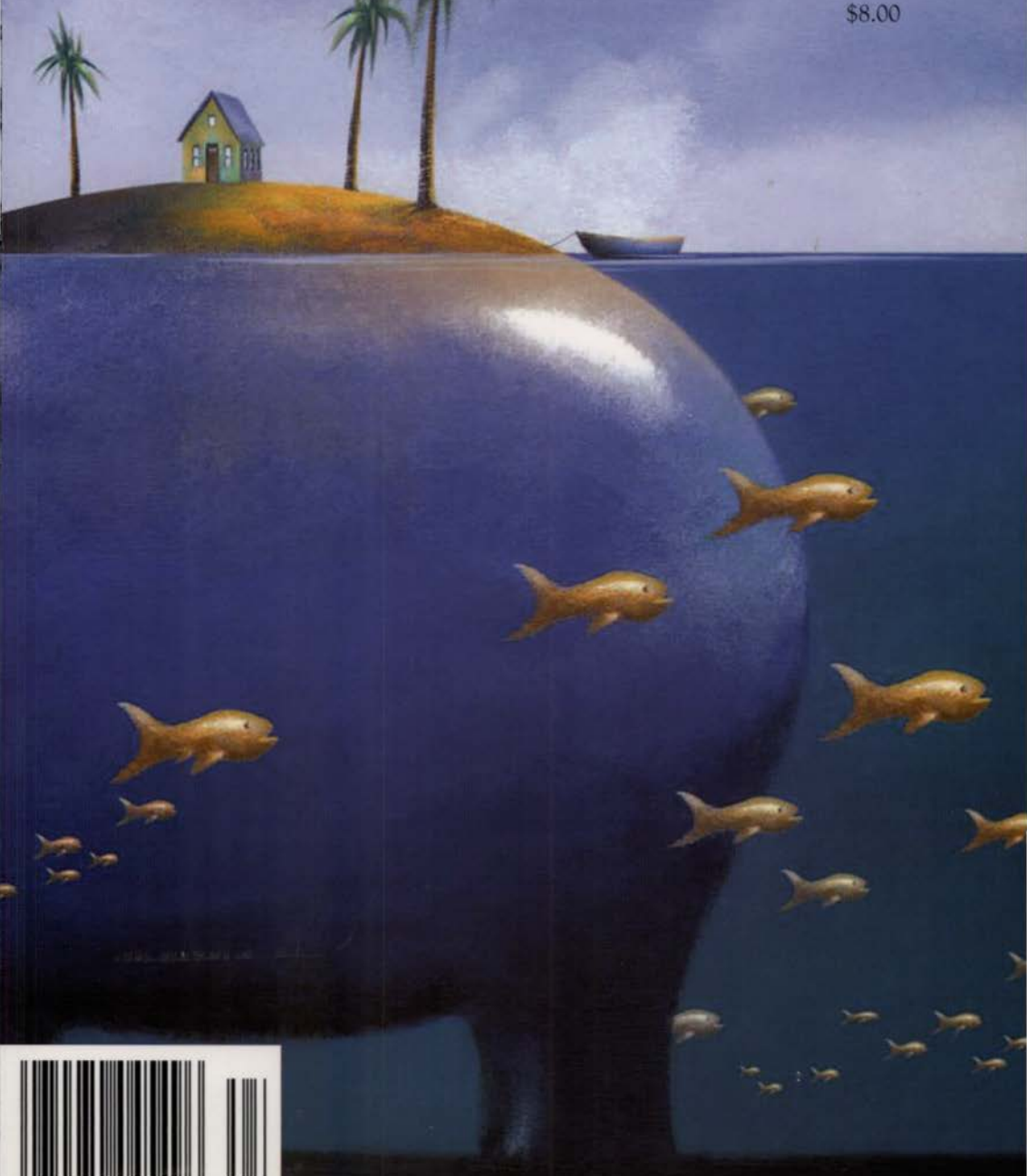


No. 33

Summer - Fall 2007

# FUGUE

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Summer 2004

Volume 114, Number 2



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“It was a pleasant café, warm and clean and friendly, and I hung up my old waterproof on the coat rack to dry and put my worn and weathered felt hat on the rack above the bench and ordered a café au lait. The waiter brought it and I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write.”

— Ernest Hemingway —

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# FUGUE

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This issue is dedicated to the memory

Of

Kurt Vonnegut

(1922-2007)

## Corrections

Nancy Trethewey should be corrected to Natasha Trethewey in the Fall/  
Winter 2006-2007 issue #32.

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# FUGUE

Winter - Spring 2007, Vol. 33

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## —Editors' Note—

It is a great honor to publish the winners of this year's 6<sup>th</sup> annual prose and poetry contest. We received volumes of strong writing and we thank all of those who entered the contest as well as our judges, Ronald McFarland and Jo Ann Beard. It is a privilege to publish and award writing that is crafted with skill and intensity.

To our staff who volunteered their time and expertise, we thank you. Without the contributions and support of the University of Idaho and our subscribers, *Fugue* could not bring this fine work to print for our readers; therefore, we gratefully extend our thanks to all who helped this issue come to fruition.

It is both challenging and rewarding to submit one's work to a journal and we extend our gratitude to all of our contributors whose work is surprising and complex. *Fugue* enjoys when writing takes risks in language and form, but also the art of technique—the pieces included in this issue show a deepened knowledge of the music of form, language, and narrative. We ask that you absorb these lively works and do not be shy, but enter into their worlds, just briefly enough to become entangled in their whimsies and darkness.

Sara Kaplan and Justin Jainchill

## Luna Green

Zizi is hitting me, first with her palms, then with fists when I cross my wrists in front of my face. She is yelling, "You never do anything, never, never, never." We are on the shore and the boy is in the river, but he's not yelling anymore himself, not flailing. He's in there with the fish, I know, maybe snarled on bottom debris, eyes moony, his skin cold and swelling.

We were picnicking to celebrate a new truce. I was off the pills for six weeks, and Zizi, she wasn't seeing Neill anymore and promising. Cleaned up, new start. We had Merlot and a bucket of chicken. She was laughing, her lipstick on the paper cup, a drumstick in her hand. The boy was trying to fish in the spillway, which was no use. And he was happy, too, even if our feast was ruining his privacy, but then we heard his laughter tearing all to shreds and turned to see. He was gone.

I jumped up, her running beside me, her hair a red sparkle in the sunlight. When we got to the shore where the fence is, there was nothing but white rush and roaring, the water savage and no sign of a boy floating in the boil and backwash.

The rain the night before had been savage, too, toppling a few beetle-eaten trees like soldiers. We were worn out from reunion sex, but I sat up in bed, and there were scars of lightning in the windows. Zizi slept through it, but next morning the dog bowl on the porch was full, and there was a luna moth floating in it, not dead yet, his wings fluttering. I slipped my hand under and lifted him, feeling the tickle. I left him on the grass like some lacy thing a woman would set there to dry. He was struggling but hopeless. The cat would get him by noon, I knew. Then she was up, and I went back in.

The suck was roaring, all turning currents and whirl. I pulled my shoes off and kept looking, trying to see deep, and Zizi was yelling, "Save him, Bradley, save him."

It's the worst thing, when somebody's so deep it gets dark. I knew it was too late, him sleeping already, like he was dreaming it all, lonely, and he wouldn't get out till they came with the grapples like a hawk's claws, tearing his flesh as he broke free and rose, cruel even if he's dead, and he is.

But here I am on the bank near the barbed wire, backing off, and her coming on, still shrilling, now just, "You, you, you," flailing fierce. I can see her eyes are filling with that mid-day light, and they are the greenest ever, that moss color, that streak-of-dawn green after a storm, but I am thinking, "It's no use, it's finished this time," and then, "That luna, that luna green,"

This is not, not my fault. **F**

## Infestation

Ghostlike, they came to me  
through open windows, cracked doors.

Shed their husks, left them hollow  
and opalescent on the sill, left

a buzzing breath, their small bodies  
remembered on my skin.

Strange, their lack of warmth,  
despite their blood,

and the ease with which a life  
is cut in flight.

Yes, I took lives every day in desperation—  
a wild germ of hatred, not solely fear.

I too had a murderous side,  
some poisonous self seeping

into me, slowly building.  
But they were stealth in their approach—

letting me think I controlled  
them from my little black doorway.

When it was they who flooded my room  
and wakened me from a sleepless life.

## Celestial Mechanics

I have been betrayed by gravity;  
it does not connect me to anything.

Sometimes I am floating in a tower, unreachable.  
My hands pressed cold against the glass.

I see you floating by: a lost skyscraper, an unwinged vessel,  
the moon.

For years, I calculated my orbit by yours.  
Or was I fooled by that too?

There are larger pulses at work.  
The trains grumbling beneath the surface,

the kicked surge of the power plant as two million eyes open,  
two million feet fall towards the ground.

You are only one among many.

## Prepare

Nilsa cleans the fish  
grates the scales with the blunt edge of her knife -  
those slim disks of light  
flicking the silver - the bloodmarsh - of the bowl

& plating her arms like mail.  
With her blade-point she crosses  
the throat and the gullet -  
fish-back firm in her palm

And like the Harpy she  
tears out the gills -  
with the crack of tooth extraction -  
scoops out the ventral dark

& rinses in a basin of less red water -  
the scales, so many coins.



## While Mending the Rosary

Dear Life,  
My hands smell like Cod and whale oil. Here, in Newfoundland, Cod is on the cross. Flayed, gutted and nailed to wooden planks, salted stiff white, it is Cod I pray to. Cod gives me life, a home, wood in the fire. Cod, whale and seal are my word, as it was also my Father's, and Father's Father, and back to before we can trace.

I bleed whale oil. Thick, fatty oil takes over 100 years to dry. In the winter, chiseling into the whale vertebrae, yellow liquid pours. Claire cleans cloudberry jam jars and I drain the slick, careful not to spill. Yellow jars litter my blue saltbox home. The smell of sea, decay and whale oil absorb into the wood. On hot summer days we open the windows.

To catch Cod nets must be made. Thousands and thousands of knots worked, until hands are rubbed raw. Each knot is important, they must not fail. At night, every inch must be inspected for tears. I sit by the kitchen window darning wet rope. In the morning the kitchen table is coved with the fallen sea salt, and Claire sweeps it off the table with her apron, onto the planked floor, where it rests in the cracks.

People are moving to Saint John's, pushing their homes across the ice. Boys are looking for jobs in the canning factories, pressing Cod into tin cans. Populations are dying out along with the Cod. You have left us to die among the ice.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Control,

Claire made cloudberry jam today. Wearing her worn blue dress, she collected the berries in the skirt's folds. A few were bruised and the bitter orange membrane stained the cotton. She sat at the kitchen table and carefully washed each berry while she sang a French Canadian folk tune. I do not understand French, but I counted each syllable. I took the number of syllables and reduced it until I came to a prime number. Claire gingerly measured out the cloudberrys and crushed them in my Mother's old ceramic bowls. They were a wedding present for my Mother when she was sixteen— she only a girl, father only a boy. The bowls were given to Claire and me for our wedding— us just children. They once were white, now a tan hue, with a cobalt blue band around the lip. The top layer of the clear enamel is cracked and water seeps in between the clay and glaze causing the bowls to be heavy and cool to the touch.

Claire boiled the seedy pulp with sugar. She said that you can only make six cups at a time, otherwise it will never set. She poured the marigold liquid

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into jars and let them cool. Claire licked her fingers, and the spoon, smiling. She loves sugar and cloudberries, especially when it is still hot syrup. In Québec wild berries do not grow. Mother had to teach her how to adjust to life as a Newfoundlander.

I sat in the corner of the kitchen. No fishing today, the sea was too turbulent. I checked my net's knots. I counted them and then rechecked this. I find solace in counting and recounting them and then reducing the number of knots to a prime number. The sea is so uncontrollable, but numbers never change. I can't control Newfoundland—the slow decay of my people and the Cod populations. When I was small my Father used to catch fish as large as I was. Now all the Cod have gone. I can't even control Claire, fiery woman. It is the French in her. All I can do is count the clouds, sounds, cracks, and words.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Humming,

I spent all day at sea. At one point, I was sure I was going to have to sleep in my boat. I can't leave unless the number of fish reduces to a prime number. The back of my neck and my lips were burned pink. My hands felt waterlogged and cracked. The fishing line cut through my flesh; it stung as I rubbed salt in it so as not to get an infection. I sang to the Cod as I gutted them. Claire yelled at me to leave my boots outside so I would not drag in the innards. She hates the smell of fish. Newfoundland is not in her blood.

I do not think she will ever get used to it here. At night, when we are lying in bed, she cries because the house is sad. I would not have it any other way; the vibrations of the wind hitting the side of the house can be felt through the metal bedpost and ripple through the water in my body. Claire wants to move back to Québec. She is used to the sounds of the city. She has a picture of a younger version of herself grinning while wearing a cotton dress with a giant bow. Shops line the cobblestone street and in the background you can see horses pulling carriages. I have looked at it and tried to see what the colors would have looked like, past the gray pixels that make up her youthful face. I have never been to Québec City — too many people, too much noise.

Once when I came home early from fishing, I walked into the kitchen and Claire was sitting in one of the whitewashed wooden chairs, covered in flour. Her hands were veiled under layers of dough from the seal flipper pie she was making. The crust was rolled on the counter top, flour container tipped over. The face that she made was one of such sorrow. Tears poured with conviction. Swaying to her guttural wails, she was primal, manic. I have not seen her look so sad since the baby died. I know she does not want to be here, she hates this land, and me. She wishes she had never been trapped into this life. Maybe if the baby had lived. Maybe if I could say that

---

I love her. I do love her, but I do not deserve to be loved. She is fire caught amongst ice.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Obsession,

Claire made Cod tongues for dinner. She browned them in a giant cast iron skillet. I walked to a bog and brought back a dense pile of peat for her to burn. We are running short on firewood. The ore in the peat melted in a hard mass on the bottom of the stove. When it cools I will have to scrape it out. I am not sure how we are going to last the winter with such a shortage of wood. With no Cod there is no money. I am still in debt from the supplies for last winter. Jim Hawkins is going to move to Saint John's, pushing his home across the ice to the city. He is going to get a job compressing Cod into tin cans. I have not told Claire. What would we do in Saint John's? I rather die than can other men's Cod. I am meant to be out at sea, not trapped in a factory that reeks of tin and motor oil.

Claire went to go see the baby today. I know she did because she made Cod tongues. She hates Cod tongues. After she sees the grave, she can't eat. If I start making knots at my doorway and walk at a constant pace, I can make 37 until I reach the tomb. I always leave the knotted string at the grave. Claire hates when I do that; my obsession drives her crazy. She screams in French, throwing the rope into the weeds surrounding the plot. Her hair falls in her face and her freckles seem to dance. She thinks I am crazy. Maybe it is true. Maybe it is good that he did not have me as a father.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Red Rock,

I fished today. The water was greener than normal and stood out against the red cliffs of the coastline. The distant rock face makes me think of Claire's hair. The first time I met her we were at the air base in Saint John's. She was eighteen and a nurse. I worked on the air strip filling aircraft with gas. Planes were flying over to Europe to fight in WWII. Those were turbulent times in my life. I was away from my saltbox home and my inlet for the first time. My home, my current house, was so remote that no roads came or went to it. To get to Saint John's I had to take a boat. Men I knew were sent off in planes, packed like Cod in a can, to die on foreign soil, flown to die away from the people who loved them— away from Newfoundland. My friends, shell shocked and mutilated, were shipped back on boats for burial. Their bodies soured on the journey from Europe to my island.

I had cut my hand with a box cutter and went to the makeshift hospital. Newfoundland had just become a hub for fueling and was going into a transition. I sat on a white bed, red with blood, and in walked Claire. A wave

had come loose from her tight knotted bun, which rested at the nape of her neck. Her dress was white and pressed. She had come from the city to help with the War. She was everything that I was not— wild, free, all smiles, long legs, rosy cheeks, and French. I was enamored with her, though not sure of what she thought of me. I was some boy who only knew Cod, loss, and water. Claire only meant me to be a fling, to anger her parents. We'd would run around Saint John's and dance in hazy pubs. Holding her close, we danced, and I smelled her hair and kissed her temples. Claire would smile big and look bashfully down at her pointed patent leather shoes. She knew that she was too good for me. She is amazing and I have killed her. I killed our boy.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Wind,

I spent all of today gutting and drying fish. Some of the Cod in the drying shed got wet and started to rot. To stop decay, I put salt on top of the meat. The extra salt will lower the value of the filets. Already, I will not be able to pay what I owe, now I will earn less than I thought. I am not sure what I am going to do. This land used to be known for its seas, now seal eat the Cod we have left.

Today the house smelled so strongly of whale oil that I had to open the windows and doors. After some time the smell of whale was overpowered by soap. Claire stood on the porch with a large wash basin, rusted blue gray. She vigorously scrubbed our white cotton sheets against a wash board, using all of her force. Tiny blue bubbles lapped over the side of the basin onto the ground. She was humming an old French song. Her feet danced as her upper body scrubbed, creating soapy mud. Her lips were turned up slightly— it was the first time I have seen her smile in a long while. When she was done she stood, hair wild, one arm at hip and looked up. Her chin was to the sky— she stared at the sun, as if she was competing with it. Claire had something to prove.

I took a long walk by myself, knotting rope in prime numbers. This is my rosary. I could not go to bed with Claire. After seeing her defiance of the sun, yellow-eyed, I could not face her. She looks so beautiful when she sleeps. The wrinkles around her eyes and the corners of her mouth go away, they relax. We have not so much as touched in years, not since it all happened. Her body is scared with our sin— my sin. There is a massive scar from where the baby was cut out of her. Her body was so small, so young, that she could not take it. Now she hates that I defaced her. I caused her swollen stomach and ageing.

On my walk I went by Saddle Island. I sat on the rocky shore looking at the jagged landmass in the distance. Recently a ship, manned by people who do not fear the sea, had sunk. The giant metal mass stuck out of the water as



a blatant reminder of the power of the sea. Half the ship, black and beaten, was exposed. It is eerie to think of the lives lost in that ship. It is eerie to think of all the people who I have known who came to a lonely watery end. Sometimes I take my boat out to sit. In the winter, if not trapped by snow, I walk across the ice. No one lives on the island. In bad storms the whole island is taken over by waves—eaten. The earth created us, and the earth can take us away.

From the highest point of the Saddle Island, I can look onto my inlet. I can make out the outline of my Nova Scotia blue home, the house's simple saltbox shape. I can see the tiny shed where my fish dry, and the outline of my little boat, resting in the smooth rocks. All of my world can be seen.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Change,

What I love about Newfoundland is that it is unchanging. People who are brave enough to live here know that they are at the mercy of the sea and ice. To this day my inlet can not be reached by car. To get to town, one has to take a boat and sail for about 103 knots. Well, 103 knots if the weather is good. If the sea is angry there is no time to tie rope. One can walk on the ice in the winter, careful not to fall into the frozen salty waters. All supplies must be brought back, careful not to get wet in the boat. Once winter sets in there is no way to bring back supplies, the ice could not hold the weight.

The bogs and air are magical here. Bodies trapped in the peat stay young forever, they do not fall victim to decay—they do not change. Bog bodies' are smashed like a pressed flower in a book, flattened under the weight of peat and humans. Their features stay the same, hair and nails intact, forever in a state of limbo until someone unearths them for fuel. No one knows for sure why people were given a burial in peat. Some souls that are found have gruesome cuts from being murdered, others have nooses. When I dig peat I sing lullabies to the dead, careful not to disturb their sleep. My son, James, was buried in the ground. I imagine that in the winter, the rot slows because of ice. It is haunting to think of my boy frozen like a slab of meat. I picture the water in his muscles turning to crystals and expanding, icy maggots festering in his vellum. I wanted to put him in the peat so he would live forever. Claire would not hear it. She did not understand.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Flint,

Claire asked me today if I love her. Sitting at the kitchen table, one elbow on the wood surface, the other hand resting in her lap, vacant eyed, she looked right through me. My ice eyes saw into her fire and said no. She looked down at her hand, gazed at the simple gold wedding band. It was all



I could afford on soldier's wages. I had not planned on getting married, but she was expecting. Claire looked at her ring like it was a collar that held her. Empty and scared she looked at her stomach. I walked out the back door of the kitchen, counting the syllables in what she said. *Do you love me?* Four syllables – not prime.

I lied. I love her, but do not want her to love me. Love and warmth is something I do not deserve. It is my fault, I killed our baby. I took her on the boat. I insisted we live on this god forsaken inlet, far away from the doctor. The pains of birth started and I took Claire out into the storm. The waves were too much; she went into the blue.

Shamus Napier.

Dear Cracking,

I could not sleep last night. I was haunted. Downstairs I lit the furnace, warming myself by the weak flame. I felt unsettled, so I walked outside and striped the wooden planks on the side of my house. The moon was full, and the scent of Cod hung low like a thick fog I could not escape. With a metal scraper, I applied pressure to the boards, soaked in layers of Nova Scotia blue paint. The lead wash cracked and piled up on each other, like lobsters in a pot. The blue pigment caked my hands, buried in my wounds and fell to the ground like snowflakes. Underneath the paint, the wood was steel grey. The knotted grain was coiled like a fist. I removed all the paint on the first floor of the north wall. When I finished the sun was up and Claire was making breakfast in the kitchen. She didn't say a word as I walked past her, sweaty and beaten.

I did not fish today. Instead, I slept. When I closed my eyes I remembered— I was in the boat and I saw Claire sinking, dove in, and wrestled with the imposing waves. They wanted her. They wanted her son. I pulled her body. The water nearly extinguished her fire. Her lungs filled with salt and I beat it out of her chest. Pounding against her sternum, like flint on a blade, I tried to make a spark. She spit up water, and it ran down her chin. Crumpled in the base of the boat she clenched her stomach. Claire could not yell, or scream in pain— she just chocked as she took in air.

Shamus Napier.

Dear James,

No Cod today. Five hours on the boat and no Cod. I gave up and went back to shore. I walked to his grave. The brushed stone felt cool against my sunburned palms.

The doctor said that the baby had been cut off from oxygen for too long. By the time my boat bobbed to town, James was dead. They cut James out

with a gray scalpel; his skin was as blue as my eyes. Claire cried not in pain, but in loss. On the white cot, hair like fiery tendrils, formed a crown around her. The doctor sewed up her flesh as she extended her arms towards the shell of our child. She yelled with such passion I worried that she would combust with anger and pain. She grabbed the body of the child and held him to her breast, rocking him to the slow pace of a French folk tune. She held him as if she wanted her warmth to make him alive. His head flopped to the side, eyes closed and swollen, hair dark ebony, like mine. She took a lock and ran her finger through it. It was matted with salt water and blood. The look she gave me I will never forget. Her yellow retina narrowed. The whites were red and bloodshot from sea salt and tears. In a harsh whisper she said *you*. Claire sat rocking James until the sky went dark.

Shamus Napier.

Dear life,

I fished today. Claire made Cloudberry jam. She licked the sugar off of her fingers and hummed under her breath.

Shamus Napier. **F**

## The Doldrums

In mid-sea, where high swells subside,  
Where trade winds merge to founder  
On a vast expanse of waveless surf,  
The sun is blank and bloodless.  
Light-mottled crests of foam turn grey  
Like puddle backwash. Here is a ship,  
Stranded and uncertain what to do.

Dead reckoning. Flotsam languishes  
Off the starboard bow, never aft.  
It temps the youngest boys aboard  
To fetch it back. The traverse board  
Is useless, every syllable cried out  
In vain in this watery county that  
Can't be drunk and shrinks the shoes.

The men spook in their hammocks  
As worms crawl through the wood.  
In cloudless night, a false breeze comes  
From eastward, like a shadow swaying.  
But the wind, figurehead of history,  
Won't blow by day. Now wave is known  
By only fate and deepest waters can abide.

The fiction is to see this from a distance,  
a vantage that will never be conceived  
In truth, but is heir of the compass  
And the horizon passed. This world  
Is made by winds that rise and do not rise.  
Only an innocent could wish a fleet  
One fate. Draw closer. God is in the hold.

## Amber

By the shore at the trailhead reeds  
with hollow stalks & plumelike panicles,  
stem-elegant, elephant-tall, astir in a trance,  
at the base of the Palisades near the riverbank,  
hundreds of rushes & cane grasses up to their ankles in mud,  
sheltering bullfrogs & marsh hens, blue herons' eggs,  
the thicket's huge panpipe tuning its stalks  
to west winds spilling over the cliff,  
  
whose footpath slid among rocks,  
whose maples & pines rang with robins  
& sparrows, wood thrushes fawn-brown as basalt  
eroding in hillocks of scree or split into igneous hunks  
alongside the stone stairs' square landing which gave on such views  
of the river's burnt-umber mile-width that she paused  
while climbing to gaze out just as the shore  
gleamed gold with windrows of reeds.

## Myrtle Grove

Inside a stone wall four huge yew trees said  
To be a thousand years old towered above  
The house where Walter Raleigh went to bed  
And dreamed one night that he was making love  
With Queen Elizabeth, who doffed a glove  
And quipped, "Kind Sir, no royal stands as tall,  
No yew tree sports such bristly branches of  
Enchantment and desire as you in all  
My kingdom from far London to your manse in Youghal."

The arched door opened to a chilly floor  
Whose walls, three arms' lengths thick, were built to last  
For centuries with no one to restore  
Them and lure Irish poor folk to their past—  
Walls housing Brits alongside locals fast  
Creating chaos, who would soon burn down  
The castle of a courtier who'd harassed  
Them tooth and nail from countryside to town,  
Then lifted tankards of pale ale to England's crown.

One day he visited and eyed the yew  
Trees poking through a scrim of morning mist,  
Whereat his host said, "Edmund, see that blue  
Patch in the sky? It equals what we've missed.  
Whether we've been rebuffed or we've been kissed,  
We can't hold anything that won't be gone:  
No lady love or lucre or—by Christ!—  
No thought of heaping glory on our Queen  
Will save our swansongs from the mist that shrouds the swan."

His friend, who would die first, who dreamed he'd live  
To write his way to immortality,  
Stepped through the threshold and declared, "Forgive  
My candor when I say I feel so free  
Inside your house, so far from misery  
—These seaside city streets where squalor looms—  
That I could write nine lines of poetry  
And call the stanza by my name. Your rooms  
Are flowerbeds in which an epic poem blooms."

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Then, climbing stairs, he wiped out County Cork,  
Forgetting spuds and Gaelic, picturing  
A woman on a donkey at the fork  
In two roads that stretched forth in early spring.  
She rode, past daffodils and blossoming  
Wild mustard plants, beside an armored man  
Who gently spurred his horse, accompanying  
Milady on adventures stranger than  
They'd ever been through in their meager lifetimes' span.

The visitor paused on the highest stair,  
Imagining a monster in a cave,  
Pulsating, stinking, in its filthy lair,  
With oozing ulcers: "Walter, I'm the slave  
Of phantoms that will haunt me to my grave."  
His friend replied, "To be in exile here  
One must be cautious, Edmund, and be brave.  
Our Irish holiday will be, I fear,  
Extended by our Virgin Queen year after year."

His second storey boasted a salon  
Whose chairs and tables faced a fireplace.  
The two friends warmed their hands and chatted on  
Until the host assumed a long, long face  
And said, "Excuse me, Edmund, but Our Grace  
In London wants an answer to her note.  
I need to write her." Suddenly, the space  
Was his, the guest's, alone. He shed his coat  
And sat down at a desk and tried to clear his throat.

Books on the shelves: Torquato Tasso and  
*Orlando's* Ariosto met the men  
Who wrote how warriors, launched from Athens' sand  
To sack Troy, jolted Trojans west again  
To Rome, which banished Ovid's poems, which then  
Met Immerito and good Colin Clout,  
*The Shepheardes Calender* from Edmund's pen  
That teemed with words hooraying to burst out  
And live in stanzas, rooms they loved to scour and scout.

Above the desk, shaped like an aureole,  
A window led his eyes around the back  
Side of a little church set on a hill.

The morning darkened; clouds emerged so black  
He thought of Armageddon and the crack  
Of broken necks hung from a gallows' noose.  
No matter how he tried to make it slack,  
It tightened in his mind and would not loose  
The breath inside his chest that fought to be of use.

A thunderclap: God's judgment on the soul  
Of one damned poet waiting here, half-dead,  
For words to circle, for an aureole  
Of speech sounds to descend and free his head  
From its slipknot of silence and, instead,  
Release a single line to greet the rain.  
He squinted at the storm with hope and dread  
And then, without a thought, picked up a pen  
And wrote, "A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine."

## Two Back, 1959-1973

Before he let it kill him, the barn saved his life. They called it Two Back because it belonged to Tom “Two Back” Cannery, who was once caught in Joe Johnston’s wheat field making the beast with two backs all by himself. *Drop your pecker ‘n get back to work, Cannery. I’m payin’ you to thresh the wheat, not yourself*, Mr. Johnston had said, who was the father of one of Cannery’s friends. They were in high school then, just kids, and had been suffering through Shakespeare in sophomore English that semester when, in a last ditch effort to gain the class’s attention, their teacher began pointing out the dirty puns in the language. So the nickname seemed to just present itself, fitting as it was, being Cannery had been caught, quite literally, red-handed. It was the kind of nickname that stuck immediately, like cudded gum to shoe sole. Yes, from then on it was Two Back for Cannery.

Years later, Cannery came up with the idea for the barn over a game of cards. His friends, who themselves had farms and families now, were gathered around Cannery’s kitchen table, thumbing the dog-eared corners of three-of-a-kinds and straight flushes. At the epicenter of the round maple table sat a 1.75 of bourbon and it was upon taking a few sniffs that Cannery stood up abruptly, threw down his cards, and declared he was going to build a barn, something he’d been thinking about for some time but had never mentioned. The others were silent, looking at each other, maybe raising an eyebrow, wondering if the juice had already ruined Cannery for the evening. *Shut up and bet, Two Back* Will Frighton finally said. *Yeah, make your goddamn bet, Two Back*, the others echoed. *I’m sittin’ on a winner here while you’re running your dang mouth*. Cannery looked down at his cards, couldn’t remember what kind of hand he had, and threw a couple of pennies into the pot. *I said, by God, if Kansas is flat as Frighton’s wife, I mean to raise a god darn barn out there*, he repeated, slamming one hand on the table and pointing the other one at the wall of the kitchen that divided the men from the rolling Flint Hills surrounding them in all directions. Frighton jumped up and had to be stilled by the others as he wrangled for Cannery, who stared calmly back. They pulled on his shoulder till he calmed and took to his chair. Seated again, the men looked at Cannery’s hand, still frozen in the air, undisturbed by the commotion, and then down at their cards, shaking their heads, raising a few eyebrows. *Drunk hisself stupid is all*, Bob Wilson whispered. Having known him all their lives they’d seen how Cannery was always coming up with crazy ideas that never amounted to squat. Besides, the men knew—everyone in town knew—bad luck followed him around like a haunt. Like the time he drove a plow clear through Mr. Wilkerson’s barn,

having lost himself in the movement of the cloud patterns overhead. Like the way his fields always yielded less than everyone else's. Like how his wife couldn't bear children on account of his dead seed.

No one said anything about it and Cannery eventually sat down to flip over a small pair, losing for the third straight hand. But by the time Bob Wilson returned from his rusted Ford pickup with a second bottle—*thought we could use uh extra*—the mood lightened and their smiles came easier. *Good thinking, Wilson*, they hooted and clapped while upstairs Cannery's wife, Trudy, rolled over in bed, pulling the worn cotton sheets to her chin, the cool underside of the pillow over her ear. It was going to be a long night. So when Cannery said it again a couple hours later, down three dollars, Will Frighton's reprimand to *Shut up and bet your ass-sorry cards* was met with Don McCarthy's response: *Shut up yourself, Frighton. Worse 'n a sour old whore to-night. The man said he wants to build a barn, tired of throwing tarps and gunnysacks over all his equipment. Lord only knows that's understandable, ain't it? Hell, I think we should help him.* Everyone at the table, all seven, nodded their heads with the ease the liquor loosed upon their bodies. And so it was settled that night on the breath of their whiskey oaths: they would help him.

This was in the spring of 1958, when the men were readying to range burn, which was their way of preparing for the upcoming harvest by burning the topsoil of their fields to cleanse the area and enrich the soil for re-planting. More ritual than necessity, range burning had become something of a tradition over the years. That spring the night's horizon would be alive with the intermittent fires from neighboring farms, and if one were stranger to the Flint Hills area he might think it were the end of the world. All evening and night they'd burn, the men staying alert to ensure the fire didn't spread uncontrollably, and in the morning the charcoal clouds still lingered in the air and the smell carried from home to home as the collective ash scattered in the breeze and settled into the soil, ready to yield a new round of crops. But by that fall the men were unsettled to find that the usually busy crop season in southeast Kansas had all but been reduced to dearth by an ungiving soil. The rainy season had ended earlier than usual with the sky allowing only the occasional drip. The dry summer and the deep crusted strata of blanketing snow from the previous winter left corn and wheat yields pitifully low, reducing corn harvests from 150 bushels an acre to a paltry 25-30. The government was promising help, but the government was always promising help, so what the hell else was new? If that weren't bad enough, the warming weather sped up the pests' breeding cycles and expanded their range, increasing the chances of over-winter survival. There were rumors of plague. Weekly, Pastor Bryan sermoned on His judgment and everyone in town, congregated on the splintering pews of the dilapidated chapel, nodded their heads up and down. The men grew desperate, resorting to selling their emaciating livestock (as their grandfather's had

done during the grasshopper invasion of 1874) and later their daughter's Shetlands to stay afloat. They hardly left their homes and for sometime no one spoke of Cannery's barn, barely speaking to him at all for fear his ill fortune had brought this on the town. With all the lost time in the fields, the men began drinking through entire days, watching the sun rise and fall from their sunken porches.

It wasn't until one day some weeks later, with winter nearing, that Don McCarthy came by Cannery's and things began to change. *Well ain't much else can go wronger. Show me what you're thinkin'*, McCarthy said when he found Cannery scrawling in charcoal on a tablet of white paper, sketches of his barn. In addition to the general air of haplessness about him, Cannery's friends teased him for the interest he'd always taken in drawing, something they thought foolish. He'd been the one from the group to sketch passing fancies during class, daydreaming, or to stare off at sunsets during peak harvesting, losing precious hours of light. They couldn't understand why he wasted his time with such idling. But McCarthy wasn't chiding him now, rubbing his chin as he examined Cannery's plans. At the next game of cards, their first since the drought, with the men reduced to betting matchsticks, they resolved to begin working on Cannery's barn. Wasn't much else to do with things the way they were, they said. Cannery thought their pledges kind but wasn't expecting them to show up, so when he saw Frighton and the others through the kitchen window the following morning, just able to make them out—ghostly figures, the whole lot of them—as they trudged through the early dawn towards his house, tools in hand, pulling carts of lumber, he was surprised, running to grab his tablet from the bureau. *What do they want, Tom?* Trudy said, over her shoulder, cracking an egg into the black skillet. Cannery brushed past her through the salt and sizzle of the kitchen to the door. *They're here to help with the barn.* Trudy watched the white of her egg brown, the yoke harden, thinking, the barn?

They worked on the shortening cycle of daylight for the next few months through late fall and winter, during the hours they'd normally have been tending their own farms. The man from the bank in Wichita had said, *Are you sure you want to do this now, with the way things have been? I would not think this wise*, but Cannery just smiled the way he always had in face of long odds, undaunted and confident, reaching for the check.

It was in the early spring, with the thawing of the pestilent earth, that the men neared completion. They worked long days and soon developed a growing crowd of spectators after the winter's passing, sometimes men and passers by, but mostly women and children coming to watch—some of them pleading for their husbands to come home for a change, while others were simply fascinated by the way they had poured themselves into it—these men who seemed to have given their lives over to slothfulness the past year, relying largely on their wives and field hands to run their families and farms.



Trudy would bring pitchers of cool water and the occasional honeyed biscuit to offer in commiseration. And on the day when they finished in early April, after having added a second coat of red and painted the last of the white trim, people from all over town came to see the fruit of the men's labor. And they, Cannery and his friends, were proud. But none more than Cannery. Here they had done something, worked hard, as when they were young. The red wooden beauty grew out of the ground where nothing had been before, taller than anyone else's for miles and miles. A sight, for sure.

Cannery decided on a celebration, a dance the whole town would attend, folks coming from all over the Flint Hills. He decked the barn out as fancy as anything the Legion hall had ever seen and brought in fiddlers that made the saltiest soul tap his foot. Whiskey, cards, dancing. Everyone seemed to enjoy himself. Cannery was pleased, having finally seen something through without any mishaps. The looks he got from people were different now, less sorrowful and pitying than a validation, respectful. He always thought he'd give the barn a distinctive name—something from a fancy book—but before he had a chance to say otherwise it quickly developed his own, Two Back.

