My wife never had any other kids. I’d know it if she did. And she never lived in Kenosha!”

“Where were you in June 1942?” the woman said. “Were you with Vera at that time?”

He didn’t answer.

“Did you even know her then?” the woman said.

"I knew her," Arnie said, and mashed the phone back into its cradle.

But he didn't. Not in 1942. In 1942, he was on a ship in the Atlantic. He met Vera on November 22, 1943, at a USO Thanksgiving party. She was dishing up the pumpkin pie and administering huge dollops of whipped cream. Occasionally she licked the excess off the side of her finger, but she seemed unaware that this could turn a guy on. He liked that about her—that innocence. And she had good legs—he could see that from across the room—and upswept Betty Grable curls, her ginger hair a little darker than the pumpkin. He knew it was November 22 because they were married six months later to the day. And Vera was slim. You could tell that from the picture: skinny ankles and trim hips under the peplum of her suit jacket. And she wasn't the least maternal; she didn't even have big boobs.

On their wedding night, Vera was a virgin. He was sure of it. A lot of girls weren't in those wartime years, and he had known a few of them himself—good-time girls with as much lust and desperation in their eyes as any wartime sailor—but Vera had always stopped him from unbuttoning the last button, from slipping more than a finger into the silky wilderness beneath her step-ins. And he respected that. He told her so—that he respected girls who had some modesty, who could still blush. And when the ring was finally on her finger, when they had ducked through a sidelong rain into the rickety motel on the Great Lakes beach, Vera was as nervous as a bride would be—they were both nervous. Nervous and in love, and almost aware that nature itself was setting the pace for them—a rhythm of stormy breakers that rocked and rocked against the shore. And when he moved, perhaps too soon, to enter her, Vera sucked in a sharp, audible breath.

"It's okay, babe," he said, not wanting to hurt her, but wanting her, bursting and aching and needing to get inside her

and be there every possible moment between now and when his unit shipped out. "It's okay," he said, because they were married, and she was his to possess, and any little pain she felt would be short-lived.

And Vera loved it. The waves still rocked against the shore when their own rocking had ceased, and Vera was smiling at him, stroking his face, and calling him "my love, my love . . ." And then she excused herself—or was it after the second time?—"just for a little minute to get cleaned up." So if there wasn't blood on the sheets—and he couldn't remember either way—why should there be? The lights in the room were out, and Vera was fastidious even then, and he could hear her in the bathroom with the water running. He remembered that; he was sure of it. They had ten glorious days together, and by the time he shipped out, he had gotten her pregnant with Clark.

The phone started ringing again, and Arnie grabbed for the bedpost, sinking slowly to the bed to protect his bum knee. He glared at the light blue trimline on the bedside stand, but it seemed to be at a distance, an artifact from another life. Why did they have such a sissy blue phone anyway? It looked like it belonged to a little girl! It was supposed to go with the walls, he guessed, but the walls looked tired, faded. Gray marks from Vera's wheelchair nicked into the doorframe and made streaks along one wall. "You need to take driver's ed," she'd tell him, trying to make light of the fact that her bones would no longer hold nor propel her. "You'll have to buy me a helmet, the way you steer this thing."

The phone stopped ringing, but he could hear his daughter's voice from the message machine in the hall. "Hey Dad? Martin wants to borrow that extension ladder you've got. He's doing something with the flashing around the chimney when he gets the gutters cleaned out. We're going to swing by after lunch if you're home. Give us a call, okay?"

Fine, he thought. Let them borrow the extension ladder. They could have the damn ladder for all he cared, but he wasn't going to call them. He wasn't going near that phone and let them hear a quaver in his voice. And he wasn't having anybody rooting around his house either, examining his things. He grabbed the keys from the bureau and headed down the hall to the garage. There, he maneuvered the ladder off its storage hooks and leaned it against the side of the house. They could come get it if they wanted to, but he wasn't calling anybody back, and he sure as hell wasn't going to stay home waiting for the phone to ring.

In the car, he drove his usual route: past the post office, the donut shop, the old hardware store that was mostly cutesy giftware these days, out to the shopping mall that was anchored with a Marshall Field on one end and a Target on the other. He got out of the car near the Target end and stood there staring down the length of the complex until some woman with big hips and a Sunday-school face stopped with her shopping cart. "Are you all right?" she said, as if he was senile or something. "You look a little confused."

"I'm fine," Arnie snapped and got back in the car, hunching his elbows over the steering wheel and turning on the radio to stationless static he didn't bother to change.

Vera had a sister who lived in Kenosha. Pat. Pat Grady. She was older and married with a couple of kids by the time he and Vera got hitched. And she was dead too, the same breast cancer that killed Vera twenty years later. Walt was dead, and their kids would have been too young to remember if there was anything "funny" about a visit from Aunt Vera in 1942. But damn it! She could have told him. What kind of man did she think he was that after all these years she couldn't tell?

But tell what? There was nothing to tell. Some asshole woman found a name that probably wasn't even spelled the same and wanted to chalk up another win in her little detective

game. What did she say—I've found seven and Vera makes eight? And she couldn't prove anything. Not a damn thing. It wasn't like she had some sample of Vera's blood and was going to get a DNA test like they did in the O.J. trial—and look what a mess that was!

But could she get DNA from his kids? He'd seen some program about a woman who claimed to be a Russian princess, and these scientists got blood from Prince Philip, who was a shirttail relation, and proved she was really just a seamstress after all. And LuAnn would probably give it too. Clark would tell the woman to go to hell, but LuAnn would stick her arm right out, and Bruce might not be much different. LuAnn listened to all those psychologists on TV now that her kids were out of the house. It was her idea to get Hospice in when Vera got bad so they could hear all about the stages of grief and how people were supposed to be honest and not hide their feelings.

Did LuAnn know? Jesus! Was that why she was so big on all this honesty crap? Would Vera have told her? Would she have betrayed him like that and told her daughter instead of him? Because the one night of their marriage Vera slept on the couch and refused to come to bed was the night LuAnn came home pregnant. Or admitted she was pregnant. Or stood there crying in her too-tight blouse and her bell-bottom pants, while Vera said, "But they're getting married. They're both of legal age, Arnie. These things happen, you know."

Was that why she sided with LuAnn, white dress and church wedding and the whole nine yards, when he said he wasn't walking any pregnant woman down the aisle? When he said, "Why don't you just hitch a ride downstate and elope?"

But would she have told LuAnn after all those years? Assuming, of course, she had something—anything—to tell?

Another woman with a shopping cart had paused and was looking in his direction. What? he glared back. Was every

do-gooder in greater Chicago out looking for old men who've lost their marbles? He turned the Buick's key, tromped on the gas pedal and brought the engine to roaring life, heading out of the lot and back to the hardware store. You couldn't even sit in your own car anymore. Couldn't answer the phone without some nutcase interfering.

He was on the stepladder painting the bedroom when he heard the back door slam. LuAnn had a key from the months she came after work to help out with her mother, but she usually had the decency to knock. "Dad," she called from the kitchen. "Dad?" He heard her footsteps coming in his direction, clumping as she always did. She'd never learned to walk dainty like her mother. "Dad?" She was in the doorway now. "Dad! What do you think you're doing up there?"

"I think I'm painting up here," he said, "and since I've got a brush in my hand, that probably is what I'm doing."

"Brown?" LuAnn said. "You're painting it brown?"

"Blue is a woman's color," he said. "I'm not a woman, in case you haven't noticed. And I can paint it any damn color I like."

"Well yeah," LuAnn said, "but isn't it going to be kind of dark and depressing?"

"I can be dark and depressing if I've got a mind to," he said.

"What's eating you today?" she said. "And why didn't you call us back?"

He dipped the brush in the paint can and with a show of confidence applied it where the wall met the ceiling. He meant the gesture to be crisp and efficient, but his hand wavered; some of the brown lapped into the blue.

Below him, LuAnn sighed, but she refrained from telling him he should have used masking tape. Outside in the driveway, Martin's pickup tooted. "Okay," she said, "we're outta here. Have fun with your paint, Dad."

“LuAnn,” he said, but when she turned, he didn’t know how to phrase what he wanted to know. “When you were going through your mother’s clothes and things, did you find anything . . . anything besides clothes and makeup and women’s stuff?”

“No,” she said. “Why? Is something missing?” She paused for a beat and her voice shifted. “Mom gave me that ruby ring. You knew that.”

“No, no,” he said. “Not that. I’m not accusing you.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know really. Letters, documents, souvenirs.”

“We went through the desk before she died,” LuAnn said. “You were there.”

“Yes,” he said, but no other words would form to help him. Outside, Martin’s horn tooted again. “You better go,” he said. “Your husband’s waiting.”

By three o’clock he had one wall finished to his satisfaction, but when he got down and stepped back to the doorway to survey the effect, it looked terrible. The brown was the color not of chocolate or of mellow wood, but of dirt. Little waves of dirt lapped all along the ceiling line and onto the edges of the woodwork. Looking at it gave him a sense of vertigo, as though he were falling out of a blue sky into a plowed and barren field.

He put the lid on the paint and stowed it on the shelf in the garage, and for the next three days he followed the routine he’d established in the weeks since Vera’s death: breakfast at the donut shop, three walking laps through the mall (1.21 miles on his pedometer), lunch at the senior center, cards or checkers if anybody decent showed up to play with, a frozen dinner in the microwave, a tray in the den while he watched the news. On the third day, the blinking light on the answering machine caught his eye before he even had time to put the groceries down.

It's that woman again, he knew with certitude, that nosy bitch, and he punched the Play button savagely. The voice that came through was softer, however, more flutelike, and strangely hesitant. "Mr. Gunther? Mr. Gunter, my name is Jeanne Manning. I am calling you . . ."

He hit the Stop button so hard he almost jammed his finger joint. He stumbled through the kitchen door to grab onto the back of a chair and let his head drop until he could stop the trembling and control his breathing again. Through his chin, he could feel his heart thudding in his chest. It wasn't the call itself that was doing this to him; he'd been expecting a second call. It was the voice—Vera's voice. Vera's voice before the first cancer. Vera's voice when she wasn't sure if he was mad at her or not.

He hadn't been mad at her often—he wasn't that kind of man—but he hated it when she let the kids mess up the entire house, and he hated it when she was sick. It scared him. Not just the cancer, but fevers and stomach flu, even morning sickness. He had found Vera in a brief interlude between war and war, and all through those hellish Pacific nights the thought of her had been his cool, safe place, his fixed point in a sky with no familiar constellations. She wasn't supposed to get sick. She wasn't supposed to have secrets. She wasn't supposed to die first either, damn her. She wasn't supposed to leave him like this.

He was still standing with his arms braced on the back of the chair, but the tears were falling now, too fast for him to see the fabric or the wood, and he hung there, sobs coming from deep in his gut, until his rib cage ached too much to continue. Then he wiped his face with his sleeve, went to the fridge for a can of Bud, and drank the whole thing without his eyes ever coming quite into focus. When he'd finished and crushed the can, he grabbed his jacket and set out from the back door on foot.

Spring had come to Chicago only to the extent that the trees were thickening their spare silhouettes and his neighbor's scraggy forsythia was making a brave attempt. Not much was green, and the alley was pocked with puddles and potholes, but here and there, a few crocuses escaped from somebody's fence.

Damn it, Vera, he said, but his anger was soft, depleted. He walked for about a mile, he figured, up toward the hospital and then back. He detoured to cross the little park where he had taken the kids to play a century or two ago. The park had acquired a newfangled wooden fort, all bars and chutes and ladders, but down the hill the equipment seemed little changed: a sandbox, a slide, swings.

As he crossed in front of the sandbox, two crows flushed up from the grass and scolded down at him from a redbud tree, their sound somewhere between mockery and rage. But something else was drinking out of a little puddle the children's feet had hollowed beneath a swing—something he couldn't identify—large and rat-like, but with a high, fluffy tail. He paused and then moved closer, putting a quiet foot forward on the grass and shifting his head to find the right trifocal lens. The creature had a squirrel's tail and squirrel posture, but something was terribly wrong. Except for the tail, the squirrel was virtually hairless, the pink folds of skin visible and shuddering in the early April wind. Was it old? Young? A mutant?

The squirrel sensed his presence and raised its head, wary, but too sick or weak to rear back and tense. It looked for all the world like someone on chemotherapy, he thought, the taut face, the pale wisps of pinkish fuzz. The squirrel held its pose, eyeing him, assessing the danger, almost seeming to plead.

Drink, little fella, Arnie said without speaking. Go ahead and drink.

As if it heard him, the animal bent to the water again, reverently, shyly, as though questioning its own right to be at

this little pool. There was something tender about the way it put its front paws down on the earth at the puddle's edge, hoping not to give injury to anything more vulnerable than itself, hoping not to be turned away.

Very slowly Arnie crouched, stretching forth his hand as though he would feed the creature, but as he did, his bum knee gave way, and he went lower than he intended, tumbling onto his side in the still damp grass. He knew without seeing that the squirrel had startled as he fell, and he was able to prop his head up just in time to see its tail disappear into a row of spirea bushes on the other side of the park.

"Damn knee," he said aloud, but without much anger. He lay on his side until the pain subsided somewhat, and then began the business of righting himself. He might be old and decrepit, but he could still get up when he was down.

He made his way home limping a little, and hungry, but he didn't open the fridge or any of the frozen entrée boxes still on the counter in the grocery bag. Instead, he pulled a chair into the hall next to the answering machine and pressed the button that said Rewind.

The voice was still soft, still hesitant, and it seemed to come from an enormous distance. "Mr. Gunther?" Jeanne Manning began, "Mr. Gunther, I am calling you basically to apologize. I had no idea that your wife just died or that . . . or that this whole business might be a source of grief to you."

Jeanne Manning went on, and Arnie listened to the message from Vera's daughter twice and wrote her number down before he began to weep again. He let the tears flow freely this time, not for the Vera he loved, who was dead and gone, but for the other one, the Vera who—had he lived his life only a little differently—he might someday have come to know.

Don Kunz

How to Become a Blues Musician
(For James Baldwin)

Grow up in Harlem. Hang out in the hood. Be a homeboy. Let your bro go to college, be a high school teacher. Algebra, shit like that. You know, Whitebread. Say you want to leave to get away from drugs. Stay. Become a junkie.

Stand on corners. Listen to the noise. Smoke some shit. Get knocked around. Pig's knuckles, like that. Get busted. Go to jail. Swap letters with your bro who teaches high school algebra. Swap needles with your cellmate. Call the guards honkies. Call yourself black. Rattle some cages. Get busted upside the head. Hear some new sounds. Hum a few bars. What you did to be so black and blue. Bars behind bars.

Get out on parole. Get a night job. Night watchman, janitor. Sweep up smoky bars. Minimum wage. Stay with your bro. But hang in the hood. Buy your own records. Listen. Muddy Waters, Sun House, Dr. Longhair, Howlin' Wolf. Play 'em loud. Play along. Listen to gospel singers on street corners. Hear the junkies whisper your language. The sounds of heavy traffic. Suffer. Practice.

Wonder why it's always dark outside. Inside, too. Find the light. Turn it on. See how dark you look. Brush your teeth every morning in a cracked mirror. Practice your smile. One morning see how your teeth look like piano keys. Sell some shit. Buy a piano. Become a player. Make something up, something with teeth in it. Ebony and ivory. Sounds of the ghetto. Shades of darkness—black, brown, blue. Feel the hood in your fingers. Stick it in their ears.

Andrew Bradley

En el Asilo

In the Kingdom of Deception overlooking the river
the hard bread is divided by saw, the round cow

en la banqueta loca que no tiene razon cerra el ojo.

The doctor asks the nurse, "Do you know

who God is?" To think of you, it pleases me.

I think of you a great deal, you and the music of joy.

The doctor asks the nurse, "How many died
last night?" The one who refused the medicine

que lastima, he believes he sighs in a cathedral
overlooking the green night with all its flowers

he calls the orderly *mecanografo*, raw visions
of the brain butcher signaling through flaming doors

as I think of you in a dreamy state. A cigarette
begins to light the straggly ends of my hair.

I think of you, I think of you, it's like a religion
with peasants who believe God is dead, but miss him.

The doctor asks the nurse, "*Tiene murria*, are you blue?"

They remove the window with the mountains on it

and install the completely black one in its place.

The one who refused the medicine cries, "*Es la Noche—*

she dresses all in white!" It scares the living daylight
out of the old teacher, who has never uttered a single word.

The washbowl, the mirror, the balcony, I give each the name
"my heart." This is how much I think of you, I'm insane.

If you came here, perhaps to share a cup of tea, I would place
a book on the table before you. I would sit quietly and wait

while the one who refused the medicine rocked complacently.
This is *The Book of the Arrow*. You dissolve it with your tears.

Alison Krupnick

Valentines

Around Valentine's Day I realized he was more than just another classmate—this boy with the big eyes, goofy smile and head that seemed too large for his three-year-old body.

My three-year-old daughter Melanie and I were making valentines for her preschool Valentine's Day party, one for each kid in the class—twenty-eight valentines in all.

We began the project on a weekend, when we were all sick, housebound and bored. My husband lay on the couch watching football. Maya, the baby, crawled from room to room like an explorer, hands slapping the floor as she moved to warn us of her arrival. And Kitty, my twenty-one-year-old cat, in the last stages of kidney disease, occupied her usual spot on the corner of the couch—an inert black-and-white body propped up against a pillow, sleeping so deeply that I had to touch her to be sure she was still breathing.

I was relieved to find an activity that would keep us busy. I went to the art supply store to buy the materials we would need to create valentines—red, blue, purple and green glitter; stickers; extra-large red envelopes for the oversized hearts we would cut out. I am not artistic by nature. But since having Melanie and Maya I'd thrown myself into projects that reminded me of the magic and innocence of childhood.

Melanie and I could do this project together. I would cut out large hearts from pink, red, purple and white construction paper. Melanie would decorate them with glitter and stickers—cats, hearts, insects, flowers, jungle animals, birds—something to please everyone and give each valentine a personal touch.

We settled ourselves at the dining room table, supplies laid out in assembly-line fashion. "Whose valentine should we make first?" I asked, looking over the list of kids in the class, trying to match faces to the names. I wasn't surprised by her choice. "Olivia!" she announced, naming the girl she'd talked about most since starting preschool. Olivia had been Melanie's first friend. After months of hearing her complain that nobody liked her and she didn't like anybody I was pleased when she began playing with Olivia. But theirs was a tempestuous relationship with tears and power struggles and I wasn't sure whether to encourage it. I cut out a white heart. Melanie chose some stickers and placed them on the heart, proclaiming, "Olivia likes dogs! She doesn't like cats! I like cats!" I decided to forego my usual speech that it was okay for two people to like the same things at the same time. Instead I asked her what color glitter we should use. "Red," she answered. I made a glue design and gave her the red glitter to sprinkle on. "Not bad," I thought, admiring our handiwork. "Only twenty-seven more to go."

"Who should we do next?" I asked. Her answer surprised me. "Sage!" she said, her face illuminated by her smile. "Let's do Sage because I like him!" I racked my brains trying to remember what I knew about Sage. He'd been the Cat in the Hat at the school Halloween party. The red and white striped stovepipe hat made his large head look even bigger, but with his rakish features and sly sense of humor he was a pretty convincing live version of the Dr. Seuss original.

Melanie carefully chose the stickers and colored glitter for Sage's valentine. She lost interest in the project soon after that and I ended up making twenty-two of the Valentines by myself the night before the party. But though her interest in the valentines waned, her interest in Sage did not. She came home from school each day telling stories about him. The initial attraction had occurred at snack time, when he did undisclosed

things with his milk that made her laugh. He liked to say, "Pop Goes the Weasel, mmmmmm," which also amused her. Each time she talked about Sage, Melanie became radiant, as she recounted his exploits in a loud, cheerful voice.

