No. 30 Winter 2005

FUGUE

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We must never cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot

FUGUE

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This issue is dedicated to the memory

of

Saul Bellow

(1915-2005)

FUGUE

Winter 2005, Vol. 30

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Submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1 (postmark dates). All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please address submission to the appropriate editor and send with SASE to *Fugue*, English Department, 200 Brink Hall, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844-1102. Prose no more than 6,000 words pays up to $50 (as funds allow)and a one-year subscription. Poetry, all forms, pays up to $25 (as funds allow) and a one-year subscription. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be mailed separately, each containing an individual SASE. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), with the explicit provision that the writer inform us immediately if the work is accepted for publication elsewhere. We will not consider multiple submissions (more than one submission at a time). All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again.

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From the Editors

This issue of *Fugue*, No. 30, is the product of a collectively brilliant and tireless staff. Small press literary journals like ours face financial perils that threaten to foreclose what is, essentially, the freshest venue for the literary arts. Without those who volunteer their services and expertise, *Fugue*, like so many other journals, would have to close the proverbial shop. Many thanks to you all.

To our subscribers and patrons, we are similarly indebted to you. Your continued support of the journal sustains us financially, but more importantly your support affirms that we are truly doing important work. It is our belief that reading is an act of creation; writers offer us their words and with these words we author our own meanings, our own stories. Reading a new essay, or returning to a favorite poem, is a way to reconstitute what it means to be human. If nothing else, you will recognize parts of yourself in the stories, poems, and essays we proudly present you with. The humanity in this issue is often dark, but tenderly so. There is a certain edge to the work; words slice off the page so cleanly, so sharply, the cut itself seems, somehow, carefully, perfectly made. We hope you enjoy!

Lastly, we must thank the writers whose work we are lucky enough to showcase. Life is full of presents, trinkets, little goody bags we present to one another because we have to, or think we should. But no one ever demands that a writer offer his or her gifts to the world, and yet here they are. Their concerns are multifold, their agendas as diverse as their aesthetics, but what really matters is that their work sustains us beyond the sorrows they explore in the human spirit. We ask that you read the following issue with a boundless spirit, one that acknowledges Ansel Adams' idea that the "force of all times has been the force of originality and creation profoundly affecting the roots of human spirit." The human spirit can take flight even when restrained. We hope that you cannot look away.

Justin Jainchill and Sara Kaplan

Kevin Wilson

Breathing the Winter

It is deep winter and my brother lies inside a white, submarine-like machine that breathes for him. It forces him to take in air. I have to get very close to him to see it, the tiny spires of steam rising from his lips like a prayer.

I am afraid of the cold.

Our parents are now dead. My brother and I spend all day in the house, orphaned but in our twenties, old enough to understand it. I am not sure if I can take care of him by myself. He doesn't say that he is worried about this. He doesn't say a word.

There is a TV, but I don't ever watch it. The machine makes too much noise. I don't begrudge him this, could care less.

I sit on the couch and shoot up or take some Quaaludes that I buy with the money they give me to take care of him. I lie on the couch and we stare at each other. I try to make myself breathe. I think about it for hours on end; breathe in, breathe out. I try to understand but I pass out. When I wake up, he is still staring at me and his machine has not stopped.

The house is not made for the cold. I keep the other rooms closed off and forgotten. There is only the living room now, which we keep warm with a wood stove and space heaters. I run into the bathroom or the kitchen, shivering as I put food in or take it out, but they are unfamiliar places, the tile slick and greasy with a glaze of ice.

I worry about the fuses going out or an ice storm taking down power lines. There are safety precautions but I do not know if they actually work. I touch the machine sometimes and feel its insides hum with purpose. I tell it to keep working and it does.

My brother's eyelids are droopy. His muscles cannot even support the tiniest things. His face is pale white and unlined and beautiful. I kiss his forehead before I go to sleep on the couch beside him. It tastes completely like nothing.

The motor pushes air in and out of the tank and it makes a noise like *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*. He can only talk in between the whooshes, and even then he does not like to talk. He says it hurts. He says everything hurts but we try not to think about it.

It is so cold sometimes that I cannot find my veins. I hold my arm over the space heater and slap them to the surface until my hand stings, until everything turns bright pink and numb, and then I can get on with it.

The doctor tells us that soon they will take the machine away and give us something better, more lightweight and built into my brother. It sounds fine, but seems like a promise that is too far away to consider. It is like the

spring, something we can only trust to see someday.

Two smaller trees outside our house snap, and it sounds like the report of a shotgun from inside the house. I force my way into my snowsuit and step outside into the snow. Near one of the fallen trees is a nest made of gray twigs and ice-crusted dirt. It fits perfectly in my hands and when I turn it over to look inside, there is a tiny baby bird frozen to the inside of the nest. It is mostly head, pronounced and bulging, connected by a thin, twisted neck to its deflated body but it is easy to see what it was at one point. I take off one of my gloves and feel the inconsequential weight of it, frozen solid but weighing nothing more than gravity's pull on it. I am angry to the point of crying, tears freezing the instant they form, because the mother left it behind, even though it was probably already dead before she and her other babies flew further south. I try to bury it but the ground is frozen solid. I put it in my pocket instead but somehow I will forget about it later.

The feeding tubes send off-color liquid into him and there are tubes that take it out. My brother tells me that he has no sense of discretion anymore. He must take and give whatever the machine makes him. It is the first thing he has said in weeks.

I steal car batteries at night. I put on soccer cleats and walk for miles in the pitch black, carrying them in a knapsack strapped to my back. A single car battery can power the machine for over eleven hours. We have a generator filled with gasoline that can be connected with a cable but this is what the winter offers my brother and I, the ever-present possibility of danger. We have to be prepared.

I used to walk into the bedroom we shared when we were kids and find my brother sprawled out on the floor, his arms and legs straining to lift himself. I would wrap my arms around his chest and hold him up until his legs found the ground. His body was always slightly warm, feverish against my own skin. Thinking about those moments now, my brother looked like a deer on a frozen lake, flailing softly against something entirely natural and unfair.

We talk so little. The molecules of air that float through my house are untainted with the sound of words. And when I do say something, it is almost as if I am talking to the machine and not my brother. I am asking the machine a question, and the humming is the only reply I want.

When the winter gets to be too much, I make a snowball from what has built up on the windowsill. I pack it loosely and toss it at my brother's head. It splatters against his ear, explodes, and the face he tries to make is like a smile when I go to clean him up.

Sometimes at night, when the drugs I have taken have sunk deep inside of me, it gets inescapably cold. I pull my knees close to my chest and fire-breathe, rapid bursts of air in and out. It sounds like I am hyperventilating, but it circulates the blood and the drugs through my body and I can feel

myself warm slowly from the movement through my veins. I pray that my brother is asleep, cannot hear the sound of the easy way I move the air inside the room.

I take my brother's waste from a compartment inside the machine. There is always less than I would imagine. I walk out into the freezing air in only my underwear and a pair of snow boots. I always empty the bag in the same place, in a post-hole sized opening in the earth beside a winter-bare skeleton of a hydrangea bush. I pull down my underwear and try to urinate in the same spot but my testicles pull up inside of my body and I cannot go. It does not seem like the winter will ever go away.

Early one morning, just before the sun rises, I break off twigs from pine trees and collect a few frozen cones. I catch a ride over to the cemetery where our parents are buried. I trace my fingertip along the lettered indentions on the marble gravestone. I do not begrudge their leaving us behind. They took care of us the best they knew how, constantly seeing it was not enough to save us. I am beginning to realize that it is a life not altogether uncommon. We work to keep the things we love alive and always slightly fail.

I place warm compresses against my brother's face, sit for hours, and watch the steaming cloth leave him fresh-faced and pink. The cold air increases the mucus he produces and it thickens in the corners of his nose and mouth. I shave him with a long-handled razor but the hair that now grows on his face is nearly imperceptible, like feelers on an insect. I trim his hair and clean the wax from his ears and when I am done I hold a mirror above him but he cannot open his eyes enough to see it all.

I can't imagine bringing someone back to this place, what they would think. It doesn't matter anyway. I can't imagine anything that involves another person besides my brother and I. It seems like a fact that everyone spends the winter hibernating. Waiting.

One night, there is an ice storm and outside we can hear the steady popping of tree limbs breaking off at strange angles and crashing to the frozen earth. I pull a chair as close to my brother as I can get and press my hands against the machine. I wait, holding my breath each time another tree sheds its limbs. I seize my body silent, and the air around me settles while I listen to the machine rhythmically force air into my brother.

Further into the night, as the power still stays flowing and alive, I wake with my face pressed flat against the machine. I listen carefully and hear the sound of my brother's voice, nearly silent but unmistakably his own. He is singing, trying to sing, and I listen to him force the words out of his body with measured determination. He can only sing a few notes at a time, having to wait for the machine to breathe out for him to expel the melody. Then there is the whoosh, and a few more words. I finally realize he is singing "O Holy Night," and I hold onto the machine like it was a life preserver. I listen to the stilted, forceful sound of my brother singing.

Song, whoosh, song, whoosh.

In the coming weeks, almost without my noticing, the snow begins to dissipate, turning to liquid and evaporating into gas. The sun wakes us a little earlier each morning and finally one day there is something alive and mossy green underneath the ever-present layer of pure white that we have known for so long. The days are passing and we are moving along with them.

I clean the yellow gunk from the corners of my brother's eyes with a handkerchief. His eyes look clear underneath his heavy lids. The muscles that control his face have gone slack from disuse but there are other ways of knowing how he feels, what he needs.

The winter is now a memory, something faint and invisible like steam. I watch my brother inside his machine and I feel like we have made a life for ourselves, have constructed a way to make it from day to day without hoping that it one day won't be like this.

On a dinner plate I pile up things for my brother to smell. I gather up blades of new grass and moist, spongy dirt still dotted with crystals of ice inside of it. I pull my chair close to him and hold each thing under his nose. I trace delicate puffs of dandelion across his lips but I do not know if he can actually feel it. An exhalation of air being forced out of his body scatters the thin strands of seed into the air and I try to catch them before they settle on his face.

I am trying to do the best that I can, and my brother is doing the same, though we will never be whole. We do not worry about this, focus only on the passage of each day, the slow, steady way it forces its way through us, changes the air surrounding us. I think to myself that I can do this for as long as it takes, for as long as I am needed, and it is not a bad feeling.

The hydrangea bush, despite everything I had imagined, has spit out dozens of faint blue blossoms, exploding in all directions.

I sit on the porch of my house with my brother wheeled as close to the door as possible. We sit well into the evening, listening to the sounds of life outside, humming and squeaking and laboring through the night air. When it is time for us to fall to sleep, I shut the door and close the windows. I kiss my brother on his perfect forehead and I shoot something small into my body. I lay on the sofa and my brother and I watch each other in silence. The machine hums and whooshes and we listen to its steady, rhythmic pulse, the sound of a heart beating. F

Franz Wright

Introduction

How do you do. I am the broken
bird hidden in a grass-filled shoebox
and gradually nursed to death by some neglected child

I'm the crazy woman whose pet rat rides her left shoulder
drinking her tears.

Wait a minute–
allow me to regress.

(See

there once was a weird little girl
whose weirdness was not all her fault;
for her shrink research father
kept locked in their vault–
like basement not one rat but scores of them, cage
stacked on cage of them, tiny
red green and yellow electrodes affixed
to their skulls.
I mean really.
I think I myself would turn into a strange
little mouse, forget
girl, if
brought up in that house:
she secretly possessed, you see,
to that truly fucked up Dad's underworld,
her own bright silver key. . .)

Ok.

And I am her muteness,
the blue of her eyes

like the color of light filling up
vacant airliners' cabins at dawn,
and her night dreams, far happier and more real
than any psychiatrist's BMW life! Which
is as it should be: it is

the only rest and dark
the only
infinitely lonely
and cruel gift that psychosis has to offer.

I am her to learn
to bear
the beams of love,
what else

Bells
through the leaves, I am here to endure the

bells tolling
underground

Like you a guest, a ghost here

Everything will be forgotten

And either I am too alone
or I am not
alone enough
to make each moment
holy

(No one bats 1,000, friend
no one
bats 500)

And I have heard God's silence like the sun
and sought to change

Now
I'm just going to listen to the silence

till the Silence.

Franz Wright

Ohio Sunflowerfield

Hiddenly, one minute
each one believes
death to be
an unforeseen
catastrophe
only occurring
elsewhere, to
everyone else,
and the next
minute a personal
doom to which he
alone is condemned–

What's wrong with the truth, so profoundly consoling and
perfect?

Seth Sawyers

Some Kind of Apology

I'm imagining a man somewhere out in the dark of his living room, a former high school football player, a real estate agent, or a retired chief petty officer, sitting in his favorite chair, watching the street. Not watching what happens on the street—he doesn't care about the delivery trucks or the kids on bicycles—but the street itself. He's looking at the newly poured asphalt shimmering with bits of mineral, the street outside his window still summertime warm, breathing and alive, holding onto the heat of another American day because that's a good street and he won't have it behaving any other way, not on his watch.

And I envy this man. Because although his lower back hurts reliable as static just now and has since way back, he's familiar with hard work like he's familiar with two-week bronchitis and so he knows about the hours and days that went into the street, the excavators and the shovels and the dirty orange coolers of warm tap water for the men who shaped it. He knows how those workers hunched over his street, smoothing it and cooling it with drops of sweat, making his life a little easier, closer to something he can lay claim to. Then, maybe he thinks about how much money his kids cost but sooner or later he returns to the street because it makes him feel good. He doesn't know the specifics, the numbers, but he doesn't need to because he understands that his day and all the others before that paid for and built and leveled that street out there, that dark, shining monument to what happens when good people act responsibly and do what they should and quit all their complaining and fucking around.

That's my man, somewhere in the darkness, and he and I are not the same. Because I have very little to do with the streets getting paved. It's true that I work a little and when my students ask what I do when I'm not spilling coffee on their papers, when I'm being honest, I tell them I sit in front of a computer. That's the real answer. Or part of it, because sometimes I don't do even that. Sometimes, I'm just bony. Friends have called me this, although I prefer lanky, thin, long, lithe, or as a last resort, skinny.

A girlfriend once said I had "no discernible style," but she was wrong. A lack of style would require a lack of intent. And I've got intent. I've got a style and it's called determinedly apathetic. I wear Levi's, button-downs, thin-soled things the catalogue called "desert boots" that would perform poorly in an actual desert, and in October and November, wool sweaters a half-size too small. Often, when I go to bed drunk, I wake up wearing only one sock. I am gentle and easy to make laugh when I've been drinking and so you'll want someone else at your back if you're prone to bar fights.

Some things don't fit into categories and so I won't cram them in

somewhere. For example, I'm not one of those people who doesn't know how he did on the SAT. Though it's not cool to admit, I am sentimental and I know this because I miss friends who live in other places maybe more than I should. I have only one black friend. He is light-skinned, although I have a few Indian friends who are dark and I think that should count for something. I do not like reading philosophy. I own an acoustic guitar that I don't know how to play and I am not a Republican.

When establishing an identity, it helps to know what's been given up so that you can see what didn't work, what's been crossed off the list. So I used to be a vegetarian (thirteen days and it was a plate of twelve buffalo wings), Catholic, a deliverer of pizzas, a telemarketer, a small-town reporter, and lastly, stoned. Some things remain. One is that I drink coffee. Not long ago, when I was home for a few days, when my dad was leaving for work, he told me that I should stop smoking. It was early in the morning, and I was still mostly asleep and so I said "I know," but later I thought about it and I didn't know he knew I smoked. In any event, he's right. I should.

Cigarettes are expensive and I am, for sure, prone to poverty. Several collection agencies are familiar with the specifics that identify me as a unique human being—a white one, male, not married—but poor people don't get much sympathy and I shouldn't be the exception. I can't afford sushi, but growing up, I ate lots of deer meat: as steaks, in stews, from the grill and from the crock pot. We never called it venison, though some people do. I'd like some venison right now.

There are the fears and the shortcomings, of course, and the two seem to be linked. I saw a speech pathologist in the fourth grade because I stuttered, and I still stutter when I'm nervous, though if you talked with me you might not notice. I learned that my kind of stuttering has a lot to do with fear. New York City scares me pretty good. I don't know what to make of a town with more than ten places where you can get a good slice of pizza. There's that thing about options. Too many out there and if I choose this one, who's to say that other one isn't better, shinier, just for me, the thing that some smart person has designed for my optimum happiness?

My family, however, that's a known quantity. There are just five of us, though one of my brothers got married and they've made a little one who sucks his thumb like I used to. I come from good people—humble, funny, loving people from a small valley of the world—who when I was growing up gave me books and bikes and room to do and say stupid and awkward things. I can be awkward. For example, I'm not so good with gifts but if I could, I'd buy my dad this book of poems about baseball and if I won the lottery the first thing I'd do is get my mom a place on the beach and I'd make sure she wasn't busy before I visited.

When you spend your days doing what I do, there's the problem of free time. I like watching the Steelers on TV. But that's only four months out of

the year and so I also watch movies on my thirteen-inch set with the tiny white dots running in diagonals from bottom left to top right. I work if I have to and so I know, from experience, that I can handle a fully-loaded wheelbarrow, which weighs, I'm proud to say, 300 pounds. But I prefer sitting to jogging and lying on my stomach is even better. If I could, I'd stay up until three in the morning and wake up at noon. Shopping malls are great. They make me feel like an American even if I don't buy anything and they sparkle and hum like clean commerce.

My people are sports people and so I know how to shoot a jumper and I know how to cast a fly rod and load a muzzleloader. My dad showed me how to throw two kinds of fastballs. I'll sit through a game on TV for the moment, after the buzzer sounds or after the last fly ball's caught, when the winners crash into each other in a fit of some of the purest joy around, hats and chunks of dirt tracing ecstatic arcs through the air. My mom has no innate love for sports but she's acquired one because she had to and anyway she's taught me to keep my darks separate from my whites and that loving another person is the best there is.

I try to follow my mom's advice but I can't, not all the time. Because I want the world to conform to my needs. I'd like to eat rich, spiced food and read books on balconies. I'd like to fly somewhere sitting next to someone I love, drink cold beer, take black-and-white pictures, spending all the countless nights with loud, obnoxious, fascinating people and later writing about it, hung over, bad in the stomach but good in the head. I won't lie and tell you I wouldn't be the star of these stories. I would and I'd probably make myself look better than I am.

Because I'm not hiding anything here, I can say there are some things I'm not sure about. I have two brothers but no sisters and so girls are tough, complex, smarter than us but volatile. I'm still learning. For example, girls are all about subtext, what's not being said. That's a tough one to learn, but I'm trying to get fluent in that language even though I've tried Spanish twice and it never stuck. This subtext is why I say they're smarter, because they live their lives as if everything means something, the pauses in speech and the tilt of eyebrows carrying deep, rich meaning that I've spent years ignoring. Sometimes, when I'm feeling especially exasperated, in the dark and awake on the far side of the bed, it seems as if they're tapped into some secret world of colors and melody and then in the morning I wake up and realize it's all true, that their world exists. They speak more languages better. And they care about things like picture frames and thank-you-notes. And soup.

And I don't know how to have arguments with them and I don't know whether they should be called "girls" or "women" or, in certain situations, "ladies," but a women's studies major told me once that "female" is almost never correct and she had a serious look on her face when she told me this. I

do know that Asians are people and Orientals are rugs. I mean, come on.

I wear a pretty good game face but it's true that I get confused a lot and though I try to stay positive I suspect it's only a way of covering up what's wrong. For example, my friends are disappearing. They're marrying and making babies and buying houses and fixing them up and I wonder if I should disappear, too. Because I want a place that's certain, known, an address that doesn't change every two years, or at least a bar dark enough and ripe with the odor of enough ashtrays to call home. As it is, sometimes I'm not sure where I should stand or with whom I should be standing. The world feels stiflingly big and the part in which I pace around excruciatingly small. I'm getting too old not to know what I want. I'm sorry.

I get conflicting reports about what's to come. I'd like to think it gets easier but when I follow the trajectory I've come to know very well, the path from all the way back there to right here, it's easy to get discouraged. I wonder when the questions will stop.

I do look for the answers, though. I pick up the rocks and poke around underneath but I can't find God because I killed him a while ago. And even if Marx was right about religion and opiates, my cynicism doesn't make me feel any better when the walk from the car to the front door feels as long as the night. So I'd like to make up my own faith, something bigger than my bedroom and kitchen and even my dreams, just for me and maybe a couple of close friends who'd be into that sort of thing. I think my religion would have something to do with worshipping the cathedrals men and women build for themselves and their fallible egos, the parks in the cities and novels so tight they hurt and also the Big Bang. I'd worship the stuff that some of us think God made: the Oregon coast and also the fox squirrels and red-capped woodpeckers in the hills behind my parents' house. I'd even worship the guts of those novels I was talking about, the mysteries of love and jealousy and hope and I promise I'd never try to convert you unless you asked.

I'm not sure if it's because of this religion of mine or what, but once in a while, this thing happens to me. I can't predict its coming, but once in a while, I turn holy. Yes. Sometimes, on long, straight drives up I-95 or west on I-70, sailing up the rolling Maryland piedmont toward the place where I grew up, the wind whistles through the cracked window just right and the static punctuates the radio only a little and I can think such clear thoughts as I'm eating up the white dashes on the black asphalt. Something about being alone on the road, in total control, lets me see the world in all its fleeting, stupid, beautiful simplicity. If this feeling made a sound, it would be a click, soft as a pop in the ears. A dropping away of everything but the bones, the beautiful, simple bones bleached white by the sun.

These moments keep me going. Because when I'm on that asphalt worked smooth by men and the machines they know better than themselves,

there's no worry out there. Because I treat my friends fairly. I know people love me and know that, when I don't have a headache, I am able to love them back. Sometimes I recycle and I pet dogs outside the 7-Eleven when they look like they won't bite. I don't care about pet fish or your local police union calling to raise money and I think all baby pictures look the same. But some cats are OK, especially the cats that act like dogs.

I keep a journal. I read through an old one recently and found this: "Last night I laughed so much it felt like my smile was ironed-on." I don't remember writing it, but there it is, in my handwriting that from the looks of it is only three or four beers deep. What kind of price tag does that get? What's that worth? I may have little to do with the giant cogs and wheels that smooth the American streets, but I'd like to think I can do something with them once the streets have been laid. That's what I've got. That's all I've got.

I can't shake it, this holy feeling. It lingers like a cough. All the girls who matter like me and the ones who don't just don't get it. Would you believe me if I told you that when the balding tires hum and the sun's made the steering wheel as warm as a bath, I suspect I am somehow chosen? Sometimes, my legs tread in a pure, secret river that runs beneath me, my head at one with the trees and taillights, the dreaming part of me unshackled, free to dream. It's just me in this beautiful place where nothing's broken, a young white male hurtling at seventy-five miles an hour, as straight and steady as the road that just goes. F

Peter Ramos

The Nineteenth Century

There was nothing left on earth
to discover, so we finally took sick.

Low doses of mercury prescribed
by the physicians kept us in bed

long afternoons, the curtains blowing
through open windows and at night

we dreamt of children—their milky limbs
and torsos androgynous. Convalescing,

we spoke of our lives, gatherings
at Harper's Ferry, speculations out West,

the words we left in our boot-prints: *Turkey-Foot*,
Indian-Grass and *Rattle-Snake-Master*.

History groaned, the millennium approached—
we knew this but succumbed in the end

to fits of nostalgia, to bourbon and verses
of Jimmy Crack Corn until dawn.

And yet—to have gone out
the other way—beside the river—

bright-eyed and shirtless, exsanguinating,
our teeth exposed in the dim daguerreotypes…

Maggie Nelson

Tell Me

You are gone now, truly
and to look you up in the dictionary
is no longer possible or

enough. The new season's arrow
cleaves the maudlin
right out of the air, stays

the wavering knife. *Better off*
without you, say the crickets, say
the Christmas tree lights

which each night make a party
out of the darkness, tell me
which green porch is home.

Maggie Nelson

Winter Song

Solitude is a gift
Say it to yourself
under a canopy
of phony stars

Think of Lily in
her old season, living
with three pale cats
Her mind a lavender wash

Think of the man floating spray mums
at the feet of the colossus
before a day spent staring
at the wall

On the great ceiling of plates
and grates, a single leaf scrapes by
as the clear poison singes its path
from nostril to deep brain

The winter is not too sad, say it
then sing it
from your new pod, your new fig
made of glass

Maggie Nelson

Resolutions

The wind today is spectacular
and essentially my friend.
Over and over again
I will amble up the hill
made of graves, mistaking
Atwater for *at water*. Over
and over again I will sit
in the empty door frame
in a stranger's garden,
its wood white and soft
with spiders. But no longer
will I stay mired in shit
and call it love. I will walk
in the kingdom of God.

Rob Walsh

My Wife the Officer

What was wrong with my car was cracked headlights. I woke up and the headlight plastisol had cracked and spilled down around by the tires.

"Carburetor," the mechanic said.

Right away I guessed scam. That's how they scam you: by supposing you don't know any better and charging big money for it.

"My carburetor, you say," I said, on to him. I was getting ready to copy down his name and a string of numbers on his baseball cap which could have also been important.

"And your windshield," he said, bringing the axe down into my windshield. The windshield looked like melted chocolate after that, because it was tinted. Then he brought a chainsaw out and started it with a string.

"Look," I said, reasoning with him. "I'm on to you. Stop that."

Pretty soon he had just about ruined the whole car. He looked like a normal man but so do almost all brutal killers, and at this point I had my ledger out and was writing down his name and the numbers on his hat. He took my ledger away from me and put it high on a shelf where he could reach but I couldn't.

He asked me to sit on a stool.

"I've ruined your car," the mechanic pointed out. "You don't have anything to drive anymore. You might as well sit on the stool."

When I sat down he took off my jacket and my shoes because he said I'd be more comfortable. Then he took off his own jacket, shoes, and socks. He kept staring at my socks. He was looking at them really hard so finally I volunteered to take them off. Then he ducked out of his overalls. I didn't want him staring at my pants the same way he did my socks so I took my pants off quick. He removed shirt, briefs, neck chains, and I removed all those things except I didn't have chains.

We sat there naked talking for awhile. We were drinking beer from a little fridge like the one I had in my college dormitory.

"You mind if I sit on that stool also?" he asked, pointing at my stool. I didn't see why I needed the whole stool. I'd had a lot of beer from that little fridge.

We were talking in softer voices, bunched together on the stool, when my wife the officer charged in with her cop lackeys. The cop lackeys put the mechanic into a choke hold and pushed over his cabinets and racks.

Normally you have to make statements and be formally investigated but my wife made a hand signal and they cleared me to leave. In her squadcar I had meant to say thanks, but I shivered instead and hugged the blanket

she wrapped me in. When we were inside our house I jogged upstairs and ran a hot bath.

Underwater there was a low liquid ring. We were out of clean towels so I used hands and arms to cover myself and answer the bedroom line.

It was my wife's father, Dan. Dan called saying he found a really nice piece of pork and we drove over to eat the pork.

"I want to show you something," Dan said, leading us to the oven. Inside the oven that day was a pork loin.

A topic I mulled while eating the loin was the dresses my wife wore to her parents' house. They were drafty around the bosom part. She'd also wear these dresses to movies and basketball games. If windows were open or if she walked by a fridge you could stand there and watch her bosom start to stiffen.

Seeing her move in those dresses made me remember having sex. When she passed her father the gravy, I thought the way she passed it might have been lewd. She also passed him roasted potatoes that were the size of small birds' eggs.

Her mother passed me something I didn't ask for. It was asparagus. I said thanks to her mother but ended up just passing the asparagus along to her father, who had four serving dishes crowded onto his placemat. He seemed backed into a corner.

"Hey Dan," I said to her father, trying to help him out of the corner. "Let me give you a hand with that," I said, and I speared the asparagus onto his plate. I moved on to the roasted potatoes and shoveled them with a ladle. I couldn't fit all the roasted potatoes on his plate so I left the remainder.

By glancing between my own bites, I supervised my wife eating. She'd inherited a method of eating that disclosed her front teeth and ended with burping. Her family had a specific way of burping. As if it was fine. Her parents burped as a signal they were full, then my wife burped, which was essentially vomiting air. Her bosom inflated for one or two seconds after the burp, and I thought she had another one. But her breasts settled back into her dress and the table was noiseless.

My wife said goodbyes while I started the car. When we got home I stood in front of the fireplace and performed a joke I'd written. Every once in a while when I told a funny joke my wife would lean back and geyser out the beverage I'd served her. Usually it was ginger ale on a coaster or doily. In her mirth she'd spit into the air! There was one incredible instance of this where she composed herself immediately after the geysering and caught the beverage in its descent.

My joke warmed her up for a game show called *Please Save Me*, which featured contestants without health insurance but with serious medical conditions. They were set into panels. During a segment where the host made a quip, my wife stood up tall and spit liquid across the room. It reached

a couch and loveseat both, and of course the carpet. I tried the club soda trick but since it was cranberry-ginger ale there were pink smears left.

Later that evening her sister came over to be in our company. I'm pretty sure she saw the smears but she never commented. Once I saw her looking askance in the smears' direction, and I invited her to speak her mind. I said, "come out with it."

One thing about my wife's sister: she can rearrange almost any subject to her liking. Somehow we got around to talking about how the can of bean dip was empty and I trotted off to grab another from the pantry.

When they said goodbyes it was my cue to set up the board. My wife and I played board games in bed, with the board and attachments set up over the quilt and between my legs. We did this instead of reading. I'd balance the game on my knees and had to control my emotions because if I pumped my fist or exulted in some way, the whole setup could topple. My wife requested the red fire engine, and I said, "Fine, here's the red fire engine," balancing it in my palm. "It's fine that you're the fire engine now," I said when she possessed it, though the fire engine, with its faithful reproductions and cherry finish, was the star of the game pieces.

I WAS STOIC THEN. I COMMANDED MY NERVES. I'd come up with a superior strategy and beat her every time, but I never exulted outwardly, I kept that for myself, storing it like gas. F

Shiromi Pinto

Give a man luck (and throw him into the sea)

It was a fortune teller that told her. A fortune teller with a wide, wide smile and a scarf swept around her head like a great ship, its sails sporting fuchsia flowers and bright green stems which billowed and blustered with each shake of her arm. Edna watched the mass of Madame Traoré's upper arms jig and swivel like a shoal of frightened fish. She cast a tired glance around the church hall. Why had she chosen this stall at the Christmas bazaar? she thought. Last year she'd contented herself with a plastic Santa Claus badge with eyes that opened if you pulled a tiny drawstring. This year she'd paid good money for something even more flippant and, quite possibly, un-Christian. Edna sighed.

Madame Traoré flashed a broad, ivory smile, her round face smooth and shiny like polished cherry wood. "*Remember, my dear*," she said, "*luck is wise when fate denies, and only once rebuilds our lives*."

'Luck?' thought Edna. 'What luck for me?' But she thanked Madame Traoré all the same, wishing she could climb up into the grand woman's scarf and sail away in its vast pinkness.

In the months that followed Edna neatly shelved Madame Traoré's prophecy in the recesses of her mind, its echo muffled by volumes of pink and green silk. At home, Edna arranged her tins—canned peaches and plums on the top shelves of the pantry cupboard, tinned tomatoes in the middle and fish on the bottom. She ate simple, spare meals, working her way through a moderate variety of canned goods per week.