That ensuing year the earth gave back what it had withheld previously, bountifully. The men returned to tending their own farms but journeyed to Cannery's weekly to play cards in a little area of the barn away from the machinery and crop bins that Cannery left bare for such occasions, excepting a long oak table and bottles of bourbon, of course. It was one such evening when Pastor Bryan showed up, knocking hard on those unweathered red slats, though the sound hardly made more than a hiccup inside the cavernous barn. He was coughing and Cannery motioned him inside. *Come on in here*, Ed Wilson said. They watched Pastor Bryan move cautiously inside. He looked shook up, sick maybe. Will Frighton extended his glass of bourbon but the pastor waved it off. *Whatsa matter, P.B.?* McCarthy said. They were all churchgoers, but truth be told they weren't the godliest of men, often sleeping through Pastor Bryan's sermonizing. Older than their young pastor, the men had taken to calling him "P.B." for short, kindly letting him know he wasn't above them just because he wore that collar and could speak of momentous matters. *The church is in trouble*, the pastor said, shivering. *It's falling apart. Needs renovation, a new steeple.* The men looked at each other, silent. Thinking he'd figured it out, Joe Johnston said, *You saw what we did with Two Back here and you want us to fix up your church.* He was smiling. *Is that right?* The pastor shook his head and then looked at Cannery, who was unsettled by P.B.'s unyielding stare. Then he realized why the pastor had come and, after finally convincing the young man to sit down and have a drink for God's sake, that was the night Two Back became their church.

FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS Two Back housed Sunday's impassioned gatherings when it turned out that the original church had to be rebuilt, and souls



traveled from miles around to come and sit on bales of hay and feel fear as Pastor Bryan spoke about God and man, animal and mineral. Collection hats circulated with S.O.S.: *Save Our Steeple* written in felt-tip pen across the side. It was back underneath the tarpaulin covers for Cannery's equipment, but he didn't much mind, for seeing the way people flooded through the doors of his barn, complimenting him so admiringly and pleasantly, filled him with a sense of genuine satisfaction he realized long missing. When service let out, Cannery would stand outside the large red and white doors, a few feet behind Pastor Bryan, shaking hands with the folks who were filing out of Two Back, returning their smiles and touch. *See you folks next Sunday.* And soon a strange thing happened, further validating Cannery and his barn: of their own accord people started referring to him as Tom again, and when they spoke the words Two Back they were referring only to the barn. Cannery came to love Sundays, nearly as much as the nights he and his friends played cards. So when those three years passed and it came time for the church to move to its newly fashioned home, Cannery saddened, moping around Two Back alone, kicking dirt. He didn't want things to change, had unspokenly hoped Pastor Bryan would permanently settle the congregation there, seeing how much folks seemed to like it so. When he confronted Pastor Bryan about it, the mealy-mouthed young man had thanked him for his service, and, when Cannery persisted, lowered his voice, saying, *There is a war going on, Tom. People need comfort—they need guidance. And God, well God needs a real house of worship, not a barn.* The ingratitude of which filled Cannery with a dyspeptic rancor. He stopped attending church altogether, instead watching from the upstairs window as Trudy slid into the old Ford—I have to go, Tom, she said resolutely—to drive the three miles to church, where she would sit alone in the hard-backed pew, offering excuses and apologies for Cannery's absence.

IT WAS LONG ABOUT THE TIME PEOPLE in town were learning to distinguish Vietnamese from Vietcong that Cannery came up with an idea that would return people to Two Back. He'd read about it in a magazine near the train depot, and so moved by the possibility decided he would try his hand running picture shows inside the barn. He spoke to a man in Kansas City who ran three movie houses there and the man had tried to discourage Cannery from the idea. *Movies is a bad idea right now. Don't you know there's a war out there that people get to watch free of charge every night on their television sets?* But when Cannery proved his commitment unwavering, the man began speaking dizzily of things like start-up capital, demographics, and markets, a wild-eyed craze to his timbre, and he agreed to talk to his distributor about the "rural draw" of pictures being untapped. But such possibility came not without sacrifice, and to get the money needed to start Cannery had to give up farming, consenting to sell off his plow and tractor, nearly all his acreage,

leaving only the house and the barn for himself. It was a gamble, but what wasn't? he explained to Trudy, who, just-informed, let her chin fall to her chest, puffing out gill-like folds of skin from her neck. His friends thought he was crazy. *Why the hell'd you have to go and do that for?* they said when he started out with the second-run pictures, thinking Cannery had been swindled by the fast-talking city man. But folks around there didn't much care how old the films were; they were just pleased not to have to drive clear out towards Wichita.

And the people did come back, as Cannery had hoped. It was just as he envisioned it: folks came from as far as three towns over and paid to sit in Two Back, on the same bales of hay that had cushioned the hams of churchgoers before them. He started out showing movies on Saturdays only but really turned a profit when he began showing them on Wednesdays and Fridays as well, selling the place clean out and breaking even in only three years. A few months later, as a little blasphemous fuck-you to P.B. he began showing Sunday matinees, stealing nearly half of the church's draw. Cannery would take tickets at the door with Trudy selling cups of cold cola and lemonade at a nickel a piece. When it was time for the show to start, Cannery would welcome his guests and ceremonially unfurl the large white sheet comprised of six linens Trudy had stitched together, and then climb up the ladder to the hay-covered loft to work the projector, as the man from Kansas City had shown him. From there, once the reel was set, Cannery looked down at all the folks below him, the couples holding hands or furtively touching one another, the children who came to every show, the families who had never been to a movie before. When the projector rumbled to life, the bright light shot over their heads in a straight powerful line to the white sheet. And with the movie starting, the bright colors that flamed against their still bodies filled Cannery with the same awe that caused him to stare at the sky or pick up charcoal to sketch.

For several years it was this way, but then, with the certainty that many in town had quietly asserted, Cannery's ill fortune returned in the tornado season of '73, which laid waste to much of southern Kansas. Cannery had turned off the radio, but sensed in the ominously green dead air the twister's approach. Soon the hail came, falling as though stones from an angry God. It took all of Trudy's strength and pleading to get him to leave the barn and follow her to the cellar, and there Cannery sat on an upturned crate, Trudy huddled at his side, listening as it tore the barn apart, slats, shingles, and siding racketing off their house. In the morning, with the break of light, Cannery ventured out to find disparate pieces of Two Back spread as far in the distance as he could see, recovering what he could as he stooped to drag the scattered limbs. He picked up the weathervane and held the hard metal in his hand. The pit in his stomach grew as he gathered what he could. *We should be thankful, Tom,* Trudy said, following him. With a godly fickle-

ness, the tornado had settled down on the barn and quickly risen to the sky again, as these storms were wont to do, not touching down for another quarter mile. He looked back at his untouched house. *We should be thankful*, Trudy whispered.

SOME WEEKS LATER, ON AN AFTERNOON when Trudy was gone to church, Cannery went to play cards at Joe Johnston's, where the game had been moved after the tornado took Two Back. The entire time Cannery sat silently listening to the others painfully take care to avoid speaking of Two Back, talking about damn near everything else: the upcoming crop season, the hot weather, their plans for range-burning soon. Johnston's son, just back from the war, sat quietly in the corner of the room watching the men, holding a glass of water. He was pale and thin, still dressed in full uniform, and whenever someone spoke to him he'd look away and fill his glass from a pitcher at his feet. Cannery looked at him, failing to distinguish his name from the rest of Johnston's brood, recalling only his face—that of a young boy's, clinging to Johnston's legs as he tired to walk. *Musta been hell to come home to this*, Cannery said. It was the first voluntary thing he'd offered all night, and the men shut up, looking at Cannery and then Johnston's son, but he just leaned forward, picking up the water pitcher, and filled his glass a sip's worth. Cannery had meant it must have been hell to come back home to a tornado but realized the implications and ambiguity of *this*.

*Wore out is all he is*, Johnston said, then slapped Cannery on the arm, *Now let's see what your cards say*. Cannery flipped them over, a loser. He won not a single hand and after an hour or so quietly stood and walked out the door to return home, the others watching him, then looking at one another and exhaling a collective *Sssshhhiiiiittt*.

It was a short time later, a day or so maybe, as he sat on his porch drinking Millers from a blue cooler at his feet that he saw a young man approaching in the distance. It was his first visitor since the insurance inspector had visited in person to inform Cannery his plan had covered fire and flood, not tornado. Cannery blinked a few times now to make sure he hadn't nodded off, being that he barely slept anymore, lying in bed most nights listening to Trudy sougning laboriously in her sleep until he got up and walked around outside in the thickened night.

This man was wearing a military uniform with bright patches and medals, colorful ribbons bundled together in a neat square of his chest like a tract of variously cropped land. He looked like he could have been Johnston's son, though now he seemed thinner, paler, more gaunt. He nodded at Cannery. *Just got back*, he said in a strange and broken country manner, adding *from the war* when Cannery said nothing. He barely opened his mouth when he spoke, as though it pained him to do so, perhaps injured. Cannery looked at where the soldier's name was on the uniform but couldn't make

it out, bad vision and all. *You Johnston's boy?* he asked, but the soldier just looked down, kicking languidly at some dirt. *I usta come here fore I left,* the soldier said, meeting Cannery's silent stare directly. *I'd brung my girl an we'd watch your shows. Your pictures. She usta let me touch her, there in the dark,* he said, smiling a private smile that made Cannery wish he were inside his head so he could see exactly what the soldier was remembering. Cannery thought of the nights after shows when he'd clean up, how he'd have to broom over the spilled soda cups and half eaten apples, dust and lint streaming over the occasional stains of semen and blood. *When I was over there an things got hairy, all I thought of was sittin right there in the dark with Alice Anne, hopin she might let my hand slide inside her dress, but still liken the picture alright if she didn.* Cannery pointed out to where his barn used to stand and began to say something, but then stopped, lowered his arm and exhaled. *Look son, they got shows an hour and a quarter from here, out towards Wichita,* he finally said, but the soldier shook his head. *No, I just mean to tell you what I come for, see.* He looked out at the expanse and then back at Cannery. *She left me while I was gone.* Cannery moved to speak but no words escaped his mouth. *Thought I might find her here when I got back in the world again, but I see you've had somthin stolen from you, too.* The soldier looked out at where Two Back used to stand, whispering to himself, *Me, the war. You, the torn-ado.* He said it again, this time quieter, then he turned to leave. Cannery stooped to grab him a beer. *Hey,* Cannery said, calling the man back, feeling something move inside him for the first time in weeks. *Come back.* He wanted to listen to the soldier talk, and so he did, all afternoon and into the evening, listening to his stories about war, though the soldier shook off Cannery's offers of drink.

*Whutchoo gonna do now?* the soldier asked sometime later, lifting his chin in the direction of where the barn had stood. *Gon build another?* Cannery considered this a minute, something he'd done incessantly since the tornado. After paying off his initial loan on the barn and with no insurance money coming in, it wouldn't be long before he was near broke. There was the twice-mortgaged house and the square of land that he'd plowed under to make room for the barn. That was it. *No, movies is over for me,* he finally said, feeling the whole venture had been misguided, lead astray again by his whim. Then the idea, which took on the rush of realization, presented itself. *Started out a farmer, didn' I? Heck, that's what I'll be again. Still got a little land left,* he said, cracking open another beer, *ain't much more than football field's worth but that's something. Nuff to live on, I spouse.* The more he spoke, the more Cannery found himself taking on the soldier's manner of speaking.

The idea so moved him that Cannery stood too quickly, stumbling a little as he walked off the porch and around the side of the house, appearing a minute later with two drums of gasoline. *Come on off that porch and give me a hand, will you,* he said to the soldier, who followed Cannery out to where



the barn had been. The summer night was sweating, thick and sticky. Cannery tilted his drum so that gasoline began to spill out, walking slowly so that the viscous liquid left a trail behind him. You too, he said to the soldier, and he started doing the same thing. *This here is called a range burn, son*, he said into the air. The evening was turning into night all around him and soon Trudy arrived in the Ford after a long day of collecting donations and selling baked goods at the church. She looked strangely at Tom and wearily said, *What are you up to, possessed so?* Tom was hunched over a gasoline drum, mumbling to himself, and he looked up once just long enough to say range burn and wave her inside.

*Range burn*, he continued, speaking over his shoulder to the soldier as he continued spilling gas onto the dusty earth below. *This*, Cannery said as the last drops trickled from the drum, *is how we start again*, realizing now he was standing where the hand-hewn walnut center post had stood. He stopped, feeling the weariness deep inside his bones. Dark now, he could still trace the edges of large cloud masses in the black sky overhead. He closed his eyes and then the memories were upon him again. The farming, the church, the picture shows. All those years seemed to converge within him at that moment, overwhelming.

When he opened his eyes, he couldn't find the soldier anywhere. He looked around, saw the empty drum sitting alone, and in the distance could just make out a lone figure pass over a hillock, disappearing into the darkened horizon. Striking a match off his belt, he lit a few pieces of wood that had been apart of Two Back and threw them to the ground. The fire caught, rapidly shooting all around him on the dribbled path of damp soil Cannery had traveled with the gasoline. He stepped away from the flames. Being so close made the sound of catching fire deafening, but here outside it was silent for miles and miles around him. Out there people were sleeping in their beds, dreaming the same old terrors from childhood, the ones they couldn't shake, or turning up the volume on their new color televisions to watch repeated footage of helicopters carrying the last soldiers from Saigon, civilians clinging to the runners in hopes of being taken away.

Trudy had let herself go when Cannery urged her inside, as if carried by her exhaustion. Upstairs she'd crawled into bed, trying to stay awake until Cannery came to join her but was already snoring in a matter of minutes, a wearisome and angry kind of sleep. Then, awoken by the sound—like an endless line of wet clothes snapping in a gusty wind—and light reflecting off the mirrors of her bedroom, Trudy crept to the window and peaked through the inch between curtain and sill. From there she watched as Cannery looked around one last time and walked into the fire. Her mouth opened but nothing came out and she turned away, quickly slipping back into bed, where she pulled the covers to her neck, pausing there as she shut her eyes, then finally up and over her head. **F**

## What the Mirror Said

Only he is in that gusty field.  
where stars wiggle from constellations—  
worn nails popping loose.

His words are thick with gathering distance,  
his voice—more rustle than a voice:

how febrile the imaginings on the other end?

Between the whitest sheets—thin as frost— he lies, a forest of tubes.  
Wrinkled eyes drift shut like birds.

Weighed down by endless departures  
the bed gleams a chrome fire.  
And the narcotic murmur of nurses—  
closer than the living or the dead  
or the mirror which fogs  
when I lean too close and the unspoken rises  
as sweat greeting the skin.



**flat baby**

you are just a page in a book with too many words just the idea too  
peach too round too blue and blonde

no veins showing through no umbilical scar unreal  
I touch you still when no one's looking I finger  
your ten toes

pretend to smell your glossy hair all powder and milk I get only a whiff  
of book glue I play peek-a-boo with you

shut and close the book look flat baby I hate to squash you I leave you  
open perfect fat face up for every sad girl

in this waiting room world to wonder at your rubicundity she will  
touch her flat tummy  
and stare

## Je T'aime – Moi Non Plus

for Angelique

all the pretty girls.  
look the same.  
your girlfriend is no exception.  
she's just a tribute to a dead decade  
where

all the pretty girls.  
looked like her.  
looked like they were made of soap,  
ceramic,  
melty blinky eyes,  
gumdrop mouths over-sweet.  
her cardigan is too tight.  
she needs some saddle shoes.  
you love her, spinning like a 45,  
heart clenching like Northern Soul,  
and yeah, that sounds good and all,  
clear, but

there's no heart inside a bell, just a ball,  
the swinging piece that makes it tinkle  
and then be silent when you put it down.  
if you left her alone forever, would she make a sound?  
your girlfriend is only capable of chords.

her french is pretty good, though  
words are easier to remember in another language  
because they mean less.  
you can string them together,  
string them up,  
a sad soliloquy of paper lanterns,  
and they are still pretty,  
I guess,  
in the way of frosting roses.

there are plenty of girls.  
who like to sing backup,  
shake up a black tambourine,  
glass eyes staring out,  
though you'd think someone would have broken  
them all by now.

## Heat

That summer was the last time my sister and I slept together. We never stopped rolling. The sea mosquitoes were ravenous. We were 21 and in heat, and we imagined the wattage of the right man plugged into us could light up the whole galaxy.

We attended our cousin's wedding in Rome. The groom, a Neapolitan cop, cornered me at a table of lady fingers and suggested, with a wink, that I attend the honeymoon.

It was so hot the thermometers broke. The streets of Rome were abandoned. Ruby fanned me as I dozed through the ceremony and Mom rolled her eyes. I awoke to find a splotch of blood on my pew. "Good thing you picked that loud dress," Mom whispered. "The blood just looks like part of the pattern."

The asphalt sizzled. The brains of pit bulls imploded and babies died.

One day, as we crossed a crowded piazza, Mom's heart screamed and she crumpled to the cobblestones. Ruby and I rushed her to the cool of a church, where we lit dinky candles as she prayed: "Hey God. My story's not over. You ain't killin' me off yet!"

We escaped by ferry to Croatia with Mom and her boyfriend, sipping beer over the blue sea and watching dolphins leap in the turbo foam.

"Remember," Mom said, "His family's very Catholic. Me and Niko are married. He's your stepdad. Got it?"

\*\*\*

Ruby exhaled sexily. "Italian men are such fruits." We sat by the black night sea, burning foul hash we'd bought at dawn from a Roman raver with an ugly, balding dog and carried on the ferry inside a lavender eye pillow.

"You would know," I said. "You got with one."

"Yeah, well. *Jesus*, Kiki! Did you fart?"

"Sorry. I thought it'd just... fly away in the sea breeze."

"You should see a doctor. There could be something really wrong with you."

"Screw you. Boondogglers."

My heart thumped in my fingertips. Orange lights of civilization moshed on the water. I stood on two legs, yawned, and pawed the stars. Their hearts beat too.

Ruby and I walked down gravel roads past abandoned construction sites, through a depressed seaside town whose boom never came. Our street name - *VELEBITSKA* - was spray painted on a cinderblock wall.

Niko's brother was employed and unemployed in construction, depending on the day. His sister-in-law cooked meals for large Hungarian tourists

who came on bargain holidays. The rent was cheap, the sea was dun, and the land was barren as the moon.

If you were flying above the island of Vir you might have seen two girls cutting through a vacant lot of stubby, dry grass, lighting the night with fluorescent lace slips we'd dyed ourselves in steaming soup pots back home. Goosebumps swept down our shoulders and up our thighs.

"Ooh, look at my girls! Lookin' hot."

Our mother entered the field from a break in the wall, wearing a black slinky nightgown and a gold necklace Niko had bought her.

"Do we look like hot *bitches*?" I asked.

"Yeah! Watch out, though. Igor's over," Mom hoisted herself onto the cinderblock next to her wine glass. "Better stay out here where it's safe."

"Igor!" Ruby clutched her heart. Her lips flipped inside out and she entered a spastic state not unlike seizure.

We looked to our rental home, past the stone cocker spaniels guarding our door, and saw Igor through the window, sitting with Niko on the yellow leather couch. Igor was a runty bald man with no chin. He came over nightly to drink beer and quiz Niko about life in Amerika. How much did booze cost? How much did bread cost? Could a man in construction afford his own house? Were the women.... generous?

\*\*\*

Every morning, Ruby and I woke up early and went back to sleep on the asphalt beach, tugging our bikinis slightly north, south, east and west, hoping for softer tan lines. We aimed our flanks, our armpits and our veiny white wrists at the sun. "Tanning is a science!" we said.

I snorkeled halfway around the island looking at dull fish while Ruby read a big old burgundy Shakespeare Bible. I carried home strange translucent shrimpies in a lemonade pitcher. She sautéed eggplant and garnished it with queer green curly leaves from the yard and slices of blood orange. She used red lipstick to scrawl "IGOR" on the bathroom mirror, inside a lopsided heart.

"Oh, stop it!" Mom said. "That poor man! He could be a great genius, what do you know? You have to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, even..." she began quivering with laughter, "the Chinless One!"

\*\*\*

"You arr lucky man!" Igor would say to Niko, suddenly in English, when we appeared, flashing us spastic, desperate smiles. "Byootiful Amereekan wimmen!"

Igor's timing was impeccable. He'd walk in the instant Ruby exited a steamy shower, radiating essence of melon, rivulets still trickling down her chest. He'd be greeted by my glutes in tiny yoga boxers the moment they rose into downward dog.

"Oh, girls. I was a hot bitch too," Mom said. "I remember going out one night, wearing my pink dress with the lilies on it – such a hot dress. I was at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. I walked into the lobby and a man dropped his drink. It shattered on the floor! And I turned to him, and I said: *thank you*."

"Men still honk at me sometimes. They see my blond hair and my ass but... I love to watch 'em when they see my old face."

Mom and Niko met in a Greek taverna in Chicago when he paid for her *Cosmopolitan*. She motioned him over and he never again left her side.

"It feels like," Mom said, "when you live a long time – all your experience distills on your face and the real you finally shows. Niko saw me."

Around us, Niko was quiet as a rabbit. He held his liquor tight, never stumbling, just shutting his eyes and drinking sounds. In the big town, he gave us each 100 kuna to spend in the market. We acquired peacock scarves, polyester hair flowers and crochet bikinis while he and our mom sat in cafés, gazing at the sea.

"Thanks, Daddy Niko!" Ruby murmured to herself, change chinging in her swinging bags, and with her free hand she grabbed mine. We prowled the streets together, quietly laughing at the passersby, our hands squeezing in synchrony at all the same ones.

\*\*\*

When Mom was going to drive-ins, getting wise about men, Niko was wearing diapers. And Niko was still a virgin, scrubbing ships and dodging the war in a lonely port town, while our mother was enjoying her first divorce. She was domestic as ever, a book report maven and a badass cook, but when I slept at my father's, she seized the night.

"There was one regular at Jodi's they called Gun Dick. Ava slept with him and said it was *monumental*. We wanted to see if it was true, so one night we all decided to stare at him."

"Yeah?"

"Well, when a roomful of women stare at your groin, you naturally rise to the occasion."

"And?"

"And it was *big*."

\*\*\*

Ruby and I weren't from the same womb. We met when our bodies were molting. We had sleepovers in plaid flannel pants and awful t-shirts: "*Groovy Butthead*." "*I'm Thumbody*." In the dark Ruby told me that she humped down pillows in kindergarten and waited to give birth to goose babies. That she wanted her first wedding to be a musical, and she hadn't decided yet about the second. That she wanted me to stand up at her funeral and give the following eulogy: *Cock a doodle doo!* We joked about being elderly together,

gardening and farting and pinching the bums of young lads.

She moved in and became my sister. We came to do the things that sisters do. We wrote lists of what we hated about each other and taped them to the wall. She communicated for weeks with nothing but grunts and shrugs. I threw a slice of pizza at her face.

\*\*\*

One hot, nasty Chicago afternoon. I watched Mom enter the yard through the alley. Crab apples were rotting. Worms were ecstatic. She was murmuring in the breeze and she seemed pissed at the sun. She was drunk.

"Oh, honey."

She'd come from a smoky, black-windowed bar where she learned the barmaid's son was born with his bladder outside his body, and rushed to America on an emergency visa. The doctors saved his life but left him with a stub of a penis.

"The kid is fourteen. He has a *girlfriend*. All he wants is a penis, God bless him! We're gonna raise the money. Whaddayou say? We'll put on a grand gala."

Ruby was pumped. She mapped out endless menus of goodies and planned to invite the world. She picked out songs she would sing on a stage of bubbles, wearing a silver gown.

And then, not long after, Ruby moved out. "I'm changing," she said, and she disappeared from our lives. The party never came to be.

\*\*\*

In the big town, on the mainland, we stayed in a garden apartment with Stana, a warm old woman who fed us good fish and lemonade. Ruby and I shared a room again. We watched each other dress for the disco and tried to outskin one another. Ruby's breasts quivered a bit in her corset top. My tits stood alert in nothing but a tissuey t-shirt.

A burly man with a white beard watched us walk. "*Ladies*," he pronounced in a voice as low and cool as the rumble before thunder: "*God damn!*"

After the disco closed, the line at the bakery snaked out the door. Apple baklava, bread balls with lids on top and cream inside, cherry cobbler, cheese pie.

A man in line told me he could see my future. "You will have baby before you know it," he said.

Niko had already left for Bosnia, to see his father. We scarfed our sweets in bed and stayed up past dawn with Mom, gossiping under crisp white sheets.

Our cousin had called from her honeymoon suite on the isle of Capri. She spoke like a stone and she split to shards. "He's already left for Rome. Probably got a date with some bitch tonight! It's over! I'm getting the paperwork done and I'm coming home."

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"Oh, men," Mom said to Ruby and me. "Don't be discouraged. They're out there, you just have to steer clear of the ones who never grew up. Niko told me something once, I'll never forget how he said it. This was how he said it -

"To become man... boy needs know wolf inside. Man must find good woman - and teach wolf respect for woman. Woman who loves man, also respects wolf."

\*\*\*

The first time Ruby made out with a boy, she puked her guts out. Her real mom had taught her that sex was bad. Sex was something you gave men, something they squeezed out of you in exchange for the prize of love.

"Nah, honey," Mom said. "God loves sluts. You just love yourself and you'll be a-okay. You'll find someone who loves you too."

Ruby's brothers spun tales of Ruby sucking off security guards and Slurpee jerks. Her mother believed them. She smacked Ruby with a paddle while her own boyfriend drowned in Christian Brothers brandy, passed out on pillows soaked with cat pee.

\*\*\*

Mom and Ruby and I boarded a bus that left the seaside and twisted through emerald forests, around devastating cliffs and past shell pocked buildings to Bosnia. Niko picked us up at the station, where women wrapped in scarves stared at us as they bounced babies on their knees. In this country, men called to us like ghosts. The sounds came from behind lace curtains and trees, and we never saw their faces.

Niko's two cousins came for us every night, still smelling of their showers. Ruby and I tittered in the backseat, watching their eyes creep into the rearview mirror. The boys snuck us into the city pool at midnight and tossed us in. The pool was cold and deep, and the bottom was as black as the sky.

\*\*\*

While Mom and Niko sat at home drinking Turkish coffee and listening to Dedo's war stories, Ruby and I scuffed up mountain trails, the air so clean it hurt our heads to breathe. We stopped to talk to goats. We stuffed wild strawberries in our mouths and felt them explode like tiny tart bombs.

"Kiki," Ruby said, "listen to this. I borrowed Niko's line. *To become woman, girl must know bitch inside. Woman must teach bitch respect for man. Man who loves woman, also respects bitch.*"

But when Ruby left us, she left without a word. I wish she'd stayed long enough to fight. I wish she'd had the nerve to be a bitch.

\*\*\*

Mom always joked that when she died, we would fight over the hot dress, the one with pink lilies that destroyed a man's cocktail glass, and we'd rip it to shreds.

"Huh!" Mom muttered from her hospital bed. "Guess that pink dress goes to you fair and square. Why don'tchou call up Ruby and tell her." She tried to sit up but the wires restrained her. A monitor mirrored her heart-beat, jagged and schizophrenic. "Call her and tell her I love her. Tell her I love her like I gave birth to her. As far as I'm concerned, I did give birth to her."

I called. Ruby never answered.

"Friendships die like people do," I murmured. "We should have a funeral for her. I'll go in her old room, find a dust bunny or something with traces of her skin cells, and we'll bury it and say Hail Mary. Or cock a doodle doo."

\*\*\*

Girls' night in the big town was winding down. The streets were empty. It was that purple time - not night, not day, the crack between the worlds. One bird chirped a rumor of morning. We sauntered along the harbor road, speaking in jingles, guffaws and squeals, and those lazy fragments only the closest people share. Beneath us algae breathed; and fish swam through murky secrets.

"Sorry girls. I can't hold it anymore."

Mom sat on a bench and hiked up her skirt. She peed gracefully between two slats while we laughed and laughed and laughed.

\*\*\*

Ruby and I never stopped rolling, tangled in our sheet cocoons, our bedroom dark as a cave and roasting hot, with girly garments strewn around like shedded skins.

Mom creaked our door open and crept through the dark like it was a party. She found our ankles and patted them. She found a head. A nose. There were murmurings and clumsy kisses, and one eruption of laughter. Mom left. We closed our eyes and the mosquitoes began to feast. **F**

## On Halloween, Your First Profession

Though we knew each other  
without overlapping  
our clothes,  
still, with this autumn wind's sound,  
I find myself waiting for you.  
—Izumi Shikibu (974-1034), trans. Jane Hirshfield

The night most of America has snapped on  
black capes and gauzy era-imitation dresses,  
our hostess bearing her torso-length cleavage in a jumpsuit the color  
of a spinach tortilla, you tell me you love me. You say this leaning  
on the car, two blocks away from the house strumpeting its hours of music,  
and though I believe you I can't quite shake my need  
to question where the festivity ends and you begin, so  
here I am, quivering in a kimono I wear  
all the time, knowing I'm not *that* cold on this empty  
street, where it seems we could stand for the rest of our lives, the stars  
having  
turned out their porch light—*No more trick-or-treating*  
*here*, they say, *Try the moon*, and me parsing out the beaded length of what  
you've just said, calm as a willow in that voice of yours,  
because tonight, for the first time, I saw you dance  
like a drunkard, which is the clearest example yet of your unde-  
clared love  
since you were not drunk and *do not* dance, since I was failing at  
Pollyanna-does-Zelda Fitzgerald, and you up and decide I need a good  
laugh, no one else dancing, not even the man dressed as a Magic Genie  
who'd gripped my elbow till you came back with your Whiskey Sour,  
him sauntering away with a smile like a wine stain,  
the enormous blue bulb of his hat bumping people  
left and right in the face, and your friends who invited us, the other  
sober couple, telling me how amazing you are, kind, articulate,  
A *catch* is what the woman said and her husband winked at me  
as if we'd grown up together, though we'd just met,  
marveling at brocaded pumpkin-paisley wallpaper

in the master bathroom where we took refuge from the man  
with a foot-long rubber penis on the tray of triangled  
sandwiches and another man with strap-on hard-nippled boobs looming

over cocktails, a lady in one of those sexy bunny outfits  
offering, *They're fake!*, roaring her laughter  
and stroking the man as her cotton-puffed tail shook and shook  
to the music—but when *you* danced, sharper than  
Brando in the single black suit you own, it was the ridiculous

waggle of your neck, your eyes snapping  
open like bean pods, your palms shimmying up  
as if to request all you cannot sound out, what is louder than  
each song pounding its confused *loves* and *wants*, it was there,  
peanut candy dissolving in my mouth and your two hands reaching

for my face, I knew exactly who you were, your whole self,  
stop-sign tall, eyes flecked-green, how your hot spirit

seems to bob each moment like a hard-boiled  
egg. Here, the dark bolder than that costume  
with the crotch cut out, I may understand what Anne Morrow  
scrawled in her diary while falling in love with Charles Lindbergh,  
“All my life, in fact, my world—my little embroidery beribboned

world—is smashed,” which might be the least romantic  
of all things to say about a man who truly knew the wind  
from the whirl, but is the most enchanting, too, those other men  
swept aside,

“all the pseudointellectuals,” she wrote, “the sophisticates, the posers,”  
this is how it might be with us, our worlds smashed with a clarity we almost

don't know what to do with, separating with ease the carnival  
of certain human need, that exquisite house and its

exquisite owners and their books and back deck and wet bar  
and costumed *Who's-Who* I would have wilted into  
but for you, man who brushes my hair, who hand-makes paper lanterns,  
who presses against the window of a life that, as Wendell Berry  
has it, *won't compute*: loving the Lord, loving the world, working for nothing,

spotting the field where we'll lay down beneath an old tree  
and saying to the most piano part of my ear, *Look, there.*

## Love, Anonymous

It used to be, back in the ninth grade swirl of skirts and books,  
a vacant look on every boy's face but Jeremy Toppe who soon  
learned better than to smile behind you on his way up the stairs,  
you dreamed of the kind of attention only you

could give yourself, so much, in fact, that you'd write anonymous notes  
and tape them to your locker on Valentine's Day, dangling a pouch  
of candies on the latch for good measure. *Do you know*, one note  
began, *you've the wit of a pasquinade, the mind*

of a Cubist, the sad strength of a eunuch and oh  
*my darling, the quick song of a finch at roost*. All this  
and Tootsie rolls, too. *Love, Anonymous*. Someone's got it bad  
for you, and after class when your one friend saunters close

to speculate who, examining the handwriting, you know  
she knows, just enough of the curl and wisp  
on the ends of *hs* to give you away, though she's too kind to say  
anything, takes the Jolly Ranchers

you proffer in a kind of *détente*: *It's true*, you want to say,  
*surely this fella's right about me?* Now, after the many years  
you gave up anonymously gifting yourself and instead,  
each Valentine's Day let your sister buy you the FFA's stupid

carnations without signing her name because she wanted you to know  
what wondering if someone wanted you was like,  
that you're *awesome*, girl—now, now that someone has actually left  
an anonymous gift for you in the department lounge,

a small orange box of sweets—it bothers you. You're  
unsure how to be grateful, grinning dumb as a sock monkey  
at each colleague who walks in to check the shelf of cubbies—it  
unnerves you, your tongue pinked with candy, that small light

inside you signaling, the last sound of a slow train, the quick work  
of *cherish* or *maybe* or *saccharify*. When you tell your mother  
or perhaps your sister, you won't include this part—that you left the box  
sitting under your name six days before opening it

in case it was a mistake. Or maybe because there was something else:  
in the blank loam of unknowing, a nugget of fear, a tiny moment opened  
roughly as a stolen purse. Who knew yearning would feel this way, inured  
to white space, waiting the ball-point pen of a lover?



## Conversation

They talk on telephones and cannot touch each other. They say things like "hamburger," "lemonade." There are words now, that they can catch and hold on to, like moths. "Raucous." "Rectify." She's making lists of things. "Ok, tell me what's next," she asks him. He breathes, and she can hear him breathe, and there is static, and he says, "What's next? Ok. I'm going to the drugstore to buy a toothbrush and some razor blades. There will probably be explosions - drugstores are always dangerous." He mocks her. But she's thinking snow. She's wondering, "Is there snow now? No? Ok, how about now?" She wants him to tell her everything. Everything he says would be important. She wants everything he says to be important. She's like a child, and he tells her that. "You're making me late." "Late for razor blades?" "I'm going now, Amelia." "When did you get so hostile?" "I'm not hostile. You should go to sleep." It's three a.m. where she is, midnight on the other side. There won't be snow. It's October, it is hot. She's hearing trains, teakettles, bugs that scurry, sound like rats. "No, stay," she says. "It's getting dangerous."

THERE IS ALWAYS TALKING. HE CALLS, he calls. It's dark. There are things they never say, and things they always say. There is a pattern. "I miss you," she says. And she does. Though she will think about it differently, the words will sound different, they will. "I miss you," she says. And he doesn't listen (this should be obvious). She wonders what this means. He could say *paperclip*, *aluminum foil*, and it would mean more. *Lemonade*, *summer*. They would be bright, they would mean more. Somehow. He says, "I'm going out." He says, "I'll call you Tuesday." She sees them fall around his ankles. All in a string, connected - *colored pencils paperclips* - they mean more than what he does say. He doesn't say goodnight.

THIS IS IMPORTANT: THERE IS ALWAYS TALKING. There is nothing that means anything, in that, all that wading-through. She wants she wants she wants. This is like a tantrum. There are afternoons. He is in California. This is important. She thinks, should it be summer, winter, afternoon?, as if this is important. They talk about the time, the weather, as if they are what's important.

THEY SMELL LIKE BIRTHDAYS, THOSE afternoons in California. And like getting stung by bees. He calls and says, "Are you awake?" It's two o'clock - would she be sleeping? She doesn't say this. He's not listening. "There are alligators," she is saying. She talks about the water and the depth of lakes. He talks in hammers, nails, in semi-colons. He is calling from his house; the

walls are falling down around his ankles. She goes out, gathers things, newspapers, post-its, cardboard boxes. She goes back home, goes back to sleep.

SHE WILL NEED THEM, SHE THINKS - newspapers, post-its, cardboard boxes - protection, winter, comfort. She will need, she thinks, to ignite things, when she grinds her teeth, when she is scratching at her own skin in frustration. She will need them. She goes out, captures things, takes note of things, everything. *Everything* is a bigger word than she can think of. It breaks - there is too much holding onto it.

ISOMETRIC. RADIOACTIVE. THEY DON'T MAKE SENSE. He never used to tell her *go away, I am not listening*. What he does tell her, it does not make any sense.

It's 12:45. He is calling from his bathtub. She didn't picture him having a bathtub, and she tells him this, and it sounds like echoes, space; there is no water, just him sitting there, his clothes on, too much bass. She thinks of sunglasses, afternoons in California; it's dark. He didn't used to have a bathtub.

They talk about green. "Do you think it should be this color, or that?" he says. He doesn't say which is which. "That," she says, as if that is the answer. She talks about ice cream, about dinosaurs. Wings and scales and mint chocolate chip: green. "I'm thinking about you," she says. Which is what she always says. "I'm thinking I should go with yellow," he says. "But what about green?" she says. And this is all they say, yellow, green, blue. She doesn't know. She can picture him in his bathtub, lying down with the tap above his head, dripping onto his neck, and he is wearing boxer shorts and dirty socks. "The stars," she says. "What color are they?"

