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VISTA

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

*Writing of
interest
& intrigue!*

fall '03



northridge review

fall 2003

ERRATA

Melanie Necktar Baghdassarians' This is it is on page 100

Rita Hermann's 950w.455s is on page 101

NOTE: During the printing process this poem was truncated. Below is the complete poem.

Hymn

Kathleen Seeley

It was on the high, upland moor
on dry, sweet grasses, that
you first put me to your hand.
The wind as cool as the eagle.
All around us on the fine air rose
brown dust as fine as your glance. My lord,
who would have thought a king could be so shy.

And so I placed the sacred wreath
upon your sacred brow, kissed
gold upon your blessed person.
How I have loved thee, Alexandros!
By the ancient inland sea you first kissed
me, in that old palace of sweet cedar you
returned to me the youth I had never spent.

Yes, I have drunk, and greedily
of your sweet salt, a man's tears.
Now, in his sacred bath, a god rests.
In this Pharaoh land my sorrow falls
silently. The Nile flows by me,
memory of all you gave me quickens my
heart. You were in love with giving!

Recall with what great joy I have knelt
at your feet! Even fire is tender and thus
you were with me. We are an ancient race,
we worship flame. Yet I did not deceive myself.
He was like old Oxhead, for whom you would
have ravaged a province. Though he would never
again carry you in battle. He was inviolable.

His face clear and grave. You never spoke
his name to me. Though lust had long waned,
you were still his boy. Hephaestion came back
that terrible desert of Gedrosia, saved me
from death, because he knew you loved
our Persian. Never let it be said that my lord
turned away love. It is not the nature of divinity.

To your wedding feast I
wore my jacket of silk with
its clusters of ruby buttons. The last hand
to unfasten them had been yours. Under the
dark silver of Sogdian skies you crossed her wishes,
you would not command me to dance. Then she knew,
poor princess, it was the wife who was the concubine.

The bitter, mountain passes in midwinter,
it was true love's knowing braved me rise and
limb those terrible old rimes stones to enter,
unbidden, that ogre's lair. Even Peritas left
the couch unasked. You were such a man with
me that night, my lord, I beg you to remember,
did not once speak of Roxane. Or of *him*.

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Staff: genevieve branco (fiction, business), deborah catanese (fiction, layout), corinna coorssen (fiction, layout), tyree dillihay (poetry, layout), danny haloosim (fiction editor, layout), mona houghton (boss), joshua keim (poetry, layout), alex lee (managing editor), dustin lehren (layout-design and production, fiction), linda leseberg (poetry, layout), dan portillo (poetry, business), kariana ravkina (fiction, layout), ianthe roldan (poetry), stephanie rudell (poetry, business manager), irena sinitsky (poetry editor, layout), jeff swarns (fiction).

EDITORS NOTE

Here are your editors:

Irena: Let's quarantine ~~clichés~~.

Danny: Ha, ha.

Alex: I vote no.

So here are your editors:

Alex: Let's just publish nothing and leave this blank.

Danny: Good idea.

Irena: No. But let's do it without ~~clichés~~.

Still, here are your editors:

Danny: I like that.

Alex: It's all right.

Irena: I'm recording this but without ~~clichés~~.

Alex: Forget it.

Enjoy

The Northridge Review gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English Department faculty and staff — Marjie Seago, Angela Leidig, Chros Paez, Arturo Rivera and Karin Castillo — for all their **help** and **generosity**. Thanks to Bob Meyer and Color Trend for their continued assistance and support. A very **special** thank you to our faculty advisor, Mona Houghton who is perfect and wonderful with time and **effort** to making this magazine (even though she says we don't have to say anything about her). **And Special Thanks to Trader Joes!!**

AWARDS

The Northridge Review Fiction Award recognizes excellent fiction published in *The Northridge Review*. The winner of this award is Tracey Ruby for "Heros" and the two honorable mentions go to Genaro Ky Ly Smith for "Land South of the Clouds" and Brian David Cinadr for "A Flat Corn Town Carnival."

The Rachel Sherwood Award recognizes excellent poetry published in *The Northridge Review*. The recipient of this award is Jeff Sosner for *Dig*.

The Northridge Review is also pleased to publish the winner of *The Academy of American Poets Award*. The recipient is Kelan Koning for *Cryobanking on America* and the two honorable mentions are Jeff Sosner for *Dig* and Hollie N. Stewart for *Swimming*.

The Benjamin Saltman Award, honoring the memory of Professor Benjamin Saltman, recognizes excellence in poetry writing. The recipients of this award are Tiffany Austin and Olga Vaynkof. The Honorable Mentions are DeAnn Jordan and Alex Lee.

Historical Insignificance

Garrett Clancy

I AM: unemployed once more, 4th time in past year, which is 100% tell-me-somethin'-I-don't know info as

I AM: an L.A.-cliché, AKA failed TV writer, with lone 6-years-in-past credit, but 2-day is 2-day and

I AM: on Zuma sands, sweating ass in yellow plastic chair.

I AM: sans sunblock yet again,

I'M: still on Prozac, AND

I'M: reading something calculated to make me more attractive to some *Baywatch* beauty-type, though she'd need a degree in contemporary Lit or else won't recognize name of author of same Grove Press tome, which I hold, but don't read really- a ploy, as I say, to gain the interest of some boobs *and* brain dream-combo and NOT the fully-dressed man with the John Brown-wild, granite-colored hair and beard, who, as he stands like darkened dew-fat cloud between yours truly and the warm-as-raisin-toast sun, is fucking with my George Hamilton, and who claims

I am your biological father

and who has tracked me here to this spot, he further elaborates, after having received tip from faux-Jamaican accented mama answering the telephone at 1-900 psychic thinggy – but he could just as easily have found my # & my address after B.S.-ing some nosey neighbor, Crazy Kelly no doubt, she with aged tattoo of weeping Jesus on Pillsbury-Doughboy white left ass cheek, latter and its twin in serious need of Thigh-Master action to point that Jesus, when Kelly sashays in satiny G-string bikini bottom after leaving my apartment door, disappointed yet again, shimmer-moves and appears to be face from LSD flashback (Vermont, 1979, Neil Young plucking acoustic guitar in converted cow pasture, and me speaking aloud to any funhouse-mirror-faced fellow concert-goer nearby in fluent German, I think, having never studied same) all wavy'n shit and Kelly always slapping at same

ass cheek with turquoise ring-weighted hand, reminding me that "he's" (weeping tattoo Saviour) "got my ass covered!" then haw-hawing at own quasi double-entente & extending invitation #332 to me to drink Mickey's tallboys by our apartment building's kidney-shaped pool, said pool overflowing with water the color of that which passes thru same organ, but I digress; daddy, or so he claims, could've gotten info on my whereabouts any number of places/sources, though when he mentions

You were born in Washington D.C. to an Army Corporal mother named Sally Des Bladdes

he gets my attention, as that is my surname and mommy of mine was in fact a soldier once upon a time. My back stiffens as though I've just been informed that some black widow spider crawled upon same, then daddy, if he is indeed who he claims, pokes at cover of book I pretend to read and offers

Kathy Acker- dig her stuff too and here is a little something I've been keeping for you son which explains just how twas you came to be

and he hands me this gnarled blackened THING, which I take after contemplating three or so beats, to be a bullet, tho kinda looking now like a stubbed-out cigarette butt that's been bronzed and left to tarnish

gouged it out

Daddy points to bullet with Uncle Sam war poster finger

with m'Swiss Army pocketknife from this bus stop bench in Austin Texas three days after same little sonofabit-chin' bullet come within a cunt hair of givin' me an impromptu pan-cree-ass removal an' ol' Charlie Whitman he's the reason this bullet is the reason you are here as I dove like Johnny Weismuller for shelter behind said bench and fell a-toppa this pretty young filly wearin' an Army suit- in the Navy once m'self - and we clung to each other two survivors Lucky as the so-

*named smokes all day and thru one sleep-
less shivering night and when I got back
to m' daddy's ranch outside Laramie,
Wyoming a year or so later after working
oil rigs in Tulsa, Oklahomey and various
other assorted bullshit gigs my own
daddy showed me this faded kinda yellow-
like-ginger candy Western Union
telegram announcing the birth of my
baby boy which'd be YOU by God I'd
hardly recognize you and sorry and all
that but I've got cancer of the balls see
and by the way I hope you're wearin'
sunblock case it's her-editary and I am on
my last legs as they say old hairy pencils
at that so here we are*

he breathes finally and sits down
beside me on my beach towel, which
is actually a poster for The Godfather,
and of course is yet another ploy
to...but it's too late for that now;
what cute/smart angel could even see
it underneath Raggedy Andy's bone-
butt? and by God I'm seriously
thinking about introducing this char-
acter to Crazy Kelly, dad or no, just
for fucking with my serenity and new
girlfriend-dream plans and

interrupting my flow of such-themed
thoughts with

*here we are at what has got to be one'a
the prettiest darn beaches on the sweet
clean ass of Mother Earth and to be
honest with you sonny I'm broke as
Moses and tried to sell*

pointing to MY bullet

*self-same symbolic token of your existence
and my near-death experience a'course as
the chubby fella at the last pawnshop told
me and he was right there just ain't no
real way to prove that there slug is the
gen-u-wine article fired from that crazy-
as-a-shithouse rat ex-Marine's rifle on
that awful awful day but ain't it funny
how I think often that I almost lost my
life and made a NEW one all in the same
24-hour period but again as I say pawn-
shop owners don't give a monkey's ass
about history so can you spot me say a
ten-spot or a couple'a sawbucks sonny
so's I can die in some motel room in
Malibu which has in fact been my dream
for quite some time now*

STOP

You've never read Kathy Acker

(In addition I'd like to know, though I don't mention it, the whereabouts of some three decades-plus of back child support, seeing as I am, myself, broke as Moses or whatever he said, and could sure as fuck use even some fraction thereof)

Well o-kee so I lied ya caught me but I read a lot'a stuff in my Navy days stuck out on the battleship U.S.S. Virginia 6 long months at a time I mean you got your smarts from somewheres I suppose

YES – my mother!

Well I bet you ain't read half the stuff I did stuff like Journey to the End of the Night by this French doctor Say-leen and mucho stuffo by Jack Ker-roo-ack whose name I mispronounced for a good year're more til a Lieutenant J.G. from Massachusetts set me straight and then old Thomas Wolfe and As I lay Dying and Sound and the Something-or-other

by William Fawk-ner and aww hell I ain't got time to argue this shit out with you I'm dyin' boy have an ounce of sympathy why don't you by God show some appreciation for history that bullet is REAL fired off the University of Texas liberty tower and it might be the ONLY true connection between us you'n me and do the math were you not born pretty much exactly nine months after the fact why how could I make such a thing up an ol' cowboy like me who may or may not've read a couple'a good books and I'd settle for pocket change at this point kiddo maybe a ride back to Santa Monica a good word fer chrissakes even

PLEASE I think but don't say and then it smacks me like Moe Howard's hand across my too-thin superior lips that this has been MY dream, to see an old, dying man who claims to be my father show up one fantasy day, broke and much like this dried up husk of a John Doe (I still don't know his name) who sits beside me – it has been my wish to take satisfaction in the suffering of he who abandoned me (and my mother) before even my

very birth – but though it has been my hope my passionate desire to have this man, my father, beg forgiveness (in my dream it was from a piss-smelling wheelchair) for all his many wrongs, just so that I could pass him by on Skid-row (though why I'd even be walking on such a street is unclear to me) with nary an acknowledgment of his wretched existence, don't need you or recognize you are even alive, old man I dreamed of saying – but now I find I am inexplicably moved touched, empathetic even, wanting and wishing now I could help somehow this unfortunate creature, my father...and it is then I see the porpoises. A pair. Dipping disappearing re-appearing slippery in and out of the Earl Grey-tea colored seawater behind the surfer dudes hanging-zero and lazier than even me. Smooth, Flipper's second cousins are, diving again like black...bullets

by God look at'em go

dad says interrupting my thoughts, once again, my very fears

free as rain what a great and wonderful thing it is to be free as rain

LATER, after I have driven us, the reunited, to my Van Nuys \$510 per month failed screenwriter special shit-dump, and after I was sure as he lay there on my tequila and cheap beer-stained passenger car seat (that trip to Ensenada with Frederick and Nickle-bag Boy) with eyes closed, spittle fizzling over lower lip he had in fact already gone to swim with Flipper's second cousins forever, and after Crazy Kelly nosed in and was actually welcome for once, a regular Candy-Stripe 1970's drive-in movie theater exploitation half-angel/half-whore Colleen Camp nurse-maids, and who whines "oh, the poor old cowboy why didn't you tell me your dad was comin' to visit you what kind of son are you he's a real looker too do you think he wants a beer?" and after he opened his eyes just as CK, mini-skirted simply because it was Tuesday, was bending over in front of dad prone on my lone sad couch to

remove his socks blacker than an Arabian horse neck and saw the weeping Jesus tattoo smiled and cried

I do not deserve your piteous tears Dear Lord but take me home and end my general discomfort and let sonny-boy know by sign or miraculous intercession that he was although a stranger indeed - be-loved of me

After all of this I want to say WAIT DO NOT DIE ON ME, but do not as I know by now, though deprived of paternal guidance and affection these 36+ years, until this moment that is, that strange events such even as the visitation of ghosts do not, cannot occur without there being (though dog-years may pass without genuine clarity concerning same) some MEANING attached...