At least, she told herself, she wasn't Mr. Finch from two doors down, who didn't have a cat, but ate Whiskas right from the tin. She'd seen him years ago, sitting in his strip-lit kitchen, scooping up brick-colored chunks from a can. Edna's pension went a little further than that, permitting her the odd luxury: preserved pineapple or artichoke hearts, vacuum sealed and looking much like the photo on its wrapper.

Most days Edna donned shin-high zip-up boots, a wool coat, and polyester headscarf to take a morning walk past Mr. Finch's to the park. She would drop by the library on her way back to peruse the shelves, then spend the afternoon cleaning and re-ordering her kitchen cupboards.

Occasionally, a memory overtook her, its winged heels losing feathers that bowed the air as they drifted down, bringing Vera Lynn and Lili Marlene with them. Edna would allow herself a frivolous moment: a brief waltz around the room or a solitary minuet. Her body would find eighteen again and nestle itself in the arms of an unknown soldier. Cigarette smoke unfurled like cream stirred into coffee as Vera Lynn gave way to Satchmo and sorrow turned its cheek. But seeing herself in the mirror—her acne-

ravaged face simpering a teenage fantasy—Edna would stop. Satchmo, Vera Lynn—they played songs for girls with blushing cheeks and curls that clustered like bells at their temples. Girls called Lilly or Marianne who vied for the attention of the unknown soldier and won. Every time.

Edna knew her limits. She was as plain as the two parts that made up her name, as rigid as the gritted teeth that hinged the two syllables together. She had no children, no pets and few friends. Every week, she went to Loblaws to buy her groceries, beetling up and down its aisles in her boots and coat, pausing to study a tin here, a bottle there.

EIGHT MONTHS AFTER HER MEETING WITH MADAME Traoré, Edna was doing just this, leaning over her shopping trolley to pluck a large can of tomatoes from one of the shelves. She had to stand on the very tips of her boots to reach it, and still it was just out of grasp. Her fingers scratched its papery label, made contact with its metal rim, but her palms remained empty. Around her, families shopped, striding up and down aisles, plucking cans off shelves with nimble fingers. A child inside a shopping cart reached up and snatched a tin of pulped tomatoes. A young man hurried along with a clipboard, checking off items. Edna swallowed. She couldn't trouble people, not with something as trivial as this. Even if she did, she knew they would be distracted. They would stare at her face instead of listening to her words. Edna frowned and re-adjusted her position, this time moving the cart out of the way so she could use her full sixty-one inches.

The can remained on the shelf. Again, Edna struggled up on point, building up a sweat inside her woolen coat. Her fingers grappled the paunch of the tin, and then the tin lifted off the shelf. Edna looked at her hand. It was still empty. There was a sound—the unmistakable breath of trumpet snapping a groove through the intercom. Edna blinked. The tin was a lot further away now, but in the space where the can should have been was a hand. A hand was hovering in front of her. Edna's eyes twitched up and down. Trumpet tripped through speakers, peeled louder. Edna saw she was sitting on the floor, one arm outstretched. She looked up again. The hand was still there, just inches from her own. She reached for it.

Edna blinked—once, twice—grabbed hold of the hand, and found herself spinning through the aisle at Loblaws with the ease of a child on a skateboard. Bolts of fuchsia and green silk unraveled in her mind. Edna's feet scarcely touched the linoleum as she spun from canned goods to produce with all the effort of a smile.

"Freddy," he whispered. "Just call me Freddy."

Edna startled at the sound of his voice, was surprised to find she was still on the ground, hand in his, surrounded by waves of pebbled shadows thrown by an unseen glitter ball. His words twittered around her like a ring of tiny birds. A row of stars and medals hung from colored ribbons on his

chest. And his smile stretched from *Pasta/Rice* on one side of the aisle all the way to *Canned vegetables* on the other.

For a moment Edna flinched, withdrew deeper into her scarf. She closed her eyes, saw propriety wag a caustic finger at her. But Satchmo reeled out notes that skittered up her calves. Head bent, she allowed Freddy to help her to her feet, where they stood, hearts thumping, breaths catching. Edna found eighteen again. She clung to Freddy with sticky palms, while propriety tugged hard, prying up fingers and holding a mirror to her face. Edna turned away, digging deeper into Freddy's shoulders until half-moons crowned her fingernails.

Freddy. Just call me Freddy. His hair clung to his head with shiny resolve and his eyes saw in her a yearning for pleasure—pure, egotistical, sensual.

"What is your name?"

She grinned, flushing with the warmth of his palms against her waist, blushing inside her scarf. *What is your name?* The question passed from below his modest mustache and edged itself between her teeth, shattering her smile. "Edna," she said finally, biting down on the two syllables, feeling her feet turn to clay. He sensed the embers dying in her eyes and tightened his grip. But she had already slipped away, trolley wheels squeaking before her.

EDNA WAS CONFUSED. SHE STACKED HER CANS neatly in the cupboard: tomatoes, soup and sardines on the middle and lower shelves, peaches and Bird's Eye custard on top. She folded her cloth shopping bag carefully and stored it in its drawer. Downing half a glass of water she ran upstairs and flung herself under a hot shower. She scrubbed strenuously, raking the wash cloth across her stomach over and over again, rubbing the pumice stone into her soles.

As she sat down to supper that evening, she scolded herself, asking what she could possibly have meant by allowing a strange man to touch her like that—and at her age, too. Of course it was kind of him to help an old woman in distress, but holding on to her once she was on her feet was worse than improper. What might people have thought?

She slept early, waking the next morning, her mouth set tightly with thin-lipped reserve. 'Freddy—just call me Freddy,' she scoffed as she made the bed. 'Who ever heard of such a thing?'

POOR FREDDY. HE STOOD OUTSIDE LOBLAWS FOR WEEKS, waiting for Edna, a fresh daisy pinned to his lapel every morning. Edna knew, but ignored him, tightening her head scarf about her ears as she walked by. Sometimes, she looked at him secretly, remembering the surprise of being touched, but only for a second. Six and a half decades on her own had taught Edna her

place. Neither a Lilly nor a Marianne was she. And true to form, she vied for no one. Her face ravaged by acne was all anyone needed to see—her mother had said so, long ago. And if anyone persisted beyond that, well, then something in the universe must have gone wrong. As Madame Traoré's smile edged its way into her mind, Edna shooed it away with a tightly rolled newspaper.

Let Freddy stand there as long as he wished, thought Edna. Not for her nostalgic pangs and schoolgirl giggles. Edna was the kind of woman who knew that Loblaws' aisles were meant for careful deliberation over the selection of tinned fish or fresh aubergines, not the Virginia Wheel. She remained firm, polishing her resolve, erasing the quick breaths that fogged its shiny surface.

So she continued, and so Freddy stood with white boutonnière ripe against his heart.

Soon the snow began falling, and Freddy's smile, so wide and seductive, never flinched—(though few could say whether it was he or the freezing wind which kept it so perfectly still). As the snows finally receded and the smell of dog dirt hitched the wind, Edna walked out of Loblaws cradling a bag of shopping in her arms. Preoccupied with thoughts of missed bargains, she paid little attention to where her sensible shoes were falling, and none at all to Freddy. Heart-broken, Freddy lowered his eyes for the first time and almost missed the only chance he would ever have, for there was Edna, throwing her shopping to the sky, right leg executing one very precise Canne-Canne kick, boot cartwheeling above her head.

Freddy caught her waist before she fell, and lifted her up like a ballerina. Edna was stunned (which accounted for her still jack-knifed leg), but quickly recovered with a graceful arabesque. Now, thought Edna, now was the moment to move away. But while she was thinking this, the right moment moved on, leaving Edna where she was, still nestled in Freddy's arms.

Millimetre by millimetre, Edna's chin tilted upward, cheeks emerging from beneath the awning of her scarf. Resolve misted over as she took in Freddy's stars, his ribbons, the dandruff around his collar. With trembling breaths she eyed the creases in his neck, the plump chin, the silver-tipped mustache, the pert nose. She might have stopped there, might have spared herself the inevitable disappointment. But Edna was no coward. She looked Freddy square in the eyes, fearing but prepared for vindication.

Freddy's eyes were small, round, laughing, generous. Not eyes that looked far away even when you were up close. Not eyes that took on a patent leather sheen, pretending they didn't care what you looked like when they did. Not eyes that looked through you, searching for someone better in the background. No, these were eyes that devoured what they saw and demanded to see more. Something indeed had gone wrong in the

universe.

Edna looked once into Freddy's eyes, placed both her feet on his, and the two waltzed down the road through traffic and black slush. Behind them lay a wasteland of dented tomato tins and rolling onions. And at the center of it all lay one black boot, a dollop of shit smeared on its sensible toe.

That night Edna's naked feet—toes tangled by Rheumatism—imprinted themselves into Freddy's skin. They slid languorously along the cracks of the wooden floorboards, carving intricate patterns around his legs. Stomach against stomach they circled the room, palms nervous and slippery.

"Edna, my Edna," Freddy whispered hoarsely.

"No. Not Edna. Please."

But without an alternative, Freddy was at a loss. He satisfied himself with tapping out her name on the ground, and picturing those letters in bold Roman type. Edna saw her name rising in capitals from Freddy's feet and cried, "Alright, alright—if you must, but please, let it be in cursive." So the room began to fill with italic-ed E's and d's, and in spite of herself, Edna laughed to see her name catapulting heavenward with such finessè. Her face, mottled with scars, glowed with a joyous rage. And her body, muffled beneath layers of wool, hummed in Freddy's arms.

"Such legs," he murmured, "such lovely legs." Freddy pressed his lips to Edna's pock-marked cheeks, and she sighed. Down slid the polyester-silk scarf, and Edna's hair spilled black and long down her neck, silver roots like the edge of an eclipsing moon.

Rumors lost their purpose in Edna and Freddy's world. The two danced whenever desire struck them, caring little for the jaws that gaped on street corners. People stopped on the road to watch the couple soft-shoeing their way across the front window. As the gramophone reeled out Louis Armstrong, Edna's skirts would flap and swirl, uncovering at angles a muscly calf, a fleshy knee, even a dimpled thigh. Propriety had long since given up, taking to a cupboard shelf with Edna's arthritic toes for company. Freed, Edna let loose the full force of her exhibitionism, fashioning a skirt out of dried chilies to vie with Josephine Baker's bananas. Defying her sciatica, she slid her hips up and down to popping timbales, and the chilies shivered with her, rattling like Cuban maracas. As Edna shook, Freddy tapped, slapping the floor with silver clicks and twirling on the edge of his shiny brogues.

Neighbors who had never noticed Edna before either smiled at the two or creased their brows and muttered about the indignity of old people carrying on like teenagers. Mr. Finch, however, showed the full-lipped grin of the sated, his diet of cat food having been replaced by generous donations from Edna's larder.

Still there were those among the casual onlookers who kissed their

teeth and crossed themselves, pushing their soles deeper into the earth. Others felt a trembling at the base of their stomachs, and gave in to the spasms which took over their limbs. It wasn't a miracle which turned the moon into a mirrored disco ball, though the heavens thundered with congas and cowbells. Many hid their heads beneath candle lamps and prayer lest they should shrivel up into crude blocks of salt. Still many more hitched up their flannel skirts, discarded their shoes, and parted their knees with deliberate abandon.

THERE WERE NIGHTS WHEN EDNA OPENED HER KITCHEN cupboards and stared fixedly at the shelves. *Pastene*. *Primo*. She would read the labels of the canned tomatoes still lining the middle shelf. She noticed propriety curled up between them, black and ridged like a weevil. "Just throw them away," Freddy would say, finding Edna so troubled.

Edna would nod, but never threw anything away. When Freddy wasn't around, Edna slipped out and bought more cans, one at a time, to fill the gaps on the shelves.

THEY MARRIED IN STYLE, WITHOUT CHURCH OR PRIEST, on Edna's front lawn. The gramophone churned out Mahalia Jackson, and Freddy said, "I love you Edna." Edna just smiled, throwing him a playful wink. They stepped mildly, rocking left and right, holding each other with whitening fingertips. The frills of Edna's blue chiffon dress swished lightly at her knees. She was barefoot, while Freddy wore high-buffed black leather shoes. She felt good in his arms. Her heart twitched against his chest, and her cheek rubbed into the folds of his neck. She was beautiful alright—a gorgeous, elegant lady.

Men in broad-checked suits and women with daisies in their hats sighed as they watched the pair. They threw rice, dyed fuchsia and green, as the couple waltzed in circles toward a brightly painted wagon. One of the guests, a man with over-sized arms, ushered Edna and Freddy into the box before pulling it down the road, past Loblaws, on toward the harbor.

The guests followed on foot, singing. A short woman in a long green dress pulled a silver trumpet out of her purse and began playing. Some shook maracas out of their trouser pockets. Others revealed congas under their skirts. A toddler blew excitedly on a whistle from the swaddling confines of his pram. Edna and Freddy locked hips, quickly stepping forward and back on the small stage of the wagon cart. She threw her head back and laughed, shaking loose pink-green grains from her hair. "Freddy," she cried, "I'm so happy. I've never been so happy." There were tears in Freddy's eyes as he kissed the cork of her throat.

It was drizzling by the time they got to the harbor, and the strong-armed man wasted no time in rolling Edna and Freddy onto the SS Fortuna. The

boat smelled of fish and beer, but the wedding party was undeterred. They wove their way through sailors and fishermen who stuffed their bristled mouths with bread until their necks bulged. At the center of the dining men, Edna and Freddy dismounted, and with their guests, began a slow Salsa. All mouths ceased chewing as the short woman in the long green dress blew sultry peels on her trumpet. Edna's hips swivelled blue chiffon and several daisy-hatted women followed suit. Checkered trousers soon shimmied up and down the floor and the eating men dropped their bread rolls and moved in unison toward the dancing party. Men hugged men, women clasped women, women grabbed men. As the congas picked up speed, legs pumped faster, and sweat filled the space where skin touched skin. The heat became unbearable, and Edna led the way to the deck where she straddled Freddy's thigh and snaked an S with her spine to the singing trumpet. Everyone danced, and as the rain fell, steam rose from glistening skins. Dresses sagged and clung to circling hips so that the men (and some of the women) held their breath and closed their eyes.

Edna never dropped Freddy's gaze. Her feet followed his faultlessly and when he spun her, she pirouetted without either of them blinking an eye. Even as the rain thickened and the boat began to rock, the couple continued in measured steps, eyes infinitely fixed on one another. Up rose the waves and Edna surged with them, gaze unflinching, feet still moving. Freddy rose and flapped, like an ibis in her embrace, then spun her again. Wind beat Edna's cheeks as she whirled. Faces blurred with laughter, the horizon filled with fog. A Tern soared skyward, its wings melting with rain. Edna laughed, reaching for Freddy's hand, eager to feel his skin again. But her fingers clutched air. Freddy was moving further and further out of reach. Edna gasped, watching his white face recede like a wave hurrying back to the ocean. For as they danced, two immaculately manicured hands rose from the water and plucked Freddy from Edna's grasp, plunging him into the foam. Edna would always remember his eyes burning into hers, carving his name into her flesh.

Filled with thoughts of ship-shaped scarves, Edna staggered home. Married and widowed on the same day, she had no desire except for her box-spring bed. The next morning, she tidied the house, packing the gramophone into a cardboard box. The dried chili skirt she picked apart and recycled for culinary use. And in two prim gestures, she tied her hair back and drew the curtains closed in the front room.

She sat in the dark for days, seeing Freddy's pale face, his mouth twisted with terror and disbelief. E's and d's lay splintered around her, littering the ground like dead earwigs. Propriety shrugged and held its arms open to her. Edna didn't move. Her toes seized up; her hip bone grated in its socket.

She pulled herself from the couch and shuffled past propriety without a glance. Oval tears slid down her cheeks, spattered the floor. Edna limped to

the kitchen, dragged a stool before the cupboard. When she opened the door she found row upon row of shelves, filled to the top with tins. Baked beans, mackerel, artichokes and tomatoes hovered before her: a great curtain of labels. One by one she removed them, joints creaking with the effort, and packed them into boxes. Hollowed of its contents, the cupboard seemed smaller and the house, too, appeared to shrink, its front room foreshortening like a noon-day shadow. F

Priscilla Atkins

Adagio

after a Painting by Hugo Simberg

Young Gertrude has learned to do things with her mouth;
a thin downward turn
testing grace with knowledge.

Just now she realizes the price:
a garden's torn rose arabesque,

half-hidden chair, woman weeping.

Yet Gertrude is not unhappy, caught, as she is
in the gazebo's blue perspective.

She can just make out the jeweled pond
slinking like a green snake among the cattails.

A chamber orchestra is tuning up.
Now it's vibrating on her tongue, behind her lips.

She balances the wobbly world on her head.

Out of the corner, glimpse of tears'
pressed yellow pleats,
cultivated cupped-sleeves.

In her ears, the wind is a tender crescendo,
violin's sacrament,

flock of long-necked swans unfolding in a china bowl.

Ten Questions:
An Interview with George Saunders

The following interview transpired over the course of a four week correspondence between *Fugue* co-editor, Justin Jainchill, and fiction writer George Saunders. Saunders is the author of two collections of short stories, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, and *Pastoralia*, as well as the stand alone novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*. A new collection, *In Persuasion Nation*, releases in April.

Justin Jainchill: I'd like to start in a broader context and narrow our focus to a more distilled conversation about the crafting of your stories. So, to begin, I'd like to ask about contemporary short fiction. What you notice, like, or more interestingly, what may or may not concern you as an artist. Are there any trends you discern about the stories being written today? If so, are they exciting or excruciating?

George Saunders: I guess I shy away from thinking about trends and so on. Mainly because, once you've identified one, you are going to either 1) try to be part of it or, 2) try not to be part of it. And then you're limited by your concept, if you see what I mean. If you can conceptualize Tendency A, which is opposed to Tendency B, then the danger is, you are going to end up choosing one or the other, instead of doing some third, and probably more interesting, thing. I think it's important to read new work, and let it kind of percolate inside you, so that whatever you do takes into account what's going on—but in a very non-rational way.

JJ: I think if there's any subtext to the previous question, it's that your stories are markedly different from the majority of those being written, or at least published, today. I don't want to say that realism dominates contemporary short fiction, but I will anyway. So there must be something about contemporary fiction that makes you want to write a different kind of story. What is it about the realist tradition that doesn't appeal to you, or, really, the type of story you want to tell?

GS: Well, to me, fiction should do two things—or at least, I want my fiction to do two things. First, I want it to do emotional work—to open up the world for a moment and kind of reconstitute it for the reader. Second, I think fiction has to sell itself—I mean, in terms of believability. The reader has to accept the premise and the movement of the story. So seen this way, I don't think about realism, per se, but just about making the story run deep enough that it affects the reader; and to do this, I have to make the reader 'believe' the story. Basically I have to avoid that moment where

the reader says: No way, that's b.s., I'm being jerked around here.

I just read this terrific thing the critic James Wood said about this: "Realism is not a law, but a lenient tutor, for it schools its own truants. It is realism that *allows* surrealism, magical realism, fantasy, dream, and so on." What I think he's saying is simply that realism is the baseline from which we read. Or, realism is a set of effects that tend to make us see and believe the narrated action, to accept it as viable. It's all sales, to me. If I want you to believe that a man suddenly turns bright yellow and starts floating around his room, there are a bunch of ways to approach this—some more convincing than others. But the reader HAS to accept it, in order for the story to do all the other things we expect it to do: To mean something, to represent something, to do intellectual work, move us, etc. So I know that in my most "unrealistic" stories, I've had to work very hard to make the unlikely seem possible. I do this through tone (which is pretty mundane and New Realist) and by trying to stay as low-key and factual as possible. It's like if you were trying to sell somebody a car: Purple prose and a loud voice and a lot of hopping around just makes people suspicious.

The second aspect of making somebody believe the unlikely lies in the purity of your intention. If you are trying to be Fancy or Experimental just for the sake of it, the reader feels this. Whereas if there is some deep, unavoidable reason for the experiment—that is, if you've tried the simpler, more 'real' way, and found it lacking—the reader feels this, and follows you. You are doing whatever it takes to get into the deepest possible space.

Nobody ever stopped reading Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" because they didn't believe a man could turn into a bug. They MIGHT have stopped reading it if Kafka had tried to convince them with all sorts of bug data, or if they felt that Kafka was in love with his idea. But instead what he did was immediately take the story up a notch—Gregor doesn't go, "Crap! I'm a bug!" Instead, he worries about missing his bus. And with this move, Kafka signals that the story is about something bigger and more mysterious—and we accept his premise, and go along with him on this wild ride—a ride which we HAD to take, to get into this very specific and deeply true emotional space.

JJ: I think what James Wood says about realism is really interesting, especially in regard to your stories. I think it can be argued that your stories create suspended or alternative realities, and yet there is usually, if not always, the presence of what I will crudely refer to as a realist narrative thread. A father who adores watching his children play with their toys, a husband consumed with marital jealousy, an elderly woman who feels displaced because of her age. I guess what I'm getting at is this: Would it

be possible for you to craft these suspended realities without the presence or functioning of realism? Or, to put it another way, to what extent does realism become a kind of binary referent that works to illuminate the real-life-humanity of, or within, the alternate worlds you create?

GS: I think it would be impossible to do those stories without realism. What Woods is saying is simply that realism is what we expect—maybe what we are neurologically designed to want: the use of familiar symbols, in a pattern that is mimetic of "real" life—or at least our habitual way of talking/thinking about real life. But realism is also, we've come to realize, false. Or at best it is merely partial. When we say: "Jim walked down the street towards the dry cleaners," we are positing that "Jim" is a distinct, permanent entity. Well, we know that Jim is not that. Jim is comprised of some number of atoms etc, Jim will eventually die in a plane crash, Jim was formerly 300 pounds heavier than he is right now (where is that part of Jim now?), Jim once gnawed on the bars of his crib, the dry cleaners was once a Wendy's and in ten years will be a vacant lot—and this is only realism's failing on a gross physical level. So to be truly "realistic"—that is, to really show life for the multiple, various thing it is, we may feel we need to do more than "mere" realism. But realism is always the base, whether we like it or not. When we say something is 'experimental' we are implicitly measuring this thing against something: realism. And personally I have no problem with that—the trick, as far as I'm concerned, is to do something that whacks the reader right in the heart, and I don't care how it's done, only that this happens, and the story functions more as a tool than as a documentation of something.

JJ: In an interview published in the *Missouri Review*, 2000, you say that, "I'm realizing more and more that it's not fiction's job to be photographically representative of reality." The worlds you create exist in a kind of suspended reality. They resemble our own, but the old rules, our rules, don't necessarily hold up. Things work differently, as in your novella *Bounty*, or the story *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, and yet there is a humanity and a compassion and a vision that unmistakably encompasses the world, this world, that you and I exist in. Can you talk a little about this relationship? Do the worlds you create make it easier to say the things you want to say about our world, our culture, our society?

GS: It's hard for me to answer that question…I mean, thank you. I don't really have anything I want to say about our world or culture. Or, rather, I don't know what I want to say until I've said it, and the way I say it, is to involve myself in the fun of creating a world that is roughly our world, but with certain aspects exaggerated. And I don't know which ones will get

exaggerated or why or any of that until I'm in the middle of it. I guess I mostly proceed on a line-to-line basis, just radically preferring this to that, if you see what I mean. I have, of course, little temporary ideas about what I'm doing, but these tend to get revised or vanish, or be replaced by better, more complex ones, ones I couldn't have imagined at the outset. It's a very intuitive process mostly, and to be honest, the motivation in the moment is usually pretty simply to be entertaining or funny or cut out the fat, or do something slightly unexpected....to make an exciting, odd, surface that isn't merely exciting/odd but has a resonance outside of the story.

JJ: I think what you articulate about not wanting to say anything about the world until you've said it is really important. If I can infer correctly, you're saying that first and foremost it has to be about the story, not the intentionality or thematics behind each story?

GS: Right—that's it exactly.

JJ: I'd like to now start talking a little about the stories themselves, about how they work and the technical decisions you make while crafting. To begin, you said earlier that a story has to be sold, which means, I think, it has to be naturalized, has to appear authentic in the context of its world, and I wonder how you go about doing this. Most of your stories are written in first person, so does a first person perspective authenticate a story in ways a third person narrative can't? Technically, first person narrators inhabit the stories they're telling, so to what extent does this dynamic create a certain believability, or at least allow for "the suspension of disbelief," to use an old workshop cliché?

GS: In my experience, it's not so much the point-of-view but a certain tonality, I think. Also, I suppose, a certain level or flavor of detail? It's a really good question and I'm not sure I can answer except to say that this question is really the whole enchilada: How do we write prose that drags people in and convinces them that this thing they know is a lie, is somehow worth staying with, until it becomes true for them? And of course each writer approaches this in a different way, based on his or her gifts/liabilities/neuroses. I think it can be done in first—or third—or second-person. I think it's helpful to give the character the maximum amount of credit—think of the character as you on a different day (or with a different childhood, or a different body, etc)—don't do this thing we all tend to do, which is make our characters dumber/more quirky/less logical than ourselves; that is, don't be The Puppet Master. I think the reader, in this situation, feels the condescension—the writer's desire to totally control the situation, to prove a point, to teach the character an (easy) lesson—and pulls away. I

think empathy is the strongest glue a writer can offer—the reader comes to see herself as one with the character...and then who wouldn't want to know what happens next? And empathy actually comes pretty easily, if you think of it—providing we stay out of the way. Imagine a movie that opens with a young man walking toward you, crying. Instantly, your interest is engaged. And likewise if he's trying very hard to do something, even something trivial...or is visibly fired up about something, or angry....we are naturally curious about other people.

JJ: I'm wondering about your use of the grotesque, especially in regard to the title story of your first collection, "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline." I think Flannery O'Connor said something about using the grotesque as a way to shock readers/characters into awareness. In your story, and specifically the last paragraph, which is mesmerizing and very beautiful, your narrator is stabbed to death by a homicidal security guard, Sam, and in the process achieves a certain omniscience—a fully realized view of humanity. He comes to understand the pain and misery of the very man who has taken his life, while also seeing a number of other things about the human condition, and for a moment he feels reborn, reconstituted. Can you talk a little about this moment in the story, the context of your work, or both? Is this one of those instances when you have "open{ed} up the world for a moment and kind of reconstitute{d) it for the reader?" And, in a larger sense, how does the grotesque help you, as a writer, engage the humanity within your stories?

GS: Well, for me, these types of moments often come about in response to some narrative or emotional need that the story has created. In this case, the death seemed right (the narrator's not a tough guy, and Sam is a killer, and he has put himself in opposition to this killer, ergo....) but as an ending, a simple and brutal death didn't seem sufficient—there was more to it than that. So the leaving-the-body is a sort of device to get that other aspect represented, if you see what I mean—to remind us of what he's leaving behind, and also to show Sam's future—i.e., to show the effect of this murder on Sam. And it was made possible, in a sense, by the presence throughout the story, of other ghosts. This might be an example of what I mentioned before—this 'experimental,' or at least odd, move, felt necessary to me, and also earned, in some way.

Also, to be frank, the grotesquerie in my stories—the violence, the severed limbs etc—is also just a symptom of a certain lack of subtlety. If I feel I need to create some sympathy, I lop something off. A more sophisticated writer would do something better, but alas. Although I think this is the essence of literary style: the enthusiastic embrace of those aspects of

yourself you wish were different.

JJ: In your story "Isabelle," along with many others, I discern the presence of a subtle but unmistakable spirituality. It's not any sort of new-age, karmic thing, nor is it really theological in any sense. I guess what I see is the idea of redemption. Moral and spiritual redemption rooted in the things we do, and the decisions we make, as human beings. In this way, the redemptive act works both dramatically and thematically in your stories, as it often allows your characters to transcend life's invariable sadness. In "Isabelle" specifically, your narrator assumes responsibility for a handicapped girl he grew up next to. At the end of the story he says, "Sometimes it's damn hard. But I look after her and she squeals with delight when I come home, and the sum total of sadness in the world is less than it would have been." This is another striking moment, one that never ceases to arrest me, and I wonder how it works in regard to the story as a whole? How do you, specifically, go about dramatizing such an idea, and to what extent does the story move, narratively, toward this concluding moment of grace?

GS: Again, thanks, and I'm not quite sure I can answer this adequately. For me, writing a story proceeds in a very stepwise way—that is, I start with as little idea as possible about the whole thing...maybe just a good sentence or an image I like or whatever. Then it's just a sentence-based investigation of that little bit of created reality: who are these people, what happens next, why is this guy doing this certain thing, where do they live etc—with all of these investigations happening on a sentence-by-sentence level, rather than via 'decisions.' So the story builds up gradually and, gradually, kind of defines/creates its own themes, if you see what I mean. I didn't plan that ending at all. It just came out of the situation that had been, more or less accidentally, built up to that point: Isabelle living in that home, the narrator having watched this whole tragedy, having been affected by all the cruelty he'd seen, wanting to interrupt that pattern, etc. I also notice that one of the things that lets us finish stories is our own dissatisfaction or discomfort with the story as it is—in the case of "Isabelle," I found myself craving some human decency. So this craving gets located inside the narrator, and then the narrator does something the writer can't—namely *act*, within the frame of the story.

I think stories can only be finished if there is sufficient, and distinterested, detail built up in the body of the story. Flannery O'Connor has that wonderful bit about the ending of "Good Country People." You get that ending because 1) the artificial leg exists and 2) the Bible-holding briefcase exists, but neither of these were introduced with that ending in mind. It happened the opposite way: their existence caused/permitted the

ending—and they were created "innocently," as it were: not to fulfill some narrative function, but because the girl was limping. Why was she limping? Uh, we can imagine O'Connor thinking, ah: fake leg. The salesman comes to the door, selling Bibles. What is he wearing, what is he holding? A too-tight suit. A briefcase. And just like that, the seeds of the ending are planted, via a hunger for detail.

JJ: Let's fast forward a little bit. We've been talking a lot about your first collection and I'd like to discuss a few things about some of one your more recent stories. "ComCom," which appeared in *The New Yorker* last August, is an interesting on a lot of levels. Specifically, I want to ask about the function of language in this story. What I notice is a type of middle-management discourse, an empty cooperate rhetoric, and I'm curious about this. To be specific, in the story's initial paragraphs, we encounter terms and labels such as "Pollution Control Devices," or "Rention Area," and a little later we're introduced to a phenomenon called "Designated Substitute Thoughtstream." In a very interesting way, these examples remind of Donald Barthelme's fiction. In his work *Snow White*, Barthelme refers to language as "waste, dreck," or he relates it to the "trash phenomenon." To some degree, I think Barthelme had a fine ear for cliché, for language that operates with, or through, a certain self-importance, but which really means nothing in particular. I see a lot of these ideas at work not only in "ComCom," but in the majority of your stories. So, I guess my question is to what extent do these ideas, particularly about language, inform your work?

GS: I had a certain experience in corporate America, which was simply that, when people wanted to lie, they gussied up their language. And this in turn dumbed-down the discourse, which allowed more outrages. And of course this is a trope that has now made its way up to our Fearless Leaders. (And turns out, Fearless Leaders have been doing this all along).

To me that kind of language is poetic. It is like a dialect. It has the stamp of a certain experience and mindset about it. And, like all languages, it can be overflowed—with hatred, love, desire, regret. The fact that we talk that way now, and that our institutions talk that way, is no accident, and is very meaningful. I think it's an indication of a kind of late-stage decadence.