THIS IS WHAT IS CLEAR: she is never where he is. He is never close to where she is. This is what is clear: they will not get any closer to each other. They can only wait to fall apart. This is the disaster: that there is none. Only slowly, so you cannot see it. Slowly, so she can picture it. This is all in her imagination. *Curvature*, she thinks. *Cupola*, *Dalmatian*, and stars and breaking things, all those spaces in between. There is so much in between, and it is unsettling, to think of it. She thinks of danger, she thinks of falling falling falling. It is too quiet. It is too dark. And she is too alone. She misses things. It's hot. He calls her.

WHAT SHE ALWAYS SAYS: *I wish I could come home*. What she means: *I wish I could come home*. What she starts to mean, slowly: *I don't know. Maybe not*. This does not make sense.

THEY COULD SAY HELLO, GOODBYE, *how are you feeling?*, and they would not make sense. They could just say *cupboard, cupcake, jelly bean* instead.

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SHE'S MAKING LISTS OF THINGS, everything in her apartment, everything along the streets. There is nothing along the streets, though the garbage piles up, full of hairs and soda cans and windshield wiper blades, and she goes looking, comes back home with her fingers full of cuts and new diseases, bruises like a hand around her wrist. She doesn't tell him this.

"WHERE ARE YOU GOING?" she says, when he says he is hanging up. Where are you going, where are you going? But she does not say this: how much she needs protection. She would never say that.

SHE TELLS HIM THERE ARE ALLIGATORS, there are swamps. There are bats. "There are never bats," he says. "Oh? But what about..." "I'm thinking black and white," he says, "paint all the walls." The conversations smell like aftershave, like forest fires. Outside she looks at swamps; she wonders about finding her way back. "Rocks?" she says. "Breadcrumbs?" What would you drop, she thinks, for finding your way back? "I'm installing a refrigerator. There are bugs," he says. He is not listening.

ON HER STREET THERE IS A TOWER, there are bats. She wanders out, to catch them with a net. She wears white skirts. They can see her, in the traffic, bats, cars, her blinking in and out like lights, and rushing in the streets, and when the power and the lights go out in her apartment, she walks right down the street and lies down in the sandbox looking up above her at the trees. "I counted them," she says. "I'm going out," he says. It's two a.m. She has sandbox in her hair. She has bite marks on her arms.

"SOAP," SHE SAYS. SHE COULD SAY ANYTHING. He does not listen. It's morning, and there is buzzing, breaking things, all around the house, and blaring, and retractions, up and down the street, of sun, of shade. It's hot. There are fires. Little fires, she sets with napkins and a match. They light, alight, and flicker, and it's warm. She watches them. She breathes on them, curling up around them as she feeds them things. Cardboard boxes, post-it notes. She watches them. They talk about helicopters. The wires that you pull out from a spiral notebook; though she says too many words for that, steps back. There is no one word for that, step back.

SHE IS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING SMALL, so she can say it. It would be easier. *Soap*, she thinks - it would be easy. Just a small word. She does not say this: it is mostly just imagined. She would not say that. This is important.

IT IS AS IF THERE ARE EXPLOSIONS, and she sets new things on fire. Maps and towels, fountain pens. There is a smokestack by the train tracks, and there are hinges on the door that fall apart when she is climbing, and she tells him this,

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about the climbing, says that everything is clear now, now that she has seen it from high up. It's clear now, she could see it all. Of course. She doesn't say that she is lying. "I'm glad," he says. He does not worry, has not. "I'm setting up the boundaries, the yard. The neighbors won't get in," he says. "They have dogs that look like children." "And children that look like dogs?" she says. "Yes," as if he is agreeing. "I'm going to the store to buy a hacksaw." She's picturing destruction, small and falling from a ceiling. She's picturing the sky. "Are there stars?" she says. She's thinking there are holes now, in his roof. And she goes out herself to check, as if she's answering a question.

SHE REPLACES WHAT HE SAYS WITH: *Soap. Daisy. Daisy chain.* The words are smaller, but she cannot wrap herself around them, they do not work. *Eggshell. Electricity.*

SHE WOULD LIKE TO LIE DOWN in the sandbox, stay there. There would be clouds. Kites. Sky. It would be open. Safe. This is what she cannot say. There is everything she cannot say. "Blue," he says. "And elephants. A leopard." "Sofa bed?" Piles and piles of things. Nets and skirts and paper, polyester. There are burn marks on her hardwood floors, there are smoke marks on her ceiling, thin lines shadowing her skin. There is no furniture, it is empty. There are piles and piles of things. He is talking late at night. He is talking. "Yes," she says. Furniture, and coasters.

HULA HOOP TAFFETA VELOCITY. These would make more sense. *Poodle skirt. Galaxy.* Something.

HE INTERRUPTS HER. HE INTERRUPTS HER. There are smoke marks. She goes out. There are growing piles of things. This is important. The words are all too big. This is what he would say: *just go to sleep. Just be quiet.*

THERE ARE NEVER BATS, there are never choking sounds of crickets, there is never anything to worry about, he tells her. This is not true. She would insist on this, but doesn't. He interrupts her, says something else entirely. None of what he says is true. She has listened to it anyway. This is important.

THERE IS FRUSTRATION, THERE ARE BATS (there are there are *there are*, she thinks). She is insistent. This is what is clear: she doesn't know.

*Lollygag. Jeopardize.* When she walks out she gets lost. She only has to walk out to get lost. There is everything to worry about.

HE INTERRUPTS HER. SHE IS LIKE A CHILD, and he tells her that. She is only dropping words into the phone. He doesn't tell her that. She feels it anyway. She keeps them in her pockets for ammunition. As if she could protect herself.

This is disturbing: everything is dangerous. She wanted to say *stay stay stay*, but she has stopped. She would have said this, before. He has interrupted her. He is in a house with walls. Which sounds so much like something solid. Safe. It is bright there, in California, dry and bright and warm, but she is picturing destruction, how all that she remembers is slowly chewing itself up – she has gotten used to this, she has come to wish for it. She will wait, she thinks, hoping there will be new holes, something new collapsing. There will be stars, she thinks, when the roof has fallen through. She clings to this. It will be beautiful, when the roof has fully fallen through.

This is important.

“I’m wondering about the bugs, Amelia.” “About my bugs? I bought some spray, and there is chalk – the writing’s in Chinese, but...” “They’re crawling up the walls of the garage.” She’s thinking about explosions. She pictures this: the bugs, they crawl around his house, set up hives and burrow, deep; he would be sitting when the awning collapses in his lap. She thinks about the pillars falling over, she thinks about the thin bones in his thighs. They would fall over. Take him with them. *Crack*. Dry and bright, the air in Pasadena.

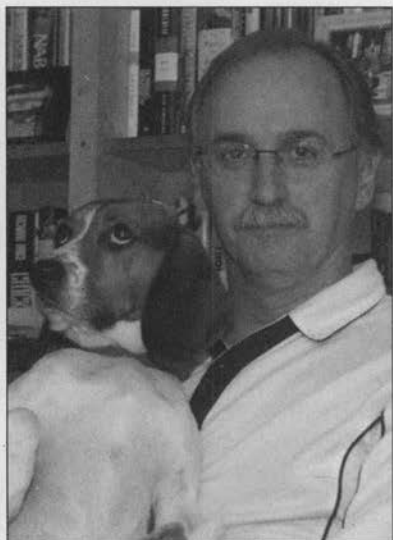
IT IS SPUN, FRUSTRATION, EASY. It is revulsion, and it is hanging from the hooks she’s nailed into her ceiling, it is nets and skirts and paper, all the paper she has gathered in a pile by the window. It lets out its own breath, the fire; it is like release. “It’s alright,” he says. “Do you think it is alright? I fixed the walls.” She would have thought of asking him, before, what he was thinking. It would have been important. There was a before – this is important. She thinks of asking him, of asking him, of telling him. Anything. And she cannot, cannot. No, no no, as if that is the answer. It is not alright. That is the answer. She hates him. She did not hate him before. It is morning, and the smoke fills up the rooms, warm and comforting, like toast.

IT’S NOT 12:45; IT’S MAYBE THREE O’CLOCK. It’s afternoon, she is crying. He talks about the weather. He says it’s beautiful; he says, “do you remember California?” Honeysuckle, lemonade. Ice cream trucks, Koreatown. She winds a hair around her wrist, feels it tighten, listens to that, listens to that instead of him, and she sits down. She listens for the echoes, for the sparks. For the flames as they’re chewing on the walls. She sits down, braces herself against a corner. She is shaking. This is important. Listen. “No,” she says, though she is lying. “No.” **F**



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## An Interview with Jim Shepard



**J**im Shepard is the author of six novels and two collections of stories. He has won numerous awards and fellowships, including the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Award in 2004, and a Library of Congress/ Massachusetts Book Award for fiction. He teaches at Williams College in Williamstown, MA, where he lives with his wife, the writer Karen Shepard, and their three children.

**Justin Jainchill:** In preparation for this interview, I reread a few of my favorite Jim Shepard stories over the weekend: “Kakatai” ~ “Messiah” ~ “Love and Hydrogen” ~ “Perpetual Descent into

Night” ~ “The Gun Lobby.” And what struck me was their essential variety. From a craft standpoint, each story is markedly different. Form, structure, point-of-view, and voice change from narrative to narrative. Similarly, the fictional milieus, the socio-cultural terrains, are equally unique. So I wonder if you’d talk about your aesthetic? How would you describe a Jim Shepard story?

**Jim Shepard:** I recently read with Adam Haslett, and he joked as part of his patter following my reading that he never knows, when I start to read, which century he’s going to be in. Reviewers have both praised and complained about the same thing: the way I seem to range all over the place. There are characteristics that do seem central to my stories, though, at least to me: especially thematic characteristics. I’d say, for example, that my fiction is interested in staging and examining the ethical costs of passivity. It’s suspicious of protagonists who are mostly victims set upon by a disappointing world. Whatever their age or education, and however dim they seem at first (and at first they can seem *very* dim) my protagonists usually turn out to be too self-aware to delude themselves entirely about their nature. And if they do escape disaster, they don’t mistake that as evidence of virtue. What I seem to continually construct is a confrontation between a compromised self and a destructive world: a confrontation that’s exhilarating as well as harrowing. Or perhaps exhilarating *because* it’s harrowing.

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**JJ:** But technically, how do you decide what a story needs? My sense is that the story makes these decisions for you; each character, each world, presents unique technical demands, and it's your job to figure out what they are.

**JS:** I think that's right. I also think that I'm always looking for what will push the situation; what will provide imminence. What will make what's happening more urgent. What will put the maximum pressure on the paradox already on display.

**JJ:** In terms of theme, a lot of writers say that what their story is about, its statement if you will, doesn't crystallize until they're well into the writing process. So I'm wondering if this has been your experience as well. Do you have a thematic agenda in mind for the story before you start working, or is your writing process more about the discovery of what interests you, on the level of idea, about a certain character or situation?

**JS:** I'm probably not much different than most writers in that regard: I have a neighborhood in mind, in terms of a thematic agenda - I've been able to identify at least that much of a reason why the thing I'm writing about seems resonant with me - but it's only a neighborhood, and things get a lot more precise, and complicated, and sometimes even redirected, by the actual process of writing. In other words, I teach myself what I'm interested in each particular case as I go. And the information I'm mining from both the world and my own psyche is the material that's doing the instructing.

**JJ:** How do you insure that the idea doesn't subsume the narrative? Or, to put it another way, how do you go about dramatizing ideas about the "ethical costs of passivity?"

**JS:** Oh, I almost never have the problem of ideas subsuming the narrative; I don't have that many ideas. I'm always interested in what's the next thing that should happen in order to have the coolest possible story, i.e., narrative. So except for in intuitive ways, elements of the narrative aren't added for the sake of the ideas they're importing. Once I have a completed rough draft, though, I begin to see how ideas are extending themselves over the course of the story, and I can start to more systematically tweak or add things then with that in mind.

**JJ:** Do you ever find yourself making authorial decisions that jive with your thematic interests but which, for some reason, don't mesh with your character and his or her sensibility? I'm talking about that moment when you say, "Hell no. She just wouldn't do that. I want her to, I think she should, but taking her husband hostage is totally out of character."

**JS:** There are lots of moments when characters turn out to be unwilling or unable to do what I've planned for them to do. In those cases, I'm always

pleased at their recalcitrance. It means that the paltry and over-simple design with which I began is being outstripped by some other kind of necessary and more intense inspiration.

**JJ:** Concerning your characters' positions within the given story, I notice that a lot of your protagonists exist on the periphery, especially those told in the first person POV. Specifically, I have two stories in mind: "Won't Get Fooled Again," and "The Gun Lobby." In the latter story, your speaker says, "There're all sorts of things about this country I never liked, and I'm a guy who believes in making a difference. My way of doing that is by not taking part in any political activity whatsoever." Here, what you said earlier about the "ethical costs of passivity" seems resonate, but in regard to the psychology of characters like this, what interests you about people who take a back seat, who knowingly refuse to engage the world, at least politically and/or socially?

**JS:** I've never stopped being interested in that old dictum of Edmund Burke's that all that's necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. I think America's current situation makes clear how undeniable that assertion is. As for what draws me to the spear carriers, I think probably my own background. I never felt much like one of the Great Men of History, and so when I imagine Alexander or Caesar, I'm fascinated with them, like anyone else, but I'm also drawn to inhabiting the people in close proximity to those figures. And it turns out that those characters' positions and dilemmas closely resemble the reader's, in terms of issues like passivity and complicity. Which makes for some wonderful aesthetic possibilities. Some of the protagonists of my new collection might be more clearly identified as alpha males (or females) by historians, in terms of what they achieved - people like Aeschylus, or Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space - but as I re-imagine them, they hardly feel that way themselves.

**JJ:** What are some of the challenges of writing stories with protagonists who assume mostly reactive positions in relation to the central action or conflict within the given story?

**JS:** Well, the obvious challenge is providing them with sufficient agency to allow them to be the main engines running their stories. And that's what I try to make sure to do.

**JJ:** Concerning the reader's relationship with the text, you spoke earlier about issues of "passivity" and "complicity," and I'm wondering if you're interested in challenging the position of your audience. If so, would you say that your fiction is discursive?

**JS:** I'm very interested in challenging my reader's position: drawing that reader into an understanding of his or her complicity not only with the

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characters but with the author: all of us attracted to something we claim, at our most self-righteous, to reject; all of us experiencing more ambivalent and unsettling responses than we'd care to admit.

**JJ:** In your mind, is there a difference between aesthetics and politics?

**JS:** The two are inseparable. I think we're aspiring to make things that are beautiful, and beautiful in their own right; I think we're also aspiring to make things that are useful, in that they might suggest both how we live and how to live.

**JJ:** With politics comes a sense of the past, so I'd like to ask a question or two about history. First, why does it interest you? Second, what is the relationship between fact and fiction, as you see it, when history makes its way into your stories?

**JS:** I think history does allow us another way into major issues of the moment, but at an angle, so we can see them in a new way. I like the idea of a reader thinking she's just reading a ripping good yarn, and then feeling as though she's putting together for herself that notion that some of the implications of that yarn might apply to her own situation today. History also provides a framework of both agreed-upon 'facts' and generally acknowledged murky areas, both of which are up for grabs in terms of interpretation. Which means that there's that pleasure for the reader, too: *Oh, he's going to do the Titanic. That means I have this to look forward to. And how's he going to deal with this closing down of narrative options?* Etc.

**JJ:** In regard to writing stories with a historical framework, do you feel a responsibility to the facts and actualities of what took place, or in some sense are you trying to re-vision history for your reader? I would think the artist sees the world much differently than the scholar, than the historian, so are you also trying to uncover the emotional truths that history fails to reflect, at least as you see them?

**JS:** I do feel a responsibility to the facts as I've come to learn them when researching something. On the other hand, the good news, once you start researching, is that you learn that, as politicians have taught us, facts can be malleable things. All of what I'm writing about is finally supposed to be serving the story's implacable emotional agenda, as it emerges, but if I become convinced that something happened that is inconvenient for my fiction, that's my tough luck, as I see it: I have to deal with that. When I was writing *Nosferatu*, towards the very end of the book's composition I came across an entirely new source for Murnau's time in Tahiti. Which by that point was not only good news, but also bad news: because what if a lot of what I'd imagined was explicitly overturned by this new source? Happily, it wasn't.

On the other hand, I don't fret much about having, say, a minor character present at an event when there's no evidence to suggest he was there. A lot depends, in my mind, on the relative historical importance of what's being meddled with. In my story "Love and Hydrogen" what happens to the Hindenburg is mostly what happened to the Hindenburg. The relationship between the two crew members at the story's center, though, is my invention.

So I'm trying to do both: honor the facts *and* re-view history. Going back to *Nosferatu*, I was able to speculate, as a fiction writer, freely in all sorts of ways in which a scholar really couldn't: on the impact that Murnau's service in the air war had on his understanding of the possibilities of the moving camera, for example. The connection there, as I thought about it, seemed utterly plausible, and very exciting, in conceptual terms. But it was also, I recognized, utterly speculative. I didn't worry about it. Which is part of the fun of being a fiction writer, rather than a historian.

**JJ:** Aside from an interest in history, what other characteristics would you associate with your ideal reader?

**JS:** My ideal reader is smarter than me. And more optimistic. And more rigorous. She makes me a better reader. And in so doing, a better writer.

**JJ:** If this person is in fact out there and reading your work, what would you hope to give her? If she were to come away from one of your novels or a batch of stories with three things, what would they be?

**JS:** If I were to hope for a single category or two, in terms of what readers were to take away from my work (besides, I assume, pleasure) it would maybe be a heightened appreciation for the usefulness of wonder. And of empathy.

**F**



## Target Practice

The price of gasoline topped  
two dollars a gallon that morning.  
Through the panic in our throats,  
no one spoke  
about the revisions that had been made  
to history, to the shade  
of the sunrise. The colors of our eyes  
began to change. We grew new hearts  
and could not teach them to beat.  
Everything out of sync.  
Arrhythmic clocks skipped their seconds.

Secrets were spoken—  
by this mouth, by yours—  
to the reeds by the pond, to the swans  
with their necks looped under their wings.  
We will not repeat them.

We began to divide our needs  
and our desires. Made lists.  
Packed what was delicate  
with newspaper. Prepared to leave.

The wind told us  
when to move,  
gave us the velocity to follow.  
We found there was a compass  
tattooed into the skin  
above our hearts.

There was only one direction.  
We had no choice,  
drove our Ford four-door  
directly at the dawn.

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J. Lorraine Brown

## How to Run an Answering Service from a Sunroom

The switchboard is oak,  
rising like an upended mattress,  
one side butting the wall,  
the back facing the door,  
so visitors have to peek over  
or around to see her sitting there  
on a wooden kitchen chair,  
desktop buried under crumpled tissues,  
yellow #2 Ticonderoga pencils,  
scraps of paper like giant confetti,  
the paperback life of some movie star  
face down in the corner,  
her cup of tea grown cold,  
a coating of milk  
floating like a leaf,  
and black cords drooping,  
red lights blinking,  
white fingers flashing,  
still in her nightgown,  
picking tobacco off her tongue,  
answering calls in her best voice,  
an omniscient oracle,  
a repository of secrets,  
a recluse with a thumb  
in everybody's pie,  
while I keep her company  
because I know  
better than anyone else  
how to be quiet  
when the lines ring.

## Monkey Shines

Whenever an Arab caravan  
came to Mohenjo-Daro,  
a great ram's horn,  
like the Jewish shofar, was sounded,

and all but laborers, artisans, and slaves  
gathered in the selling square.  
When I flew DreamLines there,  
the caravan leader had a monkey

tethered by a plaited rope  
attached to a ring on his horse's saddle.  
While the master was greeting,  
being greeted by officialdom,

the monkey untied the rope,  
wound it about its body,  
began jumping from one head to the next.  
To anyone listening, the monkey said,

"I'm 'heading' for the reviewing stand.  
Care to see this monkey's tricks?"  
I was the only one who laughed.  
The Solemn Citizens straightened,

re-ordered in the monkey's wake,  
acted as though nothing had happened.  
I stopped laughing when two Arabs  
caught the monkey, took it to its master

to be slapped—hard—then put it in a cage.  
I was the one getting glares.  
Both the monkey and I had caused  
the Arabs *and* the Indus people to lose face.

I explained, ever so sweetly,  
"To deny the monkey an audience  
is to deny its *shine*." No one listened.  
Even the monkey frowned.

## Animal Control

**B**efore my uncle's German Shepherd came to live with us, my buddy Ludo would stand shirtless in the backyard and harass the schoolgirls after we got off work in the mornings. His wide eyes and frizzy red hair made him look like a crazed Art Garfunkel as he leaned against the tall chain link fence. Dangling a bottle of Coors Light by the neck between his thumb and middle finger, he spouted all sorts of obscene things to the girls walking past the house to meet the school bus—mostly, he compared them to cotton candy and invited them to his “mustache rodeo.” Ludo claimed to be showing them the way men think to prepare them for when they grew up, and he only leered at the junior high school girls. The elementary school girls were too young, he said, and the high-schoolers liked it too much. Once, a mother threatened to have him arrested, and he convinced her that his cousin worked a rodeo in Mustache, Texas. Ludo was a smart guy.

But when I brought Khan home, Ludo stopped bothering the kids and let the dog take the yard. One-hundred and fifty fierce pounds of teeth and muscle, the dog pranced about the yard while we watched from the kitchen window. He threw out a couple of barks and wagged his tail. He bounced around at the fence until a pair of girls came close. One of them looked like she was about to stick her fingers through the wire to stroke Khan's nose and the dog went ballistic. They both screamed and jumped backwards as Khan threw his whole body against the fence. Ludo laughed, sending beer through his nose in dual streams. Khan lunged repeatedly at the fence, a whirlwind of fur and fangs, and when the sounds of the girls' shrieks had faded into the distance, the dog sat down on his haunches, looking out at the street for more children.

“Your dog's a whack-job, chief” Ludo said. He took a huge bite of cold pizza and swished it around in his mouth with a swig of warm beer.

“My uncle's dog,” I said. Outside, Khan panted in the cold morning air. His tongue lolling from his mouth, the dog looked like he was laughing.

“Total whack-job,” Ludo said. He sat back in his chair and chewed with his mouth open. “I'm taking him out for some exercise later.”

“You're drunk,” I said.

Ludo didn't answer. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and knocked his chair to the floor as he got up and staggered into the next room. I sat and watched Khan at the fence, and before long another group of kids appeared. After righting Ludo's chair and dumping the empty bottles in the trash, I went into the living room where Ludo had curled up under a thin blanket on the couch. He had folded and sorted his clothes into three neat stacks under the coffee table: one for shirts, one for pants, and one for

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underpants. His golf bag leaned against the wall beside the television, and the clock on the VCR read eight-thirty-two. I went into my room and shut the door so that Ludo's snoring wouldn't keep me awake. Outside, the kids shrieked as the dog charged them, and I was glad for the fence—there was no telling what an animal like Khan might do if he was loose on the street.

RECKLESS, IRRESPONSIBLE, SELF-DESTRUCTIVE—the words my father used to describe my Uncle Dwight when I was a kid. *You don't want to end up like your mother's brother*, he used to say before launching into the story about how my uncle spent a week in the King County jail after hitting a man with a tire iron in a bar-fight. Still, after years of too much drinking and partying, Uncle Dwight got himself sober and worked as a mechanic out of his back yard until he made enough money to open a small auto shop in West Seattle. Once, when I was sixteen, I went to my Uncle's shop and he showed me how to jury rig a junkyard water pump into a customer's Buick Skylark. When I told him that my mother said it was self-defense with the tire iron, Uncle Dwight laughed and said he had slept with the guy's wife. He said, *I don't pretend to be a good person. The world doesn't like guys like me but I'm okay with it. You'll understand one day.*

But I liked Uncle Dwight—he was tough and he made his own rules. His life seemed exciting compared to the safe existence that my parents had carved out for me as a kid. We lived in a gated community on Lake Washington, and I went to a private high school on Mercer Island where I got mediocre grades and warmed the bench for the basketball team. Most evenings, we ate dinner in front of the television—my father watched the news and my mother watched the shopping channel. When I turned eighteen, I moved out of the house and started doing my own thing: a lot of fast food, a couple years of construction, and a short stint on an assembly line before I fell into my night security job. Things might have been different had I made straight A's through school and became a doctor. Or if I started practicing medicine without a license. Or if I skipped the medical practice all together and simply started cutting people. Maybe I needed to murder someone or become deathly ill to get them to pay less attention to their careers and more attention to being a family.

When my mother called to tell me to come get Khan, I hadn't heard from her in months. She said that Uncle Dwight had a brain tumor that temporarily robbed him of his memory when it swelled. They had decided that he should try living with my parents for a while, until he could start remembering again. I refused to take the dog at first, but then my mother told me that I was the only one my uncle trusted with Khan. She said that everyone else in the family feared getting bitten. There was nowhere else for the dog to go.

It's a similar situation to how I ended up living with Ludo. We both

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worked night security at Mini-Disc—a small software company in North Seattle that made a few crappy video games. At first, it was weird drinking beer with Ludo in the mornings after work, but it made sense after he pointed out that mornings were our nighttime. Then one day after work, he got too drunk to drive home and crashed on my couch. The following morning he brought in a blanket and a change of clothes from his car. After about a week, he brought in a pillow and a pair of slippers.

When I told him I was going to start charging him rent, he said he would go home. I woke up later that afternoon to find his car still parked in my driveway. We looked at one another through the car window for about a minute, and then Ludo's face broke into a smile. He came inside and admitted that his girlfriend had accused him of cheating and had kicked him out. Then he confessed that he had cheated on Marla, but only twice. He met the redhead at a pool hall in Belltown, and the blonde had helped him pick out Marla's birthday present last year. The girl at the Space Needle didn't count, he said. She didn't count because oral sex in a glass elevator isn't real sex.

After work that night, Ludo slept on the couch again, and I never mentioned rent again. After a few weeks, having him around the house seemed normal. And when Khan joined us, it was like we all belonged together. Not a normal household with a Mom, a Dad, and a kid who'll never amount to anything. Separately, we were outcasts—but together we were a goddamn family.

I WOKE UP AROUND FOUR IN THE AFTERNOON, and pulled on a pair of jeans and an old T-shirt. In the living room, Ludo's blanket was folded and laid over the arm of the couch, and when I looked through the front blinds, my car was nowhere to be seen. Ludo's car sat in the driveway filled with his stuff: two suitcases, several boxes, a vacuum cleaner, and a disco ball that he said actually belonged to Marla. In the kitchen, I poured a bowl of cereal only to find that Ludo had finished off the milk and left the empty carton in the refrigerator. I stood at the sink with a handful of Fruity Flakes and looked out into the backyard—that's when I noticed that Khan was gone too.

I stepped outside to make sure the dog wasn't hiding somewhere. The long grass was worn and yellowed where Khan usually slept next to the woodpile at the back of the yard—the house didn't have a fireplace so the wood just sat there under a sheet of weathered plastic. Ludo's bicycle, a fifteen-speed mountain bike with no front wheel, leaned against the house under the kitchen window. A girl who couldn't have been any older than seventeen looked at me from the other side of the fence. She wore a black turtleneck and her legs were sheathed in black tights. Her thick black mascara looked like a mask against the pale skin of her face, and her spiky black hair and black clothing made her big pink leather jacket appear that much pinker. In one hand she held the leash to a cocker spaniel that waddled along the fence, sniffing the ground where the sidewalk met my yellow over-

grown lawn.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Your dog attacked my sister," she said. Her eyes surveyed the yard behind me.

"You're kind of going against the grain with that jacket, aren't you?"

The girl closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. When she opened them again, she looked me straight in the eye. "Do you even have a dog?"

"I saw a bunch of kids teasing him through the fence this morning," I said. "Jabbing at him with sticks and rulers. Was she one of those?" The cocker spaniel barked—tiny noises that were more grating than threatening.

The girl looked at me and tilted her head. "Probably," she said.

"Then your sister deserved what she got." I leaned against the chain link fence and the cocker spaniel made a high-pitched snarl. "Anyways—the fence. You're safe as long as you're over there."

"Shut up, Muffin," the girl said to her dog. She kicked it with her cowboy boot—more of a nudge really, but the gesture counted more than the result. That's what Ludo said.

"Your dog is named Muffin?" I said.

"My mom's dog." She shot a look of disdain at the cocker spaniel. "I walk the dog so I can stay at her house." The girl gestured down the street with a nod, then looked me up and down, forehead to feet and back again. "I'm Jillian."

"Randall." I started to put my hand out, but realized that we couldn't shake hands with the fence between us. "Randall Archer," I said. I tried to let my hand fall casually to my side.

"I'm not telling you my last name," she said. She gave Muffin's leash a sharp tug, nearly yanking the dog into the air. She stepped off the curb and into the street.

She was halfway across when I shouted after her. "You afraid I'll make fun your name?"

Jillian didn't look back at me. She just gave me the finger. She held that finger up high and proud like she was a Goth statue of liberty as she crossed the street and walked out of sight with her cocker spaniel in tow.

WHEN I HEARD MY CAR PULL INTO THE DRIVEWAY around four, I went to the front door where I watched Ludo pop the trunk and pull Khan out head-first. The dog followed Ludo up the driveway on wobbly legs. He came close to collapsing on the pavement a few times but Ludo grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back upright.

"Took him for a walk," Ludo said as he dragged Khan through the door.

"That dog's vicious," I said.

"He's a whack-job, alright. You should have seen—" Ludo looked up

like he was peering through the ceiling and out into space. He pumped his fist close to his chest in small circles. Then Khan slumped to the floor, and Ludo stroked the top of the dog's head. "He did good today. He'll sleep it off in a couple of hours."

"Sleep what off?" I asked.

Ludo grinned. "Don't worry, chief. No harm done." Ludo picked Khan up by the hind legs and motioned with his head for me to help carry him. I grabbed Khan by his front legs, but dropped him and jumped back when the dog opened his eyes. The dog seemed to look at me without actually seeing me. We carried Khan through the house and set him down in the grass by the back door. His eyes were open a sliver as he lay there, unnaturally still.

"It's okay, chief," Ludo said. "Just a few downers."

"You drugged my dog?" I said.

"Your uncle's dog," Ludo said. "Only way to get him in the car."

Khan whined, a delicate high-pitched sound—uncharacteristically soft, unbearably weak. In place of the fierce, uncontainable Khan that I knew was a sad, defeated dog that reminded me of the last time I saw my Uncle Dwight. I was about to move out of my parents' house and was going to ask him if I could stay with him. When I got to his house, however, I found that he had split with his first wife for the third time; his house was littered with empty beer bottles and broken dishes while Khan, a puppy at the time, had taken to disemboweling every piece of furniture in the house. *She doesn't like what people say about her*, he said. *Guilt by association, I guess*. His eyes were glassy and he barely noticed I was there.

"You aren't taking my dog out again," I said.

Ludo's eyes bugged for a moment but then he stepped back, his hands out in front of him like he was surrendering to the police. "Okay, chief. Your call."

Ludo shook his head and went inside to change into his uniform, leaving me alone with the dog. Khan looked weird, the way we set him down. I tucked his front paws under his head and his rear legs under his body, but he still wasn't right. Under the influence of whatever Ludo gave him, Khan was silent, peaceful and somber. Not at all the way he was supposed to be.

NIGHT SECURITY AT MINI-DISC WAS AN EASY JOB, and the uniforms made us feel important. Our main responsibility was patrolling the parking lot to prevent unauthorized people from driving around, but no one was interested enough in Mini-Disc to bother. There was a small office park with only three buildings and people working around the clock, the corporate philosophy being that employees work better when they choose their own schedules. Over the course of a nine-hour shift Ludo went to the men's room about a dozen times, usually disappearing for twenty minutes or more. He was always raiding the lunchroom fridges for Pepsi—he said he needed the caffeine

to keep him on his toes.

Ludo was angry that night, unable to understand why I wouldn't let him take Khan out of the yard. I watched him across the parking lot, his head moving as he talked to himself and tried to shine his flashlight on the moon. When he came out of Building Two after a twenty-six minute bathroom break, a car pulled into the Mini-Disc driveway and stopped, blocking the entrance to the lot. Ludo popped the top of a new Pepsi.

"About time we got ourselves some action," he breathed. Ludo drained his Pepsi and tossed the empty can over his shoulder. He hitched his belt up like he was a cowboy, and the fingers of his right hand unsnapped the canister of pepper spray at his belt. The car started toward us, and Ludo swaggered out to meet it. He stopped as the car passed under one of the yellow parking lot lights. It was a police cruiser: the kind that didn't have a light bar—the kind that didn't look like a cop car from the rear-view mirror, but still had a cop inside it who could cart you off to jail. We watched the car roll through the lot to where we stood in front of Building Two. Ludo took a step backwards and let his hand fall away from the pepper spray as a policeman emerged from the car.

"Evening, officer," Ludo said. He stood with his feet apart and his back straight, his hands clasped behind him.

The cop studied his clipboard. "Ludomir Kilminster," he said without looking at either of us.

Ludo looked at me, and then back at the cop. He nodded.

The cop looked up, turning his full attention to Ludo. "I'm following up on a complaint filed by a young lady who says you showed up at her house with a dog."

Ludo looked at me. "Wasn't me, officer," he said.

"Do you own a dog, sir?" the cop said.

"He doesn't own a dog," I blurted.

The cop didn't even look me—just fixed his eyes on Ludo.

"No officer, I do not." Ludo's body was rigid as he talked.

"Where were you this afternoon?" the cop said.

"Sleeping all day." Ludo nodded at me. "At Officer Archer's house."

The cop looked at Ludo with narrowed eyes, like he could see him lying.

"Serious, officer. Marla's a total whack-job," Ludo said. "She's mad because I broke up with her. You know how chicks are."

"You have an address or a phone number where you can be reached?"

"I'm kind of between places right now," Ludo said. "But I'm here almost every night until six in the morning."

"Where are you going after you get off work tonight?" the cop said.

"Not sure," Ludo said.

The cop scratched behind his ear and looked at our uniforms, his eyes coming to rest on the pepper spray canister at Ludo's belt.

"You can trust me." Ludo gestured at the Mini-Disc Security patch on his shoulder. "We're on the same side."

The cop exhaled. He looked at me, and then back at his car. The radio on his belt squawked and sputtered. "Okay, Mister Kilminster. This is a warning. Don't be threatening anyone with any more dogs or you're going to jail."

"Sure thing, officer." Ludo rocked back and forth on his heels as the cop returned to his car. Ludo waved after him, and as the taillights disappeared into the night, I jabbed my elbow into Ludo's ribs.

"You took Khan to Marla's?" I said.

"It was an accident," he said.

"An accident?"

"I took him to the park to throw a Frisbee around and then on the way back I stopped by Marla's to get my putter."

"We don't have a Frisbee," I said.

"Never said I had a Frisbee," Ludo said. "Just that we went to the park to throw one."

"That dog could hurt someone," I said. "Hurt them real bad."

"People get hurt all the time, chief." Ludo started back into Building Two. I picked up Ludo's crumpled Pepsi can off the ground, and I thought about my uncle's bouts of amnesia and the consequences of forgetting how to take care of a dog like Khan—a German shepherd running loose through the neighborhood mauling ex-girlfriends and eating children. I went through Building Two looking for Ludo so I could tell him to stay away from my dog. When I finally found him, he was asleep in the lunchroom with his hand wrapped around a warm Pepsi, his head on the table with a line of drool trailing from his lips.

I WOKE UP LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON and Ludo was gone again. I knew before I stepped out into the backyard that the dog was gone too. I imagined Ludo trying to convince Marla of the harmlessness of sharp teeth and snapping jaws. I wondered what I could tell the cop when he showed up again at Mini-Disc that night.

"You've got a hole in your fence," Jillian said. She crouched on the sidewalk examining a portion of the chain link where it had detached from the fencepost. I walked over to where she was and squatted down, and together we looked at the bent metal jagged with rust. The opening was just big enough for a tomcat to squeeze through.

"Don't worry," I said. "My dog is way too big to fit through there."

Jillian stood up and looked around at my back yard. "You don't even really have a dog."

"Meanest dog you'll ever meet," I said.

Jillian smiled and let her backpack fall from her shoulder. She wore a



long black dress, a long leather bracelet that coiled its way up her left arm, and a spiked leather collar around her throat.

"Where's that crazy jacket of yours?" I said.

"Pink's the new black." Jillian reached into the backpack and produced something wrapped in a large Ziploc bag. "I don't make the rules," she said.

She pushed the bag to me through the hole in one slow motion. I looked down at it, uncertain about what she was giving me.

"Hambone," she said. "My mom was going to use it for soup."

Sure enough, inside the Ziploc was a large hambone, still heavy with a good amount of flesh on it. It was cold, fresh from the refrigerator.

"For your dog," she said.