And thus it was epiphanic and clear to me, pretend-reader of great novels, terminally-unemployable, borderline cruel rejector of too-many-to-count advances of Crazy Kelly, that we had, my dead father and I, all along shared

so giant (Gibraltar-like, really) a THING in common, the THING being that which was the explanation for every tear ever shed, every mirror ever shattered with closed fist by your's truly -

I got Kelly to lend me a hundred dollars and promise to water my cactus plant once every three weeks in exchange for letting her call 911 to report the death of the strange man on my couch in order to give her something to talk about for the next two months ("my gawd it was awful right in front of me he went just like that - SNAPP!"), and also, though I hate to admit it, one long, sad night of forced (on my part, of course) lovemaking during which I was afraid to put my hand on the quivering vision of weeping Jesus for fear I might (once again) offend and hurt him

I load my car with books to make me seem serious & learned & in general a threat to no-one on Earth to any cop who might mistake my porcupine

cheeks and haven't dozed-a-nano-second in 26 consecutive hours eye-glaze for a potential Charlie Whitman redux, and figure I've got just enough gas & food & beer \$\$\$ to reach Las Vegas. I hold in my T-shirt pocket the address of the son I abandoned 6 years before and his mother, with whom I had spent a few sweet comforting nights not so long ago but never knew really, but who is now the very Lotto ticket to all of my future character and *purpose*...

My name is Abel and so-named is my little boy. He'll probably want to bring his gnarled and tarnished bullet to school for Show & Tell. He is, it dawns upon me, as I drive thru Victorville, not far off the age of the Latino boy shot-dead in the stairwell of the UT Li-berry tower, as daddy called it, by the firer of my ballistic memento (tho my recollection of same tragic moment in time comes via the Kurt Russell-led MOW I saw some years back while waiting for my unemployment benefits to once again run dry and so might not be 100% on-

target, pun intended all the way.) I'm listening to a block of the Stones on KLOS as I cruise east on the I-15, ass-deep in the midst, as I intimate, of my 19th *Nervous Breakdown*. I have, tho, *Sympathy for the Devil*, and I hope like my momma did when she was shivering behind that Austin Texas bench in fear for her very life that my new family will, alas, take pity on me and *Gimme* (the) *Shelter* I so desperately desire & need.

You put away
old prints
war toys
and scarred photographs
imagining patches
of quiet grass
surrender blood and bones
only the wind
can hear us
in a handful of urns' ashes
even the strawberries
do not taste the same

graphs
surrender blood and bones
only the wind
can hear us
in a handful of urns' ashes
even the strawberries
do not taste the same

I ran into Liszt in a pub and caught myself thinking

Aaron Lodge

A poet

Lost on a continuum of theory/abstraction vs. reality/experience
da da faburaka %)^: unknowing of correctness,,,,,

holed up

.swinglinestapler.

'Burning Inside' provided by Ministry

Revisions at 7:30 in the AM

Angst like dandruff floats from me

or

ro

(red underlined type-o)

racing down singletrack

crimping on a sloper

new smiles and sore thumbs

thecomcompactoxfordenglishdictionary.thenortonanthologyofenglishliteratureaudiocompanio
n.

backspace backspace backspace



Below

Madelena Montiel

You are in a foreign city where the people speak your language, in a long narrow room you call home. It is as far away as you can get. You grew up with the oranges, where the sea was outside every window, but you came here to study marine biology, to immerse yourself in the life below, to swim with the dolphins.

At night you ride your bike home from the beach. Along the dirt road, the locals have put out ruddy plastic bottles of vinegar-water to remedy jellyfish stings. Small inns line the waterfront – torch-lit, smelling of citronella and Coppertone, throbbing with house music. Surfers and scuba divers hang out next to VW vans, trucks and campers. As you pass, a man calls out in a German accent, “You wanna hang out?”

“Next time,” you say as you pass, and when you look back he has pulled off his shiny black wetsuit, revealing a body, naked and white as sole.

You ride your bike into the city and up a hill to the boarding house. They say the building once belonged to the country’s first prime minister. It

was his family's summer home. As you pull up, you see the woman who lives in what used to be the parlor. She is sitting on a towel on the front lawn. She never wears anything besides a turquoise robe with a pattern of a dragon on the back and is hugely fat. Her hair is always dirty and her fingertips have spots of old, ruby-frost nail polish. When she tells you that she used to whore and that she was very successful at it, you learn more about men in that single moment than everything you have ever known before. Now she's left "the life" for her boyfriend, a guy who used to be a cook with the navy. He is tall and thin, covered in tattoos. He looks more like a pirate than a sailor, and you suspect from the designs on his arms that the turquoise robe she wears was a gift from him – something he likes to see her in because it reminds him of other places. They are a nice couple, and he enjoys making large meals. One night in the communal kitchen, he will show you how to make shrimp scampi, but it will turn your stomach because shrimp are very sweet when they swim.

You walk around the outside perimeter of the house and enter your room from a door at the back, picking up a letter that has been slipped under the door. Your room is long and narrow. It used to be a laundry room. There is a double bed at one end and a dresser and a table at the other. The room is like the Polish pilot's landing strip – so short but oh so wide. The first thing you see when you enter is a small sink below several pipes that have been severed and capped off. There are three red candles on the table where you write.

Why is your handwriting slanting the wrong way, why have you gone to the ends of the earth, when are you coming back, the letter asks. Your handwriting is slanting the wrong way because you met a Chinese woman at the waterfront who sold you a jade bracelet. She buttered your hand and squeezed it on your wrist, warning you never to gain another pound or else it would never come off. It is a pale, foamy green, the color of the sea. You do not know why you have gone to the ends of the earth or when you are coming back.

Everything is turned on its ass here, they like to say. The people are backwards. They drive on the wrong side of the road. The water runs down the drain counter clock-wise. A bunch of celery is as long as your entire arm. On the beach, there is a boy giving hang-gliding lessons, and he is exactly like a boy you knew in eleventh grade, only his hair is parted on the wrong side.

You've never been able to adjust to the time change. You wake up throughout the night, unable to stop the sensation of the day. You feel as if

your bed is floating on waves. The insides of your body rise and fall.

Sometimes they nose you, telling you which way to go – 400 pounds of muscle, skin slick like oiled vinyl, sliding under your stomach, lifting you and carrying you farther into the water. This bachelor herd of bottle noses – they’ve learned how to play with tourists. They approach apprehensively at first but become bold and bullying after awhile. They seem to know that they have faces that humans can understand. They feel unreal, impenetrable and yet, you are warned to keep your fingernails trimmed because their skin is so fragile. Soon you will have no fingernails anyway. They are falling away – separating from the skin because of the chemicals in the tanks. One day you will become as smooth as a baby again – like the inside of an eye-lid.

Things are buried in the ground around the house – frying pans, anvils, gardening tools. One night when you return late, you find a resident digging the ground around your entrance. You’ve seen him before, this resident. He walks the neighborhood constantly, and you see him in the grocery store, the pharmacy, the post office. He is very tall and keeps a forward gaze, which does not seem to take in anything beneath his eye level. Sometimes you’ve wondered if he’s following you, but most of the time you find yourself darting out of his way. He is dark-eyed with angular features and long eyelashes. He would be handsome if it were not for this gaze.

As you enter your room he looks up from his digging to tell you that none of this exists. “It is all. We are all. Electro-magnetic force fields,” he says.

Throughout the night you will wake up and see his silhouette through the Venetian blinds. You will hear the slice of his shovel through the ground. The next morning you will walk over piles of upturned dirt as worms thread themselves throughout the black earth.

You spend most of your time alone. You’ve learned what foods you can keep in the sink of your room without them spoiling and you’ve learned what can go in the communal fridge without getting stolen. You are the probably the only one who steals food anyway – you like the custard cups one resident brings home. Your window faces the back alley, and there are a few residents who have friends with cars. Since guests aren’t allowed in the house, it’s where some of them like to hang, smoke, mess around.

A lot of them make excuses for why they are here. They are junkies, travelers, people on the dole, a woman who has left her husband and needs a place to stay while he realizes what he’s lost. They are a visiting professor and

his wife from Spain who refuse to speak to anyone during the six days and nights they occupy what used to be the master bedroom, a woman who has been on permanent disability for 10 years because of repetitive stress syndrome, several people waiting for low income government subsidized housing, a Satanic lesbian couple and several retirees: a librarian, a steel worker, and a mathematician. But even so, there is something more than that, something peculiar about each one.

Every night at 3 o'clock in the morning, your boyfriend calls from home. It's early afternoon where he is. It doesn't matter to him that you are so far away – he has a supply of other people's calling card numbers. He tells you that he should have let you go, that he thought you wanted to be free, that he doesn't know what to do now. You don't know what to do either. It's been over three months.

The operator of the glass bottom boat explains that fish have sensitive organs called lateral lines. These lateral lines pick up the vibrations made by other sea creatures, he says. That is how they manage to swim so close to one another without touching. They also do not scrape their bodies on the coral below.

He turns on a special light that illuminates the reef. Small iridescent angelfish dart in and out of neon-colored lunar rock. Strange fleshy pink, white and green plants beckon. They are sometimes tubular, sometimes spiky, sometimes fluttering like ostrich boas.

One night, your boyfriend calls to tell you that he has made a friend for you. She is the sister of a woman he has met back in the States. You do not want to know this woman, you say. It is a ploy, a way for him to keep tabs on you, to know what you are doing.

"You're always alone," he says. "It's not good."

When the woman shows up in her new car to pick you up, some of the residents come to their windows. It's rare to see someone from the outside around these parts. She is tall and has long, curly auburn hair. She lives in a condominium on the beach. She is beautiful. You get into the passenger's seat and you drive away. You tell her about how this morning, in the upstairs shower, which you rarely use, you looked up and thought you saw an eye watching you through a hole in the ceiling. The woman is horrified. "What did you do," she asks. You tell her that you quickly turned off the water, dressed and ran down to the owner's office, but he refused to answer.