So the way I'd answer your question is to say that this realization that there is a political/moral dimension to inefficient language functioned as a kind of permission-giving: I now felt I could have Fun with Inefficiency, since there was a moral/political meaning to it.

JJ: You said that stories should "knock the reader right in the heart," and for me this is what short fiction does with more acuity, and more humanity, than any other literary form. However, the risk is that you will fail to say something that resonates, powerfully, brutally, for a reader. If your story doesn't pack a punch, regardless of its technical or aesthetic merits, than the story itself is probably forgettable. With this said, your stories are hard to forget. In a recent essay in the September issue of *The Writer's Chronicle*, Brocke Clarke argues that contemporary fiction is too easy, too comfortable. He says that teachers, when all else fails, tell their students to write about what they now. So, in what ways do you write about what you know, while also reaching, artistically, for what isn't safe or comfortable? And, also, how does this simultaneity insure that your proverbial punch lands, so to speak?

GS: I think the old saw about "writing what you know" is wrong. I mean, it addresses one common problem younger writers (or maybe all writers) have, which is writers tend to write about things we know nothing about, in a way that is full of shit. We "decide" to write a novel about Bosnia, having never been there, because we have some kind of agenda that tells us this would be Important. That is a problem. So maybe we have to ask what is meant by the phrase "what you know." I think knowledge of the sort that is useful in writing stories, is knowledge of the way things actually are. That is, you go to write a scene in a grocery store. Well, we all know something about grocery stores and we all know something about some of the ways it is possible for people to feel in a grocery store. So there you go. That's something you know. The problem comes when we feel that what we know is insufficient for the grand purpose of Literature—and we start making up stupid illogical things that, we feel, are more "literary." This accounts for the high rate of occurrence of one-dimensionally evil people and wise midgets and gratuitous blow jobs in fiction. Although we have never personally met a one-dimensionally evil person or a wise midget, or gotten a truly gratuitous (i.e. random and unmotivated) blow job, we do not trust that the somewhat evil although sometimes nice people we've met, or the complicated selfish midgets, or the very complicated debt-inducing yet strangely selfless blow jobs we have known, are worthy subjects. Well of course, they are, and in fact one of the most wonderful reading moments for me is when I come across some moment or feeling that I am very familiar with, but never expected to see in prose. This happens all the time in great writing (Shakespeare for example). So maybe the cliché should not be "Write what you know" but "Trust that what you know can and should be written."

JJ: As a professor of creative writing, you are, in some sense, on the front-lines of contemporary fiction. You get to see, daily, what young or emerging writers are up to. So, to end this interview, I'd like to ask what, if anything, you say to your students about beginning, or continuing, to write stories that challenge them artistically? I think our greatest charge as writers is to create a body of work that challenges us, the artist, as much as it does our readers or audience. So, finally, how does one work toward this end?

GS: The main thing, I think, is to know that mastery, in fiction, means being comfortable with the fact that you will never be able to rest securely on top of a body of knowledge. You will never be able to take your hands off the wheel and just go. The process of writing will always be trying to repair something that doesn't exist, with tools you have to invent on the spot. That, it seems to me, is the way to keep your work challenging—always try to have it positioned at the center of what feels urgent to you right now. F

Judith Barrington

The Musicians' Seamounts

> It is only since the invention of a technology powerful enough
> to map the deep seabed that the finding of names has become
> a pressing issue. - James Hamilton-Paterson: *The Great Deep*

From Strauss in the north to Mendelssohn
in the south, they compose their two-hundred-mile
chromatic scale across the Fracture Zone,
half steps rising towards green light
then plunging four miles down to the abyssal plain.

The climber who wants to try Mount Mozart
(slightly taller than Fuji though nowhere near
as pretty) must leave the high sea, begin her long
descent past creatures that stare with bulging eyes
and flick their fins as they sidle into the dark.

When her feet land on the summit she wants to sing
so, humming a well-loved aria from *Figaro*
she sets out *con brio* to climb to the mountain's base.
Somewhere off to her left, The Bach Ridge joins
in counterpoint. Elsewhere Mount Beethoven frowns.

Silent now, she listens hard for the song
of the earth's crust, that oscillation recorded
by seismograms, vibrating on one single note—
the world itself humming *cantabile*
through an ancient, cracked, tectonic throat.

Jenna Martin

Choice

for Marc

Whether the black dress or the ochre, whether
bright light of stage or small, damp work of dread.
Whether I am the extreme of *give fruit to bare tree*
or you are *holder of all things elegant and aligned*,
there is division. A line down the center, drawings for comparison.
More ordinary faults mean cracks in the foundation, mean breathing room.
We represent something whole in our moment of consent, of *yes*, *will* and *do*.
And during the other times, we fall into our humanness. We cling and
savor and long. I choose bacon some mornings just for the salt. Others,
I want curros (being I've never seen the ground in which they grow).
To choose is an act of betrayal. Not to choose, dementia.
Insert the imperatives here. Or don't. Life will come for us. And we will go along.
Or not. Depending upon the acts of lone supplicant or sentimental cowboy.
Depending upon the
cycle of your fallows or my missed train. Settle in.
I want for the great blue something below. I cling to the absence of light,
not to its penetrating yellows.

Greg Nicholl

Outside

My brother wants to show me the trail
he carved into the woods.

Mountain alder hacked away

by the machete he sharpens
every weekend in the garage—

tattooed hands easing the rusted blade
across the flat stone
he pulled from the Dungeness River,

hands disappearing into the current,
glacial melt the color of milk.

Those same hands that gripped my neck
one night as I slept,

and I woke to his body pinned against me,
eyes gorged with heroin.

I avoided empty rooms after that.

I slept with a chair propped against the door.
I began to hate.

On the trail down to the ravine, we do not talk.

This, our common interest:
the forest, its darkest secrets.

I follow to prove to myself

even though we share nothing,
we share this.

Fred Bahnson

Climbing the Sphinx

Driving west from Bozeman an hour before dawn, Hans and I leave the Gallatin Valley's fifty-mile-long inland sea of grain. We contour along the Madison River where I took float trips as a child, make the long climb up Ennis Pass, and drop into the remote Ennis Valley. I've spent most of my life in southwestern Montana. The mountains here are my old friends. A group of them—Lone Mountain and the Spanish Peaks—rise to our east in greeting. South of these pyramids lies their silent watchman—and our climbing goal—the Sphinx. To reach the Sphinx, we drive down the length of Ennis Valley. Come summer, hordes of East Coasters, Californians, and Texans will swarm this valley in their RVs, devouring the cheap diners, the rubber tomahawk tourist shops. But it's winter now. The shops are closed, the motoring public gone. All that remains is a comforting emptiness that broods over the bent world of mountain and valley like the Holy Ghost.

We turn east off Highway 287 onto a snow-drifted dirt road that leads to the trailhead at Bear Creek Ranger Station. A five-mile hike from here will bring us to our route: the Sphinx's North Face. When I get out of the car the single-digit cold jabs my nostrils. We stuff our packs with Eider-down parkas—hedges against hypothermia if we're forced to bivouac—and swill the last of our coffee.

Winter has come early this year. It's only mid November, and already Hans and I have a month of ice climbs under our harnesses. Our tri-weekly forays into Hyalite Canyon, our training ground, have made us lean and strong. We're ready for the Sphinx. Alex Lowe, Bozeman's local ice climbing hero and world-renowned alpinist, claimed the first ascent back in 1987, and it was he who recommended the route to us. Known for his "sandbagging"—the old alpinist penchant for understatement—Alex described the Sphinx as "a nice day outing."

The Sphinx is aptly named: rising over 11,000 feet above sea level, nearly two thousand of those above the valley floor, this mountain is a geologic version of that mythical creature, and one in full dominion of its landscape. Rock buttress arms reach outward on either side. A torso of snowfields and rock cliffs support a head forever hidden in shadow. The face itself—some 500 feet tall and twice as wide—is concave, like an imploded wall. In winter the face is plastered with skinny drips and seeps of ice, some spilling off the summit snowfield, others emerging from cracks in the rock. Our route will follow a narrow couloir, an ice-choked gully that vertically bisects the face into roughly equal halves.

We're traveling light. *Less is More* is our credo. Last night at my house

we played our minimalist game, took all our gear—ropes, carabiners, ice screws, pitons—and laid it out on the floor. We divided that pile in half, divided the remainder in half again, and behold—our gear selection.

I close the trunk, zip the keys into my pack lid, and look up to see if Hans is ready. He's holding up the rope, eyebrows forming a question.

"We'd better bring it," I say. "For backup." Hans's perennial Scandinavian composure sags a hair, his 'disappointed' look. "We can still solo it," I tell him. "I'll carry the rope." This route has never been soloed—climbed without a rope—and Hans is drawn to the untried methods, the purity of less is more.

Hans sets off at a fast clip. When I shoulder my pack a wave of nausea sends the coffee-bagel-cream cheese concoction to the base of my throat. I always get queasy before a big climb. I'm eager to get going yet reluctant to leave the security of the valley. When we drove through Ennis an hour earlier, the town was still asleep. Those people will soon be waking up, stoking wood stoves, frying eggs, cradling coffee mugs. Part of me wants to be among them, among warm, sleepy-eyed souls instead of nursing my pre-climb nausea, instead of slogging up to the Sphinx.

I WAS SEVERAL PINTS of Full Sail into a keg party in Bozeman one December night when Hans introduced himself. A wiry 5'8", Hans sported the ubiquitous trio of Bozeman Outdoor Guy apparel: ponytail, bead necklace, and Carhartts. Though we both went to Bozeman Senior High School, we didn't know each other. I was eking by Year Five at Montana State and hoping not to make it Year Six. Hans, three years my senior, had just returned from Yale where he'd "picked up" a philosophy degree, cum laude.

"Chess?" he asked, pointing to a table in an empty corner. The party was low-key, the women few: another Friday night gathering of climbers and skiers. Good night for chess. Five moves in, Hans asked "Are you sure you want to move there?" It was a question I would hear in other chess games in the coming years, always asked without irony. Hans was politely giving me a chance to change course before disaster struck. It never made a difference, though. Except for once, Hans always won.

The talk quickly moved to skiing then to climbing, where it stayed. Though already a superb skier, Hans admitted that he wasn't yet a climber but said he wanted to be. He let on that he was looking for a "rope gun"—somebody with enough experience to take the "sharp end" of the rope, to lead the hard routes. Somebody who could teach him a few things. I had been ice climbing for four years, plenty of experience in his mind. Would I be up for taking him climbing?

In the Bozeman outdoor scene, you simply didn't admit to inexperience. Whether you were a climber, skier, or bull rider, you padded your resume. You didn't want to be known as a Greenhorn, an Eager Beaver looking to

tag along with the Big Boys. Whether you were or weren't, you pretended at veteran status.

Hans either didn't know these unspoken rules or just didn't care. He wanted to climb. Earnest, and with clear-eyed candor, Hans proposed that I take him up to Hyalite the next day. I said yes, and a partnership was formed. From then until April, Hans and I racked up some fifty days together climbing Hyalite Canyon's frozen waterfalls. It wasn't long until I was calling him "rope gun."

WITH HANS WALKING ahead beyond earshot, I slip into musing. Often on forays into the hills, I become an eight-year-old again, entering the world of trolls, lost children, magic portals that lead to safety. Forests become dark, semi-human forms; the mountains morph into a band of ogres, hunched together in conference as they argue my fate. One shakes his white mantle to reveal part of a shoulder, another sloughs ice shards to reveal a bristly back. There's menace in these gestures, but also a beckoning. The soft crunch of my plastic boots breaking hoarfrost allays my anxieties. When our trail crosses an open meadow, we follow our moon-shadows running ahead across the snow.

THOSE GLOSSY INSPIRATIONAL posters hanging in dentists' offices have made climbing-as-metaphor-for-life a cliché. People talk about reaching their personal peak, or climbing their own Everest. "Climbing" is what it takes to become a CEO. But for Hans and me, climbing meant climbing mountains. Climbing was life. It determined the shape of our flat-land existence. Career (as if we had careers), love life, social life—all these had to pass through the refiner's fire of climbing. The sole test for any given job or relationship was: can I still climb five days a week?

Hans's "career" involved working night shifts at Dana Design sewing backpacks for minimum wage. Though his Yale degree could have earned him more lucrative work, Hans preferred to man the sewing machines from 4 to 10 p.m. with other downwardly mobile outdoor-sport addicts. I oscillated between seasonal jobs: climbing-store clerk, UPS helper at Christmastime, traveling maid-cart repairman—anything to pay rent and fund climbing trips.

We never talked about it, but we wanted to see how far up—and in—climbing would take us. The passage upward was a passage through, a vertical portal into Meaning. The harder the route, the greater the transcendence. The vertical plane offered pure existence, an airy liminality where, with each swing of our ice axes, earthly constraints fell away. We believed that somewhere on one of those vertical faces—perhaps the Sphinx?—lay the answer to the Great Wanting.

I didn't stay the course. After climbing up mountains that promised

me bliss, I retreated, rappelled back into the world before climbing could make its ultimate demand on my life.

For Hans, climbing was complete.

MID-MORNING UNDER a gray sky we reach the Helmet-Sphinx col, a saddle between the Sphinx and Helmet Mountain. From the col we'll descend a few hundred feet then begin the climb up the Sphinx's North Face. We stop for water and a quick bite of a Power Bar. Even though the temperature hovers in the teens, we're both overheated from the five-mile hike. We shed fleece layers and stow them in our packs. A snow flurry kicks up then subsides.

After a five-minute rest we descend the backside of the col and follow a contour line through knee-deep snow to the mountain's north side. One minute we're in trees, the next we're standing at the first rock band: the beginning of our route.

"The weather's looking iffy," I say, noticing a dark cloud bank hanging over Ennis Valley to the west. Hans stares west for a time then fixes his attention back on the route.

On the drive over from Bozeman that morning, the forecast warned of a major low pressure front moving east, sure to bring storms. We'll need to move quickly. Now that we've left the safety of the trees, I worry that a squall will trap us in a white-out. I was caught once in a storm above tree-line. Everything became a blur of snow and ice, my depth perception thrown. There were no trees to offer shadow and contrast. I was nearly lost.

For the past week, though, we've had it good. A high pressure system spearing down from Canada has kept it clear and cold—ideal weather for climbing. I love these high pressure systems. While they last, I get out. I climb mountains. I soak up all the sun and warmth, camaraderie and good times I can, glorying in my freedom. High pressure is fleeting, though. Low pressure always seeps its isothermal way back, bringing the dark, bone-achingly cold days.

Hans eyes the western clouds again. "I think the squall will hold off until we get up this thing," he says and starts breaking trail toward the first snowfield. I follow his tracks but hold onto my doubts.

The two months' snow accumulation slows us down. In some places the snow is waist deep. It takes us nearly an hour to traverse a section that should have taken ten minutes. Hans has been breaking trail the whole way, so I tell him I'll take a turn out front. When I start off the snow pulls at my legs like a drowning swimmer, tugging me down with each forward step. A half-hour of slogging through this thick soup and I entertain retreat. With conditions like this we may not reach the summit before nightfall. We have only a few Power Bars between us, not enough food for a bivouac. We lack proper gear—sleeping bags, bivouac sacs, and the all-important

stove to melt snow for drinking water. We'd be foolish to risk a night in the open.

"Looks bleak," I say over my shoulder. I don't want to be the one to say this is leading nowhere.

"I'll break trail again," Hans says. "If we can make it to that rock band I think the snow will improve. Let's not give up this fast."

I soon discover he's right. We climb through a rock band, which turns out to be a vertical choss-pile of rotten conglomerate—the kind of thing Alex Lowe called "frozen kitty-litter"—and gain the first of a succession of snowfields that lead to the upper face and the couloir. The snow has turned from wet cement into a crunchy Styrofoam. Small avalanches coming off the upper face have packed these slopes into a firm layer of névé, ideal for climbing. We're in the groove now, kicking crampons into the slope, swinging our axes with verve.

We work steadily through mid-day, climbing the Sphinx's lower slopes, and by noon we've reached the face. The crux of the route—an eel-like sliver of ice spilling down a narrow scar mid-face—lies before us. Stretching in either direction to our right and left are hundreds of yards of rock, the Sphinx's weather-darkened cheeks.

Five hours of daylight left. We shouldn't waste time, but we can't help staring upward, wonder-struck beneath this frozen rampart. In its hundred-and-fifty foot descent the ice-eel never gets wider than two body-lengths; at its narrowest the ice is almost small enough to wrap my arms around.

Up close the ice loses its serpentine features. It becomes one form then morphs into another, refusing to take shape. In cold, dry air, ice will sublimate, skipping the liquid phase to go directly from solid to vapor. Forever in a state of becoming, ice is never static. Whether forming or melting, this fluid newness holds me enthralled. Ice is like lava or fire—the longer you look, the more you feel yourself on the cusp of revelation. To stare into this frozen skein of light and shadow is to rub up against Mystery itself. By spring, this ethereal architecture—a lone flying buttress supporting its cathedral in the sky—will be gone.

Before we start climbing Hans takes a test swing. He tip-toes on the front points of his crampons, crabs up the spray cone to the base of the eel, and lands a blow with his ice ax. A deep bass note tells us the ice is plastic—the climbing will be secure—and we decide to climb un-roped. Hans climbs first and is soon fifteen feet up the initial ice curtain. His ax swings are smooth, unhurried. With a surprising lack of envy, I see that Hans has become the better climber. He is, as they say, a natural.

Ice climbing, unlike rock-climbing, is possible only with equipment. In medieval times alpine shepherds used steel-pointed staffs and primitive foot spikes to cross icy passes. In the 1800's, tweed-bedecked Englishmen used the recently invented ice ax to chop steps on the lower-angled slopes

around Mount Blanc, France. The early climbers used only one ice ax, but modern ice climbers, when climbing anything approaching vertical, require two. Crampons, the twelve-point spikes worn on the boots, provide purchase for the feet. Ascending vertical ice with modern gear is akin to climbing those peg-boards in 4th Grade Gym except the holes aren't pre-made—you create them as you go. Each solid ax placement provides a portable anchor from which to make the next swing. "Never move on a bad placement," Alex Lowe once told us. "Each placement builds on the last; make sure every swing is bomber."

We plan to leapfrog each other, so when Hans reaches the mid-way point up the eel he stops, anchors himself to an ice screw, and waits for me to follow.

My muscles are stiff from cold when I begin climbing. First one tentative ax swing, then another, until I hear the tell-tale Thwok! of a solid placement.

I kick in a crampon.

Swing an ax.

Breathe.

Repeat.

The old comfort of vertical orientation returns. I slip into flow.

CLIMBERS BUILD UP a kinesthetic memory bank, a repertoire of patterns from among which the body will choose when it meets with difficulty. This corporeal knowledge instructs the limbs to pull the body over an impossibly steep overhang while the mind watches, as if from a distance. To give oneself over to this innate ability for a few seconds, minutes, even hours is to know, however briefly, a kind of bliss. A release from the burden of conscious thought.

Flow dissolves self-awareness. Gone are my flat-land pedestrian worries about jobs and girlfriends—or the lack thereof. Gone my doubts and fears, even my joys and elations. Those feelings will return, all of them magnified, but in flow I just am. The problem with this, of course, is the same one that plagues the heroin addict: the longer I remain in bliss, the less I want to come back. I grieve when that feeling—or absence of feeling—leaves. So I search for it. And over time I build up a tolerance to it. To feed the rat, I up the fix. I push harder, climb steeper, less secure routes.

Climbing rope-less is flow distilled. To climb untethered, to set myself adrift on a sea of ice, is to achieve purity of form. Self-mastery. My life depends on the solidity of each ice ax placement, each crampon kick. The choices I make are entirely mine, and I become lord of my own universe.

I WORK MY WAY PAST delicate flutings and chandeliers of ice, now fifty feet up the couloir. Whenever the angle eases off-vertical, I switch to the

French-step position for my feet—instead of kicking straight in with my crampons, I stomp the ice at an angle with the flat part of my foot. The technique eases my burning calves.

In ten minutes I've reached Hans's perch at the half-way point. I move past him and continue up the final section of couloir. "Swinging leads," it's called in roped climbing. We mimic this pattern, climbing as though an imaginary life-line linked us together.

The final section is as steep as the first—between seventy and ninety degrees—only more exposed. The whole north face drops away beneath my crampons, all 1,500 feet of it. I climb steadily, barely notice twenty minutes slide by. Soon I pull over the vertical ice and stand at the base of the final gully that leads to the summit. I look back down the ice-choked couloir. The crux is over. I've come through the vertical gauntlet unscathed. A delicious shiver runs up my spine as I yell down "Safe!"

I twist in two ice screws for an anchor, the foot-long hollow tubes disgorging their cores of ice onto my glove. Into the eye of each screw I clip a carabiner, tie off a bight of rope, and secure myself to the anchor. Hans begins to climb. The noise from his axes colliding into the ice is like the far-off sound of someone working their way down a street, methodically breaking windshields with a baseball bat.

Then amidst all the breaking ice I hear a different sound, metallic.

"Shit!" Hans yells. "It broke!"

"What?" I shout back. I heard him, but the gravity of what I think just happened fails to register.

He repeats his cry, this time louder and more insistent. "The pick broke on one of my axes. I can't move up or down."

"What do you want me to do?"

Hans is stuck on vertical ice with no rope, hanging onto his remaining ice ax. His only form of security, the only thing keeping him from a thousand foot fall, is this one ax pick sunk three inches deep in ice. My mind flips through its Rolodex of rescue moves, but all the cards come up blank. He is sixty feet below, out of sight.

"Lower me one of your ice axes," Hans shouts.

I uncoil our nine-millimeter rope. Pulling out a two-foot bight, I tie that into a figure-eight knot, clip a carabiner to the bight, then clip the head of one of my ice axes onto the carabiner. I begin lowering. As I feed out rope the ax clangs against the ice.

Soon I hear a garbled cry, too faint to understand. "Did you get it?" I yell down. In the wind I hear nothing.

At this point, I assume that Hans has tied himself in to my rope. "On belay," I shout down. Still no response. I begin hauling in coils. He must be climbing fast, I think, because I don't feel any tension on the rope. I haul faster. Suddenly the end of the rope pops over the lip. The carabiner

on my figure-eight knot chatters across the ice, empty. Hans got my ice ax, but he didn't tie himself in to the safety of the rope.

"What's going on?" I yell. No reply.

I try to lean over the couloir's lip, but I can't see him from my stance. The wind coming up from the valley brings only silence. Maybe he had trouble with the wrist leash on my ax. Maybe his good ax popped as he was putting on mine. These worries, then other worries, unspoken, coalesce in my head, then rattle into my gut like loose scree skittering down a talus slope.

I begin to shiver. I pull on my hood and zip it up until only my eyes are showing. I am alone, and the reason for my aloneness is too appalling to admit. I am afraid.

Into that fear flows a succession of clear, rational thoughts devoid of emotional attachment:

Hans has fallen.

There is no need to rappel down to him.

No need to speed-hike out to the valley to call in a rescue.

The need for hurry is over.

I then observe in a distant sort of way that I can't feel my fingers. I swing my arms around and around until the hundreds of needles stabbing my fingers tell my brain that I have swung enough, that blood is returning life—and with life, a searing pain—to my digits. Warmed, I turn my face to the mountainside, my back to the wind. Hundreds of water rivulets are freezing around the eyes of my two anchor screws. For the longest time I watch, fascinated, as my anchor becomes entombed in ice.

I begin to hate the Sphinx. This cold, lifeless mountain has taken my friend. Hans is dead, and for what? Why am I risking my life for this? Why did Hans? Not just the Sphinx but the whole act of climbing now appears utterly absurd. I am strapped to a mountainside, helpless to aid my fallen friend. Hans has my second ice ax, my second arm; I can't move from my stance. It escapes me just what the hell I am doing here. I stomp my feet a few times, do more arm windmills. This climbing business, this search for flow, for spiritual meaning—isn't it just glorified selfishness? I think of our friend Rob Williams who died the year before while climbing in Peru. High Altitude Pulmonary Edema got him at twenty-thousand feet. Rob literally drowned in his own lung fluids. Before he made his last climb Rob had traveled around Peru with his wife. It was their honeymoon. Where was Rob's wife now? How had she benefited from the risks he took?

A face appears over the lip.

Hans wears a grin like he's just dipped his hand in Fate's cookie jar and escaped unnoticed. Here is my friend returned to me, a veil of hoar frost and frozen snot falling from his face, raised up like Lazarus.

HANS SLOGS UP THROUGH the snow and clips into my anchor. He hasn't stopped grinning. Neither of us knows what to say. My anger at Hans's loss is replaced with stunned confusion. Still, we can't speak. Then Hans chuckles, and I can't help but join him. We let loose. Like a pack of coyotes, we yelp, whoop, and howl.

The head of Hans's ice ax broke where it met the shaft. He was stuck half-way up the final section of couloir. All he could do was hang onto his remaining ice ax while I lowered mine to him. With the replacement ax he set about finishing the climb. "I've never had such focus in my life," he said later, which is why he paid no attention to me yelling down to see if he was all right. Had he not the mental and physical stamina to dangle from his one good ice ax, had he tried to climb up or down, he would have fallen. In all the confusion I forgot to ask him why he never tied into the rope.

The last section of couloir leading to the summit snow field is easy, and we climb side by side, chattering the whole way. Already the story is taking shape, the one we will tell over and over in the years to come: Hans's credentials as an Alpinist are sealed. He now belongs to that elite cadre of climbers—Those Who've Escaped Death. I had already joined that club, dodging avalanches, lightning, hypothermia.

But now it's Hans who's returned from that distant shore, and I am the witness. I will be the one to corroborate Hans's tale, to tell the world that he was nearly lost but returned to life. On the final snow field leading to the summit we climb with abandon. Our bodies move like twin skiffs riding the face of a wave, skimming a cobalt sea of ice into a welcoming sky.

When we finally stand atop the Sphinx's head, Hans strikes his classic Summit Pose—ice axes raised high, arms formed in a V for victory. His wide grin is not that of the conquering hero, not cocky—just amazed to have passed through to the other side.

To the west the sun is almost buried under the Tobacco Root Mountains. This trip will end in the dark, with only the faint glimmer of our headlamps' glow to light the way. Twilight has fallen in the valleys, but our little summit is an island of light, the last tip of earth still sunlit. The squall is coming, moving toward us across the Ennis Valley. We'll get hit on the way down. But that doesn't worry us any longer. The biggest difficulties are over. At least for now. We linger on the summit, not wanting this day to end.

That night we ease down into a booth in a smoky pizza joint in Ennis and splurge on a large Hawaiian and a pitcher of Full Sail. We're too spent to finish the beer. On the drive back to Bozeman Hans perks up, talks excitedly about the climb. He curses that broken ice ax, tells how he was scared shitless hanging off the Sphinx's face with no rope around his middle. I wonder if something happened to him as he dangled there, waiting for me to lower him a lifeline, some revelation about his purpose

in this world. But if the Sphinx bestowed on him any distant visions, he doesn't say. I wish that I had asked.

We come down off Ennis Pass, drive past Bear Trap Hot Springs. The steam curling off the water reminds me of a guy I knew who drowned there one night after too many beers. We continue back along the now-moonlit Madison River, and Hans talks more about the climb. I keep silent. The highway's parallel yellow lines track my thoughts, as I return over and over to the near-accident. What could this mean for my life? I had one more notch on my climbing harness; I was a little wiser about how much trust to place in an ice ax; I had a wild story to tell; yet surely there was more. What that more is I can't say. I am still back on my airy perch high on the Sphinx, shuffling in my boots, doing arm-windmills to keep warm, one of my best friends lying two thousand feet beneath me. In the space of ten minutes I had gone from wondering why Hans was taking so long, to believing him dead, to grieving his absence.

Now here he is, beside me in the passenger seat, alive as ever. But what if Hans really had died on the Sphinx? What would I have told his family, his girlfriend Helen? Would I pull out that old cliché: "He died doing what he loved?" That was the stock response of the Bozeman outdoor community when talking about a climber or skier who died in the mountains. That phrase always grated on me, though I never knew why. After climbing the Sphinx, I know. Not only is the phrase too facile; it is an Orwellian euphemism. It seeks to cover up an ugly truth about those of us who risk our lives in the mountains—that what we do is indefensibly selfish. What if one of these days on one of these peaks I get whacked? Would it be any comfort to my parents, to my brother, to my sister to hear those words, "Well, at least he died doing what he loved?"

We get back to Bozeman that night at 9:30 p.m. I drop Hans off at his place on Eighth and College, the little white house that shelters a rotating stream of climbers who need a room for a week, a month, several years.

"So, it's November. The road up to Hyalite won't be passable for much longer," Hans says. He's got a plan. "We'll have to start skiing in soon. Before the next big storm we should go hop on that mixed climb 'The Thrill is Gone'—I heard it's in." He gets out of the car, reaches for his pack in the back seat.

The Thrill is Gone. I think of the Sphinx, of that face scarred by eons of wind and storm. I see it staring north, guarding Lone Mountain and the Spanish Peaks, those lifeless pyramids of ice and stone. "'The Thrill is Gone.' Yeah."

"How about this Saturday? Give us time to rest up. Pick me up at seven?"

"I don't know, man. I just don't know."

WE STILL CLIMBED TOGETHER the rest of that winter, Hans and I, and on into the summer. But I found that I climbed more out of momentum than desire. When high up on some peak or frozen waterfall, I felt something important was passing me by, like I was a traveler who had already missed several trains and couldn't afford to miss the next one. I came to think that God was on one of those trains and that perhaps I had better get on one and see if it would take me somewhere that climbing hadn't.

And so I left. I left Bozeman, the mountains, my climbing friends, Hans. The minimalist game—divide the pile in half, divide the remainder in half again—was no longer one I could play. Or rather, I played it too well. I shed all my gear. I left everything.

I tried to explain this to Hans. Over a Colombo's pesto pie and a pitcher of Full Sail, our now-ritualized post-climb meal that had assumed a near-sacramental significance, I tried to tell him. "Climbing's just not doing it for me," I said. My search was a spiritual one, I explained, which explained nothing. Spiritual—I thought. That word's too vague to mean anything. It gained no traction on what was missing, on why climbing left me feeling hollow. I said something about how climbing was a quest, a seeking after something greater than myself. It was God I sought when I went to the mountains, and I wasn't finding him there. Perhaps the problem was climbing—the unnecessary risks it involved, the selfishness of my pursuit. I was like Ahab in reverse: my motive and object were sane; it was my means that were mad. I couldn't explain all this to Hans. But I think he knew. He had seen my enthusiasm wane.

"Why go to divinity school, though?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said, and that was true. It wasn't like I had received "the call." More like gentle tugs that became a magnetic pull toward Something I could neither explain nor comprehend. I tried out a line I'd read from Augustine: "Fides quarens intellectum—faith seeking understanding. That's the most I know," I said. It's still the most I know.

As I retreated from the mountains Hans headed further into them, giving his life over more completely to climbing. He climbed bigger, more difficult routes. In the storm of his youth, he made expeditions to the world's great ranges: the Peruvian Andes, the Tibetan Himalaya, the Ellsworth Mountains of Antarctica. Hans not only climbed these mountains—he began skiing them; on terrain where most would want a rope, Hans was pointing his boards downhill and letting them run. He sought the pristine chutes, the never-before-skied couloirs. Years after we climbed it, Hans returned with a friend and skied the North Face of the Sphinx.