I heard the sound of the back door sliding open and the jingle of a chain. Khan howled as he charged past me and cannon-balled into the fence. He sputtered and barked, saliva flying everywhere, but Jillian didn't flinch. She looked Khan in the eye and held her hand up to the fence. Khan froze in mid-snarl, and as he did so, my stomach dropped. It felt like relief or disappointment—I wasn't sure which. Khan stood there, bewildered for a moment. He turned and padded back behind me before he exploded toward the fence once more in a growling frenzy. I grabbed him by the collar and yanked him away from the fence, sending him tumbling backwards into the grass. The dog sprang right back to his feet, his gaze focused on Jillian like she was dinner.

"Good thing for the fence," I said.

Jillian looked at me and shook her head. "What's his name?"

"Khan," I said, and the dog's ears pricked at the sound of his name. I tossed the bone into the yard behind Khan and the dog loped after it.

"He's not so mean," she said.

"Yes, he is," I said. "You cast a spell on him or something."

"I'm not a witch," she said.

"Didn't say you were."

Jillian put her hands to the fence and looked at me like she could see what I was thinking. Behind me, Khan growled and scratched at the hambone with his teeth. "People are telling their kids to stay away from your house," she said in a low voice. Her smile revealed two front teeth on the verge of being too big, one of them stained yellow. I was about to tell her that I was glad she wasn't staying away when I noticed her eyes focused over my shoulder—I turned around to find Ludo standing at the back door. He held two fingers up to his chin, his tongue squirming between them like a fat worm. When he saw me looking, he laughed and slipped his hands behind his back.

Jillian grimaced. Without waiting for me to reply, she backed away from the fence.

Ludo just grinned at me. "She looks soft and sweet," he said loud

enough for her to hear.

"Shut up, Ludo."

"Like cotton candy." Ludo opened his mouth so wide when he laughed that I could see the fillings in his back teeth.

I looked back toward Jillian but she was gone. "You went back to Marla's with Khan."

"That little one is gonna love the mustache rodeo," Ludo said

I went over to where Khan lay in the grass with the hambone and I placed my hand on his back. Ludo must have seen something in the way I was looking at him because he cleared his throat and changed his tune real quick. Khan made a low rumbling sound in his throat.

"Serious, chief. That one's trouble."

"It's not like that." I stroked Khan's back, telling myself that I wouldn't let Ludo take my dog to Marla's again. The last thing I wanted was for Khan to be put down because Ludo sicced him on his ex-girlfriend.

"Jailbait," Ludo said. "She squeals and you end up in the clink."

"No," I said. I scratched Khan behind the ears and the dog shifted his weight away from me. "I'm telling you it's not like that."

Ludo smiled and shook his head. "If you don't know what you want you'll never get it."

I sat there for a while after Ludo went back into the house. I scratched Khan between the eyes and I thought about Jillian—the way she seemed to need some kind of guidance. Any girl who would steal food out of her mother's soup pot needed something. Then a sharp pain jabbed at my palm and I wrenched my hand out of Khan's jaws. The dog went back to gnawing on his bone without seeming to notice that he had bitten me. I didn't feel a thing despite the blood running from my hand and dripping from my elbow.

THE EMERGENCY ROOM DOCTOR SAID that I didn't need stitches, but he did have the nurses flush the wound with Betadine before wrapping it up in gauze. They gave me a rabies shot in the stomach because I told them I was bitten by a stray—I didn't want to risk having to give Khan over to Animal Control. He was, after all, family.

I did my best to keep my hand elevated like the nurses told me to. As I walked through the parking lot that night with Ludo, it was hard to feel like I had any kind of authority with my arm held over my head, but my whole hand throbbed and burned when I lowered it. We walked along the perimeter of the building, looking in at the empty offices and hallways. Every so often we'd pass a window where someone was working with the lights turned off, the room illuminated with the soft glow of a computer screen. I wondered if these people had families at home. If they worked at night so they didn't have to face an empty house. Ludo was silent as we walked, except for when he talked about Marla.

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"Bitch has my putter," he said. "I want it back."

"You don't play golf," I said.

"Don't matter, chief. It's mine." Ludo took a big swig of Pepsi.

"If you keep taking Khan over to Marla's there's going to be trouble."

Ludo looked at me and grinned. One of his hands went to the pepper-spray at his belt.

"No," I said, backing away. "Not with me. The cops."

"Don't you worry, chief," he said. "Won't be no more cops."

When I asked him what he meant, he twisted the soda can with both hands until it broke in two. That was Ludo's way—twist and pull until something breaks. That was how the world worked for guys like him and my uncle. And Ludo was right—the police didn't come back that night, but that didn't necessarily mean that there wouldn't be any more trouble.

HERE'S ANOTHER ONE OF LUDO'S SMART SAYINGS: if you aren't missed, then nobody ever really wanted you around in the first place. When we got home that morning, there was a message from my mother on the answering machine. My father had decided that it was time for Uncle Dwight to move back into his own house, and that my uncle wanted his dog back. There was no update on my uncle's condition. She didn't ask how I was. She didn't thank me for taking care of Khan. I was the dog-watcher. The pet-sitter. My hand smarted as I pulled the plug out of the wall and dropped the answering machine into the trash.

"Good for you, chief," Ludo said from the couch. "Voicemail is the way to go nowadays." He had his feet up on the coffee table with a beer in one hand and the TV remote in the other.

I went out back to feed the dog, and found Jillian standing at the fence in a stare-down with Khan. She wore her pink leather jacket, a pair of black jeans and a faded Depeche Mode T-shirt. Her hair was flat and she had cast off her heavily made-up face for a just a bit of eyeliner. She stood still with one hand up to the fence like she had the other day. Khan sat in front of her, his tail wagging slowly on the ground like a snake. It was like the two of them were communicating through their exchanged looks.

"What's going on out here?" I said.

Jillian broke off from her stare-down with Khan and put her hands behind her back like she was hiding something. On the other side of the street, the junior high-school kids walked to the bus stop, their faces turned downwards and away from us. "He bit you," Jillian said.

Before I could answer, she leaned down and put her face close to the fence. Khan growled once, then turned and slinked away to the woodpile at the rear of the yard. "My sister says she wasn't teasing your dog," she said.

"So?" I looked back at Khan lying calmly in the grass. It was unsettling.

Her eyes drifted to the hole in the fence. She reached into her pocket

and produced a pack of gum. "So, nothing," she said.

"You know, I'm too old for you," I said.

"What are you talking about?" she said. She slipped a piece of gum between her lips with one hand and pocketed the wrapper with the other.

"I'm twenty-four," I said. "I could go to jail for messing with you."

Jillian put both hands on the fence and looked at me with squinted eyes. "How old do you think I am?"

"Sixteen," I said. "Maybe seventeen."

"Twenty-two," she said. "And I'm not interested in you that way."

"Sure you are," I said. "I can tell."

"No, I am not."

"Then why do you keep showing up over here?" I said, leaning into the fence. Our faces were close. I could smell the clean, spicy scent of shampoo or perfume. I could almost taste the spearmint gum on her breath as she spoke.

Jillian crossed her arms and looked at the sidewalk. "People say you're trouble." Her voice was quiet and even. "They warn the kids to stay away from your house. You and your dog are a menace. Some people wonder whether you and your crazy roommate are gay or what."

She looked at me and I thought about the neighbors peering at us from behind their drawn curtains and closed doors. I imagined the crackle of anger and loathing in the air when Ludo and Marla faced off, one with a mad dog and the other with a golf putter. I remembered what my uncle said to me the last time I saw him, his response when I asked him why he had a tire iron at a bar in the first place—to *bash that asshole's brains in*, he said. All of this flashed through me and I curled my bandaged hand into a fist until it throbbed.

"I'm not gay," I said.

"I know," Jillian said. She clasped her fingers and squeezed her eyes shut. "I know. It's not fair. People can be really shitty sometimes." Her face dropped and her arms fell to her sides. "I just thought you should know," she said.

"Fuck you." I didn't mean it, but I said it.

Jillian looked at me and blinked. She clasped her hands in front of her and took a step forward, her mouth open like she was waiting for the words to come out. We stood there for a moment looking at each other, and then she stepped away from me and into the street. "Forget it," she said. She turned to leave.

"Don't come back anymore," I said.

"Maybe people are right about you," she said.

She was halfway across the street when I called her a lesbian. I don't know why I said what I did. I wanted her to come back, but my mouth was out of control—it was something Ludo would have said. I shouted after her until my throat ached, and she kept walking like she couldn't hear me. I

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watched her march away from me, my face pressed against the fence until she was out of sight. I clutched at the chain link with the fingers of my good hand and I could feel the metal cutting into my cheekbone—then I noticed the kids standing in a group on the other side of the street. “What are you looking at?” I said. “Get out of here.”

They stood with their notebooks clutched to their chests, staring like I was on display. A couple of the girls pulled at the hems of their skirts and looked away. One of the boys looked directly at me and gave me the finger. Then they all laughed.

“Get the hell out of here,” I yelled at them. I slammed my fists against the fence and grimaced against the white hot pain in my bandaged hand. They didn’t move. They watched me spit and curse at them until they shook their heads and continued on their way to the bus stop. And as I turned to go back inside, I found Khan watching me from the woodpile where he lay nearly hidden by the tall yellow grass.

IT WAS ABOUT NOON WHEN I WOKE UP to the sound of shouting outside. I got up and wandered into the living room, my hand raised over my head. Ludo wasn’t on the couch. At first I thought that Khan might be mauling him in the backyard, but the commotion was coming from the front of the house. I parted the blinds with my good hand and peeked outside to see Ludo on the front lawn in nothing but his underpants and a Star Wars T-shirt. He danced from foot to foot like a boxer, his fists up defensively. He howled something unintelligible, his face twisted into a feral snarl. The woman, Marla, stood with her back to me, her small fingers clenched tight around the shaft of a golf putter as she faced Ludo. She threw back her hair and looked at the crowd of neighbors gathering along the sidewalk. Then she delivered a swift blow to Ludo’s ribs with the putter. He doubled over and she brought the club down across the back of his head. Ludo fell to the lawn, his body curling into the fetal position. Marla kicked him in the ribs and shouted that he was nothing without a dog to hide behind. She nailed Ludo in the back with the putter and his whole body shuddered. He didn’t make a sound.

My first thought was that I should go out there and help Ludo. Take the bent-up golf club away from his crazy girlfriend and get him into the house. People watched from the safety of their doorways and driveways on the other side of the street. Those who had dared to gather closer to the fight looked on with furrowed brows and open mouths, their eyes looking past Marla toward me. She turned her head to look back at the house and scowled—she had a black eye and a Band-Aid over the bridge of her nose. I stepped away from the window and closed the blinds.

Ludo was in trouble and I couldn’t bear to see him lying helpless in the grass while Marla pounded on him. But from the threshold of the backdoor,



I could see Khan in all his savage glory. The muscles rippled in the dog's back and hindquarters as he paced the yard. His sharp teeth snapped at the air as he barked twice. Then the morning seemed to fill with the low growls rumbling from his throat. I thought I glimpsed a wicked glint in his dark eyes as he watched Jillian's cocker spaniel squeeze its way through the hole in the fence. The German shepherd became still—his ears flattened and his front legs spread wide like he was readying to pounce, like he was intent on crushing that little dog in his jaws and shredding the meat from its bones. The cocker spaniel sniffed at the ground and then looked up at Khan. I thought about rushing out there to try and restrain Khan, to save Jillian's dog. And as the big dog moved slowly toward Muffin, I thought about how I would save Khan from Animal Control. Ludo unconscious with Marla in the front yard. Jillian and her crazy jacket somewhere on the other side of the fence. The yard seemed smaller than before and the grass seemed more in need of mowing. My hand throbbed—the gauze was seeped in blood.

“Get her, boy,” I heard myself say.

Khan's tail began wagging, whipping about dangerously as he put his nose to Muffin's tail and sniffed. He barked twice, and then gave a low, rumbling growl. Muffin was silent as she rolled on to her back. A police cruiser pulled up to the fence, red and blue lights flashing. The officers exited the car and dashed toward the front of the house. Khan nuzzled the cocker spaniel's belly, and my hand smarted and ached as I closed my fingers into a tight fist. Muffin got back to her feet and offered her hindquarters to Khan, but he seemed confused—like he couldn't figure out how to position his body over the much smaller dog. I closed the door and leaned against the kitchen counter with my eyes shut. I was going to take Khan back to my uncle's house, where I would discover that no one had any recollection of either of us. **F**

## Ratman Agonistes

If you ask me, most people see the world inside out. They walk in the front door and see that pretty secretary there behind the potted plants in her nice laundered blouse or the security guy smiling his secure smile their way and it all looks very nice, polished and clean. Pristine. Now me, I'm the guy has to go in the back door; the one has to scuttle down the basement and see what's what. And what I see down there most can't hardly imagine. Ten years at this lark now and I still ain't ever got used to seeing one. Every time still it flipflops my stomach. I've been on call to meth labs with bags of uncut yellow bam and loaded revolvers and more cash than I'd know what to do with in this lifetime spread out on a coffee table while every hard-ass dealer in the room is cowering shit-scared behind the couch because some zoomweebie just seen one in the corner. Or thought they did. In your alky wards, they call the D.T.'s "seeing the rat." Trust me, there would be a reason for that.

THIS TIME UP IT WAS THE HUSBAND called me first, very polite, very snooty, said his wife was hearing noises.

"What kind?" I ask.

"Well, she says it's like a chirrup, maybe a bwip."

"A bwip?"

"That's what she calls it. A bwip. Sometimes a squeaky bwip."

"A bwip that sounds like a squeak?" I say. "Only chirrupy."

"Umm. That's about the size of it." There's a pause on the other end. "I think it might be three different sounds," he says finally, a tad embarrassed. "To tell you the truth," he adds, "I haven't heard a thing myself."

So then he gets started on about how the wife is seven months along and sensitive as hell. Hormones all wonky. His call is bat in the wall. But she wants them well rid of whatever it is. Getting all set for the baby, see? Keeping the nest tidy. Everything spotless. Pristine, he says. That's his word. And here's these weird-ass noises disturbing everything. Upsetting the mis-sus, that's so sensitive and all.

"Bats squeak," I tell him. "Don't ever chirrup in my experience. Nah, not unless one's taken to swallowing birds lately."

I laugh and he doesn't, stuck-up type.

"But you'll come take a look anyway?" he says. "Tomorrow?"

"Nah," I tell him. "I have this serious silverfish situation over Mon-mouth tomorrow. Thursday maybe."

SOON AS I HEAR THE ADDRESS, I know what's up. It's that new subdivision up yonder on the Sonethehaga estate. They've had their issues with our friends

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before. The realtors keep mum about it. Been there seen that. The house is a split-level number with attached garage and I see right away these folks don't do the lawn themselves. Kind of place your professionals live, doctors, professors, types don't know a weed-whacker from a lamppost. The husband isn't home, just the wife. She'd be pretty if she weren't knocked up. But she's draped herself in a purple top thing with these fancy knots and black leggings makes her thin legs look like a spider's and her hair's all pouffed up like some exploded red haystack. You'd think she'd cover up more in her condition. Just because you're in the club doesn't mean you need to just quit trying. Make the effort at least. Her, she gives me the quick once over too.

"You're the exterminator," she says.

"No ma'am," I says. "I'd be the vermologist."

"What's the difference?" she says, sounding like she could care less.

"Well, what I do is critter control. I manage the problem. Fact is, it's very near impossible to exterminate some beasts. They come back as a tendency." I smile at her. "That's how come there has always been rodents in the White House. I wouldn't just be talking about the Democrats here either."

She doesn't smile, prior remark having gotten her goat, as I thought it might, immediately pegging her as one of them liberals knows what's best for the working man, especially seeing as how she's never done a real day's work in her own life, except reading her books. I ask to see the basement and she up and wonders why I don't want to look first in the attic crawl space, gets started telling me all again about her squeaky bwip chirrup. I listen for a while, watching her lipstick stick on her teeth.

"I'll stay with the basement for now," I tell her. "Seeing as how I likely know what I'm doing."

Five minutes sniffing around down there and I know for definite. When I come back up the stairs to the kitchen the wife's standing by the stove dicing carrots. She has to stretch across some to reach the cutting board. Another couple weeks and they'd have to move her with a goddamn crane.

"Yeah," I say. "You got yourself a regular *infestation* here. Urine dribbles showing up on the black light. Found a bunch of rub marks too."

"Rub marks?" she says.

"Sure. A rat always leaves rub marks, lady."

"Rats," she shrieks, and for a minute there I think she's going to faint dead away on the spot, end up all splayed on the kitchen floor.

"Uh-huh. You got yourself one big as a dog here someplace."

THE RODENTS FREAK PEOPLE OUT. There's no getting around it. Like I said, I'm no big fan myself. The fear's irrational though. Statistics prove you are in fact 10 times more likely to be bitten by another human being. Twenty times more likely if you frequent Duffy's tavern probably. But in this world if there's one thing to count on its there being no shortage of vermin. Matter

of fact there is a rat for every person in the country. Sometimes I wonder if a rat ever gets itself to contemplating how for every one of him there might be a human. Hell, I wouldn't put it past them. Smart as us they are. Your rat that survives to four must be about the smartest creature on the planet. A trap means damn all to him. Why, he'll just kick that thing around till it snaps, then scoff the bait. Clever rat senses poison a yard off. I reckon some must have taught themselves how to read. And it'd take a sniper with a night-vision scope or some such to deal with the literate kind. I decide in my mind not to share this information with the current customer.

"What do we do?" she wails. It looks like she's having a case of the fantods and some serious trouble with the breathing. Her knuckles are pressed into the cutting board and a couple of carrots have fell on the floor, which in the circumstances is not good.

"Well," I say, "what I'd be recommending is for you to store all the food in metal containers with tight-fitting lids. Take the trash out every night and be sure to bungee cord the lids..."

"But they're in the house," she says. "They're already in *the house*."

"That they are," I say. "It's tough to keep those fellows out when they've got a yearn to get in. Them boys can get most anywhere they want. Hell, I've seen a rat tippytoe across a power-line like he was a tightrope walker, using his tail for balance. Also, aside from being able to jump three feet in the air, which is useful, a rat's skeleton folds up like a concertina, which means he can squeeze through any space practically. A hole as small as three quarters of an inch wide even." I show her how big that is with my fingers. "Gnaw through *anything* your rat will as well. Concrete. Steel. There's nothing stops your rat on a mission. He can swim underwater, come up sewer lines and climb out your drain."

"What?" she says, all breathy. It occurs to me how the noise she's making now is this genuine squeaky bwip. She looks awful pale too and it could be she's like as not about to puke. In the circumstances, and with her delicate condition, I figure I won't mention the guy in Kankakee got his balls bit by the one swam up the septic tank and into the toilet bowl while he was still on the john.

"I can take care of it though," I tell her.

"How?" she says. Her eyes are all red-rimmed and squishy.

"Snap traps with wide trigger plates. We'll set them against the walls there. Rats run along the sides of things, see? We'll bait the traps. Rats like Hershey Bars, nuts, anchovies, shrimp soaked in beer, scrambled eggs with cheese. Fancy stuff. Pretty much anything actually. Say, you might consider investing in some glue boards too. For the babies I mean. After they're caught, you just have to submerge the little ones in warm soapy water for a while."

"No," she yelps. There's a big book by the phone with a fancy cover: 'What to Expect When You're Expecting.' Not this, likely enough.

"That's how we dealt with the rodent situation over at the old Maytag factory. We killed a heap of them. Mostly mothers and babies."

"No," she says again. She's staring at me now, like I'm the problem and not her current infestation issue. "No," she keeps saying over and over. Like I didn't hear her the first time. Like I'm Vincent Van Fucking Beethoven.

"Between one fifth and one third of the world's food supply is eaten or destroyed by rats," I add. "I seen that someplace. Amazing to think isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know anything about that," she says, leaning into the door-frame, taking these big yawning gulps of air.

"Maybe you'd better call your husband," I tell her. "See what the man of the house wants to do."

"Yes," she says. "Yes. I think I will do that." She's fanning herself with a paper-towel now, making these weird hoo-ha noises.

"The reason rats bite babies on the face is because they smell traces of food there," I inform her. "The sister-in-law worked in child welfare for a while, and actually treated a baby that got itself bitten by rats."

Then, before I know it, she's snuffling to herself and flicking her flabby wrist with the bangle at me, and with me just trying to make her feel better is all.

"Which experience made her grow up fast," I add, moving toward the door. But the wife scarcely listening now, doubled over sobbing like that.

ONCE SHE QUILTS HER BAWLING, which is a serious considerable while, and with me on the clock too, she shows me out the back. The screen door is rattling off its hinge. I point to where the screws have popped out.

"You'd best get that taken of too," I say. "In your condition."

Their little brick-way out back is made of re-laid Purlington pavers and she steps carefully around the broken ones, hoisting her big tummy. She unlatches the gate. When she turns I'm checking out the phone wires overhead.

"Uh," she grunts. Then she starts up screaming like a banshee.

This small blurry shape comes galloping across the lawn straight at us. The wife staggers backwards, catches her heel, and nearly wipes out on the grass. Chattering, it leaps the curb, circles us once, then bolts back across the street.

"That there was a squirrel," I say, pointing. "Obviously." I sniff a little. "Your mature rat would be about the size of a newborn baby."

Her teeth are clattering like ice in a glass now. Clickety-clack. People say pregnant women get calmer without the curse to deal with but, in this current case, I'm not so sure I'm seeing it.

"Yeah, you'd definitely for sure best be calling your husband," I say.

TWO DAYS IT TAKES FOR THE HUSBAND to call me back. Who knows what that's about? Some things don't need too much consideration. What's to discuss? It's him meets me at the back door. The screen door is still hanging. I sup-



pose him not the handy type. The sort calls out the Army Corps of Engineers to change a light bulb. My sister tells me he teaches over at the college. Surprise.

"We have rats!" he says, almost enthusiastic.

"I reckon so."

"A colony?" he asks.

"Well, I'm not presuming to say it ain't a colony," I say, knowing he's been doing research on the rat on the computer. For that's what his type does in a crisis situation. "You definitely got one for sure. A big boy."

His little daughter, the one that has been born already, comes in the kitchen for a cup of water. She has the same red hair as her mother, only normal.

"Dad," she says. "Megan even has a pet rat."

"Well," he says, smiling. "That's not the same kind of animal we have."

"Actually..." I begin.

"Run along now," he says to the girl, and she hightails it out back to play.

"Erin said something about you finding urine stains." He's whispering this last bit, and I reckon the wife is somewhere in the vicinity and that urine is too delicate a word to get spoke in her presence. That, or stains.

"Well, a rat pretty much leaves pee stains everywhere," I say. "That's how he advertises his romantic availability as it were. Rat pee contains a lot of information in it. It's sort of like a whojimicallit. A rat resumé."

"But it could only be the one rat too?" He sounds pathetic hopeful.

"Could be. Some rats also tend to mark because they want things to smell like them. Having lots of personal smell around is said to comfort an animal." After a moment I add: "It wouldn't comfort me none though."

"Me neither," says the husband.

So then he starts in asking about rodenticide, like I reckoned he would, and I explain how come it's a stupid idea enough. Yeah, I tell him, they do use tracking powder in restaurants and, sure, after running through that stuff, a rat is pretty much done for. But, I say to him, what if said rat goes through said powder and then onto a countertop where food is prepared?

"What?" he says.

"What do you think?" I say.

"What?" he says again. Him a Professor too, it's awful sad I tell you.

"Let me put it this way," I say. "Ever had a bad stomachache after eating at Zambonini's downtown?"

"Good Christ," he says, penny dropping at last.

"Yeah. I mean, was that really *parmesan* on the tortellini?"

I am special careful to reassure him with the information that he'd have to ingest more than 12 ounces of tracking powder for it to do for him. Still and all, that's why I don't eat at Zambo's no more. However good the vodka shrimp.

In the basement, I crawl along the bottom of the wall and trace for him the track of a rubline.

"Rats like to touch things when they travel," I say.

"They're thigmophilic," he says, him being educated and all.

I just stare at him for a minute. I mean, Jesus fuck. Anyhow, it's way more than that too. What's interesting is how your rat has a muscle memory allows him to remember the turns, the route, the dead ends. Young rats follow old ones and the trails get repeated, passed on down through the generations. If the walls of this basement got took down tomorrow, the rats would come out and follow the same routes, as if the walls were still there. They would remember. Deep in their guts somewhere, or their bones maybe, rats know history.

"I've been reading all about rats," the husband says nervously.

"I reckon you have," I said.

"This article I've been reading referred to them as our mirror species."

"How's that?"

"They're a lot like us," he says.. "In a way, they do what we'd most want to do. They like best eating, playing, sleeping and having lots of sex." Even in the basement dark I can see him flush up purple. "A male rat will mate as many as 20 times a day."

"I can well believe it," I say. "Not sure I see that as behavior I'd like to imitate though. Twenty is a bit on the excess side."

"You're back," says the wife, appearing at the top of the stairs like some huge white whale and now about blotting the sun from the kitchen windows.

"That I am," I say, looking up at her massiveness. This green ribbon is causing her hair to stick out on top on either side like scarlet handlebars. "Actually," this to the husband now, "your male rat will continue mating with a female rat even if she's dead."

The husband looks up at his wife quick, sheepish and nervy like, and it occurs to me how my current employer is one seriously whipped individual.

"We were just discussing the libido of the rat," he says, and snickers towards her up the stairs, definitely panicky. As observed, I had her pegged for a bigtime ballbuster already.

"Also," I say, this as much to her as him, "rats exiled from their nest by more aggressive males will live in these all-male rat colonies and mate with the other male rats. They can turn into these disgusting rat perverts."

The wife disappears back into the kitchen at that, a tad too much information about the degeneracy of *rattus norvegicus* maybe.

"Do you know about the nuclear testing?" the husband asks, shivering.

"How's that?"

"Nuclear testing. When our government was testing on Enewetak atoll in the 60's, the local rats went deep in their burrows. After the dust settled, they came out again and carried on as before. No ill effects at all."

"Doesn't surprise me none," I say, nor does it. "You'd best see to your

missus there. Talk of the rodent gives her the heebie-jeebies.”

SO I DO MY JOB. I SET MY TRAPS. Two days later I get a callback. God knows how, but the sorry-ass husband’s managed to trap himself a rat in an empty barrel in the garage. This is a situation. When I get there, he’s slick with sweat and his eyes are googly as a tree-frog’s.

I look at the barrel and then at him.

“What you got in there?” I ask. He stares at me. “That a rat?”

“Well, I think so,” he says.

“Not a raccoon then,” I say, joshing with him a bit. “You sure?” I give the barrel a poke. “How’d you manage this anyhow?”

“I did it on accident,” he says. “I lifted the leaf barrel, saw what was behind it, and dropped it quick. The animal’s got caught inside somehow.” The barrel shakes slightly. “What’re you going to do with it?” he asks, hoarse.

“I reckon I’m going to beat it to death with this here shovel I say, lifting said implement down from the wall of the garage. “How’s that sound to you?”

I can hear the rat throwing itself against the sides of the barrel still. It’s squeaking and bwhipping, but not chirruping at all.

“That sounds fine,” he says, quiet as a mouse.

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND FLIP the barrel over on its side. I expect the animal to come bolting out. No such. This one stayed put, staring at me, taking these little mincing steps side to side. It was about a foot long all told, all the while arching its back and drumming its foot, and I could see the coarse hair bristle, the pruny leather of its paws quivering. When I hoist my shovel the rat stands up on his hind legs and snarls. He knows what’s what. His black lips are pulled back, and the upper incisors are dark-orange, the lower ones stippled and stained yellow. I adjust my grip and he twitches his snout and makes his move, comes belting out of the barrel between my legs.

The husband shrieks like a woman.

I smack the rat one and line drive him against the side of the Honda Accord and he lays there, twitching, stunned I reckon. So I hit at him again— one, two, three, four times—bringing the shovel down edgewise till I heard the small bones cracking and slice him clean in two, little pink guts spilling. Both parts stayed moving for a while, then stopped, the blood oozing in the gravel.

“Now that there was one big motherfucking rat,” I observe correctly.

But I’m talking to no one in particular apparently because the husband is off retching behind the garbage cans. I always had that one pegged for a pussy.

SO I GO DOWN THE BASEMENT to investigate the burrow some more and find this yellow post-it note that has slipped between the floorboards. It says: “The love boat has crashed against the everyday. Mayakovsky.” I remember what it says because I put it in my wallet and kept it. Sometimes I take out and look at this gibberish and wonder. I mean, what kind of persons

write about the 'love boat' anyway? Wasn't that the bad T.V. show with the midget? Maybe that was Fantasy Island. When I come on back up the steps this time there's no one in the kitchen. Off in the hallway, I can hear them whispering though. I listen quiet.

"Is Ratman still here?" she hisses.

"Shhh," he says.

"Make him go *away*," she says, and I'm naturally started thinking what an ungrateful bitch she is.

"He's just finishing up," he tells her, coughing. "Keep it down for God's sake. He thinks he's found the source of the problem. He's almost done."

By now, I'm kind of famished and very uninterested in this here exhibition of conjugal bliss. So I go back in the kitchen and have a peek in the fridge. Something smelled good and meaty in there but I only grabbed a couple of apples and some cheese-sticks and a V-8 juice before heading back downstairs.

THE BURROW IS IN THE UNFINISHED crawlspace behind the kitchen addition. Some are real complex-interconnecting tunnels, passages, cavities, the whole shebang. This one is just a chamber connected to the outside by a short tunnel, with a little mound of cut grass shielding the nest cavity. The nest itself, when I extract it, is smaller than I expect, cup-shaped. I investigate and see it looped with these weird interwoven red strands. Takes me a moment to figure it.

I carry the nest upstairs and lay it on the kitchen table. They're both in the kitchen now anyway, smiling their big phony smiles at Ratman like nothing's up, can't abide twofaceness myself, and so both get the opportunity to stare at the nest for a while, baffled some. I indicate the wife's head to her.

"Made a nest out of your old hair it did. Remarkable critter."

So she right away starts up that big shrieking thing again and the husband, scared she's likely going to drop the big one there and then probably, suggests I get out of there but quick. But I wait for a bit while he writes me the check. No Pied Piper deal, this. Tell you the truth, my first instinct was to say to her something along the lines of: "Look, this here fellow made a rat's nest out of your rat's nest, ma'am. What'd be the odds of that?" But with due reflection, I reckon she weren't the type could ever appreciate the humor of a situation.

Driving back through Sonthehaga, I'm reckoning I might be riding the gravy train for a while. The subdivision backs up on the canal, and there's no such thing as a solitary rat. You could make a right fortune off such a place, if you were so inclined. But tell the truth I'm not inclined that much. Fact is, some day soon I'd like to relocate myself to Arizona. I hear tell they've got all kinds of snakes, lizards, spiders, scorpions and such, lots of business potentialities. Not even to mention all those individuals work in them casinos. **F**

## If Not Specifically Casper: A Post-modern Epithalamium

(For Meg & Mike)

Two thousand miles is too much. Simply  
having been in Wyoming, if not specifically Casper,  
I can imagine the terrain and all manner  
of wildflowers and wild animals,  
and I can imagine you,  
but the specifics might as well be  
these red oak leaves stirring in the breeze.  
Twice I've been where you're going,  
down that aisle agreed upon as sacred,  
but like each drop of holy water  
every detail, every speckle, is immense.  
Any attempt on my part to impart to you  
the maelstrom that is all the drops together  
is doomed to failure and deserves derision.

Here in our beloved White Mountains  
on your wedding day it's hot,  
and while the conservationists worry  
about the redwoods and the yellow-crowned twittlebirds  
of Central Idaho I look upon six white cabins  
screened-in and squat as chickens in a row.  
They're empty, and tonight the sky  
is going to be cloudy and likewise empty.  
I look upon these empty spaces  
and I see my dead first wife curled  
on her side on a bed in Denver. After her  
nothing is certain. Fortunately there's you.  
May two thousand miles be as nothing.  
May the breeze in the red oak leaves strengthen.  
May the empty spaces be beguiled.  
May your love make death take a breather.



## The Buck

It's likely the doe was not far away,  
watching from the woods as my father  
took her fawn, though he said then, after

stopping the car, that the fawn  
had been abandoned, its mother dead  
or injured, and it would die without

our care. So he took it from the road  
where it lay, placed it on my lap in the car  
and drove home where we kept it in a shed,

fed it from a bottle, watched it grow, its spots  
fade, until it became clear the little buck  
would become too much for us soon. I never

saw it again after the man from the game farm  
took it away, though it was rumored it escaped  
and a too-tame buck was shot the next year

down the road. I know now, grown, father dead,  
that the doe was likely watching as he took her fawn  
and drove off, and I know now if I had known this then,

and what would come after, I would have refused his gift—  
for that is what he thought it—and asked that he place it  
beside the road where it would later not be when we returned.

## Sprig of Dried Lavender

Ashes anywhere begin to look  
like ashes everywhere. The flecks  
that lift in wind off the glowing  
tip of your cigarette depict  
the flakes of house and flesh set loose  
to spin with dust by the last  
eruption on a Baghdad street.  
The fireplace collects  
the desiccated aftermath  
of just-cremated distant  
kin I've yet to meet, now can't,  
and I can't name them. Ashes,  
in streams across the morning sky,  
are smokestack plumes over Polish woods  
and strands of soot above the hillside  
neighborhoods of Beirut. I cannot  
wash my eyes of all the ashes  
falling through the light. The ash  
of stars flies at us through the night,  
becomes the glint of February's  
crocuses. Ash is the ocean,  
water of this cosmos, what  
we rise out of and revisit  
on this wave of bones. We  
must know by now, in this wise  
century, ashes  
anywhere are ashes  
everywhere. I'll burn  
this sprig of dried lavender,  
crumble its tip between  
my fingers, and let the ash  
fall into my tea. I'll drink  
to ashes, and to the sea.

## The Catholic, The Child, and The Choctaw

### *The Nightmare:*

There's a war going on in Iraq.

I pass by groups of ROTC kids on campus with camouflage uniforms and starry eyes, and I wonder if they could handle doing all of the things I did when I sported that same monkey suit years ago. If I could meld my mind with theirs, like one of the characters from *Star Trek*, and let them see into my memories for just a brief instant, would they bend swiftly to the breaking point before me like tree trunks in a hurricane?

I wonder.

I wonder if they would understand why I wake up every morning on the verge of tears, because I am just that happy to be out of the Marine Corps.

They would probably think I was one of the weak ones, one of those people every serviceman or woman hears about who buckled under the stress of combat.

A pussy, for sure.

Weak-minded.

No guts.

They would probably have a hard time picturing me using a loud scary machine gun to cut a bloody swath through a dozen heavily armed fighting men.

I have a hard time picturing it myself.

When I arrived at college, I thought that there had to be other veterans like me. I went to a meeting of the Florida State University Collegiate Veterans Association the first year I was in Tallahassee. I hoped that perhaps enough men had seen real combat in the first two years of the war that I might meet somebody my age who I could identify with.

Somebody else who spent every day looking over their shoulder, searching for the shadows of long-vanquished foes.

I heard stories of patrols walked on the hostile streets of Iraq and Afghanistan, of friends killed by improvised explosive devices. Stories of great expectations slowly atrophying into boredom and resentment. Echoes of halfhearted comradery stained the faux oak wall panels of the run-down sports bar's 'back room' within which we assembled ourselves.

A few pairs of hardened eyes peered at me from across the cheap fold-out brown plastic table, but I saw through the bravado. It was easy to spot men who still wanted more, men who didn't get a satisfying taste of the purest evils of humanity. Men who have tasted nothing save the bitterness of disappointment on the tips of their tongues. I pitied those who felt the need to exaggerate their experiences.

I wish I had seen less.

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About once a week for the past three and a half years I have had the same dream:

The dry desert air, sour with the taste of sand. My dusty brown boots planted firmly against the cold steel of my humvee's turret platform. My dark green truck crawling down the deserted causeway at ten miles an hour. The coarse fibers of my camouflage war gear gently scraping my skin. My bulletproof vest wrapped snugly around my narrow chest. The reassuring coldness of my machine gun as I gently rest my hands upon it, stroking slowly and methodically up and down its length as though it were an extension of my own cock.

And believe me, somebody is about to get fucked.

The shots do not begin slowly, but rather in a crescendo of thunder which quickly drowns out my thoughts of death and dying. A man appears before me, the brown skin of his mustached face mottled and murky. His shiny black eyes gaze into mine, all the way down to the coward buried deep inside me who is deathly afraid to shoot another man but twice as scared of dying. Unfortunately (for him) I have been trained (programmed) far too well to hesitate.

A 7.62mm bullet is a caliber used in many popular hunting rifles, rifles which are designed to kill animals well over three hundred pounds with a single well-placed shot. However, a hunting rifle only fires one of these bullets at a time, and I have a whole belt of three thousand of them which my M240G machine gun dispenses with frightening speed.

It is with equally frightening speed that I observe these bullets smashing into my new acquaintance, as I press my shoulder firmly into the stock of the weapon to absorb some of the recoil and steady my aim. The man's body shakes violently, and a great gout of dark blood spews forth from a rapidly increasing number of oozing, blackened red gouges in his pink Polo t-shirt. His body is flung backward, spinning in midair so that he lands with his toes pointing at me, and his khaki pants begin to slowly catch fire.