In truth, you continued to shower as the eye watched you. You looked up and the eye moved away, but you knew that the eye was aware that you had sensed its presence. You continued to shower, closing your eyes and turning your face towards the shower jets, occasionally glancing up as the eye stole away. You continued to run soap over your body and you washed your hair. When you got out of the shower, you sat on the floor and massaged lotion onto your legs. You stood at the mirror with a towel around your waist and plucked your eyebrows. You dressed and went back to your room.

"We have to do something," the woman from the outside says. Maybe someone she knows is looking for a flat-mate. You study her profile – a small nose, Irish features, freckles. She is glamorous, almost model-like, but she also looks fun. You like her.

"Tell me about your sister," you ask. "Younger or older?"

"Older by a minute and a half," she replies. "She is my twin."

There have always been other women: the facialist, the woman who prints the business cards, the shower attendant at his father's nursing home, the occasional Tuesday afternoon shopper, standing in the dressing room in her lingerie, separated from adultery by a flimsy curtain.

You know about them all. Your boyfriend used to take you with him to his weekly therapy session. He would hand you his knapsack before he went into the office, and in the waiting room you would read the last days' entries from his journal. You felt guilty about this at first, but later, you realized that he wanted you to do it. He wanted you to know about all of them, what their skin felt like, how they tasted and sounded when he went down on them. He told you what they talked about afterward, the questions they asked about you, the sense of triumph some of them felt by seducing another woman's man. Sometimes, in his entries, he confessed his love for you. He told you that he knew he was hurting you, and that the first thing he thought about after the women left was you. Those were the times, he wrote, that he called you for no reason, just to hear your voice.

Your boyfriend would emerge from the therapist's office smiling.

You have known about them all, but this is the first time you have seen one of them face to face, heard her voice, studied the freckles on her shoulders.

"We are total opposites," the twin says. She takes a photograph out of her wallet. The two sisters are leaning against one another, back to back, smiling. They look like a butterfly or a Rorschach test.

The owner of the glass bottom boat tells the tourists that they are looking at the bottom of the sea. But you know there are places where sunlight cannot penetrate, where the fish have bioluminescent organs and huge eyes, so they can find food, or glowing lures, so they can draw their prey in. Farther down, blind ones live on the bacteria they've sucked down in the mud, or they wait for carcasses sinking down from shallower depths.

The ex-prostitute has a Ouija board and tarot cards. She has turned out all the lights, and you light the three candles you brought from your room.

"He's out on a drunk," she says. "Won't be back until at least four o'clock."

You sit at an old table. It's a faux antique, probably purchased in the 1940's or 50's to look as if it came with the house. Somehow it got left behind, and now it has various initials carved into the veneer.

"What should we ask," she giggles. "Do you want to know about your man back home?"

"I already do," you say.

She takes out her Ouija board. "Let's ask about the house." She closes her eyes and says to the ceiling, "Are there any spirits here tonight?"

At night, there is a knock on your door that wakes you up out of a dead sleep. It is the custard-cup woman. She looks exactly the way she does whenever she discovers her custard cups missing – flustered, annoyed, and as if she is going to cry.

"The phone has been ringing for the last hour. The first time I picked up and told him that it was the middle of the night – I thought maybe he didn't realize the time difference. Now he keeps ringing and hanging up on me."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," you say as you follow her back to the house.

You pick up the phone and whisper, "They're going to kick me out if you continue to do this. Is that what you want?"

"But I'm worried about you. Everyone is."

"I'm fine."

"Your mom called me this morning to find out if I'd heard from you. I told her I was about to call her to ask the same thing."

"Don't call again. They'll kick me out and then I'll have to move somewhere else. And then you won't even know where I am. How would you like that?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Don't call again...."

As you return to your room, you are struck by the whizzing sound of wind blowing through the palm trees. There has been talk of a storm coming, and the sheets on the clotheslines have been twisted into swinging, cocoon-like bundles. As you turn a corner, you nearly fall over a shovel that is propped against the building. You hesitate before picking it up, wondering if the resident will know you have touched it. You drop it and run.

You are floating in the sea, the long curls of your hair spread out like the arms of an octopus. The sun is low. You like this, the taste of salt, which is like blood. You imagine your body being carried away by the waves farther out, your skin white against slippery brown kelp.

At night when he appears in silhouette, you begin to convulse, your head filling with whirling sounds — you open your eyes, and the light in the room is reversed — it looks like a photo-negative. Your insides lunge and you feel as if you are leaving your body, your self being torn out against your will. You are pulled toward the silhouette. You turn and see your body in the bed, hair glowing white against grey skin, bucking wildly as the man outside watches you through the window. The venetian blinds tear at your skin; they slice through you as you grab the window's frame, begging not to go.

He May Have Drawn in Ice, But He Exhaled Flame

Tiffany Austin

That could have been my grandfather
voice roughened by alcohol
singing sweetly out of the sewer dark

*He may have drawn in ice
but he exhaled flame*

each note emberdancing
as I passed—
half-expecting the obligatory catcall
but only the scatsong syllables
seduced me;
only that drunkenbeautiful music
spilling out as laughtersighs;
corner-turning to find that I'd
fallen in love with my genes—
maybe not when he'd collar her: give her what-for
five, six times a week;
but when
spirit-softened and weak
he'd armchair sing
as we'd wash dishes with clothing detergent
pretending not to hear and never daring to speak.

*He
may have drawn in ice
but he exhaled flame*

in midnight streets
dogfighting policemen,
escaping through high weeds,
or being baton-beaten
so that her screams were his song
sirens bleating
the black-eyed blues,
Ella sobbing gently
until the needle hits
the paper isle;
the vial emptying under my uncle's skin.

The sins of the father waged in the death of that house
my grandmother's bellypit
hardening into a fist
that had once spat cursed children
borne to wither
like that man whose cataract eyes called me by my sister's name
as he drew in ice
and finally
exhaled flame

To a Male Pop Musician

Hollie N. Stewart

QUIT whining about us.
Stop the estrogen songs.
Our curves aren't as firm
as your ideal,
as that dream female
plastered on the brain's walls.

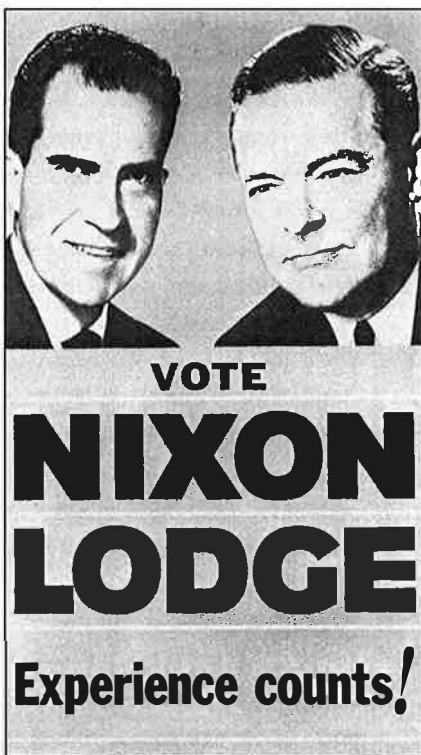
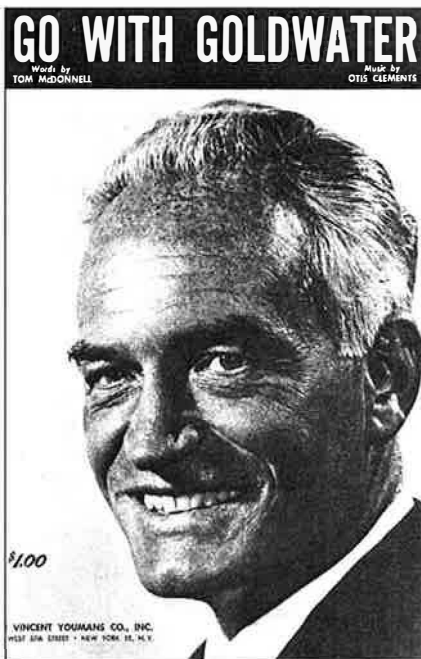
What is it about
Oceanic eyes,
the C cup,
and flowing, tumbling,
drowning blond hair?

We can't be worth
the twenty-million melodies
burned
on CD,
mind,
wedding video.

What a sound track
for the day of a man
and his fresh catch,
scales glimmering
under the flash of a million smiles.

When he skins her,
will your song conjure up
those plastic bunnies
bouncing forever young?
Or will he think original
and depart from your
verse-chorus-verse rosary?
From the three chord monotony?

May he see his bride
wrapped in *Chichester Psalm* splendor,
glowing through harmonies and dissonance.
May he feel that place
of petite chests, chopped locks,
and smile
as he key changes
once again.



Dig

Jeff Sosner

In San Salvador, they dig and cry.
They dig toward cries rising
through dirt—echoes of
seeds that will not.

Carolina watches KMEX; pick axes and
her gasps translate me, and
I know Spanish without understanding.
She trembles. I try to be

macho. But as dead grow in number,
I feel tears irrigating the corners of my mouth.
Medics check the pulse of a woman
who, until the shaking began, beat

eggs in her cocina. Now blood turns
dirt on her arms to adobe mud;
her body is a cracked shell. The spirit runs
where shovels cannot.

In Las Colinas, they dig and cry.
Carolina clings to me, half to
hold herself up, half to keep me
from slipping through cracks.

Bryce Canyon

Ken Cran

A man's backpack transfers most of its weight onto the shoulders, which are stronger than a woman's. A woman's pack carries most of its weight on the hips, where women supposedly maintain most of their strength on account of them being baby squeezer-outers. Merrik slips his Arc'teryx backpack – an internal frame model that cost him five hundred dollars plus shipping and out of state tax – over his shoulders. Snaps together the belt latchy-thing and cinches up the straps.

The backpack weighs sixty-five pounds, including the twelve-pack of Pabst, but Merrik can barely feel the weight. For one, he's two hundred eighteen pounds of old-fashioned manhood, and for another, he's taken so much Carisoprodol and Vicodin that he can't feel much of anything, including his boots on the ground. He has also taken, as is customary in the morning, Vioxx for his arthritic knees, Propecia for his thinning hair, Viagra because the Propecia is giving him an anti-boner, Tylenol because the Viagra is causing headaches, and Ranitidine because the Tylenol is upsetting his stomach. But he's healthy, because he's also taken five thousand milligrams of vitamin supplements.

From the rim of the canyon, Merrik looks down at the tall, snow-dusted hoodoos that resemble great stony totem poles. Carved from limestone over the past sixteen million years, the towering hoodoos and their bumpy shadows might inspire poetry or a spiritual awakening in some people. But Merrik's not thinking about that kind of new age crap right now. His only thought is the steep drop to the canyon floor. What is it, four hundred feet? Five hundred? Five *thousand*? He doesn't know, because he's never been here before. Utah is a state he knows diddlysquat about, other than that *Texas Backpacker* magazine has declared it "one of the great American places to lose yourself."

Now, Merrik isn't into "losing himself," because he's quite happy where he is. He's strong and healthy because he takes all those pills, he's got a good job in the painting business (*Houses, not Monets, haw haw!* is Merrik's favorite painting joke) and he's not anxious to change anything but his socks and motor oil on a regular basis. So while *Texas Backpacker* can say all it wants about finding inner peace and breathing virgin air and tasting accomplishment, Merrik feels but one need:

To do something he's never done before.