It was on one of these first descent skiing expeditions—September 1999, the beginning of my second year at divinity school—that Alex Lowe was killed. He was hit by an avalanche on the lower slopes of Shishapangma, a remote peak in Tibet. Hans was with Alex on that trip. He watched as

Alex was buried beneath several tons of ice and snow, where he lies to this day.

And then on May 10, 2001, an avalanche hit me. It was an avalanche of words, left on my answering machine by Hans's girlfriend Helen, words that quickly buried me beneath their weight, their finality: Hans, Chamonix, accident.

Between sobs Helen told me the story that I would come to hear many times in the coming weeks: Hans had been skiing the Gervisuiti Couloir on Mount Blanc de Tacul in Chamonix, France when he hit a patch of ice. He fell 1,500 feet down the sixty-degree couloir, suffering massive trauma. A helicopter swept him off the mountain, but his injuries proved too severe. He died en route to Geneva. He was thirty years old.

WHAT DID THE MOUNTAINS GIVE OR FAIL TO GIVE?

"The mountains are life-giving," Alex used to say, and so they are. From the mountains comes a welling up of deep-down things, a profound sense of life's inherent majesty. Among mountains my thoughts bend toward eternity.

But the Sphinx and her pyramids had become idols. Their loosening grip on me was being supplanted by the unshakeable grip of God. Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God, but my Great Wanting was not so much a wanting to find as a wanting to be found.

When the apostle Paul arrived in Athens, he climbed Mars Hill. On the summit, in the Areopagus, he encountered a group of Athenians. He told these Athenians that earlier, while touring their city, he had found an altar bearing the inscription, "to an unknown god." You may not know it, Paul told them, but it's really God that you worship, the God who created the world and everything in it, who gives to mortals life and breath and all things. You will search for God, and perhaps grope for him and find him—the One in whom we live and move and have our being. You will search, Paul said with surely a trace of irony, though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

I don't climb much anymore. I have a lovely wife, a six-month old son, a church community to whom I'm accountable. I know my presence among them all is cherished, that I'm depended upon. My life is no longer my own.

Still, I wonder this: when I was climbing in flow, when my ego was gone, when I found my body moving in sync with gravity, weather, rock, and ice, were not my climbs small acts of worship, one creature's hymn of praise to his Creator, to a God unknown?

BEFORE WE LEAVE THE SPHINX, Hans and I take in our last aerial view. The oblique rays of a dying winter's evening skip across Lone Mountain

and the Spanish Peaks to the north, little arrows of fire touching down, igniting a snow cornice, a rocky arête. So lovely this created earth, this world of mountains. Before the sun drops behind the Tobacco Roots, there is still time to bask in the orange light, time enough for its warmth to seep into our stiff joints, time to revel in the glory of it all. Here on the Sphinx's summit we are still innocent of what's to come. We can't yet trace the arc our unclaimed lives will follow.

In the fading alpenglow as Hans and I linger on our airy perch, I watch our shadows glide down the mountain. Their giant arms reach, spread over, and embrace the darkening valley. Like expectant children our shadows tarry on the slope, waiting for our tired bodies. For all must go together when we leave this warm, well-lighted summit, when we begin making our way back toward home. **F**

Jonathan Padua

Typhoon Songs

I. Premonition

The signs are there Maritess thinks as she fillets the large mullet that will be her evening dinner, the serrated knife slicing through the flesh and small bones, the slick of guts and salty blood rising past her hands and lapping at her elbows. She has lived on Guam long enough to tell the signs of a typhoon, long before the warning sirens bellow across the island. By that time, only the tourists are the ones who don't know, left to scurry like roaches to their hotel rooms, left to watch in disappointed awe as the winds uproot palm trees as easily as rice is plucked from the paddies.

The way her knees feel soft and pulpy with each step, the way the air stands so hot and still that even the birds have stopped chirping, means the typhoon should arrive in two days, maybe less. And this typhoon will be a punishing one, she worries, a vengeful and angry storm, not like the ones that have visited Guam in the past three years. Those were more rain than wind, more nuisance than crisis. This time, though, the fear is inside her, gnawing at her bones, but Maritess ignores it, concentrating instead on pressing the knife blade close to the spine of the mullet as she tears through it lengthwise, making sure that none of the flesh goes to waste. If she is frugal enough, this one mullet can feed her for two days.

Around her, the neighbors on both sides also worry, Maritess can tell, though they show it in quiet ways. Today, as she passed by Manny Escobal's shabby home on the way to the market, he rolled himself to the front of his chicken wire fence to greet her, the tires of his battered wheelchair jostling in and out of the dips of his weedy lawn. "This is vicious weather, manang," he said, smiling, a brown, crooked finger pointing to the sky. "Too dangerous for a widow by herself. Perhaps you should spend the nights at my place until the ordeal has passed. Better for a cripple and an old woman to suffer together than to suffer alone, yes?"

Maritess carefully wraps the innards and greasy scales in yesterday's newspaper. She places them in the freezer. It is only Tuesday and the garbage man will not come to town until Friday. If she leaves the entrails in the garbage bin the stray cats will come creeping by in the middle of the night and topple the bin over, lured by the deep stink of intestines and gills, fighting in her front yard. That's another bad sign, Maritess thinks, to hear the sound of cats fighting, the ghostly mewling and low, guttural whining, especially late at night. A sign of death, mostly, but it could mean anything bad. It's just superstition, Maritess knows, but still, given

the situation, she begins to believe.

II. Planning

The worse thing about being a store owner in a time like this, Fredrico thought, was that he should be at home with his wife, who was eight months pregnant and prone to calling him in the middle of the day, asking, *Are you coming home soon, Mahal?* even though she knew he would be home by eight. Instead, he was bolstering the six glass windows of the tiny general store with thick boards of plywood, both inside and out, sealing it on all sides with vast amounts of duct tape. After he had shooed the last of the customers out of the door he sent the two teenager cashiers home and took down the heavily varnished sign that hung outside the store. The sign, which said ***Agana Heights Family Market*** and had been there before Fredrico became owner, when he was still a customer buying cigarettes and popsicles on warm June days.

Boarding up the windows was a difficult task for a small, delicate man like Fredrico; the planks were larger than his arms could stretch, and splinters from the cheap plywood painfully burrowed their way into his fingertips and palms. He did not want to be store owner, even for a small backwoods store like this; Fredrico didn't look the part, and he was short, not much more than five feet tall, skinny and whispy as a marungay bean. He would have been comfortable being an accountant, a clerk, anything that required a desk, quiet, diligent paperwork, and minimal communication.

It was a futile cause, Fredrico knew, the typhoon would probably break through the plywood, shatter the glass of the windowpanes, and ruin the meager amount of merchandise inside the store, leaving the rest for looters and robbers. Then what? No store, no house, no water, all the essentials, gone. No child too, perhaps, if things got really worse. A pessimist by nature, he thought to himself, not spitefully. The way the clouds grew fatter and darker and lower, for three days now, Fredrico didn't have any time left, and he cursed himself for not planning ahead. Maybe tomorrow, maybe even tonight, the rain and wind would come, gently at first, then furiously rising into a torrent of stinging wet needles and winds strong enough to lift cars on top of homes.

Courage and responsibility were becoming a problem. There was his home to worry about, his house had windows and doors and things inside to protect, but there was a nagging sense of responsibility that plagued Fredrico, something that told him, just one more board, one more layer of duct tape. But still, there was something else inside him, something more powerful and quiet and cowardly, an urgent, insistent desire that told him to abandon everything and run. Fredrico imagined it clearly: the hot wind in his face, the soles of his battered sneakers stomping down the barren

gravel road, his arms pumping, the red dust rising behind him in angry spirals. The idea defies logic, he was on an island, after all, one that is no longer than twenty-five miles from coast to coast, a place where everyone knows the business of everyone. But still, Fredrico thought it would be so easy to put down the board, to just run, not even locking the doors of the store. He would just run from the store, from the typhoon, from his home, until his legs ached and his breath was exhausted, until there was nothing left in front of him and everything, everyone, had been left behind.

III. Promises

A fat drop of rain splattered the young housewife on the cheek as she carried the last of the dying rosemary shrubs into her house; a bad sign of things to come. There were maybe six or seven of the potted plants left to carry, though the mango tree and baby rose bush would have to bear through the typhoon outside. She wiped the sweat off her pale brow. It was unbelievably humid even though the sky grew bleak and ominous and the winds tousled her hair across her eyes, making low and evil whistling noises across the valley. An hour ago, her husband had gone away to fetch a few bottles of water and extra batteries, even though they had enough to last them for a few days, maybe even a week if they were frugal.

Everyone had decisions to make, the high school teacher's wife was well aware, but she loathed this place with a cold, undeniable passion ever since she and her husband arrived in the small town of Barrigada six months ago. A paradise, he had promised her, we'll be living in the Garden of Eden. Bushels and bushels of oregano, he had said, staring into her eyes: sage, peppercorn, thyme, even coriander. She had bought into it too, initially, whimsically gobbling up pamphlets and brochures that told her Guam was a tropical haven, over six thousand different types of flora, and close to a thousand of them indigenous to Guam, not realizing that the dry, hot air would turn her herb and spice plants into dried, brittle stalks two weeks after their arrival. She remembered standing in her small garden under that punishing sun, surrounded by pots and pots of dead or dying herbs, weeping silently over the sheer silliness and tragedy of it all. Her jaw clenched at the memory. She hated him for that lie. A quiet, sullen bitterness that was buried in her gut, even though he knew no better, a high school chemistry teacher, after all, not a botanist.

In her head, the housewife began compiling a list of things she hated about Guam. The weather, for one thing. This insane, maddening typhoon, another. The people too, she realized. She hated the way they stared at her, unabashed and unashamed, as if it were their right to gawk at her slim freckled legs whenever she wore shorts. She hated their unsmiling, suspicious brown faces as she stood in line at the grocery store, the way they

whispered to each other in their warbling, clucking tongue. It would have been better if her husband had taught chemistry near a city like Tumon, where pale, freckled skin was just as common as asphalt roads and air-conditioned supermarkets.

As she carried the large ceramic pot of mustard seed into the living room the wife came upon a revelation. Tomorrow, maybe a few days after the typhoon, she would sit her husband down and tell him that she had enough. She would draw clear and definitive lines, a simple matter of priorities and perspectives. It's this awful island or me. She will speak to him in the future tense. She will be on a plane back home to Oregon in two weeks and it will be his choice if he is going to be on the plane with her. The divorce papers can be sent through the mail, she will say to him, not threateningly, but clear and distinct and firm. We can be happy, she will say to him, we can go back and be as we were before we ever came here. Happy.

The wife lifted another pot, this time a pitiful shrub of sage leaves, and carried it into her house. In a few weeks she would be back in Corvalis, sipping hot English tea with her neighbors, telling them how dreadfully hot it was down there, how she and her husband lived through a typhoon. They would all laugh and shake their heads when she would tell them the story of how she had to transplant all of her herbs and shrubs into the safety of her house. It was like having a forest in your living room, she would exclaim, the dirt just got everywhere. How horrible, they would say, smiling because it was something that happened in the past. The housewife nodded hopefully at the thought; it gave her some relief.

IV. Passion

Gloria lets her boyfriend in through the back door right before the typhoon hits, right before the sun had set and before the gusts begin to pick up. Her parents are volunteering at the Red Cross and his parents at the little Baptist church where his father is a minister helping to gather some of the homeless and the poor into the church basement. Both of them were told to stay inside their homes and shut all the doors and windows. It can't be too bad here, her father had said, the walls are thick and the hills will protect us from the worst of the winds. This, she thinks to herself, is a just compromise.

Through the window, she points out the system her family uses to collect rainwater if and when the water pipes are shut down; the network of rain gutters wrapped around the roof, interlocked like mechanical legs, spiraling down into a few trashbag-lined cans below.

"Cool," he says, nodding, the corners of his lips curled up into a shy, timid smile. In the dim light, she can see the man that he will become:

sturdy and brown, like teakwood, his bony limbs becoming wrapped with tight, sinewy muscles and veins, his wide oval eyes sinking into their sockets and the creases in his cheeks and forehead becoming longer and deeper. A handsome man, she thinks, a builder of homes, perhaps, a foreman for a construction crew, a welder working the steel cargo ships in Apra harbor.

They walk silently through her hallway in the dark, to her bedroom, hand in hand, the electricity running up and down their arms, their pulses beating with sudden ferocity. They are just teenagers, true, but the winds that rattle the windows and the sound of rain pouring on the roof seems so far away with his hand in hers, the slick of sweat between their palms, the way their fingers interlock to form a perfect fit, the slight sinking feeling in her feet as they walk over the thick, plush carpet. All this delicious sensation, she realizes. Outside, the rain and the darkness swirl by, and in the distance she can hear a faint snapping and crackling, the sound of branches breaking and trees being uprooted, and for a quick, nervous second she worries about the roof above her own head and the roof that covers her parents' heads a few miles away.

"Come over here," she says to her boyfriend as they lay down on her bed and wrap themselves in her blanket in the darkness. It is not a proposal, but a command. And with quick enthusiasm they're completely naked, unabashed and unashamed, full of hopeful yearning, their garments thrown carelessly beside the bed. Never mind the winds rattling against the window, never mind the rain pouring down in torrential sheets; there is only a single thought, a sole desire, as he eases himself into her. She sighs a bit and she feels his body go tight and rigid above her, his breath a humid breeze on her face and breasts, they're that close. Gloria commits this breathless moment to memory, her hands mapping the terrain of his body, the plump contours of his lips, the rigid buttons of his spine. Suddenly, all inhibitions and worries disappear and the tiny, dark space underneath the sheets becomes a safe haven from the madness outside, a shelter where the two teenagers lose themselves, swallowed in each other's eyes, mouths, and limbs.

Outside, trees begin to groan and creek in the torrential winds like elderly, emaciated bones, a faraway reminder of the chaos outside. But for them, caught underneath the blanket, there is only this wonderful ache, this moist explosion of kisses, the small, selfish hope that the storm never ends.

V. Prayer

On their knees, Rogelita's small family gathers in the meager living room lighted only by candles, the generator having been shut off only a few minutes ago. For a while, the four of them sit silently, letting their vision

adjust to the darkness, the shape of their lives taking gradual definition before them. There is a leak somewhere too, Rogelita knows, dripping down from the ceiling, she can hear it, and the leaking water begins to seep into the carpet and fills the air with a cold, damp mugginess like standing near the bottom of a waterfall, and it is then Rogelita knows that their house cannot last much longer in this unforgiving weather. The roof is only made of tin, and the walls a few inches thick; a small, ramshackled home, and she knows that one strong, unforgiving gust could blow that all away.

"Come," she says to her husband and daughters, gathering them up reluctantly from the floors, "It's time." Somewhere, a window is already broken, and the wind that swirls around the house flickers the melted candle stubs, making ghosts dance across the walls. There are four of them, a father and mother and their two young daughters, and they circle around a small table with a framed picture of the Virgin Mary in the center, her eyes soft and sleepy and benevolent, and they all make the sign of the cross and join their hands together in prayer. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you*. Outside, the rain and wind turn vengeful; a million angry hands slapping and pounding on their walls, doors, and roof. *Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus*. Rogelita holds the hand of her youngest daughter in the left hand, the oldest on the right, and she can feel their smalls hands trembling in hers. She squeezes them tight, trying to show them courage and fearlessness even though she is more afraid than all of them put together, because she alone knows what the worst for this family could be.

Something thuds violently against the thin wall, a tree limb, a car door maybe, something large and blunt, causing Rogelita's walls to sway back and forth. Her two daughters begin to whimper. "Mama," is all her youngest daughter says, over and over again, her eyes squeezed shut. "Mama."

At first, Rogelita prays to the Virgin Mary for abstract things, the safety of the world, to make sure no one gets hurt, and no one gets injured, but when the roof finally begins to tear, Rogelita's prayers become direct and straightforward. *Virgin Mary, please keep our roof together. Please stop the windows from breaking. Please let nothing hit our small, humble home. Please keep all of us healthy and safe*. Rogelita begins to make the sign but then hastily adds, *If it be in your will, of course*.

VI. Pets

The next morning when Eddy woke up from bed and looked out the window his yard was littered with dead birds. It was an oddly bright day, but the wetness still lingered in a heavy humidity that gave the air a thick, breathable tangibility. There was a fallen tree too, the old eucalyptus tree that shaded the front porch had been uprooted and splayed diagonally

across the square patch of lawn, snarled tendrils pointing to the gray sky with clumps of soil attached to them, like an accusation. But it was the birds that stood out to Eddy the most, maybe twenty or thirty pigeons and finches, dead and scattered between the branches and debris.

Eddy's father opened the door and nodded at him gruffly, his skin already shiny with sweat, hands already stained with brown, wet mud. "I'm going to need help with the eucalyptus," he said. From the way he gruffly spoke Eddy knew his father had tried to do it himself and failed. As his father walked out of the bedroom, he left behind heavy footprints of mud on the floor and a slick, brown handprint where he had pushed open the door.

The first thing Eddy wanted to do was to find Jet-Jet, his mixed puppy not yet two years old whose short, black hairs could be found on the tables and chairs, on the unvarnished wood floors of their home. He couldn't be far, sleeping in the toolshed, perhaps. "No," his father said, "housework first. The dog will come back eventually." He thrust a black garbage bag into Eddy's hands. "We need to move the branches first. And get the birds out of the way."

Eddy had wanted to keep Jet-Jet indoors last night. His father refused. "You don't keep the pets in the house," he had said, "that's the way it is. That's the way I did it. They go out, find their way around, and they come back in the morning." Eddy had protested, pointed to the blackening sky and swirling winds, but the way his father tightened his mouth and curled his hands into small, stony fists, Eddy knew that there was no argument.

There was a strange smell in the air as Eddy spent the early morning picking up branches and dead birds and placing them into plastic garbage bags, a cough syrup scent that made the air heavy and musky. The eucalyptus, he realized. In the distance, maybe two or three houses down, an old woman was wailing. As his father made his way toward him, Eddy put his head down and began stuffing the broken branches with a fierce, quiet determination. "After we're done with the yard, we are going to have to help them rebuild."

Eddy looked out past his yard. Debris blanketed everything. The small street was littered with leaves and branches. Among the clutter Eddy could see the remains of his neighbors lives, a soiled blue teddy bear, a broken picture frame a few feet next to it, the large piece of corrugated sheet metal that used to be someone's wall. *What's the point?* is what Eddy wanted to say, *Next year's typhoon will just crumble them like toothpicks*. But Eddy was too young to fight his father. Fourteen only, and a scrawny fourteen, too, his clothes hung loosely upon his shoulders and low around his waist and his biceps were as thin as his wrists. Only two months ago he had spotted the tiny sprouts of hair peeking from the corners of his upper lip.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Dumanjig came by the house with a large trash bag, her thin, graceful hands stained with dirt and something that looked

like blood. Her house, like Eddy and his father's, was a one story home made from gray, sturdy concrete, the only two in the neighborhood. "I think this is yours," she said to Eddy, grimacing, "I found it in the garden."

Eddy nodded and thanked her, taking the garbage bag which was surprisingly light. He laid it down gently on top of the grass. There was a painful itching in his hands, probably from the Eucalyptus sap, embedded deep underneath his palms, and no matter how hard he scratched, no matter how hard he rubbed, the itching would not stop. He wiped the sweat off his brow and picked up his garbage bag, half-full of branches and finches, and continued cleaning up the yard, dreading having to move the eucalyptus off the lawn and into the street for the government workers to haul it away, whenever that may be. The yard looked so much smaller with it lying there, dead and immobile, like the severed finger of some wooden giant.

VII. Party

Now a week after the typhoon, and still no electricity, Joven decides to throw a barbeque. There are freezers full of thawed steaks, chickens, and pork bellies, enough to feed his friends and neighbors. He's lucky, he knows, after all he has his house intact, his family safe, and enough water stored up to keep his toilet flushing. The whole town of Mangilao has been created lucky; an upper-middle class housing complex in the middle of Guam with reinforced windows and concrete bunkers that never need to be used.

Joven tells his wife and two children about the barbeque and they are only too happy to have something break the monotony. They have been impatient with him for the past few days, bored silly without any TV or videogames and snapping at him for having to measure every bath by the bucketful.

Word gets around, as it always does, and suddenly the neighborhood becomes electric with activity. More freezers are emptied out, more steaks and chickens, grills are taken out of storage, marinades are prepared, and one of the more prosperous neighbors brings out three cases of warm Budwesier and a crate full of bottled water.

The conversation is lively at the barbeque, about thirty or so of Joven's neighbors lingering in and out of his backyard, the five grills churning out grilled chicken breasts and steaks the size of dinner plates. They talk about the typhoon mostly. *This close, my goodness, this close the tree was from smashing into our window.* Or, *Huy pare, I cannot take this anymore, six days without washing my hair ... the shampoo, I can never rinse out with such little water.* Or, *I cannot take this too much longer. We are old already. Better, isn't it, to go back to Cavite, where I don't have to worry about my floor becoming flooded, yes?*

Joven pats the bulge of his belly, round and bulbous like a pomelo

fruit, full of grilled meat and lukewarm beer. The afternoon takes on a slow, lazy quality for him, the hours drifting by leisurely, the conversation of his neighbors like the low buzz of flies. A success, he thinks, the alcohol floating through his body, and Joven thinks himself a hero.

He calls the attention of his neighbors. A toast, he thinks. *It's a good time to be alive, isn't it?* he says, laughing, raising his can of warm beer in the air. Some of the neighbors, the more superstitious ones, eye him suspiciously. The old women begin to to titter amongst themselves: What kind of fool would challenge his luck like that? But eventually all of them raise their cans and glasses in acknowledgement, letting the celebratory mood take over, because Joven is, after all, very, very right.

VIII. Purchases

As the two teenage Filipino walk through the empty shopping center, one of the girls, the taller one with a mouthful of purple braces, makes a comment about how the malls on Guam have seen better days. "Everything has just gotten so lame," she says, sighing dramatically. "We used to have cool shops."

The shorter one, with the spangle bracelets on her reedy, brown arms that keep a jingling beat whenever she walks, nods enthusiastically. "*Oo nga*," she says, "I'd do anything for a Banana Republic to open up again."

They walk past closed shop after closed shop in the two-story open air mall, the former Gap, the Sbarro that was once a J.P. Pepperoni, all of them closed down after the typhoon, which has become an old, old topic by now. The building itself is a skeleton; a dried up fountain in the courtyard, no music coming from the speakers set high in the ceiling. One of the empty vendor stalls, a former Orange Julius, with cracked glass panes that resemble huge, monstrous Plexiglas spider webs, still has all the juice machine inside, and bits of glass are scattered across the counter like a rippled surface of frozen dew. The purple-braced girl gives an ugly frown. "You think they would hire someone would clean that up by now," she says.

None of the remaining shops have anything worth while, nothing notable from the States, just the local shops who sell the same boring clothes. *So lame*, is what they are both thinking as they pass by one store, staring at the mannequin wearing a hideous neon green T-shirt with the words *Be Cool* in bold, black letters across the front.

After walking around gets boring, the two girls find an empty table and sit. They drum their fingers and take sips of Coke out of paper cups. A pair of Chamorro girls walk past them, just around their age, poorly dressed, the hems of their dark, frilly dresses tattered at the ends from being dragged on the ground. The Chamorro girls speak softly to each other in their warbling native tongue, their arms linked side by side as they navigate the mall,

their eyes nervously darting from side to side. The two girls eye them with a blend of pity and disdain. "So *brodie*," they giggle to each other.

"It'd be nice to leave here, wouldn't it?" The girl with the spangle bracelets says. "Move to the states; get away from boring old Guam. Maybe after high school, after we save up, take a trip, and then never come back. It'd be so *exciting*, wouldn't it?"

The purple-braced girl picks listlessly at a scab on her elbow. "Yeah," she says, tiredly, the disappointment already in her voice. "It would be. But where would we get the money for that in a place like this?"

"Yeah." The girl with the spangle bracelets puts her head down, sullen and defeated. "I know you're right." And she stares out the broken windows of the mall, past the asphalt parking lot and out into the broken, green parkway outside. Some of the half-torn trees are begining to grow again, little hopeful sprouts and twigs of green budding out from the ragged stumps. A beautiful island, she thinks. But the thought is fleeting and soon her mind wanders off to other desires and wishes, none of which have to do with here, imagining places and countries where everything is clean and unbroken, where everything stays beautiful always. F

Rachel M. Simon

The Windshield Factory

The unintended byproducts of the windshield factory
make it cold enough to freeze Molly's nose hairs crispy.
"Welcome to Maine!" it announces, "I'll teach you how to layer."

On the outside we wear a less perfect version
of the plans our parents made after the midwife left the room.

Between that and our magma, we've piled on
the bad haircuts and glasses, that were pink or red or blue
and took up a geographically significant portion of face.

All this external stuff can itch.
It never actually touches the skin.

Flimsily placed next in line are life's unwritten liner notes.
The scene from high school where someone illustrated tact
and drew the frontier between the two of you.

The day the babysitter's dad died and you rushed to the hospital
in her too-small-to-be-safe car. My father was taken to that hospital
thirteen years later, with a concussion reminiscent of Pam.

You can survive in near-freezing water
for the minutes your body keeps blood
in your organs and sacrifices your soccer career.

In the part of you that's always cooking there are
organic potholders to protect you from the prickly pear.

Franz Wright

Poet's Room in a Museum

A white sheet
of paper upon
which the words
The undecided light or

It's snowing
in the past appear
and vanish one
by one

Three lbs. of sentient meat
afloat
inside a big pickle jar

saying, Where did I come from
Where
are my dead friends

White sheet upon which the following—

Poem may be defined as the voice of some human being happier and more intelligent than anyone who exists

Poem is not composed in states of exaltation: most that are, in fact, result in total doggerel and, frankly, insufferable puke. True poem might be defined as the most successful inducer (in reader and startled author alike) of that hopelessly long—for state of exaltation

Poem in other words may or may not result from inspiration but must (in reader and author alike) produce it—

Poem should create the impression of a single correctly-spelled word

No poem without its dark punch line, wherever it may occur, the anti-punchline

Lastly poem should always be completely clear, completely concrete and completely inexplicable, like reality itself; poem's purpose is to transcend mere words, contributing to reality,and finally joining it, just as our purpose is to finally die, entering earth, water or fire to rejoin what has heretofore only been perceived, enjoyed, suffered. It will if successful allow one who possesses a gift for gazing with stillness and emptiness into it to pass, for a moment, into the eternal future and origin, no longer in the world but an inseparable element of it, and so forth

appears and vanishes

one word
at
a
time. . .

Franz Wright

Wake

I saw my friend the other day
we were all attending his wake
and he was the only one there
who looked like he was well
Somehow he'd gotten well
He looked like he was doing fine there
Everyone else in the room looked just awful

Strange how little say I had in all I said

That's what his relaxed and now youthful face seemed
just about to say
anyway those were the words
that abruptly appeared in my head

And: I have heard God's silence like the sun
and longed to
change

And one way or another I was going to
And if I could not manage to do it, it would be done
to me

You can't chose
where you come from

But looking down into the white face I knew
one day I would have to
choose

Heaven

Only Your friends can
render, here, visible
the kingdom
that bright glory

Look my friend is there

Franz Wright

Everyone's Elegy

Not all mankind will be cast into fire, though
quite a number of them were
during the decade preceding my
birth and no doubt even more will be
shortly. Why? This
no one knows—no one deserves this
and all deserve this, almost
all. But why
those particular ones, unremarkable, those
before and soon?
Only You know. And only You
know which group, the spared or murdered,
represent the doomed and which
the blessed—
the ones in the fire burned
clean of themselves, or those still remaining here
in this shocking place that more or less randomly vanished them. In
any event,
blessed are the alone, for they shall be
befriended and blessed
the dead
for they shall live, perhaps
for the first time, still unborn
in this gorgeous hell of the material.
They've inherited now
all the peace of the universe, endless
night, sleep, still nameless majority of the stars.

*

D., 1959-2004

Until the sky gives up its
unendurable beauty of Bach heard by someone alone
in her room dying, I
wish for this sadness to leave
but it will never leave.
But I am also glad: I know that

at this very moment
your poor head is resting
on Christ's breast; I know you
are comfortably seated
at the Buddha's feet, listening
forever to his calm voice
and waiting
on me,
me
still failing
here, toward you, and
following
in the bodiless footsteps of God, most peripheral
and unlikely of followers,
keeping an eye on Him
from a distance and hoping to remain
among the unnoticed
in love.
I am certain
you have now contributed your creature's
small light to the great peal of Light
still issuing from the beginning, and
rapidly traveling toward us from the end. . .

Jessica Breheny

Flyaway

To prevent suicides, the school had the windows on the second and third floors welded shut. Or maybe they think we'll fly away.

Last winter a pigeon flew in through an open window in Science, and I netted it with my raincoat, rescuing it from the other students who had it cornered against a supply cabinet. I let it go through the third floor window before it was welded. A wish. A message in a fairy tale. Carrie, who went away at the end of the year to live with her father in Florida, and who wore so much make-up everyone called her "clown," called me "vermin girl" after that.

It's true. All my friends are Flotsam, Park people. I'm a half-runaway.

Now there's no chance of pigeons or wishes or messages, just all of us in here on the first day of english under the perforated ceiling instead of the sky.

I brush cookie crumbs off my lap. Sang, who sits across the row from me, is in the corner of the room running the blade of an exacto knife along the edges of the window. It is early-September hot and with the windows closed it's been getting worse all day. My clothes absorb the heat—the black rag-doll skirt, giant men's shirt, and half-shrunk cardigan I got at the thrift store. All my clothes are black and torn. My mother told me black clothes are a sign of depression and at-risk behavior. She read it in the book she has kept on her bedside table all summer, a message from the emergency broadcast system just for me: *Zero Tolerance*.

Zeros are round and weightless, flyaways like me when I sleep curled in a ball in the coat room behind the ruined theater, half outside, away from my mother, where I can breathe. My mother thinks I sleep in my room. She goes to bed so early and wakes up so late, it's easy to sneak out.

I have to be careful because my mother's zero is heavy and comes with "consequences." When she's not around I read the parts she marks with the fashion-magazine-collage bookmarks I made her in sixth grade. There's an entire chapter on truancy. Since I missed over half of tenth grade last year, almost every other page in that chapter has bookmarks sticking out. The book says that truancy is a high risk behavior, and that it leads to other behaviors, like taking drugs and joining cults, described in other chapters. The book has "Reminder" boxes in the margins that say in giant bold letters, "**Freedom is a Privilege, Not a Right**." At the end of each chapter are recommendations, like military school and residential treatment centers. Last month she started going to a Zero Tolerance support group in the basement of a Methodist church. Zeros are falling rocks I need to avoid.

Sang laughs. He does that—just starts laughing and sometimes hits

his head against his desk. His black hair falls into his face so that all you can see is his hair and his thick shuddering lips and his mouthful of sharp teeth framed by a bristle of moustache hairs. In seventh grade I avoided him as much as possible because he was an outcast, too. He would try to make eye contact with me, or catch up to me when I walked home from school. In eighth grade he gave me a gold-plated phoenix pendant which I pretended to throw away but which I still have on the bottom of a jewelry box with a once-spinning ballerina on a rusty spring.

Sang mumbles, "Safety," in short bursts of air.

Some girls I don't remember from last year notice and giggle, tinkly sounds like crystal glasses rattling together. They have the smooth hardness of popularity.

