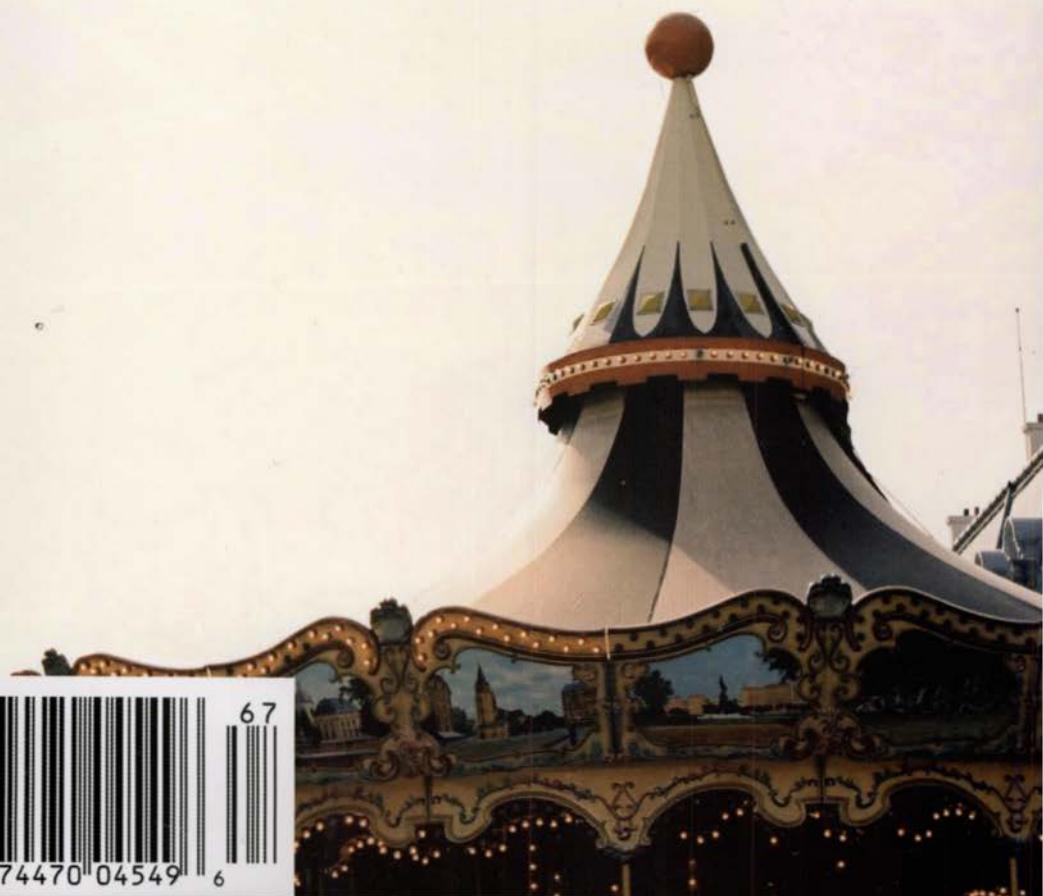


No. 37

Summer - Fall 2009

FUGUE

\$8.00



67



0 74470 04549 6

FUGUE



PAST CONTRIBUTORS

Steve Almond
Charles Baxter
Stephen Dobyns
Denise Duhamel
Stephen Dunn
Michael Martone
Campbell McGrath
W.S. Merwin
Sharon Olds
Jim Shepard
RT Smith
Virgil Suarez
Melanie Rae Thon
Natasha Trethewey
Anthony Varallo
Robert Wrigley
Dean Young

PROMOTING THE
DIVERSE LITERARY
VOICES OF NEW AND
ESTABLISHED
WRITERS SINCE 1990

WIN

We award cash prizes and publication for prose and poetry in our annual spring contest. Past judges include Mark Doty, Rick Moody, Ellen Bryant Voight, Jo Ann Beard, Chris Abani, Rebecca McClanahan, and Tony Hoagland.

SUBMIT

Fugue invites submissions of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, interview, and book reviews. *Fugue* is also home to The Experiment. Visit us on the web at <http://www.uidaho.edu/fugue>.

SUBSCRIBE

Individual

1 year/2 issues – \$14
2 years/4 issues – \$25
3 years/6 issues – \$35

Institutional

1 year/2 issues – \$22
2 years/4 issues – \$40
3 years/6 issues – \$55

FUGUE

PUBLISHED BY THE MFA PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO
200 BRINK HALL • UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO • P.O. BOX 441102, MOSCOW, IDAHO 83844

FUGUE

200 Brink Hall
University of Idaho
P.O. Box 441102
Moscow, Idaho 83844-1102

“There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they’d never happened before; like the larks in this country that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.”

—Willa Cather, *O Pioneers*

FUGUE

Summer-Fall, Vol. 37

Editors

Andrew Millar and Kendall Sand

Prose Editors

Craig E. Buchner and Mary Morgan

Poetry Editor

Laura Powers

Advisory Board

Kim Barnes
Carolyn Forché
Charles Johnson

Antonya Nelson
Sonia Sanchez
Robert Wrigley

Li-Young Lee

Staff

Elizabeth Altepeter
Dan Berkner
Nicholas Cooley
Ivy Grant
Jennifer Leeds
Zackery O'Connor
Deborah Ricks
Cory Stauffer
Kate Watts
Danielle Yadao

Jacklinn Bennett
Carly Chandler
Krystle Goding
Steve Heim
Bryan Nowak
Amanda Jane Pellett
Ciara Shuttleworth
David Thacker
Lindsay Wilson
Jennifer Yeatts

Matt Zambito

Faculty Advisor

Ronald McFarland

Fugue (ISSN 1054-6014) is a journal of new literature edited by graduate students of the University of Idaho's English and Creative Writing programs. *Fugue* is made possible by funding from the University of Idaho English Department and Creative Writing Program and is published biannually in the winter and summer.

Subscriptions are \$8 for a sample, individual copy, \$14 for 1 year (2 issues), \$25 for 2 years (4 issues), or \$35 for 3 years (6 issues); institutional subscriptions are \$22 for 1 year, \$40 for 2 years, or \$55 for 3 years. Make checks payable to *Fugue*. Add \$4 per year for international subscriptions. For back issues, please see the Website for details.

Submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1. All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please address submissions to the appropriate genre-specific e-mail address. Responses will be given by e-mail. Submissions in more than one genre should be e-mailed separately. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. All contributors receive payment and two complimentary copies of the journal. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), but we will not consider multiple submissions. All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again. Send submissions to: fugue-prosesubmit@uidaho.edu or fugue-poetrysubmit@uidaho.edu.

Cover art, *Carousel* by Matilde Travassos [2009].

©2009 in the names of the individual authors. Subsequent rights revert to the author upon publication with the provision that *Fugue* receives publication credit.

Printed by The Caxton Printers, Ltd. in conjunction with University of Idaho Creative Services.

Table of Contents

Editor's Note	6
Fugue's Eighth Annual Contest in Prose and Poetry Winners	
Poetry —Selected by BH Fairchild	7
Danica Colic, <i>A Note Left on the Counter</i>	8
Sarah Barber, <i>White Live Doves for Funerals</i>	9
NonFiction —Selected by Patricia Hampl	10
Iraj Isaac Rahmim, <i>How I Came to be an American</i>	11-30
Annie Nilsson, <i>For Milk, For God's Sake</i>	31-38
Poetry	
Hyejung Kook, <i>Another Life</i>	39
Scott M. Bade, <i>Fire</i>	43
Paul David Colgin, <i>Range Psalm</i>	44
Ben Debus, <i>The History of Missing Person 375</i> (<i>Last Seen October 18, 1923</i>)	50-53
L.D. Van Auken, <i>The Pulaski Skyway</i>	65
Francine Witte, <i>Still Life With You Never Coming Back</i>	73
Kerry James Evans, <i>Colloquium</i>	82-83
Elizabeth Langemak, <i>Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird</i>	101-102
Fiction	
Sara McKinnon, <i>Pills You Can't Take with Martinis</i>	40-42
Katherine Conner, <i>The Dancing Imps of Riverfest</i>	54-64
Jack Garrett, <i>It's 5 Feb.</i>	66-72
Scott D. Pomfret, <i>Transport</i>	74-81
Katie Flynn, <i>Under These Circumstances</i>	84-85
Essay	
Diane Bush, <i>Nova Luna</i>	86-100
Interviews	
"Totally Different Territory": an Interview with Aimee Bender	45-49
"A Marvelous Creature": an Interview with BH Fairchild	103-109
Experiment	110
Michelle Disler, <i>Bond Anatomy</i>	111-112
Contributors' Notes	123-125

- From the Editors -

Welcome to *Fugue* #37. We proudly present the winners of *Fugue's* Eighth Annual Poetry and Prose Contest. Our judges, B.H. Fairchild and Patricia Hampl, graciously took time out of their lives to lend keen eyes, and we thank them. We would also like to thank all those who entered their work - without so many fresh, exciting pieces of writing, we would have no contest.

On the cover you see a carousel - or part of one, the peak. What we found immediately beautiful about Matilde Travassos's photo is how much we don't see. We know ornate horses exist under there, people milling around, a whole city, but our imaginations must do the work. Hemingway would say "tip of the iceberg" - we say "tip of the carousel." The writing in this issue begs the imagination to fill the space underneath the words, and we hope you'll admire the craft evident in these pieces as much as we do. In each story we chose, the characters hold secrets and leave something unsaid - a haunting past, guilt about abandoning loved ones - but these generous authors ensure that the reader senses it anyway. The poetry here manages to illuminate the iceberg from the inside, so that when we examine seemingly small points - a campfire, an old folk song - we find a giant world waiting beneath the surface. And our Experiment, a collection of Michelle Disler's pieces about James Bond, paints three very different horses with facets of Bond's character.

We received continued invaluable support from the University of Idaho and its English Department. Ron McFarland, Deb Allen and Kurt Olsson deserve personal thanks for individual attention in moments of minor crisis. Thanks go to our readers for their insightful comments and for handling our increased submission volume. Laura Powers, poetry editor for the last two years, graduated in May and will move on to new ventures, so we send her off with a sincere thank you. Special thanks to upcoming poetry editor Jennifer Yeats for contributing her interview with B.H. Fairchild, joining an interview with Aimee Bender. Prose editors Mary Morgan and Craig Buchner will step up as Co-Editors this fall, and we look forward to the changes they have in mind (see *Fugue's* beautiful website as example).

Both Kendall Sand and Andrew Millar have graduated, and they present this, their last issue, with the reluctance of parents sending a child out of the house into the world. Subscribers and readers, thank you for continuing to take such good care of *Fugue*, and submitters, keep feeding our journal with your talent, the lifeblood of our editorial work.

Kendall Sand and Andrew Millar

Eighth Annual Poetry Contest Winners

Judged by BH Fairchild

First Place:

“A Note Left on the Counter”

Danica Colic

“I like the way in this poem the commonplace is elevated to a level of extraordinary significance. The imagery at the close is especially inventive, and the domestic drama suggested there is intriguing.”

-BHF

Second Place:

“White Live Doves for Funerals”

Sarah Barber

“The poem is ahead of the game immediately because of the strength of its concept. But the circular structure and narrative clarity are also impressive.”

-BHF

Danica Colic

A Note Left on the Counter

I am not a shallow person, I am trying
to explain something—

there is nothing wrong with attending
to the neatness of things, with believing the nights

spent awake and worrying were not wasted, nor
the pains we took, scouring the aisles every weekend

for the things our homes needed and guarding against
what grows in liberal vents and the overlap of shingles.

There is nothing wrong with enacting gratitude;
we were trying to apply life some meaning,

a coat of paint, small loving additions and constant
repairs, the smell of new things, the plastic peeled

from new things was a way of loving life and
prayer for fair judgment, a mark of how much

we valued what was given us—breath, limbs
and shelter that we never took for granted.

And when we hauled our carts to the parking lots
we saw the edges no one had time to care for, the grass

allowed to grow waist-high in red coronas,
and we could love it, also, and know its beauty.

Once my young son went too many days without washing
and the yeasty scent of him stirred in me such a feeling

I could have carried him to bed in my jaws like a cat.
We sent our children to bathe and we cut the grass;

there is order and there is everything else against us
and order to defend; we cared deeply, and more than you.

Sarah Barber

White Live Doves for Funerals

According to *Birds of North America*,
where they occur is everywhere all year.
The tips of their wings collide on take off.
From there it's ultraglide in white

at an angle impossible to follow, though
we'll all get our chance to try. For now,
we bob our heads when walking, coo,
and nest—which is why we were circling

the block, like good birders partly
concealed though not quiet in the car
since Journey was encouraging us not to stop
believin' those men would stop kissing

outside the gay bar beside the electric pole
we'd pulled up alongside because I wanted
those *White Live Doves for Funerals*
to hang in my study. As if "dove"

were just another word for a commoner bird—
eats grains, small seeds—and my dead
wouldn't care for the rise of a pigeon.
And though mourning makes for small

intelligence on the upper branches,
when did I stop believing? Generally,
for memory's sake, there are trees, a building,
at least a rock to mark the season by until

the birds end up where they started.
And then it's ultraglide—in black because
my eyes are bad. These birds are mad
atwitter. Where they occur is everywhere.

Eighth Annual Nonfiction Contest Winners

Judged by Patricia Hampl

First Place:

“How I Came to be an American”

Iraj Isaac Rahmim

“This powerfully searching memoir comes from a world now much in the news. But while this is a compelling fact, it is not the work’s decisive strength. In fact, writing from the immediacy of political crisis can be a pitfall. Rather, the author brings admirable shapeliness to this history and presents a valuable personal story that reveals the appeal of doctrinaire affiliations and gives us a fresh chapter in the on-going American legacy of immigrant memoirs. The quality of the writing in the face of large political and historical themes is a model of candor and simplicity. It would be easy to fall into either mawkishness or polemic, and none of that happens here. This piece has the makings of a book length memoir, and this fuller promise is yet another of its great appeals.”

-PH

Second Place:

“For Milk, For God’s Sake”

Annie Nilsson

“Annie Nilsson’s piece is a moving elegy, elegantly-scripted in its use of its central image of the glass of milk requested by a dying father, and denied by the narrator-daughter. This piece, deeply and genuinely lyric, thoughtful and belonging to the ancient and enduring tradition of autobiographical confession and personal reconciliation, is a work at least as much of poetry as of prose. The delicacy of the author’s treatment of fame—such a vexed American subject—is remarkable as well. A beautiful work, composed of noble restraint in the midst of abiding grief.”

-PH

Iraj Isaac Rahmim

How I Came to be An American—A Memoir

For some years after I arrived in America to study, when my mother called from Tehran, which was every two weeks on Friday no matter what—illness or shortage or war or bombs—I made her put the phone down and ring the outside doorbell to our house so that I could hear my dog, Lady, bark in response.

The calls were mostly very early in the morning US time. Sitting in my small apartment, alone and in the dark, with rented or old and cheap furnishings, I would listen to the voices on the line: my mother, my very young sister who was eleven when I left, Lady, my grandfather who had moved to Tehran after the death of my grandmother, and family friends and relatives if they were there.

I imagined the living room. A modern one, or Irooni-passand—to the liking of Iranians, as we say—with gleaming, speckled marble floors and wallpapers of intricate green-and-pink-and-white designs and large, colorful rugs from Tabriz and Kashan and Isfahan with medallions at the center. As a child, I imagined the medallions to be islands at war whose fractal-like borders I defended using toy soldiers and boats and little plastic tanks and, also, whatever was handy—inverted sneakers as aircraft carriers, nail clippers as swift boats—in bloody battles where I always conquered the savage enemy.

During my mother's calls, I saw glass everywhere: the main door to the living room made of obscuring, Corsican-type glass with a light green frame; tall windows opened to the front balcony upon which we sat, mesmerized by the small scalloped blue fountain with water spouting out of the open mouth of the duck statue at the top, its neck craned skyward; and chandeliers, large ones, gaudy ones with hundreds of crystals refracting light from a dozen bulbs within. Bright, bright, bright, I imagined my family, bathed in Iran's rainbow of colors as they congregated around the phone, passing the mouthpiece around, and as I lay in bed in my darkened, single room, just awakened by the harsh rings thousands of miles to this side of the globe.

I left Iran at sixteen, by coincidence only months before the 1978 Revolution. I first flew to Oklahoma City which I did not like and, then, to San Diego where I lived alone and went to a public high school some miles away from my apartment.

It had become fashionable among the circle of my friends and that of our comfortably middle-class family for teenage sons and daughters to go on summer language and culture trips to Europe and, then, America to study. This was common among the well-to-do Jews and Christians of Tehran, many of whom had become successful through study and hard work after freedoms of residence and education and housing granted them during the liberalizing years of the Pahlavi dynasty.

In the manner we begin to remember the best of what is far in time or place

and smooth the sharp edges of our own history, I idealized my childhood and our family during those phone calls. In reality, we were Jews in Moslem Iran on the verge of upheaval and my parents did not get along. It was not long after I left Iran, in fact, that the Revolution succeeded, my parents divorced, and my father moved out of the house.

Our house, or Our Own Home, as my mother calls it to this day, over thirty years later, is the first house we bought. I was thirteen then. Before that, we lived in a rental flat, a fine one, the entire fourth floor of a large walk-up with bright, rounded mosaic steps and rooms connected in a circular pattern and a large balcony that had great southern views of the city and the nearby, rooftop movie theatre. And before that, the fourth floor of another walk-up, only a block away, this one owned by my father's parents.

Our Own Home was both larger and further away. Thirty blocks to the north of the rental flats, it had a yard and a spacious basement garage with separate areas for cars and laundry and maid's room and storage and the central heater and the heater's fuel tank. And two stories on top. We lived on the first floor and rented the second to a succession of families with young children, often foreigners in Iran on business or diplomatic assignments.

Our Own Home did not come easily. I do not mean financially—though that too—but the actual construction of it. During the post-OPEC embargo growth and inflation years of the mid-seventies, many houses were built by developers, called *besaaz-o-befroosh* in Persian, meaning *build-and-sell*, a phrase with a negative, shyster-like connotation as the developers were rumored to overcharge and cut corners. My parents, both doctors and not business savvy, somewhat hapless in the real world, had much trouble with the builder of our house. One day we would find Plexiglas used instead of glass for all windows, the next a cheap heating system, the third dangerous and substandard electrical wiring and, on the fourth something else, and so had to bring in relatives and friends, the other side of the family with *useful* skills, appliance merchants and architects and traders, to fight and cajole on our behalf, the way negotiations are done in the Middle East, with argument and threats and sweet talk and calling each other “Moslem brother” and giving each other tea with sugar cubes and swearing up and down to Imam Ali and prophet Abolfazl, that *I will walk away*, that *I cannot afford anymore*, that *I will go to the Ministry*, that *I will tear up the contract*, that *I will break your legs*, that “Moslem brother, do you not have shame, do you not have a mother and a sister? Would you have your own mother and sister tremble in the midnight cold of winter or slave in the noon scorch of summer, shielded only by a sheet of Plexiglas?”

And somehow, after all, when we came back the next week, we would find the Plexiglas replaced with half-centimeter thick glass panes and the wiring fixed and the heater now a high quality German one.

When the year of construction passed, after the workers wearing shirts heavy with splattered paint and feet caked with mortar moved out, even with a cracked walkway or two and dust everywhere, we had Our Own Home, our very first.

I discovered the basement garage and its driveway, a large one to the side of the front yard, set a few feet below the rest of the house to match the sharp incline of the street. The driveway was long enough and barely wide enough for me to ride my small bike round and round for seemingly hours, making revving sounds at the turns as though in a speedway, rubber squealing, feet dragging, me laughing hard and gunning for the poor maid who stumbled beneath a hill of wet white sheets. Later on, after we got Lady, she would join in, barking and chasing me step-for-step as I made my oblong path.

A colleague of my mother from the Hospital gave Lady to us not long after we moved into our house. She was one-and-a-half years old then. A Dachshund, more black than brown, she had short legs, a sausage-like body, bottle nose, and a pointy tail always poised for the wiggle. (“Poor thing, she’s a mix,” a well-dressed woman told us once in the street because of her blend of colors, when I had taken her for a walk.)

Her bark was loud. When the doorbell rang, she went mad with excitement and, from behind the intercom, a thief would surely fear the worst: a very large guard-dog with canines the size of elephant tusks, ready to attack. At least that is what we imagined.

Very quickly, in a matter of days, Lady became a part of the family. I went to school reluctantly in the mornings and hurried back to spend more time with her. In school, I thought and talked about her often, as I imagine my sister did. At nights, Lady went from lap to lap as we watched TV, even though we had been warned against it by family friends.

“You don’t want a lapdog inside the house, do you?” they would say, perhaps a residue of the Moslem belief that dogs are *najes*—impure—seeping through despite the secular circle of our family and friends. *Najes* or not, my sister and I allowed her to sleep in our beds, in fact welcomed it—a habit that stayed with Lady.

She turned out to be finicky about food. Not knowing what to feed her, my mother organized herself and our maid into the routine of two skewers of ground beef a day, grilled on our new indoor gas kabob-maker which my father came to resent—a feeling that, in short time, morphed into a dislike of Lady on his part, one which Lady reciprocated. I cannot remember trips to the vet, but we must have taken her, if not for annual checks—which we probably didn’t know about—then at least when she was sick.

I took her for walks, or rather, not knowing how to control and discipline her, for huffing, dragging runs as she pulled at the leash in all directions and zigzagged with abandon. I did not walk her often enough, which made me continuously burdened with shame and guilt. Lady, like all dogs, had no sense of her own dimensions and

so, outside the house, attacked all comers small and large, other dogs on leashes or strays who had grown to be naturally fearful of everything. Dogs several times her size. One's who, we joked, could make a breakfast morsel out of her with a bite, if they chose to.

Iranians were not then, neither are they now, a dog-loving nation. When we took Lady outside the house, there were incidents from time-to-time. Once in *Park-e-Shafagh*, the beautiful, manicured park near our house, with a library and many pathways and alcoves and benches, a woman yelled at me.

"What is this thing you bring out to show off?" she shouted. I remember disbelief at first, that my feeling of affection for this sweet beautiful creature was not shared by another, then heat rising up my neck in anger and, lastly, fear for Lady, wondering how I would defend her in the street if she was set upon by an angry, self-righteous stranger.

Truth is, we did show her off to those who came to our house. With children of relatives and our own friends, we would run from room to room, Lady chasing and slipping behind us, cartoon-like, at the turns on the marble floor, her nails clicking, her tongue flailing and moist droplets of spittle swinging from her lips. My mother would slide her long fingers over Lady's fur, or invite guests to do so, first with the grain, then against it, lifting a brush of short hair along the path of their hands. Lady herself demonstrated as well when strangers came. She ran around guests, wiggling like a comma, almost tripping them up, slapping their ankles and shins at high frequency with her muscular tail. Once a family friend, a surgeon, picked her up, laughing at her joy, and she promptly peed on his well-pressed, summer suit. That's another thing Lady did: she peed when very happy or very afraid.

Najes—pronounced na-JES—meaning unclean or ritually impure is an important concept in the Islamic theology and culture, particularly the Shi'ite denomination which is dominant in Iran. So much is considered najes that the religious Iranian spends quite a lot of energy protecting himself or herself from contamination: urine, feces, sperm, corpse, blood, dog, pig, unbeliever, wine, liquors, the sweat of camels and those who eat impure things.

Najes elements are considered to be of two kinds. *Ein najes* are those that are intrinsically najes and which can never be purified. They include blood, unbelievers, urine, and the like. The other kind of najes is that which has come into contact with *ein najes* but can be, with appropriate action, cleansed: a solid object having touched the hand of an unbeliever or the snout of a dog can be washed; feet that have, inadvertently, stepped into feces can be purified. On the other hand, fluids touching *ein najes*, say rain water that has rolled off the skin of an unbeliever, become *ein najes* themselves and can never be cleansed and, so, must not be touched by the believing Moslem.

As with all faiths, there are Moslem thinkers who go beyond simple acceptance

of commandments and explore the reasons for such directives or, at least, impose a grid of logic upon them. For example, they explain dogs, even domesticated ones, to be, by nature, hunters and consumers of sperm and blood as well as carcasses of dead animals. One source (www.balagh.com) explains that they “are not particular about where they leave their excrement and have been known to even relieve themselves on human legs.” The reasoning continues by describing various diseases dogs suffer from including a variety of bacterial infections and parasites and, as such, even if trained and possessing a degree of intelligence and feelings, they “are impure animals and should not be kept inside the homes of humans.”

For Shi’ite believers, especially fundamentalists, there are rituals of avoidance and of cleansing (*taharat*). Rituals that, when internalized, cause the world, the outside world, to be seen more as a collection of threats to be fended off and the inner sanctuary of one’s home, a fortress with thick, towering walls of brick and stone, a place of temporary respite in which to take refuge.

A handful of times, when the door to the yard was left open inadvertently, Lady would run away, chasing smells and phantom objects and movements in the street and we, when we found out, sent out search parties, running ourselves in all directions, mad with fear and foreboding, our hearts pounding through our throats, until she was caught, grabbed, picked off the ground and brought back while still flapping joyfully, and was yelled at, kissed, tickled, belly-scratched, caressed, yelled at some more, and fed, the house door now locked and double locked and checked even more carefully to ensure that she remained inside our high walls, where she was safe.

Once she escaped as I, by coincidence, walked home from somewhere, daydreaming as usual. She had already run through Modabber, the four-lane avenue near our house, when I came across her. She ran to me and I, startled, to her. I lifted her off the ground and continued towards the house and saw my mother running in her slippers, her hair and housedress, normally proper and severe, flailing in the wind. Later she told me how she had not recognized me in her panicked state and, seeing a stranger get in Lady’s way and pick her up, had murmured to herself, “God give you a long life, young man.”

The guilt I felt about not doing my duty by Lady, of not taking her outside for walks often enough—in part due to laziness—was amplified by her escapes and the sight of her exhilaration when free, even though our house was clearly more loving than what awaited her outside. This ate at me at all hours. I remember watching a movie on TV late one night about an untrainable white horse trapped in a muddy ditch and a mute boy, about the two of them helping free each other from binds. I sat in my darkened bedroom as the final credits rolled, holding Lady tight, crying and promising that I would take her for walks the next day, and everyday thereafter, feeling more guilty when the next days passed without my honoring this pledge.

*

As a Jew growing up in Iran, privileged though I was, protected and private-schooled and doted upon, I still had occasion to become aware of my own najes-ness. There was the time, in my early teens, when I was introduced by a family friend to another boy in Kermanshah, the small town in western Iran that my mother came from and in which we vacationed for a month most summers.

"He is the grandson of Mirbod?" the new boy exclaimed as he refused to shake my hand.

"Yes," our common friend said, a bit hurriedly before changing the subject to football or some such, all three of us aware of the implication of me being from that particular family of unbelievers.

Or the time our third grade teacher, in my mixed-religion elementary school, singled out a Jewish boy for a scolding.

"Your notebook. Look at this," he held it up the tattered object and flipped through its scratched-up pages as a demonstration, now yelling. "Are you not ashamed, so dirty and messy with bad handwriting and full besides with writing on both sides of every page? They say you Jews are dirty and cheap and this is why. You get a new notebook or don't come to class tomorrow."

As all this happened, me and the other Jewish student in our class of twenty or so, she a top student as I, did what we could to minimize ourselves in shame, shoulders hunched, necks bent, heads down, hands under the table.

These and a couple of more, not too many personal incidents, admittedly, but quite enough. Over the years, these experiences were confirmed by others' stories—the family elder, a high school teacher, whose tea cup at school was washed and kept separately from others' so as to not contaminate them; the father who, on a daily basis, was name-called and beaten on the way to school; the grandparents whose home and sanctuary was raided and looted with every blood-libelous rumor and who, to the end of their long lives, marked their past less with the calendar but, rather, with sorrowful events—"No, that was the year they poured into the Jewish high school and killed the Rabbani girl," they would remind each other.

The treatment of Jews and Christians as najes, to be kept down and separate, has a well-documented, thousand-year history in Moslem Iran and, indeed, as late as into the 20th century, there were rules instructing Jews to not go out in rain lest they dirty rainwater that might come into contact with a believer or, even, enter aquifers; to not ride horses or build houses higher than that of Moslems; to wear yellow or beige ribbons—called *vasleh johoudi* or Yid-patches.

Closer to the present time, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual guide of the Revolution and the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic until his passing in 1989, the "entire body of the unbeliever is unclean; even his hair and nails and body moisture." Attempting to put a more scientific gloss, certain Islamic scholars note, for example, that unbelievers eat pigs whose body fats, according to "Moslem biochemists," behaves in the human body as that of carnivorous animals and that "many people who eat carnivorous animals tend to be vicious, lack humane attitudes toward other people, are ready to kill others without reason, and even eat the meat

of other humans.”

Traditionally, unbelievers have been understood to include Jews and Christians though, as Islam evolves, some Islamic scholars claim exemptions for the followers of monotheistic religions and assert that unbelievers should include only atheists and polytheists. I have, myself, a dear friend, a very religious Iranian Moslem who has no qualms about shaking hands or greeting me with the traditional Iranian kiss-on-the-cheeks or even being in the swimming pool with me. Theological discussion aside, as with all matters of belief, I have learned to be grateful to inconsistency—that wonderful, civilizing human trait which allows us to live together in peace, principles be damned.

In America, after my own dash for freedom, now with leave to do as I wished, to have my own car and go to the school of my choosing, to live where and with whom I wanted, I was of two minds, at first welcoming, cherishing the distance from Iran and my family and then, when the reality of loneliness and insecurity descended, I began to hide in my own mind, pushing emotions aside, inside, deep into quiet and darkness. I repeated mantras, played back memories, dreamt of achievement and approval, of accolades and ovation, all in grand loops repeated over and over again, filling my time and my mind with their false warmth. Always a methodical thinker, I took refuge with dry abstraction, with reason and logic which I wielded like cold surgical knives, gradually tearing at all true human connection, particularly with my family, as if fighting off septic foreign bodies.

I came to resent my mother's calls. They prodded. They excavated and brought sadness up to the surface for a few minutes every two weeks, ten or fifteen at the most, after which I was left with the dial tone and the dark and a days worth of burying and thumping and stomping all that remained back into its former non-descript grayness.

The calls reminded me of home and childhood or, at least, with the passage of time, the idealized imprint of *Our Own Home*, memories that came at me as a swarm. The painting, by a patient whose life my father had saved, based on a Khayyam poem, representing him as a gray-bearded old man in profile, a young beautiful muse on one arm, a chalice of what we understood to be wine in the other hand, both of them seated at an arched windowsill illuminated by a longingly far yet full bright moon. The felt 1970s-style poster, in my bedroom, of a horse rising on its hind-legs beside a cliff, its mane fluttering in the wind, its nearly psychedelic colors fluorescing in the dark every night as I fell asleep as if guiding my dreams away to another reality. The black-and-white photograph of Theodore Hertzl, also bearded and in profile, one that hung in our dining room for all my childhood and from which my psyche constructed many a nightmare over the years. The beautiful, cherry-wood, floor-top, old record player with a separate, lit, glass-front cabinet where my parents kept a few mysterious, shapely bottles of liquor, more intriguing to me for the bright colors of their contents, reds and greens and wheatish, than any aromas or taste as

I do not recall the bottles ever brought out nor their contents drunk. On top of the record player sat a rectangular walnut-wood cigarette box given to my father by the Iran Tobacco Company when he worked as a doctor in their employee clinic. Fumes rose from the box whenever we opened it, delicious ones, and inside lay an array of cigarettes, divided by length and thickness and design, some filtered, others not. These, too, I never saw taken out save for a tip-toe afternoon raid by some friends and I when twelve or thirteen, those years of early youthful experimentation and disobedience, which resulted in headaches and nausea and some vomiting though we still delighted, when our stomachs had settled, in our new, outlaw ways.

It was in that living room, sitting by an oil heater with the soot-filled pipe that plugged into the wall that my sister and I listened to my mother who, seemingly, never tired from her job as a doctor and professor, read philosophical poems by Khayyam and political ones by Eshghi—whose name, meaning *of love*, was delicious to our ears. Also spiritual poems by Hafez and Saadi and verses about love by Iraj Mirza in whose first name, the same as mine, we all delighted and whom we adopted as our own for this reason alone, and epic poems by Ferdowsi who we knew Had Saved the Persian Language a millennium ago with a single volume of poetry after the attack by Moslem Arabs, one to which he committed thirty years of his life. From time-to-time, Mother would also bring out newspaper clippings, yellow, crumbling strips with poems by young, obscure writers, many about love of a mother for her offspring which left us in tears. She also had tales, long, epic ones, of young love and bravery, of travel to lands of mystery such as the one about Malek Jamsheed, a young prince flown far on the back of a simurgh, a wise, magical bird, which he quietly fed with his own thigh-flesh when their food ran out so that they could continue their journey.