He should be applauded for that, he thinks, perhaps given a plaque or a kiss from this year's Miss Universe winner (he loves Brazilian chicks– hubba hubba). He thinks about his friends, about his neighbor Skinny, about the guys

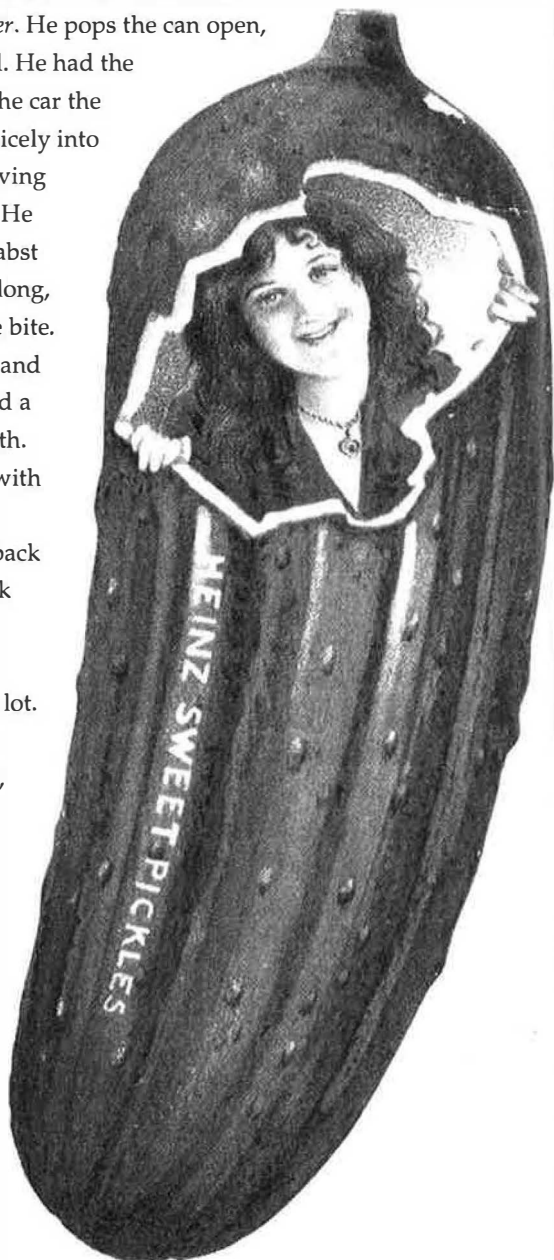
at work: Jo-Jo, Ron "Bear Butt" McBride, Amir the Mad Syrian, and Lloyd. None of them do much beside paint, drink beer and screw, and on occasion, all at the same time. *Crap on that*, Merrik thinks. *Pound your beer and Betties*.

It was just after his thirtieth birthday that Merrik decided it was time to ante up and be a liver — one who *lives* — instead of just a Beer and Bettie Pounder.

Merrik reaches into his fanny pack, removes a Pabst and a granola bar. Granola is healthy, and Merrik's heart swells because he's an outdoorsman and a *liver*. He pops the can open, swirls the slush of beer around. He had the good sense to keep it outside the car the night before so it'd freeze up nicely into a beer slushy. What good is having beer if you can't drink it cold? He chugs it down, gets a frozen Pabst headache that doesn't last too long, then inhales the granola in one bite. It's dry and sticks to his teeth, and Merrik wishes he 'd have saved a sip of beer to wash it down with.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, belches, crushes the can and shoves it back into his fanny pack. Looks back toward his car. Three hundred yards to the north, Merrik's Pontiac sits in a gravel and ice lot. *Texas Backpacker* said almost nothing about the Utah winter, but then again, the article about Bryce Canyon hikes was from the July issue, when there wasn't, presumably, the need for crampons.

He looks down at his boots — Ticonderogas — two hundred bucks worth of breathable nylon mesh, leather, suede, and



steel shanking. They've got diamond and v-shaped Goodyear rubber tread and squishy space-aged gel stuff in the heel for added cushion, which is good if you're carrying sixty-five pounds of gear in a five hundred dollar backpack. He's even wearing hiking socks, which Janice the salesgirl with big hooters promised would keep his feet dry and blister free because, contrary to popular belief, good hiking socks are made of rayon or some other man-made material. Cotton just holds the moisture, he recalls Janice saying, thus promoting blisters. Alone in the middle of Bumfuck, Egypt, the last thing a backpacker wants is an oozy blister.

Staring at his boots, Merrik ponders American Camping Supplies, hiking socks and Janice and her big hooters. She was cute for an outdoorsy girl, maybe a little big in the thighs, but certainly do-able. He wonders now as he did then if she noticed the bulge in his pants. He knows what gets women going, no matter what all the sex books and talk shows and Gloria Allreds say. He knows all too well that here in America, in the land of mammoth SUV's, super-duper sized fountain drinks and breast implants the size of basketballs, bigger is better and to hell with touchy-feely liberalism. Merrik knows full well what women want, like and need, and he'll be damned if he's going to be left behind. Ron "Bear Butt" McBride's big bear butt aside, if it's big, women want it. Viagra, so far as Merrik is concerned, came around just in time. Despite the headachy side effects, he doesn't even like it when he's not, as his last girlfriend Abby-Jill used to say, "sporting a Patriot."

Merrick looks back at his car. Snow cakes the t-tops of the '79 Pontiac Trans Am like a bad toupee on an Olympic sprinter. The urge to go over and brush it off is strong, but he sucks it up because he's hoping that all that snow will last the drive back home. He'd like nothing more than for the guys at Steven Smith Painting to see that not only did he go backpacking in Utah, but that he went *in the snow*. Even Skinny next door will have to bow to Merrik's tough-as-a-bull-Sasquatch hardiness. Probably, he'll bring over a twelve pack like he always does, but instead of giving Merrik one can at a time, he'll give him six right off the bat. *Don't want to mess with a bull Sasquatch*, Skinny'll think. Merrik will reward him with tales of the canyon and the ice and cold and hoodoos shaped like snake fangs.

Merrick looks back at the trailhead. Reads the brown Nation Park Service sign:

**FAIRYLAND LOOP
TRAILHEAD -**

**DANGEREROUS ICE.
CRAMPONS
RECOMMENDED FOR
CANYON HIKES.**

Of course, any trail named "Fairyland Loop" can't be hard. It even sounds kinda queer, Merrik thinks. He won't tell the guys what trail he went down; better to make up a new name. "Cougar Claw Pass" sounds good. So does

“Wolverine Gorge.” Perhaps “Dead Man’s Loop” if he decides to use part of the original name. Regardless, he won’t mention “Fairyland Loop.” And he sure as hell won’t mention the word “crampons.” Sounds too much like tampons, and Merrik has no interest in giving the guys ammunition to mash down his triumph.

Looking to the icy ground, Merrik can’t even see dirt. Glassy ice like frosting on a glazed doughnut encases the earth, but Merrik thinks it looks cool instead of dangerous. He places his boot firmly, pushes down. He feels the squishy space-age gel stuff against his heel, but the tread and Goodyear rubber don’t slip. No, he won’t need crampons. He’s wearing Ticonderogas, and at two hundred bucks a pair, they’d better be goddamn good enough for *fuckin’ Antarctica*.

The horizon glows as the sun prepares its ritual assault on Bryce, saturating the already saturated colors. Oxidized chemicals in the limestone confuse the canyon walls like a chameleon with a hangover; they can’t make up their minds on what color they should be. Of course, they decide to be *all* colors at once. Until last summer, Merrik had never known about the fickle canyon walls, or for that matter, the very existence of Bryce Canyon National Park. Only canyon he knew about was the Grand Canyon, and he already saw that one when he was six. His new lust for adventure demanded he try something new, and Bryce, with its alien landscape of fire red spires, fit the bill. Besides, it was close enough to home and, according to *Texas Backpacker* magazine, practically unhiked in the winter.

As Merrik scans the surrounding terrain, he sees only one other car in the lot, but no people. The ranger kiosk is deserted and won’t be up and running until April. It’s late December and Merrik is alone in the Utah wilderness, alone with his backpack, his expensive boots, his eleven pack of Pabst and his lust for life. He takes another step toward the canyon rim, tests his boots.

Solid.

There is no railing because you can’t fence in a whole canyon, though calling Bryce an actual *canyon* is a bit of a misnomer. It’s more like a series of hills with the sides gouged out. Unusual, true, but whoever named Bryce didn’t have a more appropriate word than canyon at his disposal. He certainly couldn’t have called it Bryce Hills With The Sides Gouged Out. That’d look stupid on a map.

Merrick peers over the edge. Canyon or not, it’s a helluva long way down. He takes a deep breath, turns and steps toward the trailhead.

And promptly slips over the canyon rim to his death.

Now, when they say your life flashes before your eyes, that’s nothing

more than survivor's talk, because no one who's dead can tell you what they were feeling before they died, especially from high falls.

"Yeah, doc, I saw everything I ever done flash before my eyes. Saw my gramps, who died in '72, saw crippled little Janey Hathaway from kindergarten, saw Billy what's-his-name get sucked into the hay baler on Christmas Eve, saw Tammy before she got fat, saw Ray before he got skinny, saw..."

Survivor talk, usually followed by a white light, some ghosts of Aunt Regina, cousin Artemus and other assorted figures, and then darkness. Some survivors say they hear God telling them that, by golly, it isn't their time yet and to go on back and have some fun a little while longer. As for Merrik, he doesn't see his life flash before him, doesn't see his long-dead Uncle Rizzo holding out a comforting hand, doesn't hear the voice of God.

What Merrik sees is the fractured cliff face rushing past as he falls eight hundred feet to the bottom of the canyon.

If there's a bright spot to this particular fall, it's that Merrik's body has twisted around so that he's facing upward, or mostly upward, toward the sky and clouds. And he's thankful for that, because the last thing he wants to see are the oncoming rocks of the canyon floor. Had he seen them, he wouldn't have liked them, though they *are* cool with their spiky points and wavering red-orange color. Not what someone wants to land on after an eight hundred foot plunge, that's for goddamn sure.

Merrik watches the cliff face rush past, but he doesn't scream or cry or carry on. At first, he thinks that might be a strange reaction, seeing as how death is seconds away. But he took loads of pills this morning, and they've given him a different perspective. Yeah sure, okay, he slipped at the worst place a person could slip. And yeah, he should have worn crampons, but dammit, they sounded too much like *tampons*. He isn't sure what a crampon even looks like, but if it looks anything like a tampon, well, to hell with them and to hell with the rangers for suggesting he wear them. Merrik bets that the rangers don't have to face the likes of Jo-Jo and Ron and Amir five days a week.

Merrik considers adjusting his body so that he can actually see what's waiting for him at the bottom. Exactly why he wants to do that, he isn't sure, but he thinks it might be part of his new need to see things he has never seen before. How often do you get to see the ground rushing up at you at fifty miles an hour? Besides, he reasons, people are curious. Why else would they spend lots of money on backpacks and boots, only to slip and fall to their deaths before getting the chance to put them to the test?

That's Merrik's biggest gripe at the moment – the one thing that has him really steamed. He spent all that money, and for what? *So that he can fall off a cliff?* Does that sound even remotely fair? Jesus, he could have done that with

a cheaper backpack and K-Mart boots. Hell, he could have done that with a bedroll and flip-flops. Wasted money.

Oh, well, live and learn.

The air is cold, as it should be in winter, but Merrik doesn't recollect it being this cold. He wasn't cold the night before, but then again, he was wrapped up pretty tight in a down sleeping bag. Perhaps the inner canyon is colder than the rim. That could be it. Or perhaps—

I'm falling! he remembers.

The wind from the fall must be cutting into his jacket and up his pant legs, chilling his hairy white flesh. Earlier in the morning, he considered wearing his longjohns, but decided against it. Too many layers to remove if he were to get hot from the hike down. Now, he wishes he had worn them. The rushing cold is uncomfortable, and isn't that the final insult? He's about to die, dammit. Couldn't he at least be warm doing it?

Of all the things to think about while a person's plunging to his death, Merrik doesn't think about the usual things. How someone about to smack rock pelvis first even *knows* what "the usual things" are is a question of cosmic insignificance. But Merrik's sure they don't think about what he's thinking about. *He's* thinking about the score from last year's Super Bowl, though he can't remember the teams who played. *He's* thinking about his mother's tiny feet. The color of Skinny's drunken vomit. The all-time greatest films ever made, which are, in no particular order: "Smokey and the Bandit," which of course inspired him to buy the Trans Am, "Friday the 13th," because the killer's a woman who gets her head cut off in slow motion *haw haw*, and "Die Hard", because there's no one who can take care of himself better than John "Yippy Kai Yay" McClain.