Sang says to himself, "Focus on safety." This is the slogan for the year, posted on signs in the hallways and on the marquis in the parking lot. It's a response to last year when a twelfth grader, who was in a gang, shot an eleventh grader, who wasn't in a gang, because he was on the pay phone for too long. Even though that was at Hollywood High, now there are rent-a-cops patrolling the hallways at Vista.

The second bell vibrates through my body.

Mr. Self says, "OK, let's get started."

Sang sits down across from me, leans over, and says: "You *might* be able to kill yourself, but you'd have to land just right." He holds his hand flat to show the correct angle. "You'd need *internal* damage."

I watch the minute hand on the clock above the board twitch backward before it snaps forward. The clock's a zero with numbers in it; its hands reach two o'clock—almost ta-da and almost a shrug. The room smells of ink and chalk and linoleum. Carved into my desk is the gang name "Sleepy" in perfect calligraphy. I'm sleepy too and put my head down. The blood behind my ears sounds like the freeway traffic I can hear from our apartment. The sun comes through the smoky glass, and I feel it slow-cooking my arm. Mr. Self shushes a rustle of backpacks and notebooks from the back of the room. A broken fluorescent bulb sizzles above a table of elements.

THE BOTTOM OF MY SKIRT TRAILS on the sidewalk of the once wealthy neighborhood lined with mansions. I can feel the tree-root-broken sidewalk through my canvas shoes. My backpack is heavy with food, a blanket, and my textbooks—I can't miss any more school. The houses here have turrets, busy brick mosaic walls, flounces of ivy, birds of paradise nibbling at each other. A marine layer settles down around the streets—droplets of smog. The air is finally cool and easy to breathe.

In the summers, during day camp, I used to hide in the abandoned theater next to the park. There was a coat room, small, a nest of plaster and broken boards. I got in by pushing through tufts of morning glories.

From there I could watch the other kids make lanyards and pot holders and play touch football and capture the flag. I can still fit into the hole in the drywall, and this is where I sleep now, near my friends who live in the projection booth lit with candles and flashlights.

I can't sleep in my bedroom anymore. Even my hair feels like it's growing out in tendrils and climbing the walls, taking up all the space and air in the room. My room is padded with posters, encyclopedias, stuffed animals I won on the pier, or other people won, or were given to me at birthday parties. I put the stuffed animals in the garbage bin once and my mother washed them and put them back. They are always looking at me with their lidless cartoon eyes—"What happened to you?" I think they think, because I'm not how I used to be even though I can't remember how I was.

I jay-walk across four lanes of traffic to the park, a man-made canyon of lawn sloping down from the street. Tonight the park's a bowl of fog and playground shapes blurry against the streetlights. When I was little, the park was a lot of brown grass where I tried to learn to use the boomerang I got for Christmas. The air smells like flowers and car exhaust, and I can see the orange of a garbage can fire by the playground.

My body makes a long narrow shadow across the park that points to my friends. Max and Dru are adults who are like kids. Sunny doesn't live in the theater. His house is three shopping carts bungee-corded together, filled with everything he owns. When he wants to sleep, he rolls out a piece of foam and sleeps on top of his carts. Max, Dru, and Sunny found me, a stowaway in the coat room, after a fight with my mother. They brought me a blanket; Dru reached out and wrapped a curl of my hair around her index finger; Max made me a cup of powdered hot chocolate with Brandy; Sunny dug into a pile in one of the carts and found jeans and a dashiki for me to wear because the rain was washing mud onto my bare feet and soaking my jeans. "Little one," Dru kept saying. "You're just a little one," and I felt like for once in my life someone could see me, small and whole.

Dru and Sunny are on the swings and Max is sitting at the edge of the slide rolling a cigarette.

"Honey, I'm home," I sing, as I trudge through the sandpit.

Dru flies off the swing and sticks a gymnast landing.

She hugs me and says, "Darling," like Zsa Zsa Gabor.

Sunny grabs his guitar from the sand and strums a chord, singing, "Elma, sweet Elma." He likes to make up songs with my name in them. He used to be in a band called the Flying Folks in the '60s and would make up songs right on the spot in front of an audience.

Max licks the edge of his rolling paper and then hands me a half-drunk bottle of rum. His hands are armored with rings—skulls, peace symbols, tiger's eye, jade. The first sip of rum draws a hot line from my mouth to my stomach, a reminder that I'm not just an empty tumbleweed, a float-

ing zero.

Dru drips with beads and scarves and scraps of bright remnants. She is tiny and her layers of fabric look like folded wings. Her voice is low and dramatic and she likes to make up rhymes when she panhandles, like "Spare a penny for a penniless poet," and "Change for coffee, change for tea, and I will be a friend to thee." Max is less flamboyant but wears giant hats that flop into his face. Dru and Max panhandle in places where there are lots of people, like Venice and Melrose. Sunny doesn't panhandle. He collects flowers from people's yards and pins them in his hair or tapes them to his clothes.

I unpack the food I brought from my house: half a box of cereal, the remnants of a loaf of bread, peanut butter, canned olives, and a block of orange cheese. Dru lays down one of her shawls in the sand for a tablecloth and we make a circle around the food. Sunny has glitter practically pouring out of his hair into the jar of peanut butter, and in the lamplight I see that they have covered themselves in glitter.

"Pretty," I say.

"Found some art supplies some kids left in the sand," Sunny says.

After dinner, Sunny, Max and Dru decorate me. I imagine how beautiful I must look as their art project.

I sleep on the dirt floor of my coat room in a cloud of fairy dust.

FOCUS ON SAFETY IS LIKE ZERO TOLERANCE. In Homeroom Miss Silver explains that safety is all about gangs and monitoring each other for unusual behavior. She also explains the importance of textbook covers, and says that the rules this year aren't any different, but they will be taken much more seriously. There is an assembly today to help us get motivated. Miss Silver is wearing nude-colored nylons with sandals, and I can smell her foot odor from the back of the room. My clothes are stiff with glitter that sloughs off of me when I shift in my seat.

By third period math the school is like a sweat box. This is not an exaggeration: Vista High was designed by a guy who designed prisons. Miss Jackson stopped trying to get us to do math problems a half hour ago, and I'm one of the few students sitting down. I write "X= 240," a guess because I'm not sure if I multiplied the fraction right. I decorate the "240" with extra zeros swirling out of the number and around the margins of the paper. They mean nothing and are placeholders for everything.

I put my pencil behind my ear and stand up—almost no one is sitting. I weave through the obstacle course of bodies toward a window. From the third floor I can see the perimeter of the school. At the entrance by the metal detector, a rent-a-cop eats a sandwich. This morning it was overcast, but the clouds have burned off and in the glare of the sun the school looks flat, a cardboard cut-out of itself. I pull the handle and push on the window.

Nothing. Then I try one in the other corner of the room and it creaks just a little on the bottom. I can feel a thin laser of air.

"You know, without any air coming in, we're all breathing carbon dioxide. The more people exhale, the less air there'll be." Sang, who is not in my math class, is standing behind me. "I'm going around the school checking all the windows."

"This one has a crack or something," I say. I hadn't thought about carbon dioxide, and now I breathe in as much as I can from the trickle of air. It is like sipping at a water fountain.

"Good," Sang says. "I'm making a map of those. I've already found another like that in 310 and a good one in 303. Kyle has the second floor and Analisa is checking the girls' bathrooms."

Kyle and Analisa have been a couple since Junior High. They are a school fixture of public affection. At lunch and recess they become one person, their arms like vines, creeping up each other's bodies looking for light.

"Why are you checking the windows?" I ask.

"We'll open them while everyone's at the assembly. You should help us."

I angle my cheek so it's in the stream of air. I want to open the windows and I want to be helpful.

The plan is to start walking with everyone from lunch toward the auditorium and slip into the building when the crowd passes by the door. I spend most of lunch on the corner of a concrete bench next to a patch of dirt that once had plants in it. When I'm done with my sandwich I find Sang, Kyle, and Analisa by the vending machines, sharing a bag of chips.

Analisa's tank top and jeans hang off her coat-hanger body. She looks me up and down in my glittery clothes. She is pretty in a plain way that I never noticed before.

"This is great," she says, touching the stiff shiny bottom of my shirt. "I would have never thought to do something like this."

I pull my sleeves down over my fingers, something I always do when I'm nervous.

"They can't close all the windows on us like that without a fight," Kyle says, as if that's what we were all just talking about. It's clearly been bothering him since yesterday.

"It's how they imprison us," Sang says. "But even prisoners rebel."

I think that these new friends would like my park friends and that maybe we should all run away together.

We have to walk past Principal Meyer's office on our way to the stairs, but he's at the assembly already and his door is closed. On the back of the door is a nautical steering wheel and a mirror made to look like a porthole. The principal always wears a captain's cap and a peacoat. The rumor is that

he used to be in the Merchant Marines until pirates threw him off his boat and he had to be rescued by the Coast Guard.

We walk through the halls and I can almost hear a soundtrack from the teen movies. In the movie of ourselves, we are teenagers playing a prank, but it will all work out in the end because that's how it always goes. On the second floor, Sang unpacks the tools he borrowed from shop and some silverware he pocketed during lunch: a hammer, chisels, a wrench, channel-locks, butter knives, forks.

"Take your pick," Sang says to Kyle and Analisa. "Elma and I will take the third floor."

Kyle and Analisa take the only hammer, but I don't say anything. They giggle as they weave down the hall away from us, pushing against each other's bodies. Sang and I go up quietly to the third floor. I feel like I should kiss him because in the movie of us that's what would happen, and when we get in trouble we would stand up for each other, and it would all work out with music and credits. I imagine Sang living with me in my closet like Max lives with Dru in the projection booth. But I look at him too long and he says, "What?" and I say, "Nothing."

We start in the science room, which stinks so much of formaldehyde, I can taste it. At each table is a frog in a partial state of dissection: one has had its large intestine taken out; another has already had half a lung removed; and another is cut seemingly at random into inch-long pieces as if the students were planning to eat it. A head sits by itself on one of the chairs. Its eyes are zeros veiled over with mucous.

"OK," Sang says. "What do you think?"

I look at the tools I'm carrying and hand Sang the chisel. "You start prying on the bottom and I'll hit it with the channel-locks," I say.

Sang jimmies the chisel into the crack between the window and the frame the way a pirate would pry open a treasure chest.

"Why did you start going to school again?" he asks. "I'd never come if my father didn't drop me off every day."

"My mother's into this Zero Tolerance thing and she calls the school every day to make sure I'm here. That's one of the steps in the book, to call the school."

One of the next steps—if I miss school—is to lock me in my bedroom at night. I hit the window and it opens.

"Piece of shit welding job," Sang says. "I knew they wouldn't have done it right. Is she going to meetings?"

I nod and shrug.

"You'd better watch out," he says. "They have all these schools and institutions that want your mom's money. They'll tell her anything to get it. My friend's mom started going to those meetings and she decided my friend was a Satanist. She dug up the back yard looking for the bodies of

sacrificed babies. Then she sent him to an expensive mental hospital and he's still there."

The hot afternoon air filters into the room and I am no longer choking on the formaldehyde smell. I look around at the frog guts and pieces all over the room. They are supposed to put those kinds of things back in their jars before lunch.

I shrug. "Those are in the book, too, but we don't have any money."

"Just be careful," Sang says. "All she needs to do is tell those people how you dress, and the next thing you know she'll open a credit line just to get you out of her house."

But I am out of the house. Half out.

On our way out of the room, I put a frog head into the pocket of my skirt.

We are supposed to meet Analisa and Kyle back at the vending machines at five to two so we can dip into the crowd on its way back from the assembly, but they aren't there. The students echo through the covered lunch area before they get to us. Some are laughing about a motivational speaker who talked about setting realistic goals. Sang and I have History together for fifth period but we stop by Analisa's Life Skills class to see if she made it back. Just a few minutes to go before the second bell, and she's not there.

In history, Mr. MacMillan closes the open window. "I don't know how this got open," he says, "but it's supposed to be closed."

I'M SUPPOSED TO GO HOME RIGHT AFTER SCHOOL, but my mother is usually asleep when I get home anyway. I get off the bus in front of the park and see bulldozers and cranes and other equipment with gears and pulleys and metal cages. The theater is surrounded.

Sunny, Max, and Dru are hanging out by a bench, making up songs and laughing. When I get to them, Sunny starts singing, "Elma, Elma, you've come back to us, oh Elma," and he strums a few bar chords.

Dru throws a long piece of pink lace around my neck and tugs at me to sit on the grass next to her.

"They're tearing down the theater. Max and I found a van today. We're going up the coast. Come with us."

Sunny strums and sings, "Elma, oh Elma. You don't have to live that life anymore, oh Elma."

"Sunny," I say, "what about you?"

"I got my house right here," he says, patting the side of one of his shopping carts. "Got everything I need."

Dru tightens the lace around my shoulders as if it were a warm blanket.

"Just walk away from all this, darlingest. Come with us." She looks at

me puppy-like over her heart-shaped sunglasses. "We'll drive up the coast. It gets wilder the farther north you go."

Max hands me a paper cup full of whiskey. I want to have wings like they do, but I'm only a half-flyaway.

"What will we eat?" I say, because I remember that for almost a year we've been eating the food I steal from my house.

"We'll panhandle," Max says. "It always works out."

WHEN I GET HOME MY MOTHER IS NOT ASLEEP. She is sitting on the sofa, watching a re-run of *The Partridge Family*.

"It's five-thirty," she says. "Where have you been?"

"I missed the bus."

"You're lying."

"Suit yourself." I drop my backpack in the middle of the hallway and go to the kitchen to make toast.

"Some boy called," she yells from the living room.

I take my bread out of the toaster-oven before it's toasted and spread it with a thin layer of mayonnaise.

"Who was it?"

"He didn't leave a message. He said he'll call later."

SANG CALLS LATE AND I PUT THE LIVING ROOM phone down to make sure my mother hasn't gotten out of bed and picked up the one in the kitchen. The kitchen is dark and quiet except for the rumble of the refrigerator.

Sang is whispering. I whisper too.

"The school is pressing charges against Analisa and Kyle for vandalism," he says. "Principal Meyer is pushing for them to go to juvie. And he wants to see me tomorrow because he knows I'm friends with them."

"We just opened some windows," I say. "You can't go to jail for that."

"He says he spent a lot of money getting those windows welded, and that it's about safety, and something could happen now that they're open."

"Yeah, like suicide from the third floor." I laugh and Sang laughs too.

"It's a disaster movie," he says. "Death on Floor Three."

I braid the fringe of a sofa pillow. "What are you going to tell Meyer?"

"Nothing. I'm not going to talk at all."

"Do you think he'll call me in?"

"I don't know. I heard there was glitter all over the floor, but I'm not going to say anything."

"Sang, I'm leaving."

Everything in our living room is a tasteful beige and off-white. The room makes me feel numb the way a very long speech can. The van will

be draped with lace and velvet, and smell like coffee, incense, the musk of found objects, cooking on the little van stove—everything in miniature, a doll's house on wheels.

"Where?"

I hear a click and the sound of the refrigerator. My mother is listening in.

"I have to go," I say. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I remember the frog head that I still have in my pocket, stiff and preserved. Before my mother goes back to bed, I put the frog on top of *Zero Tolerance* and tuck the book and frog in between her sheets. The sight of its dead lips smiling on the glossy cover is satisfying. Like the book, the frog's zero eyes also tolerate nothing. Let them look at my mother for a while.

I go to my room and pack. I'll spend one last night at home and meet Max and Dru after I find Sang in the morning. He shouldn't go to jail over a window. He can come with us. Max and Dru wouldn't mind. The streetlights make my bedroom glow gray. My stuffed animals' eyes look surprised. I keep my own eyes open as long as I can and in my head say goodbye to my half-disappearing room. Goodbye bear, goodbye donkey, goodbye lion, goodbye dictionary, child's encyclopedia, ceramic pencil holder I made in third grade, poster of a band I don't even like, alarm clock, chair, mirror, curtains, goodbye four walls, eight corners. I wake up during the night, expecting to hear my mother scream or stomp into my room, but the apartment is quiet.

In the morning I put on as many clothes as I possibly can so I'll have less to carry: three long ripped skirts from the thrift store that I bought when I still had an allowance; Halloween-orange tights; layers of old men's socks; a white tank top that I drew spider webs all over; two sweaters. I find the phoenix Sang gave me in eighth grade at the bottom of my broken jewelry box and hang it around my neck with a piece of yarn. I want to show Sang that I didn't really throw it away.

When I go to pour myself a coffee in the kitchen, my mother is sitting at the table.

I expect her to say something about my clothes or the frog, but she says, "Sit down."

I drizzle milk into my coffee and sit across from her, straightening my posture to accentuate the fact that I'm taller than she is.

"I called a counselor in the Zero Tolerance network," she says. "You have an appointment this morning to assess your situation. The school called me to see if I thought you had anything to do with some vandalism."

I can't help it. I start laughing so that I can barely swallow the sip of coffee in my mouth. "It was just some stupid windows. It was nothing." I hold the phoenix in my closed fist and it warms in my hand.

"I can't control you anymore."

When did she ever? Even with the books and the meetings, all the pruning she has tried to do to me, all the yelling about "limits" after she found out how much of tenth grade I missed, I'm still going to have the last word.

I want to scream at her until my body bursts into tiny pieces, but I say quietly: "If you think I'm going to meet that counselor so you can send me to some treatment program, you're wrong."

I'm still holding the phoenix. I'm worried it looks like I'm clutching my heart as if I care, so I let it go. I imagine it glowing on my chest like it's magic.

I stand up in a lady-like way. "Excuse me," I say. "I'm getting my bag."

My mother squinches her eyebrows together in this helpless way that makes me angry and sad. She puts her head in her hands. "I don't know what else to do."

Since I'm never coming back, I kiss her on the cheek. I wish I could burn a hole through her face with my lips, but sometimes being sweet is meaner than being mean, and that's the effect I want—the dignified I'm-too-good-to-stay-here kiss. And it works: she starts crying.

I leave my school backpack in the hallway by the shoes and take my duffel bag packed with clothes and jewelry and a toothbrush. Goodbye house. I close the front door gently behind me, and it stops the sound of my mother weeping at the table. Goodbye crying mother.

GOING TO THE SCHOOL TO FIND SANG IS DANGEROUS. A rent-a-cop might nab me like a troll and drag me to the principal's office, but no one is standing at the metal detector by the front entrance. The students, teachers, administrators—everybody—are in the quad, looking up at the third floor. Sang is on a narrow ledge and there are real police who look like they don't know what to do. He is crouching like a gargoyle carved into the ledge.

I see Jason Jensen from homeroom. "What happened?"

"Sang bit the principal." He laughs. "That guy is really crazy."

"Maybe he deserved it." I say.

I try to weave my way through the crowd closer to Sang. I want to tell him it's O.K., that he can come with me. There's a way out through a first floor girls' bathroom window on the other side of the building, and a low concrete fence behind the field, and a van waiting for us at the park that probably has enough gas in it already to get us onto the freeway and through the valley and out of L.A. county without stopping. I can't get close enough to him, the crowd is so tight. I try using my elbows, but they don't make any difference. No one moves out of my way. I hear someone say that they're going to take Sang to jail.

Sang breaks off from the ledge. He puts out his arms and looks weight-

less, as if the air might carry him over the school walls and land him gently on the other side. Then his arms and legs flap in nervous propeller movements, and he falls like he really is a gargoyle carved out of stone.

Everyone is quiet and at first I can't see where Sang has landed.

The crowd forms a semi-circle around him. His jeans are loose, but it looks like one of his legs is bent the wrong way. I push in closer and see that his head is not bleeding, but he might have *internal* damage. He is making sucking hissing noises of pain. The real police tell him not to move, that an ambulance is on the way. The teachers are telling everyone to get back to their classes.

The air is hot and dry, but the sight of Sang on the concrete freezes me, as if the temperature were absolute zero, as if I were floating in outer space, an astronaut falling forever away from the spaceship. I force myself to untuck my hand from my sweater sleeve and wave goodbye to Sang. I don't know if he sees me. It's hard to tell where his eyes are focused. I don't want to shout and draw attention to myself. I duck back into the crowd and out through the metal detector. Goodbye school. Goodbye broken friend.

On the street, Analisa is in the back of a police car crying. There aren't any cops guarding her. Someone has given her a box of tissues.

Through the open police car door I tell her, "Let's go, let's get out of here."

"I can't. My parents."

"I'm going up north with some friends. You can come with me."

She doesn't look surprised. "You can't just run away. What would you do for money?"

I tell her how we don't really need money. I want to make her understand that things don't have to be the way they are, that we don't have to live like this. I tell her that all of this is just a form we don't fit into, and there's a van with lace, and coffee, and hot chocolate from a bag, and sandwiches cut into tiny triangles at 3a.m., stretched to feed you and all your friends. We can live on so little.

Analisa isn't crying anymore. "It doesn't work like that."

"Then like what?"

"Never mind." She turns away from me to look out the other window. "You'll see."

THE PARK HAS A LOW MIST OVER IT, so walking on the lawn is like flying in an airplane above the clouds. The only thing keeping me from floating away is my heavy bag. I wave to Sunny, who is swinging in the playground.

"Hello!" He stops swinging. "They left early this morning. We had a big bonfire and roasted marshmallows for our bon voyage party."

"But I'm going with them." I drop my bag in the sand.

"We put the marshmallows on graham crackers. You should have come.

It was delicious."

They are in their doll house van now, driving north, on the coast. I walk away from Sunny, leaving my bag.

"Don't be mad," he yells after me. "When you didn't show up last night, they thought you'd decided not to go. They'll be back in a few months when the weather gets bad up there."

I don't know how far "up there" is: San Francisco? Seattle? Alaska? I sit at the bus stop on the corner near the park. I don't have any money, but I have a bus pass. I wait for a long time. I think maybe Sunny will come talk to me—he can probably see me from the swings—but I sit by myself. An hour goes by. The buses never run on time. A car stops at a stop light. A kid rolls down the back window and says, "Hey lady, your socks don't match." I think about my mother crying at the table, Sang in an ambulance, Sang in jail.

Dru and Max are migratory birds; my wings are paper-thin, useless. A woman in a long dress and tennis shoes walks by with a baby in a stroller. I can barely feel the muscles in my limbs or the sun burning my face. I hold the phoenix in my hand, but it doesn't warm. I watch the woman walking down the sidewalk and don't understand where her strength comes from to lift her feet, or how gravity pulls her feet down after she has just lifted them. How does she stay on the sidewalk? Up and down; up and down; here to there on the concrete and into the park.

Where I'm going is wherever I float. I am in the invisible world now, a balloon escaped from a party, getting smaller until it is a pin prick in the sky. If the bus comes its wheels will be zeros that will take me west, off the edge of the continent and into the horizon. The mother pushes her stroller towards Sunny and the playground, her clothes billowing around her. I want her to look back, to see me, but I know that she won't and that she can't. There's nothing to see. F

Susanna Childress

Prose, I say, Plasma

The night we both do not sleep, I tell you, *The body is an overturned pail of bees*. And you say, *The body is a patch of caraway*. The chickpeas soak, the recipe for hummus waiting as most wait, on a countertop, like careful

news. In the morning you find a purple onion, an avocado, *Cartesian*, you say, the quartered remains of a tomato and we eat all things eversible and holy in the form of an omelet. Food: the only entr´acte for us, isn't that the way

of it? The body, the bees, each demiurgical kick enough to sweeten our hapless honey-lack. *Prose*, I say, *Plasma. Give me something endogenous*, and all you can do is tend those precious sounds: Andrés Segovia,

the bucket on the ground almost angry with onomatopoeia, what you will still call, years from now, my rigamarole—beauty—among the calla lilies, every spade the obscurant and rightly so, my love.

Here it is afternoon, and we have just begun to haunt our ideas of each other, saunter by, the bodies we trade in every now and again for talk, for appetites, for window-view. Here we glee in paronomasia,

our forms of humor slowly colliding until the wide sun settles down, each limb a given axis, more to do with tongues than speech. But say the lentils, celery, carrots, minced garlic, cilantro, say they speak

calumny, it is here in the valiant stalk of your body, the tender petals, *Unmeasured ingredients, give me anything Aeolian*. Darling: soon we will be able to sleep, we will pour olive oil into the sea.

Ed Frankel

The Man With The Golden Throat

Crassus knew he had to have that slave's body,
or else, being dead, the gladiator would become
all the more dangerous, slipping away
like smoke from his first signal fires on Vesuvius,
slipping away into the maelstrom of years,
the broken stories in vulgar Latin,
in all the foreign tongues of slaves,
the African talking drum, the war chant
of the tattooed, red-bearded Gauls,
the backward writing, of the stiff-necked Jews.

But after the battle in Lucania,
Spartacus' body was never found.
And then, Pompeii, Crassus, Caesar,
were snapping at each others' tails
and the mother bone which was Rome.

Plutarch tells us that Crassus received
for his service to the Republic,
Asia Minor and the Middle East
which he squeezed until more was not enough.
He attacked the Parthians under Hyrodes,
whose general, Surenus, lured him
onto the open plains where Parthian horsemen
shredded his formations, and the light
mounted archers turned in their saddles
firing backwards, as they retreated
out of range of the legions' spears.

Crassus was captured by Surenus,
who poured molten gold down his throat.
Crassus, once the wealthiest man in Rome,
whose body lay, somewhere on the plains of Carrhae,
food for carrion birds.

King Hyrodes gave a victory feast.
When Sillaces brought in the head of Crassus
the actor, Jason was singing *The Bacchae* of Euripides.
Sillaces threw Crassus' head into the final scene.

Agave picked it up and pretended it was Penthius,
her son, torn apart with her own raptured hands.
Later, the head became a prop on a stick
at the palace entrance for all to see,
the solid gold dripping from Crassus' lips.

Now hardly anyone remembers Crassus,
a white marble statue with a furrowed brow,
except the custodian in the British Museum
who dust his face with a feather broom.

David Harris Ebenbach

Naming

"Oh, my God," Naomi said into the receiver. At the other end of the couch, which took up most of the studio apartment, Jacob mouthed the name of Naomi's cousin—*Dalya*—and she nodded. "Oh, my God, sweetie."

That winter, everything was babies. It was sudden—the year before, there had been hardly any of them. Life had been a relaxed, adults-only party of married people, getting together to have beer and wine and talk about jobs or apartments. Now, between the two of them, Jacob and Naomi knew nine pregnant couples, one after the other having announced last spring and summer and now one after the other getting ready for newborns in the middle of winter. Their friends' houses were piled with hand-me-down clothes and toys and intimidating baby apparatus. Regularly enough they would get a delirious, exhausted phone call like this one to let them know that another couple had given birth, had a girl, or a boy.

A few years earlier, of course, it had been weddings, just like a few years before that it had been graduations. Everyone was behaving in demographically-appropriate ways. Except, that is, for Jacob and Naomi, who had fallen off the curve, and who, after getting another announcement, would stare at each other in doubt.

After hanging up, Naomi said, "The naming's in a week."

Jacob nodded. "Great."

Then nothing until Naomi said, "*Shouldn't* we be having a baby?" They were on the couch, which was also a bed. It was new, meaning less than two years old. On the floor sat the breakfast they had abandoned when the phone rang.

"Maybe," Jacob said.

"I think it would have curly hair," Naomi said, smiling, picturing it. Jacob had blondish curly hair.

He shook his head in protest. "Straight hair," he said. He didn't especially want the baby to look like him. Even theoretically.

Naomi, who had straight black hair, shook her head in turn and then said, "The truth is, who knows what our baby would be like? Could be like anything."

"Short," he said.

"Autistic," she said.

"Serial killer," he said.

They turned from there to possible names, which is where they always ended up. It was the easiest thing. It was the one parental act they could imagine—negotiable, simple, able to be done without really damaging

anything. She liked the J-names best—Jessica, Joel, Jeremy—but neither of them had any dead J-name relatives to honor, and of course there was Jacob himself, who was alive. Seemed like bad luck.

"Should we go out, do something?" he said.

It was hard to be in their tiny apartment for any length of time without going crazy. The heat was inadequate and their walls so close, the shelves tumbling with books and framed photos and decorative things. The window of the apartment looked into what was not a courtyard, but just the large unused space behind all the buildings around them. The space was divided up and empty, aside from some piles of bricks on the concrete and trash thrown from windows like theirs. It was not much to look at, this weird gap in the city's busy continuity, their only view. But they hated to feel forced to go out for dinner or coffee or walks all the time; besides, the city was just as crowded. The evening before, on her way into the subway to meet someone uptown, Naomi ended up trapped on the stairway behind an old couple. They made a blockade in their massive winter coats, holding each other and the handrails on either side. Then, a woman behind Naomi handed off a baby to her, actually placed a small child in her arms as she struggled to get the stroller up the stairs. "I—" Naomi said, but stopped there. Without a word, she slowly climbed the rest of the way, waiting for the baby to explode or capture her heart.

In any case, on the bitter cold Sunday after Dalya's phone call, they tried to spend the whole morning in the apartment, eating breakfast and reading, but ended up walking around outside a little and looking into shops. There were many people out, so that at times Jacob and Naomi had to walk single file, and sometimes they found themselves separated and on different edges of the sidewalk. When they found each other again at corners, in eddies in the traffic, they gripped each other's hands and looked up at the buildings that held everyone there as though in a bowl.

"I wonder if we could still do this kind of thing if we had kids," he said, leaning against the window glass of a bookstore.

She looked around at the several strollers plowing roughly along the sidewalk. There was still a little snow from the storm a couple weeks ago.

"I mean in the same way," he said. Jacob was especially worried about what would happen to his music-writing, which he did sometimes, on a weekend or after work. She had to leave him alone in their place those times, while he ran through different word combinations and melodies and phrasings.

"There are lots of ways people raise children," she said.

Naomi had never thought about what she would look like pregnant. Once, though, a gynecologist had told her that she would probably have to deliver by C-section, because of her hips. She looked at the shape of her hips, hidden by her coat, in the reflection of the window. Behind her

reflection, the people passing by, the strollers.

"That's true," he said. "It's probably all about prioritizing."

"I don't know," Naomi said, shaking her head. "Did I tell you? Dalya said, 'You guys are going to be next.' She said, 'I can feel it.'"

"She can feel it," Jacob said, thinking about that. He noticed his back was cold from leaning on the window, that he was cold in general. "Let's keep going," he said.

The walk became a long one, winding through many of the ungridded streets in their neighborhood, stopping among crowds at a bakery and a cheese shop and a drugstore before ending up back at the apartment building. They both looked up at it, at all the brick. Inside was their little studio, their view of the space between the buildings. They went inside, and walked up the many narrow steps.

THE NAMING CEREMONY HAPPENED at Dalya's Temple, and then there was a gathering afterwards at Dalya and Alan's house. Naomi and Jacob saw the newborn here and there throughout the morning—small and pink and kind of loosely-fisted. Naomi had gone into the situation feeling that this time she would melt—it was a natural and hormonal thing for women to melt when they saw babies. They were supposed to feel it in their tubes. But when she caught sight of her cousin's child for the first time, she wasn't sure what she felt.

"She's amazing," she told Dalya before the ceremony. Her cousin looked both tired and buzzed with joy.

"Yeah," Dalya said, her voice full of the possibility of tears. "You have to do this. Maybe I sound like a Jewish mother, but you *have* to do this." She was gripping Naomi's arm.

"Well," Naomi said.

"You know, I never pictured this for myself." Dalya had gone through an unpleasant childhood, with critical parents who fought all the time.