In the preschool hallway, as we waited to pick up our Rainforest Dinosaurs from the Rainforest Room, I mentioned to Sage's mother how much my daughter liked her son. Each afternoon we'd gotten into the habit of exchanging pleasantries while waiting for the preschool class to complete its final ritual. Huddled on the floor in a circle, the children pretended to be encased in dinosaur eggs. When it was time to leave, one by one each child would crack out of the egg and run out of the classroom into the arms of a waiting parent. Sage's mother said, "That's funny because he never mentions her." She was a down-to-earth, practical looking type with short hair, usually dressed in an oversized t-shirt and sweatpants. I was a little disappointed that Melanie had not become a central figure in their household, as Sage had in ours. But observing Sage and Melanie at school in the weeks that followed I could see that he liked her too. After cracking out of their dinosaur eggs and greeting us with hugs and kisses, Sage and Melanie would sometimes linger in the classroom, fondling Legos and chasing Maya down the hallway. They didn't talk much, but giggled a lot, circling each other like Spanish dancers engaged in an elaborate habanera. Soon Melanie began seeking out Sage as soon as she arrived at school, once rushing across the classroom to ask him if he liked coleslaw. Clearly a bond was forming. I suggested a play date.

He came over on a snowy day in early March. The night before I'd been like a nervous teenager getting ready for her first date. I encouraged Melanie to take a bath, cleaned the house with unusual thoroughness, and sang her to sleep with the promise of what tomorrow would bring, as lacy white snowflakes gently fell outside her window. Finally after school

the next day they arrived—Sage, his mother and his baby sister. We spread out a feast of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, sliced apples and milk. I waited to see what would happen next.

Like a first date, it was awkward. Melanie was overly eager, pressing her face close to Sage's, and thrusting books, balls, blocks, Legos, stuffed animals and dress-up clothes in front of him, desperate to get him to play with her. I cringed. I was afraid he would recoil from so much unsolicited attention. We sat down to eat lunch but Melanie and Sage were not interested in food. The dining room was uncomfortably still.

Baby Maya broke the silence by shouting "No!" when I offered her some apple. "No" was a word she'd recently learned and enjoyed saying as noisily and as often as possible. Implacable no longer, Sage laughed, his face enveloped in his goofy grin. "No!" he echoed, standing up and dancing around Maya's high chair. She was delighted to find a partner in crime. "No!" she yelled, and began to chortle. The duet continued, louder and louder. Melanie was crushed. She came to me, her head lowered, big brown puppy-dog eyes on the verge of tears. "I don't like that he's playing with Baby Maya," she whispered. I hugged her and wondered how many more times through the years she would be upstaged by her impish carrot-topped younger sister. Sage's mother lured him back to the table with his favorite snack, fruit-flavored drinkable yogurt in iridescent colors—watermelon and chartreuse—packaged in skinny plastic tubes. Melanie's eyes widened. She had never seen yogurt of such vivid hue or with such an elaborate delivery system. Shyly she asked for some and watched Sage to learn the most effective means of extracting the sweet nectar from its flower. Together they slowly lifted the tubes to their lips, meticulously squeezing the gloop to the top as if it were toothpaste. Then, simultaneously, they slurped—loud and long, heads slightly tilted back, as the deliciously sweet and creamy yogurt dripped into

their mouths and languidly down their throats. At that moment they resembled junkies, just after the needle goes in, relaxed by the warm flow of the liquid high throbbing through their veins. Triumphantly their eyes met and they erupted in belly laughs. The ice was finally and completely broken.

The rest of the afternoon was a joyful melange of activity. They threw balls, made towers of blocks and Legos, and adorned themselves with a pink feather boa and an Egyptian fez. Then, with the unspoken instinct of long-time dancing partners, they raced upstairs to Melanie's bedroom and began jumping on her bed. Exhausted, they collapsed under her flowered bedspread and read books, then climbed down from the bed, ran out the door and disappeared into my bedroom. I discovered them in my bed, lying together under the covers reading more books, like a comfortable old married couple. The play date was a success.

After that, Melanie talked about Sage constantly, but with a new self-assurance. She blossomed, eager to go to school each day, self-confident and at ease around other people. I was surprised at the relief I felt. My sensitive, timid, aloof little girl was coming out of her shell.

Less than a week after our play date, Sage's body erupted in violent bruises. His own immune system had attacked his blood, causing it to be deficient in platelets. He would need a transfusion of platelets to build up the level in his blood stream, and careful monitoring for some months after that.

We visited him the day before he went to the hospital for the transfusion. Melanie was excited to bring him a gift—a glossy marine life sticker book filled with octopi, starfish, otters, and seals that he could amuse himself with during the hours he would have to sit still, as the enrichment for his blood dripped intravenously into his body. He had a shiner that made him

look like a prizefighter—a pint-sized Jack Dempsey—but his spirits were steadfast, as if to say “You should see the other guy!” Though we’d planned to drop off our gift and leave, we stayed for two hours. As they had at our house, Melanie and Sage navigated their way through piles of toys, stopping to share a peanut butter sandwich, gargling mouthfuls of milk and giggling.

The next week at school was difficult. We knew not to expect Sage on Monday, the day of his transfusion. Melanie was grumpy that day when I picked her up—tantrum prone, impossible to please. On Wednesday I reminded her excitedly that he would be there. He wasn’t. And for the first time ever she clung to me when it was time to say goodbye, time for her to join the circle of children as they sang their good morning song. “I need you, Mommy” she said, closing her eyes tightly and clutching me. And so I sat with her that day and again on Friday morning, when Sage failed to appear. I held her in my arms and sang with the circle of children, “The more we get together, together, together, the more we get together the happier we are.”

Sage never came back. News of him trickled in like drops of blood after a pinprick. His platelets were low, his red and white blood cell levels were low, and his bone marrow levels had dropped to next to nothing. He was in and out of the hospital. Doctors struggled to determine why his immune system had turned on his body and whether, given enough time, the blood would regenerate or he would eventually need a bone marrow transplant. In the meantime he couldn’t have visitors. As part of this wait-and-see period, his immune system would be medicinally suppressed to see what his blood would do. For Sage, the pain of enforced isolation—no contact with children his own age except for the sick ones in the hospital—could be as bad as the pain from the continual pricks of the needles that dripped the life-sustaining liquid into his body.

I thought a lot about pain then. Sage's pain, his mother's pain. As a mother you come to know every element of your child's body and spirit. You notice every new freckle, every bruise, every sadness. "We water them with kisses," a friend of mine once said. "That's how they grow." I wondered how it felt for Sage's mother, this plain-spoken woman who gave the impression that she did not give in to excesses of emotion. How did it feel for her to hold her bruised and battered child, to want to water him with kisses, knowing that the slightest touch gone too hard could bruise him all over again. She'd once told me that she was more comfortable mothering a three-year-old than a baby. "Babies cry and you don't always know why or what you can do about it. But a three-year-old can usually tell you what's wrong," she explained. Now Sage's three-year-old body was telling her, something is wrong. Only no one knew for sure what to do about it.

Sage's pain, his mother's pain, Melanie's pain. Melanie kept her eyes clamped shut at preschool circle time and I wondered what she didn't want to see. She came home from school each day angry and agitated, complaining about Olivia with a ferocity that I hadn't heard once Sage became part of our lives, hitting and pushing and shouting at Maya until I had to pry her away. Outside of school a new shyness overtook her. When she spoke to people other than her father and me, she whispered, and hid her face in my chest. I didn't know how to comfort her, how to bring her back from the island she had retreated to. I hadn't expected her to have to deal with loss so soon after opening herself up to love.

Sage's pain, his mother's pain, Melanie's pain, my pain. Even though this wasn't happening to us, every time I looked at Melanie and saw her vulnerability, I realized that it was happening to us. And my pain at her pain was palpable. No matter that there were other things that needed my attention — visiting in-laws and the imminent death of Kitty, whose body

was slowly shutting down. I just couldn't dull the pain. Waking up in the middle of one night, I was seized with the notion that I had to do something. That if Melanie and I could create a project to reach out to Sage in the midst of his isolation, we would somehow ease everyone's pain.

So the next morning, just as we had with the valentines, we set ourselves up at the dining room table, supplies laid out in assembly-line fashion—Melanie, her grandmother and me. We were making a Sage page—actually a series of pages, one for each letter of his name. We brought out our trusty art supplies and an assortment of magazines to identify and cut out objects using the letters of Sage's name. Just as she had with the valentines, Melanie lost interest in the project soon after it began. My mother-in-law and I continued—thrilled to find storks, salmon, salami and snow, alligators, apples, asparagus and artichokes, geese, gorillas, green beans and glitter, elephants, egrets, English muffins and eagles—which we carefully positioned on each page. I placed the Sage page in a manila envelope. Melanie chose the festive magic markers I used to write Sage's name and address on it. For the next few days, whenever she seemed upset, together we would imagine Sage's reaction the day the Sage page arrived in the mail.

Kitty was dying. She'd been a beauty in her day, with lush long black-and-white fur, the black draped over one shoulder like a strapless evening gown. I acquired her in college in California and brought her with me when I moved to Washington, D.C. to begin my career. She'd accompanied me to India, to Thailand and back home again and had had her share of adventures. In Bombay she got lost in the Taj Mahal Hotel. Once, when flying home solo, she missed her connection in Frankfurt and had to spend the night alone in the airport there. She got stuck in the heat duct at my friend Ivar's house when he took care of her while I was traveling. When

we settled in Seattle and stopped traveling, her fur lost its luster. She began to resemble the tattered silk upholstery that covered the furniture and pillows I'd collected on my travels years before. Now Kitty was dying. Several months earlier, on a frosty November night, she had disappeared. She must have dragged herself off the couch, through the house, out the cat door, into the alley, somewhere. I discovered she was missing the next morning. I was unprepared for the wave of sadness that overtook me as I contemplated the loss of this sweet creature with whom I had lived longer than any human being. Trying to keep my tears in check, all that day and into the night, I hunted for Kitty, Maya strapped to my back, Melanie running in circles around me. At some point I stopped hunting for Kitty and hunted for her body instead, convinced that she had taken herself off to die in some quiet, dark, remote space, but unwilling to leave her there. When later that evening a neighbor brought Kitty home, alive but disoriented, I knew this had been a dress rehearsal. My husband and I discussed how we would explain Kitty's death to Melanie, but we couldn't reach any conclusions. We didn't have a religious framework to fall back on—didn't believe in God or Heaven—so it felt hypocritical to promote these concepts. But to thrust the finality of death onto Melanie with no means of finding comfort seemed wrong too.

I spent hours sitting on the floor in The Secret Garden, our neighborhood children's bookstore, crying as I surveyed the selection of books that gently introduce children to death. I was most drawn to "Cat Heaven," with its beautiful illustrations of happy cats lapping up milk and napping in Paradise. But it was hard to ignore the kind, elderly God, who walked among them, cats at his feet, a cat on his head. There were books that described the cycle of life using butterflies, a willow tree, a leaf named Freddy. There were books about the loss of grandparents, books about terminal illness, even a book that posed philosophical questions about the afterlife. I sat on the

floor and thumbed through these books and I cried. I cried for myself over the loss of Kitty. I cried for Sage and his family at the unexpected twist their lives had taken. I cried for Melanie's loss of innocence.

Frail, incontinent, unable to eat, Kitty had taken up residence in the bathroom, near the heat duct, where she lay in a soft, fuzzy, round blue cat bed with a bright red, blue and yellow checkered blanket to keep her warm. Each afternoon Melanie and Maya and Melanie's beloved, tattered stuffed cat Meowme would sit on the bathroom floor next to Kitty, as if they were visiting an elderly sick relative in the hospital. Melanie would pretend to read to Kitty from her favorite book, an Andy Warhol collection of cat sketches. Occasionally Maya crawled closer to the cat bed, leaned in and gave Kitty a kiss. As Kitty shifted in her bed, disturbing the blanket, Melanie would tenderly cover her up again. On the day that I knew would be Kitty's last, we stopped at a pet store to buy her a present. Melanie and I sniffed and fondled the selections, carefully making our choice—a red and blue catnip heart. When we got home, Melanie rushed into the bathroom and said "Here you go Kitty, here's your heart! This will make you feel better!"

Melanie made Sage the favorite male character in every book she read, a central figure in every game she played. She talked about him constantly, even when I stopped bringing him up and started setting up play dates with other kids. On Easter morning she was filmed by the local TV station collecting glass blown shells that an artist had hidden at the beach near our house. That day, on the 5:30 news, as she discovered the hidden shells, Melanie announced to the news-watching public, "This one is for me, and this one is for Sage . . ." We continued to send Sage periodic offerings—a videotape of the Easter news clip, a book about tools, drawings and pictures and stickers. We wrapped these gifts as festively as we knew how, in bright

yellow tissue paper, with vivid purple ribbons, topped with a sprinkling of gypsy red glitter.

We saw him once through the window of his house, leaning on the back of the couch looking out. The black eye had healed and his face was as smooth and clear as an angel's. He was pale, his flaxen hair, fair skin and sky-blue eyes muted. It was as if he were part of the upholstery of the couch he was leaning on and had faded from sitting there day after day, exposed to the afternoon sun. He looked like he had recently had a haircut. The cropped hair made his large head appear smaller, more in proportion with his body. I watched him as he gazed out the window, before he saw me. I thought I detected a look of longing in his eyes. No longer dancing mischievously, they looked lonely. Poor sick little boy looking longingly out the window at the great wide world, which he could not go out in for fear of catching the germs that dwelled there. When he spied Melanie and me he smiled. Not his usual big goofy grin, but a quiet smile. I think he was pleased to see us. Melanie grinned and squirmed excitedly. She waved animatedly. He waved slowly, quietly, like Queen Elizabeth greeting her subjects. He moved in slow motion, totally unlike the erratic bursts of energy you get from a three-year-old, all the time, except when you ask them to hurry. I wondered if the blood flowed differently through his veins now that it was depleted of its essential elements—the platelets, red and white blood cells and bone marrow that are essential to life. I imagined it moving like caramel, thick and languid through the little boy body. Melanie blew him a kiss and we turned to go our separate ways—him to the hospital to be poked and prodded, us to play in the warm spring sunshine.

That afternoon we went to Swanson's Nursery. I had decided to create a Kitty arbor in our garden. Together, Melanie and I would select and plant a special shrub and place a cat statue underneath it. I didn't intend to tell Melanie that Kitty's

ashes would also be buried there, at least not yet. But I wanted her to know that the arbor would be a place to remember Kitty and find comfort. We wandered among the aromatic, flowering shrubs—daphne odora, osmanthus, viburnum, before selecting the one we would plant—pieris japonica, lily-of-the-valley. We also looked at stone statues of cats wearing opera glasses, cats with binoculars, cats licking their paws, sleeping cats, pouncing cats. I couldn't find just the right one so we left, stopping to buy an azalea that was almost ready to bloom for our neighbor Mike, who was recovering from open-heart surgery. I hoped these things—the Sage offerings, Kitty's arbor, Mike's azalea—were connected in Melanie's consciousness the way they were in mine. These are the things we do for the creatures we care about, I wanted her to know. This is how we provide comfort when we can't control what is happening. This is part of loving.

I don't care what my kids choose to believe in as long as they are not passive. I know that they will experience the full range of human emotion, pain included, and that I will need to let their innocence go. So if along the way I can provide them with some tangible coping skills, so much the better. I want them to know that sometimes some glue, glitter, construction paper, stickers and an oversized heart or two can help.

On a bright chilly Sunday morning with dark rain clouds threatening, the girls and their father played with our next door neighbors while I buried the cedar box that contained Kitty's ashes next to the lily-of-the-valley shrub Melanie and I had planted the week before. I spread a carpet of bark mulch over the area so you couldn't tell it had been disturbed. The air was redolent with the smell of cedar. I thought I should say some special words, have some sort of ceremony, but it felt forced. Instead, while my family played nearby, I drove to Swanson's, certain now of my choice. The rain clouds burst and it began to pour as I lay the smooth stone statue of the sleeping cat in its

rightful spot, next to the lily-of-the-valley shrub. "Have a good rest, Kitty," I said. "It's good to know you'll always be nearby."

Melanie and I admired the cat statue from our living room window, as sheets of rain poured down. For the first time, she asked me, "Where is Kitty?" "Her body wore out and she left us." I told her. "But the Kitty arbor is a place we can go whenever we miss her and need to be close to her." She looked at me and nodded, accepting what I had said without question. Then we went to Sage's house to bring him a grab bag of novelty toys—lizard soap, a bird whistle, a rubber monster head and his favorite, a bright orange rubber lobster that squeaked and bobbed up and down from a string. Sick with a cold, Melanie watched shyly from behind the screen door. Sage, who had just been released from the hospital, ran around his living room with the lobster bobbing up and down. Occasionally he stopped by the door so that he and Melanie could growl and make funny faces at each other. He looked like any normal kid except for the IV attachment taped to his arm. This time Melanie was the sick one, the one who couldn't come in to play, for fear of infecting him. We left Sage happily playing with his bobbing lobster and went home to our front yard. The rain had stopped. Together we walked to the Kitty arbor, kneeling down so Melanie could get a good look at the statue. "Kitty's sleeping," she said in a hushed voice. "She's sleeping and I'm gonna pat her." She leaned over and tenderly patted the cold, hard sleeping cat lying in the bark mulch. Then she rose and hand in hand we turned and walked into the house.

James Grinwis

A Piece of Straw

I was huddled in my one-wheel drive vehicle and the snow was snickeling down. The last words she had spoken were thudding around in my head: "Johnny, when you going to take out the trash already?" They were calm words and on the surface seemed completely removed from the sting she really wanted them to have. But I wasn't stupid; I felt the sting of them for sure, clear the way to I-95, which I was now on. I wasn't gonna let her talk to me like that. *Johnny, when you going to take out the trash, Johnny, can you come down here a minute please, Johnny, your dog is licking himself again and making that disgusting slurping noise* The insinuating underhandedness of these comments, day in and night out, each cloaked like an innocent person walking harmlessly through the woods; I wasn't going to take them anymore. But I was out now, way out, somewhere between Pigsby and Djibouti. The lanterns along the highway grinded along under the snow. I had left quietly enough like the way I'd come, like a requisition form brushed under a desk, innocuous, forgotten, never having put a dent in anybody's fabric at all.

George McCormick

You are going to be a good man

The moon has been off my left shoulder for thirty-seven years and I've never known a blue this bad, this purple. Lots of no-woman stories, sure, simple. Lots of gone-woman stories too. I am lost of gone woman, myself; nothing new here. But I need another story. What story I don't need is Gonewoman leaving East in a truck of her parents' financing, driving right back into the catalogues, leaving me half a box of Lucky Charms and a feeling that can only be summarized as *A Submarine, Torpedoed*.

But let's say that happens and let's say that the use of the transitive is more accurate here—*happening*.

My name is Dave and I've been up all morning, wandering my floors dehydrated and naked and looking for something to placate my forehead and chest which at last assessment were, well, sizzling.

OK, simple. Gonewoman leaves and goes east on the one road that runs through town. This is the road that delivers the tourists in the summer and the snowmobilers in the winter. Our livelihood is that road. We are a service to people who don't live here but who have more money than us. We do not go to their cities and vacation when we have time off. It is a very real thing to begin feeling like a parasite, living off pocket-fall and false charity. I don't feel it much anymore, perhaps I've come to terms with it, but Gonewoman felt its burn incessantly. She couldn't stand it, parasitic, and so leaves East.

East is the direction I do not go when I leave and go to town to buy provisions for my bar. She, Gonewoman, cocktailled for me for a year. I try and hire attractive women for the twin reasons of 1) it brings in more business, and 2) I might find something good myself. It is smarmy policy, I know, and that's

fine.

It is true that Montana winters are hard on women and machinery. By late March this town got real small on Gonewoman. The low cloud cover became a lid to her, fusing the surrounding rimrock to the sky to construct a tight, cold, winter box. This is bad. She is fifteen years my junior and the gossip fills the Exxon mini-mart every morning like the stink of burnt coffee.