This is what I re-lived during those phone calls and, also, the most joyful of memories prompted by the sound of Lady's loud barks. As I listened to her scream with abandon, I wished she would never stop, I could almost feel her fur rubbing against the phone; her long, wet nose extended through the mouthpiece and pressed at my face; her nails, uncut for weeks, snapping at the bare floor. Perhaps, aside from the child-like love of a pet, her voice signified for me the full range of contrasts all our lives were confined in, an expression of self and alarm amidst domestication—the dissent of the comfortable.

Less than a year after coming to the US, having finished high school and started at a local junior college and, suddenly, poor because of the Revolution and the resulting cut-off of funds and, also, without admitting to myself, tired of loneliness, I moved into a small one-story house near my college owned by a young, guitar-playing mechanic. He had two rental rooms, the other taken by Doug, a free spirit of a man, all I remember about whom is his curly hair and the time he, tentatively and awkwardly, asked if he could hug me when I was in tears because my first American girlfriend was leaving me.

In this house I learned what a *keg* is (the first couple of times I heard the word I mistook it for “cake”) and invented my first meal, the kind single men cook. The recipe included one pound of ground beef and a one pound bag of mixed frozen vegetables (a novelty and great convenience), all fried, sautéed, or otherwise drenched in oil until the meat was brown and the vegetables soft. I sprayed the concoction with large quantities of salt and pepper and piled it all, mountain-like, onto one of two foot-diameter plastic plates I had bought, both of which, amazingly, survive still. I then devoured the mix with ketchup and a loaf of Wonder Bread.

Years later, while a graduate student in Santa Barbara, I shared an apartment for a month or two with a young Vietnamese student who had just arrived into the US. He also made such a pile but of pig parts—ears and intestines and snouts and the like—along with spices, unfamiliar to me, that he had brought from home, and sat eating slowly for hours every night. Asked if he wanted to join me and my friends somewhere, dancing or to a movie, he would nod down for a second, look at us and then his food, and say that he would rather eat. Perhaps this was his way of remembering his homeland, even devouring a bit of it nightly. As for my invention, I cannot claim the same. Mine was the meal of the unskilled, the kind you make when mother is away, the kind battered and beaten into taste by the power of salt or whatever sticky bottle of sauce is found wedged in the refrigerator door. The kind of meal others in my family, such as my uncle Parviz, learned to make when they dashed out in their youth—in his case, to be a soldier.

I never felt comfortable in the house of the young mechanic even though I stayed for close to a year. Being in such close quarters with Americans so early on made me feel even more like a foreigner, a stranger, a misfit. My English, just fine in the school setting when discussing laws of geometry and physics, became broken and tentative on the living room couch. My personality, always vacillating between outgoing and shy with little in-between, became the latter to the extreme as soon as I turned the key into the door knob. When my roommates had guests, I felt like an exotic showpiece, a kind of pet who needed to behave properly in order to represent his kind in good light. I took to hiding in my room or going for long drives or, at best, standing in a corner during keg parties.

In truth, I longed to fit in and find friends, ones to whom I would automatically be acceptable—no questions and explanations about my accent and my birthplace or my wavy hair and dark complexion. During drives, especially at night, I took to giving rides to hitchhikers—sometimes lying and going out of my way—wanting the company, knowing that being at the wheel now put me in control, that in my car, in the dark, this was now my land and the hitchhiker, often solicitous and grateful, the stranger.

The concept of *najes* is, in some ways, the nasty cousin of *gharibeh* or stranger.

In conversation and life, a *gharibeh* (pronounce gha-ree-BEH) can be feared or loathed, one to be cagy around and to hide ones valuables and even family from.

(What if he is a foreign spy, a government agent, a competitor, or one from the wrong political or religious persuasion?) According to Iranian paranoia, in a restaurant run by a gharibeh, one might not be served the choicest of foods. (My father: "Hotel Laleh' restaurant? No. I will take you to another place. The best in town. The owner, his children are my patients. They will tend to us very well.") A gharibeh rug merchant might not show you the best rugs and will cheat you besides. A gharibeh taxi agency will send you for a ride for sure. In a gharibeh sandwich shop one is sure to get food poisoning. Not being particularly street smart, we had learned, early on, that one does not go shopping for major items alone but, rather, with a relative or close, trusted friend who can detect substandard merchandise or a bad deal.

So from a gharibeh we also hide, even though he is not najes, this time more for fear of harm or being tricked.

Persian literature treats the matter of gharibeh, in mythical tales and poems and stories. (A recent Google search for the word "gharibeh," in Latin letters, yielded over 17,500 hits.) When I mentioned to my mother that I was writing about the concept of gharibeh, she recited from memory these verses from Molavi, the topic, apparently, quite fresh in her mind:

Be silent, be silent, so as to not be found out,

Oh Lord, surrounded we are by strangers, to the left and right.

On the other hand, Iranians have a soft heart for the weak gharibeh, the gharibeh obviously out of his element, a lost traveler, the injured, the suffering. Once it is established that someone is no threat, doors open, assistance is given, voices, hardened by years of defensiveness, become gentle and sing-songy and solicitous. Iranians commonly laud themselves for being the most hospitable of people in the treatment of strangers and stand for little discussion or dissent on the subject. Indeed, there is a wonderful phrase in Persian for treating of the guest: *mehman-navazi* meaning, literally, *caressing of the guest*.

The year of my stay at the house of the young mechanic along with the 444-day Hostage Crisis, when 52 US diplomats were held hostage in Iran, made me feel even more of a stranger in America, all my efforts at assimilation notwithstanding—some admittedly misguided: the cowboy hat and the afro and the blue fishnet halter-top shirt—and, so, I fell in with a cultish group. Students, also Iranians, men and women from very young to the middle aged, mostly single but some married with a young toddler or two, they had organized into a communal life of study and cooperation and the youthful, idealistic goal of making a better world.

I first learned of the group when I bumped into another student named Hassan in our college administrative office and he invited me to dinner. There was a large group in the apartment he shared with a cousin and others, young men unshaven, young women unadorned and simply attired, arrayed irregularly around a make-shift drop-cloth with simple dishes, rice and steaming stews and hot flat-breads and plates

of radishes and parsley and sliced onions and feta cheese. It was a noisy affair, people tearing off large pieces of bread and eating from shared platters, shouting from this side of the room to the other, stuffing large morsels into their mouths, chewing with relish, joking and laughing, and talking about Iranian politics or that of America in ways unfamiliar to me. They were attentive and warm to me though none asked about my religion nor, obviously, my nationality. In a strange way, in a manner that I had never known till then, whether in Iran as a Jew or in America as an Iranian, I felt simply accepted.

Not long after, I agreed to move in with Hassan and his roommates, even though they lived many to a small apartment and miles from my college.

Back home in Iran, the war with Iraq, which was started in 1980, made life, already piled full of hardships after the Revolution and the Hostage Crisis, even more difficult. There were crackdowns and shortages and rationing of essentials and savage warfare and, at some point, mutual bombings of cities.

The news of the war from Iranian or Iraqi government sources were self-serving, untrustworthy, and, at best, inexact. Not knowing much about what went on with my family during this period—only fifteen minutes worth of updates every two weeks and even that filtered and softened by the normal lies and mutual half-truths which we told to spare each other—I made up stories in my mind. Told about the mini-fortress set up in the old basement where I biked with mattresses and clothes and food and water and darkened, blanket-covered windows and the move there when the missiles and the alarms became nightly, I painted my mother as a general leading the family, as if they were troops, defending the domain, the motherland as it were. I ascribed inhuman strengths of mind and character to her. I kept on recounting, to myself and to others, how, many years earlier, a servant, for no apparent reason, started calling my mother *colonel* until she—the servant herself—came to believe this and, one day, brought her conscription-age son to beg my mother for an exemption from service. I felt excited and was even envious. How, oh how, I would lead my troops when attacked. During phone calls, I could not acknowledge that they were in mortal danger. That would have required honesty and intimacy, honesty I did not have, intimacy I had lost since coming to America. I was in such denial of the fear and the danger that, when in mid-call, alarms sounded, all I could think of was how interesting it was to be there. Or when, once, bombs fell two blocks away, damaging houses on a street that I used to walk through every morning on my way to school while dribbling a basketball, the horror and proximity was lost to me, the event manifesting itself as a tale to be told to friends and classmates, possibly milked for attention.

Years later, when my sister arrived in the US, she told me about the paralyzing fear, the not knowing if any given night would be one of darkness and hiding, of sirens and ominous anti-missile defense fireworks, of the whistles of the notoriously inaccurate Iraqi rockets and the muffled thud and shaking of the ground and creak-

ing of the table legs and door jambs, of pieces of glass flying. They were all afraid: my sister, my mother, my grandfather, even Lady. "She used to get so scared when the bombs fell," my sister told me about Lady. "She would hide under our legs, trembling like leaves of the willow tree in a storm, often peeing herself."

In San Diego, the group life with my new friends gradually enticed me out of the stony enclosure I had constructed around myself. A good student, I applied myself and tried to fit in to their deliberate contrarian ways. I dressed in K-Mart khakis or old, unfashionable jeans and cheap long-sleeves with tails untucked; I shaved less often and, eventually, grew a beard.

I befriended Nasser the fastest. He was older—29 when we met. He sported a thick brush of a mustache and three-day-old stubble and nearly always wore a bulky green army jacket. He had been politically active in Iran before the Revolution and was arrested and even tortured before running away. This all made him very impressive to us youngsters and we sat around on the floor of the living room with our legs crossed and drank tea with sugar cubes and peeled oranges and listened to his reminiscences as children do to dreamy yet spooky fairytales.

"The best prisons are the older ones," he would say, "since the cells are less modern and don't have individual toilets and so you are taken out when you need to go. That way you get more exercise and pass notes and talk to prisoners in other cells."

"Better yet, in the old prisons, they stick more of you in the same cell so you get to talk and study together. We sometimes sang songs and celebrated events. We were *political*s—everybody knew this—and we got more respect even from the warden."

Lest we think of prison as a nice vacation spot, he told us about torture and torturers.

"The torturer is an animal," he said as we sat with our eyes bulging. "He has no political point of view; he just likes to inflict pain. A beast without a soul. The rule is, if you get arrested, you do not talk for twenty-four hours. You hold off. No matter what they do to you. That gives time to your comrades to vacate the safe-house after they notice you are gone. Then you talk to stop the torture."

I remember sitting there and listening, running fantasies of self-sacrifice and greatness in my mind, of safe-houses and escapes and the glories of being tortured, of resisting. I tried, so hard, to imagine what an actual safe-house in Tehran might look like—a small apartment with metal bars on windows and walk-up stairs and wall inserts as hiding places. All darkness and dust with not a shiny surface to be found.

He told us about varieties of torture. He showed us the bottom of his feet. "You won't believe this," he said, "but getting whipped at the sole of your feet is the worst. You don't pass out from that."

Another one was *the Tango*. "They shove hot hard-boiled eggs up your rectum, and you jump around. They cook you from the inside."

I remember thinking that Nasser looked like a revolutionary should. He was

short and stocky and hairy. When he ate, food crumbs got stuck on his mustache which he rubbed out, downward, using the palms of his square, workman-like hands. He loved hot bread right out of the bakery, and so every morning at four or five he would get up, and sometimes wake one of us, and strolled in his slippers to the little Vietnamese bakery two blocks away. They made one type of bread only, a small roll, and sold it very cheaply. We would get a large paper sack full for breakfast and ate a steaming one each as we walked back and talked about politics.

Largely to please him, I began to read what my new comrades read, photocopied tracts or book chapters on politics and philosophy and economics, and began to use their phrases, peppering my sentences with *bourgeoisie* and *petit-bourgeoisie* and *proletariat*, excitedly discussing the difference between a Revolution and an Uprising, between Feudalism and Capitalism, between Socialism and Communism. I shared in the chores, shopping and cleaning, and even began to cook proper food with some difficulty and after one disaster involving celery stew.

Poor as we all had become due to cut-off of funds from our parents after the Revolution—most of us children of doting middle-class parents from whom we had been separated—we shared resources and economized fanatically and, truthfully, enjoyed doing so very much as it brought us closer. Not long after I moved in, we pulled up stakes and rented a three-bedroom house in a poor section of San Diego, one walking distance to a coin-operated laundromat and a store so we would not, all of us, have to have cars, one where, regardless of the lease rules, more of us could live and study together.

From time to time, we staged artistic and political programs for the local Iranian community, trying to attract supporters and recruits. There were chorus songs and badly-written revolutionary plays of the Chinese “tractor opera” variety, brief readings of opinion-pieces, and meals prepared in our home, simple meals full of short cuts and cheap, high-volume ingredients that somehow retained enough authentic aroma and texture to be reminders of home. These programs were usually organized by Moin, the artist of the group, though we all ended up, regardless of skills, singing in the chorus and serving food and taking tickets and acting in the plays. It was all bad, even the venues which were unfailingly unsuitable—usually a large classroom at the local university or community college. But people came, dozens, sometimes hundreds, and we counted them and ran around proudly and patted ourselves on the back, happy to be disseminating our ideals, happy to be *recruiting*. I am not sure, in retrospect and given the small Iranian community in San Diego at the time, why they came. Perhaps it was *because* the community was small, that there were not, unlike today, any Iranian shops and restaurants and cultural centers and, so, good or bad, we were a link for them to the homeland left behind, a place to speak Persian in groups, to eat Iranian food en mass, to make believe, even if for a few hours, that they belonged to a larger, familiar society.

For me, aside from fulfilling the youthful need to believe, it was a desire for averageness, for belonging, that my friends satisfied the most. Their attitude towards religion was not unlike mine—that it is a man-made institution often causing more

harm than good. Rarely did my Jewishness come up in discussion and I was more likely to be razzed for my grades which remained high no matter how many political study sessions I attended or demonstrations, for this or that cause, I marched in. I remember one time, as I drove a group to an anti-monarchy demonstration in Los Angeles, someone, a new acquaintance, remarked on how no Jews took part in the Iranian Revolution. He was, promptly, taken to task by one of my comrades, with *how do you know; did you, personally, attend all demonstrations and struggles against the old dictatorship; how could you tell Jews apart from non-Jews; did they wear special garments or markings, perhaps, that only you notice?* And during all this, as the offender retreated and was cornered in the back seat of the car, I sat quietly, tending to the wheel and the road, listening, pleased not having to defend or explain my kind and, in fact, not being involved at all.

In Iran, open maltreatment of Jews and their stereotyping, rare during my childhood—at least in the prosperous, polite society which used to hold power—made a comeback during the early post-revolutionary years.

There were property confiscations and arrests and, even, an execution. Government mouth-pieces were, as they are now, filled with veiled or open anti-Jewish invective and misinformation whether serializing “the Protocols of Elders of Zion” or branding anything they did not like as “Jewish,” a laughable example of which was calling the Smithsonian, in which, apparently, a learned conference on matters related to Iran had been held, a “famous Jewish institution in Washington.”

I remember reading an anguished article in print by a leader of the Jewish community, arguing, less than forty years after the European Holocaust, that Jews have the right to exist, basing his analysis on the passages in Qor’an stating that Jews *are* to be discriminated against. Who would the Islamic Republic collect the *Jizya*—the tax on the unbelievers—from if Jews were not to exist? the author argued.

In fairness, no minorities were spared and, in fact, Bahais took the hardest hit as their religion is illegal in Iran. Their leaders were tortured and executed, their properties confiscated, their children not allowed to attend universities, and their cemeteries desecrated and built upon by the government.

There were reports, from friends and family, about the private Jewish high school I had attended, one founded by Iraqi Jews who had taken refuge in Iran after 1948: that it was taken and subdivided, that the front portion with the large yard, the one we used to exercise in, and the newer buildings next to it were given to Moslems and renamed Qhods (the Arab word for Jerusalem), that the back section with the small synagogue was reserved for “minorities” and assigned a succession of religious Moslem principals who led the students in forced chants of “death to America” and “death to Israel.” (In this same school—as documented in a recent Dutch film—a young Jewish girl was told to leave the class after she had gone out in rain as, wet, she could, now, be a source of najes should she or water from her body physically touch a Moslem.)

There were other reports of incidents small and large: a young cousin whose religious friend dried his hands on his trousers before shaking hands lest he be sullied. ("In that environment," my cousin says to me, "we were happy that they would even shake hands with us.") The distant relatives kicked out of their flat by their homeowner once he found out their religion. "What if water from your pipes leaks into our house," he had said. Or the delis, mostly owned by Armenian Christians, that, starting in 1988 and for many years, were ordered to be marked as "religious minority" businesses lest they be frequented by unsuspecting Moslems and cause their contamination.

Neither did animals do well in the Islamic Republic. According to the journalist Azadeh Moaveni, in 2001 Tehran's police declared that it had "seriously risen up against perpetrators of corruption" who included shop owners selling pets such as dogs. There was, at the same time, a fatwa against poodles, considered bourgeois lapdogs, by an Iranian Ayatollah who spent a portion of his Friday sermon condemning dogs. "Happy are those who became martyrs and did not witness the play with dogs," he had bellowed, referring to those killed in the devastating eight-year war with Iraq who had been spared the lapdog trend.

This is what had settled in my country of birth during those same years I searched for normalcy in America—a certain adolescent mean-spiritedness, the kind jamming the face of the weak and the defeated into the ground, the kind that issues fatwas against animals, the kind that forces Jewish children to participate in "death to Israel" chant-fests, the kind that builds large, soulless structures atop the lone Bahai cemetery in Tehran.

Years passed. Years of revolution and zeal and warfare during which my family, as Jews, were not easily allowed to leave Iran. For nearly twelve years, my mother was only a dark voice, whispering into my ear for fifteen minutes every other week. A voice that, as the years went by, I could no longer connect to a physical person who existed in the normal dimensions. Rather, to me, she had become an apparition, without mass or substance.

During those years, my sister grew into and then out of her teens and went to the university and then to medical school. My mother became ill, was treated, and then recovered. Relatives died. The house, Our Own Home, was sold and replaced, in our conversations, by a new one in a part of Tehran I could not recognize no matter how many times they explained.

They sent pictures. Of gatherings and birthday parties with their gradually diminishing circle of friends and family—those left behind, those still alive. Of summers in the garden, their faces aglow with the warmth of the sun; of winters, standing in front of bare trees whose branches were loaded down with snow.

Sometimes it was just them—mother, sister, grandfather, Lady—sitting on the couch, posed with frozen smiles. Sometimes they looked into a distance, their eyes

refusing to reflect the light of the flash.

The background of these pictures I recognized for a while. Our yard and the old scalloped duck fountain, now some of the blue paint chipped off. Our green-and-white patterned marble floors. Our living room couch. Then I began to not recognize the backgrounds. The rugs changed. The couch was first repainted and re-upholstered, and then replaced with another, bulkier one. The wallpapers morphed from flowering, lace-like whites and greens and pinks to vertical lines the color of rust that reminded me of prison bars. Then the house changed and all that I recognized were the people, and them just barely. That is all I had: the voices once every two weeks on Fridays, and the photographs with the frozen faces once or twice a year, arriving in air-mail letters with blue and white chevron edge-markings, and it was so hard connecting the voices and the images to each other or to the persons I had lived with for so many years of my childhood.

They no longer took Lady out for walks. What would happen if she barked at someone or blocked their path or, worse, if she nuzzled a man's trousers or a woman's flowing, tent-like, black chador? I sit, even now, and shudder at her shrinking world, a protective brick-and-mortar life sentence, some square feet of yard with tall, thick walls. I imagine her sky, day or night, a suffocating rectangle of city gray.

Our group of Iranian students in San Diego, our little cult of the young striving for perfection—in the manner that most human endeavors, if not checked by reality, tend towards radicalism—became more ascetic in nature with time. Led by Nasser and another couple of charismatic characters, we searched for a higher plain and began to self-separate by gender and developed rules of no alcohol or smoking or sex or frivolity as these were difficult to defend openly—in the same manner that even supporters of free speech are uncomfortable speaking up for the right of the pornographer. All manners of complaints were resolved by suffocating sessions of criticism and additional restrictions. A female being distracted by too-hairy of an arm of a male resulted in the banning of short-sleeves and shorts; unexpected bare breasts in a film resulted in avoidance of most movies. I remember, especially, one trip to a 7-Eleven store to pick up a pack of cigarettes and a beer or two—before these were forbidden. As we parked our worn old Datsun in front of the well-lit store window, it was a new, young recruit named Ali—younger than me even, and fierce, coming from a fundamentalist religious background—who sharply questioned us, attacking our weakness, our *deviance*.

Our study sessions, once joyful explorations of the novel, became serious, dark affairs. In these sessions, I learned that there were workers—*real people*—and the owners of capital, freeloaders, those who pampered their children in houses of soft carpets and chandeliers and small televisions in their own room, those who held delicate pets at the end of colorful leashes as they strolled about in manicured parks. I learned that what makes humans superior to animals is that we have a soul

while they do not. I learned to care for some people and to hate others, people in the abstract, people as groups, people none of whom I knew or had met, people who were, by virtue of their birth into wealthy families, *reactionary*. I learned that there was an upward spiral of history and that I was a part of it, whether I liked it or not, and I had to choose. I learned that inaction was the same as fighting the spiral. These were complemented by meetings of *self-criticism* which now appear, in my mind, as well-lit confessionals in which we admitted, after some prompting, our errors of action and the evil of our family backgrounds—our intrinsic, original sin of being born to the wrong class—as we sat on the floor in large circles with our backs pressed hard at scratched-up, chalky walls.

We began to go outside only in groups as if others, those who did not see the world as we did, were a threat to us. We were careful around strangers or avoided them altogether as if we could become contaminated by contact with the wrong ideology. We kept watch on one another and protected each other from influences and from misbehavior. Once in a while, a member left the group and, to us, he became evil—shunned, banned, avoided at all cost.

It was during this period that I stopped asking to hear Lady's bark. Perhaps it was at first embarrassment of being found out for my child-like routine, or my way of letting my mother know that I had grown away, but later I accepted that animals are not as worthy as humans and that attachment to them—aside from that of a farmer to his productive herd—is a sign of one's birth into a *reactionary class*, the class whose sight was trained on the West—contaminated, intoxicated by the West—adopting its devious and corrupt habits.

Our families, also, became less important. Phone calls from grave-sounding mothers and fathers were dismissed offhand though they continued calling loyally. Letters, in that era of no email, were not answered nor anticipated with any excitement, and, in some cases, not even read. I remember once the mailman asking us to empty our mailbox; we had not done so in weeks. There were letters in there, many, wedged in and crumpled and torn in places, airmail letters from my mother among them.

With time, we also became more violent. As frustrated youth, far from the locus of events affecting our loved ones, we fought proxy fights none of which would make the world better or affect any outcome. We fought with Islamists and monarchists alike and, in time, all comers.

There was the time when, during a demonstration in Los Angeles's MacArthur Park, Nasser and a few others broke from the group and fell upon a middle-aged man they recognized from Iran and threw him into the park's man-made lake and jumped in after him and beat him as the rest of us cheered without being sure who he was.

Or the time when flag-waving, fatigue-wearing monarchists demonstrated in Los Angeles—in front of the Federal Building on Los Angeles's Wilshire Boulevard, no less. They were attacked by throngs of counter-demonstrating Iranian students from several groups and were chased to the middle of the boulevard. I still see well our celebration afterwards as if we had cleansed a meaningful piece of real estate from evil.

Sometimes the fights were simply borne of emotion as in the time the 18-year-old

sister of one of my comrades, Ebrahim, was arrested in Tehran at a demonstration. This was during a period when the Islamic Republic government was arresting any and all dissidents and there were daily reports of young people bloodied by club-wielding thugs, of five-minute-long show-trials by turbaned jurists, of mock executions, and of the rape of young, unmarried female convicts before actual executions. Ebrahim had taken the news badly, sitting up all night, pacing, chain-smoking, unsuccessfully dialing Tehran on the phone, and so, the next morning, at the University Walk where all groups set up tables with literature and propaganda, he raced to an Islamist who stood behind his table and punched him on the nose. The Islamist was small and fell over onto the walkway brickwork as if his legs were kicked out from under him. Blood streaked down to his lip and he had a surprised, fearful look in his eyes as we restrained Ebrahim who kicked air and screamed obscenities. "This is what you do to peoples' sisters," he shouted again and again. "I shit on your Leader's turban, you sister whores, you mother whores."

There was a feeling of being out of control to all this, of losing track of what we were doing and why. At some point, our little San Diego group even splintered into Majority and Minority factions—our own mini-*Mensheviks* and *Bolsheviks*. As laughable as this sounds in retrospect, we began writing tracts and treatises, in densely handwritten Persian, denouncing each other, posting photocopies of these on all walls of the University, or handing them out to any passerby who would take a copy.

This is what my search for normalcy had brought me to. I marched and waved flags. I shouted slogans and fought. I dreamt of sacrifice. Always in need of a logical ideology, I constructed complex, self-contained theories about the future and technology and the human mind and body and about love, love pure, undiluted by the physicality of the flesh. Theories with strong reasoning and inner consistency. I lived a life of the abstract.

In Tehran, bombs fell.

In Tehran, my mother was forced into the veil in order to keep her job as a pathologist and a professor. And so was my sister.

In Tehran, there were killings of government leaders and executions and the crushing of dissent. My sister was harassed in the streets of Tehran for wearing make-up, and my family was arrested for attending a wedding and kept in jail overnight and given lashes on their hands. Others, more distant relatives, great aunts and uncles among them, were tortured and had possessions taken for being Bahais—primarily their houses, as they were not wealthy: Their Own Homes.

In Tehran, my loved ones grew somber and fearful and old.

Over a decade passed, and Lady, too, grew old and then sick, and then the end. "Tuberculosis," my mother says. "She could not jump even as far up as the couch," she says. "We would lift her and let her sleep, her head on our laps, for hours."

At the vet for the final injection, the young doctors made promises with kind-

ness, in respect to my mother's position, to bury her somewhere beautiful behind the hospital.

"Her lungs were full of holes, you know," my mother says quietly and with sadness every time she repeats the tale, her eyes dark and focused far away as in so many of those pictures. This leaves me the image of Lady with many holes on her body too, her black-and-brown coat mottled by a spread of bullets.

It had been some years since our door-bell routine, years during which I taught myself not to care about so many things—to be strong, as I thought—least of all a dog. I remember the telephone call and an expression of sorrow on my part, but it was a formal reaction, the kind you are supposed to have in order to demonstrate that you care, of the I-am-saddened-my-heart-breaks variety. Perhaps my habit of hiding—acquired over so many years of alone-ness—came to use, me retracting into my own gray bunker. Or worse, perhaps, at that moment, there was no sorrow to hide.

Many years later, after my mother was allowed to leave Iran to attend a conference and to visit me, I picked her up from her day at the conference site and, making casual conversation to break our usual silence, asked her what she had had for lunch.

"A muffin," she said with unusual assurance in her voice, proud of her improving English which she had worked on in preparation for the trip, "with cream cheese in the middle."

"A muffin?" I asked.

She hesitated and straightened a bit of wrinkle in her coat, careful and exact, as always. "Muffin. You know, with raisins and hole at the center."

"Bagel," I said. "It is called a bagel."

"Oh," she thought for a moment and said, "so that's it. When, in Iran, newspapers used to talk about 'beagle-eating Jews,' this was it?"

"Bagel, mother," I corrected her pronunciation.

"None of us knew what a beagle was and how we Jews were supposed to eat it." She seemed slightly deflated, her voice a bit lower, her neck no longer proud erect, the joy of learning, that which has been much of the basis of her life, as a doctor and teacher, now modulated.

"Bagel, mother, not beagle. Beagle's a dog, a noisy one like Lady" I said, forcing out a chuckle, unwilling, with my usual relentless distance, to acknowledge the diminishment of the status of this sixty-something woman sitting beside me, or my own.

My brush with the cult did not, ultimately, last very long—two or three years at the most. What was required were a few sobering events—arrests in Iran and betrayals by leaders—and time, age, a bit of wisdom. Perhaps some of the advice from my parents that I had tried so hard to ignore was lodged somewhere deep in my mind, surfacing when needed.

I left the group home and, for some months, trying to regain my bearings, lived alone in a hundred-and-fifty dollar a month single bedroom apartment off the

red-light stretch of San Diego's major boulevard. This was all I could afford. The kitchen had cracked and missing tiles and grimed, crumbling windowsills. The living room rug was shaggy and orange-colored and alive with the occasional slug streaking through. The grass by the front door was stamped to the gray of the earth and, all around me lived single mothers, minorities mostly, whose many dark children played in the dirt-covered common area. It was as if the feelings of disappointment, of being betrayed and the resulting emptiness, had found physical manifestation in my new surroundings; as if I had, deliberately, selected this environment as a reminder of all I had left behind.

My friends did try to keep me and even, once or twice, visited my apartment but, eventually, let me be and, in fact, shunned me—as we had done to others who had left the group. Truth is, after the years of responsibility and of being cornered and criticized and after the more recent and somewhat violent upheavals, the benign neglect of my new surroundings suited me. That no one knocked on my door except monthly for the rent check was calming. I bought cheap used furniture, the kind with dust and history and dead roaches inside. I made a bookcase by balancing old watermarked wooden bricks and boards. I began to cook for myself, alone. And I kept on going to school. I studied hard and, in time, accumulated several degrees—practical ones, all in engineering—and went to work, trying to be productive and contribute in a more modest way, searching all the while for happiness and normalcy, as we all do.

Over a decade passed before my family could leave Iran and, gradually, one-by-one, they came and tried to build new lives. Even my grandfather came, spending the last few of his ninety-nine years in Los Angeles. Into a corner of his hilly California resting place I squeezed a fistful of dirt harvested from my grandmother's grave in the desolate Jewish cemetery in Tehran so that, in our imaginings, something of them would ultimately be together and something of her, who had died decades earlier, would follow us in this our latest journey. Truth is, as we immigrants come to America, as we assimilate—sometimes trying too hard, sometimes recoiling—as we also, like all people, graduate through the stages of wisdom—from youthful idealism to bitter cynicism to, hopefully, peace at the knowledge of our own small place in this world—we always look back at our lands of childhood with some sorrow.

Many things hurt when I look back at those years of loss. The distance. The emptiness and solitude. The phone calls. The letters opened late or not at all. The letters not answered. The years themselves.

And Lady. I feel sad that at some point I stopped thinking of her, that when I decided to save the world, and when I discovered my own normalcy and value through defining other beings as outsiders, when I decided that some beings were more worthy than others and that animals were without souls, I stopped caring about her, stopped asking mother to ring the doorbell, stopped listening for her muffled voice through that long wire connecting us across the continents. **F**

Annie Nilsson

For Milk, For God's Sake

My first memory of my father is also my first understanding of death. It happens when I am three years old. He has gotten the idea to pile us four young children and our patient, pregnant mother onto a houseboat for a week on Lake Champlain. One morning we are docked in a wooden Vermont town with freshly painted signwork and impossibly soft green lawns and, according to my father, a quiet monster living under the water. Kneeling beside me at the edge of the boat he describes its serpentine neck and tiny, birdlike head and tells me if I keep my eyes fixed on the horizon I might see it make its slow way from one corner of the lake and back again.

I peer out at the opaque water with this new secret lighting the inside of me like phosphorescence, and its blackness seems to stretch out infinitely, past time. With a child's earnest solemnity I creep out along the pier to examine the tall boats as they sway on the now enchanted waves.

I must have tripped. That's how they tell it anyway. I was running along the dock and I tripped. Though the memory I have, and it's clearer than that water, is of standing completely still, staring up at the hull of some massive ship and then slipping imperceptibly through the water. I have no memory of the fall. There is no splash, it seems, to alert anyone of what has happened.

Sinking down towards the bottom of the lake I stare up at the water's thin, bright surface and know plainly that I am going to die. That is the clearest point of the memory. That I will die, right then, that I will continue floating into nothingness and will never come up again, is at this moment a fact as translucent as water itself. I don't struggle. I don't attempt to swim to safety. I scan the water for lake monsters. The hull of a boat is a whale that will swallow me up.

There is a sudden rush of bubbles and the thick mass of my father appears, in slow motion, crashing through the water to rescue me. I am scooped into his arms and we make our way up towards the light at the membrane of the water. The surface breaks and the daylight floods in and the memory ends.

I do not die that day, but the knowledge that I could, at any moment, is tucked into my subconscious like a radish seed.

Last year every night before I could fall asleep I would think about my mother and I would think about my father. It was a ritual nearest, I imagine, to praying. Or maybe more like saying one's prayers. There was a compulsion about it, and a sort of automatic fulfillment. I'd hardly realize I was doing it, my mind scanning slowly over no real material but the fact of them: one living, one dead, and then my thoughts would slacken into a limp string of non-sequiturs, and I'd be asleep.