"I know," Naomi said.

Naomi's parents were there, of course, and they sat with their daughter and Jacob during the service. They were still married, but gave off the impression that when they were at home together, neither of them said a single word to the other. When Dalya and Alan brought the baby up to be honored by the Torah, Naomi's mother reached over and squeezed her daughter's hand. Naomi looked over at her. They were going crazy waiting for grandchildren. Today, they limited their desperation to this one hand squeeze.

At one point, Dalya and Alan stood at the front of the sanctuary and the rabbi spoke. "In the Garden of Eden," she said, "Adam was given the responsibility of going around and naming all the living things around him. As Jews, we know that to name something is to acknowledge its essence.

To invite it into life." Both of the parents were strained with emotion, Dalya openly crying. In her arms a white blanketed shape.

At the party there were many children who found each other and ran nimbly through the forest of legs of the irrelevant adults. Jacob watched them from a table covered in spreads and bagels; he had once acted like them at adult parties any number of times. A man near him re-introduced himself; they had met a couple of times at other gatherings involving Dalya and Alan. His name was Michael and he was Alan's cousin.

"Right," Jacob said. "Of course."

"What an occasion," Michael said, evenly coating a sliced bagel with chive cream cheese and glancing up for affirmation.

"It really is." Jacob knew all about Dalya's childhood and was moved himself by this whole thing.

"Are you and Naomi planning on having children anytime soon?" he said.

Jacob noticed his hands were in his pockets and took them out. "We talk about it a lot."

Michael smiled, holding his bagel delicately with the ends of his fingers. They were both facing away from the table now, side by side, looking out at the crowd. "You know, a person becomes a parent the minute they start thinking about being a parent."

"What do you mean?"

"Just exactly that. The minute you start thinking about having a kid, you're already a dad."

Jacob breathed in and out. He thought about that.

ON THE TRAIN RIDE HOME, the subway heavy with people standing and sitting, Jacob told Naomi about it.

"What did he mean?"

"Just what he said." Jacob heard the voice of a young child from somewhere else in the car, asking for something. He wondered what it would mean to be hearing it as a father would.

THAT NIGHT THEY HAD SEX. They used a condom. Afterwards, Jacob sleeping, Naomi looked up at the ceiling and thought about how, if they were "trying," they would probably be having more sex, because "trying," when you came down to it, just meant having sex on purpose, without a condom. It would push them to be more intimate, more vulnerable. She looked around the room, which she could see clearly enough. The light of the city found them in the back of the building, through their flimsy curtains. Despite all their wedding gifts from a couple of years ago, there were not so many things in here; there wasn't room for them. Many of the things they owned were in storage in his parents' basement in New

Jersey. She looked around, saw the short bookshelf, the one plant on the windowsill. The TV table they used as a desk and a dinner table. In that moment, she wanted to grab it all up, throw it into a truck, and move the hell out of there, that same night. They both went through cycles of this, wanting to pay less and get more, but it never built to the point where they had to do anything. It was the same with the baby.

"You know what name I really like?" Jacob had said when they got home that evening, as he laid his keys on the edge of the sink that was by the door. "Avi."

"That's a nice one," Naomi said, and sighed.

THE NEXT MORNING, JACOB WOKE UP AND, it being Sunday again, stretched out in bed until Naomi woke up. When her eyes opened he said, "I've been thinking about that thing. About being a dad the minute you starting considering it. And a mom."

"Yeah," she said. She pulled the covers around her more tightly.

"What does that mean for us? Maybe that means we don't have anything to decide about," he said. "Maybe it means our whole lives are already molded around the idea. Maybe we should just have kids."

"I don't know," she said.

"Maybe if we go through the day, really envisioning it, we'll know. All day."

She turned her head on her pillow to him and studied the side of his face. It still seemed like a young face to her, like her own did. Though both of them had gained weight. "What is it about us?" she said. She was a first-born, but he was a second-born. They were both in therapy about their parents, but just for the normal range of things.

He turned his head toward her on the pillow. His stubble scratched the fabric. "I have an idea. Let's spend today doing things we couldn't do if we *did* have a baby."

"Like what?" she said.

"We already started—we slept in."

They ate in a bar that happened to serve breakfast, among the smell of last night's drinks, in the less-flattering light of day. They sat on tall stools, right at the dark wood of the bartop. The place was mostly empty, a few hungover conversations at remote tables.

"I'm trying to understand this business of already being a parent," he said, holding his glass. He was drinking hard cider and she was having a mimosa. They never drank in the mornings. "I mean, if it's like I have a child, shouldn't I be worried about the child, if I'm a parent, since my child isn't here? Or at least thinking about it?"

"That's probably not what he meant," she said, and then, urgently, "C'mon—what are we going to do next?"

They used the *Voice* to find a club that would be showing loud-sounding music that night, and they planned a movie for the afternoon. A lot of the day, though, was still open. They ended up walking around the neighborhood a while, just to think. As always, there was a loudness of activity and people to study. Pregnant women led children by the hands; young couples moved fast along the sidewalk, never losing contact with one another. There was hardly enough room for all of them.

After a while Jacob and Naomi stopped in the cold. They joined a small crowd in front of a pet store window. In separate cages, kittens and puppies were struggling around in wood shavings. One of the fuzzier kittens had wood shavings all over it.

Naomi took Jacob's arm and huddled close to him. "If we had a baby, it'd be as cute as those guys," she said.

"Maybe," he said. "Let's go inside."

Opening the door, they were rewarded with the warmth of the place, which came with a thick, complicated smell. They walked down aisles stacked with tanks holding lizards and fish, and, toward the back, birds and hamsters and other small mammals. The only cats and dogs had been at the front. The store was crowded, people clustered around the clownfish, around bright green frogs, around hamsters, and all of them with kids.

At the very back, they saw a child, about five years old, who was leaning on the glass separating him from the rabbit cages. A young rabbit was sitting very close on the other side, facing him, its face working in rapid chews. The glass steamed with every open-mouthed breath of the child. As they watched, he strained his head back and up to catch his mother's eye, but she was looking somewhere else and he didn't say anything. He stared at the rabbit, and the rabbit watched him with opaque eyes, for a long time.

"What's going on with them?" Jacob said.

"I don't know," Naomi said. All around them was that complicated smell—animal waste, animal musk, maybe pheromonal signals about being content with all the food or upset at the cages or lonely or satiated with sex, smell of old animals and new animals. They stepped closer to the boy at the glass, who reached out and grabbed Jacob's shirt before he realized Jacob wasn't his mother. Then the boy let go in a kind of terror.

"It's okay," Jacob said, and the boy's face calmed.

"You like that rabbit?" Naomi asked, instinctively squatting down to eye level.

The boy pointed, touched the glass with an index finger. "He's chewing and chewing," he said. He turned his unreadable face to her. Jacob looked between him and the rabbit, at their mute and enormous eyes. Jacob and Naomi were full of some dense longing that couldn't be pulled apart or identified.

After another minute, they stepped outside again. Ahead of them was the movie, if they still wanted to go, but that was a little while off. They returned to their apartment to wait until it was time.

Jacob and Naomi sat next to each other on the couch, looking out the window at a corner of what little could be seen out there. They gripped hands and sat close to each other. They both thought about what it would be like to be old. Without any talking between them, the afternoon began to move on by itself, and Naomi and Jacob sat, unmoving, on the couch that took up most of the studio apartment. F

Jenna Martin

The Modest Origins of Want

She stood for a whistle. Then her mind went blank. With the
apple and its shiny red, she gnawed her name in the desk.
P-o-s-t-e-r-i-t-y. She could spell well even then.
And now, still standing for holler, for hoot—wishing
she was somewhere outside the grade and assessment of mind
badgering spirit. But honestly, she's too scared of soul with its stunning
wings, waiting for the moment of hatch, escape and
dropped out of sky with nothing but a goddamned feather.
This is no place for small boy with blue eyes, for olive-skinned
drama girls in utero. Potential is nothing to her anymore.
(Having lost one grey sock in pursuit of it.) Like tomorrow,
it taunts. She needs stone in hand and warm gravy on table.
This seismic bubble of raunchy wannabes can kiss her ass.

David O'Connell

Minotaur

I'd say it's just the bass that's hammering my brain,
the unknown hours I've been reeling towards the bar
each time my bottle comes up empty, but I swear
I've known a nightmare that begins this way: the walls
of writhing flesh, the fog that's slashed by blood-
red laser light, the acrid burn of sweat and smoke
in eyes leering at women slinking by. I try
to navigate this labyrinth of skin on skin
but sense my spool of memory is all spun out;
like the trail of smoke I exhale at every turn,
it's disappeared. Where are my friends? Where is the girl
I ditched them for? What do I call this shape that crawls
past me on all fours? Why won't these bodies whirling
faster finally fall? In my nightmare I get out
now. This is no nightmare. He's been watching me, waits:
horns lowered, shoulders hunched, the leather skull, the grin.

Christopher Buckley

Fame & Fortune, or, I am not Christopher Buckley

Down deep, in the darkest part of the heart, no matter how modest we have become or profess to be, doesn't every writer—woken in the middle of the night for an immediate Yes or No—wish for Fame? The most selfless, the most resigned to Fate, the most given to *ars gratia artis*, would gladly accept some recognition. Or so I believe after more than twenty-five years' labor in the proverbial fields. What happens when the spotlight glances off the lapels of the glamorous and God-blessed, picks us out one time standing in the back, hoisting our metaphorical spears? Don't we gasp, straighten our ties, check our hair, and let ourselves believe a bit of that stardust might fall on our foreheads, and, against all better judgment and experience, change our lives? Answer the phone one time expectantly, open the letter mentally rolling the bones as if everyone were due a lucky break, and you're done for. It's almost genetic, systemic, buried in the blood, tugging us away from logic, realistic appraisal, and the plain hard facts of the work being its own reward. Fame, a crumb or the whole loaf, is something we desire even when we say we don't, even when we know it doesn't *really* mean a thing—spiritually, metaphysically, aesthetically. Just once, we'd like to lay our cards down in the light and clear the table. Most poets I know go to the mailbox the way gamblers go to the casino, the way the hopeless or bereft go to church. Even if they say they don't. They do. Why else send it out? Why not put it all in a drawer with your freezer-burned heart, thereby eliminating all prospects the way that Emily Dickinson did? Given one extreme or the other, most would choose Walt Whitman's route—self-publish and proclaim yourself wondrous before the burning and indifferent universe, the irresolute press.

No one likes loser-clubbers, whiners who begrudge the good their due. We can't all be stars, logic would dictate. Some writers are tiresome, a host are passable, and even sometimes the truly exceptional are rewarded. Yet marketing and celebrity in America account for most everything—in Hollywood, on Wall Street, or on Main Street. We hate to hear it but who you know and/or do lunch with counts for a good deal. Imagine that. The same obtains in politics, selling T-shirts, or selling off the national wilderness to selected oil and mining concerns. My favorite line from Louis Malle's marvelous film, "Atlantic City" is—"We don't do business with people we don't do business with." From the department of redundancy department, but true. Beyond that, there's just no telling why some are tapped on the shoulder by the angel of Fame and given the whole glittering nine yards—no matter the substance of the writing, or the lack thereof—and others are not. As a beginning writer, you're up against it.

Perhaps the best way to get beyond it is to never really "go there" at all? Write, publish when you can, but be Zen; get on with the work, cut the complaining, and do the little thing you can. Still, some bit of confirmation along the way wouldn't hurt—a letter, a review, a small check or invitation. The extraordinary and original poet Larry Levis wrote, "Anything is enough if you know how poor you are." Larry won some prizes and received a couple grants, but he did not "network," did not schmooze or flatter to do so, and who, relative to his genius, is more overlooked than Larry? But what Larry said about modesty, the essential and ultimate poverty of our vocation obtains, especially in those moments when we are realistic and humble, given wholly to the work—in short so beat down with circumstance that we become whatever's next to "spiritual."

Yet as a graduate student writing my first poor earnest poems, wearing my dead step-father's moth-bitten cashmere sport coat to look as bona fide as possible, I wanted to be acknowledged—if only in the small arena of graduate school writers at San Diego State, if only in a small magazine typed on an IBM Selectric typewriter late at night in the office of a furniture rental store where one of our "editorial board" worked. If we Xeroxed and stapled 150 copies and couldn't give them all away, it was nonetheless important to place a poem in there, to have an official "stamp" on my work, even on that pitiable scale.

Fame and fortune elude us early on—choosing-up for teams on the playground, class elections in grammar school, sports championships, scholarships and college prizes—all which we're sure will improve our lives immediately and into the future. Observation tells us that it's all out there to be had for those with maniacal drive and unflagging self worth. And the average writer who gets by allowing the work to be the thing nevertheless yearns for some approval because he/she believes in the hard work done—that kind of peripheral ambition generally kept in check so we don't sell out. So even a little regard can get into your blood like a drug and have you making endless comparisons with the haves, have-nots, and shouldn't haves instead of getting a good night's sleep. Doesn't your spirit sink as you go through all those back pages of awards and grants in *Poets & Writers* every other month? At some point you'd think we would learn from insider trading, or from the flip side of the coin, randomness and the explosion of contests, and just go back to our desks and dig up anything we can learn about our lives. Finishing my first trek through graduate school, an M.A. in English at San Diego State, I had no idea how many lessons I still had to learn.

I had sent some early poems to a contest I read about on a flyer on the department bulletin board—something like *The College Annual of Poetry*, and one was accepted. In a moment of pride, I mentioned this to my teacher, Glover Davis, who was always candid. He picked out one of the metaphors

in the short poem and asked, "You really think that's a good image" and then smiled a bit sadly. That was it. My first five seconds of fame, gone in a flash. Moreover he advised me that those college anthology things were usually a racket. True enough, shortly after the highly congratulatory acceptance letter came another asking how many copies, leather bound, of the anthology with my poem in it I would like to order at $39.95, which was not small change to a graduate student in 1973. Those companies, they took at least one poem from every sad soul who sent in. I never ordered a book or saw one, hoping that since I did not come through with the cash, they would drop my miserable poem from the book.

So much for early Fame, but Fortune was fast on its heels. Three or four months before I was set to graduate, Glover stopped me in the halls one day to ask if I had heard from anyone regarding a scholarship? I said no. I was planning on enrolling in a MFA program in poetry after San Diego State and had no money saved, so a scholarship would be a lifesaver. Glover offered no more details, just a hint of a smirk, and a couple months went by. Then one evening at my step-sister's house—where I baby-sat her three kids while she went to night school and where I received my share of poetic support via free dinners—the phone rang and it was the President of The Chaparral Poets of the Golden West. I had, she reported, been recommended by Prof. Glover Davis to receive their first ever college scholarship and would I be able to attend their convention in three weeks time at a hotel in San Diego. Dollar signs! I couldn't believe it, but I did, and I didn't pay any mind to the oh-so-poetical name of this group. I felt as if I'd just got a hold of that bad cord on the old toaster, and the air around me was humming with *scholarship, scholarship, scholarship*! Man, was I polite, jotting down times and dates and places and names, thanking the President and what must have been the large panel of judges who selected me from among thousands for this prestigious award!

At the time, it didn't even occur to me that I had never sent in a group of poems to this organization. In the weeks to come I became only marginally dubious as she called asking if I might leave early on Saturday to pick up several lady members on my way into town, and would I perhaps be able to come down the night before the ceremonies as well and give a workshop for their members, and a few other requests that I have now forgotten. I made excuses about people visiting from out of town to get me out of the bus service and the workshop. Still, I was thinking *scholarship* all the way—$500, $1,000, even $2,000 dollars—after all the word was *scholarship* as in supporting one while in school for a year, or more. *Scholarship*, I would endure the afternoon, and probably there would at least be a free lunch and maybe I could duck out early if they began with the college part. Wrong. There is no free lunch. You knew that. I knew very little. It *had* to be worth while—an organization with members, a hotel conven-

tion, *scholarships*!

Alas, as the old poets said, the scales soon fell from my eyes. I put half a tank in the old Chevy my step-sister had given me, the one with the bad cylinder that gobbled oil and gas, and drove a half hour to downtown San Diego, found the hotel and paid five dollars to park. Upstairs on the mezzanine, The Chaparral Poets of the Golden West were meeting, the signs in the lobby told me, and up I went to my reward. I was met outside the ballroom by the President and several other white, silver, and blue haired ladies and one younger gentleman in his fifties who proudly informed me that he had attended the Iowa Writers Workshop, though he had not managed to graduate. Strategically situated outside the doors were card tables upon which The Chaparral Poets were selling their books, all vanity publications as I quickly came to see. I was directed to one table where the most prominent member displayed crisp, blue hard back copies of her book of poems about John-John, Carolyn and Jackie Kennedy after the assassination—a subject she had managed to attenuate through to 1973 and her immediate circle of fame. I was polite— Yes, Of Course, and Thank You, and How Very Nice . . . . I did so want to get paid.

The room was packed with children from the local area schools, all who had written poems, and their teachers who had encouraged them to write the poems and who now would see them acknowledged for their poems. There was a large man with a large voice as the MC, someone I vaguely recollected from my youth pitching products in his baggy suit on local TV channels in L.A.. Prior to the ceremonies and the envelopes being distributed to the lucky winners, he announced that we would be regaled with a presentation by the junior high modern dance class from La Jolla school. The curtains parted and fifteen young girls in black leotards fitting too tightly, or alternately too loosely, teetered on one foot waiting for the needle to drop on the Cat Stevens album and for "On The Road To Find Out" to blare abruptly through the speaker system. The dance ended with the young ladies teetering in their positions until someone lifted the needle, with a pronounced scratch, followed by the curtains closing. This was just a hint of what was coming.

Following great applause, the MC said he would now begin to announce the prizes, and my slip of a hope was that they would start with the college award and work down. They began with fourth grade, reading the names of four runners-up, the titles of their poems, and the name of their school and teacher. They then read the same information for the winners, and the third, second, and first place winners read the complete text of their poems. More applause, envelopes handed out, children bowing into the lights, then on through to the eighth grade, and a break before the high school awards. Sitting near the back, I stole a look around; the large doors to the room remained closed. There was no help. I knew no one and there

was no one my age there—just The Golden Chaparral Poets and the school kids. Well, I thought, that at least meant they were giving only one college level scholarship, so enduring three hours of bad poetry and dancing might pay off. Out the few high windows there were no clouds, no seagulls—everything out there knew to stay away.

The last event was of course the first ever scholarship award at the college level and I was called up for an envelope presented by the President. I smiled, mouthed a thank you over substantial applause, and immediately different groups of The Chaparral Poets came up and put their arms around me posing for snap shots taken by their friends. One group switched off with the next as I tried to peak into the envelope to see how much the check was for. Someone called to the President and she walked away just long enough for me to fold back the flap and see what I had come to fear and expect: a check for $25.

I quickly tucked it back in the pocket of my dead step-father's sport coat and began walking down the long center aisle only to be caught up by the President and the fellow who flunked out of Iowa, inviting me to a member's hotel room to read a few poems and comment on the poems of those assembled there. No one knew I had checked the check, that I knew what a fatuous exercise in self-congratulation this all had been. They felt they hadn't been found out and so could continue to prevail upon my good nature, sustained by my gratitude and greed. I lied, saying I still had those guests from Seattle expecting me for dinner (there had been no lunch or food of any kind offered during the over three hours of the ceremony) and kept on walking out the door, waving politely a Thank You, Thank You, and a Good Afternoon Ladies, I didn't mean at all. Five dollars gas, five dollars parking, five hours of a Saturday shot to hell and the check for $25, which, after expenses, came out to $3 an hour for my suffering, for my aspiration to fame and fortune, emphasis on Fortune. Like any grad student, I was on a tight budget but would have paid $25 to be able to stay home. Driving back, I did not think about whether I really deserved a scholarship or not, or that I was just expecting to be lucky, to be rewarded for showing up. I thought about what Glover used to say about bad experiences, like "getting his bell rung" during a college football game—"at least I got a poem out of it"—but this was not the stuff of poetry on either end.

The stuff of poetry did, over the years, keep me afloat and I managed to publish with little magazines and small presses, for which I was truly grateful. Nevertheless, I kept trying the contests; I sent in the fees, ate hot dogs and drank jug wine. I had a first ms. of poetry by the time I finished up an MFA degree in 1976 and sent it into the Yale contest, one snowflake in a flurry, as I have said elsewhere. My somewhat realistic hope was that my ms. would come close enough to draw attention, and perhaps Stanley Kunitz would recommend it elsewhere, which is exactly what happened,

so help me. Confessionalism was the rage and much of my ms. was in that mode. Kunitz wrote me a postcard I've kept until this day saying I didn't win, but my ms. was one of the final few among over a thousand and that my poems had "strength, structure, and dignity." Bless him. That one comment, largely undeserved it now seems, kept my psyche above water for years. He recommended my ms. and one other to the University of Texas Press and mine lost out by half a vote. Disappointing of course, but all writers need good friends who, as my friend Jon Veinberg's aunt always said, "Eat marinated meat and tell the truth!" Jon soon had me seeing that I was fortunate to have had my ms. *not* taken. I tossed most of it and started again. At the time, I never realized the infamous "Fame" I would have had if that early ms. had in fact been published. I didn't know my luck, such as it was.

With the ms. of my third book entered in the National Poetry Series I again came close, or so I heard from a well connected friend. One of the five celebrated poets selecting books that year had narrowed things down, I was told, to my book and one other. The famous poet could not decide between the two and, the story went, finally tossed a coin. My intuition always was that my friend tried to spare my feelings, as the book selected seemed to be more the style of the famous poet. Ah, but what if the coin had come up in my favor? was the question I had to keep from asking.

We all have our karmas. Mine seemed to be running just out of the money. Nevertheless, I was nothing if not tenacious, read "stubborn." I kept sending poems out to places where I most wanted to have my work and finally placed two poems in POETRY when John Frederick Nims was editing. It took several tries, but I got in. Following that, he rejected everything, and after about ten more submissions he brought all of his faculties to bear and wrote saying, "Maybe you're just not writing as well as you used to."

Knowing I was pretty disheartened by this, my friend Gary Soto one day asked me confidentially if I wanted to know the secret of getting poems taken at POETRY, where he often published. I said Sure, for an instant thinking there might be a handshake, a password. Soto then said, "Send good poems!" He was a pal and we were used to a bit of razzing. But even there, I was ready to take a shortcut to even this modest level of fame.

But soon, Daniel Halpern at Antaeus was accepting poems and I'd never once been to New York or to one of his fabled dinners. He knew me from no one and accepted several poems; what more could you ask? And then Howard Moss at The New Yorker accepted a poem, bless his soul. I cashed the largest check I had ever received for poetry, $189, and I thought finally I was headed somewhere. I wasn't. And that is where Fame and Fortune really began to rub my face in it.

Soto had published several poems in The New Yorker and he told

me to expect letters—"People see your poem and write you letters; the magazine forwards them to you." He had received a number of letters in response to each of his poems, something that rarely happened with literary and small magazines. Sure enough, I received two letters and that seemed about right—my fame, or lack thereof, relative to Soto's. One was from a divinity student at Yale that I could not make heads or tails of, and the other, from a divorced mother in Detroit, was entirely surreal. It was 1981, I was teaching at the University of California Santa Barbara and the letter arrived in my department mailbox. The Program of Intensive English there was devoted to EOP students and there were about seven of us working in it, and we were a friendly and tight group. I opened this letter and began reading things that were hilarious due to their nonsequiturs, and so I took it into our little office and read it to my friends and had everyone breaking up. I should have saved that letter because it was so unbelievable, but in my early 30s, I wasn't thinking twenty some years into the future. The letter began with an indifferent reference to the poem and then went into what I'd had to say about relative language values and how I would be happy to hear that in her job for the telephone company she'd just told a rude customer to "f___-off," and felt great about it; moreover, she had used the same effective phrasing in responding to her belligerent teenage daughter with similar success. She was also glad I had had the lizard removed from my hand. It went on with a series of reports not only unconnected to my life, but unconnected to each other, so far as I or any of my colleagues could tell. There was more, and equally bizarre, but the specifics are gone with the grey cells of my 30s. It was a good laugh, but we were all finally puzzled. The letter was addressed to me c/o The New Yorker, so it wasn't a mix up in the mailroom. I was lost?

Later that year a colleague, who I hardly knew, greeted me outside the English department office with congratulations for my poem in The San Francisco Review of Books. I had no poem there and told him so. He replied, "Oh good, I didn't like it much anyway." The piece, as I came to discover, was a rather flippant lampoon of Ginsberg's "Howl" targeting yuppies and entitled "Yowl." It was written by Christopher Buckley and a co-writer, and so far as I know, is his only publication in poetry. But oh, the intimidation that travels with even a little fame. The chance that you might be slightly in the spotlight has people praising your work when they don't like it. When it is not even your work!

Not long after that encounter, my friend, the Fresno poet Ernesto Trejo, sent me a clipping from a recent Esquire with a photo and article about the marriage of Christopher Buckley. The reception looked pretty swank and there was a lot made about Christopher Buckley impulsively, and with exuberance, eating the orchid from atop his wedding cake. The writer of the article commented upon it and then Christopher Buckley himself was

quoted talking about his motivations and reactions and general health subsequent to this amazing feat. This CB was blond, tall and thin, and sometime later, in another article, I began to make sense of things. He was also a writer, writing for Esquire then, son of arch conservative William F. Buckley, and he too had gone to Yale. (My father was William H. Buckley and he had once talked with William F., but considered him too middle of the political road, my father being just right of Darth Vader.) Anyway, in a mad moment of youth it seems he had a lizard tattooed on the webbing of his thumb, but as he was coming more and more into the public eye, had decided to have it removed. He had written a nonfiction book about travel on a tramp steamer and had done some book tours and readings, where, it seems, he met a divorced woman in Detroit and had a conversation, which she took up in her letter where it had left off after seeing "his" poem in The New Yorker. Mystery solved, but further confusion lay ahead.

In the late 1980s I moved to Pennsylvania to take a job at a state college about an hour outside of Philadelphia, and my location in the east seemed to escalate my identity crisis, the shoulder bumping with fame that leaves you on the side of the road. The double, the Doppleganger, a long-standing theme in literature, the stuff of movies or surreal or expressionist novels, was going to do nothing for my career. Right off, the librarian at the university, having received the copies of my books I sent, told me that my books were mixed in with other books, all under the same name. I began receiving calls and letters in my office. The first was a request from an editor at Scribners to blurb a book on the under-culture of body building in New York City. I did not pump iron—they wanted the other guy. I did not respond. I received a second letter saying the deadline was coming up soon. Then a phone call where years of explaining that I was not "Christopher Buckley" would begin. The editor thought I was the CB she wanted and that I was just trying to get out of doing the blurb. Her persistence suggested to me that the prose writing CB must hold some sway in NYC and/or among body builders. While attending a writers conference in Slovenia, I met the editor of a small press in New York, White Pine Press. It turned out he was publishing a novel by a friend of mine, Dixie Salazar, LIMBO. He asked if I would write a blurb for the back cover and I said sure, I'd be happy to as I was familiar with the book, but I told him I had the names and addresses of a number of women and men much more celebrated and qualified to blurb the book than I. He assured me he really wanted me to do it. He was a hale-fellow-well-met type and so I sent him a blurb. It occurred to me only after I'd offered the blurb that on the back of Dixie's book it would say these wonderful things followed by "Christopher Buckley." A little publishing deception, and sometime later Dixie reported people asking her how in the world she got someone like Christopher Buckley to blurb her first novel. It was then up to her to explain I wasn't who I was, or however

she would phrase it.

Not much time went by and I received a call from someone at NYU for an anthology of short stories he was editing. The book would feature Tom Wolfe, Hemmingway, T. Coraghessan Boyle and other luminaries. Sorry, wrong guy. Ok, do I know where he is? No, try Esquire for whom he writes occasionally. Another editor of a small poetry magazine who had a new job at the Museum of Art in Philadelphia called to ask me to read at the museum for their "First Wednesday" festivities and to help promote his new issue. He knew who I was, and to prove it he offered no payment beyond a free dinner at the museum. That was the best offer I'd had in a while and I took it. Near the entrance there was a good jazz quartet and tables set up for light dinners and wine; there would be a classic art film shown at 8:00. Up the steps to the second floor and far to the back in the dark cloisters was the poetry venue. I was asked to do three twenty-minute readings with twenty minutes between each reading to accommodate the crowds drifting in. Eight or nine people poured into each reading and after the last one a man came up to me holding a magazine. He was pointing to a fellow in a photo and, looking me right in the eye, said, "You're not Christopher Buckley—he comes in for gas to my dock in Connecticut every summer on his yacht." "Oh, so that's what happened to my yacht!" I wish I'd said, but holding a book with my name on it was my only response.

It went on. A note from Charles Simic—a wonderful poet—saluting me on my essay in The New Yorker. I'd exchanged a few letters with Simic re my Fulbright visit to Yugoslavia and the poets there. He was very kind and had sent me a copy of his translation of Aleksandar Ristovic's Some Other Wine And Light. It just felt like very bad manners to write him back and say it was the other CB now writing little essays for The New Yorker, and TV Guide. I'd also been publishing the occasional poem in The Sewanee Review and once had a phone conversation with the editor, George Core, who said, without compunction, that he really didn't like the piece I wrote on Vietnam in Esquire, and that time I was happy to explain I wasn't Christopher Buckley. Not long after that I received a call in my office from an editor at Esquire, asking for my address. Once I straightened him out on who I wasn't, I pointed out that since the other CB wrote for them, he should be able to check the files there. My friend and former teacher, Diane Wakoski, suggested I use my middle initial to halt the confusion, but I'd been publishing since 1974 without the middle initial and didn't feel I should have to change things now.

The most memorable mix-up occurred months before the Clinton/Bush election. The phone rang at home one Friday morning and it was the woman who coordinated guests for "The Today Show." Very deferential—Can you talk now? Have I caught you at a bad time?—she didn't say exactly why she wanted me on the show, but she was pushing me to commit to coming

on. I explained that I was a poet; she said she knew that and had obtained my home phone number from Vanderbilt University Press who published two of my books. Yes, I replied, those are my books, but you are looking for the other guy. No, she emphatically reinforced that she wanted me to be on the show next week. By this point in time, I had come to learn that the other CB had been a speech-writer for George Bush, and moreover my politics were 180º different from his. Without too much thought, I could see that she wanted me/him to offer insider evaluations of the candidate. This woman was used to people dodging requests to appear, and she kept after me until I offered an evaluation of Bush and the Republicans—something about Iran-gate, lying, the selling of America as opposed to honoring the social contract of government—that finally left no doubt in her mind that she had the wrong man, and she hung up before I finished.

In 1996 I received a very nice invitation to read at the 30th Annual Sophomore Literary Festival at the University of Notre Dame. The letter came to my department office in Pennsylvania; a young woman with the very horse-and-hounds name of Hunter Campaigne was the chair of the event and seemed to know who and where I was. I was asked to give one reading and a workshop, accommodations were covered, but "an honorarium is negotiable" the letter said. I figured the cost of a rent-a-car, driving time as I hate to fly, and wrote back accepting, but saying that I would need at least $500 in honorarium. I looked at the list of past participants and could see I would be among the great and the glamorous—they had had Diane Wakoski, Tim O'Brien, Gwendolyn Brooks, Tobias Wolff, Sharon Olds, Galway Kinell, Derek Walcott, T. Coraghessan Boyle, but also a few folks closer to my level further down the ladder, and one or two I had never heard of. It was me they wanted, I told myself. But if I'd read back further on the list, to the late 1960s, I'd have seen William F. Buckley, Jr., George Plimpton and the like and the buzzer should have gone off. But I didn't, it didn't. I had another letter from Hunter Campaigne requesting a CV and a current photo before she could finalize my appearance at the festival. I was currently out of photos but sent the CV and never heard from her again. The deal killer was asking for the $500—not too much, too little. When they received such a meager request, they knew I was not the Christopher Buckley they wanted. They wanted the writer of the light novel, The White House Mess, and Steaming to Bamboola. The famous don't show for $500.