When I go to town for provisions for the bar the three absolute staples are bourbon, microwave burritos, and aspirin.

You can't even drive east in the winter. The town dead-ends in a snow bank fifteen feet tall. This snow bank runs from here to Billings a hundred miles away. I saw Gonewoman come booking down on her skis once and go flying right off that snow bank and land on the other side of the street. She loved the sound of avalanches miles away, and she moved on her skis as if she was something fluid herself. See her? Crouched and flying through the air? Like a miracle? Like Wonder Woman?

She leaves east, first going to Colorado to get her college stuff and then really east: Vermont. I hate both. I tell myself I loathe Colorado and Vermont so many times a day that there's no way I am not a Westerner. I was born in a nice hospital in the middle of Billings, but today I feel like I was born in hell.

I have expired Montana plates on my four-door, currently defunct, 1972, V-6, Ford Maverick. The Maverick's coat has been described by others as: butterscotch, nacho, mac and cheese, mustard, manila envelope. Gonewoman once poetically waxed that it was the color of a faded yellow highway line. I myself like *desert stone*; then other days I prefer *yellow*. I have more than expired plates on the Maverick, I also have a tape deck with the Stones in it. She's got a truck, had a truck; what is appropriate here? What construction points towards the truth of this awful leaving? The imperfect is a lie—she is not coming back; but the past participle kicks my ass in its finality. She leaves this morning. She left this morning. She drives onto

the road and out of this town. She drove onto the road and out of this town. East leaves left; gone, went.

I am thirty-seven years old and run a bar and bought the Maverick for \$70 and a repairable snow blower. I rebuilt the engine in shop class in high school because it was my only way to get to school. My father's truck was always drained of its gas and on blocks for the winter. Fun cannot be described as negotiating icy bridges with my hungover and insistent father at the wheel, all just to go try and solve long division problems on a chalkboard in front of girls who proved impossible to kiss. We read *My Antonia* out loud in class. Where's the news there? Dirt house? Shit, I know an old Sioux named Billy the Sioux who fishes like Jesus and lives his summer in a sod house. Last time I saw Billy I gave him a big thumbs up from across the river.

"How are my Redskins doing?" he yelled.

I didn't know if he meant the football team or his family back on the reservation.

"2-9" I yelled back, and it felt adequate for both.

Here's the thing, in the great state of Montana I'm allowed to drive this rattletrap Maverick as I please. In Colorado or Vermont I'd be seized and incarcerated. My sister lives up in Judith Gap and drives a three-speed Rambler to her job at Subway. She's so short she has to stand on her college degrees to work the register. She is funny, you'd like her.

Gonewoman was funny too. One morning I was out in the yard thinking *garden*, even though the only things that live here at eight thousand feet are those that can live on a rock or grow twenty feet into the air. I had my coffee in hand and the sun on my neck, I was scratching my stomach. I was in love and if you would have chosen *nice* to describe me at that moment you would have been accurate. I was even considering a long and sentimental letter to my grandmother when Gonewoman came out in her kimono.

"Look at you. Mr. Pleased because he got some last

night," she said. And she was right; the world is that simple. You could grow a garden in January on the moon in a world that yellow.

There is this other thing she tells me. We're in the back of the Maverick, this was back when it was running. We were going backpacking in Wyoming—I hadn't been backpacking in years—but we couldn't make it to the trailhead because we couldn't stop humping in the back seat. Over and over, until finally I was so much less myself than a weak suggestion of myself that all I could do was lay there while she fed me orange Gatorade.

Her body was this thing that every time you looked at it you became optimistic. I could spend an afternoon watching her step into a pair Levi's. Circles begot semicircles. I used to place shiny pennies on her while she slept simply because I liked the way they looked. I had no idea I had such a capacity for joy.

She was this healing thing, like the bumper-pool table was for me when my father died and I was bereft, or bereaved, or whatever. I didn't even know that word until I needed it. I would play on that table for hours. My mind was rife with simple geometry. I could not drink enough and I could not lose. A year later when I took over the bar I hauled that thing to the dump.

So we're in the back of the Maverick with Gatorade and her body was like a bumper-pool table and she tells me, "You are going to be a good man."

"No."

"Yes, you are."

I think about all that is impacted in those words: that I'm thirty-seven and not yet a good man; that I'm going to be a good man elsewhere; that I will be this thing when she is gone.

And see this young woman; her telling me, a man who is not exactly moonwalking into his forties, that he has promise and potential? To tell him that when he's naked?

You are going to be a good man.

I've written those words down so many times that they're shapes to me now. But I'll tell you what kills me most about all the meaning and possibility in those shapes, *you are going to be a good man*: that I am thirty-seven and have never been. And she's right.

And I need a fireball. A real one, not one of those little ones you get in your chest after the evening's first touch of bourbon. I need a fireball to toss around or turn me over. Pitch and hit one. I need one to torch my bar; I need a fireball to put in the Maverick so she'll turn over. You get Gonewoman to turn over and, by God, you're fireballed in the best way.

I've only seen two in my life. Three and a half decades and I've seen exactly two fireballs.

The first one was when I was eight. There was this dilapidated trailer down at the dump that me and my friend Lucas played in. The roof had collapsed in places and the doors were gone. We busted out all the remaining windows and cleared a square in the roof where a stovepipe used to run. In it, we fastened a trashcan turret. In the kitchen we constructed a cockpit, on the walls we taped maps, and in our fertile imaginations we had ourselves a B-17 bomber. We flew missions over northern Wyoming and into Idaho. Once we bombed Great Falls because that was where Lucas' stepfather was from.

One day me and Lucas were playing there when an intense thunderstorm moved through the valley. Lightning cracked and hail pocked the trailer's siding. I imagined flak and turbulence. We began losing altitude. Lucas was piloting while I manned the turret. Messerschmidts darted as we sank through the sky. And then I saw something I'd never seen before: sheets of blue electricity hanging from the clouds. It felt as if we were rising now, gaining altitude. There weren't bolts of lightning but undulating flags of it, and they were everywhere in the sky, enormous. Then there was this sound that made everything look a different color and I saw another thing I'd never seen before and haven't seen since: a fiery

tumbleweed, blue and white, that bounced down the back road and directly past the trailer. I felt it move in my teeth, the way you can a train when you are very close to the tracks. After it vanished it rained harder than I've ever seen it rain. Lucas bailed out as quickly as he could, hopping on his bike and pedaling like mad away from the trailer. I went home too. I was more excited than I was terrified, unfortunately, and apparently I chose *Oh my fucking God* in my description of the fireball and had my mouth washed out in the bathroom sink. But to this day, I know what I saw, and I know you'd say *Oh my fucking God* too.

The second fireball I saw was ten years ago during the Yellowstone fires. The Forest Service had set a back burn between town and the advancing fire, hoping to get to the fuel first. The winds changed dramatically and the back burn turned into a front burn that sent the fire raging towards town. That day, I hosed the bar down and loaded myself and my books and my stereo into the Maverick and took off east. By this time town was surrounded on three sides by flames. I hit the accelerator and the Maverick lurched, then made a kind of intestinal growling sound, and hit sixty-five by the time I passed the last gas station at the edge of town. But a mile up the road the fire was closer, and before me were walls of flame on either side, creating a kind of tunnel. I slowed the Maverick way down and rolled up my windows. Then these walls lifted up in to the air and swirled into a single form. Now, I'm sure there's some kind of scientific explanation concerning gasses and oxygen levels and all manner of things I don't understand, but at that moment it was a terrifying miracle: these forces assembling at the same moment to craft this flaming circle thirty feet in the air. I saw it. I could feel the heat of it. I remember wanting to wash my face in cold water. I drove the Maverick right under that strange sun, and by the time I tried to locate it in my rearview mirror it was gone.

That afternoon the rains came, the winds died, and either God or something by another name saved our sad little

TOWN.

One night a couple years ago Billy the Sioux came into the bar and showed me a photograph of the fireball. A friend of his on one of the fire crews had taken it. I now have it framed and hanging behind the bar. Me and Billy got drunk that night and I remember him telling me that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I guess, I said.

Because I'm feeling damn thin in the spirit these days, Billy. Gonewoman and all. Because I could use *stronger*; I could employ a fireball.

Gonewoman came to town to study our wolves that had been here forever, and then were gone, and were now, brand new, here again. Thanks to whom I'm still unsure. She was on a crew that monitored one of the first reintroduced packs. It was a big deal. *National Geographic* was here; Connie Chung got off a helicopter that landed at the dump. One afternoon I charged four dollars for a can of Rainier to a journalist from the *New York Times* who insisted on parading around town in a fishing vest. For a year there was money from universities I'd never heard, in states I'd forgotten the shapes of. Studies were done, dissertations completed: *Diuretic Tendencies in the Alpha Male*, by Gonewoman.

One day she found this spot where her pack had attacked and fallen a large elk. We drove down there, and on the first day we found wolf tracks surrounding the carcass. The following day, with most of the good meat scoured from the bone, there were the fresh tracks of rodents. On the third day there were coyote prints. That night it snowed and the next day there were enormous wing marks in the snow surrounding the elk. I had no idea there were such things in this world as wing marks in snow, and that is just the thing, how Gonewoman lived in her eyes. She was a child, wonderfully like a child, in that way. Maybe if I'd gone to State and received a degree like Gonewoman then this town would be small and unbearable, and I'd need to go out and see the world and discover things

like wing marks in snow. As it is I work on my own dissertation: *Grief: Informal Umbrage and the Sinking Ship Phenomenon*, by Dave.

Fuck this noise, I say. I say again, out loud. Then in the yard, then in the Maverick. She still won't turn over.

Say it again, "Fuck this noise!"

On my way to the Exxon I stop by the river for possible instruction. I pick grasshoppers out of the tall grass and throw them into the river where they are risen upon by trout.

Billy the Sioux is here, on the other side of the river. He is fishing one-handed, with lines tied to his fingers. It looks like he's manipulating an underwater marionette. I say this.

"No, just fishing," he says.

Then I ask him, what is one supposed to do with leftover love?

"You are right that there is no profit in it," he says.

"I really have no use for such a failing quantity," I say.

"Is all your information updated and finalized?" he asks.

"That is what terrifies me Billy, I both crave and fear closure."

Billy hands me a branch and tells me it is his contact number, and, if I'm going to send a fax not to do it before noon. He says he tries to sleep until one.

Down at the Exxon I pick up my first post-departure meal: two corn dogs with mustard and a bag of Doritos. Last night it was pan fried Rainbow trout and a small, gritty spinach salad. And the wine whose dregs I finished this morning in the yard.

I have a conversation with Carl who owns the Exxon. He is seventy and he looks like he's been through exactly that much winter. He is wearing a down vest with embroidered horses on it. As we talk I check it out. They are not just horses, they are stampeding palominos in moonlight. This vest is the beginning and end of all high art in town, chainsaw sculptures

notwithstanding.

Carl says nothing about Gonewoman. I don't know if it is tact or oblivion. What he says is this, "Those Olympia tall cans?"

"Yes."

"They won't be in until Friday."

"That is fine, Carl. Thank you."

I have no idea what day it is. This is not totally true. It is not Sunday. I can, and will, pick up my mail. It is not Sunday.

I buy a newspaper wondering if there might be an article about Gonewoman turning around and coming back. There is not. I don't find anything on Gonewoman, but in the sports section I find an article on Evil Knievel.

Knievel, a native of Butte, Mont., got his start when he jumped over a car to promote his new motorcycle shop in Washington state. Knievel said he has no regrets for what he admits was a wild lifestyle replete with women and alcohol.

"I read a book about Aristotle Onassis, and that dumb bastard didn't know how to have a good time," Knievel told the *Billings Gazette*. "I drank more whiskey and beer than him, I had a yacht the same size as his. I had more boats than him. At one time I had fourteen planes with my name painted on them, and I used to fly them side by side so I could read my name at 40,000 feet. I had a great time," Knievel said.

At the register Carl rings me up. I tell him that I am not a good man. He places my corn dogs, chips, and newspaper in a paper sack, nods.

"But I'm going to be. You *know* that."

He tears the receipt from the register and throws it into the bag. The studs on his vest cut right through shit of this world, and, unlike you or me, run right up cobalt light shafts and into a threadbare moon.

Fuck Evil and his rocket car. I read somewhere that he had his hand duct taped to the parachute release lever the whole time. Knieval drives like Mary Poppins. I could jump the Snake River in the Maverick if it meant something like Gonewoman. Rocket car, give me a fucking break.

It has been over four hours now since Gonewoman's going, and I sit in the yard with more wine waiting for this fact, the going of woman, to obtain. She's past Cody. She's past the Big Horns and into the wide pan of the prairie, level as a lake, and the great nothing there after to suggest this shitty little town built on rock, or my shitty little bar built on booze.

In the best possible version of things that will not happen, she will call and cry tonight. But the sooner all that won't happen happens, the closer I am to the black and necessary despair I know is coming. A black despair as long and white as winter.

I try the Maverick again, nothing. This is unembraceable. I will not be this way. Surrender is impossible: I will not wash my sheets. I go back to the river.

Billy the Sioux is gone. I wade out into the river with my wine bottle. My God, how this day refuses to stop its quitting. I wade out into the river with my wine bottle. There is monofilament in the trees. The sky is purple and either evil or stupid. I wade out into the river with my wine bottle. It is cold. Wait, listen; I have a master plan. It is this.

Cynthia J. Hollenbeck

Holy Water

Eyelids plump as lips, I stand
beside burnished cherry and blue satin
at St. Patrick's. You wear
pinstripes and a tie, skin tacky
with makeup. Wood pegs poke from your neck,
brain stem snapped in two,
Yamaha 250 a tangle of chrome
and cracked fiberglass. Every Sunday
as teens you and I did time here,
sang hymns loud and low as Pavarotti,
laughs ricocheting off stained glass
where Jesus, cross
digging into his back, stumbled
along his path. You sneaked out during Homily,
showed up later, stink of tobacco
drowning the incense—
We arrived late, left right after communion,
sipped the blood of Christ
because we knew it was wine. When
Father Ryan laid the white wafer
on my tongue, even then I knew,
we'd blister for our sins—

I kneel before the box, lean in
to kiss your lips sewn shut,
clutch a memory like rosary beads:
you above me, hairless and sleek as my own body
at eight, tang of yeast and salt,
dipping into my mouth,
like fingers plunge into holy water—

I bless myself, let the frigid
liquid trickle down my forehead,
because to wipe it away,
I've been told, is a sin.

Kathleen McGooley

The Next Bad Thing

The next bad thing was John Jr., the neighbor boy, riding his motorcycle into my sleep, the sound approaching and then falling away, approaching and receding, unzipping, a long line of steps falling downward, the road a curved staircase, a long downhill. John Jr. is not a boy but a man who lives in a barn. Nobody knocked on his headboard to reveal a staircase leading to trees of silver and gold. And John Jr. is no swan: if animal, he'd be weasel: pointy nose, fair skin, skinny. In the dull light of the stupid moon, which doesn't know better than shine and fade, shine and fade, he fumbled with the locked gates to the field across the street.

And now my dreams don't want me, they won't even send letters, just thin silvery links of cobwebs, not enough for a bracelet or anklet, not enough to line my nest, my cup of mud that swings from the catalpa tree.

Kathleen McGookey

Gift Horse

Inexplicable means you wouldn't believe me even if I explained in a way you'd understand. Inexplicable means the death of many little flowers, holding up their hands. She means to help him concentrate but her tone embarrasses me. Couldn't it be nicer? Less of a hiss? But even the long white stripe of the hiss fades from view. Wonder of wonders, little smile. Now that he has a child, he wants his childhood toybox back. I say, That's between brothers. Look a gift horse in the teeth? In the mouth? Two horses in the field rub against each other and the cows gallop to meet me and my dog at the fence. The next bad thing: I ran the vacuum too long, beyond its capacity, until the bag overfilled and the belt burned. To be liked best, overtly or secretly the favorite, isn't that anyone's goal? Anyone's admirable goal? The secretary gave me a valuable clue about the copy machine: soon the code would be revealed and taken from me. I am the bad thing, I think brother gets too much credit for his wanderings and we, who've called and visited right on schedule, haven't gotten enough. Give me the toybox, I heard him plead, but we are not about to give anything up.

Deborah Owen Moore

Hearing Disintegration

The woman with no left ear
is riding the bus again.

The scenery is the same
but she watches every day
for when it isn't.

Those who ride to her right
just look, but those on her left
always whisper. They want to see
the place her left ear isn't.
They ask if anyone's spied it.

The left-handed whispers
tickle her skin like duckling down
and tissue paper streamers
dangling from the bus's ceiling.
They sway with the traffic,
through the fetid air of the bus,
grazing her cheeks and elbows.
Some fall and settle on the sticky
floor; they'll stay pasted there
for days before they disintegrate.

Christopher Essex

Tiny Pink Flowers

I wasn't there but it doesn't matter, I know how it went anyway. My sister Heather, age 13, running through the mall parking lot, in her green and darker green Girl Scout uniform, showing a lot of brown leg given that she had grown about three inches over the summer. Throwing herself in the arms of her school's vice principal, who was just then stepping out of his aging yellow Toyota sedan. Looking up at him with her tear-streaked, freckle-faced cheeks. He never had a chance.

Heather had long blond hair, the same color and texture as cornhusks, tied in two ponytails. Other than growing taller, she hadn't developed noticeably in any other way, as I had noticed once or twice owing to the fact that the lock on our bathroom door didn't work. Once I got a nasty purple bruise on my forehead from a thrown bar of soap.

Mom tried, but it was impossible for her to catch up with and stop her angry daughter as she ran out of the mall. For one thing, she was at the top of her weight curve at that point, having spent a lot of time digging into the refrigerator since her second husband left her. Two, she was slowed down by the need to push the stroller in which my younger brother Dylan sat. He was four and so tall now that he could barely fit in the stroller, but he demanded that my mom push him around everywhere they went. When I was put in charge of him, I'd pull him out of it and make him walk, ignoring his cries and complaints. He walked fine.

As for myself, I was sitting in the food court, working on the second six inches of a Subway sandwich and a large Dr. Pepper spiked with a couple of capfuls of rum. Across the table from me was my oldest and closest friend, whom I had known since kindergarten. We had been darn near inseparable over

the years, and in fact many of our high school teachers seemed to think of us as one unit—Markanderic. Now, on this sunny summer afternoon, just as my sister was throwing herself into the arms of her vice principal, he decides to lean over the table, his chin almost touching his steak and cheese and tell me he likes guys.

Now what can I, what can a straight person like myself, say to his best friend when he makes a statement like this? I ask you.

“You haven’t told anyone else, have you?” I hissed at him, placing my sandwich down on its waxed paper.

“No,” he said, his eyes a bit wet at the corners.

“Well, you’re not going to tell anyone, either,” I said firmly. “You’re going to keep this absolutely, fuckinglutely to yourself.”

He looked down at his drink and took a sip.

“You haven’t made some sort of pass at anyone?” I said, the words sounding very strange in my ears.

He shook his head slowly.

I sat back in my chair, somewhat slightly relieved. I bit a large chunk out of my sandwich, and quickly chewed on it. “Well,” I said after a moment. “At least that’s something.”

“You’re not telling me this for any particular reason, are you?”

“I had to tell someone,” he said quietly.

“Well good,” I said. “It’s out of your system now. Now,” I leaned forward again and looked at him forcefully, “you’re going to zip up your lips about this, got it? I’m not going to have people whispering about you in gym or in the hallways. You’ve done a good job hiding it all these years, you’re going to keep it up.”

Mark nodded. It’s probably a bit late, but let me describe Mark. Moderately tall, thin, with brown hair and brown-framed glasses. He looked nerdy, but he didn’t look gay. “Got it?” I said. Typing this up, I sound like a bit of a jerk, but this was just the way we always interacted. I was always the

alpha male, the bully, I suppose.