Throughout my childhood I did say my prayers. Every night nearly, silent, but with my eyes still open I would bless my immediate family. *God bless Granddad-up-in-Heaven, Granny, Harry, Una, Beau, Ben, Olivia, Kief, and Oscar.* Then, if I was feeling especially benevolent, or especially guilty or burdened, I would include various aunts and uncles, cousins I rarely met, former nannies, the family doctor. To make a clean sweep some nights I would add: *and all the people, all the animals, and all the souls up in Heaven, and everyone and everything, Amen.* I would finish with a Child's Bedtime Prayer, tack on a final *Amen* and drift off. In this way life had a formal organization: a clear end to each day and a clean slate for the morning.

Prayer was not religious. Not really. God was involved, but only peripherally, a sort of placeholder. It was the measure of the sentences that kept me. Here was a reliable ritual. The first section was pronounced with rote swells and emphasis, *Grandadupinheaven* was its own word, for example, an ungainly mouthful that was allayed by the simplicity of *Granny, (pause).* The quick break at the end of *Kief* with its high, short e, made way for the sigh of relief, the completion that was *and Oscar. Amen.* The add-ons, though spontaneous and irregular, would be constructed with grand, symmetrical sweeps, *and everyone and everything* providing a lyrical rounding a much as a spiritual one.

A Child's Bedtime Prayer had an even easier payoff. The uncomplicated rhyming words at the end of each line: *Sleep. Keep. Wake. Take.* provided the satisfaction of direct, staccato punctuation and drove the whole poem neatly to its conclusion at *Amen.* The day would be folded and tucked away, and sleep would wash over me like confirmation.

When my mother came into my room the morning before I turned twelve to tell me my father lay dead down the hallway I understood only that her words were a lilting, gentle song. *Your father loved you so much* went the refrain. I was lifted subtly from sleep this way, with such tenderness that when I finally realized what she was trying to tell me, there was no way to be certain it wasn't just a sad, whispered ballad. There was no way to be certain that it was real at all.

As she left my room to go tell the other children, the idea that it wasn't real, that it couldn't be, was cemented by the first consolatory thoughts I allowed myself, which were: *It's alright because I'll see him in Heaven.* I lay under my pastel comforter printed with Monet's water lilies and reasoned with myself in this desperate way, curling my body up tighter towards the top of the bed. I wouldn't cry. Instead I bargained and I convinced myself, as the dark split apart like wet cotton and dawn began to break, that it was all right, because I'd see him in Heaven. My room was beginning to lighten as I watched the thin strip below my doorway shadow over and saw the door begin to glide open. I squeezed my eyes shut and feigned a strained, tight sleeping face as my mother came and sat back down on my bed. She adjusted the covers over me slightly and rose to leave and I knew I should have been awake

for her, but this thought only made me squeeze my eyes harder and my body tighter and I stayed this way until real sleep came, fighting, and wrestled me away.

In the limousine on the way to the funeral parlor I annoyed my brother Beau to no end pretending we were all celebrities on our way to an awards show. On the freeway I kept rolling the tinted window down slightly and sticking my fingers out in a peace sign at passing cars.

I didn't cry at all, or at least I don't remember crying, until I walked down the long carpet to view his body, and then everyone was crying, all at once and indistinguishable from each other, a great shared sob that flowed through us and held us corded together and made it safe and unembarrassing to cry.

For years if I were asked about it I would have said my life was divided, more or less that morning into Before and After. Before was where my actual life would remain, waiting. After was every surreal, laughable moment that would follow in the clipped imitation of life that was to come. After was, could only be, a hollow parade. I would stand arms akimbo and watch it go by with smug incredulity.

But this was a necessary distortion, only my belief in the reclaimability of my life before he died could get me to recognize the absurd suggestion of a life without him.

It's tempting still to try and divide things up so cleanly. But in fact there is a vague, chronologically mysterious stretch towards the middle of my young life that seems to straddle those handles, in which I begin to form an identity that may or may not be shaped solely by parent-loss.

Just after my youngest brother Oscar was born my family moved to a ranch-style bungalow in Los Angeles with a cracked foundation and a floor plan based upon hallways. A long, trunk-like artery shot through to the end and then split to form a T that led one way to my parent's room and another to mine. This position suited my delicate preadolescence. At this, the farthest point from my parents, I would cultivate an affected sense of distance that I could cling to in the intervening years. Here I tucked myself away from the noisy goings on in our overstuffed household and focused with searing attention on becoming an island. I had a television that got MTV in the corner of the room, and a Walkman on which I could play cassette tapes during commercials.

This part of my life is the most difficult to organize. It surrounds the submerged, wading period in which everything happened (the failing health, the warning signs, the death, the memorial, the first day back at school with a note in my mother's earnest handwriting that the woman in the attendance office stamped *funeral* and handed back to me) and is forever the most unstable: a sort of purgatory. Events that may have happened months before or months afterward get muddled together in a headachy fog. It's hard for me to place any of it. And I can't tell if that's due to death or to puberty.

It was in this period that I began to question the mild faith that had so far lulled me to sleep each evening. In this period that I, more or less, stopped praying.

Lying in my darkened bedroom one night I began to work out ideas about the universe I had been piecing together from watching Nova and James Burke on PBS. (at that time I wanted to be a scientist, an inventor. My room was strewn with an ever-improving array of bed-making devices, door-opening machines, the motors extracted from Capsella sets and tied to cords that jumbled in a spider-web of scientific progress across my comforter, my light pink walls.) I focused on my ceiling cast with glow-in-the-dark stars and instead of saying my prayers, began to work on the Heaven problem with the heartbreakingly methodical concentration that probably only children possess. Slowly the blurred ideas, shadowy contradictions, began to uncoil themselves from the corners of my room and rope along across the ceiling in explanatory trains. And I watched, wide-eyed in the dark as the conclusion was reached, by me, for me, that there couldn't possibly be an afterlife, that I would die, and nothing would keep going, and the narration would end and all there'd be were stars and blackness. At this moment the ceiling seemed to pull swiftly upwards until I was left a tiny, shivering dot, a meaningless accident in a chaotic, unknowable universe. And I was pinned straight through to my bed by a fear so vivid and pure that I couldn't cry. I'm sure I didn't sleep that night, and for a long time afterwards, the thought of what I had discovered was the surest way to keep myself awake.

But whether this scene occurred before or after his death I cannot say. Both seem possible. That I was searching for a heaven seems likely, in the midst of my baffling grief. But also, maybe, I was simply nearing twelve, and it hadn't happened yet, and that's just when you start to wonder about such things.

My father's funeral was on a clear, cold morning. It was crowded, packed to the brim with well-wishers. Strangers (old friends and colleagues, hangers on from richer times) had flown in from parts unknown to say goodbye to him. Their jolliness was startling. They spoke with booming, Music Industry voices and said things like *When Harry gets to Heaven and finds out there's no bar there'll be Hell to pay*.

I don't know who read the eulogy. I'm sure they fought for it. For my part I kept very still. I looked straight ahead and hummed a little.

When it was time to walk up to the casket, one by one, I had the distinct feeling that we, his tow-headed progeny, were on display. I was acutely aware of all those satisfied, misty-eyed strangers leering at me, and made aware, with a sickening quickness as it became my turn, that this was to be the last I would ever see him, here on this stage, with the eyes of these smug mourners upon me. What could I do? I couldn't cry, but I had to at least touch him, it was my only chance and the pressure was excruciating.

His hair was wrong. Someone had combed it back tight from his face and I could have killed them for it. I could hardly stand to look at such mockery. His skin was made of clay and his hair was a disaster. Frustration began to bubble up inside of me and I felt myself rising out away from this scene when my heart in a panic leapt up into my chest and I lurched forward, ineptly, and flung my skinny arms at

his stiff, cool shoulders.

It was a clumsy, unsatisfying goodbye, I had gotten it wrong, I knew, and the shame and embarrassment that swept through me then spread like ink over the rest of the ceremony.

I was supposed to say the Lord's Prayer at his burial, but I couldn't. And so the duty was passed to my brother while I was taken home to lie on my parent's bed and curl my body tight and pray and pray and pray.

Afterwards our house teemed with flowers. Stepping into the living room involved an awkward navigational dance through seemingly endless, gaudy displays of sympathy. Many were from relative strangers. The biggest came from an actress I didn't think he'd ever met. It was a sculptural goliath done in mauve and pale pinks with twisted silver twigs of willow jutting out at exacting intervals. As it started to fade my grandmother grabbed a handful of them and stuck them into the soft dirt of our vegetable patch. As if willow twigs would take root and grow.

In the humming aftermath over the next few weeks I found myself tiptoeing out of the sad, busy house and into the garden, just to check. Kneeling beside the sticks I felt foolish, like I was expecting them to do something, or to mean something. Yet I returned, often, and sat in a milky silence there away from everyone.

I can't say when I first realized that they were growing. I can say, however, with absolute veracity, that these two silver willow trees grew up faster than any planted thing I've ever known. It was stunning. Within months I could sit on the thin, bowed trunk of the bigger one, after a year, leaves and all, both stood taller than I did.

I couldn't account for such a miracle.

And yet I couldn't reject it either. Here I was stuck. If God was just the metaphor I had decided He was, if there was no miracle and no need for prayer, how did willow trees grow up out of sticks from a sympathy bouquet as I watched, with all my vulnerable, tenuous reasoning balanced shakily, and my heart cut open and exposed?

The last thing my father ever said to me was to ask for a glass of milk.

It was late in the day and he had come home from the dentist. Outside a tight, small sun was sinking into the chaparral behind our house. I had skipped dinner in order to finish watching *Nirvana Unplugged in New York* and was now padding towards the kitchen when I saw him enter at the end of the hall. He was weak and fleshy looking, but he almost always looked weak then. He walked with a cane when he walked at all, and he had a huge, cold oxygen tank hooked up next to his bed in my parents' room.

His apparition made me freeze, I went cold all down my spine. But his eyes lit when he saw me. He was smiling. He said *sweetheart would you get your daddy a big glass of milk with ice?*

I couldn't do it. I could smell death on him. My hands became ice. He hobbled down the hallway towards his bedroom and I ran to ask my mother please would

she get it instead. That was the last I ever heard him and that was the last time I ever saw him alive. I didn't bring him anything. Hiding in my bedroom I heard my mother's soft footsteps and the clink of the ice in the glass as she walked down towards their bedroom and for years that sound haunted my memory with more tenacity than any ghost.

My father would have seen the fable there: girl-child on the edge of womanhood refuses her dying father's request for milk. For *milk*, for God's sake, the first food. My father, who believed in symbolism, he would have seen it. My father, who would say: *the only difference between God and Good is an o, which is a zero, which is nothing.* (His thumb and forefinger forming a ring as he said this, springing open at the punch line as if flicking something weightless into the air.) It was so easy for him.

And I can't shake this legacy. Despite my attempts to remain stoic, I see suspicious miracles everywhere, strange coincidences I am embarrassed to admit I've noticed. At times the whole thing feels made up. It's too perfect, too fraught with meaning. The timing makes me shiver and I've spent years now cradling the knowledge that he died at the very moment, nearly, that I had begun to affect my own thin existential crisis. That it happened down the long hallway just as I was stretching, shrugging off the vestiges of child-faith and exploring the idea that life might be random and cold. That early one January morning, *the day before I turned twelve*, I was coaxed from the folded, tidy sleep of childhood and led blinking, not quite believing, into the dazzling, uncertain landscape of adult life.

Is this a test? Some Jobian thing?

And have I failed?

Meanwhile. My father is a record album, my father is a pop song. My father is remembered lovingly, lavishly by people (strangers!) on the internet and in print who feel like they discovered him, or have claim to him, or, somehow, as if it's possible, think they miss him.

My father's memory is public domain.

When he died it was reported on the evening news. Dustin Hoffman was hosting a charity show on HBO and he stopped and told the audience what had happened. People gasped. A man yelled out "NO!" Mr. Hoffman asked for a moment of silence.

I could have screamed.

That the death of my father could have an impact on some anonymous audience left me impotent and confused. The public dipping their hands in, and worse, knowing what to do with my own tragedy could only muddy it. They would pay their respects and process his loss and move on before I'd even get a chance to find him gone from me. Or worse they would keep him alive in a way that was distorted, and wrong.

People die and their goneness should be indisputable. They should go to Heaven or they should turn to ash or they should become a beetle or something but for

God's sake they should leave the Earth. To be allowed to linger, just barely, and for everyone, is unnatural and unfair.

But what to do? His music's everywhere. I can't escape it. They play it on the radio, in the supermarket, in the movie theater. His voice moves through the air around me and around the nameless strangers and we hear it at the same time, and he is theirs, then, if they want him, just as much as he is mine.

People ask me my favorite Nilsson song and it's like asking me to choose my favorite blood cell. These are sounds for before I could hear music. They are in me in a place that cannot be mined or altered, so familiar that they become impossible to analyze or contextualize. I sing along and I don't realize I am doing so. The words fall out of my subconscious, a spontaneous mantra.

This is a strange privilege. And sometimes, through a certain perspective, and when I am in a certain mood I try and see that it is a blessing. But, more often, it is like slow, well-executed torture.

How do we move on from a death that never manages to seem final? How do we let go when the person seems to always still be *there*?

My father never really went anywhere, and in doing so left me forever suspended in the moment before grief, curling up towards the top of my bed and telling myself that it is *alright because I'll see him in Heaven*. Half my life has passed and I haven't even begun to move on. I am stuck wading through mystery, attempting to rationalize and to intellectualize before I will let myself feel, imagining that the power of the mind might overcome the senseless inconsistency of emotion, might protect me from the heaving contradictions of a soot-black universe.

As if I might conquer this. As if there's an answer. As if willow twigs don't just take root and grow.

I was once asked to give an interview about him for a documentary somebody was trying to make. It was the only time I was ever asked to talk about him, and on camera no less, I was terrified. I didn't have much to tell them. I wasn't there for the wild times. They asked me: *what is your first memory of you father?* And I said: *my first memory of my father is of him saving my life*. They loved this, lapped it up. They said *tell us* and I told them, as eloquently as I could through my chattering teeth, about the black lake and the monster and my father jumping in to rescue me. There were satisfied nods all around, I had given them what the daughter should.

When the film premiered I bought a dress from the Banana Republic outlet store and borrowed an alligator purse that my mother had been given by Yoko Ono. (Here was an example of the curious place my father's legacy had left me: a quiet nobody, clutching a handbag from an untouchably famous personality and wandering down a red carpet in a thirty-nine dollar dress.)

I was so nervous I caught only glimpses of the movie. It was a series of bawdy stories told by his friends from those days. It was two hours of anecdotes that left

me with an even further sense of disparity between the man he was to the watching world and the father he was to me. My story never made it in.

When it was over I asked the editor why he'd cut it and he said: Well that's just it. In the end we realized that it was your story, not his.

My story. His story. It's impossible to separate. Childhood gets split by one bright, specific tragedy and it becomes the prism through which everything must filter. It defines you and it molds you and you hold its influence above all else that happens to you. And you are trapped by its significance. You are beholden.

When I am 22 I find myself in Vermont and call my mother for the name of the town with the wooden houses and the soft green lawns. I arrive and start shaking even before I slam the car door shut.

I tiptoe down to the water's edge and step slowly onto the creaking pier and it is tiny, but so familiar my bones ache. I peer into the black water, lapping coolly at the graying wood. It is completely opaque. It is not even reflective. A monster lives under there. Everything is under there. The beginning, the end, all of time.

I step down off the low pier onto the pebbly shore and suck in breath before kneeling down to dip my hand, still shaking, into the water. I cup some in my palm and lift it closer to my face and as I watch it run down my wrist I realize that I expected it to be black, like tar. Instead it's clear. Like all water.

A flash of pink catches my eye and I look down among the pebbles to see the edge of a plastic bracelet, the kind made for a very young child. I snatch it up and examine it. My heart is racing. Soft, heart-shaped beads are strung onto a thin elastic cord. I swear I had this one when I was three. I try and slip in onto my own thin wrist and it fits, but begins to cut off the circulation. I put it in my pocket. I am swept away. It is too sublime a gift.

I dash up the shore and back to my car, just once glancing over my shoulder to mouth a sort of goodbye to the water.

I hang the bracelet from my rear-view mirror and find myself glancing at it constantly throughout the long drive home. Later I move it to my dashboard, and then my glove compartment, where I will forget about it.

I find it off and on for the next year or so. Each time forced to ponder its meaning, to project my entire expectation of identity onto each faded, plastic bead.

I carry it with me like an albatross, dutifully, and with sincerity. It weighs me down, heavier than it was ever intended to be: charmed, enchanted, cursed.

I think about impermanence. I think about inevitability. I think about death. And then one day I let it go. **F**

Another Life

The hand will find a life of its own
when the mind, distracted, is unaware
of what insinuates itself beneath the fingertips,
the sensitive ridges and whorls catching
on objects the way prickly burrs would
cling to my clothes when I went walking
in late summer, during childhood, my fingers
searching out things on their own,
the sticking burrs, poison ivy hiding
in the exposed roots of a red oak,
my neighbor's grape hyacinth startled
to find itself in my hands, each tiny purple bell
pulled off and crushed between thumb and forefinger
of the same hand, the right one, that runs over
and over again the grain of this homely rectangular table,
scored and pitted by penknife and pencil tip,
as if the former life of the tree could be found this way,
could be drawn up the fingers and into the body
like the roots had once drawn water, as if
what was needed for living could be found
this way, in the spark and crackle of nerves
webbing under skin, the hand looking,
looking for an answer, here, in the wood,
in what happens as it moves,
tracing patterns, whorl, loop, arch, and the mind
finds itself caught between crest and trough
of the wave, these dark lines, the other's seeking.

Sara McKinnon

Pills You Can't Take With Martinis

My father drives with both hands on the wheel. But sometimes he takes one off to touch my mother's leg, to pull the fabric tight against her thigh. And sometimes he pretends we almost crash. Slamming on the brakes. Throwing out his arm. Like her breast in his hand is the only thing saving my mother's life.

I wonder if they know about the space between the seats.

I look out the window at an empty parking lot. My father keeps holding out his arm. And my mother, who likes to be rescued, doesn't stop him.

Lou, the first man I love, owns a blender. He knows how to mix a drink. He wants them thick and sweet, like me. On the edge of the pool, with his feet in the water, he calls my name. *Stacy*, he says. *Do it one more time*. And because this is his pool, I do. Slip down the straps of my bathing suit and start to breaststroke. Pushing the water with my arms. Pulling myself up between his thighs.

On Monday, there are no fathers. This is what I think until I know better. Until I meet a girl whose father works just down the street, and not clear across the state laying pavement on a freeway I'll never use. Sometimes I miss my father. And now, because I'm lonely, I'm sitting on his bed. I'm smelling the lotion on my mother's nightstand. Wondering why it has to be so thick. I'm opening her drawer and looking through the things she keeps inside. A broken watch. A lighter. Earrings that look like tiny birds. Behind them, a box I've never seen. The shadows of a man and a woman. Inside, yellow strips of squares. A ring in all of them. Plastic packs of sugar. But they aren't sweet. I throw away the one I open. And I have to wash my hands.

I think about the pavement on a freeway. That awful smell of rubber.

My mother doesn't know she taught me how to push a man against the wall. With your knee on his thigh, pressing him back. With your hands in the front of his shirt. Opening his shirt. Working your way up. Working your way down. Stopping to unhook his belt. Waiting, when it sticks, for his help.

My mother waiting, on the floor, for my father to unhook it himself. Never seeing her daughter in the hallway.

Lou has a suntan that doesn't quit. *Italian?* I say, the first time. *Greek?*

Lebanese, he says into the front of my neck. He doesn't want me to press him back. He doesn't like to be pushed around. He picks me up. He puts me down. He spreads me open on the kitchen counter. I hit my head on the sink. I run my hands down his skin. Which is damp, like mine.

My father counts more than change. He knows when things are gone. Sodas. Cigarettes. Yellow strips of squares. I can hear them fighting through my bedroom door. His voice. Her voice. Someone pushing someone against the wall. Shouting. More shouting. Someone throwing something on the floor. It breaks. I put my face under the sheet and stop breathing. I wait for something more.

My mother opens the door and puts her hand on the frame.

Sometimes I think about those birds in the nightstand. That thick smell of lotion on my face.

Lou buys a truck because he doesn't need a backseat. This is what he tells me, but I know better. That Lou, with lumps under both arms, is scared. But this truck can handle anything. With its strong bearings. Its solid axles. This truck can take him where he needs to go. I like to run my hand down the cold, red paint.

We take his truck to a drive-thru pharmacy, and wait in line to buy pills you can't take with martinis. Me in a sundress. Lou in a medical mask, because he can't leave home without it. My surgeon in jeans and sandals.

I put my hand over my mouth and take a breath. I'm looking down when he throws out his arm and we really crash. He takes away his hand and pulls out his wallet. He walks to the car in front of us. Leans toward the driver's window with his hands on the roof of their car. Stumbles backward as they drive away.

He leans forward with his hands on his legs. Stands up and walks back to the truck. And there, in the parking lot, I see him. With that skin and that mask. The kind of man you don't roll down your car window for.

My father thinks driving is like breathing. He could do it in his sleep. And my mother, on the telephone at two in the morning, can't change his mind. Can't get him to finish a sentence. I watch them argue from the kitchen table. My mother with her hand on the sink. Slamming the receiver against the wall. Saying, *I could kill him*. Picking up a knife from the counter. *I could just kill him*.

My mother hangs up the phone and opens the door. Says, *Stacy*. And when I don't get up, *Now*. I follow my mother to her car. I press my face against the window and close my eyes. When the car stops moving, I look forward. I watch my mother in the parking lot of a loud bar. Walking through rows of empty cars. Stopping at my father's to kneel down. Running the knife through his tires.

That night, my father sleeps in his car. In the morning, he walks home.

Lou is a man I would take over power steering. Over turning the wheel with one hand. I like the feel of his skin. This is why I drive to his house and slam my palm on the door. Saying, *Lou*. And when he doesn't come, *Lou. It's me. Open up*. I'm tired of waiting. I walk to the back of the house. Smile when I see him asleep on a mat in the pool. Say, *Baby. Watch out. I'm gonna join you*. I pull off my shirt and drop it in the grass. Unzip the front of my jeans. Say, *Baby. Wake up. You're gonna miss the show*. Unhook the front of my bra.

I'm almost to the pool. Just about to notice the empty blender. The paper bag from a pharmacy. About to say, *Lou*. And when he doesn't answer, *Lou*. I push my arms through the water. I pull myself up on the mat. I press my face against his chest and feel his slow breath. *Baby*. I put my hand on his warm skin. **F**

Scott M. Bade

Fire

I'm finding I need more time
 between seconds. It's the shadows
that matter, the opaque requests of a child
 —more milk please.

Faith is a toddler
I'm watching
 put big rocks on small ones;
 the distance between form
and content collapses like a pup tent,
 and save for the marshmallows
a campfire is a bitter twist of tree and light.
 Those embers remember the heights,
soft songs of the wren, the blue heat of sky,
and the smoky voice of the wind.

Paul David Colgin

Range Psalm

The song's got it wrong; the skies
are cloudy all day.

White herds of heaven roam free
unendangered, high above the range,
summoning strength in numbers, then
stampeding across the sky bringing rain,
speaking discouragement - but only to the sun
whose heat with thunder they disdain.

But this is our home they grace and shadow.
That is theirs, where one day in their wake
we would rise again.

Totally Different Territory: An Interview with Aimee Bender



Aimee Bender is the author of three books: *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, *An Invisible Sign of My Own*, and *Willful Creatures*. Her short fiction has been published in *Granta*, *GQ*, *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney's* and more, as well as heard on NPR's "This American Life" and "Selected Shorts." She lives in Los Angeles, and participated in the following interview with editor Andrew Millar in the summer months of 2009.

Andrew Millar: Aimee, I think it's clear you have a distinctive aesthetic. You write stories that other writers do not and cannot write. I would love to hear you explain why and how, but I don't want to ask you to define yourself or your work. That's the job of the reviewer. So instead, could you talk about some of the goals you have with your fiction, and some of the tools you use to reach those goals?

Aimee Bender: Great question. So many ways to dive in.

Goals. First, I don't have any conscious goals. Sit down, write stuff. But the more I write the more I wonder about it all. I think of writing sometimes like a kind of tube and through it, a reader and a writer crawl together from opposite ends and meet and look at something in a way they can't see normally. Except now that sounds claustrophobic. A beach at night? The work I often like to read best is work that creates an experience, that is trying to make something happen to a reader. Because of this, I love James Joyce, or Donald Barthelme, or Haruki Murakami or Lydia Davis or Walker Percy or Gertrude Stein or Wallace Shawn or so many others because I feel like they are casting some kind of spell on me, altering the way I look at the world in a way I can't quite pinpoint. So I think that's what I'm drawn to trying even though I don't sit down with that goal. As far as tools go... there are the usual craft tools. I also write for a fixed amount of time so that I can dive in and get out and hopefully trick myself into writing something I don't expect. The real goal, the main goal, is to connect to another person, a reading person. But how exactly that happens is an ongoing question.

AM: I like that idea, that you might trick yourself into something you didn't expect. It reminds me of something you mentioned in an interview in *CutBank*, 2007 - that people in this country often try to write very tidy stories. To underline this idea, I once heard an author say that sometimes all a story needs to do is follow a character

to an unexpected and interesting place. Is it wrong to see this idea at work in some of your stories? What do you think stories “need” to do?

AB: There’s a scene in Glen David Gold’s new book, *Sunnyside*, where he has Charlie Chaplin discussing ‘character’ with Mary Pickford, and Chaplin confesses to her that the character in his latest film doesn’t change. He seems worried about it, and even a little thrilled about it. And she realizes he’s right~ the character in his film stays the same! Is that allowed? And it feels like a good diving board into a conversation about that same topic in fiction. So~ as far as what a story needs to do~ I guess I feel like some sort of movement has to happen, but it doesn’t have to be inside the character. It can be outside the character, or just inside the reader in some inexplicable way. So I’d agree with what that author said about the interesting place. I do think there’s a difference between an anecdote and a story, and an anecdote is more of a fun telling with a kind of punchline, and a story has to create some kind of shift, tap into something deeper. But I don’t like story rules, in general, and the idea that the character must change doesn’t ring true to me. We’ve all known plenty of people (including ourselves!) who haven’t changed and there are many stories to be told about that.

AM: What struck me as I recently reread your first collection was how unafraid you seem as a writer, even in your first work. Whether your characters change or not, they lay themselves bare, for the reader and often for the other characters. I’m thinking of “Call My Name,” or “Fell This Girl.” There’s boldness in your choices with form and craft, too – the structure of “Fugue,” the unexpectedness of “Quiet Please” – and so I’m wondering: where do you draw confidence from? What voices (inner or not) have told you to be bold in writing?

AB: Thanks, that’s really good to hear.

It’s hard to answer. When I was writing the *Flammable Skirt* stories, I’d finally felt freed to write what I wanted to write. For years I’d felt a kind of constricted desire to write what I thought I should write, and I’d often go to panels/conferences/lectures and feel deflated. There was so much prescriptive advice, and so much realism and so many dour thoughts on the short story’s future. But something did tip, and I started to feel fed up with the little box I’d been putting myself inside, and I wanted to play with all those things you mention~ form, voice, reality, whatever. I strongly feel that fiction is much more flexible than we often think it is and we treat it with too much careful kid glove reverent care. In fact, one of the greatest things about writing fiction at all is how amazingly flexible it is. How we can jump in time a hundred years in one sentence, or make people fly or tell secrets or act out. I guess what I’m saying is there is plenty of fear and inhibition in me and the fight is to overcome it and the better work seems to happen when I get so sick of my own restrictions that I just go for something. I do have lots of encouragement~ from family, teachers, mentors, friends. A friend of mine used to go with me to readings in San Francisco and if I felt bad afterward, if something had seemed too ‘clubby’ or defeatist, she’d blow it off and

say it had nothing to do with writing and that was really helpful to me. My mother, a modern dance teacher, has, for years, been frustrated with the false restrictions people put on dance and I've taken that in deeply. One of my best teachers in grad school introduced herself on the first day by talking about graphic novels and good bread instead of any harsh severe decree about what fiction is. All that was crucial.

AM: Let's hold the deeply philosophical questions for a second. There's a lot of sex in your stories – surprising, often funny sex. What do those moments reveal that you find interesting?

AB: There's a PJ Harvey album where, in the photos/liner notes, she holds up a sign she made apparently for herself as she was writing the songs and it says "NO SUBTLETY". (I should doublecheck this- it might be "don't be subtle".) I loved seeing that. Plus it's so true- she's not at all subtle- she is big, bold, over-the-top, and yet the subtlety comes out through tiny shifts in voice or how she emphasizes a word or the guitar nuances. Inside the brashness, the vulnerability lurks. Writing about sex interests me because I can skip over some of the more quiet subtle ways of building character and try to deal with the issue at hand in a heightened way and hopefully in that, the character gets revealed. Plus, it's fun to write.

AM: So, it's as much a tool for you to unveil character as it is a way to grab the reader's attention and entertain? And by "unveil," I mean "discover." As in, discovering your characters as you write them.

AB: Yes, even more about unveiling or discovering than about grabbing the reader's attention- I know that's a side benefit but I don't think it's the main reason.

AM: I'm curious about your take on the grotesque, too. Your fiction embraces the grotesque - a man with no lips, for example. Sometimes it comes across as playful - pumpkin-headed people, benign holes in the tummy. Your characters' bodies are often strange or "wrong." What is it about the grotesque that engages readers?

AB: Flannery O'Connor talks really beautifully about the grotesque- she'll talk about how a child draws a face out of proportion and we see the distortion but the child is just drawing what he sees. So that the grotesque is just a skew that attempts to show the world that the writer has noticed. It's about getting closer to seeing, rather than any kind of deliberate distortion. I like thinking of it that way- the danger is to write weird for weird's sake as opposed to weird because it looks not weird, to the writer. And it's also about dreams- about the kind of crazy distortions that happen in dreams and getting those down on the page so we can all nod in some kind of recognition.

AM: I like that you used the term recognition, because yes, there is definitely that in your fiction. While reading some of the stories in your second collection, particularly "Ironhead" and "Dearth," I was struck by the sadness I felt as I identified with these characters inhabiting lives completely unlike my own or anyone else's. I mean,

pumpkinheaded people? Potato children? But then maybe it's wrong for me to say they're unlike us - they lost a child; she was forced to bury her children and make sense of her past. What amazes me in your writing is that the reader is allowed to get so close to characters' emotions, but these characters are distant on many levels - some don't even have names, like the ten dying men. In "Jinx," the girls receive names late into the story. I'd like to hear your thoughts on approaching character, on what is important to offer the reader and what is not. Are your characters taken from experience, from yours or those you know, or are they moreso created from a hazy outline? Sorry this has been such a long question - I'm having trouble phrasing it.

AB: No problem with the long questions~ sometimes they're easier for me to answer.

So, let me try to get my way into this one. I don't write directly from experience very often, because there's a freedom for me in writing about made-up characters. I don't really know what or who I'm going to get, and I don't know where they will lead me. Voices, traits, outfits, backgrounds, collect on the character as I'm writing along. I do think that character as a topic can be talked about too directly in writing workshops~ character motivation is something that feels elusive to me, and I can find it frustrating to have to know what a character is like in advance. A student of mine once remarked on how much we talked about character and plot and it had surprised him~ he was focused on style as the key to all of that. I think he had a very good point. So that leads into your thoughts about the distance~ I think the distance provides me the way in, the view of the character so I can get closer. Style and character are fused, then, and the way you learn about the character becomes the way you feel the character too. Does that make any sense?!

AM: It does make sense. We meet people from a distance and learn from the outside in, so why not our characters too? I'm glad you mentioned teaching. A distinguished visiting writer who recently visited the University of Idaho said the difference between his successful student writers and struggling ones is that the successful writers tell the story they really want to tell. In your experience with teaching, what have you found to be the turning point for students? Also, what has teaching showed you about your own writing?

AB: Students seem to gain a lot of confidence when they realize writing doesn't have to be drudgery, and I think this does relate to the story being what they want to tell. The question is: how do you discover what you actually want to tell? (Vs. what you think you are supposed to tell or other people want to hear.) I taught in Portland last summer and we do writing exercises in class and one student (as I've seen happen many times) wrote much more beautifully in the exercise than in her story. But she somehow didn't think the writing done from exercises 'counted'. So it was fun to talk to her about that~ what's the fake ranking about? Why judge the process? Teaching shows me lots about my own writing~ for one, it's a community where we discuss this mysterious process we can't really ever pin down and that sup-

ports me too. I also find it fascinating how classes seem to work best when I bring in whatever's on my mind right then- even if I use an old tried and true exercise, if I'm bored with it, that comes across. A brand new one, with tons of holes in it, works when it is fresh to me too.