John McClain, now there's an action hero and a *liver*. If he were in Merrik's two hundred dollar boots right now, he'd come up with a way out of this mess. Maybe he'd have a harpoon pistol with a nylon rope attached to it. Maybe he'd shoot it back up toward the cliff edge, the harpoon would hook around the *Wear Your Damn Crampons* sign, and stop the fall inches from a pit of rabid mountain lions. The good guys always win like that. The bad guys die some outrageous death.

Then, Merrik remembers how John "Call Me Roy" McClain dispatches the Euro-trash villain, Hans:

He pushes him out the window of a skyscraper.

Hans falls hundreds of feet to his death.

Now, the actor who played Hans must have had a big squishy airbag to fall into, or some such. Maybe it was space age squishy gel, like the kind in Merrik's boots. Regardless, Merrik is disappointed that he hasn't had the luxury

of a stunt crew to prepare him for *his* fall.

And it must be noted, in Merrik's eyes, that he's not the villain either, he's the *hero*. Heros aren't supposed to die this way. Heros aren't supposed to die *at all*.

Following his favorite movies, Merrik counts off his other favorite things on his fingers: his favorite song is "Iron Man" sung by Ozzy back in the days of Black Sabbath. His favorite car is the one he now owns, the '79 Trans Am with a pushrod V-8 parked in the almost empty lot somewhere above him. His favorite food is something he'd never tell anyone about, but since he's about to die, why not just admit it?

"Fruit Roll-Ups," he says out loud, though he can't hear himself from the wind rushing past his ears.

He continues: Favorite drink: Mr. Pibb. Favorite color: cobalt blue, the same color as his car. Favorite game: *Battleship*. Favorite bathroom reading material: a tie between *Hustler* and the Sunday funnies. Favorite TV show: *Face The Nation*. Favorite old TV show: *Mr. Ed*. Favorite girlfriend: Sarah Marks from the eleventh grade, who didn't care that Merrik lost a testicle to Gunner Hall's Rottweiler.

And last but not least, Merrik's all-time favorite vacation spot: ANYWHERE BUT BRYCE CANYON NATIONAL PARK.

The impact of flesh and bone against rock is swift and mostly painless. Similar to the time when Merrik was twelve and Herbie Robinson hit him in the gut with a baseball bat. He knows he bounces a few times, but he can't tell how high or even where because his eyes are incapable of focusing on the spinning terrain. The sensation of falling, the cold wind up his pant legs, the thoughts about Sarah Marks, they all cease and Merrik quickly feels warm and tingly all over, like he took a Vick's Vapor Rub bath.

He lies there on the rocks for a while, enjoying the whole breathing thing and the tingly sensation, and wonders if what he's feeling isn't the life oozing out of him. He must be bleeding buckets, he reasons, because that was a pretty goddamn serious fall. But the fact that he's conscious and rational is a good sign, and he's sure that, December or not, someone will stumble upon him, and soon. Big National Parks never close, which means the rangers are always working, which means they'll be patrolling parking lots and trail heads and possibly even the trails themselves.

They'll look down from the canyon rim and see Merrick's body and say "Sweet Jesus almighty, that was one helluva fall!" They'll hike to the bottom of the canyon, ask Merrik if he can hear them, if he can count to eleven and a half, if he can wiggle his toes, if he can remember Π (3.14 haw!).

They'll lower a basket from a helicopter, pile him in and then whoosh him off to the hospital where doctors will see his smushed body and say, "He must have had one helluva fall!"

They'll spend eighteen hours operating on him, rebuilding bones and muscles and kidneys and duodenums. They'll keep him in intensive care for two weeks, declare him "saved," transfer him to another ward for ten more weeks, get him into physical therapy to relearn how to use atrophied muscles and bones held together by pins and plates.

He'll return to work six months after that, and Ron "Bear Butt" McBride will slap him on the back and say, "Welcome back you dumb sonofabitch!" and everyone will laugh haw haw. They'll pour beer over his head and celebrate his life with white cake and cheese doodles and a keg stuck in an old fifty-gallon turpentine drum filled with ice. No one will work that day, as it will be proclaimed *Merrik Allen Moore Day*, and he'll sit and regale everyone with his trip to Bryce Canyon.

Yeah, he'll survive; he's not a quitter. With friends like his, how could he be? Of course, the one question that they're going to want to know right away is the single most important question to every guy who's been in an accident:

"So Merrik, does the Patriot still salute?"

That'll be a pretty good question in a few months, but it's an even better question right now. Merrik struggles to raise his head and have a look, fearful that any movement might further damage what must be a broken spine. Though he sure as hell doesn't want to cripple himself, he's got to know if the old hydraulics are still functioning. He takes a deep breath and looks, and gasps.

"Where am I?" he says, for as Merrik looks down toward his plumb-ing, he sees nothing but snow, rocks and a creosote bush. He raises his hand before his face, but doesn't see that either. His other hand follows suit, but the result is the same. Merrik begins to panic as he realizes that he can't see anything of himself. "I'm blind!" he screams out, but then realizes that he can see the canyon floor and the snow and some dried-up brush.

The tingly feeling stays with him and it soon becomes clear what's happened. A few yards to his left, he sees a body with an expensive Arc'teryx backpack still strapped to it. Merrik stands up, goes over and examines it. Though the body is messed up good and not even all in one piece anymore, the backpack has emerged unscathed. *Now that's what five hundred bucks'll get you*, he thinks. He searches around for the rest of himself, finds his right arm not too far away. A little more searching reveals his lower half, including his pelvis, propped up rather comically against a boulder. Merrik chuckles, but not

because of the absurdity of seeing a sizeable chunk of his body spreadeagled over terra cotta limestone. No, he's chuckling because, through his jeans, he can still see a bulge. "Wait'll the rangers see that," he says, then wonders if Pfizer can use him in a new ad campaign. Even better, Merrik imagines the headlines of the *Salt Lake Post Dispatch*, or the *Mormon Bugle*, or whatever the hell newspapers are called in Utah.

MAN DIES WITH ERECTION

Lonely Women Rush To Claim Body

Merrick looks around the canyon. The snow isn't very deep, perhaps a few inches, which is three feet less than what *Texas Backpacker* magazine said it should be.

Towering over him are the orange and red hoodoos that make up Bryce's bizarre scenery. It is beautiful, he thinks. Gazing past the eroded rock to the watery blue sky, Merrik wonders what happens now. Where should he go? What should he do? Should he wait? Wait for who?

He's not interested in hanging around waiting. He is after all, a liver-one who lives- although the irony of that statement doesn't escape him. He ambles over toward a

particularly stunning rock formation that resembles Dick Clark holding a mongoose. A

brown National Park Service sign reads:

**FAIRYLAND
LOOP
TRAILHEAD -
3 MI. TO POTABLE
WATER.**

Merrick considers this a moment, wonders if he'll ever need to drink again. He licks his lips and rolls his tongue, though he's not quite sure that he even has lips or a tongue. He sure doesn't have hands or arms or legs. Maybe he doesn't even have a head. Or a body. Now wouldn't that be a hoot? He feels a sudden release, like someone paying off a massive credit card debt.

"Hell with it," he says. And he begins his hike.

Ghosts

DeAnn Jordan

Night folds in on itself,
locked tight in this room's repose.

(My thoughts glide over,
slide under the lid of the piano,
play a tune or two).

There's no one here
but shadows to listen,

whispers
that say *sleep, sleep*
or *come to me*

gone?

or *where have you*

Where have you gone, Mother?
Do you know my secrets now,
in memory's insomniac spirals?

(woven in thought)

Do you know the spirit of the child I lost?—have you welcomed her
with a receiving blanket?

If I could I'd take you both home again, into my body,
(you begged me to in the end)

and wrap you up in quilts Grandma stitched
with her craggy fingers

(from patches of old dresses,
tablecloth and lace)

humming to herself in her deafness...

Is she there with you? Have all my mothers

(the old women,
cradled in their graves)

been joined by the thousands
of losses the soul can hold?

Give me peace now—

(Oh, blessed inheritance!)

bring me another blanket as I tilt toward the chill
solace brings,

as I dream of our next meeting:

be

when the women we were and will

will join arms again,
river-reeds waving.

Slugs

Stuart Friebert

It's hard to miss their silvery streak

across the soil, but if you want to meet

continue

What had
Narbazanes
said?
“Something
he has
wanted a
long time,
without
being
aware of it.”
That subtle
serpent,
how had
he known?

Mary Renault
The Persian Boy

Hymn

Kathleen Seeley

It was on the high, upland moor
on dry, sweet grasses, that
you first put me to your hand.
The wind as cool as the eagle.
All around us on the fine air rose
brown dust as fine as your glance. My lord,
who would have thought a king could be so shy.

And so I placed the sacred wreath
upon your sacred brow, kissed
gold upon your blessed person.
How I have loved thee, Alexandros!
By the ancient inland sea you first kissed
me, in that

old palace of sweet cedar you
returned to me the youth I had never spent.

Yes, I have drunk, and greedily
of your sweet salt, a man's tears.

Now, in his sacred bath, a god rests.

In this Pharaoh land my sorrow falls
silently. The Nile flows by me,
memory of all you gave me quickens my
heart. You were in love with giving!

Recall with what great joy I have knelt
at your feet! Even fire is tender and thus
you were with me. We are an ancient race,
we worship flame. Yet I did not deceive myself.
He was like old Oxhead, for whom you
would

hell they're doing to your Victory

them in person, to find out just what in

Grey Matter

Olga Vaynkof

It's how time happens
on a digital clock;
it's now it's now
now it's not,
with only that in between.

It slips through wombs
and institutions,
mere slivers that grow
into larks and owls and
scarlet tanagers unwise
of that which disturbs
thieves and clairvoyants
alike.

It drips deeply,
secretive as a seed,
within our blackening cage.

We hold out composure
dearly, suck in our stomachs
and forget to breathe;
Disguising ourselves,
we realize
we shouldn't have:

Our gums swell and
some stranger kneads them
while the dust is swept
from under our unkempt bed.

Garden, you'll need a flashlight, because they're

Night Vision

DeAnn Jordan

Mother,
my Mother,

Under these vast sheets of sleep,
I startle and look up to see your black
wings quiver;
they sweep over my body, a prowling cloud—

Dream Mother

bending your arms back like rotten branches—
in your woods I dream these things
afraid that if my mouth should open a thousand tiny spiders will come pouring out.

Mother of the Dark
with your pick-axe eyes,
you stare at me from your shadow face,
your endless space.

I want you to die again.

Leave my body here with its scars.

I want only to sleep,
free of the panic flash
that I will not save you from your cemetery decay, your slow
absorption into earth.

I turn away from you
huddled under a wing of Cygnus
and chant through the night a mourning song,
this is how it ended, this is how it ended,
oh God,
this is how it ended.

“Every angel is
terrifying...I
invoke you,
almost deadly
birds of the
soul...”

—Rilke

nightrawlers.
That's right. I said Victory

Housebound

Tracey Ruby

I gave her a quadruple extra large T-shirt for Christmas that said 'Fun Size' in the same type face as the one on small packages of M&M's. It even had the registered trademark stamp above the 'e.' Like you can trademark size. She was so stupid she didn't even get the joke. She just said, "Geez Benny, thanks. I love it." And she did. She wore that stupid shirt all the time. So, to push it. To make sure she got the joke. For her birthday I gave her a quadruple extra large T-shirt that said, "Sit Ups Suck." But she still didn't get the joke. She laughed at the shirt and said that I really was sweet underneath all my bullshit and that for my birthday, she would get me a T-shirt that said "Bullshit." I told her not to bother, really. Not to bother at all.