I stuffed the rest of my sandwich into the plastic bag and picked up my drink and stood up. "I'm serious about this," I told Mark. "Keep it to yourself or I'll seriously kick your ass."

I left him sitting at the table and didn't look back. As I was heading towards one of the exits, I saw Mom standing there with the stroller, talking to a mall security guard. I turned on my heels and headed towards another way out.

I took Mark's bike instead of my own, to further punish him. My bike was a piece of shit and his was practically brand new, from his last birthday. I knew it would send him the right message.

Heather, on the other hand, was reclining the passenger seat of Mr. Flip's Toyota to its furthest back position. The radio was turned to her favorite station and she was wearing his sunglasses. Flip would glance over at her every few blocks as they neared the city limits. I doubt he had any firm idea in his mind where they were going.

"I want a cigarette," she said suddenly, sitting up.

"I don't smoke, Heather," Mr. Flip said. Again, here I am late with the physical descriptions. To give him credit, he was an athletic-looking fellow with a reasonable build from playing tennis whenever he got the chance. His main physical deficit was an overlarge nose and a thick head of brown hair that no matter how it was styled never lay in any way that was remotely attractive. His mother was British, his father American, and he had just the faintest, watered-down accent at the edges of his speech.

"I want a cigarette so badly," Heather said. "There's a gas station." The girl in the Girl Scout uniform pointed.

He looked over at her again for a moment and then had to stomp on the brakes as he came up to a stoplight. "Fine," he said, his forehead furrowed.

"And get a bottle of something sweet," Heather said as he got out of the car a moment later. "Some schnapps maybe."

Look for watermelon.” He nodded and shut his door behind him.

I rode Mark’s bike around the neighborhood for quite a while, until I was tired, and then I went home. The phone kept ringing, but I ignored it, supposing it was Mark. I sat in my room, ate Cheetos and masturbated to images of Jan Brady on the television. Unfortunately, she wasn’t very prominent in the day’s episode, so I had to make do with focusing on Florence Henderson most of the time. Still, she was pretty hot. Just after I finished, there was a knock on my window. I groaned, thinking it was Mark, but got up anyway. I pushed the faded window drapes out of the way and looked out. It was Eddie, a fourth grader who lived a couple of houses away, sitting on his bike in the alley next to our house. His mom was best friends with mine.

“What did you do?” he said. “There’s cop cars and cops all in front of your house. And the TV news too.”

“Shit, I don’t know,” I said, and it flashed in my mind that maybe Mark had told someone. For a moment I panicked and just stood there frozen in fear. But then I realized that, as boring as our town was, they wouldn’t send a news crew out for that. I could hear the anchor: “Local boy likes dick. Interview with his best friend at eleven.” In any case, I climbed out the window and joined Eddie out in the alley. I knew I didn’t want to talk to any cops or reporters about whatever it was.

In the back of my mind, I supposed, I figured it was my dad, the first one, the real one. He had gotten in trouble with the law several times in the past.

Unfortunately for Mr. Flip, Heather didn’t stay in the car. She got bored after a minute or two and walked into the gas station. The vice principal didn’t notice her entrance, and neither did the clerk who was serving him, a mustachioed man in his fifties. But the man’s son, a high school dropout at seventeen, did notice, and Heather noticed him as well. He

was watching the girl in sunglasses and a Girl Scout uniform very closely as she took a package of red Twizzlers from the display, looked it over carefully, as if she was reading the calories, the fat content or something, and then placed it in the pocket of her green uniform. She did this with a Twix, a Nestle's Crunch and two different flavors of Bubblicious gum, strawberry and lemon-lime. Then she turned and looked directly at the boy, who was leaning his awkward frame against the counter. He had a number of pimples and a shapeless mass of carrot-colored hair on his head. As he watched, she turned away from him and with one hand lifted the back of her dark green skirt, displaying the back of her panties, with their tiny pink flowers, at him. Then she lowered it and slowly walked towards the door.

When Mr. Flip came back to the car, his eyes widened at the sight of the red licorice in her mouth, but he didn't say anything. He just placed the brown paper bag in her lap and started up the car.

Eddie's brother, Paul, was two years older than I and lived in the second floor of his parents' garage. The place always smelled of car exhaust, due to the fact that his uncle had killed himself in the garage a few years ago. Paul was watching TV when we arrived, but there wasn't any mention of what was going on in front of my house on either of our two local stations. Paul wanted to play cards with Eddie and me, but we weren't in the mood, so he just sat down in his old, torn-up La-Z-Boy and lit up a joint. He turned down the sound on the TV with the remote and with another turned up the volume on his stereo. He only had forty-five minutes before he had to get to work. He cooked part-time at a truck stop on the edge of town, in a kitchen otherwise full of Mexicans. Over the past year, he had learned to speak Spanish pretty well, at least in terms of cursing and kitchen supplies.

I sat down on the couch on the opposite side from Eddie. The smell of pot mixed with the lingering exhaust smell and made me feel a bit lightheaded. I closed my eyes but was

suddenly shaken awake by Eddie, who had ahold of my arm. "Look!" he said, pointing at the screen. There was my mother, her eyes red and wet, speaking into an outheld mike, and the announcer saying something about a missing girl.

"Don't they have to be gone for twenty-four hours before they're officially missing?" Paul said, and then took another toke off of the thin joint he held in his hand. "Damn, your mom's fat," he added in a constricted voice as he tried to hold in the smoke.

"That's not nice," Eddie said.

An old school photo of Heather flashed on the screen. Paul laughed. "That's an ancient picture. She's way hotter than that now."

"Don't say she's hot. She's his sister and anyway she's missing," Eddie said.

"Fuck off, Eddie." Paul sat up in his La-Z-Boy and checked his watch. "I gotta get to work," he said, but didn't make any further move. He watched the rest of the newscast with slightly glazed over eyes. Finally, as the commercial came on, he stood up, grabbed his leather jacket from the hook on the wall and opened the door. "Later, dudes," he said, stepping out.

"Fuck off yourself, Paul," Eddie said, as the door closed. The boy stood up and went over to the stereo and turned it off. Then he walked over to his brother's easy chair, unzipped his jeans, and, as I watched, pissed all over the seat. When he was done, he zipped up and sat down on the couch again. "He doesn't tell me to fuck off," the boy grumbled. Then he turned to me and said, "Wanna watch Animaniacs?"

"This isn't watermelon schnapps," Heather protested, holding the bottle up.

"Keep it down, honey," Mr. Flip said. "The closest I could get is root beer schnapps. It's plenty sweet and it's good, honey. Just like you."

Heather laughed, and twisted off the top of the bottle.

She took a sip from it and frowned but didn't say anything. She sat back in her reclined seat and put a bare foot on the dash. She had kicked off her sandals many miles ago.

"Nice toenail polish," Mr. Flip said, looking over at the foot. "What a pretty shade of pink."

"I put it on just for you," she said.

"For me?" he asked, genuinely surprised. "Are you fooling me? How did you know you would even see me today? School's been out for almost a month."

"Oh, I know," the Girl Scout said. "You hang out in the mall. I see you all the time."

"I don't hang out," he protested gently. "I do shop a lot. I just bought a house and I've got a lot of space to fill."

"But you're not married."

He shook his head.

"And you're not gay?"

The man shook his head again. "I hate faggots," he said calmly. "Here, let me prove it to you that I'm not gay." They were at a stoplight and he quickly leaned over and kissed her on the lips. It was a short peck, as the light quickly changed.

After the kiss, Heather lay there for a few moments in her reclined seat and just watched him. "Show me this new house," she finally said.

"Oh, I don't think that's a good idea," Mr. Flip said quickly.

"Did you think that was a question?" Heather said, sitting up again, her voice very serious. "Did my voice raise in pitch nearing the end of the sentence?" She shook her head. "No. That was not a question, Mr. Flip."

The man nodded, and at the next intersection, made an illegal U-turn and headed back towards town. He frowned, but the girl just lay back again.

"Does it hurt?" she said after a while, in a normal tone of voice.

"What?" Mr. Flip said.

"Does it hurt, being dragged around by your dick all

the time?"

Mr. Flip frowned down at her for a moment, and then he spoke. "Yes. Yes, it does hurt, Heather." Shortly thereafter, he turned the car into the driveway of a smallish house in a pleasant neighborhood. The house was painted a shade of yellow that was just right, not too bright, not too pale.

"Does it have a pool?" Heather asked.

"No." Mr. Flip shook his head.

"A jacuzzi?"

"No."

"A waterbed?"

"No."

"Shit," she said.

"Yes, indeed," Mr. Flip said, opening his door. "Shit." He walked over to her door and opened it for her, taking care to glance around the neighborhood, trying to do it in a calm manner, to see who might be out watering their lawns, walking the dog or taking out the trash. No one. Seemingly, they were alone in the neighborhood.

"Inside," he said. "Let's go." He hurried to the front door, but the girl, carrying the brown bag and chewing a huge wad of Bubblicious, took her time walking across the yard to the door.

"Don't rush me," she said. "I'm not your wife. Oh, I'm sorry, nobody is."

"Don't bother trying to hurt my feelings," Mr. Flip said. His hand gently touched the small of her back as he hurried her inside the house. "They're long gone, honey. They were killed a long time ago, by girls prettier than you."

Mark knew exactly where to find me, when he saw I wasn't at home. Eddie let him in and then sat back down again, never taking his eyes off the screen.

"Hi," Mark said, but I ignored him. The couch was a long one, and he started to sit down in the space between me and Eddie, but I glared at him and he stepped back from the

couch. He walked instead over to the La-Z-Boy.

“Don’t!” I said, just as he was about to sit down. Eddie giggled.

“What?” Mark said, annoyed now. “Where do you want me to sit?”

“Sit on the carpet, or on that stool,” I told him. He pulled up the old bar stool and awkwardly sat down on it, looking like an animal doing a trick.

“I heard about your sister,” he said, after a moment, turning towards me.

“It’s a day full of news,” I said.

“Aren’t you worried?” he said. “It’s your sister.”

“It’s Heather,” I said. “I’m worried about whoever’s got her.”

Heather’s gaze quickly took in the living room’s contents, the moderately sized television, the two full bookshelves, the painting of some deceased relative over the fireplace, the plants in the window. “I bet that couch folds out, doesn’t it?” she said.

Mr. Flip nodded.

Heather nodded, too, and then walked into the kitchen. Just as quickly, she walked out again. “This is your bedroom?” she asked, pointing to one of the doors in the hall.

“Yes. And that’s the bathroom, and that is my office,” Mr. Flip said, pointing to each closed door in turn.

“This place is cold,” Heather said, grabbing her arms and pretending to shiver. “Can you do something about that? Build a fire, bring me a cat, or something.”

“Yes, honey.” He nodded and started off down the hall.

“And stop calling me honey,” she said. “It’s creeping me out.”

“Okay, Heather.”

“That’s better,” she said, and even gave him a little smile as she opened the door to his office.

"You know, as a seat, this really sucks," Mark eventually said, from his perch on the barstool.

"Sit on the couch," Eddie said. I just watched as Mark pushed back the stool and came over and sat down. But the moment his butt touched the fabric of the couch, I stood up. I walked over to the door and said, "Later, dudes."

Eddie nodded, his attention still focused on the cartoons on the screen in front of him. Mark frowned at me. I turned and went out the door.

I was half a block away when Mark caught up with me. He was riding my bike, and he skidded it to a stop beside me.

"You know, as a best friend, you really suck," Mark said.

"I don't think so." I kept walking, and he threw his bike—my bike—down. He ran over, reached out and grabbed my arm.

"Look, just forget I said anything," Mark said. "Come on."

I let him stop me but I wouldn't meet his eyes. In fact, I closed them. Maybe I hoped the day would go away, the whole world and everything. But instead, in a moment, I felt something on my lips and my eyes opened to see his closed eyelids an inch away from mine. I pulled away from Mark.

"That was the wrong thing to do, wasn't it?" he said, grinning crazily. I stepped back away from him. I stumbled backwards and then ran quickly over to my bike, leaped on and rode away, pumping as fast as I could with my sneakers.

After he adjusted the thermostat on the wall of the living room, Mr. Flip went into his kitchen and made himself a drink, a Jack Daniel's and Coke with a higher concentration of JD than normal. He took a long sip of the thick, sweet liquid. He walked over to the little color TV that sat on the counter, next to the microwave. It had been a gift from his mother on his last birthday. Inevitably, as the screen flickered into life, he saw the face of the woman he knew had to be Heather's mother. Her features were familiar; he had undoubtedly seen her numerous

times at school functions. He watched her speak while he sipped at his drink, but he kept the sound down low. He watched police officers speaking to the reporter. He saw a still image of his school. As he watched, the hand that held the drink began to shake.

Heather typed quickly, in her two-fingered fashion, on the computer keyboard.

She was impressed with the vice principal's machine, it must have cost him a couple thousand dollars, she guessed. There were things attached to it that she had no hopes of identifying.

NO REALLY, GUESS, she typed.

I DON'T KNOW. DAVID'S? CLAY'S? LET ME KNOW, BOXERS?

Heather laughed. NO, I'M AT

Just then, Mr. Flip entered the room with a folded blanket in his hand. Heather turned towards him, startled. "I brought this for you. What are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing," the girl said, taking the blanket and putting it over her thin lap.

He frowned as he looked at the screen. Of course, he knew all about Instant Messenger, too. "I think," he started to say, with a sigh, but then paused.

With a couple of quick, practiced keystrokes, Heather killed the Instant Messenger program, leaving Becky hanging. "Nice computer," she said. "What else does this house have? DVD? Maybe a pool table? Ping-Pong?" She stood up and eagerly strode towards the door.

"I want you to go," Mr. Flip said, quietly but firmly.

She turned towards him, startled.

"No, I'm serious," he said. "The school isn't a far walk from here. I'd prefer not to drive you. I'm sure you can make up a lie to keep us both out of trouble. You're a good liar, aren't you, Heather? I know you are."

"I don't want to leave, not yet," Heather said. She sat

herself down in the desk chair, and spun it a quarter-ways around in one direction, and then in the other direction.

“I have a gun,” he said, his voice just above a whisper. “If you don’t get out of this fucking house this minute, honey, I’ll go get it.” He stared down at her, his eyebrows dark and straight.

“Okay,” she said, her voice soft and gentle, like a little girl’s, for the first time that afternoon.

I was riding my bike around the bases on the school baseball diamond as fast as I could, round and round, coating myself with brown dust, when I realized I had an audience, an audience of one sitting on the bleachers. I dropped the bike and walked over to the white-painted bleachers and sat down next to the Girl Scout. Heather offered me a red stick of licorice and I took it. Her eyes were dark and ringed, like she’d been up for a long time.

“You’re back?” I said.

She nodded. She spit some bubblegum down at the ground and immediately filled her mouth with another wad. We just sat there for a while, chewing, staring out at the empty diamond, and the lush green grass, speckled here and there with bright yellow dandelions and tiny pink flowers, until I broke the silence. “Anything interesting happen today?” I asked her.

“I got kissed, for the first time,” she said.

“Me, too,” I said.

“Anything else?” I said, after a moment.

“Nope,” she said. “You?”

“Nope.”

Marcia L. Hurlow

Going to the Nursing Home
for Aunt Betty

For more than fifty years this house
has been my pride and haven.

I leave it easily: it is less,
so much less than my pain

it could be a wilted daisy chain
I left as a child, breathless

and hungry, my mother's call heaven
as I ran to some other lost house.

Sandra Novack

Attack of the Pod People

Beginning at midnight, watch a twenty-four hour marathon of macabre movies like *The Thing* and *Die, Monster, Die!* Your boyfriend, who loves horror movies, has two days off before his troop ships out to the Middle East. You've decided on a sick day tomorrow, which you feel certain you will need and which he justifies by saying that you have too much sick time accrued anyway, so why not stay in bed? Is it your fault you're resilient, he asks? Smile and say, *yeah, right*. Thank him for his support, but tell him he doesn't have to tell you twice.

He supplies the popcorn with the extra butter. You supply the quilts and comfy pillows which you will hog during the scary scenes. Share one of your pillows with Bo, the dog, though, because you recognize that, as a pound-mutt, Bo has already had a raw deal in life. Try to wean him from his nasty temper with offerings of bad-people-food like buttery popcorn. He will greedily gobble gooey yellow pieces from your hands, and, if you are not careful, you could lose a few fingers.

After Bo licks your fingers clean, he goes to the kitchen and laps up water. Say: Too much salt and then rub your own belly. Lie with your boyfriend on the waterbed, feel the ripples under your bare limbs, the cool water under the plastic mattress cover that bounces the two of you, you and him, up, then knocks your knees together. Draw the quilt up to your chin in anticipation of anything frightening.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers comes on and he, your boyfriend, says, Oh, I love this one. Do not bother to tell him this one is a remake, that the original commented more on

Communism and the Red Scare while this one, with Donald Sutherland, supposedly comments on relationships in the seventies. He will not care anyway. On the TV, there's a distinct absence of pods and snatchers. You ease the grip on your quilt and say, Hey, maybe this won't be so bad. Everything seems innocuous, a world filled with dewy, peach-colored flowers and rain. What could be nicer? Oh, look, you say, that woman plucked one. Call her a plant murderer.

Just wait, he tells you and smiles. Then he rubs his hands and says, Oh, yeah, so loudly that Bo, back from the kitchen, growls before he hops up and settles down toward the undulating bottom of the waterbed.

Give your boyfriend the bowl of popcorn. Offer it as a gesture, a sign that you want to be close, that you want him to stay the whole night. Make a grunting sound and hold your stomach. Bo growls again, this time at your noisy belly.

Your boyfriend says: It's a shame you can't ship that dog out to the Middle East.

Remind your boyfriend that that would mean Bo would be with him.

He asks why you ever picked a dog like Bo in the first place.

Pretend not to hear. The truth is Bo had a sorry-looking face and was scheduled for the old heave-ho at the pound. You are a sucker for cases like Bo. He (the dog, not your boyfriend) settles on the pillow you toss him but eyes you suspiciously now that you no longer offer him popcorn.

Touch your elbow to your boyfriend's arm, your foot to his calf. On the TV, people are beginning to act suspiciously, without feelings or emotions. They do not laugh at work. They cannot appreciate a joke. Sex? Forget it. What do they care? You think of earlier that night, when you and your boyfriend had sex, how he didn't look at you, how he looked out the bedroom window instead, how, when you washed afterward,

you had a red welt blossoming on your thigh. Think: This must be a bunker mentality, all aggression. No fear, no emotion. *Just the facts, ma'am. Just spread 'em wide.*

It turns out the Chinese woman at the dry cleaners is an alien. Her husband just knows something is wrong but no one will listen: She won't make love, won't look him in the eyes, won't iron and steam his shirts. You feel badly about all this. Say to him, your boyfriend: What is it with these movies? Tell him that whoever you pin your hopes on meets the enemy. Say: Isn't that the way it always is?

He says he never pins his hopes on anything, so why should you?

Remind him about Bo. Bo will perk up his ears. Say to both of them, Yes, there's always hope isn't there? When you say this, make baby-talk noises.

Work crews lug thousands of pods off overseas boats in an effort to create a world without hate or love, war, fear, joy, or anger. Not even bagpipes playing *Auld Lang Syne* can stop them. A man and a dog sleep too closely together. When they wake up, they have turned into a mutant.

Say, Come here, Bo, but when Bo doesn't listen, when he only raises his head and stares at you as though you are a stranger, a stranger with no food offerings, inch a little closer toward your boyfriend instead. Take care not to let him know you are doing this, that you crave his skin, some knowledge of him there. Watch Donald Sutherland run into the darkness, trying desperately to escape from what could only be inevitable doom.

How can a person keep their eyes open for days, months on end? You ask. They can't not sleep, you say. *That's* obvious. You are nearing delirium yourself, and it is only your first horror movie of the night.