AM: It's summer now - classes are out for a few months. What does that mean for you? More time for writing? Painting the front porch? Days on the beach with a harlequin? I'm wondering how your life changes when you aren't teaching, and if it feels like a vacation at all.

AB: Summer -! I think I'm finally figuring out how to use it. Summer is a big reading time. And this year, growing tomatoes. And going slow. I'm guilty as most of us are of overplanning so summer is underplanning, and winding down. Cooking. Trying to check email less. Some travel, but I used to feel like I had to do a ton of travel to take advantage of the time and then I realized what I needed more was the time, unfilled. And more time for writing, yes.

AM: Amidst all this winding down and unfilled time, do you plan for any literary junk food? Any television or summer blockbusters? What do you allow yourself when you don't want to think too hard?

AB: Absolutely! In fact I'll usually start summer by reading a very plot-driven book, a mystery or something, that I don't have to or want to read slowly. It's helpful. But this year I read *The Maltese Falcon* and the writing is pretty great so I wanted to savor that one more than the usual.

And as far as movies go, yes to the blockbusters. I haven't seen the new 'Star Trek' yet though I hear it's good.

AM: Any authors you can't wait to read more of? Or have been hoping to read for the first time?

AB: I'm a new (late) fan of Alice Munro. Can't wait to read more of her stuff. I think I may finally work up the nerve to read McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* which has scared me in the past, but I read the first few pages and can't shake 'em. His language seems to be both transparent and tangible at the same time and I have no idea how he does that. I'm about to dive into Stephen Elliott's latest, *The Adderall Diaries*, which he is sending around in galley form to readers. I also decided this summer to memorize a poem or two. I never had to do that and it seems like a good idea. I could go on and on! And I still haven't read *The Third Policeman* which is ridiculous! I've waited way too long on that one. **F**

Ben Debus

The History of Missing Person 375
(Last Seen October 18, 1923)

1. *A fish*

Pressed down by heavy stones upon the bed,
where no one thought to look, the river snarled
her mouth, unfurled her lips to seething curls.
Its grit wore through her gums: her teeth swept free,
and, current-tossed, whipped through the murk, a gloss
of minnows. A molar chipped a root, and stuck -
the river-leaning willow, like a fist
that grips a bead so hard it cuts the palm,
drew in the molar, folded it in wood.
A catfish gulped an eyetooth, sulked upstream
and nipped a hook, jerked upward into air.
On shore, the fisherman filleted the fish -
the eyetooth, on a spurt of bile, gushed out.
The fisherman knelt down to scuff it clean
upon his sleeve. Not seeing what it was,
he gathered up his tackle, dampened down
his fire, and chucked the eyetooth towards the woods.

2. *A nest*

The killer sheared a snippet of her hair,
a lock or three, enough to weave a braid.
At home, he glued this to a balsa doll
he'd carved, a present for his niece. The rest
fanned upward, kelped inside the waves. Small fish
flashed through, barrettes that tugged the jag of flesh
the blow had split. A bird pecked free a clump
entwined around a reed and knit it through
a nest with blades of grass and tinsel-strands.
Two seasons later, small black chicks were hatched,
who screeched for worm-meal, nuzzled down for warmth.
They grew; they flew or faltered from the branch
and tumbled down. October came again.
Against the orangeing leaves and cloud-gray air,
the nest inside its nuding tree fell loose,
frayed downward, hung there like a goblin-wig -
it seemed so to the boy who pelted rocks

against it. But as boys will sometimes do,
 he tucked the dreaded tuft inside his coat
 and took it home. He closed the nest, with wisps
 of hair, her hair, still tangled through its twigs,
 inside a box that used to hold cigars,
 still held that musk, that wood-smoke, stifle-sweet,
 as if it were the last, most precious curse.
 He slapped the floor, and snatched the un-nailed board
 before it fell. He dropped the box below.
 And when his parents sold the house, it stayed,
 the nest inside the box inside the floor,
 and slept there through the next sale, and the next.

3. *Wash-day*

The morning frost, like sugar near a flame,
 dissolved across her floating hand. Below,
 bacteria unstitched her skin, loosed oils
 which slicked, invisible, past cattail stands
 and campgrounds, gray shacks fallen to their stones,
 beneath the coat of char a leaf-fire smoked
 upon the water. Several miles along,
 a farmer's wife scooped through a shallows, filled
 a basin, scrubbed her sheets upon a grate.
 That night, the grain outside the farm-house swished
 and leaned along the wind that stroked the eaves.
 The farmer's wife slammed down a plate of stew.
 The subject of a washing-machine arose.
 The sheets, the farmer said, were clean, and see?
 Well yes, the farmer's wife returned, well yes,
 but what am I to do in winter, see?
 Perhaps though, more than residue of her,
 the murdered woman, coursed the linen-threads:
 for as they lay together in their bed,
 each tasted something trilled, but tinged with sweet,
 and turned to touch each other with the thrill
 a bottle feels when falling towards a floor.

4. *A wardrobe*

The killer slit her skirt, from hip to knee,
 in strips, then stitched these up, and crimped the hem
 to flare a ball-gown for the balsa doll.
 Her garters, hat, the rest of her chemise

he tucked into a chest; he dropped her earrings
inside his desk. And there they stayed, until
pneumonia swelled his lungs with fluid, drowned
him from the inside out. But when he died
he had no heirs nor will, and so his niece,
who had by then a daughter of her own,
and who of all their kin was nearest him
in miles and too in blood, but only those,
took pity on his vast estate of waste,
of sewing needles stuck in carpet, scraps
of fraying fabric, wood-chips, rusting lathe-bits,
the hundred tiny dresses on their dolls.
As she catalogued, and scrubbed his walls,
her daughter tried her mother's uncle's drawers
and found the earrings in his desk – one snagged
on twine, its twin inside an Altoids tin –
and quickly looped them through her new-pierced ears:
blue porcelain balls, as large as pebbles, set
in golden egg-cups, dangled upside-down
on half-inch chains. And when the daughter turned
in answer to the mother, those bright bulbs,
like dogs who nose through brush to flush out birds,
stirred up a blur of violet in her eyes.

5. *Coal*

Her bones sank down against the bed, and curved –
the femurs turned out arcs; the ribs splayed fans
beneath; the pelvis drifted towards the skull;
so that she bent, an archaeopteryx
arising through the mud. Then rain, and flood;
then freeze, and crack, a melting of the waters.
The thin beads of her fingers gripped through kelp.
The river churned around her vertebrae,
her shoulder-blades, her collarbone and ulna,
and struck them all, like ringing plates, through silt.
The earth, a crumbling fold that rose as slow
as kneaded clay, crushed down for centuries
upon them, ground them into coal, thick clumps
of her and leaf and stump within the earth,
dark jewels in wait of someone with a spade
to dig, to strike a match across her jaw.

6. The River

A bramble pricked the missing person's eye,
which oozed, as if molasses strung up high
upon a spoon, throughout the water's murk.
At dusk, peer out around the north-bent oak
as the dim sun wavers on the river's churn -
the river holds, and shows, what she had seen:
a fish-lip slurps a gnat and ripples rings;
a flock of waistcoats gathers at a church:
a reed-stand swirls the current into whorls;
a silver comb pulls knots through loosened braids.
And though the freezing burst her ears, their bones
still quiver in the rush - now all she'd heard
the river hums: the mice who rustle nests
in weeds, the cattails drumming on a trunk,
the current's swill, become the hush of feet
along a hall, the clink of silver set
in drawers, the drift of speech from distant rooms.
The river tucks more leaves along its bank,
a woman clutched against the cold in clothes
that aren't her own: she shakes her mossy locks,
uncurls like root towards shore, and waits for you
to come up close, to bend low to the waves.

The Dancing Imps of Riverfest

Caroline has forgotten Riverfest. She has forgotten everything in Vicksburg, where she grew up, except Ash's house and what she found there. She has forgotten Ash too, how he looked before he shot himself—his face intact, the nose and jaw in their proper places, everything clean and whole. What she remembers is the dark, wet mess that shimmered like broken glass beneath the too-bright light of the kitchen. What she remembers is what she found wedged in a corner of the third floor, just before he died.

She steers her car off the highway and there is Vicksburg, after five years. The main street and just beyond it the copper gleam of the river. Quaint awnings hanging over storefronts, magnolias and dogwoods, tall skinny pines kept at bay by red brick and wrought iron and there's a stitch in her side, like a thread running through—she does remember, after all. She remembers downtown, how they pretty it up for the tourists. Just ahead is the Civil War cannon, dwarfed by its giant wheels, aimed toward the river and she remembers that too. A relic of defense, a monument to protection. But protection from what? And it hadn't worked anyway, even in its prime.

The music swells, the sounds of a fiddle, a tambourine. To her left is a wave of people, rolling off toward the square. It's Saturday, mid-Riverfest, and the city is clogged with traffic. Along the sidewalk, two men jump back, wide-eyed and gaping, as her car passes. She nearly clipped them; she should pay attention. She imagines what they saw: a small gray car, a woman huddled up to the steering wheel, her head turned toward them and a flash of her face: the eyes too open, the lower lip sucked inside the mouth, a hollow, stripped look. They're afraid of her. They should be.

Caroline would rather not know what she read in yesterday's newsletter, that Ash's house, empty since he shot himself, is being renovated, prepared for a new owner. She'd rather not know, now that she does, though she skimmed the newsletters every week just to find out. But it's not her fault; she didn't have a choice. She moved to the edge of Mississippi, almost to Alabama, and couldn't get away from it. She can smell it still—the too sweet, too floral odor of the potpourri that Ash kept in great fat bowls to hide the other smells, musty undertones, his ancestors. And now, someone will find it, what she found in the ballroom-turned-storage space, the fat metal barrel too heavy to move, filled with a foul, dark liquid and the other thing, the pale, puckered thing that bobbed up at her like a massive, skinned fruit. They'll find it, the new owners, and all she wants is another look at it before they do, one long look because the first lasted only seconds before she ran down the stairs and into the kitchen and into Ash, who knew what she had found.

*

The people are nosy here—something else she forgot. She's stuck in traffic downtown while out on the street people stare into cars. An old woman comes limping down the sidewalk and stares at Caroline too. A black box is tucked beneath the woman's arm, so big it seems to throw her off balance, and Caroline wonders what's inside it. She imagines a weapon or some teeth, a too-clean skull, its identity ravaged. Ghosts of secrets snug in their box, flaunted all over town and Caroline has the urge to roll down her window and shout at the woman that she doesn't care; she doesn't give a damn what she's hiding. But she says nothing of course; it would only draw attention.

Instead, she pulls a ladies' straw hat onto her head. The brim is wide and flops low over her forehead, half her face in its shadow. Let them try, out there, to see her now. She has taken to hats like this since she moved down to Biloxi. Tourist hats, she calls them, and on the coast she can be a tourist. On the coast, the casinos crowd close together along the strip, huge and loud like birds of paradise, and among them she can be anyone, from anywhere. She works in one as a cocktail waitress and meets all kinds of tourists, the elderly women with names like Martha or Penny or Susie, or the Midwestern college boys, tall and fragrant and well-groomed. Sometimes one will ask her about herself. "Nothing to tell," she'll say. "What you see is what you get." But it's a lie. They don't see a woman around thirty, too thin, a lot of plain brown hair hanging down her back. They don't see hollowed eyes, breasts like a twelve-year old's. No, what they see is a cocktail waitress in a tight bodice with her breasts pushed up, made plump and inviting, the circles beneath her eyes covered, the shine blotted off her nose. They see her with her face on—an expression that bothers her, as if a face is not always on, as if it's a mask worn only in public. If so, what does that make the other face, the naked one beneath?

But she's got her face on now, Caroline does, and a pretty summer dress to match her hat, in case someone is home over at Ash's.

It's hot for April and the dress clings to her legs as she walks, makes her thighs sweat. A blue ribbon flutters from the hat and sweeps, now and then, across her eyes. The smell out here is too familiar—it's the smell of the river, the dank, earthy smell of rot.

Ash's street, a part of the historic Garden District, is lined with dogwoods, their small white flowers blooming in the heat. There are live oaks as well, and their heavy, bloated branches meet overhead, form a cave. "A canopy," the tour guides call it. She remembers these guides as always plump and stern, always women in long skirts and billowing blouses. When she was a child, Caroline would spy on them, and the tour-goers. She would watch for them from the dining room windows, dart outside and fall in with the group. She found that if she stuck close enough to an adult, no one would notice her. They were too busy admiring the houses, the history, but Caroline was more interested in them, the tourists themselves. She knew that they

were more than tourists, that they had other lives, separate, hidden.

She met Ash this way, on a tour of his home. He was thirty and she was fourteen and too young for him. "You live down the street," he said.

"No," Caroline told him. "I'm a tourist." But she knew he did not believe her.

Now comes the dense part of the street, limbs and leaves and budding flowers crowding close, the air richer, sweeter. It's like piercing an over-ripe fruit, walking here, and instinctively she holds her breath, as she always used to do. Too much rich oxygen and it goes straight to the head, makes you drunk—what Ash once told her. Makes of humans easy targets and, "You don't want to be a target, do you Caroline?" But for him, she did. For him, she wanted to be all of it, anything she could.

His house is at the end of the block and built back far from the street, behind a brick fence and an iron gate. The gate is locked and Caroline has to pull her dress up above her knees and haul herself over with one arm. She hasn't thought much how she'll get to the third floor, if someone is home. From the looks of it, no one is. There are no cars parked in the front drive, and the whole place is quiet, too still. She stops, rests her back against a tree trunk, the house rising above, the tall white columns too bright in the sun, making her squint.

What she read yesterday is true; the house is being torn apart, done over. Half of the porch steps are freshly painted ivory, the other half still gray. The balcony on the second floor, overlooking the front yard, is covered with a tarp that flaps in the breeze. There are holes in the yard, deep and orange-red, and shovels standing upright in dark, new earth.

The stillness should not surprise her, the quiet, and yet somehow it does. But the house was never loud, that she can remember. Ash lived here all by himself, a bachelor with not even a dog. When there was noise, it came only from her. It came from all the roles she played for him, and she would howl like a cat in heat or hum like a locust; she would giggle or cackle or sing in a rough, deep voice made scratchy from screaming his name. Maybe it's her own noise she misses now, the sound of herself on show. She hasn't performed like that since him, since Ash, the one for whom she could dance and simper and faint, for whom she could be anything at all—Ash, the only one who asked.

She thinks of knocking at the front door. She'll say she's a tourist, if someone answers. She'll say she doesn't know any better; she's only a tourist. But if that's the case, she can go around to the back entrance, pass it off as a mistake.

The grass is too long where she walks, and it pricks her legs, makes her itch. Behind the house is the yard where she used to sun herself naked—it was another of her roles, the daring vixen—while Ash sat on the back porch and drank gin and watched. Now, it's a mess of weeds and mud, planks of rotting wood, scrap metal gleaming in the sun. The screen door to the porch screams on its hinges, slams behind her. She knocks at the door, waits, then grabs the handle. There's a trick to it,

a trick that comes back to her—she jerks it hard to the left and the door swings open.

For a moment she hangs back, at the threshold. It's dim in there, the windows still boarded up and the overhead light filtered through dust, but there's enough light to make out the kitchen table where she found Ash that day, his blood spreading over the slick, polished wood from which so often they ate his home-made cinnamon rolls and cream cakes. The same table, still there, a thick block of mahogany, solid enough to support the weight of his dead body, as she was not. She steps into the kitchen, brushes the table with her fingers, and then a shape comes into focus. Someone there. A man, his elbows propped on the table, his head in his hands, gazing up at her. Ash.

She knocks her hip into a chair, topples it.

"What are you doing?" Ash says, and stands from his chair. But it's not Ash. It can't be Ash. Closer now, and his face, its separate features take shape—a small, straight nose and beneath that, a pointed chin, a pert mouth. A face like a pixie's and it comes back to her then; it comes back to her with such force that she drops into a chair, draws her legs up and clasps her knees to her chest. Ash's face—not exactly like this one, but similar, and suddenly so clear, so vivid, rising up from wherever she stashed it for all those years. Ash's face, also like a pixie's with its delicate features, arched brows and small, red mouth. Like a softer, older version of the one now hovering, just above.

"What the hell are you doing?" says the man. And he can't be Ash because Ash is dead. Dead and gone for five whole years, though once he was as alive as this one, and she clutches her knees, squeezes them tight with her arms. Her dress has fallen back from her thighs, too much bare leg showing. His eyes, small and dark, are on her; she can do nothing with his eyes on her and, "Stop staring at me," she says.

He does not. "Get up," he says.

"No."

"Get up. Move it." He grabs her arm above the elbow and his hand is hot and dry. He drags her up, to her feet. "Listen," he says. "You better tell me who you are."

"Did you know Ash?" It's all she can manage. He looks so much like him.

"Who?" His fingers grip hard, pinch her flesh.

"Ash! Ash!"

"No," he says, and lets her loose. "I don't know anybody around here."

Caroline brings her hand up to her head, finds that her hat has fallen off. "Neither do I."

He drops to a crouch at her feet and she steps quickly back. He grabs her hat from the floor and, kneeling there, turns it over in his hands. "How did you know," he says, "how to open that door?"

"Give me my hat."

"I don't think I will."

"I'm a tourist," Caroline says. "I just wanted to see the house."

"Why aren't you at Riverfest?" He twirls the hat on his finger and the easy grace of the gesture, his deft, quick fingers—that too is like Ash.

"I was going there next," she says. "I'm only a tourist."

"Perfect." He tosses the hat at her. "We can go together."

Caroline does not answer. In the dim light—so much dimmer than the last time, when in the full blaze of the chandelier she found Ash with a sopping red lump where his face should've been—it looks the same, just as it was five years ago. The same high-backed dark wood chairs, same ruffled curtains at the windows that were too feminine for a bachelor and still are, despite that they're faded now, heavy with dust. And through the archway behind the table, the breakfast nook is the same too, same ladies' writing desk and the ceramic bowl that, though she can't tell from here, Caroline is sure is still filled with potpourri, shriveled and now odorless. If only one detail had changed in five years, if only she wasn't sure that the thing in the barrel still molders upstairs, if only the man didn't look so much like the one before, maybe then she could think of something, a way to master him.

She tells him her name is Susie.

"Like in a children's book," he says. "Nice to meet you, Susie, though you did break into my house." He offers his hand and, briefly, she touches it. "I'm Elwyn," he says, and they go on foot up the street. In sunlight, he looks her age, maybe a little older. In sunlight, he still looks like Ash. But for his boots, which are glossy black and look brand new, he's dressed like a hired man in a sweat-stained tee shirt, torn jeans. That's not like Ash, who could have been a preacher in his black slacks and collared shirts and ties. But the way he holds himself as he walks, his shoulders back, chin up, a proud, conscious posture—that is like Ash.

"What's with the women here, Susie?" he says.

Caroline tugs at the brim of her hat. "I don't know."

"Is it custom for them to show up at a man's house uninvited?"

"I'm from the coast," Caroline says. "I'm not from here. I'm a tourist."

"Well, I'm from Birmingham," Elwyn says, "where people mind their own business."

Caroline picks some honeysuckle growing along a fence. She'd like to linger here, just to show him that she can. She'd like to ask him what he's doing in this town, how he found Ash's house. She'd like to ask him too if he's been all over the third floor. But no, she'll ask him nothing. She'd rather not know.

"What're you planning to do with those weeds?" He nods at the honeysuckle bunched in her fist.

"That's my own business."

"I'll be damned," he says, and smiles.

They walk for a time without speaking until, "Look," Elywn says, and points. Ahead are the National Battlegrounds and the military cemetery. They stop beside the tall iron gate and Caroline brings her face up close to the fence, squints at the plaque as if she's never seen it before. But too many times she has been here—on field

trips every year in school and later with boyfriends, when they would climb the base of the canons, run their fingertips along the cool iron lips. The last time she was here was with Ash. He led her through the rows and rows of gravestones, the rounded, upright ones of the soldiers with names, but also the flat square slabs marked only with numbers, the unknown. It is always these last that bother her most and from where she stands on the street, the square stones are hardly visible but for their color, a bright, sun-bleached white. Like the bones would be, if they lay there instead.

Elwyn starts to move away, but "Wait," Caroline says. She tosses the honeysuckle over the fence and it lands, scattered, among the gravestones. Somewhere buried in this city is Ash himself. Not here; no one is buried here anymore. No, he's buried in some nondescript plot near a church. Caroline doesn't know where; she hadn't waited around to find out.

Men and women, babies in strollers, children eating candies from paper sacks pass too close, jostle her hat brim. They bring to her their own smells: food fried in grease, the oniony odor of sweat, the noxious, cloying scent of too many women's perfumes, and underneath, the smell of the river on them too, the stench that is always there, clinging to their skin, their hair. It took weeks for Caroline to get rid of that smell, after she moved. Now she'll bring it back with her, all over again.

Elwyn takes her by the hand and leads her through the crowd. The music swells as they pass the south stage. "Where are we going?" Caroline shouts.

"The dancing imps," Elwyn says, right in her ear so that it buzzes and hums, too loud.

They stop at a stage in front of the river. Floating overhead is the thin cry of a violin. Dancing to this music onstage are women, their bodies naked but for tiny, fluffed skirts and flesh-colored tops that bare their stomachs. They glitter, as if made of glass. Their hair glitters too, and falls over their shoulders as they dip and sway, the river shimmering behind them. There's a lot of them, up there. So many and all alike and they blur together as they dance, like a trick of light, like holograms, one woman copied over and over and projected onto the stage. Imps, is what they're supposed to be.

"Those are not imps," Caroline says.

Elwyn gazes up at the dancers with his small, dark eyes. "They could be," he says. "Let's get a closer look." He pulls her behind him. River mud squishes underfoot, spatters her shins. Damp skin, the flesh of strangers, smacks her arms, her chest. Elwyn disappears among the tangle of limbs and brightly colored clothing. But his hand is there, wrapped tight around her wrist, a hand without a body, a hot, limbless thing pulling her forward until she stumbles right up against the stage.

Just above, a dancing imp waves her pretty young arms in time with the others. So close and her face sparkles with glitter, her mouth, a glistening pink bud. Her eyelids are painted silver and flash as she blinks, like water in sun, and there's

no telling what she looks like beneath all that light. Caroline, squinting up at her, wonders if she could try it herself, that look. A lot of glimmer and flash to throw people off—she could do it maybe at the casino, let the tourists try to see her then. She would blind them, as the dancing imp blinds her now.

It's too much, in fact, and Caroline's eyes begin to water; she squeezes them shut and right then a hand, heavy and splayed, slaps her shoulder and she loses her balance, tips forward. Her thighs hit the edge of the stage and she lands with the upper half of her body sprawled across it. Beneath her stomach, the stage thumps and shakes with the weight of all those dancing legs. She pushes herself up with her arms, but too late; a dancing imp trips over her back, hits the floor of the stage beside her.

"Goddamn it!" the imp says, right into Caroline's face. She kicks Caroline with her pretty, pointed toes. "Fucking move!"

"I'm sorry." Caroline pushes herself up and slides backward off the stage. She turns and there is Elwyn, his eyes on her. Eyes everywhere on her and worse, her hat is gone, swallowed up by the crowd. Everyone is looking and, "I'm sorry," she says to them. "I'm sorry. I'm only a tourist."

Elwyn offers to buy her some taffy and also a new hat. They sit together on a bench by the river, people passing close all around them. Caroline's dress has torn from her fall and hangs loose over one shoulder.

"It looks better like that," Elwyn says.

"You pushed me into the stage," she says. "You did it on purpose."

"I said I'm sorry." He touches her bare shoulder and she thinks of pulling away, shaking him off. She could do it, if she wanted. She could dodge him all the way to Ash's house, break back in and find the barrel and be done with it, with everything, him and Ash and the whole goddamned city. It was all she wanted, after all, just to get another look at the thing drowning upstairs for so many years; one more look and maybe this time she can give it a face and wash her hands of it for good. But she lets this man distract her—an Elwyn from Birmingham with his big shiny boots, his hand so warm on her shoulder, the thumb sliding over her skin. She lets him hook his arm round her waist and pull her to him; she lets him bring his mouth up close to her neck and breathe, hot and moist, against her skin.

They sit like that while the sun sinks into the river. They sit and, all over the square, the streetlights blink on and the crowd grows louder and drunker. The festival is far from over, Caroline knows. It will go on long into the night, as it always does. Flasks, silver and gleaming, emerge from pockets; foaming cups of beer spill over chins. Overhead, fireworks boom and sizzle and wink in the dusk. Right in her ear, Elwyn says, "I just wanted to see you dance with them. You're the prettiest tourist I've ever seen," and she knows that she will have to sleep with him, before she can do anything else.

"Take me home with you," she says, and they walk quickly in the fading light.

Caroline's dress flutters up at the hem and she is aware of how naked she is beneath it, her bare thighs, her stomach and breasts covered only in a thin layer of summer cotton. She could rip it open, rip it all the way down right here on the street and the idea makes her walk even faster. Beside her, Elywn begins to pant.

They reach the house and go up the front steps, through the main door. Just inside is the foyer and the grand staircase where once she pranced up and down in long, sweeping skirts, her fingers trailing the banister, because she liked for Ash to see her that way, like a lady. She liked for him to see her other ways too, every way he could. For him, she was a coquette with smiles hidden behind her hands. She was a vamp in red lace and heavy make-up, or a simpleton with her hair done in braids and blue ribbons. She was a lunatic with a foaming mouth made of whipped cream and, just once, a suicidal teen with red slashes on her wrists, done in lipstick. It was like being onstage, being with Ash, and he was always the audience.

And now there is Elwyn, squeezing her waist. He pulls her tight against him so that her head rests against his chest, and he says, "I don't believe a word you've said, Susie. Not one word."

In the master bedroom on the second floor, on a damp mattress that smells of mildew, he is again like Ash. He's like Ash with his rough hands that pinch and tug, and his body held taut above her own. He's like Ash when he buries his face into her hair, when he sighs into her ear like it's all too much, like he'll never be the same, after. He's so like Ash, the weight of his lips, how they swell when he kisses her, and she is like Caroline, the Caroline from before, performing for him, clenching her thighs and swearing in a voice not her own, a high, breathy voice, like the whir of a mosquito. And when it's over she lays curled against him and she stares up at the same ceiling that she stared up at so often with Ash, in the same room that still smells of old wood and sweat, and into his shoulder she says, "Ash, Ash."

"I'm not Ash."

Caroline sits up, pulls the sheet to her chest. "Of course not," she says. He rolls onto his side to face her. "I wonder," he says, "if you hurt her."

"What?"

"The dancing imp you tripped," he says. "She looked soft, like you could hurt her."

"She wasn't an imp."

"Sure she was." He runs his palm down her bare back. "Listen, Susie," he says. "Who the hell is Ash?"

His fingers trail up and down her skin. She wonders how she feels to him, if her back is smooth and warm, pleasant to touch. She wonders whether he likes the sharp ridge of her spine. She closes her eyes, drops her head onto her arms and she says, "Who the hell is Susie?"

"None of my business," he says.

"I'll show you an imp," she says. "I'll show you one right now."

On the third floor, the air is close and thick—old air, discarded like everything up here, stored and forgotten. Elwyn switches on the overhead light and there, stretching out from the top of the stairs, is the room, one long floor made of smooth wood for dancing. But no one has danced here in a long time, not even Caroline. Ash would not allow it. He wouldn't allow her to come up here at all, what attracted her to him in the first place. She remembers it, the tour of his home, herself a skinny girl of fourteen with her hair tied up in a scarf, and Ash in his dark slacks and tie, tall and dignified, the proud owner of so much history. But Caroline had her eyes on the tourists, not Ash, until a couple of them tried to go up the stairs to the third floor. Ash snapped that it wasn't on show, and it was how he looked then, how his jaw twitched and his whole face seemed to ripple, like something trying to come up from beneath—it was his expression that got her attention, that he had something to hide.

"I guess," Elwyn is saying, "you've been here before."

"Yes." And the room is the same—covered in boxes and dust, the long wooden floor buried beneath broken crates and dirty clothing, racks and racks of ladies' dresses long out of fashion, old paintings propped against the walls, lamps without their shades and their bare bulbs made ridiculous, like the heads of hatless women. There's furniture here as well, heavy and looming—a tall chest of drawers, a head board, a lady's vanity table with the tarnished silver brushes and combs still laid atop it. And if Caroline were to open one of its drawers, she'd find the porcelain figurines, mythical monsters—the Minotaur, missing one of its horns, a Cyclops, its one great eye a solid white. These she found before, when she pillaged every corner of the room, opened every trunk and suitcase, emptied each box until nothing was left but the metal barrel stowed behind a massive bookcase that is still there, just where it was, in the back left corner of the room.

"So where's your imp?" Elwyn says.

"There." Caroline moves to the corner, Elwyn following. In the small space behind the bookcase is the barrel. A squat metal drum, pushed right up to the wall, just where she left it.

"You mean to tell me," Elwyn says, "that you've got an imp in that?"

"I didn't put it there," she says. "It's not my fault." But it comes out brittle, too dry. She has a sudden image of the words themselves stored here, the letters faded with dust because they're the same words she used the last time, after she found Ash's body. She came tearing up the stairs, her hands sticky with his blood, and as she fell on her knees beside the barrel, as she pounded the lid back in place she told herself that it was not her fault. It was not her fault that she found it, that it was there. It was not her fault that Ash, or Ash's father, or his grandfather put it there.

And now, she has the urge to kick a hole in the wall or topple the bookcase, to destroy something just to change it, because she is here again and it's all the same.

She is here again, as if five years have not passed, as if the town, the house, the room have all lay dormant, frozen. Elwyn, too, is just another Ash. It's like she never left at all but stayed, suspended here, the same Caroline who came looking for what was hidden. And it is her fault, after all. It's her fault that she found the barrel, that she pried it open with an old curtain rod, that she worked at it for three hours straight until her arms ached and her fingertips bled, until the lid wrenched loose and the putrid, sick odor floated up at her. It's her fault that she couldn't leave it alone in the first place, and that now she is back.

Elwyn hunches over her, reaches for the lid but she slaps his hand away. "Go on," he says. "Show me."

And maybe if she shows him, together they can figure out what it is, a mutant baby or an unwanted child, a midget or a hacked-off piece of a full-grown woman—a pretty woman, as young and elegant as the dancing imps. It could be a dancing imp, the thing in there, a predecessor to the many that spun and leapt across the stage. A dancing imp that danced maybe even here, in this very room, a room made for dancing. Caroline imagines it, the room shining and bare and the girl spinning, spinning, her long hair flying out behind her, arms held high and her young, pale body hard and firm and nothing at all like the pulpous mass that, when she looks, Caroline knows will be there, as spongy and indistinct as it was before, as nameless.

"What the hell are you doing?" Elwyn says.

She runs her hands over the lid, feels the metal, cool and dimpled beneath her palms and then she hunkers down over it, grips it by the edges and yanks the lid off. It lifts easy, much too easy, as if only balanced there, not sealed at all. The smell is immediate. The smell is the same, fat and pungent, a burning smell and so strong that it forces her back, her arm thrown up over her face. She bumps against Elwyn, who hovers behind. He catches her by the shoulders and holds her there with him while he squints down into the barrel.

"It's just a lot of liquid in there," he says. "Formaldehyde, smells like."

"Wait." Any second now it will come bobbing up, all wet and gleaming, and this time she will fish it out. This time, she will run her hands all over its pale, puckered flesh. "Wait," she says, but the liquid is dark, stagnant, and it's her own reflection she sees, the whites of her eyes, the tensed, lipless line of her mouth. And Elwyn's too, the wavering circle of his face, eyes as black as the liquid below, and something—a smile?—tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Just wait," Caroline says, "wait, wait," though already too much time has passed. The last time, it floated immediately to the surface. The last time, she blinked and it was there.

Elwyn steps back, folds his arms across his chest, and the smile is full there, now, smiling down at her with his pert, little mouth.

"It's sunk to the bottom," she says. She pushes past him, gropes along the floor beside the bookcase until she finds the curtain rod that she used the last time. She grips it with both hands and plunges one end into the barrel. She pushes it along the bottom, circles the barrel, poking and prodding, stirring up that strange, black liquid. "It's in there," she says, even as she begins to understand that it is not, that

somehow, it is gone. Gone, but the smell so strong, as if it was there only hours, minutes before. As if she missed it by a matter of seconds and if she hadn't lain so long with the pixie-faced man grinning at her from the corner, perhaps it would be there still.

She pitches the rod aside and thrusts her bare arms down into the liquid. It is warmer than she expected and thick as the mud water puddled on the bank of the river. She reaches down to the bottom, her arms submerged to the shoulder.