I sense movement behind me and I yank down the oval-shaped metal ring by my waist, which allows me to rotate the circular metal track that runs around the rim of my turret. I spin my guns around to the other side of the circular hole in the roof of my truck and take a deep breath, wrapping my left hand around the stock of the weapon and preparing to open fire once more.

Before I can steady myself I am consumed in searing flames, screaming at the top of my boiling lungs.

TYPICALLY AROUND THIS TIME I SIT UP IN MY BED, sometimes sweating but more often than not left with nothing more than a racing heartbeat and a vivid recollection.

No matter how much cocaine I snorted, marijuana I smoked, or how many bottles of hard liquor I tried to drown myself in, when I returned from Iraq the memories wouldn't go away. I couldn't even blur the edges of the terrible images that had been etched into my brain.

I just wanted to forget.

This all happened when I was nineteen years old.

*The Awakening:*

I always wondered if it would be hard to kill somebody.

After six weeks of sleeping in northern Kuwait, in sand that stretched in every direction as far as my eyes could see, the order to move was given amid whispers that the war was a drill.

The invasion of Iraq began.

My battalion traveled in a convoy that was about a mile long, with four Abrams tanks at the front followed by an assortment of three other humvees identical to mine and four humvees with mounted fifty-caliber heavy machineguns. My humvee was equipped with a medium-caliber machinegun mounted beside an optically-guided missile launcher. In addition to four bloodthirsty infantrymen and their personal weapons, my humvee was also weighed down with about six hundred pounds of ammunition: guided missiles, machinegun bullets, rifle and pistol bullets, hand grenades, single-shot rocket launchers, and C4 plastic explosive. Understandably, my platoon - which consisted of sixteen humvees equipped comparably to my own - was referred to as *Heavy Guns*.

Behind us rode an assortment of close to sixty armored personnel carriers and twenty standard humvees, with half of my platoon's humvees at the caboose. The personnel carriers were so heavy that they could only move at about fifteen miles an hour, and the rest of the convoy was forced to match their pace.

As I traversed the forty or so miles that separated my home of the last month and a half from the Iraq border, I looked up with my infrared goggles and saw barrages of naval gunfire and artillery moving through the night sky in the same direction we were traveling. They looked like fleets of shooting stars, soaring through the heavens to announce our impending arrival to distant lands. I remember very distinctly the awe-inspiring affect of the power stored within those beautiful, faintly glowing stars as I watched them blaze across the dark, starless heavens. Somewhere behind me, across twenty miles of coarse desert sands and crusty green cacti, there was a man whose job it was to authorize the release of each salvo. I stared into the sky, and I imagined him grinning and licking his lips each time he gave the order.

I was quickly snapped back into reality by the loud, distinctive *ka-chow* of nearby AK rifle fire, coupled with loud *pings* of bullets ricocheting off of the fiberglass roof of my truck - which was definitely not bulletproof - not two feet away from my unprotected stomach.

"Were those bullets?" My vehicle commander yelled at my knees from beneath me in the cabin. "We just got ourselves a fuckin Combat Action Ribbon, boys!"



I began hearing excited voices warbling out of our radio beneath me. The Abrams tanks began receiving enemy contact just a few hundred yards ahead of me. I heard quiet *pop-pop-pops* of small arms fire, interrupted intermittently by the thunderous *boom* of an Abrams' 125mm main cannon. Then I began seeing sporadic bursts of light on either side of me, like somebody was trying to send me Morse code signals with a series of flashlights cleverly concealed amongst the ruined structures I was at that moment passing.

Somebody was trying to signal me all right. Signal me that I should go back to wherever the hell I came from, preferably with a 7mm bullet resting comfortably somewhere inside my skull.

What happened next was a blur of loud noise and adrenaline.

A group of enemy fighters would try to sprint from one covered position to another. I would have to spot them first, and the .50 caliber machineguns on my neighboring humvees would aim at where my bullets were going. Every fifth round on my bullet-belt was a tracer, which meant that there was a red phosphorous compound on the rear of the bullet which burned as it traveled through the air. At night - and our attacks were always at night - these tracer rounds enabled me to see very effectively what I was hitting with each burst of fire.

They looked a lot like the red laser beams that come out of people's weapons in the old *Star Wars* movies.

Whenever one or two .50 caliber machineguns observed the direction of my fire, there wasn't likely to be anything left alive in that area within the next few seconds. I would start shooting at an enemy's covered position, meaning that he was behind a wall or a door or something that he thought would prevent my bullets from touching him. My 7.62mm bullets were not terribly difficult to seek cover from.

However, the 12.7mm depleted uranium rounds of the .50 cal trucks beside me were extremely tough to avoid. Walls, doors, cars, trucks, livestock. There wasn't anywhere to hide.

Understandably, a lot of Iraqis tried to run.

But we hadn't flown all the way to the other side of the planet to be denied satisfaction. It's pretty tough to outrun one bullet, much less one hundred of them.

In spite of all this, during my first firefight I really had only one opportunity to give myself credit for killing people.

After about an hour, contact with enemy forces had thinned out, and we hadn't heard a shot in almost fifteen minutes. My hearing was terrible from all of the shooting, and I could smell only the strong sulfur odor which accompanied the combustion of gunpowder. So when somebody tugged on my pant leg from inside the Humvee cabin, I was puzzled for a moment before I realized my vehicle commander was trying to speak to me.

"Selinsky! To your left! There!"

I obeyed, swinging my turret around a good 120 degrees. The .50 cal in front of and behind me had pulled ahead to support the Abrams tanks, who were taking sniper fire from somewhere beyond the sandy dunes.

Nobody was paying attention to what I was doing.

"Can you see them? Right over there!" My boss was practically screaming, and still I strained to hear him.

"Oh fuck yeah, I see 'em Sergeant. Wait a second -"

"RPG! Sel, shoot 'em! Now, Goddammi!"

The index finger of my right hand drowned out the rest of his harangue.

They both wore loose gray robes, each of them a single piece of cloth cut to cover the wiry frames of their owners. Checkered black and white cloths covered their heads. They couldn't have been more than sixty feet away from me. I could clearly see the fear on the one guy's face as he tried to hold his ground, kneeling steadily while his partner affixed a round to the front of his rocket propelled grenade launcher. Just as his comrade finished his task and the two of them turned to take aim at my brothers, they saw me watching them through the night-vision scope on my machinegun.

It wasn't easy to tell where the first four bullets impacted, but both men were in the process of being thrown to the ground when I saw my tracer round tear into the neck of the man holding the launcher. His head jerked forward at an awkward angle, and a fat spurt of dark mist sprayed into the night from a lemon-sized hole inches below the base of the man's skull. His body met the ground in silence.

His friend was not so lucky. I could hear his screams of pain for at least five minutes as we crawled away from him in my truck. I screamed not so that he could hear me, but only so that I could hear myself.

"I hear you, motherfucker! Sounds like it hurts!"

"Yeeeah! Die, you fuckin Hajis!" That was my driver. He must've heard me yelling.

For a few minutes I heard nothing but intermittent *pops* of distant gun blasts, and the quiet ringing in my ears from the much closer ones earlier that morning.

Then I heard something else.

Affected, lighthearted banter from beneath me. My brothers had been amused by my savagery.

My boss spoke up first, leaning his head to the left so that more sound went out of the big hole in the roof of our truck that I was standing in.

"Damn Sel, did you hear how that one motherfucker was screaming?"

I remained silent, breathing slowly and heavily, so my driver cocked his helmeted head briefly up and to his right and chimed in.

"Man, I saw th' other one's head hangin' on by, like, a little stringy bit of neck an' shit." He adjusted his grip on the wheel and glanced back at the road before he went on.

"I thought it was gonna fall right off when he hit th' dirt, but dat bitch stayed on! Hahaw!" A thin dribble of Copenhagen snuff escaped from his bulging lower lip as he laughed, sliding quickly down his stubbled chin to seek refuge in his dusty vestments.

I sighed and wondered how I had dodged so many bullets. There was a peculiar feeling in my chest, like I had just sucked in the biggest lungful of the world's best freebase cocaine. It was fantastic. Those two guys had snuck right up on us. If I'd hesitated another second that rocket probably would've killed me and the three Marines just beneath me. I had been one second away from dying.

One fucking second.

I felt indestructible.

I lay awake the entire day trying to feel the change in myself, now that I had crossed the imaginary line which separated the 'real' Marines, the combat-tested infantry Marines, the killers, from everybody else in the Corps. I found the only thing I knew was that I had taken another person's right to live away from them, and that I could do it again. It had made me feel important to do so. I had killed people, and I was now a part of our illustrious American history.

I wanted more.

### *The Sacrifice:*

The gunshots and screams of dying Iraqis are not what I remember first when I reflect on those initial days of battle.

My battalion commander, in his zeal to showcase the combat effectiveness of his shock troops, ordered that the first objective would be seized eight hours ahead of schedule. The mission was an overwhelming success. My battalion crossed the border early and seized important oil processing facilities without damaging them, while casually crushing enemy opposition. My commander's gamble netted a Presidential Unit Citation for my battalion, a combat decoration that has not been awarded to a Marine Corps infantry unit since the Korean War fifty years ago.

But when a rusted red pickup truck full of Iraqis waving white flags rolled to a stop about twenty yards from my parked truck, and one of them jumped out of the back spraying us with his AK, a bullet just happened to slip in under the bottom of Lieutenant Kilders' bulletproof vest. There, it proceeded to rip open his lower abdomen.

AK rounds spin at funny angles when they travel through the air, so the effect when one of these rounds strikes a human body can be more like being hit with a lawnmower blade than a traditionally accelerated piece of dense metal. The Lt.'s innards poked out from beneath his navel, like a fistful of fat pink worms trying to burrow out instead of in. The ropy, moist cords of his lower digestive tract would recede slightly with each inhalation,

and then protrude again when the Lt. exhaled.

I stood rigid in my turret just a stone's throw away from him, biting off the tips of my short fingernails one by one as I fought to distract myself. I tried to picture a pretty girl I knew from high school, without her clothes on, but sooner or later my gaze always drifted back to the man just across the road from me who was taking his last breaths.

A Navy medic sat beside him, trying to get him to settle down. The medic cradled his head in his arms, while at the same time gently forcing it back so that the Lt. couldn't see the wet green rag that was covering up his own intestines peering out from a four-inch opening just below his belly button.

Since my unit was in position eight hours ahead of schedule, it took an extra thirty minutes for a helicopter to show up to fly the Lt. to a hospital. He was just laying there on the ground across from me for half an hour - separated from me only by a two-lane asphalt road and a few yards of sandy rocks and dark green desert shrubs.

He screamed and moaned loudly at first, but after about ten minutes he had strength enough only for faint whimpers and forced wheezes, the echoes of which prevented me from sleeping for about four days.

I couldn't stop staring at him, as though if I wished hard enough he would just shut the fuck up and go back to being an invincible Marine, rather than a human being who was dying. Blood pooled in his groin, staining his camouflage pants nearly to his knees.

At one point, after about twenty minutes, a gust of wind snuck a few grains of sand under the dressing and into his wound, and the screaming resumed again for an endless moment before he finally lost consciousness. I later learned that he died that day in a hospital in Germany because he had not been evacuated soon enough to prevent fatal internal bleeding.

I never wore the Presidential Unit Citation on my uniform when I returned from Iraq.

### *The Hand of God:*

Dom was a tall, muscular black guy from Oakland with pale mocha skin and soft, caring eyes. He manned the turret of the heavy machine gun humvee which rode in front of mine, and our two humvees were first in line behind the four Abrams tanks that formed the tip of our mighty spear.

He would tell me when we returned home that he counted over fifty kills to his name. I don't know how accurate that was, but I would not question the sincerity behind what he would say after - that he lusted for battle, felt invincible, and prayed for another chance to snuff out men's lives.

I knew he was telling the truth because at the time I felt the same way.

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MY UNIT'S THIRD ENCOUNTER WITH enemy resistance was the taking of a bridge that crossed the Euphrates River. The Iraqi Republican Guard had

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constructed a simple network of trenches and bunkers in the sand, from which they ran toward the Abrams tanks as they crossed the bridge first ahead of the convoy.

A group of about fifteen of these Iraqis was able to use the trenches to evade devastating Abrams fire and circle behind the tanks to where Dom and I were sitting in our trucks. Dom and I both spotted them right away, but we waited until we were sure they had all crawled out of the trench before I signaled to Dom to shoot them. If any of them had still been concealed when Dom started firing, I think they would have seriously reconsidered showing themselves.

We wanted to make sure we killed as many of them as we could. We certainly had the right tools.

The heavy-machine gun variant of our humvees carried the M2 Browning .50 caliber (12.7mm) anti armor machine gun. Robert Browning developed this weapon about one hundred years ago, and it is still the most effective automatic heavy weapon ever created. It is used against planes, light armor, buildings, etc, etc. There is actually a stipulation in the Geneva Convention which states that this weapon can not be used to target enemy personnel, only equipment and vehicles.

My platoon sergeant's answer to this was that every enemy was going to be carrying some form of equipment, be it a rifle or a canteen, and that is what should be shot at. The vacuum that travels behind a .50 cal bullet is so powerful that the round could miss by a foot and still tear away an arm or a leg.

So when Dom swiveled his turret to face our attackers and began firing, it was like watching men transformed into giant watermelons and tomatoes that had tons of individual fireworks stuffed inside of them. Their corpses were mangled piles of steaming flesh, barely identifiable as former human beings. It smelled like someone had thrown a huge rack of rotten ribs on the grill. The massive barrel of the .50-cal glowed a dull red as Dom ceased firing.

I hadn't fired a shot, but when Dom turned to face me after he slaughtered those men, I saw in his eyes the same change I was beginning to recognize in myself: I was becoming addicted to the fear, to the adrenaline rush that only came when I could feel Death breathing down the back of my neck.

I had so much power. I decided who was going to live and who was going to die.

Crouched behind my machine gun, perforating the internal organs of my enemies and splashing the sands with their blood, I felt like the hand of God.

### *The Catholic, The Child, and The Choctaw:*

Angel was a short, scrawny, dark-haired Puerto Rican kid from Queens who I always thought had a very rat-like countenance. For some reason, when I see certain people they instantly remind me of some kind of animal, and I couldn't look at Angel without thinking about a little rat gnawing



away feverishly at a stale corner of cheese. I guess it figures that he was a real religious type. Understandably, I think a lot of the more religious guys questioned the righteousness of our deeds. Many of our 'objectives' were a lot less righteous than they probably expected when they signed that contract at the recruiter's office. I know my recruiter never said anything to me about ripping people apart with automatic weapons while they were trying to kill me in an equally unpleasant manner.

Throughout the weeks leading up to the invasion and even a few times between engagements, the battalion chaplain would hold these little powwows in which he would reassure us of the nobility of our actions, about how God would not view me as unjust for killing people as long as it was done for my country. Many of my more spiritually inclined brothers relied heavily on the chaplain's assurances that taking human lives for the good of the U.S. of A is something God sympathizes with, and even awards get-out-of-hell-free cards for.

Those sermons, in retrospect, sicken me more than almost anything else I saw in Iraq.

Almost.

Billie was the first roommate I ever had when I entered the Fleet Marine Forces, and he and I developed a strong bond. Largely naive to the nuances of the white man's world, Billie had spent the previous eighteen years of his life as a football/basketball/probably any other sport champion on a Choctaw Indian reservation just outside of Jackson, Mississippi. Living with a well-educated, upper middle-class white kid like me was an experience for Billie akin to when Neo gets plugged into that machine in *The Matrix* that teaches him all of those sweet martial arts disciplines in the space of seconds. I was an absolute wealth of information about a world that was largely unknown to him. And Billie was a smart kid. He wasn't a religious kind of guy, much like myself. He looked up to me a great deal, and he would often consult with me when he was having qualms about the morality of our mutual purpose. I often found that he and I were more capable than many of our comrades of shrugging off some of our more harrowing moments with our cold, cynical and often sarcastic sense of humor.

THE MORNING OF APRIL 9<sup>TH</sup> saw me and my brothers in central Baghdad recovering from our final and most intense gun battle: thirty-six hours of intermittent contact with enemy forces. Working with a CIA Special Forces team, we had seized and were then holding control of a massive Presidential Palace compound. Imagine if there was an 'MTV Cribs' for people who controlled entire nations Saddam would've made the pilot episode.

The street stank of rotting flesh that morning as I leaned slightly against a palm tree, my feet planted squarely on the sidewalk fifteen feet away from the massive iron gates of the compound entryway.

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I will never forget that smell. It's just like getting a whiff of any other kind of dead mammal, like a mouse or an opossum or something. Except that since people are fairly large animals, when there is a large group of them, dead, the stench is exponentially more repulsive.

I fondled the grip of my Beretta 9mm handgun and peered down the street, relishing the comforting burn of the desert sun on my weary face. I drew a blue pack of "Sumer" cigarettes, the official brand manufactured by the Iraqi government, from the empty grenade pouch on the front of my flak jacket and fired one up.

As I simultaneously savored and despised the bitter taste of strange tobacco, my thoughts drifted to all of the girls from my high school that I'd had, or wanted to have, sexual intercourse with. I would be lying if I neglected to point out that the former list was far shorter than the latter.

Angel stood in the turret of Billie's truck, watching the alleyway directly across the street from us. The Abrams just down the block did not have an acceptable angle to fire on this particular alley, so I had instructed Angel not to take his eyes off of it. He slouched against the back of the Humvee turret, keeping only his right hand resting comfortably on the pistol grip of the machine gun, with the tip of his index finger gently tickling the trigger. His other hand was occupied stuffing one of the more palatable ration components into his whiskery, cheese-eating mouth.

The alley was a narrow, trash-littered separation between two three-story beige townhouses, barely wide enough to accommodate a compact car. Occasional gusts of hot wind would stir some of the paper trash around in the air, causing me to wonder if I should expect a tumbleweed or two to roll by at any minute.

Billie sat in the driver's seat, disinterestedly spurting a thin stream of brown juice from between his pursed lips every fifteen or twenty seconds. He flipped slowly through the full-color pages of his *Buttman* magazine.

The faint buzz of an approaching four-cylinder engine caused him to put *Buttman* down. Angel tossed his snack to the ground and pressed his shoulder against the stock of his weapon.

There had been several reports of car bombings in Baghdad recently and my orders were to destroy any vehicles that did not immediately stop to be searched. Apparently, Saddam loyalists had even been using ambulances as bomb carriers, and my orders were to shoot any ambulances that tried to approach us as well.

I would have shot at anything that I thought we could get away with. This was the group mentality. We wanted blood.

So when a small white hatchback came racing down the alley toward us, refusing to stop or slow down, Angel looked at me immediately and I nodded to him without saying a single word. When the car came out of the alleyway, about two hundred meters in front of us, he did not hesitate. A

dozen rounds pounded into the oncoming car, causing it to swerve to our left into the concrete wall which surrounded the compound.

I heard the scream long before I could see through the spider-webbed windshield as the vehicle crashed to a halt not twenty feet from where I was standing on the sidewalk..

It was a woman's scream.

I walked slowly over to the white two-door, my pistol in my hand as the cries of anguish beckoned me forward.

A mustached, middle-aged man wearing a gray button-down shirt and old khaki pants fell from behind the steering wheel as the driver-side door was forced open from the backseat. Three neat holes in his chest were quickly soaking his robe through with dark red blood, and I could see by the way the blood was rushing out of one of the openings that his heart had most likely been punctured. Pushing him out of the car and onto the ground was the source of the screams: an old woman with blood streaming down her arm. At this point, Angel had descended from the turret and was standing beside Billie and I as we watched the old woman drag from the backseat of the car the body of a very young girl.

Four, maybe five years old.

She wore a bright green t-shirt with a faded picture of Hello Kitty printed across the front of it. Hello Kitty's thought-bubble was hidden from me by a thick splotch of blood that was dripping rhythmically from the little girl's right ear. A single bullet had smacked into the corner of her forehead, just above her right eye. The bullet had then smashed its way out of the back of her head, taking a good portion of the rear of her skull and brain along with it. Peering unwillingly over the top of the little girl's forehead past the jagged opening in her skull, I could just make out grayish-red wrinkles of what looked like thin ropes of shredded sausages, textured as they would be if they were boiled for just a brief moment so that the outside was pale and grey but the insides remained pinkish and soft. The old woman dropped the girl's body on the ground at my feet, and began pounding feebly on my flak jacket with her fists as she screamed at me in Arabic. I pushed her off of me, forced her back into the front seat of the hatchback, and slammed the door shut.

I turned around to look for Angel. He was standing beside me, shaking like he was in a sub-zero meat locker and not a ninety-degree spring day in downtown Baghdad. I quickly ushered him away from the scene, past the iron gates and into the palace garden. His pupils were huge. I plunked him down beside the rosebushes, where he began sobbing uncontrollably. I turned my attention back to the dead bodies, and to my invincible Indian.

I motioned quickly to Billie, who was studying Angel and I from just outside the gates.

"Billie! Take the bodies and make them go away."

"Okay, Sel." Billie said.

"The garage, where the others are. Put 'em in there."

"Okay, Sel."

I turned back to where I had left Angel.

"Angel," I said.

"I didn't know. I didn't know." He interrupted me with this each time I would try to speak. Finally he looked up at me.

"You can't change it, man. You gotta let that shit go Right now, forget it, you hear me?" I grabbed his shoulders and shook him roughly with my last words.

"*I don't want to go to hell! I didn't know!*" He screamed at me and then he put his head between his knees and kept sobbing, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

I stood from where he crouched and walked briskly away. I made it about a hundred yards through the palace garden before I stopped and vomited violently behind a cluster of thick, dull green bushes. I stared at the little pink and yellow pile of my own puke in the dirt, and it reminded me of when I saw that Lieutenant's guts sticking out of his belly, just three weeks earlier.

It felt like it had been so much longer.

I sat down in the dirt behind the bushes, and when I was sure no one could see me, I started crying. The tears fell to the sand as I held my head in my hands and thought about, of all things, my mother's face.

I pictured her smiling at me the way she used to do when I would tell her I loved her, and this forced a brief choking sob from the pit of my stomach past my lips as I sat, the seat and groin of my trousers soaked through with gun oil.

I wiped off my face and walked over to where my Indian was just concluding the task of dumping the dead girl's body.

"*Man, what was wrong with Angel? He was shaking. It was weird.*" Billie smiled slightly, and I couldn't help but grin at the sight of his snagged white teeth. Apparently there weren't any orthodontists on the reservation.

"He killed that girl, Billie. He thinks he's going to Hell."

"*Yeah, well I think he's a fucking pussy. People are gonna die. This is war!*"

"You're right, Billie." I said. "This is war."

### *The Burden:*

When I first wake in the morning, right after I thank God for getting me out of the Marine Corps, I think about death. More specifically, I think about the people I know who have died in Iraq, and the people I know who are risking their lives there now. I often wonder how many more Marines will die before America leaves Iraq and the place collapses into something worse than what it was before it all started. The futility of killing a bunch of

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poor people on the other side of the planet for some ideological excuse is so painfully clear to me that it makes me sick to my stomach every time I hear my President mention "progress" in Iraq on the television.

I would give anything to successfully communicate to some of those kids who will follow eagerly in my footsteps the measure of pain I inflicted on myself by inflicting so much pain and death on so many others.

And yet, if I believed for a second that this was possible, I would be seriously underestimating the mental conditioning which served me so well in the past. Once the recruiters got to me I was already a bad-ass, a killer, in my head. The Marine Corps infantry took care of everything else, providing me with all of the expertise required to proficiently operate sophisticated instruments of death and destruction.

But I was never trained to carry all of these memories on my shoulders for the rest of my life. Most of my friends today know very little about my former lifestyle. I have made a conscious effort to subdue that aspect of my personality, if only through neglect. Nobody ever asks me about it, and I almost never mention it. I think I picked that up from all of the Vietnam veterans in my family, who when probed for a 'war story' would speak the name of the aforementioned country with marked disdain and that would be the end of it.

The burden of knowing the truth, the truth of what it takes to maintain our lifestyle in the United States of America, is one which I believe is carried most comfortably in silence. **F**



## Survivor

You lived because you chopped fallen trees in a nearby forest.  
One day you prayed as you walked:  
Please come, please come. You meant God,  
death, your mother, your father. But instead you saw  
blue butterflies, a quick fox, three rabbits;  
instead, white flowers bloomed along the path,  
white, with scarlet anthers.  
Everything here seemed kind.  
Nothing here wanted to kill you.  
This was how wind through pine answered:  
If the butterfly survived the night, why can't you live  
one more day, one more hour?  
If the clouds are part of God and part of you,  
why can't they be good?  
Why can't they be sentient?

## Elegy: November Morning

New snow, blue mountain,  
smell of cedar, crackling fire.

Your green flannel shirt  
hanging in my closet.

Startled mule deer,  
whirling hawk, the long night  
broken and flung apart  
to reveal one silent  
nuthatch in your palm:  
proof of your patience.

Memory: the bright summer day we split  
and stacked three cords of firewood.

And another day, hot, when together  
we whacked thistle. Now wild roses  
bloom where once brambles twisted.

Father, if you could slip  
the bones from your daughters'  
small bodies one by one  
and still leave us  
in the wind walking,  
our fragile grace might begin  
to describe how it is  
now, two years later,  
this November morning.

## Notes from Childhood

Wind coiling and uncoiling  
in the leaves. The steep of overcast sky  
brooding in the shagbark hickories.  
*Her father is a cocklebur.*  
Hooked spines. Adam's apple protruding:  
the milk snake swallowing the field mouse.  
On her sixth birthday the sky  
reveals itself as yellow pus.  
As Sydenham's Chorea of the tongue:  
her brother stuttering with the catfish on the dock.  
Shuddering on the kitchen floor.  
Is this love? The first boy shears off  
her skin like a milk snake's.  
*Here is the four-toed salamander.*  
*The broken off, wriggling tail.*  
Then three years spent  
immobile in the carrion flowers.  
The leaves hiss. The leaves coil.  
Storms piercing the loamy cartilage  
above the river. Her mother  
a cut foot bleeding in a current.  
Rivulets worming past the rocks.  
Arabesques of clouds  
swarming as Saint Vitus on the horizon,  
coiling and uncoiling, shuddering  
like a cocklebur Adam's apple.

## Song of the South

When she was asked about the incident weeks later, Claire Pettyjohn would recall that she was sorting eggs when the car pulled into the driveway. There forward, Claire would separate her world into the time before the car stopped and the couple came up the porch steps, and everything after. As carefully as putting eggs into a box, she would pull out detail and put it in its appropriate place. Later, she would say she heard the car before she saw it. She would say the sound of the rubber tires on the newly laid gravel drive ("quarry stone", she would tell everyone, though it was common split rock) alerted her to the presence of someone in the driveway. Sometimes, when she was alone, Claire would recall that a flash of white light through the open windows caused her to look up and see a car slow down on the main road outside the house. Maybe a 1928 Packard, like the one her hired man drove. Through their windows, Claire could see a man and a woman—light brown, the very color of the grass outside the door—and shiny with sweat. The man wore a hat dark around the brim and seemed to be gripping the steering wheel with a steely intensity.

Claire absently wiped mud off an egg with the hem of her skirt as she watched the car approach, and that was when the sound of the gravel caught her. What was it that compelled her to say, when she told the story to Lester that evening, that she heard the car before she saw it?

"Listen to this," said Claire to Lester, her dress dirty and her hair full of brambles, her eyes wild. "I was just sitting here working the eggs when I heard this sound."

"You heard what?" he asked, placing his metal lunch pail on the table between the egg basket and a pink geranium that was slowly browning in the heat.

"Gravel," Claire said before she could think, and the words fell out and landed splat in Lester's lap, like the eggs that fell on the chicken house floor. "Tires on gravel, outside the house. I heard it before I saw it." And Lester's slow turning from the coat pegs, where he was hanging his hat, convinced her that she had heard the car first. A little thing like that. Of course she had.

"What happened?" asked Lester, his eyes taking in Claire's dirty dress, her wild hair, the long, raised scratches on her forearms. He stood very quietly beside the coat rack, only his eyes moving. "What happened to you?"

CLAIRE STAYED IN HER SEAT EVEN AFTER she saw the car pull into the driveway, holding the muddy egg in her hand and turning it over and over, feeling the tiny pores in the shell with her thumb. She watched the couple climb out

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and shut the doors. The man spat into the driveway, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. The woman, tall and regal, wore a blue cotton dress, cinched in the middle and full skirted. Together, they looked over the place, as if appraising it for sale—the man even pointing to the tiny graveyard on the ridge, where a bent cedar stood alone on a knob guarding Claire's stillborn babies.

It was their approach that finally pulled Claire out of her seat. Walking hand in hand, they climbed the wooden stairs that led to the porch. Claire pushed away the chair her feet had been in and stood up. She was still barefoot and the sweat had made dark splotches like flowers down the back of her dress. Still, she held her head up and walked to the door, opening it before the couple had a chance to knock.

That morning, when Lester left to go to work in the lumber mills, his hat was covered in dust so fine it looked like sand from behind. Claire sat at the kitchen table, surrounded by the new, bright iron pipes that were sitting, waiting to be installed for new running water in the kitchen. "I been thinking," Claire said to Lester's back, and he stopped, his shoulders falling into an sharp parabola underneath his faded plaid shirt. "Maybe we should go up to the ridge tonight." Lester hitched his overalls with his free hand and readjusted his lunch pail in the other. Without turning, he inclined his head down to his right shoulder and said brusquely, "You go on." Then he left out the door, banging the screen behind him.

Here now, this couple stood shoulder to shoulder in the frame of the same doorway, and the man took off his hat and held it in one hand.

"Niggers use the side door," Claire said before either one had a chance to speak. "And if you want a handout, you're in the wrong place." She stood with her hands on her hips, filling the gap on her side.

"We come to ask if you might do us a favor," the man began, starting to scuff his feet back and forth on the wooden planks. "Our baby out there..." he pointed with his hat towards the Packard. "She done gone." At this, the woman began to cry, big tears that came out silently, making her cheeks glisten in the sun.

Claire craned her head and eyed the Packard.

"And?" she asked after a moment.

"We stopped, cause we thought a nice place like this might have room to bury her." The man stopped and brushed with his shoulder at a mosquito quivering near his eye. "If it ain't no trouble."

The sounds of the afternoon suddenly seemed magnified to Claire. The cicadas buzzing in the trees, the chickens scratching in the yard, the low grunting down in the pig lot. She couldn't focus on anything—all the sounds were pressing inside her head, roaring to be let out. She stood, watching the couple, turning the egg in her hand over and over. The man laid his open palm on the woman's shoulder, and she leaned her cheek against it, closing her eyes and breathing shallowly. Claire could feel her hand tightening

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around the egg, feeling each individual pore. The strength of her hatred for the couple was quick and hot, and Claire coiled every muscle around itself, tensing as if to spring.

On a rainy day last summer, the traveling pastor and his wife squeezed together at this same door, pushed into a space that had somehow seemed too small for their put-upon grief. Lester had stood with them, clumsy and unrecognizable in a suit and borrowed tie, itchy and sweating and listening to the pastor rattle on about God's mercies. Inside, Claire sat in the living room amid the cakes and hams and the women she recognized only from the back, since she and Lester came late to the twice-monthly church meetings, and left early. She shivered, despite the heat of so many bodies crowded together, and a woman that Claire didn't know placed a shawl around her shoulders. "That's four, ain't it?" someone whispered in the kitchen, and the clatter of ironware crockery couldn't mask the reply, "No, good Lord, it's five."

That evening, Claire lay in the bed and stared up at the ceiling while Lester checked the locks and windows. "Those women were talking about me," she said. Lester pushed up hard on a window sash. "Like it was my fault." Lester shucked his chore overalls and sat on the edge of the bed, looking at Claire. She turned on her side and stroked his leg. He pushed her hand away and stood up. "Don't touch me," he said and went into the living room, switching out the lamps as he went and leaving Claire in the dark. She heard him faintly through the wall, a rhythmic banging and a long sigh of relief. She woke the next morning to find Lester sleeping on top of the sheets, tight against the wall.

Back in the sunshine, a full minute passed until Claire heard another crunching sound, like the sound of the gravel. She looked down in surprise to see she had crushed the egg in her hand, her grasp to tense that the bones in her hand stood out in full relief. The couple stood, as if one unit and Claire looked at her hand in disgust before saying to the couple, "Well, I suppose there's place down south" before walking away to wash her hand.

Claire didn't know why she said that. The colored cemetery was a good hour away, and in the heat that child might smell, but it wouldn't die again. She could have easily pointed them to the road that ran perpendicular to the highway, but standing in the doorway, holding the crushed egg in her hand made her say things she hadn't expected.

In the kitchen, Claire could see the couple whispering a conversation on the porch, their heads bent intimately close. She dropped the eggshell in the sink and rinsed her hand without taking her eyes off them. On the floor were Claire's leather shoes and she slipped them on before walking back to the door.

"Ma'am," said the man, still looking at the floor, "Is there any chance we could have her buried up yonder?" He pointed a finger up the ridge to

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the lone cedar, to the graveyard where five unmarked limestone slabs were all Claire had left of her babies. "I'd feel a sight better knowing she was somewheres nice, with other people you know."

Claire followed the line his finger drew and shook her head. "The cow lot's about it," she said. "Ain't nothing else for coloreds. Ya'll got a box?" And with that, Claire stepped out of the house into the sunshine.

WHEN SHE TOLD THE STORY TO LESTER LATER, Claire would say the couple knocked on the door, interrupting her dinner preparations. "I was cleaning that poke," she said to Lester, who sat down on the edge of a kitchen chair and watched her as he pulled his boots off. "You like a poke salat." Claire willed him to say yes, yes he liked poke and thank you for thinking of me.

But Lester set his boots by the chair and just looked at Claire, with the dirt still under her eye and long, raised red scratches on her arms and legs. "What about the eggs?" he asked. "You were cleaning the eggs before." Claire looked at him and fingered the scratch by her elbow. Lester rubbed his temples and sighed. "What happened next?"

"I opened the door, and there was this couple there—big, mean looking guy," said Claire slowly. "And she was real skinny, stretched-looking, you know?" Claire thought about the woman as she said this, that woman who was beautiful and leonine with her hair bobbed around her face like Dorothy Dandridge. She held onto the man's hand the whole time, as if he were a life preserver holding her up from drowning.

"And?" said Lester, a taut wire of tension pulling his voice away from Claire. She tugged to see if he would follow her in, lay his hand on her shoulder, stick against her like a thistle.

"And I was real nice when I opened the door and they just started demanding things, you know? They wanted to bury their child, they said and, of course, I'm not going to say no to that—what kind of monster would say no to that? But they start asking pushy questions and all of a sudden, I was scared." Claire put her face in her hands.

Looking at Lester's big, confused face made her want to sob. To start over. To say she made a mistake, but she couldn't. Lester reached across the table and patted her hand awkwardly, as sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Who did this to you?" he finally asked, touching the arm of Claire's chair. Claire could feel the heat of his body near hers and wanted to weep at the nearness of him. "You have to tell me if they hurt you," he said as gently as he could, and Claire's heart lifted. She pulled her head out of her hands and looked into his worried eyes. He took a deep breath and sat up straighter, "Did they take anything?"

Later, when she was lying in bed thinking about the day, Claire would stop at this moment. One word could have changed things. Or a glance, a movement. Maybe she could have started over with more than just the story.

Maybe she and Lester could start over with their life – come to terms with a two-person family. But Claire stayed at the kitchen table, not moving, and Lester saw the dirt, the torn hem of her dress, the brambles sticking to the back of her hair. He pushed his chair back from the table, and from the look in his eyes, Claire knew it was too late to take back the words that had already slipped from her mouth like stones into a river. It was too late to say anything else.

“It’s okay,” Lester said as he started to put his boots back on. “Don’t you worry.”

CLAIRE WALKED IN FRONT OF THE COUPLE down to the cow lot. The woman was carrying a white-wrapped bundle. The man carried the shovel in one hand and the pine box Claire had found in the other. The slope was slight, but Claire had to dig her feet into the ground to keep from falling. The trees had all been cleared and the sun beat down on them as they made their way down.

At the cow lot, Claire opened the gate and let it swing behind her, nearly hitting the man in the stomach. She didn’t turn around, but kept walking to a spot in the west corner. She could hear the couple behind her, their whispers lost in the cicada noise.

“Here,” she said, pointing to a patch of dried mud. “Ya’ll can put it here.”

The man opened his mouth to speak, but shut it again when he caught Claire’s eye. He began chipping away at the dirt. Watching him, her hand visor-ing her eyes from the harsh sunshine, Claire felt pity. So far from home, she thought, having caught sight of their New York license plates as they passed by the car. But what she said was “Make it deep enough so them dogs round here won’t dig it up” and walked over to the fence and sat on the top rung.

The woman stood holding the wrapped bundle in her arms, swaying back and forth to her own tuneless humming. Her blue dress swung with her hips, and Claire noticed it was completely dry. After about twenty minutes, the man had dug a hole three feet down and called to the woman from the side of it.