Sutherland leaves his lover to see if there might be an escape. He, your boyfriend, sees this scene and smiles knowingly. Here's the good part, he tells you. You grab one of

his pillows and hold it over your face. If you're a puss, they get you, he says.

They're already here, you say. Aliens. Tell him you are certain Bo is one. We're all monsters, you propose, changed slowly from the inside out. Remind him of sex earlier that evening. Do not mention the welt on your thigh. Tell him only that his hands were a bit rough.

Don't be a moron, he says. He tells you he thought it was supposed to be a fun night. He calls you a prude. Just like the woman at the dry cleaners, he says, kissing your cheek.

You don't argue the point when it might hurt. Fine, you say. Let's just watch the movie.

He tells you he's *trying* to watch the movie, that he thought the idea was to have a good time before he left. He says this as if you didn't hear him the first time. Think: It must just be you, that you are the one who feels strange, who registers an alien difference.

On the screen, Donald Sutherland tries desperately to wake his lover but the pod people have gotten her, and now, in his arms, her face and body crumble. Behind her, a look-alike emerges, sheltered in a field of high grasses. She is nude, though it is unlikely that, as an alien, she will perform sexual favors.

Your boyfriend whistles. He sits up and Bo, in no mood for the undulating mattress, starts a yapping fit until your boyfriend throws a pillow at him, a little too hard.

You don't say anything about his offense toward your dog, about his ogling the alien enemy while lying in your bed, or about the welt which throbs on your thigh because you don't want to fight before he leaves. You'd rather strike out, in little ways, against the thing that you can't name. And if you can't do that, you push and clamp down on it forever.

Donald Sutherland, trapped under a water grate, prays. When next he appears, he is already transformed. You see him walking in unison with other alien people, resuming his duties, not joking about sex, staring off to some distant focal

point, devoid of all feeling.

All's well that ends well, you say. Aliens rule the earth.

He wasn't strong enough to cut it, your boyfriend tells you. Sutherland's mistake was leaving his troops; that's the quickest way to end up in trouble and afraid, he says, that that is how they get you, when you're alone. Luckily, he tells you, he has his men and they stick together.

Tell him you need a change of pace, that you've had enough alien action for one evening.

Your boyfriend says, What's wrong?

The world, you say. Us, them, everything.

Coax Bo into the living room with a pillow and trail of popcorn. Once on the couch, find an old movie, *The Sound of Music*. As you watch Julie Andrews run across a mountain and spread her arms wide as if she could envelop the whole world in them, when you hear her sing that the hills are alive, decide you have no choice but to take it on faith, to reach deep and bury all the dogs within you that bite.

Chauna Craig

Scrap Moon

7:18 a.m.

Outside on the patio where the other nurses gather to smoke, I sit down on a block of wood carved to look like a black bear, and I wish—not for the first time—that I was more like my son. The bear's nose, just inches from the ash can, is charred where the grown-up children of residents stub out their cigarettes. Anxious smokers, all of them, hurrying to get in, hurrying to get out, unlike the nurses who savor their breaks, pulling smoke from the smallest butts, holding it in their lungs until they can hold no longer. Then the nurses exhale. On an ordinary day in Montana their brown haze is swept out by the blustering wind. Today is no ordinary day. Windless. The clouds of smoke cluster and hover, the stubborn ghosts of cigarettes. I wish I were like the other nurses, nicotine a reason to be out here every hour. I wish I were more like my son, his own life reason enough to never be where he doesn't want to be.

I am still looking for my reason, waiting for a wind, a warm chinook, to blow it my way.

8:42 a.m.

An acrid odor like urine or cleaning fluid that smells like urine. That smell is in my clothes and hair, and I think it would be better to be a smoker.

A bushy-browed man stubs out his cigarette on the bear's nose and rushes through the sliding doors. I must remember to move the ash can and spare the bear.

Gerta cries out for Jesus from the 100-wing. I can hear her through an open window. *Jesus! Oh, Jesus!* This is all she says, though sometimes she will say thank you when I bring a

cup of tea. *Jesus, thank you. Jesus.* Still, she can eat on her own. She doesn't need diapers. She never tries to escape. We keep her with the other independents and out of the 600-wing, the place for those with dementia.

My own mother tries to escape. She would join my son in Dallas if she could get that far. Three times a day the alarms blare from 600-wing. One of the nurses, a smoker named Liz, always calls to tell me. This morning my mother cried, told everyone she'd lost me. So I finished after-breakfast meds and went for a visit in the found flesh.

"No," she said, "this is not *my* child. Lucy wears pigtails." My mother went off to search the other residents' rooms for wherever I was hiding.

"Ready to go back inside?" Jeanette asks, flicking her butt to the ground.

I never know how to answer.

10:16 a.m.

We are out for another breath of fresh air (carbon monoxide and toxic tar in Jeanette's case) when the bushy-browed visitor steps through the silent sweep of the electric doors. He stops to light up, then looks fiercely at us.

He points with his smoldering cigarette. "It's people like you," he says. "That's why I'm moving my father to the other place. More breaks than work. You just watch people die."

He leaves. Jeanette lets her cigarette burn as she stares off after him and out to the open plain where not even a breeze rustles the short, brown grass. The fire hazard will be high this spring, summer even worse.

"He's right about the last part," she says. "That's Monty Messmore's son." Monty is near comatose. Dying. We change his bed and force-feed him, all that's left to do.

"Is he really moving his father to River Manor?"

Jeanette shakes her head. "He says he wants his father to be able to go on fishing trips like they do at the River."

I see Monty Messmore in a wheelchair, rolled up to the bank, cap propped on his head, pole tied to his arm. A sunfish bites and it's enough to tumble his bony body into the shallow edge of the river. Five inches of water would drown him.

"Jesus," I mutter. Somewhere inside the home Gerta echoes me.

11:38 a.m.

Home for lunch and I find Charlie where I left him—in front of cable news reading the ticker aloud.

"A bus rollover in Virginia. Eight dead."

"Hello to you too."

Charlie was a high school guidance counselor who used to open the doors to new beginnings. Now, retired, he's obsessed with disastrous endings. An almanac of tragedy. If I tell him how a favorite resident died of pneumonia complications, he will give me the detailed story of Jim Henson's death: "He was still young. He had his whole life ahead of him. And he invented those Muppets." If I bring up the woman in her twenties, a quadriplegic the state gave us temporarily, he will tell me she's lucky, that he saw a show about such a girl, only her family was *starving* her in a closet. Once, not long after the school year started without him, Charlie actually said, "I don't know how you stay in that job. Everyone just sitting around staring at television, waiting for the next one to die."

He turns from the TV and says, "Another actress dead of a heroin overdose."

"She's lucky," I say, searching for the sandwich meat. "She'll never grow old and end up alone."

"Is this about Dan again?" He leans out of his chair to see my face. I picture him toppling over. With his snack-cake belly, he might not get back up.

I was actually thinking of Katrina, a kind woman on my wing who loves birds and watches them from the picture

window. Physically frail, she is sharp witted. Her husband is long dead, she was an only child, and her only child lives in Brazil. When he tried to get her to move down, she said, "I'm too old to learn Portuguese." She said, "All my friends are here in Montana." But they are only buried here, under the short-grass plain. No one ever visits her—a shame because she loves to talk. When the nurses are too busy, she talks to the birds. Once, she tried to talk with Gerta, but returned disgusted. "That woman is a proselytizer. At least Jesus *listens*."

"Why?" I ask. "Did Danny call?" He only calls during the day, when he can charge the bill to his workplace.

"No, but your father did."

"Is everything okay?"

"He caught a marlin. Well, with a lot of help. He's sending pictures."

My father lives with his girlfriend, a wealthy widow none of us likes, in a retirement community in Florida. At eighty, he is still occasionally the rugged outdoorsman, the manicured golf course his adventurous standby.

Charlie calls for me to bring him a Coke, then says, "Your father invited Dan out there for a summer boating trip."

I look out the kitchen window where the crabapple tree is thinking about buds. The branches are perfectly still, like a photograph. Like we all exist in this snapshot, frozen, stuck, framed. I imagine my father on the prow of a fishing boat, gulf wind in his hair, most of which he still has. My son is beside him, pole out like a sword carving adventure into his future.

"I thought Danny couldn't get time off this summer. I thought that was his reason for not coming here." I open Charlie's Coke for him automatically, as if he were a child or elderly resident. I finish spreading the mustard.

"Who knows?" Charlie replies. "Wait, they're saying something about the dead actress." He turns up the volume, I watch a robin settle on a crabapple branch. I consider talking to it, telling it how a fish as big as a marlin could drown my father and my son in the deep ocean, how there would be no

one to turn them over for another breath. *Take that message next time you fly south.*

Behind the bird and the tree, like a little scrape in the sky, is what my mother called a “scrap moon.” A shade lighter than the clouds, just a withered hangnail, you hardly noticed it. Throwaway.

“They’re saying that it might not have been an accident. Only the coroner can clear that up. Did you forget my Coke?”

I bring it to him. He takes it and drinks without so much as a thanks.

I sit to eat my lunch and Charlie turns the television to a different news channel where two guests are shouting at each other about Medicare policies. “Politics,” he mutters, pressing the “back” button on the remote. “Commercial breaks!” he pouts when the previous channel switches to an ad for supplemental life insurance.

“I was interested,” I say. “We’ll be old someday.”

“Well, aren’t you the cheery one?” Charlie says, and he finishes his Coke with a small, satisfied burp.

12:30 p.m.

On my way back in, I notice the ash can is missing. Some really windy days it tips and rolls into the bushes. Now it is just gone, and the wooden black bear sniffs empty air.

2:12 p.m.

“Jesus!” Gerta is holding a one-woman revival. She rocks back and forth near the open window. “Jesus! Jesus!”

“I wish she’d fuckin’ shut up,” rasps an old man fumbling to light his cigarette. His fingers are swollen and twisted with arthritis. No one helps him. Once, he nearly lit up while his oxygen tank was still active. He doesn’t remember to turn it off, so the director said no smoking. But George knows about patients’ rights. George called a lawyer, and now he’s allowed as long as his tank is closed. But we aren’t obligated to light cigarettes. Feed, wipe, and medicate, yes. Start a small

fire? Not in the contract. So he works the slender lighter like someone wearing heavy work gloves. After five minutes, he is frustrated, near tears. He says it's the wind in his eyes. Only today is windless.

Jeanette finishes her cigarette and heads inside. I pause. I have helped him before—after checking the valve on the tank. I do not want to end up in a thousand parts with the smell of urine and smoke ushering me to the afterlife.

George looks up, shiny tears welling, but he doesn't ask for help. I shrug. "It's not good for you anyway."

"I want a smoke," he hollers. "A fuckin' smoke. It's my right!"

"Jesus!" cries Gerta.

"Jesus fuck!" George cries back.

"We don't always get what we want," I say patiently. "And stop with the curse words."

He tucks the cigarette and lighter back in his shirt, turns on the oxygen valve and, after a deep breath, says, "I got the right to curse. Consider yourself fucking sued."

4:20 p.m.

I've checked on my mother in her before-dinner nap, spittle pooling in the grooves of her cheek. The nurses say she misses me, but what am I to do when she doesn't believe I'm me? Outside, no need for a jacket, and most of the staff is there. Shift switch. One new nurse says she's got the rest of the week off to spend with her grandchildren who are visiting from Seattle. The wallets start to come out, the obligatory photo exchange.

I turn to sit on the bear and see that the ash can is back. "How did this get here?" I ask the oohing crowd. "Where was it before?"

Someone says that George had it. "He thought it was a spare oxygen tank." She shrugs. "I had to clean up the damn ashes."

"He didn't really think it was a tank," I say. "He was

acting out.”

“He’s losing it,” the nurse replies, then flashes a fake smile at someone’s baby photo. “Have to send him to dementia one day.” She says it like it’s a destination. A trip to sunny Dementia.

I remember that the ash can was missing before my dispute with George. I’m as paranoid as the worst of them.

“Lucy, do you have grandkids?” The new nurse is offering me pictures, forcing them into my hands.

“No,” I say. Then, blandly, “Oh, how cute.”

“Kids?”

“Yes, a son.”

“How old?”

This is the hard part. This is where the conversation always stutters: I say he is thirty-two, the other person asks if he’s married, I say no, the other person pauses like she wants to ask if he’s gay but doesn’t know how. And I always wish he were gay then because it would be a reason, an explanation.

I say, “Old enough to marry. It’s only a matter of time. I expect an announcement any day.”

This is a lie. The last time I asked him about marriage, Danny nearly shouted into the phone. “Is that all you can think about? You, you, you. You want a grandchild, I want a life. I *have* a life. I *like* my life. I like the girls I date and the oyster bars where we meet and weekend trips to the coast. I don’t want to be old before my time.”

“So there’s no one special?” I asked. “There are so many nice women in Montana. You should come up and look.” He sighed and hung up, and I sat in my kitchen, wondering when it was time to be old and why women accepted it so much sooner.

Jeanette looks at me wisely through a cloud of smoke and asks, “What kind of woman do you think he’ll finally settle with?”

I know the answer already, but I settle for another easy lie: “Someone just like me.”

8:09 p.m.

When the phone rings, I nearly drop the plate I am rinsing. I am sure it is Danny, long overdue, and I think this time I might threaten to fly down there, see if that won't call his bluff. Charlie looks up from *The New Detectives* where a murder victim, burned in a trailer, has just been identified by a single molar. Charlie likes tragedies with hard-won closure.

"Hello?"

LaDonna, the night nurse on 600-wing, says, "Your mother won't settle down. She keeps getting out of bed to look for you. It's bothering the other residents, especially when she rummages through their drawers. Do you want me to give her a sedative? Or maybe you want to talk to her?"

Talking won't work. My voice will be a lie. She's looking for an infant. My first cradle was a dresser drawer, and I swear the smell of cedar still makes me feel safe. My mother is searching for a daughter who cries and needs her completely.

I can picture her lifting the corners of folded housecoats and underthings, expecting me. I can feel her fear when each time there is only another housecoat or the flat, hard bottom of the drawer. She is listening for my cry, her heart wild to find me and hold me tight.

By tomorrow, I will be neither pigtailed child nor dresser-drawer infant. I will be sucked back into her useless womb. She'll refuse certain foods, telling the nurses that her pregnancy makes her stomach sensitive. Then the egg and sperm will separate and go their own ways, absorbed into the body to drown. Alone. Like the hot spark when the oxygen is turned off, I will fizzle.

I look at my face reflected in the black kitchen window, shaky and unstable every time headlights on the street draw past. The scrap moon has long since set.

"Sedate her," I say. "Make her settle down."

Daniel Luévano

The Libido

The last gorgeous day the second week of spring. We have
paced our arguments with body

through chemotherapy and childbirth. Now opening our eyes
and tasting lemon over hummus, antipasto, garlic in olive oil, we are
regaining our senses. This all falls

under worldliness. Driving beside us the young woman wailing
“Magic Man” out her T-top. She is, as she moves on to the next light, our
younger Eros, the libido we had to swallow like a lunch.

Younger, in the Sonoran spring, you and I wound up still-snowy
mountains. The camera made me young smiling into calm, laying a warm
shadow

like a good sundial. Off-camera, lunch and wine. Years later,
chemotherapy bags siphoned my taste, and your first trimester

curled with nausea. We have paced our arguments with body,
now southbound under the gothic Pearl brewery, now shut. Over a few
spring weeks in our younger city

limb-loads of oranges sweetened and sickened and dropped.
Oranges you could never never eat.

Suzette Bishop

Hannah Höch

Berlin photomontage artist who used pop images of the Modern woman in her work, 1889-1978. Based on her life, work, and writings. Sections in italics are quotes from Höch's writings or are titles of her works.

My mother was an amateur painter. Eventually four siblings were born. I worked in my father's office, and I was pulled out of the girls' high school to care for this child from the time she was three days old until she was six.

Hair swept softly off the face is the perfect complement to this season's decidedly romantic turn-of-the-century dresses.

The night scene in the woods. Sketch for Memorial to an Important Lace Shirt.

I studied glass design. I did Red Cross work. He leaves purple bruises blooming on my arms. I packed up and went to Italy. Much of the trip to Rome I made by foot. The borders had just reopened. It's gathered gently high atop the head to expose the sensual taper of the neck, the velvety smoothness of bare shoulders, and to create overall balance. *(the painter) undated, probably 1920.*

He thought that the treacherous female soul (treachery no doubt its most important element alongside emptiness) could appear as a cubist lemon-yellow spiral among the green.

Snow and blooms—abortions in January and May. I want to blur the boundaries. **Keep the look soft, touchable—not lacquered.** They summoned me to a house on the sea. He himself was the most perfect Merz work, a continuum. I met her then. She knew how to put words together, how to look at me.

1933: Hitler. Everyone was suspect. Language was forgotten. We were hermetically sealed off. Carnivorous plants. *With Two Faces: Masks, Veils, Make-up.* I keep the edges frayed. **Be careful to choose a headpiece that accents your hairstyle but doesn't overpower it.**

In the Dolomites at an altitude of two thousand meters where I was supposed to recuperate, I met my future husband. We must be open to the beauties of fortuity. **Your stylist can help analyze your hair's texture and recommend styles that will work with it, not against it.** A machine that measures beauty. He disappeared from my life. I've lived alone in a little house with a big garden.

My great loneliness began. **A haircut is an expression of yourself.** The woman leaps away from her shadow. She leans in at the hip and then against the air, turning and looking up past her wrist, past her hand cupping the shelf's edge.

Jason Wirtz

Twelve Ways to Steal a Car

One

If you find a car without an alarm (check on or near the dash for a flashing light), just hammer a large flathead screwdriver (I prefer Craftsman) into the keyhole and turn hard, this should break the pins and allow you to turn the chamber which opens the car. Make sure you check the glove compartment, dash, center console, and under the seats—you don't want to wire a car and find the keys later. Cut into the dash and near the ignition find two red wires, cut them, splice them, and cross them. This only works for older cars however, newer cars have a lock mechanism that doesn't allow you to turn the wheel too far without the ignition switched. Make sure you wear gloves because when you cross those two wires you're dealing with enough volts from the battery to leave a mark.

Two

Jack looked at me with that "Sure you will" face again and I swear to God, I thought I was going to scream. He just gets through fucking me from behind, my parents coming home any minute, skirt hiked up, underwear around my ankles, elbows on the dining room table next to the candle centerpiece I helped my mom set up earlier for dinner, and he gives me that look. And when he gives me that smile, the same one he gives to my mother when she asks him about his parents for Christ's sake, I know I've had it. So when he steps into the kitchen, wearing only his shirt, and opens the fridge, taking out the milk and drinking right out of the container, I take his jeans and walk outside. I take the keys out of his left front pocket and slide behind the wheel of his father's Mustang. I find a pack of

cigarettes in his other pocket and light one up, taking deep drags and letting the smoke seep into the leather. I blow smoke against the dash and it plooms out like a mushroom cloud. I start the car and feel the hum of the engine beneath me. I hike up my skirt and let Jack's cum ease out of me and pool onto the seat. Jack comes out and starts banging on the window but I've got the doors locked and he's not about to break the window of his father's Mustang, especially not in a pair of Hanes boxer briefs. I think I see my parents coming from down the street so I put the cigarette out in the passenger seat cushion, the one where his fat-ass mom always sits, and reverse out the driveway. I take off down the road, lighting another cigarette, steering the car with my knee.

Three

Get a spark plug and break the porcelain (the white stuff) into small, throwable pieces with a hammer. Take a piece of it and throw it against the window of the car. When the porcelain hits the window it's like a firecracker and the window explodes.