I asked my stupid fat sister once if stupid people knew they were stupid. She said she didn't think so because they'd be too stupid for self-reflection. I asked her if white trash people knew that they were white trash and she got really quiet. My name is Benny, I am 17 years old. My mother is a free-clinic diagnosed narcoleptic alcoholic who sleeps 20 hours a day. The other four she's either sucking the neck of a bottle or wiping my sister's ass. Of course I have no father, but that's to be expected. My mother is currently unemployed because they haven't yet discovered the asshole that will pay people to sleep all day and wipe the occasional ass. My sister is 23 and weighs 650 pounds.

She does not have a thyroid problem. She's propped up in bed all day long and looks like an enormous pile of coagulated sloped shouldered off-white freckled slop. Her two forms of exercise, besides eating of course, are blabbing on the phone to strangers (the party line) and writing crummy Christian essays for her 'satellite' church. The church donated the saggy California king which she keeps littered with sheaves of college ruled paper, alcohol swabs (my mother uses to keep the subterranean layers clean) and an array of carbohydrate crumbs.

To the strange men on the p-line — ones she insists on calling "potential suitors" — she tells the same story over and over again: A detailed fictitious account of the near fatal automobile accident that she "miraculously survived." Through her powdered doughnut lips she huffs her variations: "Oh it was. Awful. That's the least of it. There's still glass coming out of my forehead. Meet you? Ha. Wouldn't I love that. I'm afraid I'm housebound. You know that. Silly! Silly! My back and mangled pelvis? No. No. Dual compound fractures of my thigh bones. Yes, femurs! Oh I'm suing alright!"

The truth of the matter, the absolute truth is that my sister is so fat, so terrifically fat, that she cannot get out of bed. She's the kind of fat that you see on day time talk shows where, via satellite, the host talks to Super

Fat Housebound Guy in the trailer he hasn't left in like a thousand years. The host pretends that he's really concerned and has the fire department come over and cut a hole in the guy's wall so that a tractor trailer can hoist him out and get him to a hospital where he can enter a weight program and, you know, get the help he so desperately needs. Meanwhile, the camera guy keeps getting these shots of the crowd and you see a couple concerned citizens but what really resonates with you is the teenagers with their hands over their mouths and the smiling eyes. And since fun-dis-thetic, meaning funny pathetic and disgusting, isn't yet a word, those smiling eyes about their hands say it all.

"I think I just might win," she yells, much louder than necessary, as I pass by her always open door. She's marooned on The Island of Stinky Bed, so named because of its size and the smells that emanate from it. Stale Cheetos, sour milk, futility.

I bite. "Oh, yeah, what's that?"

"The contest, stupid." She flails one arm up in the air. It's the size of a chubby two-year-old.

"I guess we're not talking about beauty here."

"Ha, ha Benny! Funny, funny, Benny!" She speaks in exclamations. Excited, feminine, full-throated, yet somehow bird-like.

"Church! 'What it Means to be a Christian, by Ms. Charity Roberts.' Thank you. Thank you very much." She sits where she always sits in the middle of the king. She mock-bends at the waist. Trying to bow. Even this small motion sets her on a coughing jag. Her cheeks flush pink and she wipes spittle from the corners of her mouth. She inhales deep and sets herself back on the thousand pillows she has piled behind her.

"What's the prize?"

"Do-nation," she says.

"Like the bed?" I say.

"Like whatever I want," she says, starting low and finishing high, her voice trilling some imaginary musical scale.

"What's that," I say, mentally counting the folds in her neck.

"I don't know, maybe recovery."

"From the terrible car accident."

She frowns, cartoon-like, and stares off, away from me, and pants.

"Where's mom?" Her eyes bulge like they do when she's deprived. Deprived of oxygen. Deprived of food. Deprived. "I'm hungry."

"No offense," I say.

Garden, been keeping me going since WWII.

don't want to forget what we all went through.

I decide to go to school. I hadn't been in so long that the automated operator was calling my house every few hours and ringing phones are not conducive to sleepy alcoholics who are prone to fits of violence. My mother hit me on the back of the head with her crusty old Ked so I got my books together and headed out. I have no friends because what's the point? You can't bring anybody, even other socio-economically challenged kids, to a two bedroom shit hole complete with a narcoleptic alcoholic and a born in captivity whale. Perhaps if you had one or the other. But both? No way in hell. I make an appearance for attendance purposes and then slither home.

I come in the front door and walk the short hall toward my room. I pass my sister's door and find an odd duck has come ashore on her island. This middle-aged Richard Simmon's-type is holding her hand and they're both crying. I notice the gold glittery rhinestone letters first. "Vessel of Change" is splashed across the top of the tight, one piece, pale-blue, short outfit he's wearing. The material is a cruel blend of denim and sateen held together by a ringed gold zipper. The shorts are so short that I can see a starfish tattoo creeping down his left inner thigh (which really goes along with the whole water theme playing in my head). He's got thin, stringy shoulder-length dry hair and crooked, beige, buck teeth. His top lip isn't able to quite make the journey over the upper deck, and his mouth stays open, even though this particular moment surely calls for closed mouths. He's familiar. Though I don't know why or how. My pathetic mother is sober and awake and is standing in the small space between the wall and the island. She appears to have been crying. I notice for the first time, perhaps, the pattern of the bubbled and peeling wallpaper of my sister's room. It's ancient and faded and crusted yellow. But, they're hippos. Once gray hippos dressed as ballerinas with pink sashes knotted around their waists. I snort, interrupting the death-bed-vigil-feel they've got going on here.

The odd duck says, all bucked tooth and lispy, "You must be Benjamin.



Would you like to join uth?"

"Who the hell?" I say, and am surprised at the quiver in my voice. I sound afraid.

And my phony mother cuts me with her eyes and puts a finger to her suddenly pursed lips in a shh gesture. And I realize what I've always known: That she likes Charity best because she failed her most.

And Bucky Tooth says, "Where are my mannerth? My name ith Tucker."

So I say, "Mother Tucker." And my mom snaps and throws one of my sister's old, flattened square slippers at me and I laugh loud to cover a new feeling creeping in that I can't name, and my mother, surely picking up on the tension I've brought, screams that Tucker is our cock sucking guardian angel and what kind of a degenerate am I anyway? At least that's what I hear.

And I put my finger to my pursed lips and try to make her feel stupid, to go along with how she sounds and looks. And I say, "Mother, it's good to have you awake."

Charity groans and narrows her eyes at me. She thinks I'm ruining everything. I meet her eyes and mimic her groan and tell her that everything's already been ruined.

"Perhapth we're off to a bad thtart, Benjamin," Tucker says cheerful but desperate.

"The name's Benny. Not Benjamin. Tucker, I don't know if mom has gotten to this part yet but I was named for her favorite drug. The benny." An outrageous lie, but I say it thoughtfully so it doesn't sound like one. "I'm not sure why you're here," I continue, loudly, pouncing on every syllable with just the right amount of affect. "But, I assure you. You've got your work cut out for you." I lean against the frame of my sister's doorway; I cross my arms snug against my chest for punctuation and imagine I look imposing.

"Benny, please. For me. Won't you, please," my sister says. "He's a gift. A gift from God. A real live manifestation of my prayers," she wheezes. She inhales as deeply as her body will allow and then really gets going. "An angel sent from heaven! He's here to help with my, my re-cov-e-ree!" Chirp chirp. Cough cough.

"Charity, Charity, pleath. You've got yourthelf in a dither," Tucker drones. He waves his hand across his torso stopping to stroke the message on his chest. His index finger lingers on the glittery 'V' in 'Vessel' and he turns to my mother, "I'm here for Mona too," he says and blinks hard a few times

Rosie riveted, some came home on a wing and

a prayer, and we put up so many vegetables

against tears that aren't there.

And just when I think things couldn't get worse, my mother prepares for the ugly cry. Her face contorts and begins to fold in on itself and turns an oh so pale shade of violet. Pretty really, on flowers, but not on 40ish women who have been asleep for the past 10 years.

"Tucker," I say, arms still folded tight. Holding it in. Not seething. Conversational. But with projection. "Has Mona told you yet? Informed you that she is not a narcoleptic, probably not even an alcoholic." With gunfight speed I pull a half-smoked butt out of my buttoned shirt sleeve pocket and a wooden match from the small front pocket of my jeans. I strike the match against the doorframe, light the stub, and inhale. "She drinks to sleep and sleeps to forget. How you like them apples?" I say through the encircling smoke which looks really cool. I whistle the theme from *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* and let them digest it. "Ask her what she wants to forget." I look toward my mother. She misses her cue. "No? I'll tell you. Me. Us. That she's burdened. That her daughter is beached, that her son is born and the three of us are stuck with each other. As for Charity, well, I'm sure even you can imagine the road we've been down before."

Charity whales, "Why, why, why?" and then thrashes a few times in the bed.

I regret my performance, though only slightly. And only as far as Charity's concerned. I back out the doorway and notice that mom, for all her exertion, is either bowing her head in prayer, stifling a sob, or beginning to doze.

That night, I try to sleep but can't. My bedroom and my sister's bedroom share a painfully thin wall; our heads are separated by mere inches of hollow drywall and I can hear her gargled struggles for breath through that opaque veil. She has a mighty case of apnea and tries to sleep sitting up, but every once in awhile the weight of her body collapses on itself and she finds herself lying flat. I breathe with her, stopping when she does. Long mississippi holds. Inhale. One-mississippi-two-mississippi-three-mississippi-four-mississippi-five-mississippi-six-mississippi-seven-mississippi-eight. Squeak, squeak, gargle, gargle. Exhale. After a few of these breathing exercises I've got a head rush and my heart is pounding powerful. Bored, but convinced she'll live through the night, I flip on the thirteen inch and wiggle the rabbit ears until I've got a semblance of a picture. It's 3:00AM. I flip through the infomercials and stop at Tucker's. That's how she found him, on T.V. Tucker is sitting in a fat girl's prissy pink and flowered canopied bedroom. He's holding her pink piggy

fingers and wearing the same get-up he had on at my house, though his "Vessel of Change"

glitter is red not gold. She's draped in a pink quilted robe. Her hair is in a fifties style do, which on her fat face and head looks like a too small hat. A one-eight-hundred-number flashes in pink at the bottom of the screen. The low budget production must have included the gauzy Vaseline filter because the tears bearing down on Tucker's puffy cheeks are haloed. I snort.

"How bad do you want it, Madeline," Tucker says.

"I want it bad," Madeline sniffs.

Then Tucker looks right at the camera and grossly wipes back the snot leaking out of his bulbous nose before pointing at the home audience.

"How bad do you want it?" he asks.

The rest of the infomercial contains testimonials. Shocking before and after portraits. And for the grand finale, a much reduced Madeline walking briskly alongside Tucker on a creamy beach paseo. Arms pumping. Legs pumping. Butts jiggling.

"You're a fraud," I slurp at my sister between bites of Corn Flakes. We share an extra large breakfast tray. I kneel as I slurp.

"Benny!" she says between bites of whole wheat bagel.

"I saw the true manifestation of your prayers last night. You're completely full of shit, Madeline," I say.

"Benny! You'll wake up mom."

"Then stop screaming," I say.

A bloated cockroach skirmishes with a smaller roach over a crumb located in the one patch of morning light to be found on the floor of my sister's room. I marvel at their agitation, probably brought on by the light, and notice that the putty colored linoleum is buckling right in the middle of their playing field. I snort. Milk threatens to come out my nose. I wipe it back with the palm of my hand.

My sister pushes the tray away. I comment on the half-eaten bagel still smoldering under the weight of full fat cream cheese.