“Can’t go no further,” he said, wiping his brow. “Ground’s dried up. We’re gonna have to hope this is good enough.”

The woman looked back beseechingly at Claire, who looked down to her fingernails and stuck the edge of her thumbnail in her mouth.

“Give her to me,” said the man. “I’ll put her in the box.” It was a girl. Claire saw how small the bundle looked in the pine box she found—a box that had held her new porcelain sink. “Kincaid and Sons” was burned on to the side of the box.

The woman took the bundle over to her husband and placed it in the box herself. The man took the lid and slid it on the top, into the grooves. It hung up a little in the middle and he pushed hard on it with his shoulder.

“We gotta put her in now,” he said to his wife, who clung to his arm,

crying into his shirtsleeve. "It's time."

The woman nodded, her face still buried in his sleeve. The man gently picked up the box and placed it in the hole. Claire jumped down from the fence and absently pulled a stick from the ground as the couple said a prayer, and the man picked the shovel back up and began to toss dirt on top of the box.

The lot was crowded with noise—the cows, the bees in the honeysuckle at the far end of the fence, the thud of dirt onto the top of the box. But over it all began a low keening, a deep note held in the air. Claire stopped pulling the bark off the stick and looked at the woman, who had been silent until now. She was standing with her arms clasped behind her, her head thrown back and her coffee-colored throat gleaming. The note changed and the air was filled with the low thump and response of song. Turning the stick in her hand, Claire saw the man stop shoveling and watch his wife, the tears shining in his eyes. He caught Claire looking at him and began shoveling again. The song ended as the last shovelful of earth hit the ground. The silence left by the absence of song was deafening and so with the bark of the stick still under her fingernails, Claire said roughly and loudly "Get on out of here."

The couple turned and walked from the hole, still holding hands, their shoulders touching gently. Claire strode ahead and banged through the gate, nearly hitting the man again. He stopped and then turned back to the grave.

WHEN SHE TOLD LESTER NOTHING, Claire felt the pivot of the story turn and she stopped speaking for a moment. Lester went outside while she was silent and stood on the porch looking out to the ridge. He hooked his thumbs through the straps of his overalls and watched out the window in the direction of the lone cedar up on the knob.

Inside, Claire could see the back of Lester's head and the edge of the lone cedar. She looked again at her hands, this time they were covered in dirt and had scratches like red ribbons running across them. She would have to wear gloves on Sunday, she thought and wondered idly where her white cotton gloves had gone. She wanted to go to Lester and put her hand in his, like the couple, but she sat in the chair as if a weight was crushing her there. She watched Lester walk away towards the barns and Claire knew that when she told the story again that it would be a different story, a story about another couple and another time and another woman.

I saw the car first, she said to herself silently. They were mean-looking and I felt threatened. I can't talk about the rest of it, it's too difficult. I can't. I can't.

BACK AT THE CAR, CLAIRE SAID, "Well, that's bout all I can do now." The couple separated like a bandage from a wound and the man opened the door for his wife.



"We're obliged," he said, after shutting the door. "Thank you." He stuck out his right hand, which was closed around something soft. Claire stuck her hand out tentatively to receive it, but curled her fingers up into a fist at the last moment. His rough fingers grazed over the backs of her fingers, lingering just a breath of a moment at the inside of her wrist. A dollar bill fluttered to the ground.

"Get on, nigger," Claire said, with an intensity she did not feel, turning and walking back up the porch steps. She stood there and waited until the couple drove away, heading west towards Greenwood. Inside on the table were her eggs, the big ones for selling in their boxes, the others all mixed in the basket. In the sink was her mashed egg, the clear shape of an incubated embryo in the jellied mass at the drain.

Claire's knees stiffened and suddenly everything became very focused. She could see every tiny vein on the chick; she could hear every tiny noise of the chickens in the yard, as if she were listening in on their intimate secrets.

Claire went to the porch, where the shovel stood against the side of the house. Moving quickly, she set out for the cow lot, breaking into a clumsy half-run as she approached the gate, the shovel against her knees and tearing her hem. There, in the corner, was the mounded hole and she set to work on it, the sweat dripping into her eyes as she overturned the freshly packed earth. At last, she hit the box and got down on her hands and knees to dig it out, the dirt caking under her fingernails.

She took the shovel and the box. Carrying them both against her breast like a shield, she climbed the hill back to the house and carried the box into the bedroom. She set the box down on the bed and looked at it for a time.

With trembling hands, Claire slid the lid off the box and took out the bundle. She gently unwrapped it and looked at the child lying inside. She was beautiful, perfectly formed, maybe four months old. She wrapped the baby in the crocheted blanket from the end of the bed, put it back in the box and headed back outside, up the ridge.

The lone cedar still gave shade to the patch of earth and tiny graves beneath it and Claire took the shade like water, working to dig a hole. The sun was beginning to dip down in the west by the time she finished, but it was deep enough, and she placed the box in it and stepped back. She dropped to her knees and began pushing the dirt in with her hands, covering up the box.

She left the shovel on the ridge and walked back down by the blackberry thickets, pausing to pull the berries off the vines and eat them. She stopped by one thicket and waded halfway in, the thorns scratching her hands and tearing at her hair, shoving handfuls of blackberries in her mouth as she went, the juice staining her dress and mouth. Perhaps she would pick enough to bake Lester a pie.

Back at the house, Claire stooped down and picked up the dollar out of the white dust of the driveway. Inside, her heartbeat slowed and Claire sat at



the table and stared through the window at the cedar on the hill while she absentmindedly rubbed her fingers over the weave of her baskets.

Claire moved her hand to her face, pushed her knuckles against her eyes. The man's touch whispered at the edges of her mind. Lester hadn't touched her in months, except to pull her roughly towards, and then away from him in the dark. She kept her eyes shut tightly. The man's smell was still on her hand, and Claire brought the curve of her first finger down the slope of her nose until it reached her lips. She parted her lips with her finger and pushed the finger in, biting lightly until the smell of the man and her own breath mixed hotly on the tops of her fingers; the sting of the bite didn't drown out the pained expressions of the man and woman, as Claire had hoped. Out the window, a cicada banged a wing against the glass.

THE RADIO WAS STILL TUNED TO THE Nashville station Claire had been listening to when the car pulled up, and The Carter Family sang "I'll Fly Away" through the wires, filling the kitchen. Claire sat on the chair until the sun finally hit the ridge and the light started to dim. A noise on the gravel startled her and she sat up, looking for the couple to come back, waiting for them to see that she had changed her mind, hoping that perhaps they could see that she had decided they weren't all that different after all, but instead Lester walked through the door, swinging his lunch pail in his hand.

THOUGH SHE WOULDN'T REMEMBER IT LATER, Claire sat on her chair, even after Lester arrived back home after checking the property for signs of the mysterious strangers, until the darkness was full across the cow yard.

"Are you okay?" asked Lester, his eyes roving over Claire. "Was they niggers?"

She watched Lester stand up from the table and shrink against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, eyes looking into her as if she were one of his sick cows. She touched her cheek and felt the furrow of a scratch extending along her jawline, almost into her neck.

"No," she said, shaking her head almost imperceptibly, as if a mosquito were hovering by her eye. She brought her hand down and stood up. "Of course not."

"Did they hurt you?" he said, taking a step towards her. For a moment, she thought he might touch her, fold her into his arms for comfort, but he sidestepped around her, warily, like a dog with a stranger.

"Where's dinner, then?" he asked and walked out the door to the barn. Claire walked to the old sink and filled it with water. For a moment, she considered the water and then abruptly plunged her head in and watched the bubbles float to the surface. The inside of the sink was smooth and rounded. She wanted to touch it, wanted to float away in this depth of water in her own kitchen sink.

LATER, WHEN LESTER TOLD THE STORY, he would say he found Claire sitting

like a zombie in the kitchen, her egg baskets tipped over and confused. Later, when Lester told the story, he would say that he came home late because he was working extra at the mill. He would say this and think that it was true, when in fact he had been walking home slowly, looking for ginseng in the patch of woods that ran alongside his property.

Later, when Lester told the story, he would say that Claire told him the couple had tried to hurt her, though she never did. He would hear her say these words in his mind, could see her sitting with her yellow dress at the kitchen table, telling him the story. The dress had a square neck, he would say, and short sleeves.

Later, when Lester told the story, he wouldn't say that Claire had been petting a chick embryo, covered in dirt, red stains down the front of her dress. He wouldn't say first she told him she was separating eggs, then that she had been cleaning poke, then that she told him nothing.

What did they do to you, he asked Claire. What happened? But Claire stayed silent and stood over her sinkful of water. Tell me, said Lester. I'm your husband.

Instead, Claire stuck her head into the sink and saw her own skin transform in the filmy underwater scene.

At church, weeks later, Claire would shrug her shoulders and say that she didn't know what happened, or why that couple had stopped there. She would say they came to bury their baby and she let them bury it up on the ridge: When the women from the hollows, with their own babies slung across their chests like rifles, asked if the couple had murdered it, she would shrug again, leaving her eyes on her leather shoes. Who knows, she would say. Thank God no one got hurt. And in her mind, she would see the gleaming throat of the woman, silent but for her painful song.

Claire slept restlessly most nights, and Lester moved tighter up against the wall, bit by bit so that Claire wouldn't wake. Most mornings, he was gone from the farm before the sun started to move up in the sky.

SHE FED THE CHICKENS STILL, her movements slow and measured. One day that November, when a chill had invaded the air and Claire's breath froze in front of her, she watched the chickens from a distance. A flock of Canada geese flew overhead, and the chickens threw themselves a foot into the air to the south, squawking and sputtering, trying to join them. Trying to fly away.

Claire went inside, sat at her kitchen table, and watched the light go to gray out the kitchen windows. The radio played low in the background, but otherwise the house was silent. Gone, she thought. The cedar on the knob was dead now, the branches still starkly visible in the reflection of the windows. Claire looked at them shimmering on the edges of the beveled glass, their tiny shapes multiplied out into nothing. **F**

[Figure 1, Lovers]

*your eyes will empty of daylight  
the way the cicadas suddenly, all together, fall silent.*  
~Giorgos Seferis, *The Light*

I find it hard to believe, as if they told me that ivory comes from an animal. Think of it this way: the Egyptians embalmed their lovers with fishes' tears and linen passé-partout to take them to the hypogea on a reserved streetcar, an eminently Egyptian machine, something to be newly served, though shyly.

The everyday world enters only so much as the artist will tolerate, and no more. For example, a low white translucent sky, so hard up against me that if I turn my head I feel it in my hair, in my ears. My lips turn blue when the sky enters, figure then my surprise, not the sky but the sheet on my summer bed. Figure

as in to understand, as in, he didn't figure her the sort whose eyes empty of daylight—*figure*, after all, contains the world, the human body, calculation and imagining, pattern, reference, forecast, image, and the fruit, the fig—as Bacon says, flowers have exquisite figures,

figure then how the sky reconfigures the body, delight encounters body, its geography beneath the milky light, beneath the fragrant heat—it's a lie that lovers create their world as though the act were something conscious—lovers create their world

[Figure 2, Imagine the body as hand]

I look at you and wonder how it is I'm nearly free of grief and pain.  
Puzzled, searching the old texts for insight on returning to dwell,  
and the sun from my window strains to free itself from clouds.

An elusive change comes over the streets and the hills,  
not so much a brightening as a slight quivering of hues,  
as though the air smites itself with hesitations or doubts.

Even the body is a place beyond questions, our native land.  
Yet every age projects its own image of the hand into its art.

The whole history of art confirms this preposition, and this history  
is row itself upon row of images, though even a vision of nothing

does not come out of nowhere, as when the hand is not there,  
how lovely to understand, its absence is mere absence.

Surely I am filled  
with unimaginable powers, and it is only tiredness  
that makes me put off exercising them, like someone waiting  
for the precise timing,  
for a blow to crack the inner crust.

I could, for example, drop my job, sail away on a cargo boat,  
start a new life in Iceland, in Galilee, in Crete.  
I could lock myself  
in the guesthouse and write a symphony.

I could pick followers, start a movement  
that shatters the quiet and sweeps like fire across the plains,

where yesterday, you see, your hands opened like peach blossoms  
in the palace gardens the way, when they first adore the light,  
petals don their red devotions,  
scatter through blazing moonlight away.

### [Figure 3, Leporello Considers the Heavens]

Considers the wife of a poet, Austrian, tall and slender  
with shallow breasts, a delicate inward-curving face like a spoon  
with a sallow glow lighting it—a spoonful of clear soup—  
a long fine nose, a small red mouth, he sees her at once  
as she enters the courtyard of the inn.

The last world I lost was *opera*, he tells the poet's tall  
and slender wife with the shallow breasts and face like a spoon,  
*opera*, the word for music, the music in a kiss, who abandons  
who, he wonders now, his mouth upon her lips.

The whole thing is a place, a game, a hoax, said  
my late master, my one true master, Don Giovanni.  
This room. Candle. The dark. The past. It all lights up.

The Don stands under the awning that runs along one side  
of the courtyard. He leans into the hugely fat wife  
of the landlord, a colossal woman, her haunches swaying  
as if each one held a small girl.

Never appear to doubt yourself, my master told me once—  
if you do, you are lost.

There is something else: the music I was caught within  
as if magnificent creatures were undressing, removing their wings,  
my head almost held breath out there for an hour  
so that later I felt as if I contained that full noon light

the way a tree creates its leaves. Then, breaking  
from small miseries of convalescence, remembering  
medicines, missing appointments, the vague horror  
of all one should do, all that's threatened.

Alone, in their bright kingdom, beneath their petulant  
wakefulness, the lovers enter the perfect voyage, star-  
guided adventures recorded in fine logbooks.



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See for example Figure 3, a pacific space where dangers do not threaten though their presence demands struggle, the wise eye calculating (figuring), the sudden swipe of circumstance.

The lovers walk ahead, clear a trail,  
their hands grow into the landscape, stained  
with mossy shadows or their green pajamas,  
and suddenly freed of formal tasks,  
of being nothing more than hands.

Spiders, tents, microscopic silkworm eggs,  
the two come and go, inventing war for their armies,  
gulf and cove, they're lost in the half-light  
beyond the knees, jungle for one last effort, bent  
over to arrive, suffocating,  
at the terra incognita of their world, he  
at the whitish isthmus of her neck, she  
at the lowering clouds, they  
at the onrush of dusk,  
at the cicadas' ease.

## Cockers for Christ

**T**hank you for inviting me to share my faith with you this evening. In Jesus name, praise be. First off, my own name is Charity Henrietta Stark, but people call me "Roo," which is short for "Rooster," which as you see I am holding here under my arm. His name is Bedford Forest, which I spell with one "r," but it is after the Confederate hero, and you may not know, but the South put gamecocks on some of their money because they are fierce and beautiful and true.

This June I turned fourteen, and I expect most of you out there are wondering why a tomboy girl like me has been invited to speak to the True Breath Methodist Men's Club about being saved, but in a nutshell it is this: my whole family - which is Charles Wray, Tommy, Momma and my daddy Walter Stark (known in gaming circles as Windy) have been through the Valley of the Shadow. We have been the Devil's instruments, and have screamed and cussed and sassed each other right down to flinging household items and knocking holes in doors, though I'm obviously not the one who did that last item. We were not in the Word and the Spirit, and we got so bad to spat that Momma (who was born Lucy Dartry) packed a grip and ran off for six months, which led us all to suffer the affliction of guilt after we drove her from our door, but Daddy mostly.

But that is not the faith part of my story, which is this. You may not know how big the chicken business is around these parts, but the coolness factor this far up the Blue Ridge makes for good training weather, and my daddy Windy Stark was so deep into breeding and raising and selling and pitting cocks and making wagers that he was about to run us to the poorhouse, as a man who goes to the whiskey well too often does not make for a careful handler or gambler, and you know about money-love and the root of evil, and that was what set them at each other and brought Charles Wray (twenty) in on Daddy's side, as he loved the pits and the betting and the women he'd find at the mains. Tommy is nine and given to fickleness, swapping sides on a regular basis, but as I had learned early how to shurl and dubb the roosters and already had complete charge of feeding and keeping the water cups full and leading the cheers, I threw in with Daddy.

So Mama lit out. You see, it was gamecocks that drove us deep into the ditch of selfish worldly meanness toward our own precious kin, but it was eventually gamecocks that lifted us back on the path of righteousness, and that is what I am here to testify. You may not know that of our fifty states only Louisiana and New Mexico allow legal chicken fighting, but now you will understand why many of the tournaments are held off in secret places, and anybody so much as waist-deep in this business is defying the law of the

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land on a daily basis, which is not the way things were originally ordained, as these birds are born to scuffle, and two cocks will fight each other or one his reflection in glass or even start scratching and hackling, if he so much as sees his own shadow wrong. It's not a thing we do to them, and God made them game, made them what is called "happily belligerent," though that liberal atheist Discovery Channel will try to tell you otherwise. Fact of the matter is, birding is an honest and sincere part of our Southern traditions like the Stars and Bars and freedom of worship and to bear arms. If the Lord had not wanted them to spar and struggle, He would of made them different, and praise His Name that He didn't, because I and then my family finally learned from watching and loving the birds what it means to follow your right nature, and man's right nature is to be the master of all beasts and help them achieve their best work and surrender to the Spirit. Following Jesus is a discipline, and training up birds is a discipline, too, and I learned this from Cockers for Christ and brought it home to my hearth and kin, and now Mama is back and we are all in the Lord and in the business, and we have been rewarded with better handling practices and trophies and prize money and a good name on the circuit, but that is not so important as the feeling of joyous love He has granted us, for we are like the birds in how we have fought through the pain to seek Victory over the Devil, like Dixie itself, which was born of a quarrel but now lives in our hearts.

You may not know this... excuse me a minute; I've got to put Bedford back in his carry case here, as he keeps kicking and squirming. He doesn't much like to be still and stays on the lookout for a rival. If you are going to handle these birds, or anything that is blessed with beauty, you are going to get cuts, you are going to carry scars. Myself, I do not mind the scars.

You may not know this, but you may: Despite whatever people like to say about the popular wild turkey, it was the gamecock that almost beat out our bald eagle for mascot of yours and my great country. Two votes. They almost knew what they were doing. And President Andrew Jackson was a bird person himself and fought cocks in a pit right there in the White House, and what some history experts just found out is that before each bout he would gather all the owners and congressmen and slaves and whatever have you to hold a prayer to the Mighty Mystery before they started to bill the birds. If you've seen pictures of Old Hickory, as my history teacher says people called him, he should have been named Old Rooster, as he had a shock of hair that stood out like a poultry comb, and he was known to step out and duel himself when his honor was besmirched, which is like a gamecock in nature and is akin to a Christian who will not stand by and let some unsaved scoffer take the name of the Lord in vain.

This fact is maybe what made Wesley Morfield of Opelika, Alabama start a prayer group that would meet in the fresh morning before every battle royal, and it was real informal and word-of-mouth at first, everybody

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just holding hands and asking to be blessed and that the event would be not unruly but fair and clean without anger or anybody doping their bird or letting fly before the other handler was ready and that even the heavy betters keep in mind that it is the Lord Who has given us this day with its joy and the freedom to own and train and appreciate birds, even if we do have to evade around a bit to avoid prosecution. They would also pray that the state assemblies would see the light and legalize a perfectly legitimate business and hobby.

I know you want to get on with your scripture lesson right soon, and Bedford Forest is a little nervous up here before so many people with no other animals to point what his job is, so let me get on with how I got pulled in. Samuel Lafferty of Iron Station, Tennessee is just one year older than me, and he would come to the big matches with his Uncle Lovell. We got to be friends hanging out at the campground areas, and we would go off to look at flowers or catch frogs, and he could always sneak a Lite or two, which we would drink, with the result being a little giddiness I took to, but I might also get sick and upchuck, which I didn't, as you can understand, enjoy at all. I liked to be with Samuel, as he has always been sarcasm-funny and good looking despite a wall-eye, and because by this time, as I said, my family had been sundered, and I was restless and reckless, too. So of course the beer turned us to fooling about, and pretty soon we were touching each other in the unspoken parts and doing everything but *It off* in the woods or in his RV when Uncle Lovell (who is ordained himself) was in the pits. I kind of liked the body rubbing and kind of didn't, not all that much, as it gets creepy even when you're tingling, but I was picking up habits, straying far, which you might not know is not much of what goes on at the big derbies, most people (excepting Charles Wray and a few bunk bunnies) being so deep into the birds that it fills up their minds. But deep in my heart's heart, what I most loved was not the licking and wrestling so much as being with Samuel in a trusting and sweet way, walking out under singing robins and big leafy trees, just holding hands and learning some of the thousand things he knew about game birds.

He'd say, "Roo, you can't work a white chicken the day before you pit him. He needs his leisure. But a red rooster will appreciate a good exercise and a hen to tread, as well, then about rip his cage apart when he lays eyes on another cock." Or he'd just tell me ways to smarten up a bird's attack just before release or how to shift the feed mixture every year after first frost. This was when he showed the most pep and pleasure, and I could just stroll and listen to him till the cows come home.

Well, just last September when I hadn't seen Samuel in a couple of months or even swapped letters more than once, we met up at an event down near Danville, and when I saw his RV and ran over to latch onto him, Samuel was striding fast toward a big white tent, and when I got close

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I could see his blood-red T-shirt said across his chest in white "Cockers for Christ," and I asked what that was, though I was crude in the way I asked it. You see I was picking up the wayward ways like a magnet, not even asking how far I might have strayed from a true path.

What Samuel said was, "Roo, I have turned over a new leaf." He had been baptized when he was a lap baby, but now he'd been re-saved in South Carolina by Wesley Morfield, who I have mentioned as the first spark of this new fire slowly running through the ranks. I didn't want to buy into it at all, so deep was I into the worldly mire, and I traipsed off to go look at some Arkansas Travelers who were big favorites in the betting book because people had bragged on them over the Internet.

Next morning, though, he came after me, Samuel, and coaxed me with his croony voice to the prayer circle where about thirty mostly men but of all adult ages were holding hands in a big ring, and they shared a prayer in which it was said that roosters behaved too loyal and gallant to not have souls, and men are their keepers to train them for excellence and dedicate every word and action to the Lord. It was a little hokey at first, but then Mr. Morfield, who has bad acne scars but a big old welcome grin, had a few thoughts to share, and they hit me hard. They made deep sense.

What he said was how we all have to carry on our beliefs in every corner of our lives and that white Christians were particularly bad to "pigeonhole," he called it, our convictions away from our livelihood and recreation. Cock-fighting is mostly white people, as you might not know. Coloreds, Uncle Lovett has said, are more likely to go off in a swamp and cut a rooster's throat to throw a curse or read his liver, but that is pure hen crap and Lovett's personal blindness problem, if he still holds to it. But Wesley Morfield - who knew me on sight and said, "Proud to have you with us Miss Stark" - then reminded us how the Big Fisherman Peter was tested when Jesus was tracked down, and the soldiers - Romans, and wall art in Pompeii proves they fought birds - asked him did he know the man they caught. Well, Jesus had told his friend the night before, "You'll deny me, Peter, before the cock crows thrice," while Peter stomped up and down and swore, "I'll not do it." But he did, and it was all a symbol, as Sweet Jesus knew the rooster calls out to the sun to dedicate every day to light, and God is Light and Jesus, and without Them we are in darkness like the disciples fumbling around in actual night or the night of turning away. It hit me so true, I started to shiver and feel all giddy in a way better than any beer or that other stuff. Wesley Morfield was glowing like an ember while he spoke, and it was plain as your nose on your face I had been like as one who embraced the night, enjoying the birds for what they could give me and not for the message they were born to bring, the message of letting go and letting the light pour in. And I had also flirted with sins of the flesh and bad language.

That was our lesson, to turn away from the darkness, and I started right



in to believing that the Stark family had mis-heard the calling to sport with birds all along. We had let gaming sink us down into the blood sports just so we could have fun and be excited and make a name and hope for the big payoff, but the real reason the Powers had steered us to chicken fights was to eventually locate our path back to the Holy.

While that man from Opelika spoke and glowed, my cheeks were damp, and my palms had turned hot as pokers in the hands of Samuel on one side and a big-bearded Kentucky breeder on the other. After a spell of bowed heads and silence, we broke up the ring and everybody took turns embracing and sharing the Holy Kiss, which was pure and more rewarding than anything Samuel and I had done in the shadows. Then I walked with Samuel over a field of wet clover and under new growth pines with thimble-sized cones, and while we talked it all out, I could hardly feel the earth under my feet or the breeze that made the leaves all shake. I was beginning to understand how a Greater Purpose was starting to fill me, and I could speak of it openly and marvel with this sweet boy I liked and not have to sneak around about sharing a glow and a common purpose. Maybe, I thought, this was a secret that should be shouted out. When we went into the barn where the fights were held - not the drag pits where the wore-out birds go to fight their last throes, but the main event with the crowd and the excitement - I saw the fury and glory of sacrifice for the first time in its righteous light.

We had a Claret named Hammer who had won twice already because he was a high flyer and a good cutter and was our money bird. Daddy had been tossing him on the tether several times a day, just conditioning, as you don't really have to train what's natural, and he was up on all his black drops and tonics, peaking in his energy and zest. Daddy had got him used to his new boots and had whetted up a pair of Ruff Tuff briar gaffs, and Hammer was ready as a bird could be.

When I got in and inched my way up to the rim, Daddy was billing our hero bird against a Kelso name of King Kong who was six pounds if he was an ounce. They might as well have called him Goliath, and you near about expected him to roar. In the handling area both creatures were eager for it, size differences aside, and fully obedient to both their owners' wishes and the messages in their blood and tiny brains. Well, I'll tell you: They came together in mid-air like two balls of fever, all squawk and wing-flap, feathers flying and blood slinging out. It was fast and wild, slash and stab, peck and lunge and spin, but I saw it like somebody had put the speed on wrong, for they were nearly about frozen before my eyes, their own eyes sparkling and white fluff, red feathers and a green plume from Hammer's tail all whirling in the slowed motion. Their spurs gave off the honed steel light - flash and gleam in the floods - and I could grasp the world's bewilderment and weirdness in their pose, holding on, then touching the damp dust of the pit and then rising again, and I have hardly witnessed this before, but even

after they were handled because they both had spurs deep into them and Kong was lung-punctured, with their men blowing along their ruffs and saddles and kissing their bloody crowns, well, both cocks reared back at the same time almost and crowed the kind of call that speaks out to dawn and the first verse of every day's glory. It was so beautiful and fulfilling, I suddenly didn't want either bird to lose, as their passion was like unto the angels themselves, and I could feel the tears stinging my eye corners, but on the release they charged again fresh as all fury and double-struck. In thirty seconds Kong was a goner, though it wasn't much better for Hammer, who took about four steps and let out a feeble cry and dropped himself, dead as a doornail.

Sacrifice is sure enough what it was. Hammer gave us what we needed - to see devotion and the whole-heart effort - and then he had to give up the ghost, but there was a dignity in it I knew right then was divine and everlasting. By then, the tears running over my face were tears of joy.

But I don't want to paint too rosy a picture for you here tonight, as most owners didn't ever come around to our conversion. They can be a rough bunch and set in their ways, so pretty soon the Cockers for Christ shirts didn't show up that often, as the rank and file scoffed and talked about shunning people who couldn't keep their religion separate from bird business. This was the influence of the big-money organizers, who always fear the common man when he gets inspired. But some of us hung on to our new understanding and purpose. We'd all been persecuted before by the outsiders who scoff at rooster fighting for their own blind reasons, so I could take it from the insiders, too. Here's the reason I had to.

When I met Daddy back at the trailer and showed him the sense of it, how the birds were a sermon to us meant to draw us back to the straight path, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Roo, I can see you are changed. You are flushed and shining to beat the band." And even he could see the clear fact of it, because he said then, "You look akin to some thunderstruck twice-born!" So I told him about the prayer circle and Apostle Morfield's words and how they shook me. Pretty soon he broke down and cried like a wet baby and said it was a sign, and he could not live any longer in vanity nor without his Lucy, and Hammer being gone just made it worse. It was truly moving, as he's a hard man not prone to showing weakness, but he confessed he'd been guilty of pride and self-preening like a rogue cock, and he'd been striking out in wasteful directions for greed, out of nature and not at all with the Heavenly Father. He placed his hands on my brow and said I was charged up as an altar. And that was how we started climbing the higher path.

The next Sunday we all took the invitation down at Rehoboth and re-dedicated, and in his witness he asked Jesus to please bring Mama back swiftly as the weaver's shuttle, though he didn't deserve to kiss her hem or

feet. Because her sister Lace was in the congregation and had a cell phone, the rest is history and bliss. Mama, who had been living at the Peter Pan Motel, came back that very night, and we all fell down on our knees in the front room and thanked Jesus, not to mention Hammer, Samuel, the Apostle and the other providers and guides along the Way. I was in my red "C for C shirt," and Charles Wray held the Living Word above his head and swore to seek the narrow path and self-control, which on account of his new hormones is a big sacrifice.

And this is what we've done, us Starks, becoming His instruments, overcoming the temptations to bile and haughtiness and greed and now bringing the Word to anybody with ears to hear and a heart to understand. That is why I have this chicken with me this evening, Bedford Forest, who has - with all our Stark hands being guided in conditioning and pitting methods and the general overall attitude of thankfulness - won out in the main four times, and despite all his scars and a permanent limp he is a legend now and an example of what you can do if you put your mind to it and you have the backing of the Lord. And I'm here to speak for the whole family, all of us gaming with a new vision and in harmony, as Mama now mixes fortifying chemicals and helps clean out the brood pens. Little Tommy is learning how to exercise bantlings for a coming derby, and I am a cut man, if you can use that for a girl, and hope to be a handler some day, especially if fighting birds ever gets legal again in this land of the free. Now I am going to leave you with this last thing, as Bedford here can crow jubilation on command, since God has granted him the kind of understanding we used to believe was reserved for angels, and his goodle-doodle-do is in the service of the church and is God's instrument. He would appreciate you to stand now, to bow your heads and raise a hand to Heaven. That's right. Don't be shy. The Lord wants you to rise and lift up your eyes to the ceiling. If Cockers for Christ have ever had an anthem hymn, it is the farmyard sunrise call - a *reveille*, they name it - and look out because here it comes, warning us every mortal one to "Wake Up!" as the Heavenly Father's trumpet speaks beauty-bright and clear from the beak of a blood-washed bird.

Bedford Forest, give witness. Redeem us, Lord. Amen. **F**

## Ash

*Memento, homo, quod cinis es, et in cinerem reverteris.*

Winter, we shoveled it from below  
the woodstove, out of its catch.

We'd pour from the buckets we'd filled  
white ash onto unbreakable barnyard ice  
to keep the cows' legs from splaying  
and splitting out. It stayed,  
ice and ash, until spring sent it, black,  
into the black front fields.

The ash was traction, then gone.  
The ash was oak, then ash, then gone.

\*

Twice I cried on a willing woman's hand  
to make certain she wasn't made only of ash.  
I knew, I thought, how ash would react.

\*

We carried the wood. We split the wood.  
We stacked it tight and high. We saw  
that it would keep us warm  
and called it *good, good, good*.

Fish made of ash have it bad, almost  
as bad as birds. If water doesn't, wind  
will, if you think of migration  
as a form of scattering.

\*

I turned from the work to see us:  
two ashes in November,  
caught in the hollow of a tree.  
The tree lost most its bark to boles.

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This was years ago. We knew  
it better. We were younger.  
Blue ash.

\*

On a cigarette, when the ash grows long,  
another smoker says *You should ash that*.  
Suddenly, you have been a verb all along.

\*

*Living's not so difficult anymore.*  
You will hear this often, if dead.

*You can ash me anything you want.* I said  
that while my finger fished  
the undecorated urn  
for small bits of my friend  
the crematorium could not consume.

When I found one, without thinking  
I blew on it, thrilled. Called it Charred  
Femur, putting it in my breast pocket.  
It's often easy to wish for woman, for stove, for bucket.

\*

The ocean floor is mostly ash.  
And that's as far as I will go.



## Inventory

By the time we've told the tale ten or twenty times, we have fallen into a comfortable rhythm, the way people do when they tell stories. It becomes a performance: Richard starts, and I interrupt, and then he interrupts again, correcting and adding details. Over dinners and at parties we recount and reenact our narrative as a team, riveting the audience with sensational details. It's almost like vaudeville. It's actually kind of fun.

"So when I went into the house," says Richard, putting down his fork, "my first thought was, god, Megan, when did you turn into a such slob?"

"I can't believe you thought that." I smile at him across the potluck spread. "I am so not the messy one in this relationship."

Everyone is charmed by our repartee. I play footsie with him a little bit under the table.

"This guy was a weirdo," he continues. "Definitely not just there to steal the TV. Really made himself at home, you know, stealing her underwear" — there's a gasp around the table — "and pictures and stuff. It was personal." He shudders. For a moment, we're in the spotlight, basking in its warmth. Then someone else jumps in with a story of their own.

That's one of the things we discovered right away, in the aftershock months when we were still unsure about what had been done to us or how we should feel about it: almost everyone has been robbed. And they wanted to talk about it, too. Often they were so overwhelmed by the urge to share their own experience that it burst from them partway through our tale, a rush of pent-up words that nearly choked them on the way out: god that's awful you know I was robbed too it was terrible let me tell you... They unspooled their own narratives, replete with missing objects, violations literal and metaphoric, emotional upsets, shocking twists. In the face of such a torrent of untapped woe, we usually fell silent and listened, politeness winning out over the compulsion to finish what we had started. We'd nod somberly, chiming in when the opportunity presented itself, yes, that happened to us, the cops said the exact same thing to us, we did that thought that too!

We joked sometimes about collecting all of the stories, maybe turning them into a book. I imagined making a list, a massive inventory of things taken, bearing witness to this great migration of possessions. Vanished: bicycles, stereos, jewelry, heirlooms, musical instruments, undergarments, keys, drugs, books, food, money, videos, photographs, tools, cars, computers, telephones, jackets and shoes and hats, toiletries, toys, artwork, bags, watches, cameras, coins, wallets, trinkets. An uncomfortable mix of the necessary, the precious, and the absurd.

Of course, the account we told at dinner parties was incomplete. That's

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part of what it means to tell a story: you get to shape the narrative, you get to decide what to include and what to leave out. So we left a few things out, like the discovery that we had both become afraid of the dark again. We didn't talk about our new neurotic behaviors, like repeatedly scrubbing invisible fingerprints off surfaces and driving bolts into all the windowframes so they couldn't be opened more than a hand's-width. (When I came upon Richard standing barefoot on the couch with the drill in his hand, sturdy in his determination to make us safe again, I was filled with a mixture of claustrophobia — no more wide-open windows? — and relief that he understood.) We didn't describe the anger that simmered just under our fear, or our hot wish for revenge. The story we told in public was an edited version, more palatable than the haunted truth we shared between us.

To be honest, we felt a little guilty about demanding attention for it. After all, nobody got hurt, and in the end we even got back most of what was stolen. The sanctity of our home was violated, yes, and we felt unsafe afterward, yes, especially once we discovered the missing photographs and panties and I became convinced it was someone I knew, someone had been watching me. But the culmination of the story was a relatively happy one, at least for us: it wasn't anyone we had ever met. A repeat offender, he eventually got caught and ended up behind bars. It felt almost silly to get upset about such a relatively benign crime in a world where war and genocide are emblazoned on the front page of the morning papers. We kept up the storytelling anyway, compulsively running our thoughts over the details until their sharp edges began to wear down.

AT FIRST WE BECAME DETECTIVES in our own home. Following clues, we retraced the thief's footsteps until we had recreated that part of the story and could replay the scene for ourselves, clips from a movie we'd never seen but knew by heart. Our own part of the narrative was a known quantity, starting from that awful moment of discovery when Richard carried our weekend bags into the house, saw the place had been ransacked, and walked back out in a state of shock to deliver the news as gently as he could. But to make familiar what had gone before, we had to perform an act of invention. Unpleasant though it was to try and imagine the sequence of events, we needed to reclaim those lost hours when a stranger had taken over our home. So we investigated, connecting random bits of data into something more coherent, piecing fragments into something whole.

It goes something like this:

The thief arrives in the darkest hours of the morning, well before dawn. Walking across the lawn in the cool October air, he trips over a small metal table, driving its legs into the dirt. In the carport he finds a garden trowel with which to pry at the windows, leaving gouges in the soft wood frames, until he finds an unlatched kitchen window. He tosses the trowel into the grass, pushes the window open, and hoists himself silently inside.

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Somehow he doesn't disturb the plants situated on the counter or the dishes stacked at the lip of the sink. He's catlike in his grace, never touching anything he doesn't want to touch. He drops to the kitchen floor with a thud like my real cat would make, the cat who must be peering at him from the living room, bristling, ears erect. As soon as she sees an opening she will make a run for it, streaking out the window into the night to wait for our return.

He stands still for a moment, breathing in the smell of our house, observing the shape of things in the dark while he gets his bearings. Then he probably flips on a light, figuring it will be less conspicuous than a flashlight, and starts opening things systematically, room by room: dresser drawers, kitchen cupboards, cabinets. He scans, catalogs, runs his eyes and hands over the contents of each, on the hunt for anything of value. When he is done he leaves everything unfastened. Drawers and doors yawn behind him.