Four

A group of us went into the park with Nicki, Mike's younger brother who's a little retarded. We got to fooling around, pushing Nicki into girls, telling him to take it out and show it to people—stupid stuff like that. Then Sanchez gets this idea of having Nicki steal a car so if he's caught we can rush up and say it isn't his fault—he's just retarded and all. Sanchez sees a car across the park in the alley, it's a '98 Chevy Cavalier. It's even got some exterior mods like tinted windows and a custom airbrush paint job. Anyway, Nicki wants to play the game because suddenly everyone is telling him what to do and how to do it and how we got his back if anyone or the cops come. He walks up to the car, doesn't even look around, and starts banging on the passenger side window. I mean damn, he doesn't

even try breaking the right window. We're all on the other side of the street, sitting on the park bench, watching, laughing, having a grand old time. Sanchez is on the ground, just rolling. I'm not even sure what Nicki plans on doing after he busts the window but it doesn't matter because a guy comes out to the car, pretty well built, jeans and a red Budweiser jacket. Just as Nicki gets his fist through the window the guy pushes him to the ground. We all run over and Mike and Sanchez act like they're going to beat the crap out of Nicki, saying shit like "this is our neighborhood motherfucker what do you think you're doing." The guy in the red Budweiser jacket is confused but he's pissed about his window being broke so he reaches out and pops Nicki a good one in the nose. Now Nicki's got a bloody nose and his fist is all fucked up too from breaking the window with it and he's all confused with the way Sanchez and his brother are yelling at him. Then Mike gets pissed at the guy for hitting his brother so we all start beating the guy until he's on the ground hugging his back tire and the cops come so we get the hell out of there, Mike and Nicki trailing behind because Mike's got to hold Nicki's hand whenever they cross a street or Nicki won't go.

Five

I told the crazy fucker to stay away from the club. If the car's got the club, move on I told him. But the crazy fucker got a hold of some liquid nitrogen in Jersey and he just had to try it out. So he's sitting in the car, even got the thing running because it was so cold, he said, he wanted to turn on the heater. So he's got his hammer sitting in the passenger seat and he's ready to pour the liquid nitrogen on the club and snap it with the hammer and then show the car off to his buddies, telling them all about the club and the liquid nitrogen like it's something he thought of himself. But he pours the damn liquid nitrogen on the club with himself sitting right there in the driver's seat. The stuff goes right from the flask to the club to the crotch of his pants.

He gets out of there quick, I guess the heater in the car wasn't enough, and starts running down the street like he's on fire. The crotch of his pants cracks from the cold and falls right off until he's running around, his frozen pecker in the wind for everyone to see.

Six

Get a jack and lift the car one to two feet off the ground. This will automatically disable the alarm system because the car will think it's being towed.

Seven

Amanda Harrington invited me over to her house for dinner. It was just like I thought, front lawn with lights along a path, parents dressed in khakis looking casual, Mr. Harrington shaking my hand and giving me a big smile. Dinner was salmon and we ate in the dining room, the dog whining in the doorway since he's not allowed on the dining room carpet. Amanda laughed at everything I said even though half the stuff was just me talking and she touched my leg under the table at one point and her mother noticed but smiled like it was OK. After dinner we watched a movie, her father in his office and her mother washing up the dishes in the kitchen but the only tongue I got was the dog's who licked my hand like it was a treat. After the movie Amanda walked me to the door and I called my brother on my cell phone who picked me up at the end of the street but it took him half an hour or so since he had to get up off the couch and turn the TV off and we live in town and she's up on the hill overlooking the valley. Later that night, when my brother is on his way out to drink with some friends I ask him to drop me off at Amanda's house. "What, now?" he asks. Yeah, I say, I'm meeting up with her. "Damn, good for you man, get some of that pussy for me," he says, rubbing my head with his knuckles. I have him drop me off at the end of the block and he tells me I'll have to get home myself. He drives off and I

walk to Amanda's. The driveway is smooth stone and from up on the hill the stars are brighter. I hike up the garage door with a branch that I break off a tree in her yard and slide myself underneath. I walk to the back of the garage and open the door which leads into her house and the kitchen is dark and the damn dog scares the hell out of me by sneaking up and licking the shit out of my hand again. I take the car keys off the message board where there's a sticker from Amanda's dentist saying she has an appointment on Tuesday. I start the car in the garage, change the station on the radio from her father's to mine, and push the big white button on the garage door opener which is clipped onto the driver's side visor.

Eight

Don't ever try to steal a BMW. I took a hammer to the window of a Beamer once and it didn't break. My buddy, Kortez, took one while it was still running. Some guy ran in for a cup of coffee down at the 7-11 on South Main and Kortez jumped in the hot seat and took off down the road. It had rained, so the roads were a little slick, but Kortez says the car took over and he ended up in a telephone pole. He got out because of the airbags but he says to me, "Don't ever try to steal a BMW." That's when I tried the hammer; It didn't work. Now I pass them on the street and give 'em a wink, they wink back. God help you if you every try to steal a BMW.

Nine

Getting a car is easy, it's getting a place to chop it that's hard. Anyone can steal a car. Damn, I could go out and steal your car right now, but where am I going to take it? And if you plan on converting the car, after you respray and change the plates, you better get the exact make and model car VINs from a wrecker, and don't miss the VIN at the bottom of the ashtray. And even if you can get the right VINs you better pray no one notices they've got the standard rivets because manufacturers

tailor their rivets. Then you've got to sell it unregistered with a fake name, inspections on neutral sites, and always deliver the car. You can do your own chop shop style if you want but you can't do it too often or you'll attract attention and you need to sell to at least four or five different wreckers. Like I said, if you're planning on making a living by stealing cars, first get contacts and some buyers or whatever, because getting a car is easy.

Ten

I vaselined up my slim jim and slid her into a car just outside of San Diego—a 2000 Chevy Monte Carlo, fully loaded right down to the 16-inch diamond cut aluminum rims and stainless steel exhaust tip. I ran it down to TJ and picked myself up a Mexican honey who called herself Maria which was the same as telling me she didn't want me to know her name. She was all over me because of the car and a few American dollars so we got a room that even had a bedside table. Inside the drawer of the bedside table was a bible, courtesy of the Gideons. Those damn Gideons are all over the place, I swear, wherever you go there they are, hiding out in every room of every hotel, hospital and prison. So I opened the Great Book and started reading, well not so much reading as singing what I read off the tissue pages and stomping up and down on the bed. By this point we had already split a bottle of Don Julio Tequila and the worm was sitting at the bottom of the bottle. I knew I'd had enough when that damn worm wouldn't stop looking at me, which is when I got out the bible and started singing with it on top of the bed. Maria didn't like that one bit, she was the superstitious type and on top of that there was a rather detailed crucifix centered on the wall over the bed. Even though I told her my mother was a devout Catholic who prayed for my everlasting soul daily, Maria wrestled the bible from my hands—her milky smooth arms and calloused hands were an other-worldly strong. After that it was all I could do to get her to

sleep with me and even then it was only on the floor because she wasn't about to stay in the bed I did the bible dance on with the detailed dying Jesus on the pale yellow wall looking down on the white sheets below. In the morning I had a hell of a hangover and all my money was gone and so were the keys so I knew she had the Monte Carlo. I thought about getting up and starting after her but I knew she was long gone. I leaned over and opened up the bedside table, yeah, she even took the Gideon's bible with her. But at least good old JC was still up on his wall looking down on me.

Eleven

When I was ten and my mother didn't have enough money to take us out to McDonald's for dinner I loaned her my life savings which was around fourteen dollars. Me and my younger brother Darrel ate Big Macs and Mom had the two cheeseburger combo meal. We split one large pop—half diet Coke, half Cherry Coke. I looked out the window and saw Dr. Farell getting out of his Rolls Royce. He only took it out on “perfect days”—that's what he told me while he tapped my knees with his hammer that was made from some kind of orange rubber and shaped like a triangle. My legs kicked up and he said, “Good, good.” My mother paid him with a stack of one dollar bills—tip money, and he patted her ass on the way out the door. She sat for a minute in our yellow station wagon in the hospital parking lot. “Mom,” I said. Then she started the car and we took off for McDonald's. We're what you call regulars. I looked out at that car, eating the first meal I had ever paid for, and didn't know if I wanted to worship it or burn it to the ground. Five years later I got caught scratching a key alongside of it. They let Dr. Farell into the room with me and he called me “poor white trash who would never amount to anything but nothing and if you had any sense of what was good in this world you wouldn't have gotten yourself into this mess and how could you even think of scratching a Rolls for Christ's

sake it's not just any car do you even know how much that car is worth, well more than you that's for sure Danny Denlissen." He said "Danny Denlissen" like it was some poison he was trying to spit on me, cloak over me like a cocoon and have me suffer through for the rest of my life. From that moment on I knew I had to steal that Rolls Royce. The trick, I found out later after a good deal of research, was to get the garage code from his daughter and then the car was simple—old enough to get a screwdriver in the weather stripping and work the window down. Then I put the car in neutral and pushed it down the drive. While it was rolling I hopped in the driver's seat and popped it into gear and it started right up. Same trick I learned from my old man on how to jump a car when the starter is shot to hell.

Twelve

You wouldn't believe the shit I've found in cars once I get them back to my place or in some parking lot. I mean everything from marijuana to baby formula. I've found a ton of leftover Chinese, high school sweatshirts, family pictures, porn—one guy had a stack of gay porn underneath the spare tire to hide it from his wife, lipstick, condoms, flasks, coffee mugs with green shit growing in the bottom of them, little kid's underwear, asthma inhalers, antacid tablets—I once found an entire set of encyclopedias in the trunk of a '98 Ford Escort that had the pages cut out and dirty socks inside them, now what the hell is that? You wouldn't believe the type of people that are out there, waiting in line behind you at the grocery store.

Alana Merritt Mahaffey

Old Age as Wolf

She reminds me:

*There are no heroes over age 30 in fairy tales;
go read folklore where young people are stupid
and need old people to survive themselves.*

Article One:

Old age is the enemy.

Blind man who won't stop talking

Giant man with a grievance

Old troll

Wicked stepmother

Witch

Old age is the wolf blowing straw out of your bones.

Article Two:

Disney knew the score.

Put eyelashes on animals. It makes them cute.

Put eyelashes on Mickey. It makes him Minnie.

Give girls big eyes, it's foreshadowing. You know they'll live in the end.

All villains must either smoke or have thick eyebrows.

All villains must be over the age of 30.

Article Three:

Old age is the wolf in your senile grandmother's gown, basket full of DNA.

Wicked stepmother, menopausal.

Giant neighbor with an electric fence around his beanstalk.

Old spinster adds children, "only when expecting company."

Old age is death crying wolf, finality with no immediate obligation to commit.

Elyse Fields

Continuing Modern

In the class I hate, we press the backs of our leotards to the ground and suspend our knees in the air. Scattered across the studio like little galaxies, we're supposed to feel our lungs expand—then collapse like the Big Bang in rewind. In-Out.

We're supposed to feel our lower backs hollow as the upward movement of our diaphragm pushes our tailbones to the floor, imagine our breath going all the way down to the core of the Earth—then all the way up to the sky. We're supposed to suck energy from the ground like water, feel it climb our calves to the mountaintop of our knees—then rush down the other side: thighs, ribs, neck, head. Sometimes our teacher comes and traces the imaginary waterfall on our bodies, our teacher who hasn't yet known me long enough to know my name.

Her hands feel irrelevant.

I've just returned from the airport, where I helped the man I love board a plane for the coast. He needs to find a job and I need to finish my degree and these tasks are incompatible here in this Midwest town and it is the beginning of waiting, nothing more—only the waiting feels like the kind I do when I hold my breath to suppress hiccups, or suspend my feet in the car to avoid bad luck crossing a train track.

My traditional ballet class was incompatible, too, didn't fit into my graduate writing and teaching schedule. Labeled "Continuing Modern," the class I hate looked like an interesting substitute. I was primed for Picasso-esque body lines, a chance to cut the air with a sleekness heretofore resisted by my tutu. Modern things would get my mind off other things, I thought.

But my teacher wanted to back up, start with the essentials. In-Out.

I'll see him in three months, when we get our mid-semester break, but that's a long time, so today I am trying to forget I have a body. I forget about the line between the core of the Earth and the sky. I forget whether I'm breathing in or breathing out. The water pump at my feet disappears. I fall asleep.

My mother tells me that when I was born, I had the loudest cry of any baby in the hospital. My sister Mara, conversely, had a tiny, agitated whimper. She'd move her jaw around and wriggle her rib cage as if the two were parts of an instrument she couldn't put together, much less play. My brother Nick and I, teenagers at the time, laughed at the fact that no sound ever came out. Somehow, though, Mara became adept at In-Out. In-OUT! She expressed her disregard for the car seat with such vigor she'd spit up her last meal, and we'd be forced to abort our mission: nothing was worth driving next to Mara's pair of lungs.

"That girl is stubborn," Nick and I would warn our parents. "She's either going to be a lawyer when she grows up or she's going to grow up to be a criminal."

Breathing has been around since Earth's creatures crawled out of the water and onto the land. Cellular respiration, however, is a much older phenomenon. For millennia, it wasn't just the lungs that expanded and contracted, but a creature's entire being. Single-celled organisms pulled nutrients from their environment and expelled what they didn't need back into the ancient seas: in-out, all through tiny, cellular pores. We can do this, says the teacher who may or may not know my name. Lying on the floor, we splay our limbs in a giant X like a starfish, then pull ourselves into a ball. Ball to X, X to ball, creatures getting big, small.

I hate this class. The teacher is going around ensuring that we keep our centers quiet as our limbs reach out into the world. I keep sticking my rib cage out, like the women on car hood ornaments. "It's a bad habit," my teacher says. "Keep your center centered."

Often, I curl into the center of an X-ball as I'm falling asleep. It seems a necessary shape for arranging and re-arranging the worldly things I've gathered during the day. When I fall asleep like this, I wake up with ideas, ready to write. Mara is so different from me: since she was a baby, she's fallen asleep with all her limbs spread out, hands and feet and head directed to the ends of the universe. I remember her in her crib and think of starfishes. I remember her in her crib and wonder what it would feel like to leave my house first thing in the morning and rob a bank in a high-powered executive suit.

I e-mail the man I love that we had to lie next to another person in class today and attempt to adopt their breathing pattern. "I don't want to be aware of anyone's breath but yours," I type. But then I think of Mara, and my family, and my students and decide that that's a pretty limiting approach to the universe. I press the backspace bar.

I imagine I am an amoeba. I imagine I am a paramecium. I have no rib cage.

My teacher knows my name now, but she rarely calls it; perhaps she senses how I count the weeks until the class is over, beating myself up inside for not filling out a drop slip before the mid-semester date. The other day, my teacher was talking about the message people send out to the world by the way they organize themselves at a spinal level. "People who hold their spines too rigidly are often perceived as uptight," she said. "People who let their spines droop are perceived as

unmotivated.” I sensed my own spine, slumped over the unused ballet barre in the back of the studio. I wanted to go home.

I wanted to go home as I stood in the middle of the studio in my leotard with one hand on my partner’s head and the other on her tailbone. I wanted to go home as I provided resistance to her spinal moves in various directions: she was supposed to be pretending she was a fetus receiving feedback from the uterine wall and I, apparently, was supposed to be pretending I was a uterus. I wanted to go home as we switched places, and I felt nothing like a fetus, felt nothing for remembering what it was like to be in my mother’s womb. My teacher had explained that thinking about our first awareness of our spines would repattern us to take account of them today, but I didn’t see what this had to do with dancing.

Standing in front of my own students—writing students—I notice that there’s one girl, Brooke, who never participates. It frustrates me because the essays she turns into me are concise, insightful, lovingly built. I’m about to call on her and ask her why she of all people isn’t open to learning when I notice she is slumping over her desk. It hits me then: she’s like I am.

I consciously straighten my spine.

Ball to X, X to ball, all to the voice of our teacher whose class I’m trying on. I imagine I am an amoeba, absorbing nourishment, expelling my attitude and other negative things. I imagine I am a starfish. I center my center.

We move onto the spine. Even within the womb, our teacher tells us, the fetus is able to sense itself as its head or tail pushes against the uterine wall and receives feedback from its environment. Guided by the head and supported by a yield and push from the feet, our spines push us down the birth canal to enter the world. Today in class, we are being born.

Jut your head forward and you look like you’re going to stab someone, our teacher says; jut your head back and you

look like the cheerleader who snubbed you at prom. Tuck in your lower back and you'll slink like a whipped dog, tail between its legs. In our spines, we hold the power of posture. More importantly, as our predecessors discovered, we hold the power of locomotion.

The single-celled organisms that developed head-tail appendages were able to swish around to a nutrient-rich environment instead of waiting for a nutrient-rich environment to swish around to them. Their spawn were able to propel themselves through water as fish, slither through jungles as snakes, and scamper through woodlands as small mammals, gathering caches of seeds and nuts. Eventually, some of Earth's creatures were able to raise their necks, sit, stand, move vertically through space. Up off the ground, food was for the taking and predators could be seen a long way off.

The spine is so important to mammals that newborn human babies turn their heads when their cheek is touched in a reflex that rotates their spine toward the mother's breast; without his or her spine, a newborn baby would fail its attempt at post-uterine nourishment.

Mara learned to walk the normal way. I remember her lying on her stomach in the middle of the living room floor, eyeing what must have been to her Earth-fresh eyes an excruciatingly interesting table leg. She flailed arms and legs with as much energy as she could muster, but remained stranded like a turtle turned over on its shell. Suddenly, she realized that if she pushed her arms into the ground, she'd move. It was an exciting, but disappointing discovery: she could only move herself backwards! With consistent effort, she came to learn that if she pushed with her feet and yielded with her arms, she would move toward, not away from her goal. She began scooting, then crawling, then standing, holding onto the very table leg that had initiated her quest—it was all very rational.

My mother tells me that I had no patience for such middle stages. I pushed myself backwards and immediately decided my limbs just weren't worth the trouble of learning how to use. Instead of scooting or crawling, I simply rolled on my spine wherever I wanted to go. It was quite efficient. When my spine got tired of being horizontal, I experimented with it being vertical and went directly from rolling to walking.

I never cried when my parents put me in the car seat. Mara never wrote stories.

I consistently dream that my childhood friends are grown up but still walking on the handstand hands of our kindergarten world. In real life, my friend Eric Herbison could get all the way across the playground upside-down, but now, in my head, he can get all the way across town. Often he'll stop me at the entrance of the local bookstore and tell me that this refusal to move on anything but my feet is the reason I'm not yet published. That this reluctance to consider my range of motion is why I can't find a way to be with the man I love. "Eric," I say, shaking my head. "I can't even do push-ups. You're a ridiculous man."

Monkeys walk nearly upright, but they use their arms a great deal more than humans do. We are moving across the floor like apes in the class I'm coming to enjoy, swinging both feet in the air as we support ourselves with our arms, repositioning our hands like the rubber stoppers on the bottoms of crutches, then swinging our feet through again. It's only a small time that we are completely supporting ourselves with our upper bodies, but it amazes me how relieved my lower body is when I take all the weight off of it. At one time in my life—the time when I pushed myself with my arms as a baby and thought I'd move forward—I considered all my limbs equal. Now my legs do 100% of the supporting, freeing my arms up for other tasks—reaching for a glass of water, clapping at

concerts, holding the man I love. I am thinking, though, in this class I'm coming to enjoy, that monkeys drink and clap and hold too. All this while still being able to swing branch to branch! Why did humans stop using their arms to support themselves? Snakes don't have arms, lizards don't have arms, gazelles don't have arms. Limbs that can support as well as reach are a late evolutionary feature. Why do we humans, supposedly the most evolved creatures on Earth, no longer use them to their fullest potential?

I've been thinking about sea anemones, reaching their flower-like shoots off into the ocean. Sea anemones close up when they sense danger, close up so fast that before you can say, "monkey," they're a tight little wart on the leg of a dock. I wish Brooke wouldn't be so afraid to speak in class.