"Tucker says I can eat whatever I want," she puffs. "It's about portions, really. Quantity."

"Well that was a mouthful," I say.

"Vessel of Change," she sighs. Crush-like.

"Oh God," I say, feeling where she's going.

"It's possible, Benny. And

the old fruit cellar's still bulging. But

where was I? Let's see, oh forget putting

Tucker is so cute. He says I'll lose 300 pounds no problemo. He's seen it before." Beneath the blanket, she kicks her fat foot up and upsets her tray. The smeared, half-eaten bagel lands on her hairy blanket. The jangle of my spoon against my bowl sets me on edge.

I reach for the stray bagel. It looks like a miniature life preserver.

"Leave it," she says.

"You're being set up. Tucker's a phony." I try to remain calm but can feel the adrenaline starting. My head is clear. I smoke.

"Tucker is the answer to my prayers. I won. The church has worked out a deal. It's dreamy and perfect. Mom is going to stop drinking."

"Please, Charity," I say. "Mom will never stop drinking. You forget you forget it all. You forget all the 'we're going to goes.' And the oh, sorry, it just 'didn't work outs.' And the oh I guess I overslept. She always says she's going to. And I'm going to stop and how bout if we all get together? How can you, lying in that bed for so long. Be hopeful? You. You are not remembering. You have forgotten." I de-ash on the bagel.

"This has nothing to do with her," she says. "Tucker is mine and I have agreed to share him. Stop being such an asshole," she says with a rare flash of anger. Of almost anger. Anger for her. "You have nothing to lose. Just don't be an asshole. That's all you have to do."

I nod my head. We have nothing to lose. My nothing. Her nothing. Our nothing to lose. Our nothing is everything. Has always been. I don't tell her. Don't try to explain. She won't hear me.

We've roused Cruella. She enters my sister's inner sanctum wearing bleach white capris and an old mint and mauve striped pilly sweater. She does not look like a woman about to embark on change. She has three large bumps in her hair indicative of a fitful nights sleep on the flattened couch in our 'living room.' Some invisible cue makes her look down at her sweater, and she notices, sleepily, what I've noticed, that two buttons of her sweater have been mis-partnered with their hole counterparts. Her forehead creases, momentarily, with worry and confusion. She fingers the culprits and, I imagine, thinks about re-aligning them, which ultimately, proves too much for her and she wrings her hands in frustration instead. She glares at me, accusingly, as if I were somehow behind her mis-buttoned sweater. She pulls hard at the crumpled ball of Kleenex sneaking out of one of the sleeves. Child-like, she blows her nose and puts the Kleenex back in its place. And like a magician, with countless tricks up his sleeve, she pulls from the other sweater sleeve a wadded up disability check. She half smiles at my sister. "I'm going out," she breathes.

Her short exhalation stinks of vodka and Juicyfruit. I wince. My sister smiles.

out a taste of beer in a bottle cap, slugs

"It's a beautiful day," my sister says, cheerful. Hopeful.

"Enjoy yourself, mother!"

My mother smiles. It's sleepy but she at least acknowledges Charity. She looks around the room and sighs. Thoughtful. Perhaps she's pondering the absurdity of my sister's 'beautiful day' comment. The beauty of which, much like a diamond, she may judge solely by the size, clarity, and brilliance of the lone patch of light on the floor of her dingy and hopeless room. My mother looks thinner and older and even more confused than yesterday.

"Yes, mother, do," I say.

Tucker does a phenomenal job with my sister. In three weeks he succeeds in extricating her from the bed. I make fun of the meteor size imprint she leaves behind. Tucker's camera crew shows up to document the 'Before.' He is able to get the cement slabs that are her feet into her square waffle slippers and they shuffle hand in hand around our tiny apartment. Tucker congratulates Charity on every step, but when he does he looks at the camera, not at her. I want to puke.

My mother bathes and touches up her roots. Who knew? Who knew that underneath the grime of her life, washed away in a cracked tub with limey spigots, was a woman who looked normal, almost pretty. Clean. She is sober and maniacally cheerful. A truly unbearable development. She is a pile of nervous energy and cooks and cleans non-stop. She shadows me throughout the apartment asking frantic questions like, do you need anything? Do you want me to do that? Are you hungry? What can I do to help? Benny? Benny? Benny? I ask her if she's on crack and her eyes puddle up. I retch a couple of times loudly which makes her cry. She's down to 12 hours of sleep a day.

Tucker stops lisping. It turns out the primary cause of his lisp is the Invisiline braces he wears. When he removes them his lips close and you can kind of have a normal conversation with him. One night we're alone at the kitchen table. He's through for the day with my sister, and mom is taking her late afternoon, early evening nap. Through the long stretches of silence between us I rock on my lopsided naugahyde-padded chair. He clears his throat several times like he's really working up the courage to talk to me. Finally, he asks me about change. He strokes his shirt. He strokes the glittery 'V.' He Looks down at the glittery 'V' and then at me. He freaks me

will hang around for more, till you're all

out.

"Do you want to?" he says.

"Not really. What's to change?" I say. I raise my bare sweaty leg from the chair and am pleased at the fwap sound it makes as it tears itself away from the naugahyde. I create a little fwap beat, alternating legs. I think it's interesting back up to our conversation.

"Well. Your life for starters. You don't seem to be doing a whole lot with it."

Fwap fwap. Fwap fwap.

He crosses and uncrosses his legs at the knees. Sissy. He's still dressed ridiculously; and I feel absurd having this conversation with someone who looks the way he does. His tone is light but carries a phony, infomercialized edge of concern. I resist the temptation to tell him to fuck himself. He has, after all, worked miracles for my sister.

"Don't you have enough on your plate," I say between fwaps. I try to make him uncomfortable by staring at the bulge pressed very tightly against his striped short shorts. I wonder, momentarily, if he's wearing a jock, for how can he bear to have his balls so neatly compressed? He reads my mind.

"You're trying to make me feel uncomfortable, Benny. So that I will go away," he says, and opens his legs wide.

I think about chewing gum.

Tucker gnaws on the lip of the melmac cup he holds awkwardly. The warmish orange Lipton tea is half gone. The tea, combined with a poor previous washing of the cup, has left a thin foam grime near the rim. Tucker's large teeth edge precariously close to the residue.

"What's your story anyway, Tucker. What's in it for you? You really getting paid? Or are you a true manifestation of my sister's lame-ass prayers?" I gesture wildly indicating heaven and hell with one swoop of my skinny-white arms. I wish I had a smoke. I can smell the bullshit before he even opens his mouth.

"We all have our challenges, Benny. Your sister has her weight issues."

I laugh.

He chomps on the cup a couple more times. "And your mother. Well you know your mother." He shakes his head and smiles wearily. "She has issues as well, but they're both working so hard. I think it's your turn, Benny." Tucker sets the cup down and stretches his hairy arms out to me.

"Really, Tucker, I'm fine. My job around here is to make sure that everyone's miserable. Myself included. It's satisfying, really. And, in case you haven't noticed. I'm quite good at it. I'll admit, I was much better at it before you got here. You have made it somewhat easier to be the younger brother of a

circus act, but I know you won't be staying and soon enough mother will tire of sobriety and sleep deprivation and my sister will go back to well, the Island of Stinky Bed. And hopefully, collectively, this family will put an end to one branch of the family tree."

"Benny. My God. My poor Benny. You really are a hard case. So smart. So sure of yourself. There is much that can be done for you. All you have to do is ask. To want it. To reach out. Do you want it, Benny?" Tucker actually bows his head and clasps his hands in his lap. This is too much.

In a final fwap crescendo I stand. And walk away.

Tucker and my sister get married. A hubbub of great proportions ensued. Charity Roberts, and her angelic glow on Tucker's infomercial, was a hit with the super fat crowd. Tucker, no slouch, it turns out, to self-promotion, waited until my sister was down to 500 pounds before proposing. He showed up in his best denim, fringe-braided, cut-offs and tank top and three man camera crew, and real prissy-like perched himself on my sister's island. The island, since it would be featured on television, had been custom fitted with pink satin sheets and strewn with fuzzy pink heart shaped pillows. One large pillow had been obscenely customized with Tucker's likeness blowing a kiss. The day before the proposal I wedged a cigarette butt between a loose square of the woven material in the pillow, so it looked like Tucker was smoking hard-core. Charity was not amused and said I'd ruined her pillow. I felt bad when she cried and agreed to try harder not to be such an asshole. During the proposal shoot I stayed off camera and made vulgar noises. I was finally ushered out of the house by my mother's screams of abortion regrets, cock sucking bastard complaints, and worthless mother fucks. At least that's what I heard. My mother cried throughout each bogus proposal.

Six months passed between the proposal and the wedding. I didn't think Tucker would actually go through with it, but Tucker's audience got antsy. Tucker put Charity on a high protein diet and my stupid fat sister got down to 370 pounds. The nuptials were taped and infomercialized on a creamy beach paseo complete with gazebo. I was not invited. I did not attend. The marriage is never consummated.

"Benny!" she shrieks from the new, smaller, fresher, island. The California King is long gone. Discarded for the brand new queen, donated by the funky Christian church my sister is now able

to attend.

"I'm right here."

"I've finished!"

I bite. "Finished what?"

"'What it Means to be a Christian Wife,' by Mrs. Charity Tucker." She flails one arm up in the air. It looks like a long flat gooey balloon.

"Great. Does she get laid?"

She snorts and rolls onto her belly. She props herself up onto her elbows. I think this display is not for comfort, for how can it be comfortable, but more to show me that she can do it. "An angel named Tucker comes to town and rejuvenates her spirits, and marries her." She lets her eyes roll round a couple of times and then closes them tight like she's reliving some Danielle Steele moment. She licks her lips and sighs, girly and long.

"And he doesn't see or speak to her for six months," I say. "Sounds pukey."

"You're in it and so is mom! You're the younger asshole brother who tries to thwart all that is good in the world."

I join her on the bed. There's ample room for me even though her weight is creeping back up. I try not to think about what that might mean. She's cloaked in layers of loose skin but wears tighter clothes, I presume, to keep from drowning in her own flesh.

"I think mom's drunk," I say as I plump at one of her old pillows and jam it under the small of my back.

"No way," she hisses. "She's got a cold. It's Nyquil," she says, rocking on her elbows. "You're such a pessimist."

"At least she's awake," I say, with what I think sounds like optimism.

That night I try to sleep but can't. My stupid fat sister is breathing better. The Mississippi holds are not so long. I can hear her long wet snores through our wall. I flip on the television. It's 4:00AM. Back to back vignettes of my sister's wedding are being shown on Tucker's infomercial. Her hair is slicked back and a braided crown alights the top of her head. She's swathed head to toe in canary yellow. She turns her face toward the camera and smiles. Oxygen tubes connected to nothing poke out of her nose. A dramatic, meaningless display. I snort. Tucker, naked above the waist except for a white bow tie, jogs down the aisle toward his beaming bride high-fiving the phony guests as he goes. He kisses my sister's swollen cheek and then turns toward the camera and shouts, "How bad do you want it?" I don't laugh at Tucker as I normally would. I'm caught off guard by a glimpse of my mother. She's standing next to

Pooch, my stupid cat, who'll get into most

Charity looking confused, sullen and, even at this goof-ball event, out of place. Her pale yellow full length dress is exquisite but too baggy in the bust. And her small tightly wrapped bouquet of carnations has wilted. She looks, momentarily, at the camera, at me, and sighs, briefly filling the emptiness of the dress before turning her back.

At that moment I can see a smallish knot of bed-head fuzz in her otherwise neat pile of hair and a long wet grass stain snaking down her back. I take a deep breath to try to ease the tightness in my chest and the hollowness in my gut. I close my eyes tight against the knowing. Knowing for certain that things are just the way they seem.

anything — I've rushed him to the vet's

Bibliophile

Candice Barrow

LIBRARIAN: 60 year-old woman

ARBY: 35 year-old man

SETTING: Public library, several people sitting and reading some talking quietly to each other. LIBRARIAN stands behind information desk skimming a small book.