In 2001, I received a second National Endowment for the Arts grant in poetry. Speaking with the coordinator after she gave me the good news, she told me who the judges were, and my response was, "Someone made a mistake." I couldn't believe that the poets on that list would choose my work, poetry politics being what they are. But there were more judges than in the past and so not every judge read your work. Some angel had guided

my mss. past the hands of those with "agendas" and into hands of more receptive, or I like to think, objective, judges, into the hands of fortune for a change. The woman at the NEA knew I wasn't the other CB, and related the story of the final meeting during which the coordinator matches names with the winning numbers of the mss., for the proceedings are these days truly anonymous, unless of course you are a judge who recognizes your students' or friends' poems and does not recuse yourself. In any event, when she matched a number to "Christopher Buckley" there was, she said, an audible groan, the judges thinking that they had given a poetry grant to the Christopher Buckley of TV Guide articles and such novels as Thank You for Smoking and Little Green Men. She explained that I was not that CB and they breathed a proverbial sigh of relief she said. For once, not being Christopher Buckley landed me in fortune's lap.

A year later and did the NEA change my life? No. The phone still doesn't ring and it's still them on the other end. Notoriety turns the wheels and loosens the coffers, and depending on your tax bracket, you give a quarter to a third of your grant back in taxes. But it sure keeps you going, is acknowledgement from your peers, and enables you to repair the car and write over the summer without extra work. In short, it enables you to keep on with your work and that is more important. Much gratitude, no complaints.

The capper occurred in December, 2001. In one week I received a number of e mails from friends and letters from relatives congratulating me on finally reaching the ranks of the celebrated. A poet friend wrote, "I know the National Book Award would be great, and a MacArthur even better, but you can't go wrong being part of the Final *JEOPARDY* answer, as you were the other day." A former student I had not heard from in twenty years also e mailed after watching the show. I had not seen it, but to have your name mentioned on TV certainly denotes a degree of Fame in our culture. It turns out that the final question for the contestants was more or less, "Famous American painter about whom Christopher Buckley wrote the book, Blossoms and Bones." And the answer was "Who is Georgia O'Keeffe?" I knew that recent quiz shows threw in a question about poetry at the high levels to stump contestants—they know Americans read little poetry. While having dinner at my mother's one evening, I'd seen an episode of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire" and the question that stopped the contestant at the half million dollar level was, "Who is the current Poet Laureate of the United States." More to the point, I knew that the other CB had some cache' with NBC, TV Guide, and a number of slick magazines, and that libraries and Internet sites listed our books all together. It was not difficult to figure that some devious researcher thought that the book was by the other guy, that he was famous enough to mention in a quiz show question. *Sic gloria transit mundi.*

ART IS LONG AND LIFE IS SHORT, and I found a little satisfaction recently when searching for two of my out-of-print letter press books. I was at the library using the Internet for a great web site, ABEbooks.com, which lists hundreds of bookstores and book sellers in the US and Canada. This was one of my first times at the site and instead of typing in a particular title, I just typed in my name and something like 870 books came up. Major poets such as Philip Levine might have a thousand listings; Tim O'Brien might have twelve hundred. I plowed through all 870 and, way back in the 700s, I found one copy of each book I wanted. Perhaps thirty of the books listed for sale were mine. Twenty or so belonged to a British Christopher Buckley who wrote books of military strategy about WWII. Roughly 800 books then were novels by the other CB, and despite celebrity, it didn't seem that many people held on to them. I was happy to pay some high prices for my two rare, beautifully printed books, content with my relative Fortune and Fame, even though I wasn't Christopher Buckley. F

David DeKrey

Orangutan, a Biography

"Non-violence leads to the highest ethics, which is the goal of all evolution. Until we stop harming all other living beings, we are still savages."

Thomas Alva Edison, Harper's Magazine, 1890, as quoted on the Orangutan Foundation International Website.

Wallace Jackson was a connoisseur of the bizarre. In his private collection were several scrimshawed oosiks, a string of pinkly luminescent conch pearls, an entire shelf devoted to Haitian goatskin tchotchkes in the form of voodoo idols and fertility talismans. Once, after a dinner party, he held a mummy unwrapping. The ancient Egyptian, falsely assured during life of an embalmed eternity, suffered the indignities of being exposed in Mr. Jackson's drawing room rather well. Its face was frozen in an emaciated grimace, lips drawn back to expose yellowed teeth eerily similar to Mr. Jackson's own.

Wallace Jackson was a tall man. A bit too tall, in fact, for his hair, which grew in a greasy fringe over his ears. On his scalp above the tree line were liver spots and occasional scabs of obscure origin. He was excitable, and when talking of his latest acquisition, the tenor of his voice would verge on hysterical and ropy spit would form in the corners of his mouth, stretching to accommodate each word. Speaking with Wallace Jackson was a bit unnerving. People trapped by him in conversation constantly suffered the urge to look over their right shoulder at whatever it was his lazy eye was staring at so intently.

Part of his motivation for collecting was the belief, however misplaced, that someday a woman would find his collection intriguing and, perhaps, possibly, just maybe, sleep with him. His prize possession, and he hoped, the coup de grace with a certain Charles Darwin devotee of his acquaintance, was a Southeast Asian ape, an Orang-Outang.

At this same time, the late 1880's, two titans of American invention and industry, Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse, were advocating competing electrical systems. Edison's direct current system was safe but impractical and would have required a power plant in every neighborhood. Alternating current, advocated by Westinghouse, could be transmitted long distances but was quite dangerous and as Edison said, "...if we ever kill a customer it would be a big blow to the business." Unfortunately, even Edison could see that if his safe DC system was to win the battle, subterfuge was in order.

The progressive nature of the age was about to help him out.

Just prior to the Edison/Westinghouse feud, several poorly executed hangings had embarrassed New York authorities. This was due to the fact that in England a hang man's handbook was used that based the length of the drop on the weight of the condemned, but in America there was no such standardization. The convicted often either slowly strangled or had their heads jerked violently from their bodies when the hangman, in an attempt to avoid the former outcome, left too much slack in the rope. In order to clear up these complications, a death penalty commission was appointed in New York in 1886.

The commission's report, after describing in detail 33 methods of execution, determined that five were used in "civilized" countries. Each of the five was dismissed. The guillotine was messy and associated with revolution. The headsman's axe likewise caused embarrassing spatter and required a skilled technician. The garrote was used only in Spain and was too closely tied to the Inquisition. The firing squad was "demoralizing, particularly because of its tendency to encourage the untaught populace to think lightly of the fatal use of firearms."

Descriptions of hangings, both botched and successful, went on for 23 pages but it was ultimately dismissed due to the inherent problems that had led to the original establishment of the commission.

Having rejected all historical methods of capital punishment, the death commission needed something new. Lethal injection was considered but dismissed due to the objections of the medical community on two grounds; that it would contradict the Hippocratic oath for a doctor to administer lethal drugs, and that if used in execution, hypodermic needles would take on negative connotations in the public mind and they would then be less inclined to submit to injections.

WHILE THE COMMISSION DELIBERATED, several well-publicized cases of accidental electrocution had occurred, including that of a man who snuck into the Westinghouse power plant in Buffalo and touched the generator. The deaths in each case appeared swift, painless, and entirely novel. Electricity was also being used to euthanize dogs and had already been used punitively in place of floggings in the Ohio State Penitentiary, where the punishee was made to sit naked in a water-filled metal bath that was then electrified.

Based on this evidence, it was recommended by the commission that electricity be adopted as the means of execution in the Empire state. The commission, it seems, wanted to be state of the art.

Art was another hobby of Wallace Jackson's. Hindu Erotic Art, Japanese Erotic Art, Renaissance Italian nudes. Sepia toned photos of turn-of-the century ladies with their voluminous skirts hiked up around their wastes

exposing tangled jungles of pubic hair and dimpled thighs.

In pursuit of his ardent collecting, Wallace would regularly travel to New York City and spend time on the docks. He'd buy gallons of cheap West Indies rum, knowing that sailors, when sufficiently lubricated, could be more easily persuaded to part with their exotic gimcracks. On one such buying trip he was approached by a Portuguese deck hand with a footlocker full of shrunken heads. Wallace, having acquired several shrunken heads years earlier, was uninterested, but knew from experience that those just in from the Malay Archipelago often had the most curious of the curiosities. Cajoled by Wallace and plied with rum, the deckhand provided a tour of the ship, introducing Wallace to the ship's mascot, a four-year-old orangutan named Pongo. The captain was summoned. Wallace, using a more than insignificant chunk of his inherited fortune, purchased Pongo, and brought him home to decidedly un-tropical upstate New York.

The cage Wallace had constructed in the formal garden of his estate was roomy enough, but bleak. The ornate Victorian filigree on its roof provided Pongo's visitors with visual stimulation, but did nothing to relieve the ape's boredom. Inside the cage were a concrete floor, a large dead tree limb, and a pile of straw, replaced daily by the gardener.

PONGO HAD BEEN TAKEN from his dead mother when she was shot for bush meat, her hands cut off and sold in a Hong Kong market. Raised on the ship, he had enjoyed nearly constant interaction with the crew and as a result, was good natured and engaged. There was always activity onboard and the rigging provided ample climbing opportunities. But in his bare, frequently cold Albany prison, Pongo became listless, bored, and unpredictable.

Wallace Jackson, his peculiarities and seeming social handicaps notwithstanding, threw very popular parties. Lavish meals of turtle soup and roasted peafowl were followed by absinthe and discussions of avante garde theater. An invitation to the Jackson estate was the social equivalent of being chosen Catherine the Great's favorite horse. It was a consummation devoutly to be wished. On the day Pongo unwittingly set in motion the events that would bring about his own death, the appetizer at the Jackson Manse was Ortolan Bunting. The tiny songbirds had been netted in southwest France and, in order to more delicately flavor their entrails, were fattened during the trans-Atlantic voyage on a diet of bran, herbed with thyme and oregano. Thus prepared, the birds were brought flaming to the table in a retinue of bunting pans. Each guest draped a linen napkin over their head to capture the unique aroma, and lifting a bird by the beak, popped it whole into their mouths. The sweet tender meat yielded to the crunch of the tiny hollow bones and the bursting intestines, which released the flavor of truffles and foie gras.

Albany's most eligible young lady of the moment was Diane Foster, the aforementioned Charles Darwin fanatic and student of evolution. The daughter of a textile importer, she arrived at the party in a forest green silk gown. Its narrow waist flared at the hips, on which, through careful positioning of his head, Wallace was able to focus both his eyes. Thus arranged, Wallace could perceive depth and more fully appreciate his guest's feminine curves. The high-necked bodice of her gown was Belgian lace, the sight of which caused Wallace to be more phlegmish than usual, exacerbating his already distracting saliva problem.

Following dinner, as guests discussed the unique flavor explosion and multi-layered texture of the passerine hors d'ouevres, Pongo was led among the small chatty knots of Albany's privileged. It was his first time out of the cage in two weeks and he was in good spirits.

Wallace had cornered Miss Foster under the wisteria arbor and was making a sincere attempt to impress her with his nearly encyclopedic knowledge of Galapagos Finches. As he spoke more and more excitedly of the variations in their beak morphology, Miss Foster's eyes began to wander. She found she couldn't look at Wallace Jackson's face and concurrently pay attention to what he was saying. The two were mutually exclusive activities. No matter what he said, his conversation could never hope to compete with the riot of things going on with his face. It was as if a woolen mill had been perched on his shoulders with its multitude of whirring, spinning, disjointed parts.

Pongo, attached to a stout chain, waddled slowly up to them. Miss Foster was enchanted. She bent down to look at his nearly human face. Pongo, like Wallace, was intrigued by the lace on her gown. Reaching up gently, he touched it with long fingers, their skin creased like a crumpled paper sack. Then, with surprising ease, he tore the bodice from her dress. Miss Foster shrieked and stood up. Her mummy-brown corset could be seen confining her midriff in a whalebone cage. Wallace, in defense of the lady's honor, struck Pongo with his walking stick, severely miscalculating the gardener's abilities at restraint. Pongo easily jerked the chain from the gardener's hands and swung it at Wallace, hitting him squarely in the crotch. The heavy chain rendered Wallace forever unable to consummate his collection fueling dreams.

Then, dropping the lace, Pongo headed for the trees.

Across town, having determined that electricity was the favored means, all that remained was to determine the exact method by which executions would be performed. The New York Death commission asked the Medico-Legal Society of New York to recommend procedures for implementation of the new law.

Enter Harold Brown. A self-educated electrical engineer and consultant, Harold Brown's livelihood was also being threatened by AC power.

One of his inventions, used to combine high voltage arc lamps and low voltage incandescent bulbs on the same DC circuit was about to be made obsolete. The day after the electrocution bill passed the New York legislature, Mr. Brown wrote a moving letter to the New York Post describing the "poor boy Streiffer," a young lad who accidentally touched a telegraph wire and was instantly killed. Mr. Brown went on to attack AC electrical power as too dangerous for use. At this same time, not to be outdone, Edison Electric Light published its own pamphlet titled *A Warning*, cautioning the public on the dangers of AC.

Asked by the death penalty commission to investigate the use of electricity for executions, Harold Brown approached Thomas Edison and requested the use of his laboratory for experiments into the lethality of alternating current. Mr. Edison quickly agreed. Much as the medical profession was concerned about the use of hypodermic needles to kill the condemned, if Westinghouse's AC could be linked with executions, the public would be less inclined to allow it into their homes. Edison's DC would power America.

Westinghouse, for his part, acknowledged electricity's potential danger, saying "AC will kill people, of course...so will gunpowder, and dynamite, and whiskey." Oddly, the latter two were not even considered as possible means of execution by the New York death commission.

Brown went immediately to work, even staging a public demonstration in which a large Newfoundland was subjected to increasing amounts of DC power up to 1000 volts. At this point, the dog, uncomfortable but very much alive was immediately finished off with a mere 330 volts AC, proving its much greater lethality.

Following this, the journal *Electrical Engineer*, showing a more whimsical side than most trade journals of today, published a bit of song craft amazing if for no other reason than the ability of the author to work in the word "viscerae."

Mr. Brown and the Dog, a Ballad.

The dog stood in the lattice box
the wires around him lead.
He knew not that electric shock
So soon would strike him dead...
At last there came a deadly bolt
The dog, O where was he
Three hundred alternating volts
Had burst his viscerae

Critics argued that the dog had been weakened by the earlier DC shocks and that the experiment had proven nothing. They also suggested that a 78 pound dog was not an acceptable surrogate for a human being, and that no comparisons could be drawn between the two.

The Jackson estate was large, with acres of old fields reverted to woodland. Pongo swung from branch to branch in the canopy. Word of a free-range orangutan spread quickly from the party. Edgar Allen's Poe's *Murder in the Rue Morgue* had recently portrayed orangutans as the murderously violent poster child of mans' bases instincts and Wallace's neighbors became much more concerned with the prospect of molestation at the hands of a Bornean ape than they would ever be with the idea of alternating current powering their bedside lamps. Doors, unequipped with locks, were secured by forcing wedges into their jambs. Windows, normally open against the summer heat were bolted and shuttered. For the three days of Pongo's freedom, ladies did not venture from their homes unescorted. Wallace Jackson, unable to walk more than a few gingerly steps, directed parties of searchers armed with ropes, nets, and hastily constructed live traps.

Pongo quickly discovered that the woods of New England offered little nutritional value to a large non-human primate. Hungrily driven from the trees, and ungainly on the ground, he was easily captured after being spotted casing a neighbor's chicken coop.

On December 12, 1888 the Medico-Legal Society submitted the recommendation that AC be used for execution purposes in the state of New York. The well publicized "Battle of the Currents" between Westinghouse and Edison had seemingly been won by Edison, already a national hero. Questions about the effects of electrocution on the human body, however, remained to be answered.

When Pongo was finally back in what would become his ornate death row, Wallace Jackson contacted the Medico Legal Society and suggested that in Pongo he had the means by which to finally settle the question of whether electricity was an appropriate method to "take the life of such as are condemned to die." Harold Brown was contacted and a private demonstration was arranged.

Mr. Brown designed and built a stout oak chair as the instrument to deliver fatal electrical charges. A metal cap, looking much like a small colander, would serve as one electrode while the second electrode would be strapped to the leg of the condemned. Heavy leather restraints were positioned to fasten around the chest, forearms, and calves. The chair's circuitry was connected to a steam-powered Westinghouse AC dynamo.

The word "electrocution" had not yet been coined. *American Notes and Queries* contacted Thomas Edison to inquire what term should be used for the new method of execution. Mr. Edison submitted "Amperemort," Dynamort, and Electromort, to his attorneys, Eaton and Lewis, for their opinion. None seemed exactly right, and Eaton and Lewis instead suggested "electricide." Then the attorneys went one better. Perhaps, they stated, "As Westinghouse's dynamo is going to be used for the purpose of executing criminals, why not give him the benefit of this fact in the minds of the

public, and speak hereafter of a criminal as being 'westinghoused.'"

A SMALL CROWD, INCLUDING BROWN, Wallace Jackson, and members of the Medico-Legal Society gathered in the carriage house of New York governor's mansion for the demonstration. The dynamo, sufficiently stoked with coal, was brought humming to life. Pongo, looking calm but mangy was led into the room. Having frequently sat in chairs on-board ship, he thought nothing unusual of this one until the straps were quickly fastened around his arms. He struggled, but even with his surprising strength could not free himself. A sponge inside the head electrode was moistened with salt water and fastened like a yarmulke to his head. A bare wire was attached to his leg and secured with wet gauze. Then, without ceremony, without an opportunity for last words, or even a final meal, Wallace Jackson threw the switch.

And so Pongo, one of the most well-traveled and cosmopolitan of his species, became the final test subject of a new and progressive method of capital punishment. This final test was necessitated by critics concerned about the effects of electricity on the human body. Testing on dogs was inadequate, and not just because of their size. Harold Brown and others under the direction of the Medico-Legal Society had electrocuted several calves and two horses, the largest of which weighed 1,230 pounds. Rather, Pongo met his fate not because he was savage, not because he was dispensable or merely a handy test subject; rather, Pongo was the first to suffer such an ignoble fate because he was so nearly human.

Reprise

The *Garuda Purana* precisely lay out what reincarnatory destinies await those who engage in certain unsavory activities:

> *The murderer of a Brahmin becomes consumptive, the killer of a cow becomes humpbacked and imbecile, the murderer of a virgin becomes leprous—all three born as outcasts. The slayer of a woman and the destroyer of embryos becomes a savage full of diseases; who commits illicit intercourse, a eunuch; who goes with his teacher's wife, disease-skinned. The eater of flesh becomes very red, the drinker of intoxicants, one with discolored teeth...Who steals food becomes a rat; who steals grain becomes a locust...perfumes, a muskrat; honey a gadfly; flesh, a vulture; and salt an ant...Who commits unnatural vice becomes a village pig; who consorts with a Sudra woman becomes a bull; who is passionate becomes a lustful horse.*

The *Puranas* do not, however, indicate if sins are cumulative such that a drunken carnivorous butcher will return in the next life as a ruddy, imbecilic hunchback with gingivitis, or if instead the most heinous sin trumps the others. Nor could the writers of the sacred Sanskrit poems, even with

divine inspiration, foresee the need to document the karmic consequences of an orangutan's electricide.

With Pongo's execution Wallace Jackson didn't feel the satisfaction he had anticipated. Instead, he was simply left with an acridly singed former exotic pet. Wallace died bitterly in a room stacked to the transoms with his life's work. For all their conversation sparking interest, his collections were unable to mitigate his loneliness.

Pongo, in a fit of well-placed rage had consigned his captor's extant incarnation to the fate reserved in the next life for those who commit illicit intercourse. Yet, even with this blot on his character, it seems that an orangutan, transported from his jungle home aboard a Portuguese trading vessel, forced to endure a diet of table scraps and bruised apples, and ultimately sentenced to an unnatural death, will be rewarded with reincarnation as the fifth son of an Irish immigrant. At the moment Pongo was Westinghoused, Simon Grady came screaming into the world, led by a shock of bright orange hair. The Portuguese ship, although inanimate, received its retribution when it sank in a gale, the only survivor the cabin boy, released at last from constant buggery.

Simon's infancy passed as did most infancies of his generation. He suffered from constant diaper rash, croup, and a snotty nose. Still, he was the darling of the household and enjoyed frequent dandling on the knees of his older siblings. But at the age of eleven months, the birth of the next in a long succession of Gradys relegated Simon to the background. No longer the baby, he became just another member of the group generically referred to as the "little kids."

Simon's hair color was more a consequence of his Gaelic ancestry than a lingering manifestation of his simian roots. On the monkey bars he was not known for his brachiating skills. His upper lip was not unusually prehensile. Simon did not suffer the urge to pick nits from his siblings' hair even though lice were a constant visitor to the Grady household. Rather, the only aspect of Simon's personality held over from his former life was an uncanny ability to predict electrical storms.

Maureen Grady was ironing the wash she took in to supplement the paycheck her husband sporadically produced, when the usual household din was punctuated by an eerie silence. Simon, age six and half, had been wrestling his brother on the middle of the kitchen floor when he suddenly released Sean from a half-nelson and stood up. He stared blankly at a mildewed spot on the wall above a framed picture of Pope Leo the XIII recently distributed to the faithful by the Knights of Columbus, and said, "Ma, I think you'd better bring the clothes in off the line."

"What're you talkin' about?" his mother asked, trading her cool flat iron for one freshly heated on the pot-bellied stove.

As a steaming petticoat released the scent of lye into the close room,

the sky darkened and fat, cold raindrops settled the dust. Mrs. Grady ran into the yard to gather the laundry as the distant gargle of thunder confirmed Simon's prescience.

As Simon grew, his predictive powers became more refined. He knew a storm was approaching farther and farther in advance. Simon couldn't say how he knew. The knowledge of a coming storm and the time of its arrival would simply occur to him while he was thinking other thoughts. Much as the smell of damp wool suddenly brings on childhood memories of mittens secured against loss by a long piece of yarn strung through the arms of your winter coat, a sense Simon couldn't quite define would inform him that a violent gully washer was expected tomorrow before sunset, accompanied by high winds and pea-sized hail.

Simon gained quite a reputation. At first the neighbors speculated his hearing was just more acute than theirs. He could hear the approaching thunder before they did, that was all. There was nothing supernatural about it. But when Simon began to accurately predict storms two or even three days in advance it was clear that even the most extraordinary ears couldn't hear thunder from weather systems still unformed.

When Simon knew it was about to rain, he'd go around the neighborhood and collect a few pennies from those eager to know if they should plan a picnic, go fishing, or close the windows before leaving for work. Simon's dad would take the information across town and place bets on whether it would rain the next day. The bookmaker soon discovered the reason for the unprecedented winning streak and Simon's fame increased beyond his local community.

Just after Simon's 14th birthday his voice dropped an octave and hair the same shocking shade of orange as that on his head sprouted elsewhere on his body. Simon discovered that dreams of his eighth grade teacher taking off her blouse resulted in embarrassing stains on the sheets, and that not only could he predict the weather, but could now summon storms at will.

It was a steaming August afternoon and the back of Simon's sunburned, unwashed neck itched under its accumulated grime. The air above the sandlot shimmered as Simon rotated the end of his bat in slow circles, staring intently at the pitcher's mound.

"God it's hot," thought Simon, "wish it would rain."

At the bottom of the sixth with Simon's team up three to two, the game was called as the formerly cloudless sky grew gray as twilight and the rain came down in sheets, buckets, cats and dogs.

So Simon learned he could make it rain. When regions were struck by drought Simon would get word, a telegraph, a letter, a wrenching plea, and he'd head out for Missouri, Colorado, or Saskatchewan. He didn't really need to be on site for his powers to work, he only need think to himself, "sure would be nice if they got some showers in Boise," and the Idaho skies

would open, muddying the ground above potatoes growing like tumors beneath the earth. But, he liked to travel and he liked the attention he received, riding into town like St. George, a dragon strapped to the hood of his truck. With growing notoriety his fees increased. Local governments would drain the treasury in hopes that a wetter spring would bring in the farmers for new reapers, plows, and nights on the town.

What Simon couldn't control was the duration or amount of rain. If just a few sad sprinkles fell, driving mosquitoes mad with the anticipation of stagnant water, he need only wish for more until an inch or two had fallen. The problems arose when his clients received too much of a good thing. When Simon was run out of town by an angry mob after a flash flood washed away the greater part of Le Roy, Pennsylvania, he became much more careful. Before he would deliver the goods Simon made sure the situation was serious.

It was 1933, the stock market had crashed four years earlier, the Great Plains were choking on the dust of dead family farms, and a 31 year old Strom Thurmond was actively discriminating against Negroes in his position as the Edgefield County, South Carolina Superintendent of Education. Simon Grady was packing his bags for a tour through Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and the Texas panhandle. It was a tour he hoped, even in those dire economic times, would bring in enough funds for an early retirement in California. He'd been to California once or twice. It was a state prone to occasional drought, but drought was not his concern, and he liked it there. Oranges grew, and he hoped to slip into quiet obscurity among the groves.

His first stop was Kearney, Nebraska. As the train rolled west from Omaha, Simon looked out the window and saw mounds of fine topsoil like snow drifts along the tracks. It was hot. The leaves of the stunted wheat were yellowing and tattered from the constant sandblasting of the prairie wind.

In Kearney, a community of dirt roads and graying buildings with false fronts badly in need of paint, a celebration had been organized for his arrival. A platform was set up in the town square, adorned with red, white, and blue bunting. The last of the aging plow horses had been pressed into service to haul wagonloads of family to see the rainmaker. As flies bit the horses' fetlocks, the skin on their flanks twitched spasmodically like the tail of a headless snake. Farmers just in from the fields gathered in small knots to talk about the weather. The farmer nearest Simon removed his hat and wiped his brow, revealing a white forehead, clearly demarcated from the deep brown skin of his arms and face. Dust mixed with his tears forming miniature clods in the corners of his eyes.

"Good god," Simon muttered under his breath, "these people need rain."

But he was getting ahead of himself.

Simon mounted the platform and settled into a metal folding chair with the words "Lions Club" stenciled across its back. The mayor stepped to the podium and began to deliver a long-winded speech.

Towering cumuli were building in the west, their dark flat tops rising like mesas above the horizon. The rapidly beaten tympani sound of thunder could already be heard. The Catholic priest and Presbyterian minister each truncated the eloquent pleas they had prepared and in the interest of brevity said short prayers as the first drops began to fall.

Afterward, the spectators would recall their hair standing on end moments before it happened.

The priest and minister stepped down off the platform and just as Simon was about to stand and say a few words of gratitude for being asked to come and do what he could to help, a bolt of lightning parted his hair and gave Simon an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

The lightening passed through Simon, into the folding chair, and grounded out through the metal legs of the temporary platform. The rivets of Simon's jeans were instantly superheated, branding his backside with an abstract dot-to-dot. The rain was falling harder and the smell of ozone was strong as the shaken crowd gathered up Simon, who was unconscious on the platform, and carried him to the doctor's office.

Simon remained unconscious for several hours and when he came to had no memory of the day's events. The town and surrounding farms had received a good soaker and everyone was in better spirits than they had enjoyed in months. Simon was shaken and dazed but, aside from the tender welts on his rear, did not appear to be suffering any lingering ill-effects. The next morning, on schedule, he boarded the train for Salina, Kansas.

The scene was repeated in Salina, Simon on stage surrounded by dignitaries, the grim crowd anxiously turning their attention to the podium, and Simon thinking to himself,

"All righty, bring on the rain."

An hour passed, the sun was growing hotter, a breeze began blowing from the west. No raindrops fell, no clouds appeared, and the first faint murmurings of fraud began coming from the crowd. Three hours, five hours, the wind increased, and things began getting ugly. Simon had been wishing for rain since before the white sign with "Salina" painted on its face became visible out the train window. Just as things appeared hopeless, a roiling black cloud became visible over the tops of the cottonwoods that ringed the city park. Simon was relieved; he let out a sigh and relaxed for the first time since the previous day. And then, the sky growing darker, Simon got a taste of the dust first kicked up on the plains of eastern Colorado, and he began to cough. He blinked his eyes against the dust storm, set down the watery, tart lemonade he had been pretending to drink and climbed the platform

to return his fee. The people whose hopes had momentarily been raised, sighed collectively and stoically returned to bitter resolve. Humanity, it seemed, would have to wait at least another day for deliverance.

Author's Note

Since its first lethal use, electricity has been employed in the executions of over 4,200 convicted criminals, probably one orangutan, and at least one elephant, Topsy, publicly electrocuted on Coney Island in 1903.

The "Battle of the Currents" took place in 1888 and 1889 as described. Already making major inroads by that time, AC quickly replaced DC as the form of power used on the entire American electrical grid, in spite of Edison's best efforts. Thomas Edison eventually admitted his mistake, acknowledging the problems inherent with DC.

The story of an orangutan (or in some accounts an entire family of orangutans) being electrocuted as the final test of the electric chair has been frequently reported, but may in fact, be apocryphal as no firsthand accounts of the event exist. F

Franz Wright

The Heaven

I lived as a monster, my only
hope is to die like a child.
In the otherwise vacant
and seemingly ceilingless

vastness of a snowlit Boston

church, a voice
said: I
can do that—

if you ask me, I will do it
for you.

THE EXPERIMENT

"Art is individualism, and individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. There lies its immense value. For what it seeks is to disturb monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine."

- Oscar Wilde-

Laura Hope-Gill

The Fifth Fiancee: An Opera Without Parts

Supertitles:
He: You're one of the fiancées, aren't you?
I: One of?
He: There are five of you here.

Aria:
A man has just asked me a question. The answer terrifies me.

It is gray November. It is a discovery, an uncovering, an opening up of mysteries. It is that kind of opening which we can't ever close. It is a question we don't answer, just live.

I attached myself to a mystery that took the form of a man.

Confession:
I moved with his life for a year, and then I had to leave it because he asked me to. His name is a mystery, too. Savion became his name when he died and I could create him again. He is my golem in words, my dirt lover, a phantom form of what I once knew to be true.

Supertitles:
In this moment, it is more over than I'd expected anything could ever be.

Memory:
I put my hearing aids in during the taxi ride. Wearing them on the plane makes everything too noisy. I might already have been going deaf when I was with Savion. I wondered if that's what he meant when he told me I was too insular.

Examination:
The quiet of our life together had been a comfort to me. I liked that he and I could write in the same house, that he could read while I took long baths, that he didn't come after me when I was smoking on the back porch, that we could move near each other's presences without having to be in them. I want to hold on to my version of it.