Today in class we are not going to have a discussion, I decide off the cuff; we are going to have a reading. I tell my students to go outside and watch people move for ten minutes, then come back in and write about it. One by one, they get up and share their observations. "I know we were supposed to watch people," Brooke says in a small voice, "but I saw this duck fighting this other duck in the river. The one duck almost bit the other duck's leg off." The class is listening intently. Brooke's voice grows louder. "I think they were fighting over this girl duck. Now I don't know how you tell a girl duck from a boy duck, but this girl duck—I think it was a girl duck—was just preening and preening . . ." An irrelevant but hilarious story ensues, complete with laughter, questions, clapping, and confidence. I had a hunch Brooke was a writer. I wanted her to see that words on a page could be spoken as well as written, that that possibility existed.

Sea anemones close up before you can say, "monkey," but they can open back up in the same amount of time, bursting into bloom before your eyes.

I lie in the middle of my floor beneath the hum of my computer, going ball to X, X to ball, ball to X. I stay in the X for a few moments, reaching my arms, legs, head, and tail out as far as they will go. I have no rib cage. I could get used to this. I could get up right now and print off this piece I'm writing, send it to a publisher.

We are talking about body half now in the class I now like. We are lying on the floor pretending to be babies. If you move to suck your thumb, even as an adult, the knee on that same side of your body will rise to help you curve inward and meet your hand. What's more, the other side of your body will elongate, arm reaching down to assist this curving motion—all without any thinking on your part! The teacher is asking me if there is a side I prefer to curve and a side I prefer to elongate. I tell her I feel more comfortable moving to reach my right thumb. She asks me to stand and pick up one leg. I pick up the right. My right side is simply good at moving around. My left is good at supporting.

My mother tells me that I was vehemently right-handed, that I wouldn't even pick up a baby bottle with my left. Nick was vehemently left-handed. Today I teach students the proper order of words in a sentence and Nick creates comic books.

Mara is right-handed, but only because her kindergarten teacher made her choose. As a toddler, she ate with both hands, colored with both hands, cut paper with both hands. Any theory that doesn't attribute handedness to genetics is pretty much disregarded these days, but sometimes when I watch my sister swim, I can't help but give habit some credit. Mara learned to swim almost as early as she learned to walk. While my toddler activity—ballet—involved standing on one leg (always chose my left) and sticking the other in the air (always chose my right), her toddler activity demanded she use both arms and both legs simultaneously. Mara has built equal strength in her shoulders,

learned to trust each side of her body to carry her across the pool. I wonder what she will be when she grows up. To say criminal or lawyer now seems small of me.

Lying on our stomachs, my classmates and I pull ourselves across the studio floor one body half at a time. It's harder than it sounds: we're not allowed to dig our knees into the ground, or push off with our feet. I reach forward and feel muscles in my back I've never felt before. I imagine I'm pulling myself across muddy ground, as if I'm in the military and this is boot camp. My left side is especially resistant to reaching and pulling. What is the point of this repatterning, I ask myself. It's so hard. What is the purpose? I see Eric Herbison in my mind's eye.

My back hurts the next day. My teacher tells me I'm feeling my "scapula." I wonder how many other muscles I have in my back that I've never heard of and that I never use. I look around at everyone lying in the ground in leotards, knees in the air. I wonder how many galaxies we have in our universe that we've never seen. What if the man I loved came to live with me, even though he didn't have a job here? Or what if we worked together this summer, even if it meant at least one of us would have to forgo our usual summer jobs? It would take some planning and some changing, maybe even some sacrificing, but I feel today, lying here on my back, that people are stronger than they think.

I ache for warm up to be over so I can put my "scapula" back to work.

Sometimes now when I'm falling asleep, I think about humans condensing into babies, into fetuses, into cells. It feels cozy. Sometimes I think about all my experiences gathering themselves into one point, sharp as a paramecium stained beneath the microscope. A bit of amoeba here, a bit of teaching

there, a bit of talking to Mara on the phone, the man I love in letters flung across the room, all a part of one whole. Sometimes—for kicks—I imagine all human experience gathering in this point, including our dichotomies of head-tail, upper-lower, left-right; including our evolution from fish and snakes and monkeys. Then I imagine that point expanding, Big Bang in fast-forward. It gets bigger than me. It gets bigger than all of us. And yet it *is* me, it is *composed of* all of us. Tomorrow when I wake up, I am going to write about expansion.

The teacher of the class I love is calling my name, and she is calling out leaps and dives and rolls that Picasso himself would never have dreamed of. We are ready for these things: it's time to dance.

Retail

I don't think most people realize how beautiful they are when they smile. How their faces shrink up and their eyes expand and all you can see are the whites of their teeth the wrinkles on their face and all the joy swelling up from inside. If they knew, if they had any idea, they would do it all the time.

I think for some reason a lot of people are embarrassed. They feel like they have to hide everything inside. Their happiness is for them or their children or their partner. Not for strangers. Heaven forbid you grin at a passerby or a vendor or the man that checks out your groceries at the supermarket every week.

Heaven forbid you show anyone you don't know your face at its best.

Babies smile just for the sake of it, adults never do.

Yesterday I pulled a double to cover for Cody who called in sick, again, his fifth time this week. It's always the same with the young kids, a party, a concert, a hot date comes up and they're immediately on the phone, coughing, wheezing, snorting, begging to have the day off. It's illegal to say no to them so Andrew always has to concede and I always have to cover. Every once in a while we get lucky and the kid forgets and comes into the store, oblivious, to buy some potato chips or a sandwich or something they could have gotten anywhere else. Just laughing with their group of friends around them, telling this joke or the other. I always ask them how they're feeling, and, without fail, they simply shrug and say:

"Fine."

The only kids you can count on are the ugly ones. The greasy girls, the pimple-faced guys, the too thin or the too fat, they'll always show up on time everyday, willing to do whatever you ask, willing to work as long as you want. Sometimes it's almost as if you have to force them to go home.

Yesterday, a lady came up to my register to buy something near enough to close, a carton of ice cream I think. She was average in just about every way you can be, brown eyes and hair, about five-six or so. She was flustered because around close we go from our usual five registers to just two and then one. She seemed to be in a hurry and when her item didn't scan she looked at me and asked me if I knew what I was doing. It's something I get all day long. But the thing about it was, when she looked up at me I saw her face fully for the first time. It was paralyzed. All down the left side. Her eye was heavily lidded, her mouth drooped at the edge, and all the skin on the one half was as smooth and soft as pudding. And, on top of it all, from the corner of her ear all the way down her cheek and chin and running on to her neck was a thick pink scar. She was hideous. I stopped moving when I saw her face; I just froze up and stared. She must have known what I was looking at but she didn't say a thing, she didn't look away, she just waited for me to go back to ringing, to fix the problem. After she had left all I could think about was if she had a husband at home, if she had ever been with a man.

At home, alone, later that night, the image of the woman kept flickering in my mind, all of her, her face, her anger, and how she was probably at home just like me, on a couch or a bed, eating her ice cream and softening it with her tears.

Anna-Maria, the girl from the bakery department, asked me what I did for fun. It was in the afternoon sometime, maybe right before or after lunch rush. Her boyfriend had proposed to her the day before, bought her a bouquet of lilies with a tiny

diamond ring around one of the stems. The bouquet was wrapped in lace and it had been the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“Mami, eres mi corazon, te amo,” he said when she found it, after he told her to put the flowers in some water so they wouldn’t die. They were getting married in twelve weeks on May 15th. Their little son Eli couldn’t have been happier. Anna-Maria couldn’t have been happier.

She wanted to know if anything I did ever made me feel that good.

I told her I didn’t do much.

“But Williang what does jor wife do with jou wheng jou aren’t here at the store?”

I’m not married, I told her, never have been.

“Jour girlfriend?”

Don’t have one of those either, haven’t for a long long time.

“Jour famili?”

There isn’t much left, and what is lives across the country.

“Theng what do you do by yourself, wheng jou wan to relax ang have fung. Wha gives jou joy?”

I don’t know. I just walk around mostly, I said, just walk around and wait.

“Wait, wait for wha?”

Same thing we’re all waiting for, I guess.

I moved East when I was twenty-nine, living back home was bringing me down and I had to do something. I thought the change in climate would be good for me, I’d meet some people and try to get something started, a business, a family. They all said I was just running. That I couldn’t get away from it, that the things that make you restless will follow you until you change.

I don’t know.

Andrew hired me four months after I arrived, told me to get a good winter jacket, a scarf and a hat, showed me how to run the register.

It's been a few gray hairs since then.

I know register five works better than register eight because the \$ key sticks on five. I know that milk gets rotated on Thursdays and that it's the best time to buy because the new stuff is sometimes dated more than a week ahead. Andrew had heart surgery once and his wife's name is Margaret. The items further back on the shelf usually aren't the freshest because the stock crew can't be bothered to pull out all the old stuff and put the new stuff behind. Remember to tell the fifteen-year-olds to never mix ammonia and bleach. That both don't clean any better than either alone. I know old black women and young white boys take the longest breaks and immigrants, no matter where they're from, work harder than any five people put together. Customers never really care what you answer to any of their questions. And no one ever says thank you that won't yell at you immediately if they realize you've made the smallest mistake.

My time in between shifts is on the streets, strolling, watching everyone walking in a hurry from here to there. I see kids run ahead of their parents and get yelled at and the same parents yelling when the kids lag behind. I see joggers and dog walkers and sprinters and bikers. I see a million couples cuddling, kissing, caressing, and smiling those special dizzy smiles. Sometimes I want to walk up to them and block their paths. Just to see how long it takes for their smiles to turn into frowns, their coos into yells. How long does it take for you to hide back inside yourself? To reinforce the wall that strangers aren't allowed to climb?

My favorite places are the parks that everyone passes through on their lunch breaks, downtown, right near the center,

where you can see every type: executives, students, homeless men stirring garbage, looking for anything worthwhile at all.

When they're by themselves, almost everyone walks as if they're being chased.

A long time ago, years by now, I saw an old woman trip while walking on perfectly smooth sidewalk, trip and fall and hit and lay stiff. She must have been at least seventy. Her fall was quick, a sharp smack. The woman's body was nothing, so frail she didn't even whimper, just hit and stopped.

Dead.

These people on their lunch breaks with only however many minutes left just stopped and stared, everyone looking at everyone else, expecting someone to deal with the problem. Some shook their heads and kept going, most just stayed frozen, whispering. She bled, face down, immobile. After I couldn't stand watching them forming a circle with their eyes I went over and helped her up, her bloodied nose contrasting, making her skin look even more pale than it could have possibly been, white paper splashed with red paint.

I cleaned her up.

The whole time she clutched firmly on to her purse.

Cody didn't come in yesterday because he's smarter than a lot of the kids we hire.

After the lady with the ice cream had left, we closed up and Andrew told me thanks for covering, that with all my extra money I could put a big deposit on a house. I shook my head; time and a half on my pay is nothing. I capped out on hourly years ago.

I walked home, alone, and greeted my roommates when I got back. They all smiled at me from their various cereal boxes, cans of pasta and tubs of oatmeal.

Ha ha.

I don't really remember if I ate.

It was a cold night, the windows were fogged and weather forecasters predicted a blizzard within the next few days. TV belched commercials and sitcoms and sensible talk eventually devolved into images of products that could be obtained just this one time for a low low discount price.

I turned it off.

And, as always, late, when even the buildings have all gone to sleep, I stripped off my uniform: the blue apron and tie, the black slacks, my yellowed nametag engraved with my date of hire, I stripped it all off and back like the skin of a banana, I stripped down to nothing and I walked out of my apartment into the street, walked with my bare feet scraping carpet, then wood, then grass, then cold wet concrete, my eyes wide and frosting I looked up at the sky and I drank the cold cold night, I saw the stars gleaming and tasted the clouds, my head cast back I gulped air that burned like flame and fire and the depths of a pyre, I opened my mouth and smiled and smiled and smiled.

Then I went back inside, to bed.

I had to pull another double the next day.

—Interview—
Scott Russell Sanders on Nonfiction

Scott Russell Sanders is one of the most widely published and highly respected practitioners of the personal essay. He is the author of numerous essay collections, as well as works of fiction for adults and children. A long-time resident of Bloomington, Indiana, where he teaches in the Indiana University MFA program, Sanders was the University of Idaho's Distinguished Visiting Writer for a week in April 2003. He also served as the contest judge for *Fugue's* first nonfiction contest, the winners of which appear in this issue. Sanders was interviewed by MFA student Jen Hirt.

JH: I think young writers are constantly trying to judge praise and criticism, trying to figure out when they've "made it" to the next level of the writer's life. Can you describe some of the successes and setbacks you have experienced?

SRS: As it happens, I didn't come to writing through workshops. I didn't take creative writing classes. In college I studied physics before I turned to English, and I knew nothing about MFA programs. The first workshop I ever attended was the first one I taught. So I never had anyone, a teacher or a classmate, tell me whether I was making progress in my art.

Of course, like any writer, I've wanted to improve, and I've looked for signs that I'm learning the art. In the early years, when I wrote fiction, that meant aspiring to make stories good enough to engage my fellow graduate students in literature. The next step was to persuade an editor to publish something I'd written. So I began sending off short stories and essays to magazines. I wasn't seeking fame and fortune—and a good thing, too—but rather for confirmation that what I had written was of interest to people who cared about contemporary writing. Perhaps because I was living in England at the time, and because my stories stood out as different from the usual run of

fiction by young English writers, I had some early luck in placing work in magazines—in *Cambridge Review*, *Transatlantic Review*, *Stand* and others. And that was tremendously encouraging to me.

I remember vividly those early publications. In one instance, I ran into Jon Silkin, a fine poet and the editor of *Stand*, as he was selling copies of his magazine on the main street in Cambridge. We struck up a conversation. You must understand that I was shy then, am shy now. I'm reluctant to impose my work on anyone. That patient man kept asking me questions until I confessed my passion for writing. He asked to see something I'd written, so I bicycled home, grabbed a story, bicycled back, handed it to him. And I stood there while he read it slowly, the pages ruffling in the wind. I imagined my inexperienced sentences coiling through his mind. When he finished, he said he'd like to publish it in *Stand*, and I was ecstatic. A couple of years later, when Silkin returned to Cambridge to read from his poetry, I reminded him of that act of generosity, and I gave him a great bear hug.

Many years and many publications later, I still hope to improve as a writer. I don't measure growth by sales figures, reviews, or prizes, but by what I'm able to take on, the questions I'm able to ask and the forms I'm able to achieve. My work has become more complex, more layered, over the years, as I learn how to gather more and more of my experience into a coherent shape. I also measure success through the impact of my work on readers—people who send me letters or email, who speak with me after a public reading, and who say how something I've written has given them pleasure or helped them see their lives more clearly.

JH: And what of any setbacks you faced?

SRS: When I returned to the States after graduate school, I continued to publish stories and essays in magazines, but I struggled to find publishers for my earliest books. I wrote

two novels and two collections of stories over an eight-year period before I was able to get any of them published. It was hard to keep writing the next book when the previous ones had found no home. But instead of breaking my desire to write, this period of waiting toughened me. I was serving an apprenticeship, like the potter who must knead clay and practice on the wheel for years before he's allowed to show his work to the world. Even without publishing any books in those years, I learned how much writing mattered to me. I drew meaning and pleasure from the work, even though I could never be confident that anybody else would ever read it. If I'd had success in publishing right away, I might have grown discouraged whenever I hit a hard patch later on.

And all writers hit hard patches, periods of discouragement and darkness. Merely getting a book in print is not the end of your challenges. I've had books orphaned when editors leave the publishing house. I've had books lost in the shuffle of multinational takeovers. I've had books buried in jackets ugly enough to make me wince. I've had books ignored by reviewers because I live in an unfashionable part of the country and write about unfashionable subjects. But by and large, my experience as a writer has been one of slow and steady growth in the practice of my art and in the span of my audience.

JH: Nonfiction has been coined the "fourth genre," behind poetry, drama, and fiction. Of the other three genres, can you explain which one might be the closest cousin to nonfiction? Last year, visiting writer Mark Doty said, without hesitation, that poetry and nonfiction are more closely connected than any of the other genres.

SRS: Most people think fiction is the closest analogue because it's written in prose and it tells stories. Certainly there are affinities between fiction and nonfiction. I came to the writing of essays by way of short stories and novels—as did

such notable essayists as Peter Matthiessen and Edward Hoagland. But actually I would agree with Mark Doty's answer; there is a more intimate connection between poetry and the personal essay. For one thing, much poetry, like the essay, is told directly out of the writer's own experience, rather than through invented characters. And essays can be organized in a variety of ways reminiscent of the strategies in poetry. They can be organized around an image, for example, or variations on a theme. They can be collages or mosaics or quilts. They can be eulogies, elegies, lyric outbursts, or reveries. They can be held together by voice. By contrast, I think there are fewer ways of organizing short stories, and nearly all of them rely on narrative.

JH: In some fiction and poetry, there is a degree of experimentation. Meanwhile, nonfiction seems to be fairly traditional. In your experience, have you come across any nonfiction you would call experimental?

SRS: I think nonfiction is on the whole more conservative in form than poetry or fiction. Much "experimental" writing is read only by specialists, people with an expertise in the genre, whereas nonfiction is usually intended for a general audience—for what Virginia Woolf called the Common Reader. Certainly I aim to reach ordinary, literate, curious people, people who work with their hands as well as their minds, people for whom reading is neither pastime nor puzzle, but an essential nutrient, like water or salt. I like to invest my energy in asking hard questions and telling complex stories clearly, rather than in playing with the shape of the essay. The original meaning of *essay*—as understood by Michel de Montaigne who invented the term—is a trial, an effort, a weighing out, and so it is an experiment in understanding, a search for pattern.

At the same time, we should remember that the essay can take many different shapes, and some of them may be as

daring as anything in fiction or poetry. I think of *Walden*, which is still a radical work, or some of Emerson's essays. I think of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being*, or Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*. In those books, and others I could name, one feels that the driving impulse is not experimentation for the sake of novelty, but the searching for an adequate form, for a way of saying something no one has quite said before. That edge between what is sayable—and therefore thinkable, feelable, imaginable—and what is not-yet sayable, is the frontier of good writing. If working on that frontier requires me to try a new form, I'll do so.

JH: *Leap* by Terry Tempest Williams has moments where it breaks into poetry. Even though nonfiction and poetry are so closely related, did you find that decision detracted from the larger impact of the book?

SRS: I love the work of Terry Tempest Williams. But *Leap* seems to me less successful than several of her other books—*Refuge*, say, or *Pieces of White Shell* or *Red*. I sense that she was trying too hard for lyricism here, and that she was trying to link too many things to Hieronymus Bosch's painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Even if the book doesn't quite work, in my view, it's still a garden of delights.

JH: When I think of nontraditional forms of nonfiction, the use of fragments—on the sentence level—comes to mind. When you come across fragmentary writing in nonfiction, what is your reaction?

SRS: I think fragments ought to be used sparingly, and only for good reason. They ought to signal that language is breaking down, that the pressure of feeling or event or insight is too great to allow for the formation of complete sentences—

like the breakdown of matter under extreme conditions. In contemporary writing, however, sentence fragments are often used out of laziness. I suspect that writers hope a sequence of punchy little phrases ending in periods will lend an emotional power to their work that the material itself doesn't justify. That's an illusion, and it comes from reading advertising copy. If you look at ads in magazines, on television, or on billboards, you'll see skeins of fragments. New! Improved! What you need! Those shards of language are aimed at persuading us that the item for sale is more alluring, more necessary to our happiness, than it really is. When any writer lapses into ad-speak, I become wary.

JH: How about essays that have a fragmented narrative? Annie Dillard's "The Wreck of Time" comes to mind. Everything in that essay is thematically related, but it's broken into chunks.

SRS: Interweaving several story lines can be a powerful way of organizing an essay. Each line of narrative has a structure, and the whole essay, if it's skillfully made—as Annie Dillard's essays certainly are—will cohere into a complex pattern. I've used this technique in a number of essays, and in entire books such as *Hunting for Hope* and *Staying Put*. The sections of the essay may not be explicitly connected one to another, but if the reader stays with the work, the links between the various strands will become evident, and a larger vision will gradually appear. The universe is extraordinarily complex, intricate, and grand. But it all hangs together. It's a single reality. What seems fragmentary is only the result of our partial seeing. The same is true of our lives.