"That'll burn," Elywn says.

But if it does, she is unaware. She is conscious only of the smooth and empty bottom, the metal all slick beneath her fingers, the liquid splashing up into her face, her hair. Finally, she pulls her arms up and turns, dripping, to Elwyn. "It was here," she says. "I swear it was just here."

He stands slouched against the wall, his eyes half-closed. "I'm sure it was," he says. "But where's it gone now?"

She can't make out his expression. There is too much shadow; her hair has fallen over her face. Drops of liquid shimmer from the strands over her eyes, reflecting back the dull overhead light, and Elwyn's face is distorted, fragmented, like broken glass. Like the gleaming, wet mess that had been Ash. Like the dancing imps, throwing off light, hiding beneath light, so there could be anyone under there, anything. Or there could be nothing at all. **F**

L.D. VanAuken

The Pulaski Skyway

Damn the lowdown land routes,
the guttered underscuffle
and daily cramp.

Like Orwell's ore-laden pods,
the General's steelspan rises,
a river-straddler and grump.

Careful not to mistake the tyrant
of cantilevered lording
of cabled arc and maw.

It's no cathedral's buttress,
nor so friendly a confessor
as the gothic arch—

None of that. Come cant your face
toward awful angels, to worship
glint of rust and thrust of reich.

Before us there was nothing.
Above the city,
the sky makes way.

IT'S 5 FEB

Word came down while you slept. You slept through the night. Last night you did. It came on in the night. Night fell. Word followed. And now you've got it. What is it? It's war.

Normally you get a call. Word comes down and a call goes through. You answer the call and you get the word, and then you know. Sometimes you ask, "Is it war?" and you get the answer, "Yes." If you ask.

Normally you don't ask. Don't need to. But you've been out of the default circuitry. Yes you have. Not a matter of being excluded. If it was a matter of being excluded you excluded yourself. But did you do this? Not entirely. Nevertheless, you didn't get the call. You'd fallen off the lists. Were put on *inactive*. Relegated. Look, lots of people get relegated, not a big deal. You miss a meeting, you miss three. When time comes to make the lists you're not there. It's not that they've forgotten you, they might even go, "Where's he?" No. Here's what it is. It's that they're not going to put you on the lists without your knowing you're on them. Even.

So meetings get missed, lists get made, and you're not on them. Any of them. They *remember* you, they go, "Oh yeah," but you're not on the lists so you don't get the call. You have to ask.

I asked. I called. My old contacts. But I couldn't get through. Of course. I couldn't get through of course because my old contacts had already shifted into *who doesn't know shouldn't* mode. In this mode, according to practice, everybody who needs to know knew, so anybody who has to ask didn't, and shouldn't.

Except those who've fallen off the lists. Like I have. I had to ask. I'll tell you how it happened. I woke this morning having slept and opened my eyes. I didn't like what I saw. It was dark. My furnishings were obscure. My sheepskin coat thrown over the back of my slatback chair appeared to be small prey on a savanna playing a harp. Roughout sheepskin with woolly cuffs so like nature. But there was no music. It was all wrong.

Still I stared at it remembering a dream. In the dream I was lord of the manor and my serving people unclothed. I was unclothed too but no one noticed. They satisfied my every whim. They left and came back. Then they stood by, waiting for further whims. Aching for command. That was in the dream, their aching.

Now I understand the dream. Or why I had it. Because after a while - call it 25 minutes - I realized I was looking at no high plains prey but my sheepskin coat where I had thrown it over the back of my slatback chair after coming in from a night of drinking three drinks gradually in a public lounge alone where I'd once seen a woman I was extremely attracted to. I saw her from the floor up: legs like kids' scis-

sors, waist of bunched blousetail, gleaming clavicle, red head. My eyes found hers, she came. I believe she was a serving woman.

At this point I got out of bed. I went to the window facing west, the one not painted black, raised the shade and raised the sash and felt a wash of nostalgic light from a morning spent in a small Pennsylvania town down the front of me. I put my head out. It wasn't Pennsylvania.

The early morning electric air was on fire. But not in a way that made you think of electric air on fire. Yet I was unalarmed. I looked down and looked up. There was a head out one of the other windows, alert, above, and to my left, whistling an oldie.

I didn't know my neighbor. Did it matter? No. Because today nothing mattered and I was about to find out why. With my own head still ajut I reversed my feet on the floor executing a complete horizontal rotation in order to rest my neck on the sill, look up at my neighbor and say, "What's that you're whistling?"

There was a pause and a rustle of material inside my neighbor's flat before my neighbor answered, "Windy. The Association."

"As if I didn't know," I said. And then everything converged within my scope of concern - the dream, the drinks, the coat, the chair, having fallen off the lists and not gotten the call, the old whistled hit reinforced by ready identification, and I said, "Is it war?"

And my neighbor looked down at me as if to say what might never be said. To say it as if I'd asked if the river had risen because of the rain. And it had rained and rained and rained.

At this point I withdrew to equip myself. That was my choice. My neighbor might make the choice to thrust his head out the window whistling Windy and I don't question it. But for me, in wartime, no.

Once in wartime I'm going to fall back on my hours of drilling. On my hours of drilling, on my materials, on the updates, and on the precedents. On the precedents for protocol and the precedents for maneuvers, I fall back. I may have fallen off the lists but when the column formed I'd fall in.

And now that I would, it had. From high closets I retrieved my kit, my *without-which-nothing* kit, which includes the basic elements you need to get started. It came in a small to medium-sized metallic box sealed with clear drum-taut packing tape which had yet to be breached or otherwise compromised. The kits were distributed during one of the meetings I didn't miss when I was still on the lists and the army flush with cash.

Call it an army. Now that it's war, you can. You couldn't then. Then you called it a lot of persons parking and sitting around in one of the community utility/prayer/club/meeting rooms in the area. Which is why you don't have proper uniforms. And probably never will now that the textile manufacturing plants will have ceased operations. In wartime, apparel is a low order priority.

This is also why the seals of the kits have until this time remained uncompromised. Until this time there was no reason to compromise the seals and no reason to consider it. As for the lack of uniform, you ignore it. You array yourself a certain way. What makes sense. In all things you ask yourself, "Do these make sense?" And if you can answer brutally honestly, "I think they do," then more power to you, if you use it wisely.

The principle by which to abide is to cover every segment of your body, if only with the flimsiest material. This is termed the rudimentary layer. When you're in the field for 60 to 180 days, when heat of sun and fog of moon and shower of ordnance are your only companions - other than the fellow next to you in the hole - your humanity is tender and must be shielded. The formula goes

*Coverage Over Torso
Makes a Warrior More So*

a formula you copy from the whiteboard at an early meeting, commit to heart, then shred or otherwise utterly cloak all evidence of, except the stark evidence of your behavior in the field. Yes it's mnemonic, yes it rhymes, and it'll save your skin for better times. Ah men.

And that's what you say. As sunlight scrawls up the bluescreen you array in the rudimentary layer and your stomach roils. You may stop now and listen for the report of gunfire. If you get no report you have breakfast.

Now, there are two schools of thought, or at least two. First (or home) school: eat what's at hand - provided of course it hasn't been contaminated by enemy innuendo or germ storm. Second (or secondary) school: break into your rudimentary ration stowage, which has been assembled and stowed during times of peace and plenty. The idea behind secondary school being Do It, Eat It, Get Used To It, Inish Cap Bold. And if you're worried about what's *inish, Cap, bold* you're not, aye! Mnemonics are tonics, for evading bubonics. That's the Middle Ages talking, and they lived to tell.

Which is why it's equally sensical to eat what's at hand. Consume the ordinary while you can, conserve the rudimentary for the van. The latter being the semi-armored vehicle which if you're extremely lucky will carry you to or from the field. Though necessarily without upholstery - stripped and secreted at a safe remove - the van is a crunchable hold, a rolling container of army or segment thereof providing an extra layer of absorbent protection.

The truth about the van is that the van will not hold the army, but the army will strive to be held and woe to whoever's at the bottom of the pile. If panic ensues, utter the watchwords. If you forget them, utter other things. Many things. Loud. That's war. You wanted the truth and if you didn't you shouldn't but too late now.

Having arrayed in your rudimentary layer you inventory what's at hand. Open the cabinet. By this time it's later. No mortar fire but your upstairs neighbor has stopped whistling. Anything could happen at any time. In the cabinet are

Two jars of hoisin sauce.
A drum of hominy grits.

There is also a can of kadota figs.
 Five cellophane sacks of crisp Cantonese noodles.
 A box of sugar, a cylinder of salt, and a flagon of safflower oil.
 And a box of Kix.
 And a tube of cake icing with a detachable nozzle for putting names on cakes.
 A Ziploc of pistachios, dyed scarlet.
 A bottle of sausage flavored salad bits.
 And a can of bacon flavored franks.
 Seven sheets of phylo dough.
 A box of cheese.
 A dish of peppercorns.
 A saucer of currants.
 A lidded receptacle of former dumplings.
 Unfrozen ice pops in polyvinyl tubes.
 Polyvinyl thimbles of liquid creamer.
 A pomegranate, one side softened by gravity and darkness.
 A pouch of feta crumbles.
 Four cans minced clams *au jus*.
 A cruet of shallot vinegar.
 A jar of gherkin dregs.
 Cinnamon applesauce in aluminum demitasse.
 Six broken breadsticks bound with twist tie.
 Three stalks ripe rhubarb bound with twist tie.
 A Shoo-Fly Pie in a boiling bag with two twist ties twisted, tied, bound and decoratively teased.
 Couscous.
 Muesli.
 Maypo.
 Curds, small.
 Close the cabinet.

Reassured, you prepare to commence the protocol for mobilization. This is the juncture for that. Now, the protocol is broken into three alphabetized segments: A Phase, B Phase, and C Phase. This is known as protocol segmentation. (Phases beyond C are fluid and are assigned letters in the field.)

A Phase commences with the Queue of Army and here a wall is met. For while you would fall back on your hours of drilling, on precedent, the wall is spelling out for you the fruitlessness of drilling, the beside-the-point of precedent. You think fast. And you think hard. UPSHOT: you are turned inward upon your own peculiar resources. You are handed what you are given. And what you are given is the wall. ITEM: according to practice, the Army must Queue *en masse* and you are freestanding. The rank and file are falling in but in who knows what far-flung parade ground or paved acre. For to Queue the Army in A Phase takes an acre.

All right, listen: here's what's going to save your seat. You take the stairs. The streets are quiet and serene. After all, it's wartime and fate doesn't send invitations. Nonetheless, the air remains enflamed. You make approach to the curb. You gauge the probable locus for the docking of the van and boarding of the queuing Army. You hazard the probableness from contingencies implicit in the thick materials of which you have made a study. With this fully in mind you stand at the curb at parade rest.

And you wait - for - the van.

Despite a lack of incident time continues to pass. Inevitably, you catalogue your most recent dreams and dreams of most recent nights. You sit in the manor. You see serving people. You think of Pennsylvania. Everyone's unclothed. A whistling comes through the canyon of buildings behind you. Without looking you know it's your building. Without thinking you know it's your neighbor. So, he's at it again.

The van doesn't come. A wind whines. Trash skitters. Your toes entwine with litter, coolly. Suddenly, a distant clap of clog soles signals a foreground approach. Turn, look. Eye contact is oblique, inconclusive. A woman, attractive, yet not the one from the public lounge. Yet not necessarily not the one. On foot, and moving. Moving as if she doesn't know you as well as she should. That's deep cover. And you approve. She transects your purview without signage. Wait for the van? Not her. Her fish to fry fly solo and she'll greet them *mano à mano*. You, you're a piece in the puzzle, and the puzzle is large, deadly, and in country. One day you'll come marching home, but till then, Johnny, you're on the spot. You let her go. She's gone.

Where - is - the van. Silence like an anvil drops. Except for the whistling. Abruptly, you're haunted. After the second drink she smiled at you. Or was that the one for everybody she sees. And serves.

Absent a blast wave you're cleaved from reverie by the grind of engines. "At last," you mutter - but not so fast. It's mobile, it's armored, it's there, but in the guise of a sanitation truck on civilian rounds. Okay fine, there pump the pneumatic elbows. There hurl the rubber tubs. But there stands the sanitation man, whose own elbows dangle free, at the ends of which soft gloves keep safe those hands for other duty. Is that where you'd seen him before? Braiding lanyards at the last meeting? Playing piano at the public lounge? Or was he just another she served?

Who are you kidding. War doesn't wait for the waste stream. Try to part two rivers met. He's on his way to the field. If the van doesn't come, he can take you there. If he can't take you there, he can give you the coordinates. And he can give them to you now. Loud and mercilessly you petition, "*Where?*"

The man in gloves shifts squarely to the outburst, takes your measure, all containers now void and toppled. He is so still. "*Where?*" he echoes strangely.

In reply you mention, "Yes."

"Man," he says, affording the certainty it's you he addresses, "*everywhere.*" And clinging to the truck he proceeds, irrefutably to the field, and is gone.

The van - doesn't - come.

The whistling has ceased. It is here that three things become manifestly clear. Number 1, despite your survey of what's at hand you forgot to eat breakfast and are

feeble with want. Number 2, though you have arrayed yourself in the rudimentary layer with every segment covered if only with the flimsiest material, it's 5 Feb and you are professedly hypothermic. Number 3, while it's true that there is always a number 3, in this event number 3 is a restatement of Numbers 1 and 2 made emphatic by redundancy or, alternatively, an accrual of 1 and 2 compounded at 100% per pause to reflect leaving you your 3 and probably more. That's how huge this has become.

What is to be done? The van doesn't come. The whistling resumes. Before a headlong rush into behavior you stop to catalogue the nomenclature. All's in play. With this acknowledged, unseen forces go to work: Number 2 cures itself in the anticipation of stepping onto the field, for despite the flimsy falling-off quality of your layer, the heat of battle is a warming heat. As for Number 1, there's no help but to compromise the seal of your rudimentary ration stowage. That's why it's there. And if it's not there you break ranks, run back upstairs and get it. Now budge yourself, soldier.

This has all been happening. This is the real deal. The stairs are slick with mid-morning dew so you aim for the non-skid strips. The landings are alive with the echoes of cries yet to be heard. Uncanny, but for the people it's early. Though it all happens in their name, they are the last to wake up and admit it.

Back behind your door you conduct a search. Your rudimentary ration stowage is part and parcel of your *without-which-nothing* kit which contains all the basic elements you need to get started. You knew that, you heard it before. Notwithstanding, you had left for the field without it. Forgive yourself and focus. Where - is - the kit.

From a still small point at your center you slowly pan, your need like a laser aimed. ITEM: it's small to medium-sized, it's metallic, and it came from a high place. You mount the seat of your slatback chair and look up. Again, the whistling has stopped. You wonder why. If the van docks before your return to the curb, the Army will leave without you, the day may be lost.

Down from the chair to the window you go, turn around, limbo back, and out-thrust your head. Above you your neighbor scans the horizon. "New intelligence?" you ask.

And your neighbor looks down at you as if to say what might forever be said. To say it as if you'd asked if he were your father and your mother was chained in the crawlspace.

Then, a crash. As a result of your hours of drilling you know without thinking what has happened. Your *without-which-nothing* kit has fallen behind the refrigerator and is lodged between the black metal grillework and the yellow plaster wall. You bring your head inside and move it along the room.

You stand athwart the refrigerator. You identify the kit wedged viciously behind it. You survey the factors of compression. Greasy, dusty, black metal grillework. Cracked, hortatory, yellow plaster wall. Laying a hand on the trapped kit's metal flank you apply force and soon come to the realization that it is unyielding. You retrieve your slatback chair and place it legs-down abut the refrigerator. You climb it and readdress the *without-which-nothing*. The refrigerator clicks, grumbling to life. Atop the chair you

quail but sustain loft. No time to not do. Time is for having done. The manor gates rattle but hold. Your serving people stand by. Your blood sugar plummets. With one hand on the kit's face and another on its behind you utilize the push-pull method of dislodgement until, according to practice, with a snap and a swoop it dislodges, abruptly depriving you of your work area. You fly rearward, the *without-which-nothing* heavy and hard in your close embrace.

For a moment, I'm out. I'm in a public lounge alone drinking three drinks gradually when a woman I'm extremely attracted to heaves into view. She glances at me and I think for a moment she's going to serve me, but no. I look down. The third drink is half-full. I drink it. I look up. She's gone. No, she isn't. Her back is turned. She leans on the end of the bar and the bartender leans on the end of the bar and he tells her something. He tells her something and she listens. Then she laughs. Behind the bar bottles shatter one by one like soldiers.

When I come to, the seal of the kit has been profoundly compromised. The elements formerly within are strewn about me like checkers and flowers. Bruised and softheaded from hunger I yawn my ears clear and jar free a question. The rudimentary ration stowage. Where? There. At the end of my knees. Small metallic blessing from larger metallic bounty tumbled. Scooby-Doo's face scratched but intact. I pivot its toggles and open says-a-me.

How many lifetimes are lived before your eyes tell your bowels tell your heart that what you before you behold – is a tin of crumbs. The nutri-bites and krispy-rounds and jerky-pastes have like little ruins clotted, brittled, crumbled, and are as dust. You frown: when was that last meeting?

You wet a pointing finger and insert. Crusted, it rises to your open mouth. Such are your breakfast. You look beyond the ends of your knees at the flimsy wrappings cats-cradling your heels and ankles. Such are your footwear. What would she say if she saw you now? How about Hello? That tends to get things going.

You pull your finger out, so very clean. You're done. Crumbs are not enough. No, never. But don't fear. Remember something. The kadotas in the cabinet. You'll eat those. Change your clothes. Drop by the lounge. Maybe she'll be there this afternoon. You can drink another drink. You can say something. You can tell her about a little town in Pennsylvania where the morning light sometimes makes everything almost good again.

No, don't fear. Today is a day. The field a field. The war, that war, the one that came on in the night, will happen without you. **F**

Francine Witte

Still Life With You Never Coming Back

How silly of me
not to notice
that first shiver of leaves.

And how did I miss
the moon, that white
zero pulling at you like a tide?

If I were a painter,
I'd paint us back
to yesterday, or last December.

Remember? The two of us posed
in front of the twinkly tree,
the one with the fake needles

and pre-lit bulbs. Our
moonsliver smiles
in the camera flash,

and, in the background,
on the wall behind us,
a poster of the framed sky.

Transport

“Whose turn to pray?” barked the LT.
Good soldiers stared at the deck as if the LT had asked whose turn it was to die.

Then Orleans piped up from the Humvee’s darkness. He said: *Thanks be to God for a just cause and strong armor. Save the lives of our men and our families. Forgive us our sins, and God grant us the courage of crusaders. Amen.*

“Amen,” said the men.

“Amen,” I echoed like I was spitting out a tooth.

The lead vehicle pulled away. Outside the wire, the convoy picked up speed. The tank commander had strict orders: don’t slow down. If a little kid ran out in the road, hit him. Then keep going. Never let Haji get a clean shot.

Orleans’ leg rippled and jumped. Every lurch threw him against me and then tore him away, repeated attacks that filled my nostrils with bursts of crotch and collar and armpit. Ever since Orleans had come to the forward operating base, the LT had never let him within ten yards of me. So for Orleans to have taken a spot next to me meant ~ what exactly? Either Orleans had put out of his head everything the boys had told him about me. Or maybe he had a genuine and abiding belief in the goodness of man and the possibility of redemption.

But if you put my balls in a vice and pliers on my fingernails, I’d guess Orleans had heard that I’d never taken so much as a scratch in my three tours in Iraq. And luck is contagious, and luck was reason enough to bite your tongue and swallow your scruples for the length of a mission outside the wire. Faith in God was one thing, but it never hurt to have a back-up plan.

“Hey, Orleans,” I said.

“Sir?”

“How’d she like the ring?”

“Sir?”

“Your fiancée.”

At Christmas, Orleans had hunkered down in the Commo building and proposed to his sweetheart over the phone. Men cheered when she said yes. They helped him order his engagement ring on the internet, so that she’d get it before the New Year.

“Oh, man,” he said. “Happy enough, I reckon. Not one that goes for diamonds. What’s important to her is God and family.”

“She got a diamond in you.”

He stiffened. In Pontefract, Louisiana, where Orleans came from, it was considered arrogance to acknowledge a compliment, especially from another man.

“Naw,” he drawled. “Naw, sir.”

“And you in her,” I added lamely. Excess chatter hung in the air like a spare asshole.

"No, sir," he said. "I mean, yes, sir. You bet."

Jenkins threw him a rescue line. He drawled, "What's up, Orleans?"

"Nothin'. Bourbon Street," Orleans said. His voice was full of relief. "Jasmine."

"Gumbo," Jenkins said. He was also from Louisiana, and it was a running contest between them, what smelled best. "Pickled okra."

For every word they said, another flashed in my head. For "jasmine," I thought "cordite." For gumbo, I thought "burning flesh."

"Fried," challenged Orleans.

"Fried," Jenkins agreed.

Fried, I thought. The easy familiarity between Orleans and Jenkins made me want to press the pressure points on Jenkins's neck until he breathed his last. I could do it with my eyes closed. I could do it in my sleep. For years, I'd done nothing but study and read, lift dumbbells, ponder, shoot, kill, masturbate, and ~ over and over, in the confines of my can ~ practice martial arts, the *taolu* of *wushu* and *shotokan*, silent killing forms, the point of which is to repeat strictly prescribed movements with slow precision until you've murdered the instincts God gave you and replaced them with a ruthless set of your very own.

The night was moonless. Under cover of noise and darkness and blinding flashes of occasional light, I slipped the heel of my boot to the left to put my calf in contact with Orleans'. His calf was hard and thick from so many days on the march. He had been working the weights relentlessly since he came to the base. He'd jacked himself up twenty pounds. I could barely make out a silhouette, but I'd observed and scouted his face a hundred times: skin pale as death around a blank return stare as if he had heard something I'd said, understood each word, but was still putting together what, strung together, they meant.

If Orleans sensed my incursion, he gave no sign. He was a machine. A robot. A mighty fucking scholar-warrior, *wushu*-master like me. I packed all my intensity into those few inches of flesh in contact with Orleans' body. Despite the other men all around us, I willed him to understand me. To respond. I even allowed myself to think that maybe Orleans had other motives for dropping down next to me in the vehicle. Against my better judgment, I dared to imagine myself and Orleans running in the wadis in underwear, splashing each other and laughing and getting wet, watched over by armed soldiers who had our backs but politely looked the other way. I dared to imagine a desert turned green overnight after a rare shower and a world without hostility, where I might be useless.

I wanted to explain that he wouldn't be the first I'd had, and there was no shame in surrender, because today might be the last day Orleans and I ever drew breath, and we should die happy.

Not that I believed that happy horseshit. We all have a destiny. I was eight years older than Orleans and tattooed all over. I had a bronze star, a purple heart, and chevrons on my dress uniform. I wasn't a true believer by any means, but I was a Marine. I knew my place in the world. There are those cut out for the homeland and kids and picket fences, and those meant to die in the desert, and those like me

meant to fight forever in a godforsaken round of futile, feudal squabbles the world over, proud gladiators in the circus maximus.

I've got no place to go without this war. No home. My mom might yet answer that dreaded knock some dawn in the future. "Ma'am?" the soldiers from the department of defense will say and touch their caps. "May we come in?"

They'll sit in her living room and describe me as a hero. My mother's face will be set and firm. She'll say, "Nobody of that description ever lived here. Bury him yourself."

Orleans wasn't the name on his dog tags. His real name was a casualty of friendly fire. When he joined the platoon, Hurricane Katrina had just passed and Pontefract was close enough to New Orleans for government work. The boys couldn't be bothered with geography, and the more Orleans resisted, the more the name stuck. Now he answered to it like it was his own.

He was twenty-two years old. His face was honest as an EMT's. Back home he sang in the choir. He didn't drink and he didn't smoke. He was saving himself for marriage.

He had adjusted quickly to life on the base. He picked his battles and loved his God, but he never looked down on another soldier for a few bad words or the larceny in his heart. When the fighting picked up and the "thump, thump, thump" of artillery was more constant than a heartbeat, I heard Orleans tell the LT not to worry about him; he had been born in a hurricane. His mother had screamed and his father found him peeking out beneath her skirts. His father caught hold of him and her mother pushed and Orleans came into the world. His father found some scissors, boiled water, held a lighter to the blades. Then he snipped the cord and tied it tight. He gave Orleans to his mother, who hadn't yet a chance to hold him. The next day his father had set out for the hospital with the little boy in his arms. There were soldiers in the streets. They pointed their guns at Orleans' father and sent him back where he had come.

"That's the story," Orleans said, "that my daddy tells. He says the angel of the Lord is looking over me."

I took one look at those full lips and long lashes and thought: *You're the angel, Orleans.* The first time I laid eyes on him, I tried my damndest to get him assigned to my can, but the LT put the ky-bosh on that notion. The LT had a serious hard-on for me. He had no use for my kind. Though if Haji had a gun to my head, the LT would kill him, more likely than not.

A headlight flash showed the LT's face full of resentful meditation. A soldier coughed a cough that might have been a warning. But then the lights lit up our truck a second time, and the men's expressions proved blank. They had no curiosity about where we were headed or what we were doing. They were soldiers and heroes. Thinking was beyond them. Like me, they obeyed orders. No doubt at the end of

this interminable drive, our mission would become clear. Or else it wouldn't. And we would get where we were going, jump out, load back up again, turn around and never know what the hell the generals had been thinking.

Deployment is like that, in my experience: getting repeated, recurrent urges to do something you only vaguely understand, for an end you do not seek or believe in, through acts you would never own up to in polite company. Shock and awe, my ass. We've got a job to do.

Orleans dozed and mumbled something drowsy in half-French to people not on board. I could barely make out the words over the diesel's roar. I, too, feigned sleep. As if a sleep made me do it, my hand jerked and jumped like a fish on a line. It landed in Orleans's lap. I had planned this maneuver as meticulously as a night patrol. I had considered the risks and the benefits and other alternatives and weighed the potential loss of life against the ultimate objective. It had seemed like a good idea.

But the reality of my hand in his crotch was obvious as a scream. A classic military blunder: I had extended the front and outrun my supply of excuses. I imagined Orleans drawing back, staring at my arm as if it were a snake in the garden. Crossing himself and spitting and saying, *Be Gone Satan! Get thee hence!*

Now, I'm not religious in the classical sense. Not like Orleans. In Aroostook County, Maine, God wasn't much influence, except maybe Sunday morning. But in Iraq, I had more time to think of Him. And more reason. And I discovered that, religiously speaking, I was a gambling man. I was a shrewd negotiator - I'd offer God these blue light specials on virtue just to get myself through whatever that day's Hell happened to be. *Just this one time*, I prayed over and over. *So help me God.*

Then, when I got through the firefight, or the mortar attack, or watching some poor kid writhe and scream while the medic pulled a piece of hot shrapnel from his groin, I'd find ways to string Him out and not deliver. *The check's in the mail. You have my word on it.*

Of course, God's no fool. I understand that. Sometime soon He wasn't going to take my terms. He was going to walk away and leave the offer on the table and me with my dick in my hand and my thumb up my ass and a whole lot of angry Haji at the gate.

But there's nothing like a long ride and a dark night to undo the discipline of a good mind. I made God another deal. If only the Almighty let me get my hand on Orleans's sweet cock at some point during this long night, I would go no further. I'd be content with just that one special grace. Henceforth, I'd go to Mass on Sundays and confess my sins and be a better person all around. *Cross my heart and hope to die.*

I faked another spasm and flipped my hand palm-down. My fingers rested on Orleans' left flank. I felt his cock twitch. He brushed at me. Minutes passed while I played dead. The Humvee raced through the desert that had been here before God or man ever gave thought to America or Marines or love itself. In those cramped eternities, I remembered my father dying on his bed and me at stiff attention, tears streaming down my eight-year-old face. *Yes, sir!* I'd barked, making promises I would not keep: protect your mother, make me proud, raise good sons.

The tires dinged a crater. The truck lurched. Someone cursed. Through a tear in the Humvee's soft skin, I looked out into the night. The distance was lit by a flare from some firefight far from us. We passed over a bridge, our bridge, built last week by the engineers with my rifle platoon riding shotgun and picking off Haji in the surrounding hills before he took his potshots. We rushed through a village. Though it was the dead of night, Iraqi women on their roofs stared down at us. They stared as if they thought we might be killed in front of them. They didn't want to miss a minute of the carnage. They wanted to see me and my kind wiped from the face of the earth.

I don't like to say I hate people. But I don't like the Iraqis. I don't trust them. They can do me less harm when they're dead. I felt guilty for not trusting the Iraqis, but I had built no trust to give. They gave me nothing to work with. Same with the LT. I didn't want to say I hated him. But I'd be damn sure better off if he let me alone, or took another command. The squad's motto: Be polite. Be professional. Have a plan to kill everyone you meet.

Before I let the flap close, I glanced at Orleans. His eyes were closed. His breaths were low and even. His mouth fell open. His head nodded with every jolt over the rutted road. Sleep made it easy to imagine Orleans in easier times in another world, back in Baton Rouge, pampered by some mammy or mother or older lover entranced by his beauty.

I don't like to say I love anyone either. Better to be responsible only for your own gear, your own mission, nothing to slow you down.

A spasm closed our hands on one another. Another spasm followed, and then another, one after another, born of bad dreams or potholes or lust. The truck barreled through the night. It stank of diesel and dung and burnt plastic.

Somewhere on the road ahead, a battle waited. But I was fighting my own war here. A war of inches. A struggle of will. A desperate, miniature battle with an inscrutable enemy over uncertain terrain in which life and death seemed at stake.

I am no hero. No rebel. No flagwaver. I'm a soldier. And war boiled down to simple questions definitively answered: Are you a man? Did you run, or did you fight? When they shot at you, did you freeze or did you shoot back? Did you accept the order to kill the innocent? Run over the kid at seventy miles an hour and never look back? When you get those answers, it'll be hard to shake them the rest of your life, whatever you do. They get hardwired in you.

At the next lurch of the Humvee, I launched another sortie. I slumped over on Orleans. For a minute he did not react, then, with a few sudden jolts, he extricated himself from the bulk of my weight. I fell back, my charge repulsed.

For a diversion, I hastily rummaged through my gear as if I were looking for something. Something missing and urgently needed. An antidote. I glanced at him when a headlight cut through the gloom. His eyes were open wide as if he were ready to meet his maker and had done nothing all his short life that made him ashamed.

I envied Orleans. I envied him his girl and her diamond, his faith and simple prayers, his guiltlessness and strong jaw and loving family. He was a soldier's soldier, not a lucky degenerate like me.

Orleans twitched. His lids drooped. He squeezed triggers in his sleep. Or maybe it wasn't sleep. Maybe he was just an infinitely better warrior than I. A master tactician. A brilliant general. My actions and sorties seemed insignificant and trivial, flies on a camel's backside. I felt outclassed. His tactics had been planned days ahead. Perhaps months. The whole unit was in on it. Orleans was a plant, a way for everybody to get off at my expense. Orleans must have known who I was. What I was. They all knew.

I was living out one gigantic joke: there's always something ridiculous about two men holding hands. It happens here, and in all Arabic cultures, and the men joke about Haji taking it up the ass. But not too much, partly because we've seen them bury fags up to the neck and stone them to death, and partly because no one wants his enemy to be a fag. There's something demoralizing about it - it's a battle you can't win, because if you win, you've only done what's expected and if you lose, it's like getting beat up by a girl.

Sometimes, to let off steam, the guys searched and probed until they found what pushed your buttons. But no one plays jokes on me. If a new guy does start, it ends in a heartbeat.

Sergeant's fucked up, they say. Bad ass. Out in the desert too long.

A native of Hell in the skin of a biped, the LT once said, and none of the men knew what the words meant, but they knew what he was saying. There's something out of kilter, boys. Plumb line's not true. Best you steer clear. Truth is, if I hadn't been a mean son-of-a-bitch, if I hadn't been a superior soldier and a lucky fuck, they'd long since have killed me. Truth is, if there hadn't been such a thing as other men's loneliness and vanity, I'd have been all alone.

The LT grunted a command into his headset, and every driver in the convoy flipped down night-vision goggles and cut his headlights. The darkness was pure and cool, comforting as fresh water. Under its cover, Orleans stretched and adjusted his hips so that they were angled more toward me. Relief and suspicion flooded me in equal opposing waves. I glanced at the darker darkneses that were the outlines of the other men. I flipped down my own goggles and saw two dozen men glow green and pick their noses and scratch their asses and let their hands tremble. You never would have guessed it among men packed so close you could smell the next guy's asshole, but we each had our secrets.

I glanced at Orleans' inviting hips. Was this a way to allow me better access beneath his belt? The whole night seemed suddenly full of signals and intimations, crossed wires and commo gear down, fog of war and all that shit. Hadn't I been bold enough?