Conclusion:
There was an ethereal beauty to my year with him, during which we barely involved ourselves with the goings on of the world. Some things occurred in it that reached us—Lady Diana and Dodi were killed, we were saddened by that—but most of it drifted by. We lived like monks of the Rinzai school of Buddhism, never going over the wall to tell others about Nirvana. We lived as though we'd achieved it ourselves. We were weightless in our loving, when we touched it barely left a mark. He withdrew from any sort of sex that left him distracted, would stop me sometimes and whisper, "it's too much." What was too much was anything that pulled him too far into his body, which inhabited a meta-world between the one most folks move in and that other one only he did. Loving him was like loving the dream you remember upon waking, knowing at any second it will slip back under the door of sleep, back into the room of dreams.

Supertitles:
I mistook quiet for contentment. I loved beyond words when words are important as well.

Analysis:
It was easy to hide my growing deafness from myself and from him in our house in Indiana. To bury it under a false wisdom, to sit for an hour making patterns in sand with a wooden fork, organizing the stones in new beautiful ways while he sat on the cushion by the window, reading poems by a poet we'd both known but who had died the year before. We shared a reverence for poets, particularly the dead ones, particularly the dead ones we'd known. I believed those hours. I believed those hours could build a life. I never called them silent. I never called them deafness. It never occurred to me that I was the one receding.

Memory:
"You never talk," he said. "You don't need anybody."

Retort:
With my hearing aids in, I still had trouble understanding as the taxi driver told me I am beautiful. He had to say it into the rearview mirror. I read his lips that way. I know that I am beautiful. Not being beautiful has never been the problem. Being deaf is a problem; being in love with Savion is a problem.

Memory:
"And since you moved in here, I haven't gotten any of the good poems. You're taking all the good poems."

Setting:
And there was Ground Zero across the water, two months down. I held Savion's death up against it in my heart. It lost. It also won. "You are too beautiful to be traveling alone," said the driver.

Memory:
"You're blocking my view of God."

The problem has always been something else.

Scenario:
I once explained the hearing aids to Alex. He told me he'd always wondered what it's like to make love with a deaf woman. For her, I explained, it's like making love in outer space once she closes her eyes. You have to keep bringing her to earth. Don't let her close those eyes. I'd met Alex long before I even knew Savion existed, on paper or otherwise. If for only an afternoon glass of wine, Alex and I had been meeting in the City to talk about poetry for nearly a decade. We never left the restaurant. We never made love in his apartment in Brooklyn, never went for walks. What we did was talk, and it was the best conversation I'd ever found in this relatively stunned and speechless world, up to that point at least, which is to say until I met Savion. By the time I was moving to be with Savion, Alex knew me. He had even picked out the lingerie Savion gave me as a welcome present.

Act One:
Alex was reading his poems at the Public Library the night I came to New York. Other poets and writers were there, men and women I'd read or read about. One of them was like a God to me, so I steered clear. He started talking to me anyway. I didn't mention Savion, that I was there in New York for his memorial, which I was. It was the third memorial. He'd been memorialized in Virginia, his birthplace, by his parents. He'd been memorialized in Indiana, where he taught. And now he was being memorialized in literature central, New York. There was no doubt about it: Savion's immortality was being carefully engineered. And the engineers were well aware that there is a brief moment following a poet's death during which the poet's spell must be cast over all humanity, or as much of it as they could fit into a place of worship or a special events hall at the Academy of Arts and Letters, provided they were the right people, the ones proven capable, through a dossier of ideological torch bearing that would now matriculate them into being bearers of not just ideology but personality, of being the preservers of memory. The conditions must be tantamount to those under which the entire skeleton of a dinosaur gets cast into stone for

later reconstruction in plaster while those of a million others simply turn to dust on the far terrain of the millennia. I didn't tell the God-writer that I was on such a mission. The truth of the matter was that I hadn't really told myself yet.

Supertitles:
I am in a room of moving elegies. His photograph on the table is killing us. But this is only the beginning. He was not meant for life. Only paper. It is clearing up now, I am starting to understand what has happened here. There is an unfolding of him now.

Intermission: to be read while listening to music of a lilting nature.

Theme:
After his reading, Alex and I left the scene and ate Thai food in a modestly renovated basement. I was careful to read his lips without looking up and down his face. This is the same thing that actors do in movies when they are being sexy. I didn't want to be sexy. I would not move through him. We flirted joylessly. The last time we'd seen each other had been the summer. Savion was still alive, living in Greece, although he had complained to Alex that he was having trouble peeing, that he must have a urinary tract infection or something. I'd seen Savion the previous winter when we shared the final leg of our journeys to Asheville—his from Greece, mine from L.A. on the exact same 5 A.M. puddle jumper out of Cincinnati. When we met for coffee a few days later, he apologized for ending things the way he had. He also mentioned "the suicide attempt" and was surprised I hadn't heard. I'm a grape on a different vine, I said.

Supertitles:
I'd dreamed of the poets gathering. I'd dreamed of the conversation of the masters. But in the dining room, all we discussed was who was publishing whom, who had turned away from it all. They spoke of each other like racehorses—a strong track record, stamina. Savion had a good track record. But in the end he lacked stamina. Or not. His poems still run, scents of gasoline and straw.

Lights dim, finish the cigarette.

Drums begin. Fanfare.

Lilting music.
We were walking a path beside the Swannanoa River in the surprisingly warm January air and I had difficulty hearing him over the water as he described "the suicide attempt" the way I suppose some would describe

somebody else's wedding or an unsuccessful shopping trip. I found myself focusing on his stockiness, the movement of his muscles through his jeans as he walked beside me. I wondered if he'd ask me to come back with him to Greece. Instead, he told me he was happy in Athens and in love with a waitress who loved books. She worked at a restaurant on the way up to the Agora. I pictured her standing on the patio, grapevines drooped serenely around her dark hair. She was holding a book, looking up from it, thinking about him, the poet from America who was the answer to all her prayers to a manifold orthodox Greek God. I wasn't jealous of her standing there. I was happy she'd found love. I wondered what book she was holding, whether or not it was in English. After telling me he'd asked her to marry him, Savion suggested we sit down on a fallen log. He'd finished the book he'd wanted to write about St. Augustine and gave me the manuscript, unsigned and not dedicated to me. I read the first three pages and then a few more in the middle. It was beautiful. I recognized myself in a scene where the man tells the woman she has to leave because she's blocking his view of God. I didn't ask him to sign it. Three months later, when I'd summoned the courage to read the entire book, I emailed him, telling him that since so much of our relationship was in it, right down to the description of the black flecks in the iris of my left eye that I really felt I needed to be mentioned at least in the acknowledgements. He'd agreed in his response that I was very much in "the over-arching emotion of the work," whatever that meant. Over pad thai, Alex was now excitedly telling me the book was published. I asked about the acknowledgements. I wasn't in them.

(Silence, then.)

Supertitles:
I realize that in my imaginings of other people together, they are never talking.

Heavy Metal:
Alex then told me he had something unpleasant to tell me. He touched my hand by accident while reaching for his glass of water. He told me I wasn't going to be able to read the poem I'd written for the service, that Thalia, the waitress from the Agora, had removed my name from the program. I understood almost immediately; it made sense. She didn't want his former fiancée reading poetry at her fiancé's memorial service. Other poets would be reading, but they hadn't slept with him. She wasn't like Sonny Bono's wife who let Cher go on for twenty minutes at the funeral when Sonny Bono died. She was like Spenser Tracy's wife who Katherine Hepburn knew wouldn't want "the other woman" present at the ceremony, graveside or otherwise. I was being Katherine Hepburned. And it hurt. I'd wanted to read the poem. I'd needed to read the poem. I'd worked damn hard on that

poem and it needed to be read. But I wouldn't. I would not get to say my good-bye this way. The waitress appeared in my mind, gazing down from the Agora over smog filled Athens, his book in her hands, her finger tracing the dedication.

Blow the dust from the needle.
She is blocking my view of him.

Theme 1:
Changing the subject Alex explained he'd set me up with a room at the Something-Something Yoga Center on First St. or First Avenue. It was under a hundred dollars, he'd explained, and it was walking distance to his place. I couldn't tell if this was a suggestion that I could walk to his place and have lunch with him and his wife and their three-year-old daughter or if it was a suggestion that he'd be visiting me alone. I could never tell with Alex. I was aware that in Jewish Law, the Levirate Law to be precise, the death of one man rendered his brother responsible for the happiness of the dead brother's wife. He and Savion were not real brothers, though, and Savion and I never married. He seemed to want me to be happy. I couldn't do that. He was a part of my sadness.

Theme 2:
We finished our food with the awkward possibility of sex floating between us, the way it floats between old friends with a shared tragedy. It would be a challenge to say no to Alex. My grief could over-ride my ethics, could erase his wife from my mind for the hour it might take to know whether Savion could somehow be conjured by our being together. He'd always felt sex was sacred and capable of opening doors to the unknown. He approached it cautiously, like it was a tarot deck. I said no to Alex and myself and possibly even Savion with every possible mannerism I could come up with as he escorted me through the Village to the yoga center. I didn't ask him up and he went his way home, like a dog.

Variation 1:
My room at the yoga center was the size of the interior of the dark gray Pontiac station wagon I lived in for one semester of college. It opened into an octagonal open space illuminated with candles and serenely decorated with bright Indian portraits of various aspects of the Buddha. The hardwood floors were perfectly clean, as though tended to by an apprentice to the Master himself. A rattan box outside my room contained yoga mats, a spray bottle and a roll of Bounty paper towels. I cleaned a mat and did twenty minutes of balance poses before getting ready for bed.

Act Two:
(Abandoning of music, five fingers on each hand flutter in waving motion.)

The following morning I called Alex, but no one answered. I needed to thank him for getting me here.

Supertitles:
We talked about poetry at the beginning. I thought we'd come to an agreement that words only carry us so far. I must have stopped using them then.

Variation 2:
"You, I'd rather stand back and watch," Alex once said, explaining why we never got involved. Beside, he was always either seeing someone or I was, and it wasn't in either of our natures to cheat. Instead, we'd drink and sometimes smoke. Actually, I always smoked. He sometimes joined me after having a drink or two. When he told me he was getting married I wept all the way into the street, on the curb while he hailed me a taxi, and clear through the cab ride to LaGuardia. The cab driver opened the window between us—I could hear back then—and said in a thick Hindi accent, "You know, when I feel the way I think you are feeling, I write a poem and it makes me feel much better." I smiled politely but I wanted to tip the car over. When I called that morning, I didn't leave a message because no wife would want to hear the message I would have left. On the bulletin board above the telephone cradle was a cut out article reporting the Massai had given the United States fourteen cows to show their condolences after September 11. The United States had told them it would rather have their value in jewelry, which is easier to ship and doesn't carry disease.

(Silence: congregants may offer their own prayers.)

Coda:
The Yoga Center had actual residents, permanent people who cooked tempeh and bread pudding for breakfast. I joined them, promising to prepare something in return that evening, after I'd done what I'd come to New York to do. They invited me to join them for a yoga class before it came time to do it. And I did. The studio was one floor below the residence and had floor to ceiling windows overlooking First Avenue. I struggled with every asana, fighting with myself. At the end the teacher had us picture our breath as creating a large gold ring spinning before our faces. I finally felt good. I felt I could walk upstairs, shower, put on the dress I'd bought back when I lived with Savion, and go to his memorial service and not break down. I felt that I could do this.

Koan:
The Rinzai Buddhists stay within the walls whereas the Mahayana Buddhists leave the serenity of the garden to tell the world what they have learned. What school is it that the walls fall apart and the world comes in?

Memory:
"He's dead," said Alex over the telephone, "and he didn't do it himself." There was a disease, a one-in-a-million disease and of the few that get it, one in a million die. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you." He did it, I wanted to say. It was July, the sunlight slashed my address book as I wrote the date of his death under his telephone number.

Theme:
(You are my sunshine my only sunshine plays faintly, as though on a radio on a boat fifty meters from shore.)

I walked to Alex's building which was only four blocks away. When we'd spoken on the phone in October he'd told me that the smell of burning flesh and computer wire still hung in the autumn air from the explosions, that they couldn't open the windows of their apartment because of this. I rang the doorbell and met Josephine, his wife, through the intercom. Alex met me inside at the top of an old staircase. When he'd kissed my cheek and led me to meet Josephine, I wished I'd read some of her short stories in magazines. We didn't have anything to talk about except Savion. So we didn't talk at all and instead let their daughter entertain us by showing me her toys. I was sitting on the floor playing with a musical cube when a woman arrived whom I'd met when Savion and I were together in Indiana. At first, it occurred to me that she was the babysitter and this was just a really big coincidence, but then the sitter showed up. The woman sat down next to me on the floor. She acted very warmly to me. I felt warmed by her, as if I'd re-met an old friend. She told me her name was Melissa, I think. I felt that I could grieve with her, which I hadn't really felt I could do with Alex and Josephine. They seemed closed to my sadness. They seemed very strong about the whole thing and I wondered if that was because they'd gone to the other two memorials. Maybe it took three memorial services to really get over Savion's death.

Geography:
We rode in a taxi, all four of us. Josephine directed the driver on where we were going. The Academy wasn't like the Met. The cab driver had no idea. I realized I'd never really believed it was an actual place, but more of an idea. The Academy. But there it was when we pulled up to it, all old and stone and stalwart as though gravity pulled just a little harder at this

particular place on the earth. Rather than the usual 9.8 grams per second squared here it was a full ten grams. I'd gain six pounds just by walking in there.

Dirge, voice of Richard Burton doing Shakespeare on LP's:
And there we were. Going up the stairs so grand and florid with their metalwork, there we were going to grieve Savion with poetry and music and song. Through grand wooden doors, the bodies of the living writers already moved, sipping wine from real glasses, nibbling on real food. I recognized a few of them from the backs of books they'd written. Some I recognized by name from New Yorker calendars of events or lists of visiting writers at MFA program advertisements. All of them had appeared on Savion's caller I.D. box at one time or another when we were together. That brief second which now had the power to haunt me for the rest of my life. A table was set up, a photo of Savion in the middle, surrounded by his books.

Vivace:
After he'd told me to leave, that he couldn't "do it," this after I'd presented him with all the options for the flooring of the house we'd just bought together, this after the villa in Tuscany had been reserved for the summer, this while the puppy we'd picked up a week before from the Humane Society slept on my foot, after he'd said "I'm not talking about flooring" and I'd said I'm going to stand in the living room for one minute, after that minute is up I'm going to come back in here and you can either pretend you didn't start this conversation or you can continue it and I will leave, after I'd gone back in and he'd continued the conversation saying I was so insular, saying I was blocking his view of God, saying I was taking all the poems, after this I met him for one last dinner and he told me I could have the new car, the villa in Tuscany, or the grand piano he'd bought me as an engagement present. I told him I'd keep the puppy, that I'd I buy his beat up old pick up truck from him for a dollar just so I could get out of there, after all of this, I left him standing in the rain of the rearview mirror, not asking me to stay, not asking me to forgive him for everything he'd let me see as ever being possible. On the passenger seat next to me, Zoë the yellow lab-whatever mix puppy shifted and napped in a blue kennel crate. I bought a pack of cigarettes when I filled the tank and smoked all the way across the Ohio River and home to North Carolina. By the time I arrived home, I didn't feel or breathe anymore, and I lived like that until he died three years later. And then it would be the kind of pain that shoots out of you like shooting stars during a meteor shower over a remote and silent beach. Anywhere you are, people will see it. I glowed with grief, not for the poet but for the man. And not for his death—for his ever having said no to me, for leaving me so hard I had no choice but to pack up my stuff,

load it into an old Chevy and create a new life without him until he realized what he'd done. It was as though I had been waiting for those three years for him to call me, to write me the kind of letter he'd written before he proposed, to contact me in some way and insist he now saw in me all that I had seen in him, that he was open to it, ready for it, that he wanted to come back. All the other men had done this. But not him. I had only gotten two letters since the day I left. One was a statement releasing me from the mortgage on the house. The other was the apology for his having felt the need to push me away, to push everything away in order to create the solitude necessary to be the poet he was. He needed only his own darkness, only his own terrors to keep him company. He'd written that he had honestly believed that by loving me he could live without these forces, that he could allow happiness and companionship to enter his life, and he wrote that he honestly believed that I could be the one to draw him back into the world and that he could belong there. In the end, he concluded, it became increasingly clear to him that he never could be in this world, that the other world would always claim him as its own. I never read the end of the letter. I didn't even keep it very long. Whatever answers it might now have offered me are gone.

Supertitles:
We are in the room of elegy. We are the keepers of his memory. Feel him breathe us in and out. The gold ring spinning before our faces.

Scene One:
"Yes, you're one of the fiancées, aren't you?" says a voice from the mouth of the head that is connected by a strong masculine arm to the hard muscular hand that was shaking mine. I press the button on the back of my hearing aid to increase the volume. It had automatically downshifted in the commotion and I had not noticed. The voice introduces itself. I recognize the name: he's the composer Savion had been working with on his opera about St. Augustine and a woman he referred to as his concubine, the one who blocked his view of God. He repeats: "You're one of the fiancées, am I right?"

"One of?" I ask him.

"Yes, there are five of you here."

(silence, then.)

I glance around the room, feeling as though I would recognize them if I saw them, and then I'd know them. I look for Alex and then I stop.

I maintain grace, "I was engaged to Savion three years ago."

"Are you the one he left in Rome?"

"No," I regret having to make such a correction, "Indiana."

Diversion:
I imagine myself in Rome, in a white dress next to a fountain, waiting for him. But I'd never even made it to the altar. I had the dress. I'd found it in a small shop in Sedona. We'd flown to visit his parents in Phoenix where they spent their winters in a borrowed house with no lawn, only black plastic tarpaulin overlaid with white stones the size of ping-pong balls. Each morning small baby rabbits floated dead in the swimming pool. His father fished them out with the leaf scooper and tossed them into the trash. His mother passed out prayer cards over breakfast. We were saying prayers for the people whose names were written on them. I didn't feel right praying for any of them but did anyway. I hoped no one was out there with a card with my name on it. It felt like some kind of psycho-spiritual imperialism. But Savion went along with whatever his parents said. We didn't even sleep in the same bed in Phoenix, because they didn't believe in premarital sex. I thought he'd creep into me in the middle of night each of the seven nights we spent there, but he never did. In Sedona, I found the dress and bought it. It reminded me of the dress Lady Diana wore at Westminster Abbey that day back in 1980. All rough silk and swoopy. No bows or sequins. Just romantic. It was the perfect dress. We then all met up for nachos in a strange little tex-mex joint before heading back to Phoenix. They all seemed so excited about the bulging garment bag I slumped over an extra chair at the table.

"Not Rome," I finish the thought.
I want to continue. I want to explain which of them I am, name something that might make me matter just a little bit more than the others. *Fiancée* is a word that has long been used to signify the highest order of girlfriend, now it is something else. It is Savion's order of girlfriends, like an order of nuns, only we are not the brides of Christ but of a poet. It is something Savion liked to have, a woman willing to be there with him. She wore his diamond to prove it. It was her habit. Bright and glorious, expensive and hers. Belonging only to her. They are, we are, the true keepers of his memory.

Libretto:
"I'm the one that blocked his view of God," I reply as calmly as one stating her name, "I'm also the one that took all the good poems," I add. "But, no, we never went to Rome."

Benediction:
At dinner following the reading, four of us fiancées are seated together. Savion's father makes the toast, circling our table exclaiming how wonderful it was that his son *had* so many beautiful women. I can hear him clearly as

he says this because he looks directly at me. Thalia who is blonde hasn't spoken to any of us but remains on the other side of the room, shaking hands with everybody as gracefully as Jackie O. I tried to approach her to tell her how sorry I was. I wanted to tell her that she was welcome to drink with us but I knew she wouldn't come along. She is the last. She has that. He went into a coma on her wedding day, but damn it, she is the last one he'd ever kissed or told he's going to love her forever.

(Now, then, very faintly: CURTAIN) F

—Contributor's Notes—

Priscilla Atkins lives in Holland, Michigan. Her poems have appeared in *Epoch*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Bellingham Review*, and *Smartish Pace*.

Fred Bahnson's poems and essays have appeared in *Rock & Sling*, *The Independent*, *Sojourners*, *re:generation Quarterly*, *The Mennonite*, and the anthologies *Dance the Guns to Silence: 100 Poems Inspired by Ken Saro-Wiwa*, and *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*. With his wife and son, he farms in central North Carolina and is the garden coordinator for Anathoth Community Garden.

Judith Barrington's third collection of poems, *Horses and the Human Soul*, was published by Story Line Press in 2004. Her book, *Lifesaving: A Memoir* won the 2000 Lambda Literary Award and was a finalist for the PEN/Martha Albrand Award. She teaches at conferences in the U.S., including this year's Split Rock and Haystack programs, and in Britain for The Poetry School. She is a web mentor for The University of Minneapolis.

Jessica Breheny lives in Santa Cruz, California. She teaches English at Hartnell College in Salinas, where she is the fiction editor of *The Homestead Review*. She also serves on the editorial board of the newly resurrected *pingpong*, The Henry Miller Library's literary magazine. She has work forthcoming from *Other Voices*, and is currently working on a collection of short stories.

Christopher Buckley's most recent book is *Sky*, The Sheep Meadow Press, 2004. Sheep Meadow Press will also bring out his 14th book of poetry, *. . . and the Sea*, Spring '06. Recently he has edited the poetry anthology, Homage To Vallejo, Greenhouse Review Press, 2006. And, with Alexander Long, he has edited *A Condition Of The Spirit: The Life And Work Of Larry Levis*, published by Eastern Washington Univ. Press, Fall 2004. Over the last 25 years his poetry has appeared in such literary journals as *Apr*, *Poetry*, *Field*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Quarterly West*, & *New Letters* among others. He has received a Fulbright Award in Creative Writing to the former Yugoslavia, four Pushcart Prizes, two awards from the Poetry Society of America, and is the recipient of NEA grants in poetry for 2001 and 1984. He teaches in the creative writing Program at the Univ. of California Riverside.

Susanna Childress has recently published in *The Missouri Review*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and is forthcoming in *IMAGE*, *The Notre Dame Review*, and *Indiana Review*. Her first volume of poems, *Jagged with Love*, was chosen by Billy Collins as winner of the Brittingham Poetry Prize with publication by the University of Wisconsin Press in November 2005.

David DeKrey works at an environmental consulting firm in Portland, Oregon. Aside from his Master's Thesis," A Comparison of Fish Community Structure in Relation to Habitat Variation In Three North Dakota Streams," his work has been published mostly on-line at *Absinthe-literary-review.com*, *sweetfancymoses.com*, and *mcsweeneys.net*.

Ed Frankel lives and writes in Los Angeles California. He is on the faculty of the UCLA Writing Programs. He has co-authored the first and second editions of the college text, *The Course of Ideas*, HarperCollins. His recent poetry has appeared in *Confluence*, *The Dogwood Journal of Poetry and Prose*, *Nimrod*, *The Kennesaw Review*, *The Litchfield Review*, *AmericaWest*. *Americas Review*, and *In Our Own Words*, *Burning Bush Press*.

Laura Hope-Gill lives and teaches in Asheville, North Carolina at Christ School. A graduate of the Warren Wilson MFA program for writers, her poems and stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Poet Lore*, *The Laurel Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Phantasmagoria*, *13th Moon*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Bayou*, and *Cairn*, among others.

David O'Connell received an M.F.A. from the Ohio State University. His work has previously appeared in *Poet Lore* and *Tempus*.

Jenna Martin received her BA in English from the University of Texas at Austin and her MFA in Poetry from New England College. She comes from a place of riddled grace, steeled in the shape of Texas' best monument, yet distanced, the perception of perimeter. She comes nonetheless, comes to contemplate the world's birds and worms and middle of the sky gliders. This is her nature. Her work has also appeared in The Alembic and di-verse-city.

Maggie Nelson is the author of *Jane: A Murder* (2005), *The Latest Winter* (2003), and *Shiner* (2001). A new collection of poems, *Something Bright, Then Holes*, is forthcoming. She has taught writing and literature at Wesleyan University, the Graduate Writing Program of the New School, and Pratt Institute of Art. Recently she joined the faculty of the School of Critical Studies at CalArts and is now living in Los Angeles.

Greg Nicholl is a freelance proofreader living in southeast Idaho. His poetry has recently been published in *Feminist Studies* and *Rattapallax*.

Jonathan Padua is twenty-three years old and lives in Honolulu. He holds a B.A in English from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, as well as a handful of writing awards, among them an American Academy of Poets Award. This is his first publication.

Shiromi Pinto is a writer and editor based in London, UK. Her work has appeared in *Serpent's Tail's Kin anthology*, Tell Tales Vol. 1 (Arts Council of England), the *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* and *opendemocracy.net*. Her first short story, "Bulat Kisses", appears in *Notes Across the Aisle* (Thistledown Press, Canada) and was awarded second prize in the publisher's 1995 short story competition. Her first novel, *Trussed*, is published by Serpent's Tail in March 2006.

Peter Ramos's poetry appears in *Verse*, *Poet Lore*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and *MIPOesias* (on-line). His manuscript *Short Waves* won the 2002 White Eagle Coffee Store Press Chapbook Award. *Watching Late-Night Hitchcock & Other Poems*, his other collection of poetry, was published in Winter 2004 by Handwritten Press.

George Saunders is the author of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, *Pastoralia*, and, most recently, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*. A new collection, *In Persuasion Nation*, is out in April. He teaches at Syracuse University.

Seth Sawyers received his MFA from Old Dominion University. A former reporter, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *and Jabberwock Review*. "Some Kind of Apology" is the final essay from "Young White Male," a collection of personal essays he has recently finished. He lives in Baltimore.

Rachel M. Simon's work has appeared recently or is forthcoming from *North American Review*, *Black Rock & Sage*, *H_ngm_n*, *and Forklift Ohio*. She was named a finalist for the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets, the Inkwell Prize, the Hearst Poetry Prize and the Arts & Letters Prize. Her manuscript was accepted for publication by Pavement Saw Press. Rachel teaches at SUNY Purchase College and lives in Yonkers, NY.

Rob Walsh's stories have appeared in *Redivider* and are forthcoming in *NOON*. He lives in Seoul.

Kevin Wilson has published stories in *Ploughshares, One Story, Carolina Quarterly, Greensboro Review, New Stories from the South* 2005, and elsewhere. He lives and teaches in Sewanee, TN.

Franz Wright's last collection, *Walking to Martha's Vineyard* (Knopf, 2003), received the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. His new book, God's Silence, will appear in March of 2006. He lives in Waltham, Massachusetts with his wife, writer and translator Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright.

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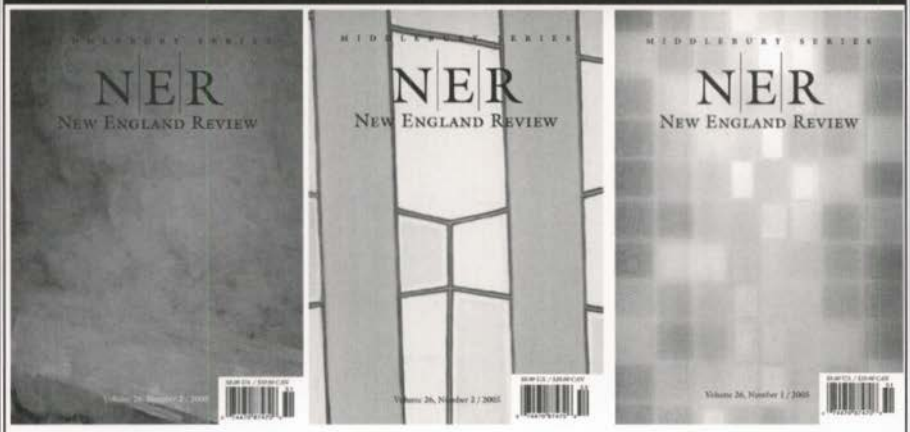

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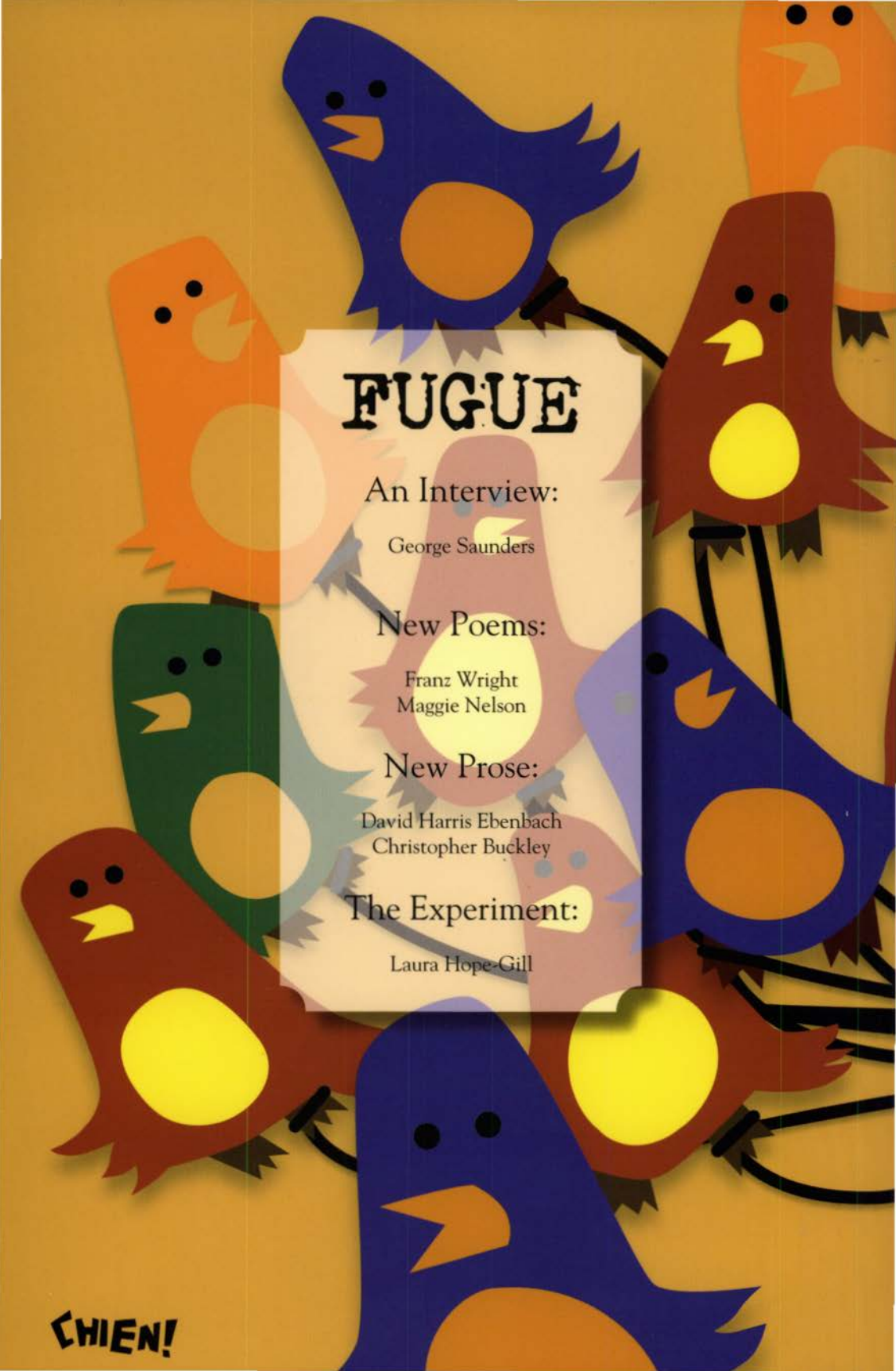
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