JH: Nonfiction writers often have an obligation to reflect extensively not only on personal events but also political events, to shed light and reposition these events in a unique way. What role might literary nonfiction writers play in

reflecting on 9/11, and (in general) all the other major events from the last few years?

SRS: We are a society infatuated with experts. On television, on the radio, in the newspapers and magazines, the people who offer opinions on 9/11, the war in Iraq, or global warming, say, are retired generals, scientists, physicians, policy makers. Sure, we need to hear their opinions. But finally, we must make up our own minds. And we're amateurs. As citizens, we need to inform ourselves on the vital issues, but we can't become experts.

Personal nonfiction is a place where the writer can think aloud, as it were, in public, as an amateur. The essayist does not ask us to accept his or her opinions, but rather invites us to ponder our own lives, and to reflect on the momentous events that shape our society. Since 9/11, there has been an outpouring of essays, stories, and poems written in response to those terrible events. I've written my share. As I've read the responses of writers from around the country, I'm struck by how much they differ from what the media and our so-called leaders have been telling us in the aftermath of that attack. What we hear from the poets, the fiction writers, and the essayists is often much deeper, more compassionate, and more helpful than anything we've heard from the experts.

JH: What have you read in the last 18 months that's informed your opinion about 9/11?

SRS: I look at opinion from periodicals around the world. I turn to poets such as Pattiann Rogers, W. S. Merwin, and Robert Hass. There's a volume edited by William Heyen, *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, with strong work from all over the country. I've been moved by a couple of essays from Wendell Berry, which appeared in *Orion* and have been gathered in a small book called *In the Presence of Fear*. There have also been several other extraordinary pieces

in *Orion*, including essays by David James Duncan and Barbara Kingsolver.

JH: You've said *Orion* is your favorite publication. What do you like about *Orion*?

SRS: It's a magazine that explores issues of social justice, conservation, science, and spirituality, all through the medium of visual and literary art. *Orion* is the only place I know of in America today where one can move across all of those realms, and show their interconnections. Too often, these themes and concerns get divided up into separate boxes. Yet the world is one. It's only our approach to the world that divides it into specialties. Caring for the Earth, for example, can't be separated from caring for people. Searching for a spiritual ground can't be separated from the pursuit of scientific understanding. In *Orion*, writers, photographers, painters, scientists, and grass roots activists try to see our lives, the Earth, and the universe as an integral whole. This wonderful magazine unites vision and activism, a regard for beauty and a regard for concrete results.

JH: Is *Orion* succeeding?

SRS: I think so. It has attracted many of our country's most exciting writers. I've mentioned Wendell Berry and Barbara Kingsolver. There's also Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, Rick Bass, Robert Michael Pyle, Ann Zwinger, John Elder, Peter Matthiessen, Richard Nelson, Gary Nabhan, Alison Deming, and many others. That's a sign of a magazine doing really important work. Over the past ten years or so, I have sent to *Orion* the essays I care most about.

JH: What are some other magazines you read regularly?

SRS: I read *Resurgence*, which comes out of London and is widely circulated in the United States. It aims at the same intersection of social justice, environmental concerns, science, art, and spirituality, with a global perspective. It's less interested in literary qualities, and more focused on the issues. But it's a wonderful magazine.

I also read *Wild Earth*, which comes out of Vermont, and *Northern Lights*, out of the Rockies, as well as *Audubon*, *Parabola*, *The Georgia Review*, the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* and the Christian magazine *Sojourners*.

JH: What have you read that wasn't directly in response to 9/11, but spoke to the situation?

SRS: I read the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, especially *Being Peace*, and Ursula Le Guin's recent translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. And I reread *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* by Martin Luther King Jr. It's a book about responding to violence with compassion and courage, very much in the tradition of Gandhi and Jesus. Along with millions of other black people, King was contending with daily terrorism. He was facing the KKK, club-wielding policemen, attack dogs, fire hoses, and he was arguing for nonviolence as the only viable response.

He insisted that it's wrong to answer violence with violence, because many innocent people will be hurt, and because you will only perpetuate the hatred and sow the seeds of future suffering. Only a compassionate and courageous response, while avoiding violence, can break the cycle of murder. We still have much to learn from King's *Letter* as we react to terrorism and to threats—real or imagined—from countries like Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

I've also returned to some of Thomas Merton's essays on nonviolence. Merton was a Trappist monk who died in 1968, and who was profoundly disturbed by racial strife, the Vietnam War, and the nuclear arms race. Unlike many people

who call themselves Christians and advocate war, Merton took seriously Jesus's instructions that we love one another and make peace. The books of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and the gospel accounts of Jesus in the New Testament are among the most thoroughgoing calls for compassion and forgiveness ever recorded, and yet they're often used as recipes for judgment and domination.

JH: What writing projects are you working on now?

SRS: I'm working on a book called *A Private History of Awe*, which records my efforts to understand my own life, the meaning of community, and the fate of the Earth in light of spiritual wisdom. I'm drawing on such wisdom wherever I can find it, but for me this has chiefly meant Christianity, Buddhism, and various Native American traditions. I'm a beginner in my knowledge of Buddhism and Native American teachings, but I'm grateful for all I've learned. I was reared in Christianity, steeped in the Bible, marinated in sermons, so I know that tradition fairly well, but now I look at it from outside the church. If one sets aside the claims about immortality and special deals from God, what values and truths remain, and what do they have to teach us about living in our place, in our time? For example, during this war with Iraq, I've been rereading the Psalms, thinking about the pain, anger, violence and longing that inspired those grand songs more than 2,000 years ago. They are poems about exile, loss, fear, and revenge, and they still speak to our condition today.

During my visit to Idaho this week, I've been making notes for an essay entitled "Quarreling with Emerson." Whether this will become part of the *Awe* book I don't yet know. I've been trying to discern my own lineage, my debts to particular writers in the tradition of social and wilderness thought. In Emerson's case, I have a sense of gratitude for lessons learned, and also a sense of the need to go beyond him.

JH: What elements of Emerson do you think we need to move beyond?

SRS: Emerson was an idealist, in the philosophical sense. He believed that mind is primary, matter secondary. Such a philosophy has the dangerous effect of treating the natural world as an illusion, a side-effect of our own clever thoughts.

I don't believe that Nature is a creation of consciousness, even though of course our perceptions and language are shaped by our thoughts. I believe that we are a creation of Nature, including our apparatus of perception and our speech. Consciousness itself, the very shape and texture of mind, is a response to a fabulous, amazing, intricate reality that transcends us. The universe is much older, wiser, and subtler than we are. If Nature is an illusion, as Emerson claims, then anything we do to the Earth—extinguishing other species, destroying habitat, poisoning rivers and seas, disrupting the atmosphere—does not really matter, since it's all only a side-show, a phantasm. I want to turn Emerson on his head, and reclaim the natural world as the primary reality, with consciousness as secondary, however curious, complex, sometimes terrible, and sometimes beautiful our minds may be.

Also, Emerson doesn't speak much about community, about living in relationship to other people. He's the great proponent of self-reliance and splendid isolation. "Is not a man better than a town?" he asks in one of his essays. Well, yes and no. We shouldn't have to choose between honoring individuals and honoring community. By putting so much emphasis on the solitary person's freedom to define the world as he or she sees fit, Emerson slighted the pleasures and obligations of living alongside other people.

JH: What are the implications of all this for the traditional nature writer?

SRS: In a sense, Nature is already doing the writing. We are the eyes, ears, noses, and mouths of the creation, gazing back at the universe, listening, pondering. Whether we respond in song, painting, poem, essay, dance, or scientific formula, we are the product of the Earth, the mountains and rivers, the seas, and the starry skies. Other creatures gaze back as well, but they don't record their responses in books.

Thoreau, Emerson's greatest disciple, accepted this role. He started out as an Emersonian idealist. But the more time he spent outdoors, the more he came to acknowledge that what he called wildness is not derivative of mind, but is the original reality. Human thought, feeling, perception, and language have all evolved in response to that primal reality. Over the course of his life, Thoreau shifted from being a Transcendentalist to being a quizzical animal, tromping around in all weathers and all seasons, studying birds and flowers and ponds, responding to the beauty, intricacy, power, and *rightness* of Nature. His early journals were filled with metaphysical musings, but his later journals were mostly field notes. While Emerson sat indoors and thought about Nature, Thoreau went outside and watched what was going on.

JH: So do you consider yourself a nature writer?

SRS: When you label somebody a nature writer, it implies that to pay attention to the natural world is a special interest—like being a film buff or a racing car enthusiast. We have food writers and sports writers, who pay attention to some field of activity. But Nature is *the* field of activity, the ground for everything. Seeing our lives within the context of the greater life of the Earth, therefore, should be normal. What's *abnormal*, what begs for a special label, is literature that ignores the fact we live on a planet in the midst of a several-billion-year-old-evolutionary stream, alongside millions of other species. My friend Gary Nabhan only half-jokingly suggests that such

writing should be called “urban dysfunctional literature.” Gary, by the way, is someone who knows we live on a planet, and who’s fascinated by all the critters, including the two-legged ones—as you can see in his wonderful books, such as *Songbirds, Truffles, and Wolves* or *The Desert Smells Like Rain*.

The fact is, I don’t write just about hiking in the mountains or paddling in rivers. I write about families, houses, towns, good work, good food, the discoveries of science, the mysteries of spirit, the pleasures of community. I’m trying to understand my life, and the meaning of life, within the embrace of this glorious creation. We shouldn’t need a label for writing that acknowledges we are animals among other animals, that we live and breathe and drink the world constantly, that our lives unfold within the web of starfish and stars. Such writing merely accepts the most elemental truths about our existence. This is very old and essential knowledge, as recorded in the traditional lore of our species, from ancient cave paintings and myths to folk tales and songs. Our species happens to have spun this wonderful fabric of language, which enables us to make books, but this skill doesn’t make us fundamentally different from the bears and the bees, the mushrooms and mice. It’s all one great family. Since we’re the noisiest members, we ought to take care to say something useful and true.

Contributors

Suzette Bishop is a teacher at Texas A & M International University in Laredo. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and have been nominated for the AWP Intro Journals Project and the Pushcart Prize. She received an Honorable Mention from the Academy of American Poets and an Oberlin fellowship for women writers.

Andrew Bradley is author of the chapbook *All Beautiful Lies*. His poems have appeared in *Curbside Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Correspondence*, *On the Run from the American Dream*, and online at *notcoffeeshouse.com*. He is a founding member of REPO, a multi-disciplinary performance collaborative that mixes poetry, music, theater, video and other visual arts in live concert. He lives in Philadelphia with his twelve-year-old son Mattias, and Artaud, a companionable gibbon.

A Montana native, **Chauna Craig** now lives in Indiana, Pennsylvania, where she teaches Creative Writing at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Ascent*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Passages North*, and *Crab Orchard Review* and has earned her two Pushcart Prize nominations.

Christopher Essex received his MFA in Creative Writing from Indiana University, where he was a Hemingway Fellow and served as fiction editor at the *Indiana Review*. He has had short stories published in *Pearl*, *The MacGuffin*, *Whiskey Island*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Crescent Review*, *Flying Island*, *Bathtub Gin*, and other literary magazines. During his undergraduate years at the University of Colorado-Boulder, he was an editor at *Walkabout* magazine and worked on the staff of *Rolling Stock* magazine.

Elyse Fields studies and teaches literary nonfiction as an MFA candidate at the University of Iowa. Her work has appeared in *The Inlander*, *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, and a variety of regional

magazines. She wishes to acknowledge her Continuing Modern teacher Amanda Hamp, whose approach to dancing—and living—is based on Peggy Hackney's book, *Making Connections*. Elyse has been dancing since she was three.

Sonia Gernes grew up on a dairy farm in Minnesota and is currently a Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame where she teaches Creative Writing and American Literature. She has published one novel, *The Way to St. Ives*, (Scribners 1982) and four books of poetry—*The Mutes of Sleepy Eye* (1981), *Brief Lives* (1982), *Women at Forty* (1988), and *A Breeze Called the Fremantle Doctor: Poems/Tales* (1998). She has taught in New Zealand, Australia and London, and was awarded an NEA creative writing fellowship in 1999. She is currently at work on a book of essays.

James Grinwis' work has appeared in numerous publications including *American Poetry Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Artful Dodge*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Columbia*, *Conduit*, *Quick Fiction*, *Mudfish*, and *Skidrow Penthouse #5*. He works in education research and lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Cynthia J. Hollenbeck lives in Moscow, Idaho, with her husband and two daughters. She's a graduate student in the MFA program at University of Idaho. Her work has appeared in *Talking River Review*, *Washington English Journal*, *Red River Review*, and *The Ledge*. Currently, Cynthia's working on a memoir: *Nancy Navy: Secrets of an Enlisted Woman*.

Austin Hummell's first book of poems, *The Fugitive Kind*, is available from the University of Georgia Press. He teaches at Northern Michigan University and is poetry editor of *Passages North*.

Marcia L. Hurlow is a native of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, and a professor at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky. Her poems have appeared in

Poetry, Poetry Northwest, Chicago Review, Poetry East and *Nimrod*, among others. She has three chapbooks, *Aliens Are Intercepting My Brain Waves* (State Street Press, 1991), *Dangers of Travel* (Riverstone Press, 1994) and *A Tree Ogham* (Nova House Press, 2002).

Alison Krupnick lives in Seattle, Washington, where she writes and takes care of her two young daughters. In early 2003, "Valentines" received an award from American PEN Women. It is her first published work. She is currently at work on a collection of essays entitled *Ruminations from the Minivan*.

Don Kunz is Professor of English at the University of Rhode Island where he teaches literature, film studies, and creative writing. His essays, poems, and stories have appeared in a variety of literary magazines. When he is not working, he enjoys hiking, rafting, and long-distance wilderness trail rides in the American West.

Holly Leigh has written about getting lost in Scotland, praying at a racetrack in Ireland, riding a logging train in Romania, and walking the hazardous roads outside Boston. She has published essays in *Bellevue Literary Review, Fugue, The Larcom Review, Mediphors Journal, Moxie Magazine* and *Practical Horseman*.

A former NEA Fellow, **Donald Levering's** most recent poetry book is *The Fast of Thoth*, from Pudding House Press. His previous poetry books include *Horsetail* (Woodley Press), *Mister Ubiquity* (Pudding House Press), *The Jack Of Spring* (Swamp Press), *Carpool* (Tellus), and *Outcroppings From Navajoland* (Navajo Community College Press). He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he directs the Theaterwork Poetry Reading Series.

Metta Little lives in Asheville, North Carolina, sometimes writing music reviews for a parody newspaper called *The Asheville Disclaimer*. A student at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, Metta hopes to learn something (anything at all) about making documentaries.

Daniel Luévano is the author of the chapbook *The Future Called Something O'Clock*. He lives in Greenville, South Carolina, with his wife and daughter.

David Lunde lives in North Bend, Oregon. This is the second time his poetry has appeared in *Fugue*.

Alana Merritt Mahaffey, 29, has been published in journals including *Poetry Motel*, *MidSouth Poetry Review*, *Fugue*, *Grasslands Review*, *Lucid Stone*, *Xavier Review* and *Slant*. She teaches literature at Garland County Community College.

Jane McCafferty lives in Pittsburgh and teaches at Carnegie Mellon University. Her fiction has appeared in the *New England Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Witness*, *Story*, and *Mademoiselle*, among other magazines, and has earned her an NEA fellowship and a Pushcart Prize, as well as inclusion in *Best American Short Stories*. Her books include *Director of the World* (1992), a collection of stories awarded the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, and *One Heart* (1999), a novel. "Brother to Brother" will appear in *Thank You for the Music*, a collection of stories due out in January.

George McCormick is a dishwasher who splits his time between Madison, Wisconsin, and Cooke City, Montana. He has recently published stories in *Cutbank* and *The Talking River Review*.

Kathleen McGooney's work has appeared in *Boston Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Epoch*, *Luna*, *The Journal*, *Ploughshares*, *Seneca Review*, *Verse*, and other journals. Her book, *Whatever Shines*, is available from White Pine Press. Her website is www.kathleenmcgooney.com.

Sheila Sinead McGuinness lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Previously she taught Creative Writing at the University of Montana,

where she was also the editor of *Cutbank*. Her poems have appeared in *Natural Bridge*, *So to Speak*, *Main Street Rag*, *Iowa Woman*, and *Common Lives*, among other magazines. She is also the recipient of a Massachusetts Cultural Council Poetry Fellowship and an Academy of American Poets prize.

Malachi McIntosh was born in November 1980 in Birmingham, England. He has worked as a cashier, stock clerk, newspaperman, factory hand, collection agent, disc jockey, mover, and pizza boy. "Retail" is his first published short story.

Deborah Owen Moore is a poet and translator whose work has appeared in journals such as *The Abiko Quarterly*, *TriQuarterly*, *Confrontation*, and *half tones to jubilee*. Currently, she works for the Council for International Exchange of Scholars, the organization that administers the Fulbright Scholar Program.

Sandra Novack holds a BS from Moravian College, an MA in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Cincinnati, and an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College. She has taught writing and literature at the University of Cincinnati, Duke University, North Carolina State University, and writers.com and is working on her first story collection.

Paul Perry was born in Dublin, Ireland. His poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Poetry Ireland Review* and *The Best American Poetry 2000*. He won the Hennessy New Irish Writer Award in 1998 and the Listowel Poetry Prize in 2002. He has been a James Michener Fellow at the University of Miami where he received his MFA in 1997 and a James Cambor Fellow of Poetry at the University of Houston. He has also been Writer in Residence for Co. Longford. He is currently Writer in Residence for the University of Ulster at Coleraine, in Northern Ireland. His first book is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry (www.salmonpoetry.com) in the summer of 2003.

Professor of English at Kean University, **Susanna Lippóczy Rich** hosts *Poets on Air*, recently interviewing Billy Collins, Stephen Dunn, and Alicia Ostriker. Her poetry and creative nonfiction appear in such venues as *Nimrod*, *Frontiers*, *Proteus*, *Kalliope*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Phoebe* (both New York and Virginia). With artist Jo Jochnowitz, she tours an interfaith program entitled *ashes, ashes: A Poet and an Artist Respond to the Shoah*. Longman/Allyn & Bacon just issued the fourth edition of her textbook, *The Flexible Writer*. "Lullaby (Cradle Song)" is a chapter from her manuscript *Still Hungary: A Memoir*.

Michael Shilling lives in Seattle. His fiction has appeared in *The Sun*, *Bridge*, and *Night Rally*.

Maureen Stanton's essays have appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Sun* and other literary journals and anthologies. She is the winner of the 2002 Mary Roberts Rinehart award and the 2003 Penelope Niven Award in creative nonfiction.

Angie Weaver is a native of Northern Kentucky, where grass grows tall and family and friends grow strong. She is currently a graduate student at Miami University of Ohio. Her work has appeared in *Writer Online/ NovaLearn* and *Reflections*.

Jason Wirtz taught English for three years in California before deciding to concentrate on writing. He has since moved to Michigan to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing at Western Michigan University where he is teaching and writing today.



FUGUE

Suzette Bishop
Andrew Bradley
Chauna Craig
Christopher Essex
Elyse Fields
Sonia Gernes
James Grinwis
Cynthia J. Hollenbeck
Austin Hummell
Marcia L. Hurlow
Alison Krupnick
Don Kunz
Holly Leigh
Donald Levering
Metta Little
Daniel Luévano

David Lunde
Alana Merritt Mahaffey
Jane McCafferty
George McCormick
Kathleen McGookey
Sheila Sinead McGuinness
Malachi McIntosh
Deborah Owen Moore
Sandra Novack
Paul Perry
Susanna Lippóczy Rich
Michael Shilling
Maureen Stanton
Angie Weaver
Jason Wirtz