The truck swerved. Its movement loosed us from our seats, our proper places. *Shake the cup and re-roll the fucking dice*, I thought. Going on pure instinct and adrenaline, I let my hand cup Orleans's package. His legs opened. Like an angel shedding wings, forty pounds of gear fell aside: flak jacket, SAPI plates, throat protector, neck

protector, groin protector. To me, he was naked as the day he was born.

I made a light, circular motion on the base of his shaft. A ripple passed through him. A longing gaze burned my face. I felt projected on me a whole host of faces from Pontefract, Louisiana. A whole host of people Orleans might never again see. I wanted to put a finger to his lips and rock him like a baby.

Without warning, Orleans seized my wrist. Head bent, grip tight, rocking slightly in his seat, he prayed over me. Startled, I had no reason to think his reverence was anything but real, but doubt about the objective filled me. I could have wished for a soldier with more cunning. Or perhaps a better sense of irony. Perhaps someone who every once in a while could crack the religious tension with a good old fashioned joke about Jesus.

Still, I unhinged the button-fly and slid my hand into the fold of cloth. There was a slight, sudden rising of his chest like a sharp indrawn breath. He wore no underwear.

I eased out his hard cock. I stroked the area just beneath the mushroom head. The truck shot over the pitted highway. The cock twitched, insistent as an animal. Eight inches and thick as rolling pin. A boy with whom God had been generous.

The LT cursed, men stirred. Green hands rubbed sleep from glowing sockets. Orleans stiffened. He looked at me with those wild frightened eyes, feral, like the eyes of an Iraqi child whose world has been made strange, whose stump of an arm is still fleshy-full and not yet withered.

"I'm afraid," he said.

I wanted to blot the words from existence. I wanted to bottle them up and put back the stopper. But they could not be unspoken. I glanced away. Lulled by long nights of patrol, the other soldiers were again soon asleep, nodding so like so many bobbleheads on a dashboard. Fallen away from us like so many dead men.

Our getting caught might have been Orleans's ticket straight out of this Hell. My ass, they couldn't afford to lose. I could have had my hand so deep in Orleans cookie jar it was coming out his throat, and they'd never let me go home. But him, he was young. He had little experience at the front. They would have sent him packing presto, back to explain to that little girl that loved God and family but not diamonds why he wasn't going to fight any more.

But a real Marine never takes Hell's back door. He never takes the easy way out. I rested two fingers on Orleans' cock as if I was taking a pulse. I gathered his balls in my fingers and kneaded gently. His mouth fell open. He licked his lips. A rock shot up from the road and smashed into the chassis beneath us. Orleans yelped, and the LT shouted, "Shut the fuck up!" But he didn't mean it, because he, too, loved Orleans. We all did. We all made this same mistake.

"So messed up," Orleans murmured. And I swear, looking back, he wasn't just talking about me. He meant everything. God and all His works. The terrors inside him. The child with the hole in the forehead and the woman in a burkah whose tongue had been cut out. He meant my hand on his rod and the rush of blood and his sweetheart back in Baton Rouge and his Bible and those passages he knew by heart and those he had underlined that seemed to resist commitment to memory.

Orleans shot a short, urgent glance at the closest dozing soldiers. He pushed out with his opposite elbow against the sleeping form on his far side, as if he could press him away, out of this shared darkness into a further darkness all his own.

"I'm going to make her a good husband," he said. "You wait and see."

He spoke as if he just wanted to hear how these words sounded. Whether they seemed true. Orleans hadn't resigned himself to the fact that he might not go home to Pontefract, or that he would never again know men like the men riding the truck with us - men who would have his back and watch him cry and never under pain of death mention it any of it to anyone outside the unit. Orleans and I came from different worlds, but those worlds fell away. It was like we were born here in the desert, had lived here since ancient Ur and Babylon were the greatest cities in the world. Just him and me.

Boldly now, I circled the base of his cock with thumb and forefinger and jerked him off using straight hard strokes timed with the lurching of the truck, demanded by the potholes in the road and the ruts and bumps and divots as if Iraq itself were jerking Orleans off. Jerking us all off. He whimpered and came.

For a brief moment, I had shown him another world. But now, in this next instant, he was profoundly, unmistakably here, among the sounds of the Humvee and weight of the gear and the dripping of jizz and the dust in the air he could never hope to wash from his body and other men who might never love him again because of what he had done.

He slept or pretended to sleep. His head lolled. He drooled. The saliva was wet and hot as the spunk on my fingers. For his sake, I tried again to imagine a place where Orleans and I could be together, a place other than this place, as different from the place we had left behind as it was from the one we were in. A place where no one would laugh at one man holding another man's hand. Or his dick. I tried to imagine this place at the end of the convoy, a destination we were hurtling toward in the Iraqi dark. If there was such a place, it was covered in darkness. **F**

Kerry James Evans

Colloquium

Here is the lamp of my marriage: slender and green,
a fluorescent bulb to save energy, and the base:
dust collecting into a gray mass that is my hair,
my new Chrysler—American-made, and to prove it,

a sticker on the driver's side rear window: *Built
with quality and pride by UAW members at the Sterling
Heights Assembly Plant*, which is enough for me,
though Sterling Heights sounds as generic

as the store where I bought this lamp, the blue-vested
man explaining energy efficiency. And I can't figure
out which I hate more, the person, or the phrase
energy efficiency: nasal in sound and paradoxical

in nature. No, listen. Energy means life, spirit,
emphasis. Efficiency: the ability to produce
the desired effect with a minimum of effort,
expense, or waste. What is sterling about a city

supported by a car plant? My car is an abomination,
and the fluorescent bulb lighting my room
is an elephant on Silk Road; efficient at what?
Gas prices are down. A recession has taken hold.

I've made some plans, and they start with this lamp,
a box of hair dye and my car. These three things
are all I need to get laid, and I'm not talking
about my wife—I'm talking about Sterling Heights.

A woman working the line, tired after work,
drinking a beer with the guys at the bar, and yes,
I'm hitting on her at that bar, and the guys
give me a look. I've got it all planned out.

I ask her what she thinks about these new hybrids.
She says, *They're not bad*. I agree. We walk out
of the bar, leaving the guys, leaving the beers
on the table, and I ask her to quit her job

and move in with me; I'm kicking my wife
out of the house. I hate our lamp. And the lady
says, stepping into my car, *These Sebrings*
are pieces of shit. Come to find out, she drives

a Toyota. And that's fine. In Blue Springs, Toyota
just opened a plant. There must be a formula
for car plants and communities: lame adjective
plus general noun—the particular language

left for the owner's manual, which is where we
are, flipping from one page to another, looking
for directions on how to operate the jack,
how fast to go on a donut, and she says to me,

You're leaving your wife? And of course I reply
that I'm not. There's nothing in the Declaration
of Independence that leans toward compromise,
only the absolution of what makes us plain,

and I want her right now, in this new car
on this new and glorious day. I want my wife
to watch, because she and I both know we're living
together under the pretense of lower car insurance

and half rent. This is the first marriage, ruined
based on the same principles that give young people
in college the courage to believe they can major
in anything, when their parents know well enough.

They raised these children, saw them developing colloquial
speech patterns. *And you want to study microbiology?*
Very well. I have no plans to visit Sterling Heights,
and I'll never squeeze a bottle of dye on my hair.

Katie M. Flynn

Under These Circumstances

If a pot jumped up off the stove and scalded her son's shoulder, his neck, his once white cheek, if the house - *her house* - revealed itself as a violent thing, a mother would know - *from that moment on* - that they would have to leave, to move.

Under such circumstances, her husband would want to believe her - *really* - or at least to sympathize because it seems like a perfectly reasonable reaction for a mother to have after her son suffered third degree burns on one-quarter of his body, after child protective services - CPS, they call themselves, like FBI or CIA - assigned a caseworker to determine if she, the boy's mother, was in fact responsible for his burns.

The caseworker would come to the house and sit on the sofa, open a manila folder in her lap, not touching the tea she had said she wanted. *It's not poisoned*, a mother might think, though she would never say it. She would sit there on the second sofa, ankles crossed, stroking the boy's cheek, his skin red and rippled like warm wax, and she would answer every one of the caseworker's questions, never once letting the woman see how it shamed her.

She would be declared fit because it would be obvious that such a mother suffers from the guilt of having failed to protect her son from something she did not understand, not something she had done.

Of course, a husband could not look into his wife's agonizing eyes and think that she had done such a thing. No, a husband would not blame her, at least not when they dared to go out in public, to take the boy for a burger. He sat between them in the circular booth, coloring his placemat, hiding behind a baseball cap from the onslaught of stolen glances and hushed whispers.

At night, she would hover half-asleep in the boy's doorway, sometimes leaning into the frame to doze. She would dream that the house she had decorated, the life that she had designed, had become unstable and was collapsing all around them. Eventually, she would believe this to be true and tell her husband so.

At first, he might say to her, *you're imagining things*, or *it's grief talking*, but after a while, after the conversation circled back, over and over, again and again, a husband might say, *you are fucking nuts*. *Nuts*. This, a husband would not be able to excuse or even apologize for. No, he would have to go on like he had not said it at all, like it were not true, like she had continued talking to him, instead of herself, her nails sunk into her scalp, under her unwashed hair, and their son, a shadow, gone from the doorway before his father could even look.

It's not like a husband could really leave, not under these circumstances, not even if he wanted to. *Deadbeat*, he'd be called. *Lout*.

Why can't we just move? That's what she, the wife, would want to know.

Why can't we just move, a husband would repeat, holding her by the arms too tightly, as he thought about all he had sacrificed for this house, taking a job that

turned into a life. WHY CAN'T WE JUST MOVE? A salesman, science teacher, tax attorney – it does not matter what. The sacrifice would be the same. It would be everything he was, an entire life spent making payments and planning for the future, a college fund for a boy who had almost melted, who was in the process of evaporating before their very eyes, and it would be nothing at all.

But a husband might start to wonder why he had refused his wife's simple request to start over, to move far away from there, their house, where accidents continue to happen, not to the boy, who, by now, would have taken on a near spectral state, but to them – the husband and wife. First she would slip in a puddle of water on the bathroom floor, chipping her top front tooth. Next, he would lose the tip of his middle finger while digging between the blades of the garbage disposal for his wedding ring. Third, her hair curler would fall just shy of the bath within which the wife hugged herself, her eyes under a damp cloth. They would be most vulnerable near water, an easy weapon, one no one thinks of. Finally, he would experience a power surge while shaving, an experience that is violent in two ways.

It is while getting stitches in his chin, still shaking with the electric shock, that the husband would decide it is time to get out. He would not go back, no, because going back would be suicide. Rather, he would leave the hospital in a taxicab, asking the driver if he would take him to the airport, directly.

Do you have any luggage, the driver would ask, immediately regretting the question that he should not have asked, that normally he'd be smart enough not to ask to a face like that.

No, a husband would say. *I have no luggage*.

It would not happen until a husband's plane has ascended into the air and the seat belt light is long off. Only then would such a husband realize he has done something wrong; he has miscalculated. He would think about his son, a pale ghost running alone in their house, haunted, or possessed, or just plain pissed – who knows – not him. He, in mid-air, would think of his wife, sleepless with frenzy, a little bit insane, possessed or pissed off herself – who knows – not him.

He would turn around. Of course he would. He would hop on the next plane back. A husband, a father, would have to go back. *He couldn't just leave*, he would say to the passenger next to him after his long-winded, hypothetical explanation, fueled on by two flights worth of gin and tonics. He would search the woman's face for an answer, any sign she understood him. *Well he'd better*, she'd say, and he would recognize in her voice a mother's reprimand, knowing he deserved it. And she, the passenger, would know it too, though she wouldn't be able to help herself from leaning in. *Living with regret is a terrible thing*.

In a scenario like this, that is the only certainty – regret. He will regret leaving and he will regret going back even more when he opens the front door and feels the silence, as if born from a storm, his wife and son gone. He will know that he is too late. And, under these circumstances, his life again empty and all his own, he'd be right. **F**

NOVA LUNA

I live in a culture of deep and persistent faith among people whose ancestors crossed vast distances to build a Zion on earth. Unlike many Utahns, I have no pioneer ancestry and no children. I don't study Scriptures, go to church, or adhere to any defined doctrine. But I know what it's like to search for peace in an unknown and often hostile country. I buried my father, my mother, and my first husband before I turned 29. To survive, I hid my dreams deep, like precious bundles stuffed in the corner of a handcart.

I came to this place an orphan and a widow from Minnesota, a land of dark woods and lakes scattered like pearls from a broken necklace. Like the Mormons before me, and the others before them, each footstep was an act of faith.

I used to think that I would grow old and die in a two-story white clapboard house in Lyndhurst, Ohio. Instead, I wandered from west to east to north to south following men or jobs—the promise of home dangling before me like a shiny bauble or a bright, twinkling star.

I first saw the constellation Orion as a girl at my father's feet. It was a cold winter night, and we stood at the end of our suburban driveway watching the sky darken from orchid to indigo to black. Dad smoked while he talked about the heavens, his long fingers sweeping the horizon, speaking the patterns of stars by name: Betelgeuse, Rigel, Bellatrix. They were like his children, those stars.

He knew them from before I was born. In the early 1940s, my father, Ernest, desperately wanted to go to war. Too old to enlist, he lied his way into a navigator's seat on a B-17 that dropped bombs on Germany. He learned the names of the stars and how to calculate distance with a sextant. After his 30th and final mission—bombing the headquarters of a German Army division near the French coast on D-Day—he toasted victory with a bottle of scotch and prayed that the war was over.

In navigation, *dead reckoning* is the key to finding where you are. Hewitt Schlereth, in his book *Celestial Navigation in a Nutshell*, writes, "I have often thought that if a pagan could be a saint, Ariadne would be the patron saint of navigators. When she handed the end of that skein of twine to Theseus as he entered the maze to find the Minotaur, she ... hit upon the fundamental principle of navigation: If you know your way back, you are not lost."

Unlike my father, who steered by the stars, I have no sense of direction. I get lost inside buildings and in parking lots. I can only read street maps by turning them upside-down. Topographical maps are as indecipherable to me as a mathematical equation.

I know that to be a good orienteer, you need to turn around every once in awhile to fix a landscape in your mind, but what do you do when you don't want to remember where you've been? You might hide from the world, follow someone else,

or like me, continually change your surroundings. But in moving from place to place, you risk forgetting the landmarks that can guide you safely back home.

I walk the trail in late afternoon, the fading sun at my back. The shadows are soft and will soon grow heavy and dark. It is late May and the creek rushes loudly, foamy with cold mountain runoff. After 10 years of living in this small, northern Utah town, this canyon is the place I love the best.

I love it because I know it. I know where the old mine is and where the aspens begin. I know where avalanches crash down, the most likely spots to spy snakes, and where coyotes feed on deer carcasses dumped by hunters. Walk with me through the seasons, and I'll show you where the arnica grows thick and the side canyon where a cascading waterfall nestles under a great peak. We can follow the sweep of glacier lilies in early spring, sample delicate thimbleberries when the sun is high, and watch the fog roll over the ridgeline in late autumn.

Deep underground, fire and pressure breathe life into stone. The shifting earth constantly nudges the younger mountains higher while the creek works hard to cut through the very old rock below. Hundreds of millions of years ago, what is now Utah was located near the equator and covered by a vast, shallow sea. The warm tropical waters nurtured a wide variety of marine invertebrates, algae, and corals. The fossilized evidence hides in these rocks in the form of ooids, trilobites, brachiopods, and crinoids. To think that this path was once a sandy beach!

Rocks, tell me a story. Tell me how the warm waters covered you when you were simple grains of sand. What did it feel like when the earth trembled and bucked and suddenly you were tumbling for what seemed like eons before you came to rest? How you sat undisturbed for millions of years. Tell me about the great floods and of the hidden springs and how they smoothed your rough edges and made you crack and fall apart. Rocks, tell me the story of how weathering and time make us who we are and turn us into something better.

All the men in my father's family were steelworkers. They toiled beneath screaming ladles of fire until their skin turned black and they smelled like sweat and shaved bits of iron. They made large castings that weighed more than an elephant and smaller castings of clowns that swallowed coins when you moved a lever on the back.

A solar system is like a foundry. Buckets the size of the moon hold the light from 10,000 suns and spit enough dust to fill the Milky Way. The air is alive with a million stars. Stars are born when dust gathers, coalesces, and collapses into dense, hot cores of more dust and gas. The nearest star nursery is 1,500 light years away in a nebula hidden in the constellation Orion.

I am familiar with Orion because I drove beneath it every winter night for two years on my way home from work. Just recently, I baked bread at a small artisan

bakery and worked with fire like my dad. Deftly slashing patterns into rising loaves with a razor blade then quickly navigating the bâtards, boules, and baguettes into the tall oven with a long-handled wooden peel required strong shoulders, a delicate touch, and a close relationship with the worry of time and danger. Thick welding gloves helped protect me, but burn scars still pepper my hands and forearms. Baking is magic. A thick goo of flour, salt, and water transforms itself into a perfectly browned, intensely fragrant sourdough loaf. Sprinkling flour on my workbench, I made galaxies appear and reform with the flick of my wrist.

Growing up, I never imagined I would bake bread for a living. I wanted to be an astronomer but was lousy at math. I secretly hoped for a telescope to see nebulae, which in pictures looked like bright bubblegum clouds and sparkling white-hot stars. I wondered how something measured in light-years was invisible to the naked eye.

Too near-sighted to stargaze with Dad, my older sister lost interest as soon as he started a lesson. He gave up on her and when I was old enough, we headed outside. “That’s Castor and Pollux,” Dad would say, pointing to the constellation Gemini, his voice a deep pebbly rumble from years of exposure to smoke and soot. In the wan glow of starlight, I could see the sheen of Vitalis in his thinning gray hair. There were other names: Arcturus, Aldebaran, Spica. Even now, the names roll off my tongue like a long-lost language.

Why don’t parents name their children after stars? Not celebrities like Britney and Brad—there are enough of those in the world—but constellations, heavenly bodies. The idea takes root while I page through a stapled file of yellowing papers that belonged to my father titled “Star Identification.” I pause to study a list of star and constellation names and their pronunciations. Intriguingly, many names have Arabic origins. I later discover that Claudius Ptolemy, a Greek astronomer living in Egypt, devised the earliest known star catalog in the middle of the 1st century AD, translating the original Latin and Greek names into a language Arabians could understand.

Ptolemy “named” stars by where they were situated within constellations. Today’s parents, on the hunt for an unusual child’s name, might experience a disconnection between a lyrical star name and its meaning. On the surface, Mirach seems decent enough until you learn it means *abdomen* because of its location in the lower part—the girdle—of the constellation Andromeda, known as The Chained Maiden. How about Enif (*nose*), the brightest star in the constellation Pegasus, or Fomalhaut (*mouth of fish*) in Pisces Australis? Once you know their meanings, these names are hardly inspiring; but others, such as Alnai’ir (*bright star*) and Alnillam (*string of pearls*), would make lovely girls’ names. And what young boy wouldn’t want the name Shaula (*sting of scorpion*) or Altair (*the flying*)?

For their second child, my parents hoped for a boy and planned to name him Samuel. Instead, they named their youngest daughter after the Roman goddess Diana, a name that means *divine*. My father had a special nickname for me: Sam.

He didn’t seem disappointed that I wasn’t a boy, and I didn’t hesitate to act like one. Athletic and outdoorsy, I spent hours at a nearby creek with my Aunt Fan (who lived with us) picking black raspberries and playing softball and tackle football.

Male playmates fought to use the toy guns in my collection, especially a metal replica of a machine gun.

I never asked my dad what he did for fun as a child. He appears studious and serious in many childhood photographs, and I imagine him spending his spare time reading books about science or working out math problems. Because my mother and all of his brothers and sisters are dead, he exists in a cardboard box in my closet as a handful of medals, a gold tie tack with his looping signature, folders of war records, an obituary, a reel-to-reel tape, a small lined notebook. Years ago, thieves broke into my house in Minneapolis and stole his heavy, silver Air Force ring, worn so smooth that only a faint outline of wings remained. I study a formal penmanship award that he won in the 5th grade at Lafayette School in Cleveland. The elaborately scrolled certificate mentions his "improvement in Free Movement Business Writing and Correct, Healthful Posture." Paired alongside a formal photograph taken with his brother Jim on the day of their First Communion, it seems he favored white shirts, ties, and shiny shoes.

My grandfather told his oldest son that man would go to the moon one day, but Dad didn't believe him. The old man said, "The only thing holding us back is gravity, and one day, we'll figure it out." Was Julius flint to the tinder of his son's desire to be a foundryman and forge the stuff of stars?

I picture a boy staring up at the full moon as shiny as a dinner plate, barely visible through the tall trees lining the street in front of his house on Buckeye Road. In the houses around them, aproned women with babushka-covered pin curls spooned up plates of stuffed cabbage and veal paprikás on Formica tables set on creaky linoleum floors. In a few years, the death of his mother would eclipse his world. But for now, the spark of his father's words burned bright.

I imagine he didn't doubt the idea of going to the moon but wondered how it could be done. Years later, I followed his gaze skyward as he ran his fingers through his greased hair, took a drag off a cigarette, and imagined the impossible.

I like to visit cemeteries, especially ones deep in the countryside. I usually see them from miles away. From my years of training as a newspaper photographer, my eyes scan the landscape constantly looking for patterns of earth and sky as well as what doesn't fit, places like cemeteries.

Say it's late fall, and I'm on a two-lane road in Utah just south of the Idaho border. Fields stream past in rhythmic succession, the stubbled straw poking up like a miles-long, blonde kid's flattop. I've already noted three hawks perched on a snaking, silvery wheel line and a red tractor chugging toward a faraway barn when I see the silhouette of a metal sign arching next to a clump of trees. As I get closer, the steering wheel instinctively turns in my hands, taking me down a dirt driveway toward a black iron fence and gate. I step out of the car, glance around to see if anyone is watching and try not to move too quickly; I can already feel my heart beating faster.

Most rural graveyards are quiet and deserted, at least of living people.

In contrast, big-city cemeteries offer more elaborate headstones and crypts so densely packed you can't walk a straight line between them. Foreign cemeteries are mysterious yet accessible—only the names are unreadable. Maybe I visit cemeteries because death has shadowed me since girlhood and to walk among the dead feels oddly familiar. Like a storybook full of tales that have the same ending, a lesson I can recite by heart.

With my first camera, I traipsed around overgrown Ohio cemeteries, the ones that the landscape was swallowing up. Thin, wooden tombstones lay split and scattered on the ground along with stubs of monuments so worn away they looked like piles of rocks. Tall grass and weeds topped a thick carpet of tangled roots and fallen branches covering up any evidence of graves.

No longer a working photographer, I now visit cemeteries with my friend Kathy, who takes pictures of abandoned homesteads to paint in watercolor. Near what was once the thriving railroad town of Kelton, Utah, we explored a cemetery that was the only obvious sign of habitation in the midst of the sagebrush. I remember the tiny lamb carved on a child's tombstone the color of dried blood and the way the wind threw sand in our faces. The carving was weathered and worn, like the memories there.

On a warm summer day in Clover Valley, Nevada, Kathy and I dodged irrigation sprinklers to study the marble city of local pioneers. The Ruby Mountains swallowed the sinking sun while birds scattered like golden coins thrown in the air. As we walked back to the car, Kathy said, "I like to go to places where no one else wants to be. You know, lonely places."

I nodded. She and I often went on road trips to historical spots off the beaten path and packing extra gas, full-size tires, and extensive food supplies became a routine part of traveling together. I liked these out-of-the-way cemeteries because they weren't popular with tourists. It's not that tourists don't visit cemeteries, they just gravitate toward ones with famous residents such as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, or Billy the Kid. Who's buried where is the least of our concerns. We stopped in Kelton during a Box Elder County excursion that followed parts of the transcontinental railroad route through Utah's northwest corner. Once teeming with workers and travelers, ghosts and ghost towns now populate the area. Clover Valley is close to a pass the Donner party took as they hurried west toward the Sierras. Kathy encourages my obsession with the party of emigrants trapped in the mountains in the winter of 1846-47. "Anything new with the Donner party?" she asks then listens patiently as I detail my latest findings.

As we drove away from Clover Valley, I wondered if cemeteries are truly lonely. I don't feel lonely when I'm in them; I feel comfortable and safe, surrounded by the weight of lived history, the human stamp upon the earth.

I didn't always feel this way. I remember nothing of Calvary Cemetery on Cleveland's east side, where both of my parents are buried. Years ago, on a trip through northeast Ohio, I stayed with my godmother, Angie, and asked her about visiting my parents' grave. She warned me about the "bad neighborhood" the cemetery was

in, that I shouldn't go there by myself. She offered to accompany me and drag her boyfriend, John, along for extra protection, but I decided instead to eat a traditional chicken paprikás dinner at a local Hungarian restaurant followed by a dessert of cherry strudel. I may not remember what my parents' grave looks like, but I never forgot Angie's fear that something unfortunate would happen to me in a place full of dead people. As sprawling and private as many cemeteries are, I just can't imagine muggers roaming through them looking for victims. Who brings money to a cemetery? At most, criminals would come away with some lovely bouquets and flower arrangements.

Every year, in the days proceeding the Memorial Day holiday, rows of plastic-potted mums in white, gold, and brown appear at the grocery store where I shop. I watch families fill their carts with plants and remember my dad, mom, sister Lynne, and aunt buying flowers at Mayland Florist for my grandparents' graves before driving to Calvary in our burgundy Thunderbird. The tiny shop smelled like a million roses. I would beg to accompany whoever went inside just so I could stand at the counter and breathe deep. I didn't know that the holiday, originally conceived to honor Civil War veterans, changed its name 14 years before Aunt Fan was born to honor all US veterans. She called it Decoration Day, so I wound red, white, and blue crepe paper through the spokes of my purple banana bike and led an assortment of spruced-up wagons, tricycles, and bicycles on a parade around the block.

There is a name for a cemetery buff like me: taphophile, from the Greek *taphos* (grave) and *philia* (affection). Some plan vacations around visits to cemeteries to study tombstone inscriptions and symbols, take photographs, or make rubbings with wax crayons, charcoal, or chalk. Others pick up litter and rearrange toppled vases, plants, and bouquets.

Taphophiles have been around for years. On his trip in the late 1920s retracing the Donner party's route from Wyoming to California, Charles Davis shot a number of photographs of graves (figure 1). Many feature him kneeling in the dirt paying his respects—like so many postmortem photographs.

Families in the 19th century commonly used photographs of their dead loved ones as memorials. They were often the only evidence that someone had lived and cost very little. All classes of society could afford them. In *Secure the Shadow*, a book about postmortem and funeral photography in the mid-1800s to the early 20th century, Jay Ruby describes how such photographs “provide the mourner with a private reminder of that which cannot be changed.”

I have a photograph like this (figure 2) that I have carried from house to house as I moved around the country—as if it means something, as if the 11 people in the photograph are members of my own family. Perhaps they are, but I don't know their names. I also don't know how I came to possess this photograph or why I'm compelled to keep it. Although I am aware that memorial photography was as ubiquitous as snapshots are today, I don't know anyone else with a similar photo. I also don't know anyone else who is as familiar with death as I am.

The beige-colored mat around the photo is torn and stained, and the embossed pattern on the front has worn smooth. The image is sepia-toned, a yellowed brown



Fig. 1. "(Capt. Davis present) These unknown graves are Emer. Bound down the Humboldt River, below the Gravely Ford, on the South side. The large cross in rear is ok Lucuida [sic] Duncan 17 year old Emer. Trail."

that turns the shadows to chocolate, the highlights the color of sour milk.

It is daytime, probably just past noon, because the shadows are jagged and dark. The background shows an undefined sky with a line of trees reaching up. It must be midsummer: thick strands of ivy on a picket fence are barely visible on either side of the frame.



Fig. 2. Postmortem photograph in author's possession. Family, date, location unknown.

It is a child's grave; we can see that from the size of the white casket, which is open, the body a vague bundle with a scrap of darkness showing under a small bouquet of flowers. Two women and three men cluster around a gaping hole dug into the stony ground. A lattice of two-by-fours supports the casket and two children, a boy and a girl, who stand atop the jutting boards. Two babies wearing white caps and long gowns—twins, maybe?—and a girl wearing dark stockings, a large white bow in her dark hair, and sturdy shoes, complete the scene. The three men could be brothers. The women are dressed

in black, their hair covered by dark babushkas.

For the photographer, the baby's death was a lucky find, an extra bit of money to supplement the portraits he took of families as he traveled throughout the area. Perhaps he learned of the death from a neighbor or friend of the dead child's parents, who saw his wagon parked on the side of the road and suggested he pay them a call. If it had been 50 years earlier, he might have posed the child as if asleep in its crib, on a daybed, or in its mother's arms. That he shot this portrait at graveside hints to it being from the 1920s or '30s, when the practice of postmortem photography was waning. By then, funeral homes had replaced home viewings and home parlors became "living rooms." In years past, a more wealthy family might create an elaborate shadowbox of dried flowers and hand-colored photographs of the child or tuck a plait of the child's hair into a silver or gold locket along with a small photograph. Mourning jewelry and clothing were common during the Victorian era, when etiquette required widows to mourn for two and a half years, most of those wearing a layer of black mourning crape that was gradually removed as the months passed.

The photographer reminds his subjects to be still, but the young boy in the foreground cannot keep from closing his eyes. The sun is too bright, and he blinks. In the back right corner is a woman who resembles my father, which makes me think this photograph belonged to his family. She has his broad face, thick nose, and close-set eyes. Her eyes, the eyes of everyone in the photo, stare at me intently. There is a hardness there. Brows furrowed, mouths thin, dark lines. This is a photograph of edges, of a crossed border. "Look," these eyes say. "Look and know this tearing away from life. Look and see this baby's death."

I have no one to ask about the photo. My grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles, all dead. I will never know the names of this silent family or who they are. They are familiar yet out of reach, like so much of my life.

Where I imagine raw grief, author Geoffrey Batchen recognizes something else: the fear of our own mortality. In *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, he writes:

As historical artifacts residing in the present, these photographs have ... come to represent ... the specter of an impossible desire: the desire to remember, and to be remembered. ... For these photographs remind us that memorialization has little to do with recalling the past; it is always about looking ahead toward that terrible, imagined, vacant future in which we ourselves will have been forgotten.

How to remember my father? He was at work so often and at home so infrequently. When I wake up in the middle of the night I hear his deep cigarette voice, watch his fingers trace the constellations, smell his Sunday morning breakfasts of bacon, scrambled eggs, and rye toast rubbed with garlic. But if you asked me what kind of man he was, I can only recall his funeral Mass at St. Clare's Church and his flashy car with the automatic windows.

How to remember my mother? She laughed easily but mostly while watching TV. Stroke-addled and overweight, she never told me my father was dying and sent me to a psychiatrist instead of encouraging my creativity, my intellect, my athleticism. In my mind, she is stumbling, choking, far away.

How to remember my first husband? I married Dennis before I turned 21, after the car accident that broke his back but before the brain tumor that killed him. I fell in love with his red hair and thick moustache the color of wild plums, his easy laugh, his fearlessness. In the end, he couldn't walk, couldn't make love, and couldn't talk. Why remember months of hospitals and bed bags, bowel programs and bedsores?

How to remember my Aunt Fan? She raised me after her younger sister, my mother, got sick and we spent hours together picking berries, decorating gingerbread cookies, and raking leaves. She tatted delicate lace the color of robin's eggs and rainbows, never married, and stayed with my mother until she died.

Where is he? My mind whirls as I wander up and down a hillside at Gate of Heaven Cemetery & Mausoleums in Los Altos, California, on a sunny June day in 2008, looking for Dennis's grave. I'd long since remarried and moved halfway across the country and back, but I needed to visit the grave again. The cemetery was about a day's drive from Donner Memorial State Park in Truckee, where I'd been doing research for my master's thesis; Kathy came along to take a break from family responsibilities and to keep me company. I told her that I wanted to visit the cemetery to allow any unresolved emotions to resurface. Although fairly certain I had worked through my grief, I was curious to see how I felt once I stood at his grave.

We'd spent the previous night at an unremarkable hotel after searching for the house Dennis and I lived in near the San Jose Flea Market. What I remember as big cherry orchards and vacant lots are now densely packed developments of single-family crackerboxes. I tossed aside the map I bought at a gas station, unreadable due to the tiny typeface and sprawling coils of roads and strip malls that reminded me of the intricate Spirograph drawings I made as a kid. Away from Utah and its ridiculous liquor laws, we slurped margaritas at a restaurant next to the hotel and toasted our success in finding my old house on Seville Way through a maze of streets I no longer remembered and arriving at our hotel without an accident. Waking up the next morning to blaring traffic and bright sunshine, we took our time, knowing that we had the whole day to find the cemetery before heading east toward the Sierras to camp.