In the living room, he cuts the cable to the television and hauls it out the front door. He goes in and out repeatedly, carrying the window air conditioner, the VCR, clothes, food, a bookbag crammed with fetish objects — trophies, a friend called them — like earrings and underpants. It's as though he is shopping among our belongings, browsing and selecting items based on his own strange internal logic: computers, no; Halloween candy, yes.

He takes his time. He's comfortable in this foreign space now that he's acclimated to its contours, confident that he is alone and will be for awhile. Stooping before the open fridge, he pulls out a six-pack of beer to add to his collection. He runs a finger down the list of phone numbers on the bulletin board, dials one, and says vile things to the woman who answers. (She will call me later and confront me, voice shaking, demanding to know who in my household would do such a thing and why.) Then he gathers a stack of photographs from the counter and takes them into the bathroom, where we will find them — minus a few of me that he keeps — scattered on the rug next to the fouled toilet.

When he is done he exits one last time through the front door, leaving it open behind him. It swings idly on its hinges, seeming lazy and inattentive in its inability to have kept him out.

THE LIST OF THINGS THAT HAVE been stolen from me is a long one, and growing. First to go was my tricycle, taken from the yard by the twin girls across the street. It sat on the grassy slope near their porch, inaccessible to me with my no-crossing-the-street rule. My father retrieved it in ten easy strides, but the loss was as sharp as anything I've felt since: That's not fair! my four-year-old brain cried.

Next was the first of two vanished bicycles, an old blue three-speed, taken — perhaps understandably — from the rack on my college campus where it stood unlocked well into the winter, up to its spokes in snow. The second, a sporty graduation-gift mountain bike, was taken from my Seattle apartment on Thanksgiving Day. Just up the coast, I was obliviously eating

stuffed pumpkin with my newly-divorced stepmom and three little sisters, the Sound silver and still outside the windows of their off-season rental.

My new pinstriped jeans were taken from a dryer at the laundromat in my hometown. They would be a sartorial travesty today, but in 1983, when I was starting high school, they were the pinnacle of my personal fashion expression: button fly, tapered capri legs, coin pocket. I had bought them with hard-earned babysitting money, the first new piece of clothing I'd purchased for myself. Unable to believe they had vanished, I checked the empty dryer over and over. "Those took me forever to save for!" I wailed. "I'll never find another pair like them!" In the car on the way home I leaned disconsolately against the window, pouting and chewing my lip. Years passed before it occurred to me that someone who'd take pants from a public laundromat might have needed them more than me.

Then there's the jewelry: rings and necklaces taken by friends or classmates or who-knows-who, or maybe just lost in a crack between floorboards. (Sometimes a theft turns out not to have been a theft at all.) The Halloween thief who broke into my house took it to a new level, bringing to my jewelry box an uncanny ability to sniff out just those pieces that were the most important to me — a necklace hand-beaded for me by a sister, a gold ring I'd inherited from my estranged birth mother. Whenever the thief saw a pair of earrings he liked, he took just one, leaving me with its unmatched twin. He was similarly selective with my underclothes: he didn't take the plain panties or the frayed just-before-laundry-day ones. He stuck to the ones with satin trim, bows, catchy patterned fabric.

Of course, none of these things really matters. If it were about the things themselves, the solution would be simple: replace them. But these literal objects stand in for other things that cannot be replaced — the metaphors out of which we make meaning and upon which we build our lives — and each time some concrete object of significance is taken forcibly from us, we feel the loss of what it represents. A little bit of self feels chipped away. Scratch the surface and just under the shiny paint on the stolen graduation bike is what my father said to me through it: I'm proud of you. Woven into the fabric of those jeans is my teenage ego: look at me. Run your fingers over that beaded necklace and feel the texture of: we are connected.

WHEN THEY CAUGHT HIM, I was relieved at first, then more unsettled than ever once I'd seen his past criminal record in the newspaper. But this time I had somewhere to direct that energy: here were his name and home address in black and white. The tables were turned. Doubtless he didn't remember our address, probably he never knew our names, perhaps he didn't even recall the particular night he'd robbed us. Now here he was, exposed to us like a fish on a rock. I rehearsed his vital statistics in my head, a litany of facts to replace the question-mark he'd been before: name, age, physical characteristics, hometown. We talked about driving past his house, just to



see where he came from; we talked about going to his arraignment. Giving him a real face might, I thought, shrink him back down to regular size, rob him of some of his obscene power over my imagination.

So much of our language and thinking in response to the experience was a kind of reverse theft: robbing him of some of his power over us, taking back what had been taken, stealing a bit of his privacy in turn. Once the initial fear dissipated a little and a baffled, righteous fury took hold, we longed for retribution and revenge: to see him made ridiculous and small, dispossessed of any shred of pride he might have. I wanted to make him feel the way I'd felt: like someone who'd had her home made strange and terrifying to her, her underclothes pawed through and her most treasured possessions ransacked and scattered.

But the urge didn't last. Our initial fascination and our wish for some kind of vengeful contact gradually faded, replaced by a desire to have the story simply wind to a quiet close. Collecting more data, adding another chapter to the tale, began to sound exhausting. Allowing that impulse toward retribution to take over, I finally decided, may be where the worst kind of thieving lies.

Ultimately Richard and I gave up trying to make the experience into a story with a moral, its loose ends tied up neatly. We stopped obsessing over the details and performing our vaudeville act. In the end we told ourselves the only story that really mattered: how we put it down and moved forward.

IT WAS A QUIET, SUNNY September afternoon, and the Iowa air smelled like autumn. We followed the squad car out to the edge of town, where the Heinz ketchup factory used to be, and pulled into a storage facility: row upon row of faceless buildings with numbered garage doors, behind which was stored god knows what. In one of those bays the police department had stowed everything they had repossessed from the thief's home when he was caught nearly a year after robbing us, the holdings from his strange spree all inventoried and gathered in one place. We had been invited to pick through the collection and reclaim what was ours, accompanied by an officer with a clipboard. (As if we were going to rob them, we'd snickered halfheartedly on the way there.)

The detective who would be our guide sat waiting for us with the engine of his sedan idling; when we pulled up in our rusty Honda he stepped up to my window, leaned in, and instructed us to follow him around the corner to storage bay #110. The gun riding on his right hip made my skin shudder involuntarily as he swung back into his vehicle. I stuck close to him as we rounded the first row of buildings, a tiny convoy of two, and then parked carefully just behind him.

The white garage door slid up to reveal what at first glance seemed like chaos: stacks and piles and boxes, everything heaped unceremoniously. But as we looked closer, it became apparent that there was a method to the



madness. The objects were sorted by category – videotapes lined up along one wall, garments arranged by type, small appliances stacked neatly in rows – and tagged with catalog numbers. A breeze played over the jackets piled in a corner, the Christmas wreaths and bags of jewelry in another – costume or real, it didn't matter, the man was a magpie with an eye for bright objects – and reduced everything to its unimportant, slightly shabby shape. The initial impression of disarray gave way to a sense of supreme order, of stubbornly-exerted control, lending the bizarre circumstances an edge of normalcy.

We stood at the entrance, uncertain about how or where to begin.

"Is this all stuff he stole?" we asked. The detective nodded, head bowed over his clipboard as he read our police report. He looked uneasy when Richard started rifling through paper grocery bags, looking for familiar objects. I asked the detective if he'd prefer we wait for his instructions. "It's just..." he paused, "I know where everything is in here, and if you start moving it around, I won't." He wasn't kidding, either: when I pulled a box full of single earrings out of my pocket, he matched them to their partners methodically, one by one, pulling ziplock baggies out of boxes like a deck of playing cards he'd memorized in advance.

I staggered at the thought of all the cataloging that had gone into the job: every single piece of property in the aluminum-sided chamber, from wristwatches to televisions to a series of battered old vacuum cleaners (why four? I had to wonder), sported a black magic-marker number. Somewhere there existed a master list, tens of pages long, corresponding to all these items. Each earring in its own baggy: silver hoop with glass bead, #456. Gold chain, #587. Men's watch, black leather band, #324. On and on, the trivial and the significant jumbled together in no particular order, costume jewelry bagged and boxed alongside irreplaceable heirlooms with stories to match.

At first we kept ourselves reined in, following the detective obediently from one heap to the next, but the situation was so surreal and fascinating that it was impossible to maintain our calm. Before long he gave up trying to chaperone us and we leaped in, curious, a strange holiday glee overtaking us as we tore through piles and dug through boxes and bags, relieved and excited to be reclaiming what we'd lost, but pleased as well to be putting together a clearer portrait of just who this weirdo was and what the hell he'd been up to in our house while we were away for the weekend. "My ring!" I crowed triumphantly. "My jacket!" cried Richard. We smiled and waved things uneasily at each other in the clear, uncomplicated air while the man with the gunbelt watched, all of us knee-deep in other people's stuff.

THERE ARE MANY FIRSTS after being robbed. The first time you don't check the door-locks half a dozen times before bed. The first time you don't break into a nervous sweat when you can't find something – an earring, a piece of clothing, some fragment of your daily life – because for the first time you

haven't assumed it was taken, too. The first time you realize you haven't taken an inventory in twenty-four hours. The first time you manage to stop obsessing about every fingerprint and footprint he's left (however dimly imagined) on every square inch of surface space in your home, because you have persistently overlaid them, inch by precious inch, with territorial marks of your own.

WHEN WE GOT HOME, I STEPPED out of the car and eyed the backseat full of loot-in-reverse. We'd recouped so much, and I knew I should feel relieved and grateful. Instead I felt hollow and bruised. When Richard opened the back door of the car, ready to carry things inside, I shook my head. I didn't want to touch any of it again for awhile. "Let's get it later," I said, and headed inside to wash my hands twice. After warming some leftovers in a bowl I crawled into bed, where I lay looking at the ceiling. I was running on four hours of sleep and wanted a nap so badly I could taste it, but instead I ate the leftovers in big gulps and then cried, also in big gulps. As far as I was concerned, those things (that's how I thought of them: those things) could stay in the backseat of the car for good.

Meanwhile, Richard — I would find out later — quietly unpacked everything and moved it to the basement where I wouldn't have to look at it. Seeing how shaken I was, he stepped in and stowed it all away, willing to wait.

Once I'd formulated a deeply superstitious cleansing ritual, I was reluctant but ready. We carried everything upstairs and de-inventoried each object, wiping everything down. We burned incense ceremonially. We bundled Richard's jacket back into the car to be taken to the dry cleaner's, both understanding that the jacket couldn't be worn yet, even though he had told me it didn't smell bad and showed no signs of wear. It was a code we both followed implicitly and to the letter. I unbagged the stolen jewelry pieces one by one, dumping them into a dishpan full of soapy water along with the unmatched mates I'd taken from my jewelry box. The only way to stop identifying one earring in each pair as defiled, I knew, was to mix them up so I couldn't distinguish one from the other. We willed the objects to become uncontroversial again, willed them to blend back into the everyday workings of our household. The earrings were paired again, the odds and ends put back where they belonged. Little by little we started letting ourselves forget.

IT IS ANOTHER SEPTEMBER, and I stand one night near an open window in the dark. I'm watching a satellite slide past in the clear late-summer sky and listening to the leaves rustle. There are no bolts in the windowframes of our new house, and at night we leave the windows open wide. All that comes through them is the evening breeze. It whispers now through the long white curtains I have hung, running its fingers gently across every surface, taking inventory, harmless and light as air. **F**

## The Bargain

1-3

Dear Zhishang,

It's been a long time. I hope business is good and life is treating you well. I remember two pieces you had in your gallery. If you still have them, I'd like to buy the burlwood stand and the Khmer apsara stele<sup>1</sup>. In return, I'm offering the Qing Dynasty jade staff and US \$14,000<sup>2</sup> in cash. I've attached a photo of the staff.

Please let me know if this sounds feasible.

Best regards, Jack

1-6

Dear Zhishang,

Business is really hopping here. Did you get my last email correspondence? Please let me know if my proposed deal is of interest.

Regards, Jack

1 Jack remembers standing in front of the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia, sweating in 110 degree heat. He was supposed to meet Zhishang at this spot at 1:00, and it was now 2:30. He was tired of the old women circling around him, trying to sell him cheap baskets. Tired of their grins, which showed off their teeth stained red from chewing Betel. Tired of hearing the tour guide tell groups of tourists that according to Hindu mythology, the highest dome at the center of the temple represented the holy mountain of Meru, the symbolic center of the Hindu and Buddhist world. Morons, thought Jack. You could tell the American in red plaid pants, who was nodding and snapping pictures, that the dome represented Mary Magdalena's tit and he'd believe it. God, he hated tourists. He hated this country. He hated Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore and Burma. He hated his tight leather shoes.

When a cloud covered the sun, the pressure of the blazing heat momentarily eased. Jack looked up. There, staring down at him from one of the temple towers was an apsara etched in stone. She smiled at him and seemed to rise from the tower, offering her exquisite throat, her nimble legs, her full breasts, the curve of her hips. In every regard, a heavenly nymph. He stood gazing at her, entranced, until he was so light-headed and woozy he had to get out of the sun.

He wandered into a small shop, packed with so much crap he couldn't see the walls. It was cool in here, almost like breathing water, and it smelled like nutmeg and incense. He wandered around. Nothing, junk, nothing; but behind a plastic bust of Jayavarman VII, he spotted a white marble apsara, as stunningly beautiful as the one on the temple. He picked it up, brushed off the dust; it was cool to his fingertips. He looked closely at the carved lines, the delicate fingers etched in marble. He felt his fingertips tingle, a buzzing in his head. For a moment, he failed to understand she wasn't real. It was his first big find, but it wasn't just that, was it? Sublime was the word that fumbled around in his mouth. She was heavenly. He gave the dried up old man US \$5.00 for it. Which was when Zhishang walked in and snatched the marble slab from Jack. "Nice," said Zhishang, studying the writing on the back. Had Jack intended to keep the marble slab for his own? Sell it on the side? Never mention it to Zhishang, who'd paid for the business trip, who'd made it clear that anything they found was Zhishang's since they'd flown over and stayed in this country on his dime? Hell, yes. Finder's keepers.

2 Jack doesn't have \$14,000, but he'll get it when he convinces the recently widowed South Beach

1-9

Dear Zhishang,

I have sent you several correspondences and have heard nothing. I hope you are not still upset that I went out on my own. That was over a year ago.<sup>3</sup> I believe we are both mature businessmen who can put the past behind us and deal with each other as professionals.

Best,

Jack

1-25

Jack,

After a year of silence, I hear from you again. I hope the Year of the Dragon brings you wealth and prosperity.<sup>4</sup> I don't have time to write now. I am overwhelmed with orders from all over the world. The New York show was outstanding and so was Paris and Milan. My reputation continues to bring me many lucrative deals. This may end up being my most profitable year. As you recall, Jack, this business is based exclusively on reputation and my reputation is beyond reproach.

Personal Regards,

Zhishang

man to buy the 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese ivory netsuke of a naked woman screwing a samurai. At the Miami show, Jack had to pry the two-inch figurine from the man's trembling hands. Jack had said he'd sell it for \$10,000 and the man said he'd call his broker. He'll call the man and say he's got another buyer and the price is now \$14,000. Which means Jack will get four times the amount of money he paid for the nasty little thing.

3 A year and three months and fourteen days. One more day and Jack would have grabbed the 19<sup>th</sup> century bronze turtle from the Edo period and smashed it on Zhishang's head.

4 The prick, thinks Jack. Zhishang's not pure Chinese. His mother is Thai, a race that Zhishang hates. Jack found Zhishang's family picture ripped in half and stuffed behind the History of Art book in the gallery library. Zhishang's father, a hard-ass, steely looking man, wearing a straw hat, stared straight at the camera, as if it might attack. Beside him, a grim-looking woman, worn to the bone, a pole across her shoulders with two baskets of rice hanging on either side. From their loins, eleven children in different states of disrepair. Torn pants, no shirt, a hat with half its brim missing, a kid with missing teeth, a kid with no shoes and a hair lip. Another kid missing an ear. Zhishang, the oldest, a squat, muscular boy stood next to his father, expressionless.

Jack knows the story; he's heard it enough times. When he was thirteen, Zhishang was sent by his family to America to work and make money to pay for the entire family to move to California. A good story, a sob story, until Zhishang tells you with a hint of pride, he's now 33, has sent gifts home—Disneyland T shirts, a map of Yellowstone, some San Francisco sourdough bread that was green mold by the time it reached China—but he has not, nor does he have any intention of sending enough money home for any of his family or relatives to join him. He opened his art dealership business after being struck by a Los Angeles tour bus in a cross walk. He hired a lawyer and won a \$500,000 judgment. He walks with a limp, but he once told Jack, with a bit of bravado, "If I had to do it all over, I'd throw myself in front of that bus again."

Besides, this Year of the Dragon stuff is a perfunctory thing that the Chinese say not to be mistaken for a true wish for the other to actually prosper, at least not more than the speaker.

1-27

Zhishang,

Your last correspondence failed to address the proposed deal. Please respond. I am extending my offer another 20 days.

I'm in Maine dealing with family issues. My California office will be closed for at least a month.<sup>5</sup>

Regards, Jack

2-2

Jack,

Let me remind you, I come from a people who have occupied this planet for over 4,000 years. We have excellent memories.<sup>6</sup> If someone betrays us or cheats us, we do not forget. We remember when the Mongols invaded in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Britain, upset by the trade imbalance, turned us into opium addicts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and when Japan grabbed Manchuria in the 1930s. We know who is a friend and who has screwed us over. As Confucius said, "Have no friends not equal to yourself."

Zhishang

2-3

Zhishang,

5 More like two months, thinks Jack. A persistent knot in his chest tightens at the thought of staying that long. When his father called and ordered him home, Jack thought he'd be here a couple days, maybe a week. He'd straighten things out, get his father's finances in order, fire the wrong people, hire the right ones. He's been here four weeks. How is he going to survive his father's reckless rage? No, you selfish bastard; how is his mother going to survive? Calm down, just calm down. He's got a buyer for both the burlwood stand and the Khmer apsara stele—a man with a persistent rash on his neck who saw pictures of both items and fell in love. The deal will raise over \$150,000, which will pay for enough homecare, as well as medical treatments for Jack's mother, and then Jack can leave. That's the plan; it's a good plan, a solid plan, an airtight plan, he just needs to close the deal with Zhishang. And the deal with the sad pervert, and the deal with rash man.

Not long ago, a doctor stood in a small room in front of a chalkboard while Jack and his parents sat in plastic chairs facing the board. "Your mother has a rare form of colon cancer," said the doctor. He drew something that looked like a huge tangled earthworm. "This is the colon," said the doctor, tapping the white chalk on the board, sending chips of chalk floating onto his dark leather shoe. It has two basic jobs: It processes food to create energy and rids the body of waste matter. "He means shit," said Jack's father. "Shit shit shit." His mother blushed and nodded solemnly. The doctor blanched. Jack got up, walked to the back of the small room, and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Jack's mother went through one round of chemo and, after losing most of her hair and appetite, decided not to continue. A home nurse now comes three times a week. She's built like a bull, with big broad shoulders and a flat face, and she's paid a whopping \$5,000 a month. It's whopping because there is so little savings. Where did the money go? Jack wonders. When Jack investigated his parents' bank records, he found there was no nest egg, only a nest, which was falling apart. Jack suspects his father did something with the egg.

During this morning's visit, the nurse said, "Let's use a magnet to hang a list of emergency procedures on the fridge. That way, the next time the patient's red buzzer goes off indicating a dangerous drop in insulin, everyone will know what to do." Jack's father laughed in her face and said he would not stoop to such low brow tactics. "A magnet, for Christ's sake," he said.



I'll throw in the 17<sup>th</sup> century bronze figure of the hermit scantily clad in a leaf costume.

Jack

2-9

Jack,

Do I detect a hint of desperation? Never a good thing in this line of work. Since you've been out on your own, renegade style, as is the American way, I guess you've forgotten this is a high stakes game of deception, a mind game, a game of manipulation, of love and hate. It's a world where the best players take home millions. Yes, I've seen those heights. Maybe one day, Jack, you will, too. But I doubt it.

As your former business associate (we were never partners, Jack, we were associates, an important legal distinction and one that I emphasize at all times), I'd say you have a ways to go. People remember when you cheat or lie. The lie festers and grows foul smelling.

It's my word against yours. If I say it's Ninth Century and you say Twelfth, I win because my reputation is more solid than yours. If I say Edo and not Meiji, you don't stand a chance.

Zhishang

PS: Keep the hermit.

The home nurse leaped from her chair, her starched nurse outfit crackling, and stomped out the front door, forgetting to check on the patient upstairs. Jack quickly did the math: 12 visits per month at \$5K, less one visit. He'd deduct \$416.67. Jack went upstairs and carried his mother into the bathroom to pee. Jack tried to think of something to say. He asked how she was doing? "Yesterday, I didn't want to be here." Jack looked away to give her some privacy as she settled herself on the toilet. "Well, how are you doing today?" asked Jack. "Oh, not too well." She flushed the toilet. "Is that an improvement?" he asked.

Jack hears a loud crash. He rushes downstairs. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Qing Dynasty opalescent vase is now fine glass slivers sparkling in the green shag rug. For a long time, Jack watches the light refract off the broken glass. Stands there until he sees all the colors and shades of color. Then he remembers it was a present from him to his parents for their thirtieth anniversary.

He steps into the kitchen to yell at his father, but he isn't there. Probably slipped out the back. The silence crackles. He must do something; he wipes the counter, scrubs the sink, tosses the used coffee grounds into the garbage. There, in the garbage a piece of paper with his father's scrawl.

Where to bury the body where to bury/his fury white-eyed females scrambling to escape the voice that won't shut u.... Where to bury the body where to bury/his fury white-eyed females scrambling to escape the voice that won't shut u The rest is smeared with grape jam.

Jack tries to console himself. His father sometimes fancies himself a poet. Still, he decides he needs to watch his back.

6 Jack has an excellent memory too, given the right conditions and finely tuned levels of serotonin and lithium and other psychotropic pharmaceuticals. Manic depression, bipolar disorder, call it what you will, Jack was diagnosed ten years ago and by now he knows everything about it—its manic highs and suicidal lows. Knows Areteus in the second century A.D. discussed "mania" as he described a group of euphoric patients who would "laugh, play, dance night and day, and sometimes go openly to the market crowned, as if victors in some contest of skill" only later to appear "torpid, dull and sorrowful." Knows that in 1686 Theophile Bonet coined the term, "manico-melancolicus", to denote the connection between mania and melancholia. Jack knows that lack of sleep, stress and psychologically traumatic events are key triggers for episodes. The doctors and researchers might not know, exactly, what causes it, but Jack knows. Knows

2-10

Zhishang,

I'm offering a good deal here, a win-win.<sup>7</sup>

Jack

2-15

Jack,

Imagine the wise one sitting down with the fool. The wise one (still young and quite handsome, who has managed to achieve great success before the age of 35) sighs heavily and decides he ought to assist the fool (a short, ugly toad who has a proclivity for thinking too highly of himself). Maybe this offer of help will bring good karma to the wise one. Maybe the fool will go away and play with himself.

I am currently flooded with jade items, the market of which has dramatically slowed and the last thing I need is to be stuck with another jade dildo that you have been trying unsuccessfully to sell or use. In order to offset this dilemma (me get stuck with this dildo for ten years or more and you get off the hook), please be more sympathetic with my situation.<sup>8</sup>

I could briefly summarize your proposed trade as follows:

Jack: ends up with two saleable, fresh, and fine pieces, parting with \$14,000.

Zhishang: gets screwed with a used, shopped around dildo, parting with

that it's his father's gift to him; his grand inheritance.

7 When Jack leaves his bedroom, where he has moved his global art dealing business onto his Dell computer, he runs right into his father—chest ramming into chest. His father, lean and strong as a thin metal sheet stands in the hallway, right outside Jack's door, as if he was waiting for this moment, for Jack to crash into him and fall back, as Jack does, even though Jack has the same build as his father, has the same fierce dark eyes, the same wild dark hair, the same-sized hands, the same way of grinding his molars.

"You ate all the cashews," says his father, his voice cold and harsh. "You come back home and what do you do? You eat all the cashews. The cashew is your mother's favorite nut."

"I'll go to the store and buy more," says Jack.

"That's beside the point."

"A cashew is a cashew," says Jack.

"You're missing the point," he says, jabbing a finger into Jack's chest.

"You don't want to start this," says Jack.

"What if she wants one right now? At this very moment? What if she calls out demanding a cashew?"

"I'd run to the store fast."

"It's not good enough."

In fact, Jack's mother does call out. She needs to go to the bathroom. His mother looks ghostly white, her limbs quivering, her chest fallen in on itself. Jack picks her up and carries her into the bathroom. She's so light, thinks Jack, like a one dollar bill.

"Mom, do you know what Dad did with all your savings?"

"Oh, now Jack, leave our money alone," she says. "No more wild schemes. No more sure bet investments. No more buying strange artifacts from places we've never been, places we don't want to go."

"Mom—"

two more desirable pieces.

Hope the above helps you see that you have the better deal. Now you understand why your “deal” deserved no response. My mother is not doing well either; she’s dead. So is my father, and now I’m supporting all my siblings, as well as far too many relatives. The cycle of life, Jack, includes death. If your karma is good, you get another whirl at it. If not, you come back as a cockroach.

I still have the white porcelain vase you sold me. The one with the golden pear design that you claimed came from the Tang Dynasty. Don’t think I have forgotten that deal.

Zhishang

2-15

Zhishang,

You dick. I’m trying, we are trying, we are attempting to° ...

2-16

Jack,

If you can’t say something nice—

I still can’t find the stone sculpture of the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Did you steal it?

“Please, Jack. Please.”

8 Jack leaps from his chair and storms into the bathroom, then out of the bathroom, rushes down the stairs, into the kitchen, outside on the back porch. The crows scatter from the railing and fly to the high branches of the fir trees. He won’t look into their black glass eyes, won’t make that mistake again and have that eye pierce him, follow him for days and days, from room to room. Head down, Jack marches over to the metal file cabinet, which is sitting in the grass—what’s it doing out here?—and punches it. Sympathetic to his situation? Sympathetic to the half Chinaman who is up to his eyeballs in debt? Who cannot NOT buy something that grabs him by the balls and shouts beauty. Who can’t keep his hands off pretty boys and girls. Who after a couple of drinks, puts his dick into anything that moves or squawks or bleats. Jack runs into the house, grabs his boxing wraps and gloves and returns to the file cabinet—his father must have moved it out here— unleashing a flurry of punches. Who cheated that old Asian woman out of \$100,000 by telling her the white marble head of her Bodhisattva couldn’t possibly be from the Eastern Wei dynasty. Sympathetic? Who cheated that elderly couple by denying the blue vase with the cherry blossoms was from the Meiji era. Who made Jack wait three months before paying him his \$60,000 commission. Sympathetic? Sure, when Jack started, he knew nothing about the business and Zhishang said it didn’t matter; he’d teach Jack. Sure, sure he did, but what about now? What’s he going to do now? When he stops punching, he begins to shiver. He puts his fists to his temples and looks down. It’s thirty degrees out and he’s standing outside without a shirt or shoes. He steps inside and returns to his computer, feeling a little better. Until he hears his mother vomit. Which his father won’t clean up because he can’t stand the smell.

9 A power surge shoots through the house and the screen fills with \*\*\* ##### ))) \$) % (\$\$ \*#&@ & \* #) {#%\$ 09 \$(\*&\$%j do ifjw \$ ( \$ %\*( \$ #) \*#@) (\*\$@)(\$#\*\_ )(|%\*e)w(r\*\$(#)\*\_\*\_#(1#&(\$&@(|)%\*\$\*\$@) [\_\*\_\*\_](#%\$\*#09409)(JFIDS)\_(\*ER)[\$#\*]+@(\*#@)+(#@\$>\*E:F><<?S<FEOP[WR//2934)(#\*\_\*)\_(\* (rei)#@(|\$)(#@\_)\$#\*#\$\*#\*#####)))]\$)(\$\$\*#&@&\*#)(%#09\$(\*&\$%idoifjw(\$(\$\*(\$#)\*#@\_)(\*\$@) (\$#\*\_\*e)w(r\*\$(#)\*\_\*\_#(1#&(\$&@(|)%\*\$\*\$@) [\_\*\_\*\_](#%\$\*#09409)(JFIDS)\_(\*ER)[\$#\*]+@(\*#@) +(#@\$>\*E:F><<?S<FEOP[WR//2934)(#\*\_\*)\_(\* (rei)#@(|\$)(#@\_)\$#\*#\$, which translated means, around and around, and came home home came home because sick but came home sick need money, mother money to make money where to get money, the stock market shit the IRA locked up money sunk

If I remember, the so-called "Tang" vase with the silly fruit design came from the Ming Dynasty period, some six hundred years later. How do you explain the discrepancy?

Zhishang

PS: If you have a buyer for the burlwood stand and apsara, I would be happy to deal with the customer myself. Of course that would cut you out of the loop, but seeing you do not have the merchandise that the buyer wants, you were never in the loop in the first place.

2-17, 12:10 a.m.

Zhishang,

One of the stray boys that you find at nasty bars probably nabbed it as payment—a bonus for servicing you.

The Tang vase is a Tang vase. I stand by it.

So what about it? Do we have a deal yet?

Jack<sup>10</sup>

2-17, 4:15 a.m.

Zhishang,

We're running out of money, don't have enough to pay the bull nurse, he fired her, but we'll hire her, have to, for God's sake, and money for medical

into the California house toxic mold sold it for no money for the mother, only son because of the thing he inherited and the spinning into don't don't don't into the you can't hit your father you can't you can't which is why can't hit and didn't come back, money, what did he do not under the mattress, the basement, savings account, the safe so easy to crack, and if he found the money, he could do this deal, even if the sniveling pervert in Florida doesn't want the netsuke.

Jack heads outside to finish off the filing cabinet. After a while, he feels someone watching him. Eyes boring into his back. Coward, thinks Jack, sneaking up from behind. He whips around, expecting to find his father. But no one is there. Damn the crow's beady black eye. But it isn't the crow, isn't anyone, but then it is. He thinks he sees a ghostly figure at the upstairs bedroom window, looking out at Jack; his mother, smiling softly. I don't understand you, Jack. I'll never understand you. He returns to his punching, imagining how he must look to her; foreign and beautiful and violent. She'll stand there for a long time, watching the qualities blend and blur to make something exquisite. No, he probably looks violent, only violent.

When Jack comes inside, he finds another scrap with his father's scrawl: this dream that comes from the black back of mindcoming after the hurt with its blanket comfort

the child dream of vengeance its shadow stretching

but where to bury the body and how to survive

this burial it is not written that I will survive.

Got to get out of here, thinks Jack. But to get out, he must raise the money. There's an experimental drug she could try. He runs his finger along the counter, touches a fork, the stove, the salt shaker, the edge of a knife. Germany. Fly her to Germany for the experimental treatments. If only he could raise the money. But it isn't only about raising the money, is it? He feels the thrill run through his limbs, tingle his scalp. The excitement of a deal, of putting one over Zhishang one last time.

10 Jack has been awake for 36 hours. It's quiet, except for the occasional creak of the shifting house releasing its heat and his mother's delicate breathing. Then he hears something, a murmur, a secret laugh. He goes downstairs. His father sits in front of the TV.

"What are you watching?" asks Jack.

and mortgage and food and water, can't stay, can't help without the money, and he's tucked in the basement and accused me of eating all the cashews, the son who comes home with nothing, but why did he have to smash that vase? Where the hell is his money? Can't find, I accuse him of stealing the money, accuse him and find him guilty, his pockets full of money and he spent it somewhere, or hid it, hid the money he was supposed to save for when she is too sick to get out of bed—did you take his money?

Whatever you want for this exchange. I'll round up a gaggle of pretty boys, pretty girls, goats, sheep, they're yours for carnal pleasure, with a case of that crap brandy, Boulard Grand Solage, and an All You Can Eat Korean BBQ, because we got to get the money or we're going under over here, we're hitting bottom, head first, clocking our heads against the bottom of the money barrel and father who watches Boogie Nights every night, \$400K gone or buried, buried the body of money, and mother can't get out of bed and"

2-18

Zhishang,

I haven't heard from you. Take a good look at that staff. Think of the possibilities.

Jack

2-19

"What do you want?" asks his father, staring at the TV.

It's Boogie Nights.

"Dad, what did you do with all your money?" asks Jack.

His father turns to him, his eyes fierce.

"What did you do with it?" Jack asks again.

"Oh, no," his father laughs. "That's like handing a drink to an alcoholic. Like handing sugar to a diabetic, drugs to a drug addict, a double cheeseburger to a fatty."

"You would know."

"You bet I know," says his father.

"I'm not going to take it. We need it for mom."

His father doesn't say anything.

"Did you bury it somewhere?"

His father grips the arms of the chair and glares at Jack. "Who told you that? Did your mother tell you that? Jesus, who told you that? Is that why you're spending so much time in the backyard? You're not going to find it and neither is your mother or the federal government or the banks or the IRS."

Jack stands there, wondering where his father buried the money.

"Everyone's blessed with one special thing," says his father, as if trying on the phrase.

"What?" says Jack. For a moment, he thinks his father might have offered a rare word of praise. "What did you say?"

Which is when Eddie in the movie, who will soon be christened Dirk Diggler, says the line his father just recited. His father's laughter explodes high and fast. Jack laughs. For a long time Jack and his father watch the movie. Jack repeats some of the lines out loud. "It takes a lot of the good old American green stuff—" His father chimes in, "to make the thing," and Jack finishes it off, "You bet your ass it is." Finally his father turns to Jack. "What the hell do you want?" His father has dark bulges under his eyes, like Jack.

---



Zhishang,

OK, so I've pissed you off. What do you expect from a crazy cracker like me?

Jack

2-20

Z-

We're hitting bottom.

Jack

2-21

Jack,

I paid \$25,000 for the "Tang"<sup>12</sup> vase, which you said 8<sup>th</sup> century. For months, it sat in my gallery, staring at me, those damn pears. For twelve months, it sat there and I felt sick every time I looked at that ugly piece of shit. I sold it yesterday. Guess how much? \$5,000. I think *you owe me*, asshole cracker.<sup>13</sup> Don't bother me anymore.

Zhishang<sup>14</sup>

2-21 4:17 pm

Zhishang,

His skin, gray, almost ash.

"How are we going to pay for the nurse?" asks Jack.

"I fired her."

"You fired her?"

"She smelled bad. And I don't approve of her insubordination."

"Who will take care of mom?"

"I will. So will you."

"I can't stay here forever. I've been here over a month. I can't stay here much longer."

His father stares at the TV.

11 Jack pauses, looks at the swirl of words and sees the head of Guandi, the god of war in full military attire emerge from the writing and climb on top of the computer. He pushes delete, erasing his message, and clicks off the computer.

12 Tang tang, stand by tang and Tang in hand give me that tang.

13 Tang tang, stand by tang and Tang in hand give me that tang.

14 His mother calls for him.

"Could you help me drink this water?" she asks.

He sits in a chair beside her bed. Her body is so small now, so frail; she seems lost in the hole of her bed. As he lifts her head from the pillow, he feels her hair, soft, wispy, as if it were the hair of an infant. So much of it is gone, but the hair that remains is silk. And yes, he's carried her to and from her bed to the bathroom. Yes, before the IV, he slipped the spoon of plain yogurt with a dab of honey into her mouth, but it's only now he feels how real she is. A body, a human body with age spots on her shaky hands, freckles on her shoulders, a fine fan of wrinkles around her pale blue eyes. Her body coursing with blood. She sips the water. The small dark hairs on his arm rise, as if he's cold. She sips more water, her lips moist. A body ravaged by cancer cells, multiplying, colonizing, consuming her. A body decomposing, slipping away from him.

No one likes to admit his mistakes. Hell, I've made plenty of them, and it sucks. You're wrong about the vase. You got taken, not by me, but by this person who offered \$5K. How did you fall for that?

What about my offer?

Jack

2-21 12:15 am

Zhishang,

Come on. Answer me.<sup>15</sup>

Jack

2-22 7:00 am

Zhishang,

You know, for a long time now, I've been waiting for something from you. We spent five years together, running around the world going to art dealer shows. We worked hard, driving to old grannies' houses who'd called thinking they had a precious Asian art object only to find a worthless piece of junk covered in dust and mildew. This is what I expected from you:

My friend, my friend of five years, my friend who helped me score over \$100,000 in a short two month period (remember that run?), all I can say is, THANK YOU! thank you for offering to part with Fourteen Thousand

"Thank you," she says, her voice sounding as if she's underwater. She closes her eyes. He feels dizzy, as if the world tipped and he hasn't found the right way to stand.

15 Jack heads downstairs and finds his father in the kitchen staring out the sink window. All four burners on the stove are on, but nothing is cooking. The burners blaze orange red hot. His father looks like he's been crying, his face is red; his eyes, red-rimmed, puffy. He wants to put his hand on his father's shoulder. But then again, it could be a ploy, a decoy. Jack approaches cautiously.