We stopped first at Oak Hill Funeral Home and Memorial Park, in the middle of downtown San Jose, where I thought I'd find Dennis's grave. A large funeral was about to begin, and it took me several minutes to squeeze through a crowd, including several mariachi bands, gathered in front of the main office, where they gave me the name of and directions to another cemetery north of town. As the state's oldest secular cemetery, Oak Hill turned out to be a fascinating detour. Divided into dozens of sections with pastoral names like Birch, Laurel, and Wisteria, the

cemetery includes areas specifically for Druids and members of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. Not surprisingly, the pioneer section contains a number of graves of Donner party members. I tried to contain the excitement in my voice as I told Kathy that no, Dennis wasn't buried here (although it's where his funeral was held), but the Reed family was, along with William Eddy, who walked to safety then went back to the camps to rescue survivors.

How ironic that these emigrants, who spent a disastrous winter burying their babies, wives, husbands, and siblings, should suddenly appear where I least expected them. Like me, each of them walked out of a desolate landscape into a new life.

Entranced by the columbaria, we walked around the impressive Great Mausoleum with its colorful stained glass windows and statues. The glass-walled cubicles for cremated remains stretched to the ceiling with funerary urns shaped like books and vases and alphabet blocks, both stately and sort of strange, if, like us, you never had seen anything like that before.

By the time we had driven across the Santa Clara Valley to Los Altos, we were more at ease in heavy traffic and sated by the unexpected Donner party discoveries. For me, that feeling of relaxation didn't last long.

He's got to be here, I tell myself, scanning the grass for the flat, brown stone. Moving quickly, I can feel the sweat drip under my arms, prickling my skin.

Gate of Heaven Cemetery resembles a classic garden cemetery with a large pond and fountain, bridge, wide streets, and sweeping lawns that nestle against the Los Altos Hills. Dennis's parents chose the location because of its remoteness, far from the bustle of Silicon Valley. Large statues of Jesus and Mary and colorful mosaics of saints and the Holy Family dotted the grounds of the Catholic cemetery.

In all the time I lived in San Jose, I only visited Dennis's grave once or twice. I was in my 20s, still angry with him for leaving me and sad to be on my own. I didn't want to be reminded that I was a young widow. Once I moved away, his mother and father tended his grave and brought flowers, sometimes as often as once a month. I wondered if they discussed my lack of interest, but they never mentioned it to me.

Several people sit three feet from where I think Dennis's grave is, and they've spread out a blanket and chairs, laughing. I want to tell them to go away, that they don't belong here, but you just don't do that in a cemetery. Eventually I cry because I'm walking along the rows of flat headstones reading every name, moving back and forth across the hillside, able to remember the hill, but I must be in the wrong section and the sun is hot and the inside of my sunglasses is wet and the people are still laughing, and it's as if they're going to stay there the rest of the afternoon and what is wrong with me that I can't find a stupid grave and where the hell is he?

I take a few deep breaths and go back to the office where a dark-haired woman fields phone calls and accepts delivery of a birthday cake while she points to an area called St. Theresa Court on a cardboard map and confirms that Dennis is there. As I turn the corner into a courtyard with ceramic urns of pink petunias blooming wildly in each corner, I suddenly realize that he was cremated, his ashes interred with those of his older sister, Barbara. Did someone ask me about doing this? I don't

remember. I watch an elderly couple unwrap a colorful bouquet and am ashamed that I did not remember to bring flowers.

I find Dennis and Barb's names etched on marble squares high above my head and have to sit down because suddenly I am dizzy. Then I am angry that their names are here, angry that they died. And then I am crying again because I was only 26 and because the birds are singing. My heart opens as a robin's chattering echoes off the marble and bounces around me the way the song of a hermit thrush pierces the morning calm in High Creek Canyon back home in Utah, where I am far from where Dennis lived and died. And that, I think, is how I want to remember Dennis: not as a pile of ashes behind a square in a wall but out in the world.

Aunt Fannie dreams of a blue jay in an oak tree. Its call sounds like a squeaky garden gate or branches scraping the windowpane. She raises her head toward the sound as black wings brush her face. She spins in the space between sleeping and waking, unsure of where she is, eyes tracing the outline of a crib. Mildred's crib. Fannie, 10, shares a room with her sister, who has diphtheria. Her mother is often sick, her father often drunk, and she is the oldest girl, responsible for watching her younger brothers and sisters; three-year-old Mildred is her favorite.

Mildred breathes through a small tube that prevents her swollen throat from closing shut. A piece of string tied to the tube attaches to her clothing with a pin. Fannie picks up the wiggling girl, notices the missing pin, realizes she has swallowed or inhaled the tube; she is choking, throwing her head from side to side like a cranky baby who doesn't want to eat. *Mildred*, she calls, her voice thin and wavering. *Mildred! Mildred!* She shakes her sister to make her listen, but Mildred is quiet and still.

A day or two later, Fannie sees her casket in the parlor. She picks up her sister—she is as light as a bird. Fannie holds her, rocks her to heaven. *Put her down*, Fannie, her mother scolds. She hears her mother from far away and rocks the baby. *Ssssh*, she whispers. *Ssssh*.

How to remember Mildred, who died in her arms? Remembering triggers the feelings of helplessness and fear that choked her like the tube in her sister's throat. She will speak of the baby's death only once, to her niece Lynne, who is tape recording her stories. As she calls Mildred's name, Fannie goes into a trance. In her gaze, Lynne sees the outline of the tiny bed and knows she is in the darkened room remembering everything.

The year before I was born, my father left my mother, sister, and aunt and hitched a ride to California before going to Hawaii. He spent six months living on the beach and working in factories, dreaming of owning his own foundry.

What did he think about when he walked along the ocean at twilight and saw Diamond Head looming in the distance, pushing up into the Hawaiian sky? Did he

whisper the names of the stars aloud while his eyes strayed to the twinkling lights of Waikiki? Maybe his mind recalled the brown leather jacket that kept him warm on nighttime bombing runs over Berlin, how even in the thickest fog and smoke he brought "Mis-Fortune" and her crew back safely. I like to think that the sight of the familiar constellations grounded him and gave him peace, even while his mind whirled with choices he had yet to make.

After he came home, the four of them moved into a white house far away from the old neighborhood. He bought a small foundry called Taylor and Boggis and became its foreman. He wore shiny blue gray suits and white shirts with collars and cufflinks and black shoes with tiny holes that looked like a picture of the night sky. I imagined that when the sun shined, the holes made star patterns on the tops of his feet as if he carried the sky with him wherever he went.

We rarely took family vacations because Dad was always working. One summer though, we drove to Palomar Observatory in California to see the 200-inch Hale telescope, at the time, the world's largest. The winding road led to the top of a mountain where five domed observatories stood sentry like giant marble carapaces.

I still have a stack of colorful postcards from that trip—the blue and red gas clouds of the Trifid Nebula in Sagittarius, Virgo's "Sombrero" Galaxy, the purplish glow of the Great Nebula in Orion—but wish I could remember more. Looking back, I wonder if driving miles out of our way just so I could see a telescope I couldn't even look through was my father's way of telling me that someday, I could study the stars. That if I wanted something bad enough, I shouldn't hesitate to dream big. He wasn't the sort of person to say words like that aloud and, besides, I was only eight.

Dad planned to retire when he turned 55. Instead, he received a lung cancer diagnosis. I never knew how sick he was or that the reason he never came home from the hospital was because the doctors were worried about blood clots. My sister, Lynne, tells the story of how when she visited him on the day of a solar eclipse, March 7, 1970, he asked her to go out and buy some apple strudel. By the time she came back, he was dead.

At twilight, on November 1, 1996, our tour bus lurched to a stop outside a small cemetery on the outskirts of Oaxaca, Mexico, as I nervously looked out the dirty window. Nervous because, although we had permission to be there, I was aware of the insect-under-glass affect of camera-toting tourists. I carried a Leica rangefinder, considered the quietest for documentary work. It looked like a cheap, automatic camera but arguably had the best optics in the business. My husband, Dan—also a photographer—was using his Nikon F4, reliable but bulky, a photojournalism workhorse.

It seemed as if the entire town was walking in our direction. Most lugged shovels, rakes, and other hand tools along with armfuls of bright yellow marigolds and fuchsia cockscombs. Excited children ran among and around the adults, full of anticipation and energy. Inside the cemetery, families pulled weeds and brushed dirt

off headstones, and the air was smoky from brush-pile fires. A band of musicians wound its way through the graves accompanied by a priest offering prayers for the dead and comfort for the living. Here and there, old men rested in knots, sharing stories and watching. Two elderly men saw my tentative steps and motioned me over. I didn't speak Spanish but wasn't afraid. One held up a bottle of homemade mescal and widened his eyes. Would I like to share a drink with them? I nodded yes.

Dan and I met up about an hour later. We talked excitedly about the quality of the light, the friendliness of the people, how amazing the night had been. He was shooting color slide film in the hope that we would sell a newspaper story after we returned home. I asked him if he noticed how the sharp arc of the setting sun scattered the smoke from the fires and lit the faces so beautifully—the kind, generous faces. He said yes, he was getting some good shots too.

As I fiddled with the strap of my camera, I shifted my arm and the bottom fell off the camera. Leica rangefinders have a metal cap on the bottom with a key type of lock to keep the film in place. In my haste to change film in the growing darkness, I had forgotten to secure the cap onto a metal pin that kept it closed. I looked at Dan with tears in my eyes. All my shots were ruined. How could I have been so careless?

With one simple gesture, my camera became superfluous, the latent images on the strip of negatives aborted. With no magic box to mediate my place in the world, I felt naked, exposed. With no photographs to guide me, how would I remember this night?

By then, it was too dark to take pictures. I leaned against a cold marble headstone and stared at the sky, the scent of marigolds as sharp and fierce as the candles that burned. Around me, people collected tools, patted colorful blossoms into place, gathered family members to their sides. Grateful spirits mingled in the sweet copal smoke that guided them home, calmed the bellies of sleepy children full of sugar skulls and *pan de muerto*, kissed the lips of all who tipped bottles in one last toast. Safe in their embrace, I didn't need pictures to remember who and where I was. Freed from the expectations of the camera, I let myself melt into the night, into that cemetery alive with laughter.

I'm at a Utah thrift store, scanning the shelves for dishes to break for mosaics, my latest craft obsession. I'm entranced with the idea of purposely breaking things in order to make a beautiful object. Retreating to the garage, hammer in hand, I gleefully smash dishes, cups, and bowls and sweep shards of pottery in shades of custard, sage, and plum into separate plastic bags. The broken ceramic pieces sound like bones dancing. I fit the jagged edges together like a puzzle, framing them in snaking lines of colored grout before I rub them with a soft cloth and brush them with a clear sealant so I can display them indoors or out.

Lifting up a small stack of plates to see the patterns on the bottoms, a flash of silver catches my eye. Nestled together like a stack of tipsy crescent moons, delicate

white plates edged with stars wink at me. Obviously from the 1950s or '60s, the dinner plates and saucers are small compared to what we eat off of now, symbolizing an earlier time when food meant sausage, mashed potatoes, and canned corn three nights a week.

I snatch up all the plates and cradle them in my arms. At home, I delight in their simple design and place them, unbroken, on a kitchen shelf. They remind me of my father, just like another of my favorite possessions, a metal Mercury lunchbox from the early years of the US space program. Named after the mythological Roman messenger, Project Mercury successfully sent humans into orbit around the Earth in 1961-63.

Vincent Van Gogh said, "For my part, I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream." He painted perhaps his most famous work, *The Starry Night*, in an insane asylum about a year before he committed suicide. If my dad was familiar with Van Gogh's artwork, he never told me. But I know a little about how Van Gogh felt—how your brain can't stop spinning and it seems to you that planets look like black raspberry suns and stars glow like giant orange disks.

After my father died, I dreamed that he was running on the sands of a Hawaiian beach. I could feel the smooth white sand under his feet flowing through his toes, the dark shapes of palm trees rushing by. When I awoke, I had the overwhelming feeling that I was in his blood, and he is in mine. We were on that twilight beach together. The tidal pull of kinship blazed supernova. No photograph could capture the strength of our bond; like the Oaxacan spirits' embrace, we share an essential connection that can never be broken.

Years ago, reeling after the end of a long relationship, I wrote my father's sister Florence to ask if she knew why he left my family so long ago and what made him come back. He secretly tape recorded her begging him not to go to Hawaii, and she didn't speak to him for many years because of his stubborn refusal to listen. Maybe that conversation would help me understand why men leave. I still hoped my boyfriend and I would get back together. She wrote, "It's been said he didn't feel loved growing up—that when my mother died, no one looked after him. ... Your Dad was 15, and there was no one there for him. ... I'm convinced that in time he would have come to terms with himself, but he didn't seek the help he so desperately needed." She ended with, "I only see a lonely heart who wanted nothing more than to be loved."

I wish I could tell my father that for some of us, living is enough. Now when I search the sky at night, I see him in the stars. To me, he is Alphard, *the lonely one*.

I stand on the summit and trace the dusty folds of canyons drenched with red, yellow, orange, and green. The Indian summer sun is warm and comforting. For the past few years, a friend and I spend one night in the shadow of the peak at the head of the canyon. On the way to our campsite, Kathy and I curse the steep incline, our too-heavy packs, and the periodic beer cans. Tied together by our good-natured

complaining, we renew our love affair with the mountains and remember why we stay in a place so culturally unlike us.

The peak that supports us is composed of Ordovician limestone, a geologic period capped by the mass extinction of marine life. Contrary to its rugged exterior, limestone dissolves a little bit every time it rains.

Looking down on this familiar canyon, I can almost believe that loss is a gift; that the achingly blue sky is brighter for me because I know how black it can get. But it is simply that: the sky.

I know change will come to this canyon—more hikers, more hunters, more skiers, maybe more houses along the road. I am fearful of this place becoming just another spot on the map. I understand that we all have the need to explore new locales, that “undiscovered” places sell magazines and books, that unfulfilled dreams guide us, that this canyon doesn’t belong to me.

Yet this canyon is mine. Every season—the blues of winter, the exhilaration of spring, the heat of summer, the fruits of autumn—reflects the complexities of my life. I could study the biology of the cicadas, the geology of time, the ecology of riparian environments, but will those facts tell me how to live in the world? Better to open my eyes and step on the well-worn path. As T. S. Eliot wrote, faith is “in the waiting.” This may be the winter when a wall of snow thunders down the mountainside snapping trees like twigs, but see how the robins rocket overhead like planets orbiting the sun?

I never put much faith in remembering, but I see things differently now. Twenty-five years have passed since Dennis died—time enough to distance myself from death. Along with my husband, Dan, I have built a second family of friends, neighbors, and strangers. Now I see my first family as a collection of home movies. Here is my mother, her curly hair circling her head like a halo. My father runs toward her on a Hawaiian beach holding a sea urchin, laughing—did I ever hear him laugh?—bare-foot, tanned, happy. Aunt Fan quietly tats lace. Dennis stands on a hilltop smiling, hands on his hips.

I hear my friends discuss their ailing parents, their aging bodies, and my thoughts drift to those silent scenes. I am glad their deaths are far away, though I know more are coming. Visiting cemeteries, watching others honor their dead, noting inscribed names and the dates of their birth and passing, connects me to mourners everywhere. In our grief, we are never alone, though it may feel that way.

Next year, when drifts of yellow maple leaves cover the lawn, I’ll make an *ofrenda* or altar, like they do in Mexico. On a kitchen shelf, I’ll arrange bright flowers in vases next to photographs of Marie, Ernest, Dennis, Frances, Ruby, Smudgy, Nanook, and Bullet. A bottle of whiskey, pieces of hard candy, catnip, and a dog bone will fill the space around the photos. In the evenings, I’ll light a candle with a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe pasted on it and drink a toast to my family and friends. I will welcome their spirits into my home and remember them as best I can. **F**

Elizabeth Langemak

Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird

I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.

- Frida Kahlo

Of course, when Kahlo said *self-portraits* she meant to say *loneliness*. But she also meant *suffering's lushness* or *exquisite*

doubt, as if the two were acceptable states, each a ripe pleasure to pluck and hold out at a distance, a shining fruit she could polish

and eat. For her, rendered sadness had its joy and the stare of the dead was meant for the living. In this example we see only her,

and her gaze pinches us dully in the two-fingered hold one reserves for wings on rare insects. Behind her are symbols: the black cat eyeing her

as if she is the danger, a monkey that won't deign to climb on her back. It is tempting, we know, to ask for more: to want the thorns to press through

her throat like crown into scalp, to ask the stuck bird to stand in for breezeless days, to unravel the purple scarf until she can hold one end

in her hand and toss the other, like a life-rope, to someone who can catch. Perhaps you have heard that Kahlo painted both what was there and what

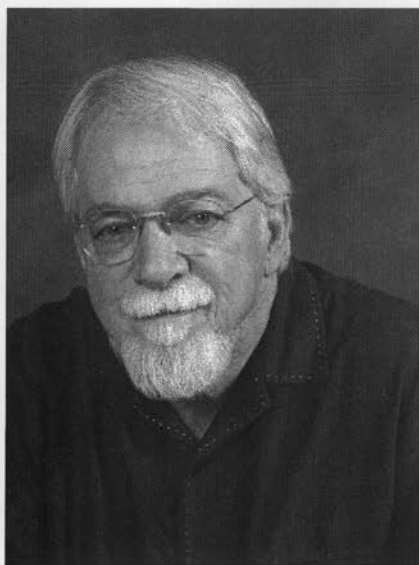
could not be: happiness right before it happened, right after it swerved away. This is only partially true. Her paintings place her in the middle: in this portrait

we see the threat of explosion stemming from silence, how the strongest desire is also a weakness, how hair grows on lips of even the beautiful. What we don't see:

the middle, as in *heart*, obscured not by symbol
nor brush, but by the clutter she placed there to help
her forget that when he visited her workshop and leaned

over her shoulder to say "I love you alone," he didn't mean
that he loved only her, but that *alone* was what
he would love her into. What she would become.

“A Marvelous Creature”: an interview with B.H. Fairchild



B.H. Fairchild was born in Houston, Texas and grew up there and in small towns in west Texas, Oklahoma, and southwest Kansas. *The Arrival of the Future*, his first full-length book of poems, appeared in 1985 and was republished by Alice James Books in 2000. His third book, *The Art of the Lathe*, was a Finalist for the National Book Award and also received the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the William Carlos Williams Award, and the PEN Center West Poetry Award. His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, and many other journals and anthologies, including *The Best American Poems of 2000*. He has been the recipient of fellowships

and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Lannan Foundation and is the author of *Such Holy Song*, a study of William Blake. In 2001 the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded him the Arthur Rense Poetry Prize for “consistent excellence over a long career.” Fairchild’s fourth book of poems, *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, appeared in 2003 and received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Gold Medal in Poetry from the California Book Awards, and the Bobbitt Award from the Library of Congress. In 2005, a revised edition of his second book, *Local Knowledge*, was published by W.W. Norton, and Fairchild was honored with the Aiken/Taylor Modern Poetry Award from *The Sewanee Review*. His limited-edition fine press book, *Trilogy*, appeared from PennyRoyal Press in January, 2009, with illustrations by Barry Moser, and *Usher*, his sixth book of poems, was published in June, 2009. Poetry editor Jennifer Yeatts conducted the following interview with Mr. Fairchild in the Spring of 2009.

Jennifer Yeatts: In an interview with Paul Mariani in 2005, you said that “one of the most important transitions for [you], psychological or otherwise, was the gradual, halting movement out of the physical world of work into the world of art and literature and ideas.” Could you describe that transition a little more? When did it take place, and does physical work still have a place in your life now?

B.H. Fairchild: I had always been an intellectually hungry kid, and although I was reading by the time I was four, I didn’t find my way into a public library until I was

ten, and my first visit to an art museum or anything approaching that cultural level occurred when I went to the state university. I grew up in the world of the oil fields, and it's difficult to describe what a thoroughly blue-collar, physical world that is (see McMurtry's or Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* for a fairly accurate rendering). I've written of this before, and only a long novel would do it justice, but the fact is that it was pretty much a world of work/eat/sleep, then later perhaps work/eat/drink beer/sleep, and as a boy of fifteen or sixteen I was finally just walking around asking what the point of that life was. But then I began to discover that in serious literature, life always came to a point. And my hunger simply increased, and soon there was philosophy and art, and when I finally arrived at the university, the whole exciting thing called the life of the mind. I still enjoy physical work of a kind, but the intellectual life is crucial, and I feel very lucky to have found a place in it.

JY: *The Last Picture Show* was filmed in black and white, though color was available in 1971. Some of your poems might be seen that way, set in grayscale to illuminate a certain timelessness—particularly “Two Photographs” and “Death of a Small Town.” What is the relationship between color and your method of imagining a poem?

BHF: I'm not conscious of any connection between color and the way I imagine most poems, though I have thought that if I had “Body and Soul” or “Beauty” made into a film, I would want it in black-and-white, and I must admit that in my memory the machine shop is in black-and-white. But that may just be a general aesthetic bias. I much prefer black-and-white photography to color. The nuances and subtleties seem endless in black-and-white, while color seems too “busy,” too “pretty,” and the aesthetics beyond artistic control.

JY: You taught yourself how to be a poet by reading poetry, analyzing the poems & trying your own hand at writing them. You've noted the influence of prose writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and James Agee and the poems of William Stafford. What particular aspects of these writers' work found their way into your own poetry?

BHF: As the previous response might suggest, in high school I had no literary sophistication whatsoever, but when I read Hemingway and Faulkner, I knew instinctively that there was something very different and sort of wonderful about the way they wrote, about the way they formed sentences, and I remember thinking that this is what people mean by prose style. Later there was the prose of James Agee (*A Death in the Family* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), and this, too, had to do with the way he made sentences, and all of that, because it was the artful use of language and because it was beautiful, was a kind of bridge into poetry, where the beauty of language was raised to an unbelievably high level. I of course read poetry in high school, but I didn't fully understand yet what kind of a marvelous creature it was.

JY: Considering your reverence for the construction of sentences, what are your thoughts on language poetry, which challenges the traditional notions of form and diction?

BHF: At about the same time that I was taking Winston Weathers' class in tropes and schemes, I was also taking a class in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Given the experimental nature of the prose in *Finnegan's Wake* and the fact that classical rhetoric itself challenges conventional, modern notions of the sentence, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry seems less radically experimental to me than it might to others. And certainly experimentation with conventional sentence structure has been going on for a long, long time. But many contemporary writers possess a limited repertoire of even so-called "conventional" syntax, and for that may I suggest Virginia Tufte's recent, brilliant book, *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*.

JY: You've also mentioned that you'd give yourself "little exercises in image, metaphor, syntax, or form" and that you "thought about precision of technique." Could you give an example of the type of exercise you might have done? Do you still "exercise" your poetic techniques?

BHF: My first ambition was to be a professional jazz musician, though I had a completely oversized, unreal idea of my talent for that. After writing some really awful poems in high school, and having no poetry workshops available at the university, I began to think that it was probably learned the way music was, that is, by listening to (reading) the masters and doing basic exercises repeatedly, then gradually moving up to harder ones. I began doing image exercises (sort of automatic writing in which one had to write nonstop exclusively in imagery) and metaphor exercises (driving to work, making myself make metaphors out of at least five different objects seen along the road).

JY: When you taught at Kearney State College in Nebraska, you once sat in on a class in prosody and had "something of a breakthrough" that "opened up the interior life of the poem for [you]." What was that breakthrough? Could you try your hand at defining that ever-elusive "interior life"?

BHF: In my first teaching job after my M.A., I sat in on a prosody class from the Nebraska poet, Don Welch, and it opened up the "interior life" of the poem for me: the line, meter, sound textures, and the amazing powers these had, and how they emerged naturally from the language rather than being "forced" upon it, which is a total misconception. Later, at Tulsa, I took a class from Winston Weathers [mentioned above], who taught a kind of modernized version of classical rhetoric, mostly tropes and schemes, and that did incredible things for my writing, both prose and poetry. I wish I had been taught classical rhetoric from the beginning.

JY: What instrument do you play? Professional jazz ambitions aside, are you still playing music?

BHF: I played tenor saxophone, but no longer. Our home was broken into, and they stole my old Martin tenor and treasured Berg-Larsen mouthpiece.

JY: I should have known about the tenor sax, since it's a pointed detail in "Hearing Parker the First Time." Yet some readers make assumptions about the details in poems written in the first-person, that those details are true to the poet's personal life, which of course isn't always the case. How would you define the role of "truth" in your poetry?

BHF: I think my sense of "truth" in poetry and indeed in all serious literature is fairly traditional. The writer isn't after the small truth (factual truth); he or she is after the big one (imaginative truth). There was a time when "confessional" poetry was so dominant that the general public began to think that poetry was by definition only "confessional," but that time has, thankfully, long since passed. When my friend, the poet Charles Harper Webb, is asked of one of his poems, "Did that really happen?," he sometimes replies, "Is that your real hair?" A poem can be created from nothing but facts, but if the imagination is completely excluded, the chances of embodying a larger truth are greatly diminished. There are some very sophisticated folks who believe that truth is always illusory and therefore no longer the business of poetry. But if I thought that, I wouldn't be writing poems.

JY: Does the work of the first poets you read still influence your writing now, or do you look to any contemporary poets for ideas and inspiration? Also, of poets writing and publishing now, do you have any favorites?

BHF: Well, this really isn't an either/or sort of question. Your first influences stay with you, but you're also constantly reading newer poets to see how they're doing it. You can always learn new things from the masters (Shakespeare, Donne, Keats, Dickinson, etc., etc.) and one learns constantly from a wide range of contemporaries, but what is often not admitted is that it's also possible to learn from one's students--in my case, Chad Davidson in particular, who just co-authored with Gregory Fraser a terrific book called *Writing Poetry: Creative and Critical Approaches*.

JY: Yes, Chad Davidson is a teacher himself now, as many of us students of poetry will (with any luck) become. What sorts of things have you learned from him (and from other students)? How do you think the teaching of writing has affected your own personal work?

BHF: Well, for instance, in Chad's most recent book, *The Last Predicta*, there is a lot of movement, unpredictable connections, crowded imagery, and sudden shifts in tone and subject, and it simply reminded me of some of the things I used to do and now wanted to get back to a little. Not incoherence at all, but just a verbal denseness and energy somewhat like jazz improvisation. Mary Copeland wrote very polished and perceptive poems about family and domestic life, and I hadn't written about family in a long time. Alba Cruz-Hacker, who is Dominican-American, wrote to a degree outside mainstream American culture, from a very different perspective, and you can certainly learn from that. I think what teaching has mostly done is to inform and clarify and force me to think more deeply about my poetics.

JY: You've said that *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* could be considered a "religious book," and many of the poems in that collection make use of Biblical imagery and language. How has your faith affected your life as a poet?

BHF: Well, I don't remember the context in which I said that, but yes, at least in part, on some level, it could be considered a religious book. The presence of Biblical imagery and language wouldn't necessarily indicate that, however, since that imagery is simply a part of my inherited mental equipment, like the imagery of the high plains or of baseball. In the closure of the last poem in *Memory Systems*, the mysterious, unidentifiable narrator says of the author, "still you do not know who you are," and in "The Deposition," two poems earlier, the eyes of the dead Christ seem to be saying, "I know who you are." That 's a very old religious/philosophical idea that the finite mind can be fully comprehended only by an infinite mind.

JY: Speaking of the distinction between that "unidentifiable narrator" and the author, how closely related are those two entities for you? Is that distance necessarily different depending upon the poem?

BHF: Hmmm. Actually I was talking about something peculiar to that poem rather than a general problem. Usually one talks about the persona rather than the author of a poem. But in that poem, the persona is constantly addressing "you," the author, directing him to perform certain mnemonic tricks of psychological association so that he will remember forever the things that he most loves.

JY: In his review of *Early Occult Memory Systems*, John Poch said, "Fairchild's memories ask questions about themselves, never afraid to doubt out loud." Could you talk a little bit about the role *doubt* plays in your poems?

BHF: I read that review by John, but I don't recall that particular sentence. Honestly, I have no idea what role doubt plays in my poems. I would like to hope, if it's not too immodest, that at least occasionally I might be touched by Keats' "negative capability," in which the poet surrenders to doubt and uncertainty without any "irritable reaching after fact or reason." You know, winging along only on the power of the imagination, as Keats did in the great Odes and many other poems.

JY: Definitely - "negative capability" is something I'm learning more about lately in poetry workshops. It's a struggle, sometimes, to strike a balance between a poem's *meaning* and *being*: trying to express moments and images in a way that doesn't necessarily call for extensive interpretation. How do you decide if a poem needs to express a particular sentiment or if it can succeed by simply existing?

BHF: I'm not sure I understand this question. I don't decide consciously whether a poem needs to express a particular sentiment. And besides, after all these years, there are so many decisions in the composition of a poem that I make intuitively.

JY: Well, even if you didn't understand the question, I think I understand the answer.

In the same review, Poch praises your poem "Delivering Eggs to the Girls' Dorm," saying, "The poem needs to be mapped, diagrammed, scanned, studied under ultraviolet lights, then, maybe, eaten." Could you comment? Do you have any favorite poems, perhaps by the poets who influence you most strongly, to which you might assign the same sentiment?

BHF: I wrote that poem at the MacDowell colony, spending a considerable amount of time on it. The subject matter seemed to be calling for something formal, a nonce form that I invented and then got very interested in, so the poem just kept getting more complex and interwoven, right down to the sound textures and meter. There are poems by other poets that are much more edible than mine, although I appreciate John's praise. There are any number of poems by Anthony Hecht that would fit that description, and "Venetian Vespers," "The Grapes," "The Gardens of the Villa d'Este," and "Green: An Epistle" are only a few of them. Others: Sylvia Plath's "Tulips." "Supernatural Love," by Gjertrude Schnackenberg. I'm going to stop with the names of contemporaries because many of them are friends, and I might leave someone out. As for poets in the preceding generation who influenced me, in addition to Hecht, I could certainly name poems by Wright, Hugo, Stafford, etc., but the list is way too long. Think of Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," Wilbur's "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World." OK, enough.

JY: Your father shows up in many of your poems, particularly in the first section of *Early Occult Memory Systems*. Yet you've said that he "hated the poems," though he'd have been "very proud to see [you] mentioned in the *Wall Street Journal*" (for the collection reviewed by Nat Hentoff). Why did your father dislike your poems?

BHF: The poems were the very opposite of what he would like me to have done with my life. He was a good man who grew up relatively poor in a hard country, and writing poems was simply not what a man did. Build roads, work oil rigs, run a lathe, be a welder, do construction, or read the *Wall Street Journal* (which he did every day) and learn how to make a ton of money, but not write poems. "Hated" may be too strong a word; it may have been more accurate to say that he was embarrassed by the poems.

JY: You've written a book about William Blake, *Such Holy Song*. Have you written any more prose you'd like to publish? Any more poetry collections we can look forward to?

BHF: I've written essays on poetry and film that I would like to put together in a book. *Usher*, my most recent book of poems, is out [now], and now I'm working on a selected poems.

JY: I'm new to the world of publishing, figuring out where to send my poems, trying to get my name out there and earn some readers. What advice can you offer to young, impressionable poets like me who are just getting started?

BHF: Oh, wow, I'm hesitant to give advice about anything at all, especially poetry publishing, since I apparently did it all wrong. I was in my forties before my first book was published and in my mid-fifties before I could even get a New York poetry editor to read one of my manuscripts. At least twice I tried very hard to stop writing poems, but failed utterly. I guess I could say this: if you are driven to write poems, if you simply can't help it, then you'll just have to arrange your life so as to permit that. If you're doing it only as a chosen "career," then don't, because you probably won't survive the disappointments and frustrations along the way. And besides, it's not a career, it's an art. **F**

Experiment

“Let me try and enlarge your vocabulary.”

-James Bond, *The Spy Who Loved Me*

Michelle Disler

[BOND, James] : *cigarettes*

(The action: *smoking*, 1953–1965, 1966)

*James Bond took out a cigarette and lit it.¹**

James Bond lit a cigarette.

James Bond lit a cigarette.

James Bond lit a cigarette.

James Bond liked his special blend cigarettes.

James Bond liked his special blend cigarettes.

James Bond disliked Virginia tobacco.

James Bond sat back and lit a cigarette.

James Bond sat back and lit a cigarette.

James Bond reached for his cigarettes.

James Bond lit another cigarette.

James Bond lit another cigarette.

James Bond lit another cigarette.

James Bond finished his drink and lit a cigarette.

James Bond finished his cigarette and had another drink.

James Bond finished his cigarette and had another drink. But who was the girl? What was her name? When could he reveal himself to her?

James Bond stabbed out his cigarette, took another out of his gunmetal case, and lit it.