"Dad?"

"I don't know what I'll do without her. Thirty-seven years with the woman."

"Thirty-seven? I thought it was thirty-five."

"Who told you that?" He whipped around to face Jack. "Your mother? Did your mother say that?"

"No, I just thought..."

"You're just like your mother. Wrong about the important things. Your mother thought she had the flu."

"Oh, go to hell," says Jack, feeling a slow pleasure melt over him. No one has ever compared him to his mother before. His father stomps out of the kitchen. Jack stands in a pool of warmth, looking out the kitchen window at the night. His eyes water. Fatigue, he thinks. Underneath the Boogie Nights droll, he hears his mother's breathing.

16 Jack looks out the window. It's 1:00 am and his father is mowing the lawn in straight, angry rows. He's wearing a white T-shirt and he's nearly running with the lawn mower. His head is down and his arms taut and straight, as if he's going to mow until the mower begs for mercy to stop. Jack charges downstairs, enraged.

"I was going to do that!" shouts Jack.

His father nearly mows right into him. Jack leaps out of the way.

"Watch where you're going, asshole," says Jack.

"Get out of my way," says his father. "Just get out of my way."

Jack waits until his father's back is turned. Then he pounces, tackling his father to the ground.

17 Jack has trouble typing this last email. His knuckles are wrapped in white athletic gauze with an

Dollars of your hard earned cash at a time when I owe the world a fortune and people are going to have me killed. Thank you for the fabulous sexual aid cleverly masquerading as a Qianlong mark and period nephrite pebble staff in return for a paltry burlwood stand and a drab stone block with a girl with broken fingers and big boobs on it, from, oh yeah, Cambodia.

You have greatly exceeded both my hopes and expectations.

Best to your dying mother. My thoughts are with you.

MY QUESTION TO YOU: Can you explain the discrepancy?

Jack<sup>16</sup>

2-22, 9:15 a.m.

Zhishang,

I promise I won't tell anyone how you cheated those elderly out of hundreds of thousands of dollars or how you pluck the virginity right out of innocent boys and girls or how you cornered me that night in the back of the gallery, pawed me up and down and I had to push you off, had to take the ivory sculpture of Buddha and threaten you with it, if you put one hand on me, if you wiped your germs on my arm, my chest, my cheek again, that can be our secret, our little secret, and I won't go to the IRS, won't tell them about the deals you insisted had to be in cash, US dollars that you shunted away in some bank account in Switzerland or maybe your old homeland of Thailand

outer layer of duct tape. Each knuckle has blossomed into the size of a small bulbous plant. Last night, after the scuffle with his father, after not sleeping for five days, he beat the back fence with his bare fists until the fence buckled.

His father told him to cut it out. "It isn't out here," shouted his father. "You think I'm an idiot who would bury it here?"

Jack's shoulders are stiff and his back hurts. Winter has brought rain, snow, rain, and his mother lost another five pounds in two days. So weak now that Jack must carry her everywhere. When he came inside last night, he lay on the floor beside his mother's bed to make sure she didn't pull out the IV feeding tube. A day nurse and a night nurse. That was what they needed now. The room smelled of strong, pungent medicines, sweaty flesh, dirty laundry and rotting cheese.

Mid-way through the night, his mother pulled out the IV and went into diabetic seizure. His father, hearing the red buzzer, ran into the room, "Darling, my darling," he shouted, and tripped over Jack who was stretched out on the floor, asleep. He hit his head on the bed post. Jack woke to his father's body on top of his, fused to his. He shoved his father off, carried his mother to the station wagon, stretched her out in the back seat, ran back into the house for his father. He carried his father over his shoulder and buckled him into the passenger seat. As he drove them to the hospital, his mind whirred like a mass of gnats, how to pay for this hospital stay? And the night nurse, the day nurse, the medications, the experimental treatments? How? Sell the silver sports car, but not enough; the Mountain Shaped Censer, Han Dynasty, bronze with gold inlay for the mother, priceless tucked away in the treasure troves of storage, the hanging scroll of Laozi on an Ox, mid 16<sup>th</sup> century Ming Dynasty ink on paper a lovely addition to God's gallery, lovely for the mother, the gilt bronze statue of Zhenwu Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heavens, Ming Dynasty don't have it but could get it if you wanted it God if you want the Dark Heavens up there with you, I'm open to bargaining...

The lights were off in the hospital room. Jack sat in a chair between his mother and father. His father lay on his back, stiff as a tin plate, snoring. From her bed, his mother looked over at Jack and said, "Jack, tell me something good."

Hell of a thing to ask, thought Jack. What was there to say? A wreck of memories. Anything he said won't change her, won't change his father's condition or his. After a while, she sighed, rolled over and fell asleep.

(I'm privy to that secret, too), won't bother the IRS with this interesting, titillating fact of your avoidance of taxes, no our secret. Just ours.

Your trusting friend,

Jack

2-22 10:12 a.m.

Sir,

Who are you? I've never met you before in my life. Fuck off.

Zhishang

2-24

Zhishang,<sup>17</sup>

OK. I'll throw in the shunga piece (add it to your mushrooming porn collection), but no way am I handing over another \$1K to someone who has bad skin and bad breath. Make it \$14,500 and we have a deal.

Jack<sup>18</sup>

18 At some point, Jack began talking, talking, maybe a memory, maybe a fantasy, a hallucination, he couldn't be sure— a fishing trip up in Canada—the three of them, just the family. "We'd spent the week prior to the trip crafting artificial flies and insects from feathers and pipe cleaners," he said, his voice slow, as if lingering over each word had a tactile quality to it. He saw the feathers, the beautiful order of each filament. "We stood in the river in green waders and you taught me how to fly fish," said Jack. He was eight, no nine years old. "You swirled that silver fishing line above our heads, as if you were lassoing the air. You and me, wild river cowboys.

"The clear water, the gray stones, the smell of the ripe blackberries along the bank"—as real as her pillow, as real as her dry, papery skin, as real as her sweet sad smile. "We stood in that river for hours," he felt the mist on his face, and out of the corner of his eye, saw his father run up and down along the river bank like a frustrated hound dog who wanted in, but didn't want to get its feet wet. Finally, his father stopped whining and it was quiet, only the sound of his mother's transparent fishing line slicing sunlit green, water swirling around his ankles.

His mother startled him when she spoke. "Beautiful. It was beautiful there, wasn't it, Jack?" she said, a lilt and softness to her voice, as if he'd transported her there, somewhere, and she'd found it wonderful, majestic. Moonlight seeped into the room, illuminating his mother, and for a moment she looked like light bouncing off water.

"Yes, it was," he said, searching her face, pulling his chair closer. ¶

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## THE EXPERIMENT

“You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.”

- Nietzsche -



## Leap Years

### Eleven Days

She always said that she just wanted their one night together. One night, that's all I want. She wrote this in notes to him. She said it once or twice each time they talked on the phone. She wrote it on a postcard. We will have our one night together. They had been together in the way they were together for many years now. Both spent nights in different cities, with other people. There had been times they had been together but not one whole night. Rooms that lasted an afternoon, or a morning or an evening. A day rate, the hotels called the arrangement. Someone else would have the night in the room. The housekeeper arriving, shooing them out as they were leaving. There had been the lunches and breakfasts, the brunches, the buffets and dinners, the drinks at bars, with other people and alone. The conversations on couches in lobbies, lounges of airports, train station waiting rooms. On sidewalks. In hallways passing each other. In his car or hers, driving or stopped or parked. Or outside of cars, in the shadows of parking decks, the expanse of parking lots, the moon off in the distance struggling to rise. Waiting for a bus, in the subway, cabs, and riding in cabs, the cab that one night. There were rides in empty elevators, empty but for them, a few seconds between floors to embrace, their hearts racing as the car stalled to let on someone else. They had been together, but not one whole night. She added up all this time together—the seconds, the minutes, the hours or two she remembered being together and figured it accumulated into a semblance of a few patchworked days—a spotty night or two, perhaps, cobbled together a week of such fractured moments made up of hours, minutes, seconds. Catch as catch can. She was good with numbers. But none of the moments were sustained long enough, false continuity, into one whole night, a night long enough not to simply sleep with one another but to really sleep with each other, together, to fall asleep, to waste the time together in that luxurious unconscious proximity. No, that had never happened. She wanted that, that one night together. But on all those other nights when she stayed up thinking about this dilemma, stayed up alone, her husband asleep beside her, wanting that one night together with this other man, late those nights she let herself think if even that would be enough or if that one night would be too much. In the night, in the dark, she thought of all the nights divvied up to her, the nights she had already spent and the finite number of nights not known to her yet that she would have to spend on this or that, another night without being together. It added up. Awake she thought about the falling asleep with him and then falling asleep she thought about the waking up with him there. That would be some kind of

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leap, that one night of being together so that they could be apart, to have, finally, the time, some time they could skip over together, they would be there and not, suspended out of time. Out of time, at last, and out of time, outside of it. It made no sense late at night. The time distorted, her sense of time. She remembered that the world still ran on two calendars, an old and new one. She thought of a the time when the new calendar began to replace the old, of the 11 days the world gave up to switch from the old calendar to the new one. Everyone went to bed one night and woke up eleven days later, a chunk of an October missing. And history would record nothing happened on those days, that those days never happened. It didn't matter if one used one calendar or the other, both erased those days, lost them. She imagined how it felt, this artificial eclipse, the world both standing still and, still, jumping forward. This happened years before movies, before time-lapsed film that speed very fast to record in very slow motion the explosion of a flower or a bullet flowing through an apple. A fortnight of still pictures gave the illusion of movement. In the theater, they sat in the dark to see the light. They watched a movie together, holding hands in the dark, another part of a night. It flickered and skipped, the interrupted image. In this dark, with him next to her, trying to put together the images, she imagined a night eleven days long, eleven days of night to be together.

## A Leap Second

He opened the box of extra seconds, letting them warm to room temperature. The seconds, packed in like eggs, hummed in the carton. He turned to the window to pass the time. Later, he would select one second and add it to the official time, but for now he thought about what had happened. Outside, it was snowing. It seemed to always snow at this time, at times like this. The snow was a kind of static in the window. Not long ago, she had said it was over. This this was over. A moment before they had been a they and then, then. One day, way before that moment they would no longer be a they, there had been that other moment, a moment when they had become a they. Time passed as he thought of these two distinct points in time. Outside, it snowed regularly. The earth was slowing down. One day it would stop all together. But that wouldn't be for a very long time. Meanwhile, time needed to be corrected. Brought up to date. Another extra second needed to be added in order for time to synchronize with the decaying speed of the world, the planet stalling. He will spent the rest of his life doing this, what he is doing now, turning to the box, his hand hovering over the thrumming seconds as if to select a chocolate from a sampler. The rest of his life will be an accumulation of these second seconds. Suddenly, he thinks.

## Daylight Saving

Fall.

Fall, in the middle of the night, she was riding the Century Limited west from New York to Chicago when, suddenly, the train came to a creaking halt in the middle of an Ohio cornfield.

Such delays are not all that unusual for a passenger train that runs its routes over private, freight company rails.

Passenger trains are often shunted off onto a siding, letting the proprietor freight have the right-of-way.

But this pause was different.

Time was falling back.

Time zone after time zone, time was turning back time.

This wrecked the train's schedule.

If the train didn't stop, it would actually arrive early at the next station.

The train's schedule had to catch up to the train.

Pass it.

She stood looking out the open top of the Dutch door in the vestibule between cars.

No lights but cornfields everywhere, she knew, or bean fields that next year would be cornfields and bean fields that next year would be corn again in the rotation.

All over the country, trains, passenger and freight, were slowing down, coming to a halt where they were.

Trains waited, panting, stopped in their tracks.

Out of time, she waited for the time to overtake her, time to catch up everywhere.

Time would, she thought, slam by shaking the whole car like when another train on the paralleling track slammed by this train, rattling the windows, drawing the air out of the coaches.

Time expedited, a true "Limited"

Tracks cleared, the light green, time highballing west.

Then, the brakes would sneeze, and the travel in the coupling would groan and take hold and the tug would stutter through the cars, one after the other, and she would be moving again.

Trying to catch up now.

He would know to wait.

He would have remembered to turn back all the clocks, say, when they met again at the station, that they had lost the hour.

Stalled, she watched the moon move west over the cornfields, the bean fields, out ahead of the train, extending its lead.

He watched the moon rise over the lake bearing down, gaining on the

train somewhere out there behind it.

The moon's a clock face, handless, or its hands a blur, a faceless clock, unstoppable.

It seemed he had now this extra hour to live through again, this time to kill, but it didn't really count.

She would arrive an hour late.

They all lied when they said they hadn't really lost the hour, that they weren't really late.

Everyone was instructed to set their clocks back before they went to sleep.

He stayed up and waited for the time, for the time that time officially drifted.

Looking up at the stars, he remembered he was looking back into time.

The light landing on earth this second was ancient.

And in the spring, when they might see each other again, he flying there or taking a train or driving, he would have to give the hour back again in any case.

Time was distance, distance time.

He was here and she was there.



Seconds passed.

### Leap Day

They broke up then on leap day over email, sending ever-shorter messages back and forth by hitting the reply button until the final word "stop" was the final word.

They left the subject field blank except for the abbreviation for reason, re:, which multiplied with each reply to one another so, at last, the space read: re:re:re:re: etc.

Each of them, miles, apart paused a moment to read again what each had written on the screen, the fingers poised about to send the other this next leap.

Four years later, all the reasons for doing what they did are lost to them, the email program purged, but this extra day returns to both a surplus sadness.

**F**

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## Sixth Annual Poetry Contest Winners

### Poetry

(Judged by Ronald McFarland)

#### First Place

"The Green Spider"

by Susanna Childress

Susanna Childress's poem, "The Green Spider," was the easy prize-winning choice. McFarland was taken right away with the quotidian point of departure and the spider's point of view and then with how Childress quickly leaps to horrendous events, Madagascar and Utah, seemingly encountered at random—and then back to the ordinary, irksome yet mind-absorbing event involving the bank teller and the octogenarian. And yes, he was captivated by the humor of the piece as well. He admires the mental agility of this poem, the mind at play, and appreciates the pleasant convolution of the syntax.

#### Second Place

"Carnival"

by David Krump

McFarland admires David Krump's "Carnival" for its quick movement and how it begins at the supposed café where "I" would like to see "you," then slips away into the world and beyond. Especially appealing to him are the "aging father," who checkmates his son, the prospect of laughter doing somersaults across the grass, and the keen ear of this line: "a cricket plays the wicked piccolo of its legs."

#### Third Place

"Little World, Flitting Away"

by Sally Molini

McFarland proposes Sally Molini's "Little World, Flitting Away," as the 3<sup>rd</sup> place winner partly because he enjoys her intertextuality, so to speak, with the Alice in Wonderland material. This poem strikes him as playful and thoughtful at once. The intrusion of the statement about cancer seems oddly effective, but he can see how some readers might find it *simply* (therefore objectionably) intrusive.

## The Green Spider

I will take your mind off the things you think of only  
in the shower—space cleared by an egg-shaped soap turning over  
in your hand, by the white tile, the wet sheets down your

length. You might have thought of the seven children  
in Madagascar whose parents were taken with no  
explanation, the children walking each day

past the prison until one of them lobbed  
a stolen fish through the bars for his mother, for which  
he was shot: once in the hip and once in the ear. Or

perhaps the woman in Utah who buckled her daughter in  
for a ride to find the girl's father, her cheating husband,  
catching up with him outside a paint store and running

him over, and backing up, and running him over,  
and backing up and running him over until, according  
to witnesses, he stopped screaming and lay, spilled

as the canisters of Alaska Bay Blue purchased for his new  
home. I will even take your mind off the teller in your mother's bank  
who swiped \$3 from accounts late on various afternoons

for over a year and would've made a clean break but for  
the octogenarian who hit the bank president over the head  
with her purse for nine weeks of miscalculations

and the \$27 she could not do without. Today the chamber  
of your shower is hallowed with the smell of lathered hair, equal parts  
ginger and goat's milk, and though I find no joy

in deceiving you, I will: so small, translucent and green you'll forget  
these things, the slow crimp they might have made in your understanding  
of peril and need so that instead you'll bend close to it

and stare, think how intricate the world is, how delicate  
and composed, motionless on an inner curtain.

## Carnival

I'd like to see you this way: in the café beside  
the busy skirt of the waitress and a steady  
sun on the chubby child's head. We'll order eggs  
that arrive like broken atoms and coffee dark

and formulaic as all our evenings below these hard skies.  
We'll sip it hot and make little remark  
while, shooting from the city's center, silver trains  
and time depart, point by point, to the far towns

and tired stations of our simple stories. I'll tell you  
everything, while the cargo passes from Eden  
to Nod and a little boat works the wind, whipping it sick  
in the harbor: one yellow sail, small

against the blue world. In a nearer park, a bright girl discovers  
flight through the sudden song of birds, an aging father  
checkmates his son, laughter somersaults across cut grass,

I'll push my empty plate aside and slide my solid hands  
across the checkered plastic tablecloth to assure  
you: *See? You are you again—flesh and spine—not even  
half the ghost you thought you were.*

## Little World, Flitting Away

*"As wet as ever," said Alice  
in a melancholy tone.*

I leave my all-or-nothing tide  
and swim to a fresh-pebbled shore —  
the Sea Mink, Deepwater Cisco  
and others are there, not surprised  
to see a human arrive.

"Sixty years ago it was rare  
for you to know someone  
with cancer, and now your kind  
are at sea in a downpour,"  
says the Pallid Beach Mouse,  
who talks of territorial wars  
and tries to dry my clothes  
with the implacable past.  
The Dodo tells me history isn't  
rational and calls for a race.  
His last days spent in a fairy tale  
resort, a Seaside Sparrow  
claims running is pointless.  
Nothing to say, I count the lost  
but soon lose track,  
too many creatures these days  
ripe with passage, nature's  
wind-bruised weave at its thinnest,  
death, last proof of change.



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## Sixth Annual Prose Contest Winners

### Nonfiction

(Judged by Jo Ann Beard)

#### First Place

"Obsidian"

by Kisha Lewllyn Schlegel

"This is a tender and strange essay about grief, loss, geology. Strange in the best possible way – nothing is resolved, but much is revealed, through beautiful language and fine rendering of detail: A rock with cheekbones, cameras in the sky, rabbits smoking cigars, a child's reflection in the curve of a casket. There is subtle humor in here as well, astral projection, and other surprises. Its power is in its brevity and restraint, and in the clarity of the detail." - Jo Ann Beard

## Obsidian

ob·sid·i·an | b'sid n | (n.)

*Of felsic lava, the igneous rock cools in the margins;*

Every August, the Georgia heat stinks like halitosis. The acrid breath hangs on you. Clothes stick to skin, particularly between awkward, pre-adolescent crevices: the folded belly, lumpy chest. Only the rocks around our mailbox seemed to cool the body. As a kid, I would slide bare-legged onto the stone lap, and feel the rock pores suck heat from my thighs.

Before he died, my father gathered those rocks out of gorges, embankments and caves from Cheyenne to Enid to Amicalola Falls. Mom called them souvenirs because he wasn't a geologist. He was a historian who routinely organized records of the past. He filed these rocks at the bottom of the driveway, organizing the exact records of the moment he found them: the place, time and weather archived into a physical mass.

The fist-sized oval limestone was classified next to flat granite as big as the mailbox, then the compressed clay and chinked quartz, and the most beautiful, the obsidian, the size of a head, with its polished black surface.

I held the obsidian on my lap, and stared into the rise and repose that formed a small nose and mounded cheeks. While most kids played on the slip n' slide, waded in the oily creek or stuffed crabapples into the storm drains, I sat at the end of the driveway holding a rock.

*darkened by silicon dioxide, it is reflective;*

When I was seven, I liked to talk to myself in the mirror, but most of the time, I just stared. I liked to look at my face until the features separated into my family: grandmother's widow's peak, maternal birthmark on my neck. I could even see what my father had left behind: inky eyebrows, ancestral Cherokee cheekbones Welshed white. With so many borrowed parts, I couldn't believe that I was in there. I could not understand how I inhabited that interesting and awful body. I felt without and within it all at once.

I had stopped staring at myself for some time when my friend's New Age mother started talking about astral projection. I didn't like the term, and didn't care for her much either, but one night as we ate delivery pizza she nonchalantly explained, "Your body is just made of energy. Without the body, the energy has to go somewhere."

I stopped chewing, wondering what she knew about it.

"Have you done it," her daughter asked.

"No," she popped her gum, "not yet."

My pensive friend tapped the table with a fork as she continued with

questions, "So when the body dies, is that what happens? The energy goes somewhere? Where does it go?"

Her mother ascended the stairs, shaking her wrists above her head, her bracelets ringing like bells as she proclaimed, "Everywhere! Everywhere!"

That night I went home and tried to project above my body. I lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, attempting to force the inside out. I squeezed my eyes and held my breath, but it was impossible to do what she said. I could not leave my body.

Instead, I went back to the mirror and stared until the parts became my family, until I could see that my face wasn't just mine. I stared until I did not feel alone and could begin to imagine what I could not believe.

*metastable and forming conchoidal fractures like a clamshell;*

I came home from church one afternoon and decided to hate god. Another kid must have told me not to because it suddenly occurred to me that I could.

I stood in the backyard, beneath the loblolly pines, held up my fists and swore at god like I had seen people do on my favorite television show, *Dallas*, where you could hate and look good while doing it. When JR shot himself off-camera, Bobby's eyes bloomed with hate. And long before that, when Bobby got hit by a car, Pam cried up at the hovering camera and let her mascara run. As the theme song swelled, she screamed rather than say what no good Texan woman would dare, "I hate you god. I hate you."

Of course, she didn't know that Bobby would come back the next season; that it was all a bad dream. She had forgotten that on *Dallas* people return from the dead.

But I would not scream. I would fearlessly chant those unspoken lines until god knew I was serious. I stared into the pretend camera hanging between the pines and said, "I hate you god. I hate you." I focused my anger at the sky where the clouds rolled left, shape-shifting into fruit, old men, rabbits smoking cigars...

and suddenly I forgot what I was going to say. I lost my lines and my motivation. I was a bad actor who couldn't imagine god. And I couldn't hate someone I didn't know.

Discouraged, I walked to the end of the driveway where I sat on the rocks and began to tell obsidian what I knew about not hating god. With obsidian, I could explain everything including the roly-poly's curl and how fuzzy caterpillars relayed the way the season would finish (a band of black and it would be cold, no band and it would be warm).

I began to explain, but couldn't. The cicadas clicked; the males shook their tymbals - a surging, mournful song of *now-now-now-i'm-here-here-here-come-here-here-here* until each call obscured the low hum of rush-hour traffic

behind our house. Next to my knee, frantic fire ants carried the segmented bodies of other ants into concrete ground holes. I had nothing to say. I didn't know where to begin. And I wanted to know. I wanted to remember what his voice sounded like. I wanted to know where he went.

*used as a scalpel, the split edge cuts a wound molecule-thin;*

His black casket was lustrous under fluorescent lights, and I could see myself in its reflection: a girl in a corduroy jumper, hair pulled tight into a knotted bow – a five year old who would soon be six and would not cry until she was nine, would not say the awkward word Daddy until ten, and would find his wallet at eleven, the prescription card for lithium tucked behind his driver's license – the license defining him more than memory could... Eyes: Hazel; Hair: Black; HT: 6'; WT: 170.

I reached for the girl in the reflection. She reached back.

The adults circled and patted our heads telling us, "he's not in there; he's in a better place."

The diminutive casket-girl pulled at her stocking. I stared without blinking until a stranger picked me up, and I left her in the curve of the casket. She stayed with my father who had broken our childhood golden rules: Look both ways before you cross the street; Hold someone's hand.

After the car hit that December morning, his bipolar body couldn't decide. The brain depressed and died while the body went manic with life.

They capped his surviving corneas onto another man's eyes, and when I could still remember their hazel hue, I searched for them in passing men – the checker at the grocery store, waiters, even old men on park benches. When I couldn't remember them anymore, I looked in the rock, and the rock looked in me.

*this will diminish trauma, allay scaring.*

When the charcoal clouds smudged the sky, the cicadas went quiet. Ants disappeared for good; it started to rain.

I closed my eyes, and traced the rock relief with my fingertips. I accumulated the edges as if his life were archived in the stone. One fracture formed the widow's peak; another cut a jaw line; the broken base a neck; the divots his eyes. I rubbed until I could see him as clearly as my mom saw him the night after he died. She was wide awake. He sat on the bed with his back to her as if waiting for a bus. She said his name. He turned and smiled. Then he stood, and walked down the hallway, just out of view.

I pressed my thumbs along the nacreous cheekbones, feeling the weight of what had gone. **F**

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## —Contributors' Notes—

**William Bernhard** lives in Seattle and is the Web Editor for *Poetry Northwest*. His poetry has recently appeared in the *Portland Review* and he has recently enrolled in the University of Washington's MFA program.

**J. Lorraine Brown** is the recipient of a Massachusetts Professional Development Grant and a Vermont Studio Center Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in such literary journals as the *Cumberland Poetry Review* and the *North American Review*. In 2005, United States Poet Laureate Ted Kooser selected one of her poems for his nationwide newspaper column, "American Life in Poetry" In 2006, she won the Pacific Northwest Writers Association Zola Award.

**Susanna Childress's** debut volume of poetry, *Jagged with Love*, was selected by Billy Collins for the 2005 Brittingham Poetry Prize as well as by University of Southern Illinois University-Carbondale for the Devil's Kitchen Literary Award. She recently graduated from Florida State University with a PhD in Creative Writing and teaches as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Hope College in Holland, MI.

**W. Todd Kaneko** received his MFA in fiction writing from Arizona State University, where he was Fiction Editor for *Hayden's Ferry Review*. New stories are published or forthcoming in *Passages North* and *Roanoke Review*.

**Amy Elizabeth Dixon** is an undergraduate at Hollins University where she is studying music and welding. She would like to thank *Fugue* for giving a young writer a chance to share her work.

**George Drew** was born in Mississippi and raised there and in New York State, where he currently lives. *Toads in a Poisoned Tank*, his first collection, was published in 1986; a second, *The Horse's Name Was Physics*, in 2007 (Turning Point). Drew was the winner of the 2003 Paumanok Poetry Award, and the 2007 Stephen Dunn Poetry Award. He also is the runner up for the 2007 Louisiana Literature Poetry Prize.

**Kate Duva** has been published in *Hair Trigger*, *The2ndHand*, and *Flashquake*, and she was a finalist in the 2006 Chicago Guild Complex prose competition. Her writing and visual art can be seen in the *Duva Diaries* at [www.kateduva.blogspot.com](http://www.kateduva.blogspot.com).

**Shannon Finck** is an M.F.A. student at Georgia College and State University, living only five miles from the home of the late Flannery O'Connor in Milledgeville, GA and working on a thesis in Creative Nonfiction with Dr. Karen Salyer McElmurray. She also studies poetry with Alice Friman and



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Laura Newbern. Her poems have previously been published in *Map of Austin* and in *The Sandhill Review*.

**Rebecca Morgan Frank's** poems have been published or are forthcoming in such journals as *Georgia Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Sou'wester*, and *Calyx*. She is co-founder and editor of the online journal *Memorious: a forum for new verse and poetics* ([www.memorious.org](http://www.memorious.org)) and the Associate Director of the Blacksmith House Poetry Reading Series in Cambridge, MA. She teaches at Emerson College in Boston.

**Marissa Fugate** grew up in southern Kentucky. She received her MFA in fiction from the University of Arkansas and is currently working on her MA in literature at Boston College. "Song of the South" is her first publication.

**Michael Gibbs** has been a freelance illustrator since the early '80s. After majoring in architecture for a year at the University of Maryland, he attended Pratt Institute as a photography major, switching to illustration in his final year. His work has been featured in books on illustration and design skills, including *Information Graphics and Visual Clues* [Rockport Press] and *Step-by-Step Graphics*. Clients include magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Worth Magazine*, *Consumer Reports*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Diablo*, *Chicago's NorthShore* magazine and *InfoWorld*; corporations such as Wachovia, United Airlines, Verizon, IBM, Sears, American Airlines, CitiGroup and Oracle; institutions including Johns Hopkins, the IMF, BET, American University, and World Bank; publishers like Harper Collins, Dell Books, TOR Books, Ziff-Davis and Random House; newspapers including *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Hartford Courant*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and *The Bermuda Royal Gazette*; and associations such as the American Federation of Teachers, ULLICO, American Society of Industrial Security, The American Bankers Association, and many others. He has also done posters for theater, notably the Pittsburgh Repertory Theater, The Virginia Opera, and the Pittsburgh Opera. His artwork was also used for the logo of *SenArt Films*, producers of such films as *The Station Agent* and *Fog of War*.

**Gail Giewont** received an MFA from the University of Pittsburgh. Winner of the *Many Mountains Moving* Poetry Prize and finalist for the Lynda Hull Memorial Prize in 2006, her work has been published recently in *Slipstream*, *PMS*, *Natural Bridge*, and *5 AM*. Gail teaches eighth grade English in Virginia, where she lives with her deaf dog, Radar.

**Colleen Hollister** was born in Los Angeles and is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama. "Conversation," her first published story, was recently nominated for inclusion in *Best New American Voices*.

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**K.A. Holt** lives in Fort Worth, Texas, where she currently works at a public library. Her poetry has appeared in *American Literary Review* and *Allegheny Review*. She is a graduate of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston.

**Megan Linnet Knight** lives in Iowa City, Iowa, where she received her MFA from the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa. A lecturer in UI's Rhetoric Department, she teaches courses in rhetoric and creative nonfiction. Her work has previously appeared in *Iowa Woman*.

**David Krump** is a current Ruth Lilly Fellow. He attends graduate school at Oxford. His poems have appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Poetry*, and *Verse*.

**Jeffrey Levine's** second book, *Rumor of Cortez*, was nominated for the L.A. Times Book Award in Poetry. He's a past recipient of the Larry Levis Prize, the James Hearst Poetry Award, the Missouri Review Award, the Kestrel Prize, and the Transcontinental Prize from Pavement Saw Press for his first book, *Mortal, Everlasting*. New work appears in *Agni*, *Harvard Review*, *Ploughshares*, *National Poetry Review*, *Barrow Street*, *American Letters and Commentary*, *VQR*, and elsewhere. He is Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of Tupelo Press.

**Michael Martone's** book, *Michael Martone*, is a collection of contributor's notes published in the contributors' notes section of various magazines. His newest book, *Racing in Place: Collages, Fragments, Postcards, Ruins*, will be published in 2008.

**Andrew Malan Milward** is currently studying at the Iowa Writer's Workshop and holds degrees from the University of Arizona and University of Missouri, where he was the Senior fiction Editor of *Center*. He is working on a novel as well as a collection of stories about his home state of Kansas called *The Thirty-Fourth Star*, to which "Two Back, 1959-1973" belongs. Stories from the collection have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *The Literary Review*, *Nimrod*, *Failbetter*, *Confrontation*, *Arts & Letters*, and *Columbia*.

**Sally Molini's** work has appeared in various literary journals such as *32 Poems*, *LIT*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Best New Poets*, the *Chattahoochee Review*, *Margie*, and *Calyx*. Online journals include *Mad Hatters' Review*, *Tattoo Highway*, *Boxcar PoetryReview*, *Eclectica*, among others. She is a graduate of Warren Wilson College's MFA Program and lives in Nebraska.

**Jed Myers**, a Seattle poet and singer/songwriter, was recent guest editor for *Chrysanthemum*. He won Writers' Haven's 1st Prize in 2004. His work has been featured on NPR, and has appeared in various journals and collections including *Poetica*, *Drash*, and *Tattoos on Cedar*, and on the web in *Friends Journal*, *Satya Center*, and *Tempozine*. He hosts NorthEndForum in Seattle, and is ever reachable at [medjyers@hotmail.com](mailto:medjyers@hotmail.com).

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**Doug Ramspeck** directs the Writing Center and teaches creative writing and composition at The Ohio State University at Lima. More than 200 of his poems have been accepted for publication at journals that include *West Branch*, *Connecticut Review*, *Rattle*, *Seneca Review*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Confrontation Magazine*, *Hunger Mountain*, and *Rhino*. He lives in Lima with his wife, Beth, and their seventeen-year-old daughter, Lee.

**James Reiss's** most recent book is *Riff on Six: New and Selected Poems* (2003). His debut novel, *Façade for a Penny Arcade*, will appear in 2008. His work has appeared in such places as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Poetry*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. His first book, *The Breathers*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. His fourth, *Ten Thousand Good Mornings*, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Former college president, **Dr. Lynn Veach Sadler**, has published widely in academics and creative writing. Editor, poet, fiction/creative nonfiction writer, and playwright, she has a full-length poetry collection forthcoming from RockWay Press. One story appears in *Del Sol's Best of 2004 Butler Prize Anthology*; another won the 2006 *Abroad Writers Contest/Fellowship* (France). *Not Your Average Poet* (on Robert Frost) won a *Pinter Review Prize* for Drama Silver Medalist in 2005.

**Kisha Lewellyn Schlegel** received the 2005 Richard J. Margolis Award. She began writing "Obsidian," while a fellow at the University of Montana's Environmental Writing Institute, where a teacher instructed her to write about a "magic object." This essay is dedicated to him, as his assignment helped her map the "field effect" of yearning, and triggered a series of lyric essays, another of which won the 2007 *Nonfiction Prize* from *Dislocate*.

**Nina Schuyler's** first novel, *The Painting*, was published in October, 2004 by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. Her poems, short stories and essays have appeared in *Tumbleweed Review*, *Oxygen*, *EM Literary*, *Watchwordpress*, *Red Weather: A Journal of Poetry and Culture*, *Transfer*, *Sojourn Literary Arts Journal*, *New Town*, *Newsday* and other publications. Her short story, "The Big Break" placed second in the 580 *Split Fiction Contest* in 2006. Her short story, "Road Trip" placed second in the *Big Ugly Review Fiction Contest* in 2006. Her short story, "Don't Mess with Mr. In Between" was a finalist in the Lewis "Buddy" Nordan Fiction Contest, sponsored by *Nidus*, a journal published by the University of Pittsburgh. Two of her short stories have been nominated for *Best New American Voices*. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Health*, *Newsday*, and *Stanford* magazine. She earned her MFA in fiction at San Francisco State University. She currently teaches creative writing at the University of San Francisco and San Francisco State University and is finishing a second novel.

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**Thomas Selinsky** was born in Philadelphia in 1983. He served as a heavy machine gun and TOW missile launcher operator in the United States Marine Corps infantry from summer 2001 to summer 2004. He is currently an undergraduate at Florida State University in Tallahassee. This is his first publication.

**Jim Shepard** is the author of six novels, including most recently *Project X* (Knopf, 2004) and two story collections, including most recently *Love and Hydrogen* (Vintage, 2004). His short fiction has appeared in, among other magazines, *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, the *New Yorker* and *Playboy*, and he is a columnist on film for the magazine *The Believer*. A third story collection, *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, will be published by Knopf this September. He teaches at Williams College and in the Warren Wilson MFA program.

**Rob McClure Smith** has published stories in *Chelsea*, *Confrontation*, *Other Voices*, *Barcelona Review* and other literary magazines. He was a previous winner of the Scotsman Orange Short Story Award. He teaches at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois.

**R. T. Smith's** newest books are *Uke Rivers Delivers: Stories* (LSU, 2006) and *Outlaw Style*, a collection of poems to be released by the University of Arkansas Press in late 2007. His work has also appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Zoetrope*, *Best American Short Stories*, the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, and in four volumes of *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best*. He edits *Shenandoah* for Washington and Lee University, where he also teaches writing and Literature. In 2005 he served as Philips Family Distinguished Professor of Rhetoric at Virginia Military Institute.

**Matthew J. Spireng's** full-length book manuscript, *Out of Body*, won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published in 2006 by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. His chapbooks are: *Young Farmer*, 2007, Finishing Line Press; *Encounters*, 2005, Finishing Line Press; *Inspiration Point*, winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition, 2002; and *Just This*, 2003, Hampden-Sydney College.

**Melanie Rae Thon's** most recent book is the novel *Sweet Hearts*. She is also the author of *Meteors in August* and *Iona Moon*, and the story collections *First, Body* and *Girls in the Grass*. Originally from Montana, she now lives in migration between the Pacific Northwest and Salt Lake City, where she teaches at the University of Utah. Her new work appears in *Pushcart Prize XXX*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2006*, *Pushcart Prize XXXII*, and at [www.drumlummon.org](http://www.drumlummon.org).

**Danielle Grace Warren** is a MFA candidate at Hunter College. She lives in Harlem, NYC.

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**Jared White** recently finished his studies in the MFA program at Columbia University, where he received the Academy of American Poets' University Poetry Prize 2005. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Barrow Street*, *LVNG*, *MiPOesias*, *Square One*, *Western Humanities Review*, and *Meridian*, where he was runner-up for the Editor's Prize 2007. He was also a finalist in the *Southwest Review's* Morton Marr Poetry Prize competition last year.



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