James Bond took in the scene at the casino, ordered another drink, and lit a cigarette.

James Bond sat back and thought for a moment. He lit a cigarette and ordered a drink for himself and the girl.

James Bond sat back and thought for a moment. He reached for a cigarette. He'd had two double bourbons. He ordered another. James Bond rocked back on his heels, and thought for a moment. He paused, and then reached for a cigarette. Would the cigarette someday reach for him? It was a foolish thought. He pushed it from his mind. He thought dismally of sleep.

James Bond was on an island without any cigarettes. His gun was wet and water-logged, and the girl he'd picked up on the beach collecting shells wasn't turning into a cigarette any time soon. He cursed aloud. —, he said harshly, because his curses always went unnamed.

¹ A familiar and often repeated action for James Bond that appears verbatim in many 007 novels. All other written text is original commentary based on this action.

James Bond took out his gunmetal case and his lighter and a cigarette, his twentieth of the day.

James Bond lit his seventieth cigarette of the day. The villain would have to wait, but the girls—

James Bond lit his seventieth cigarette of the day. The girl would have to wait, but the villain—

James Bond lit out after the villain; it was his seventieth villain of the day. The girl would have to wait.

James Bond lit out after the girl; she was his twentieth of the day, and he was failing by about five. The villain wasn't going anywhere underneath that pile of bird shit, so Bond lit a cigarette, inhaled the girl deeply. The cigarette would have to wait, burning like the girl and the villain—Bond cursed them for making him love them and then lit another. *But which one should I light*, he had whispered fiercely to himself as he grabbed his lighter. *Which one?*

James Bond lit his first delicious cigarette, his first delicious girl. He was delirious and covered in blood; soon he would not know the difference anyway.

James Bond wondered if he was about to die, so he reached for a cigarette. He figured things looked pretty bad for him, so he'd buy himself a little time with a smoke while the villain gratified himself with a nice little speech. "For your part," the villain had said before James Bond killed him, "you cannot see further than the gratification of your last cigarette. So enough of this idle chatter."² But killing the villain had been pretty gratifying, and James Bond wondered idly if the villain had been right. Bond staggered a little, realized he was naked, and lit a cigarette. The villain remained dead, and James Bond's cigarette seemed to stay lit longer than usual.

James Bond concentrated on his hand. The table was hot, and he was on fire. He lit a cigarette; he had won.

James Bond concentrated. His hands were steady. He lit a cigarette. It tasted harsh and sweet—deadly, like the girl on the beach.

James Bond lit one with steady hands, drew the smoke and the girl and the villain and the warm metal gun that had lain against the skin of his flat stomach into his lungs somehow, all of them, all at once. Only ten cigarettes remained, and there were two hours left to go.

James Bond lit into the girl, the villain, his amiable island guide—everyone within reach; where the hell was his gunmetal case with his special blend smokes—and the shark repellent?

James Bond lit another cigarette. He told the girl who opened the pack and lit one,

² The villain Ernst Stavro Blofeld utters these words before attempting the murder of 007 in *You Only Live Twice* (1964).

giving it to Bond, "I smoke about three packs a day. You're going to be busy."^{3*} And so she would have been, but these girls, they never live long enough to open another pack.

What you do when you're James Bond and you've just lit a cigarette is walk over to the window and stand there, or you throw the pack and the lighter on the counter. Or you throw the villain or the girl on the counter. Or you light another—girl, villain, pack of smokes, depending on how many packs you've smoked so far, and how many girls or villains remain—they'd all be delicious, reassuring, like the sound of the springloaded action of your favorite gun pulled out from underneath your pillow.

James Bond has lit no fewer than ten cigarettes in one day.

James Bond has lit no more than seventy cigarettes in one day. Throw in two bottles of champagne, crushed Benzedrine tablets, and a villain who cheats at cards, and he's got himself a pretty good deal. James Bond lit a cigarette in Jamaica.

James Bond lit a cigarette in Paris.

James Bond lit a cigarette in Miami.

James Bond lit a cigarette in Vienna.

James Bond lit a cigarette in New York.

James Bond lit a cigarette, and then another, and then another. He was in Turkey. He was in Prague. He was in Vegas. He was not underwater wearing scuba gear, hunting for another man's stolen missiles. He was not ripping the girl he almost loved from a bloodstained sea. Instead, he was hurtling through the dark, soundless night on the Orient Express, and he was about to be killed.

James Bond lit another cigarette, this time in London where it was raining and he was depressed. The villains had all gone home, and there were no girls on the streets. Peace was killing him. He loved violence. He feared violence. But there was nothing more fearful, depressing, or violent to James Bond than the hollow sound of an empty gunmetal cigarette case.

James Bond may have smoked in the lavatory.

James Bond lit a cigarette in the casino. He lit another on the way to his hotel room. He would light another when he sat down on the bed—he knew he would—especially after he slipped his favorite gun underneath his pillow. He never told anyone he did this, and the girls, they never noticed, or they never asked.

James Bond's villains never smoke. They don't really drink either. Don't believe in it. The world's worst criminals, the best criminal minds really take care of their bodies. What does this mean? Healthy villains make better or stranger targets? But they're also sexless and deformed—no hands, metal eyeballs, heart on the wrong

^{3*} James Bond steals the voodoo villain Mr. Big's visionary girl Solitaire and tells her this as they flee the villain in *Live and Let Die* (1954).

side of the chest, and their hot girl assistants aren't even really "beards"—faced with such adversity, who would blame villains like these for taking up bad habits like this—smoking? Or would the smokes suppress or curb their grosser appetites—like, say, for world domination? Maybe smokeless villains are just what the world needs, or James Bond would be out of a job. His own appetite for destruction isn't enough to carry the day. Bond and his villains share similar appetites but one; Bond lights up at the thought of a cigarette and the villains light up at anything, anything at all. What does it mean when James Bond *gradually* draws the smoke into his lungs? What does it mean when James Bond swears that he's down to ten cigarettes a day and has not had a single drink? Do you believe him when he says he can swim all day without getting tired? Who swims all day on ten cigarettes without tiring, without even a single drink? Offer him a smoke, see if he takes it, a whisky, too, and watch him sit back and shrug off his newfound resolve. Watch Bond set grimly to work on the smoking gunmetal girl, sweeping her with the force of ten thousand *graduallys* softly down into his lungs. **F**

Michelle Disler

[BOND, James] : *body**

(The action: *body*, 1953–1965, 1966)

a.

b.

Bond bowed and drank more sake

c.

Bond choked back the sickness that rose from his stomach into the back of his throat

Bond clenched his jaws and half closed his eyes

Bond clenched his teeth

Bond climbed under the single cotton sheet

Bond controlled his rising gorge

Bond crashed headlong into the wine-red floor

Bond cursed himself

Bond cursed softly to himself

d.

Bond decided to give up

Bond dozed wakefully

Bond dragged the smoke deep into his lungs

Bond dropped to one knee

e.

f.

Bond felt a lump in his throat

Bond felt a pang of jealousy

Bond felt a surge in terror that almost made him vomit

Bond felt himself starting to vomit

Bond felt his body getting out of control

Bond felt like hell and he knew he also looked it

Bond flicked the lighter

Bond fitted the Beretta into its holster

Bond frowned

Bond frowned

* All "body" statements are taken from Ian Fleming's James Bond 007 novels 1953–1965, 1966.

g.

Bond gasped for air
Bond gathered his breath
Bond gave a deep and relaxed sigh
Bond gazed into the beautiful worried eyes
Bond glanced at his watch
Bond glanced at his watch
Bond glimpsed endless miles of palm-lined avenues
Bond got clumsily to his feet, shaking his head
Bond got out of bed and gave himself a cold shower
Bond grimaced and clenched his senses
Bond grinned
Bond grinned apologetically
Bond grinned to himself
Bond gritted his teeth
Bond gritted his teeth and his muscles lumped under his coat
Bond groaned
Bond groaned and lifted his head
Bond ground his teeth
Bond ground his teeth
Bond ground his teeth and shut his mind
Bond grunted noncommittally
Bond gulped down the cool night air

h.

Bond had walked for only a few minutes
Bond hammered with his only free hand
Bond heaved a deep sigh
Bond held his breath

i.

j.

Bond jumped to his feet

k.

Bond knelt on the backseat

l.

Bond laughed
Bond laughed
Bond lay and panted through clenched teeth
Bond lay down on his bed and stared at the ceiling
Bond let out a deep sigh and picked up his discarded cigarette

Bond looked at his fingernails
Bond looked at his watch
Bond looked away from the sprawling figure
Bond looked up into the spangled sky

m.

Bond made a frantic effort to move
Bond made no comment

n.

p.

Bond picked up his cards and his eyes glittered
Bond pitched forward on the floor
Bond put an arm around her and held her to him
Bond put down the receiver

q.

r.

Bond racked his brain for a solution
Bond raised his eyes to hers
Bond raised his head
Bond rubbed his naked shoulder against her

s.

Bond sat for a moment, frozen in his chair
Bond sat on his bed
Bond sauntered on in search of an air-conditioned bar
Bond screwed up his eyes and opened them again
Bond scrubbed the rouge off his lips
Bond shivered
Bond shook himself
Bond shook his head, waiting for the story
Bond shouted
Bond sighed and sat down
Bond shrugged
Bond shrugged
Bond shrugged
Bond shrugged his right shoulder and saved his breath
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders

Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders
Bond shrugged his shoulders and moved to the window
Bond shrugged his shoulders and then went back into their sitting room
Bond shrugged his shoulders and waited for the steward
Bond shrugged his shoulders and walked quickly to the telephone
Bond shrugged his shoulders impatiently
Bond shrugged his shoulders to lighten his thoughts
Bond shrugged impatiently
Bond shrugged with indifference he didn't feel
Bond shivered
Bond shivered
Bond shivered
Bond shivered slightly
Bond shuddered
Bond shuddered and went on his way
Bond sighed and shrugged his shoulders
Bond slammed the door
Bond smiled
Bond smiled
Bond smiled a thin smile
Bond smiled and grinned slightly
Bond smiled at her and shrugged his shoulders
Bond smiled at the appeal for help
Bond smiled bitterly
Bond smiled cheerfully
Bond smiled down at her
Bond smiled encouragingly
Bond smiled for the first time
Bond smiled grimly
Bond smiled grimly
Bond smiled grimly to himself
Bond smiled grimly to himself
Bond smiled into her grey eyes
Bond smiled ironically at the introspective scrutiny
Bond smiled politely
Bond smiled politely
Bond smiled to himself

Bond smiled stiffly

Bond smiled sympathetically

Bond smiled thinly

Bond smiled thinly

Bond smiled warmly at her

Bond smiled weakly

Bond smiled wryly at his reflection

Bond snorted

Bond squared his shoulders

Bond staggered over to her bed

Bond staggered to his feet, keeping low

Bond stiffened

Bond stirred and felt the prick of a dagger over his kidneys

Bond stood and dripped sweat and blood

Bond stood for a moment gaining his breath

Bond stopped in his tracks

Bond stopped in his tracks

Bond strained his eyes

Bond stretched out with his head in her lap

Bond strolled off in the direction of his bedroom

Bond stumbled over a mangrove root

Bond suddenly felt that he did not know quite enough of the answers

Bond suddenly felt that he had had enough of the ghastly glitter

Bond swallowed

Bond swiveled

t.

Bond tensed

Bond tightened his arm around her shoulders

Bond twisted like a dying animal on the ground

Bond twisted to protect his stomach

Bond turned his back on the scene

Bond turned his back on the table

u.

Bond uttered a realistic groan

Bond uttered an animal groan and fainted

v.

Bond verified that his room had been searched

w.

Bond walked over to the bed

Bond was delirious

Bond watched listlessly

Bond waved a cheerful hand

Bond whistled softly

Bond whistled softly and smiled

Bond wiped the cold sweat off his face

Bond wiped the sweat out of his eyes and stood listening

x.

y.

z.

Michelle Disler

[BOND, James] : *gun*

(The action: gun, 1953–1965, 1966)

_____ likes his _____ warm, underneath his pillow, and sometimes cold against the skin of his flat stomach where it's almost always tucked firmly into his waistband. The _____ may be wet or waterlogged, or _____ may carry it between his teeth—whatever it takes for _____ to remain armed. The make and model may change, but the results are pretty much the same: _____'s _____ signs death sentences. _____'s _____ effects introductions. _____'s _____ is concealed among the rags of his clothing on the desert island where _____ hunts the villain with single-minded resolve. But sometimes the caliber changes. Sometimes the make and model change. Sometimes _____'s _____ winds up in the wrong hands, the hands of the opposition—and doesn't _____ feel stupid when the man he's mistaken for a brother in arms turns out to be his executioner. Unless _____ can turn things around pretty quick, _____ is staring down the barrel of his own _____, which is pretty embarrassing. ("Bit on the light side," _____ had said when he handed his _____ over, "but it'll kill if you put the bullets in the right places."*) Some of _____'s finest moments are with his _____—_____ meditates on his long "marriage" to it; _____ dismantles and dries it on the beach while his shell-collecting honey wonders at the sight of it—this is also when _____ finds he's reassured by the _____'s healthy reassembled sound; _____ holsters it; _____ feels "naked" without it; _____ hates it when someone, anyone touches it; _____ can't fall asleep without it—always the right hand moves to the butt of the _____ underneath his pillow while sleep overtakes him; _____ likes the heavy metal feeling against his skin, whatever the caliber, make or model; _____

*Bond utters these words in *From Russia With Love* (1957) just before putting his gun in the hands of a Russian executioner he thought was a brother in arms.

smiles grimly at the thought of it; _____ waves the enemy forward with it. _____'s opened wide for it himself, carrying his _____ in his mouth while he crawled on hands and knees toward freedom and release. _____'s practiced shooting himself in the wardrobe mirror (one wonders: are objects larger than they appear), has pumped rounds into beds in hotel rooms around the world before disappearing into the night to face whatever villain awaits him. It's usually better for _____ if the odds are against him; the villain's got to have far more firepower than * Bond utters these words in *Casino Royale* (1953) just before putting his gun in the hands of a Russian executioner he thought was a brother in arms. _____'s own little _____ is capable of producing. But the trouble with the villain's firepower is easily discovered—and _____ usually does, usually—the trouble with the villain's firepower is that it's usually not his own. It's stolen, secretly amassed, which means it's not legit—ineffective; it's always returned to its rightful, peace-loving owners who don't know how it could have fallen into the wrong hands. This is when _____ restores order and world peace, even when his _____ has gone missing, which is the real puzzler, practically and psychoanalytically speaking. For the matter of that, _____'s _____ jammed on him once. _____'s boss got wind of it and made _____ get a new one, which is pretty embarrassing when you're _____ and suddenly your boss is thinking the _____ you've always trusted has absolutely no stopping power. But there is good news for _____ and his new _____. _____ can get ammunition for it anywhere in the world, and it's much quicker on the draw. But this issue of legitimacy is an interesting one, given comparative size and power—also girls, who rarely get to hold a _____, not even when they're working in the service of the fleshy asexual villain who wants his gold, diamonds, cash whatever the cost and by whatever means necessary—okay, okay, I get it: with or without his smoking-wet-reassembled _____, _____ and his _____ are legit. But to survive, to carry the day in any convincing way, _____ needs a villain, plenty of mirrors, a hard butt, and a dumb girl who wouldn't know what to do with a piece of firepower unless _____ decided he'd take the time to teach her, which _____ almost always, almost never does.

Contributors' Notes

Scott M. Bade is a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Night Train*, *H_NGM_N*, *Blue Earth Review*, *Poetry International*, and others.

Sarah Barber received her Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. Her book, *The Kissing Party*, will appear in 2010 from *The National Poetry Review Press*. Her poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *Poetry*, *Juked*, *Western Humanities Review*, *The Journal*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Georgetown Review*, and *Malahat*, among other places.

Aimee Bender is the author of three books: *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, *An Invisible Sign of My Own*, and *Willful Creatures*. Her short fiction has been published in *Granta*, *GQ*, *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney's* and more, as well as heard on NPR's "This American Life" and "Selected Shorts." She lives in Los Angeles.

Diane Bush recently received her MS degree in American Studies at Utah State University, where she was an editorial fellow at the journal *Western American Literature*. Her current work, a hybrid of memoir, literary nonfiction, and history, explores the landscape of loss and its intersection with personal and collective history. A copy editor at *Western Historical Quarterly*, she lives in a small town just south of the Utah-Idaho border.

Paul David Colgin has lived with his wife in Midland, Texas for many years. He has worked as a language arts teacher as well as a sales and marketing specialist in educational publishing. His poetry has appeared/is forthcoming in many publications across the country, including *Borderlands Texas Poetry Review*, *The Iconoclast*, *New Zoo Poetry Review*, *Nexus*, *Pearl*, *Plainsongs*, *Poem*, and *River Oak Review*.

Danica Colic lives in Brooklyn and curates *Uncalled-For Readings*, a monthly poetry series. Her poems have appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Terrain*, and *RealPoetik*, and are forthcoming in *Nimrod*.

Katherine Conner's stories have appeared in the *Press 53* anthology *Surreal South*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, issues 55 and 56 of *The Portland Review*, and *Front Porch*. She recently completed a Ph.D. in Creative Writing at Florida State University.

Ben Debus is a recent graduate of Indiana University's MFA program. He lives now in Chicago with his wife, poet Cate Whetzel, and works at a law firm. His work has appeared in *Subtropics*, *Umbrella*, and *Mississippi Review* (online)

Michelle Disler has a Ph.D. in Creative Nonfiction from Ohio University, and teaches literature classes focusing on women writers and nonfiction workshops featuring the classical and cross-genre essay at Ohio Wesleyan University. Her work has appeared in *The Laurel Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Lake Effect*, *Gulf Coast*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Hotel Amerika*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Witness*,

Southern Humanities Review, and *Columbia*, where it received the Essay Prize. Disler has also received the Virginia Woolf Prize in the Essay, and is an AWP Intro Award in Nonfiction and Pushcart Prize nominee, the latter for her multi-genre work on Fleming's Bond. She counts MFK Fisher, William Hazlitt, and Freya Stark as her favorite and most influential essayists, and loves opera, swing dancing, and writing about James Bond.

Kerry James Evans is currently a PhD candidate in creative writing at Florida State University. Poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in the following literary journals: *Agni*, *The Comstock Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Georgetown Review*, *Grist*, *Harpur Palate*, *New England Review*, and *The Pinch*.

B.H. Fairchild was born in Houston, Texas and grew up there and in small towns in west Texas, Oklahoma, and southwest Kansas. *The Arrival of the Future*, his first full-length book of poems, appeared in 1985 and was republished by Alice James Books in 2000. His third book, *The Art of the Lathe*, was a Finalist for the National Book Award and also received the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the William Carlos Williams Award, and the PEN Center West Poetry Award. His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, and many other journals and anthologies, including *The Best American Poems of 2000*. Fairchild's fourth book of poems, *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, appeared in 2003 and received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Gold Medal in Poetry from the California Book Awards, and the Bobbitt Award from the Library of Congress. His limited-edition fine press book, *Trilogy*, appeared from PennyRoyal Press in January, 2009, with illustrations by Barry Moser, and *Usher*, his sixth book of poems, was published in June, 2009.

Katie Flynn's stories have appeared in *The Bellingham Review*, *Pindelybox*, and *Quick Fiction*, among other journals. She lives in San Francisco with musician Brian B. James and their daughter Thea, and directs the Writing Center at Menlo College in Atherton, California.

Jack Garrett recently moved back to Los Angeles after many years in Brooklyn where he wrote for theatre and performance venues. His work has appeared in *The New Orleans Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Bald Ego*, *Eureka*, *The Portland Review* and *Vulcan*, and is forthcoming in *The Santa Monica Review* and *Quarter After Eight*. He is also an audiobook narrator.

Patricia Hampl is the author of five memoirs—*A Romantic Education*, *Virgin Time*, *I Could Tell You Stories*, *Blue Arabesque*, and *the Florist's Daughter*—and two collections of poetry. Most recently, she co-edited *Tell Me True: Memoir, History, and Writing a Life*. She has received a MacArthur Fellowship, among many other rewards. She lives in St. Paul. Visit www.PatriciaHampl.com.

Hyejung Kook is currently working on *Flight*, a chamber opera libretto commissioned by composer Sarana Chou. Her work has appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, and she is a 2009 Kundiman Fellow.

Elizabeth Langemak lives in Bethany, West Virginia. Her most recent work is forthcoming in *The Journal*, *The New Orleans Review*, *The Cimarron Review* and *Diagram*.

Sara McKinnon is an MFA candidate at Ohio State University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gulf Coast*, *The Iowa Review*, *the New Ohio Review*, *Quarter After Eight*, and *Quarterly West*.

Annie Nilsson is from California, though she currently lives in Iowa City, where she is an MFA candidate at the University of Iowa. In 2008 she was awarded a *Tin House* Nonfiction Scholarship. This is her first publication.

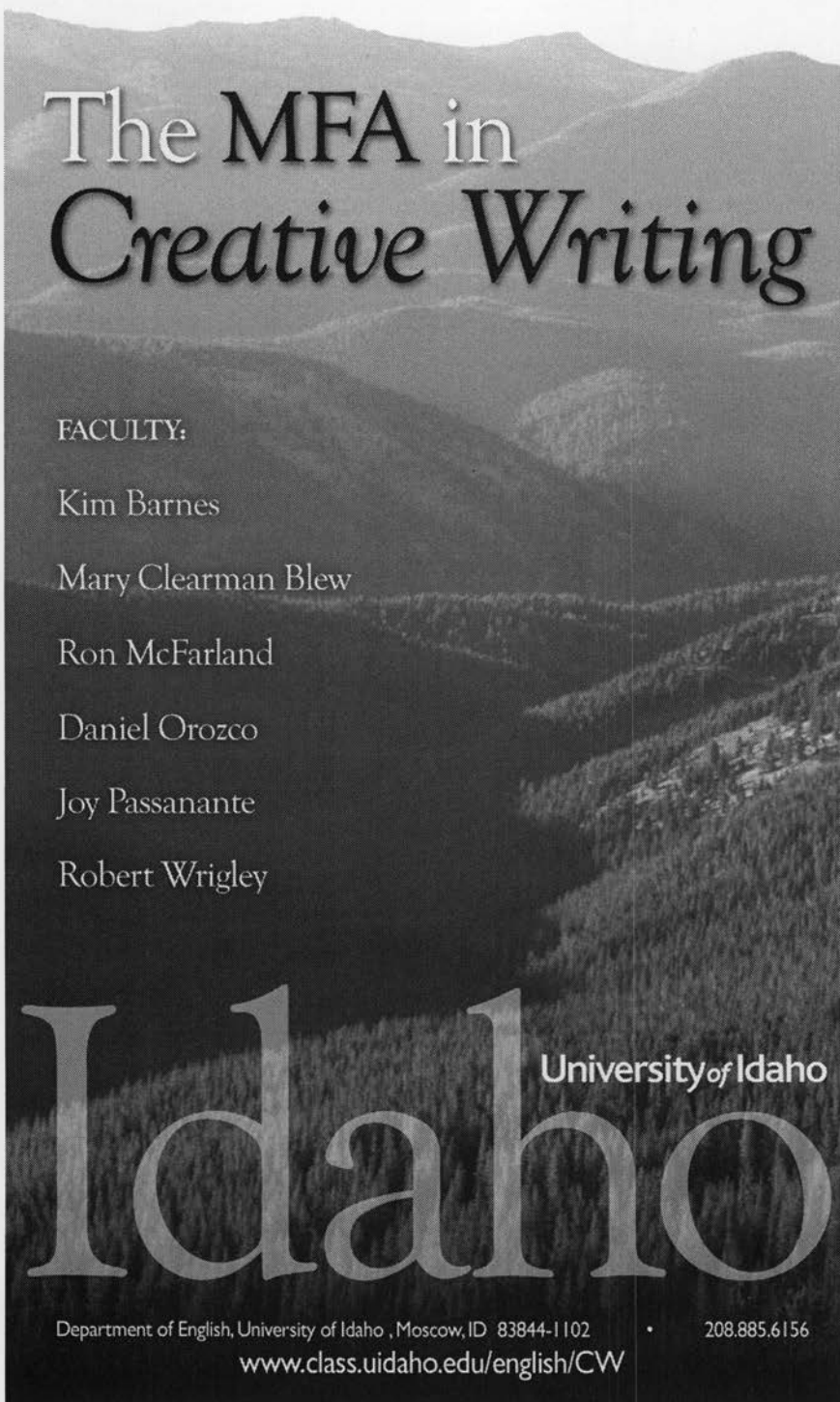
Scott D. Pomfret is author of *Since My Last Confession*, an irreverent and lighthearted memoir in the style of Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* describing three years of stalking the Archbishop of Boston during the Massachusetts same-sex marriage debate. Other works include *Romantics*-brand gay romance novels, the *Q Guide to Wine and Cocktails*, and dozens of short stories published in, among other venues, *Post Road*, *New Orleans Review*, *Fiction International*, *Fourteen Hills*. Now at work on a novel *The Prostitute's Son*, Pomfret by day prosecutes securities fraud for the United States Securities and Exchange Commission. For more information, go to www.scottpomfret.com or www.sincemylastconfession.com.

Iraj Isaac Rahmim's recent essays and fiction have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Commentary*, *Commonweal*, *Gulf Coast*, *the Houston Chronicle*, *Reason*, *Reason.com*, *Rosebud*, and been broadcast by *Pacifica Radio*. A 2007 MacDowell Colony Fellow, his essays have been selected as Notable Essays by Best American Series from 2004 to 2007 and awarded a Fellowship in Literature by the Texas Commission of the Arts. He holds a PhD in biochemical engineering from Columbia University.

Matilde Travassos was born in 1986 in Lisbon, Portugal and studied graphic design and photography. In 2008 she went to Paris and did a Masters in Photography. She was always interested in fashion and art in general. Now she's living in London, working as a fashion photographer, but always looking for more personal and artistic projects. www.matildetravassos.com

L.D. VanAuken worked briefly in publishing before earning her MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University. A former assistant editor of *The Literary Review* and nominee for *Best New American Voices* and the Pushcart Prize, her writing appears in many literary magazines. Her first two novels were contracted with Hachette Book Group, to be published pseudonymously in 2009.

Francine Witte is a poet, playwright and fiction writer. She lives in New York City, where she is a high school English teacher. Her flash fiction chapbook, "The Wind Twirls Everything" was published by MuscleHead Press. Her poetry chapbook "First Rain" has just been published by Pecan Grove Press as a winner of their chapbook competition. Please visit her at franigirl.com.



The MFA in *Creative Writing*

FACULTY:

Kim Barnes

Mary Clearman Blew

Ron McFarland

Daniel Orozco

Joy Passanante

Robert Wrigley

Idaho University of Idaho

Department of English, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844-1102

• 208.885.6156

www.class.uidaho.edu/english/CW

santa clara review

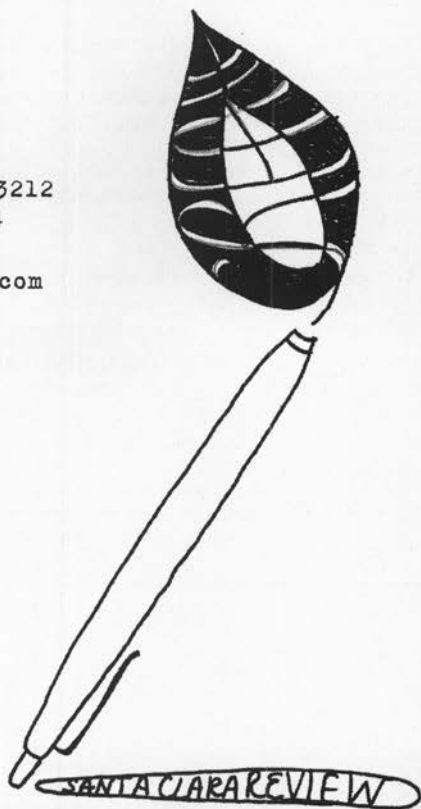
poetry • fiction • nonfiction • drama • art

The santa clara review showcases the work of new and established writers and artists. Issues have featured such figures as Neil Gaiman, Ron Hansen, Bo Caldwell, Katharine Noel, and Frank Warren.

The review is published biannually. Submit to the address below or on www.santaclarareview.com/submit. All submissions are eligible for the \$100 Editor's Choice Prize awarded to one contributor in each

santa clara review
500 El Camino Real
Santa Clara, CA 95053-3212
phone: 408.554.4484
fax: 408.554.5544
www.santaclarareview.com

Subscriptions:
One Year: \$10.00
Two Years: \$19.00
(Postage Included)
*Please make checks
payable to the
santa clara review



The MacGuffin's 14th National

Poet Hunt Contest

Judged by Thomas Lynch

First Place Prize \$500

Two Honorable Mentions

Contest Rules

1. Each entrant will receive one FREE issue of *The MacGuffin* that includes the 14th National Poet Hunt winners.
2. Staff members and their families are not eligible to participate.
3. **An entry consists of five poems.**
4. Poems must be typed on sheets of 8½ x 11 paper. Clean photocopies are acceptable. **DO NOT** place name and address on submissions. Entries can also be made electronically as an MS Word document on a 3½" disk or CD (PC format recommended).
5. Each entrant must include a 3 x 5 index card that includes **poem titles** and the contestant's **name, address, daytime telephone number, and email address.**
6. There is a **\$15.00 entry fee.** Please send check or money order payable to "Schoolcraft College." Please do not send cash.
7. Poems must not be previously published, and must be the original work of the contestant. Poems may be under consideration elsewhere. *The MacGuffin* reserves the right to disqualify work that is accepted elsewhere.
8. No entries will be returned.
9. Entrants wishing to receive a list of winners should send a stamped SASE.
10. Entries must be postmarked between **April 1, 2009** and **June 3, 2009.**

Mail entries to:

The MacGuffin/Poet Hunt Contest
Schoolcraft College
18600 Haggerty Road
Livonia, MI 48152

Winners will be announced in September 2009

First Place and Honorable Mention poems will be published in a future issue of *The MacGuffin*
The MacGuffin reserves the right not to award any Honorable Mentions



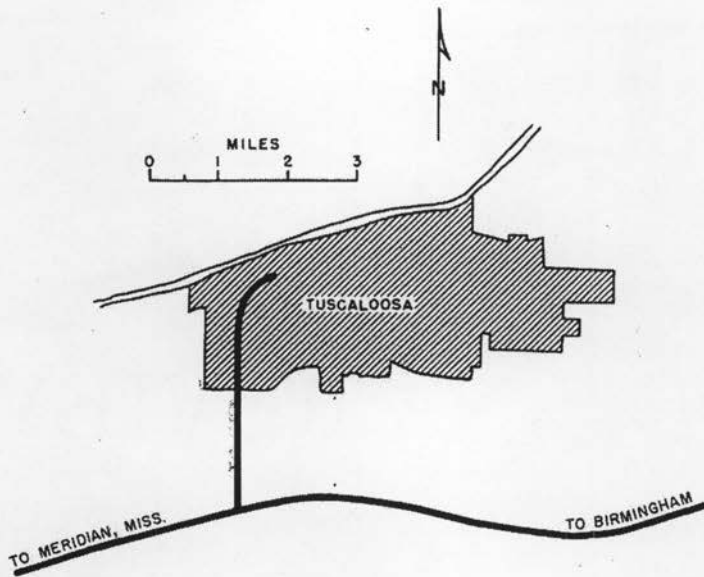
IR

INDIANA REVIEW

*Publishing innovative work
by established and emerging
writers since 1976*

**FICTION * NONFICTION * ART
POETRY * TRANSLATION**

www.indianareview.org inreview@indiana.edu



BLACK WARRIOR REVIEW

A preeminent literary journal founded in 1974 at the University of Alabama, *Black Warrior Review* publishes contemporary fiction, poetry, nonfiction, comics, and art by Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winners alongside work by new and emerging voices, in addition to a featured poetry chapbook solicited by the editors.

Please visit BWR.UA.EDU for more information, samples of published work, and web-exclusive content.

FUGUE

9th Annual Contest in Prose and Poetry

fiction

**1st prize receives \$1000
and publication
2nd and 3rd prizes receive
publication**

Poetry

**1st prize receives \$1000
and publication
2nd and 3rd prizes receive publication**

**\$20 entry fee includes one-year
subscription to** **FUGUE**

**Deadline:
May 1, 2010**

**For full submission guidelines go to:
www.uidaho.edu/fugue**

FUGUE

Featuring:

The Winners of Fugue's 8th Annual
Poetry and Prose Contest:

Sarah Barber

Danica Colic

Annie Nilsson

Iraj Isaac Rahmim

Experiment:

Michelle Disler

Interviews:

Aimee Bender

BH Fairchild

Plus:

pills, taphophiles, and chain-smoking
with James Bond.