ARBY walks up to the counter.

ARBY: Excuse me,

(LIBRARIAN looks up)

(ARBY pulls out a handgun and points it at LIBRARIAN. She trembles violently)

ARBY: I'm looking for a book, its called Eternal Star Fire by Maxwell Plunkett. You don't seem to have it o the shelf, yet your records indicate that it is in the library. This book is vital to both my sanity and your life. *(LIBRARIAN grabs a book cart for support)*. Don't you understand? I need to have this book. It is vital to...to everything! I can't go on if I can't get back into that world. I need to be in the Star Fire realm. I need to be in some other place. I just can't stay here! I need to be inside a book. I need to have a book inside of me! *(Looks at LIBRARIAN)* Haven't you ever caressed the spine of a hardcover book, savored its weight in your hand and marveled at the sheer number of pages? Haven't you ever mouthed the words so sweet that they were as a lover's lips? Haven't you ever stroked the pale paper and stared at the contrast of the black inky words until you couldn't make them out anymore? Weren't you ever sucked with agonizing pressure into a world that made this atrocity of an existence pale in comparison? Did you ever lose yourself in the creation of another's mind knowing that they used only paper and ink to bring you there to the brink of insanity, to the place where reality becomes fiction? When you were in that place, that world alive with such color and texture and adventure, did you want to leave? Did you want to be jarred back into this... *(Gestures wildly with the gun)* This steaming pile of refuse built upon suffering and perpetuating only sorrow? *(Pause)* I need to have this book; I need to have a place to go in order to escape from this crumbling illusion of realism before it caves in on me!

(LIBRARIAN faints)

ARBY: *(to the man at the circulation desk)* Okay...fine. Do you have any Danielle Steel?

END

any number of times. Okay, I know I'm rambling

1 & 1 is 3

alex lee

1.

norman mailer is a modern writer
a natural he-man, his day starts
with schnapps or whiskey

a natural sponge

the local ass

swearing at an old woman in front of
her grandkid or calling foreign sailors names

often found face down

in early mornings

"what are you doing out of your house,
norman mailer?" "did you toss your typewriter
out the window again?"

look at him

with his big monkey ears

throwing a swing at a cop & missing
orange vomit splattering shoes~ & then
four cops jump him to stop him.

2.

apes in gibraltar

sunbathe on the rock

the brochure pictures

happy japanese tourist &

apes eating a banana while nipponese

huggle them. scratch

them. everybody's happy.

but real apes steal things

with their clumsy arms

longer than their bodies, they reach

scratch & bite & there's

a young tourist & she screams &

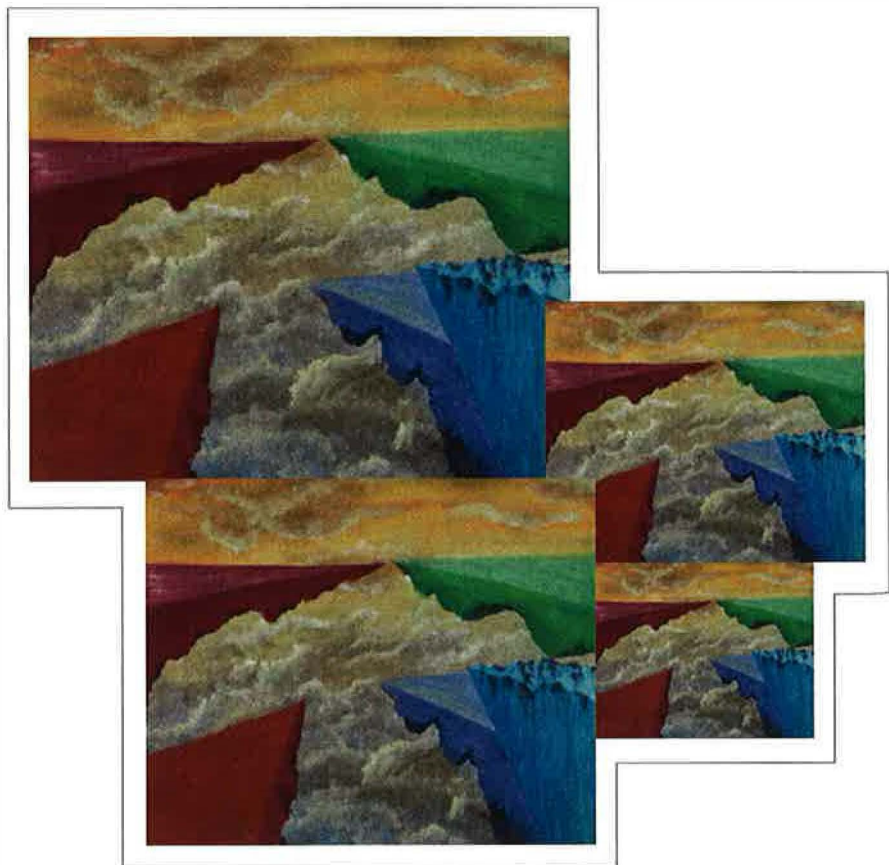
they fall around, circling, emptying her purse

with their spooky bare asses, howling &

jumping & then

there's norman mailer

please don't tell my daughter. She's trying



Land South of the Clouds, Excerpt

Genaro Ky Ly Smith

Mother walks out the front door and heads to the mailbox. She lowers the door, squints inside, reaches a hand in and pulls out a bundle of mail. As she goes through each piece of mail, Mother mouths the name or company on each envelope before tossing it to the ground. She goes through the bundle quickly and reaches in for the next stack. Bills and letters pile all around her feet, and still she pulls out more, sifting through them faster and mouthing one name after another so that they become one continuous word.

She reaches in and shovels out all the letters, and she doesn't pause until she comes across a clutter of envelopes with blue stripes along the edges. But she continues, reaching inside and sweeping them all onto the patio. The letters slide down the steps and onto the street below.

She cleans out the last of the letters before peering inside the mailbox. Mother reaches in with her right hand. The box swallows her arm whole. Her armpit is butted up against the edge. She cranes her head back and shuts her eyes against the sun, and grunts. Sweat forms over her brows, and her neck is beginning to glisten. She pulls but only manages to keep her armpit from touching the mailbox. Her body curves taut from her pulling.

Still, she strains with the box. Her arms shake. Her legs tremble so much that more than once they buckle from under her, but she catches herself each time. The blouse is wet against her body. Streaks of sweat fall along the sides of her temples and collect at her chin. Mother bares her teeth as she pulls, and her elbow is now exposed. She stops for a moment and pants. Before continuing, Mother breathes in through her nose and blows air from her mouth in quick spurts. Her grunting gets louder.

"Long-Vanh. Help. Me."

I run to her side.

"Help. Me."

I wrap my arms around Mother's waist.

"Pull," she forces the word.

I tighten my hold around Mother and together we pull. Her stomach tightens, and I feel it fill up and deflate with each breath. We go at it for some time until she says, "OK. Let go."

I stand aside to watch. Mother relaxes her whole body, takes in a couple of deep breaths, fixes her hold on the object inside the box and takes in one last breath. Leaning away from the mailbox, she yanks and out comes what she has been reaching for all these years. Mother ends up on the ground with her back

to stay tender, but I see it in her eyes.

stuck to the ground by my painful surprises,

against the patio's ledge, catching her breath. Her eyes shut to slits and the lids waver as she struggles to keep them open. An old man stands before us. His clothes are wrinkled like the flesh around his neck.

He stands doubled over from old age. His hair is as white as the dress shirt he wears. The sleeves are long; the cuffs cover his knuckles. Slowly, he straightens up like a flower at dawn. His eyes are closed. He stretches the tendons in his neck, and his balled fists slowly open. I can see the outline of his ribs against his shirt. They stick out at places: poorly mended bones that stretch the skin around the area.

He lifts his head and I see that his eyes are shut tight. Slowly, he pries them open against the sun's brightness. He blinks repeatedly before he is able to keep them open. The muscles beneath his eyes twitch as he squints at the tall skyscrapers in downtown Los Angeles. The freeways are knotted up by traffic and the tops of buildings choke from the brown smog. The man's shoulders slacken.

"Long-Vanh." Mother calls from the patio floor. "This is your grandfather, Ba Nguyen."

*

Because it has been years since he last slept in a bed, I have to share mine with Ba Nguyen. We lie facing the window. Moonlight comes through and casts the geckos' shadows against the walls. The geckos are out in large numbers, and we watch as they wait and catch insects. Ba Nguyen places both hands behind his head and lets out a sigh.

"They remind me of my mistresses," he says. "They wait and take."

I turn my head to look at him. I can barely make out his words. They come out warbled, come from a mouth filled with crudely healed cuts and the broken jaw that never realigned right. When he speaks, a corner of his mouth stretches downward to hold the weight of syllables.

"That plump one there," he brings one hand from behind his head and points at a gecko in the middle of the window screen. "That is Thanh. She was always greedy. It was hard to keep her because she wanted everything: jewelry, gambling money, jade, opium. I don't know why I kept her for as long as I did. She was not that good a mistress. Always stealing from Ba Nguyen."

The bed slightly moves when he shakes his head. Thanh, the plump gecko, scrambles for the mosquitoes; she is always moving. At times, she crawls over another gecko to get at a mosquito.

"But that one there," he points at the lower corner of the screen. "You see her? The little one?"

Among the geckos a small one stays in one place as those around her dart here and there.

"That is Ly Van. She was my best mistress. Look. So obedient is she. Very small and quiet. She never asked much from me. Be careful of the shy ones Long-Vanh. They play timid, but they are not. Ly Van's sexual appetite was unsatiable. She wanted me all the time. Sometimes I had to hide from her. Sometimes I had to beg her no more. She always wanted to go again even when I wasn't erect. I am old. I was old then. But she would pout and beg, but she didn't care about jewelry or money or opium."

Ba Nguyen sighs. I turn my head to watch his profile. His eyes are half closed from dreaming.

"Her breasts were small, her nipples were always perky. They were so hard that I thought if I suckled them long enough they would erupt ripe with the sweetness of figs thick with syrup."

"Ba Nguyen," I say.

Ba Nguyen's eyes open wide and he blinks several times before turning in my direction.

"Yes?"

"I'm only ten."

He stares at me for a long time before he says, "Oh."

*

It is not the sun coming in through the window that wakes me up, but someone's breath warming my face.

Ba Nguyen sits beside me in bed. He is dressed in the clothes he wore yesterday afternoon when

Mother pulled him from the mailbox.

"I need your help," he says in a calm voice. "I cannot do this alone."

Ba Nguyen leads me out onto the patio, and the first thing I see are big green mountains, a green rich and lush in color, a green daily drenched with water. These are not the ones I am used to—brown and faded in appearance—but mountains that seem to be alive, breathing.

"I need your help," he says again, the corner of his mouth stretching and closing to complete the 'p' sound.

The door to the mailbox is down, and there are clumps of red clay and blades of grass pasted around the edges. Ba Nguyen reaches in with one hand and his whole arm is swallowed up by the box.

"Come Long-Vanh. Take a hold of me."

I stand behind him and wrap my arms around him and I can feel his ribs and how they stretch his skin. The way they protrude in places sickens me.

"Hold tighter," he says.

He leans away from the mailbox, and I pull, afraid we will go over the ledge if what comes free suddenly gives. The mailbox begins to tremble. Ba Nguyen grunts as he grits his teeth. He slackens a bit before yanking, and dense green water gushes from the mailbox. The stream is so strong that it shoots over us, over Montana Avenue down below, over the houses immediately across from us. The currents snake their way to downtown; they uproot trees and swallow houses whole and carry off cars. The green body of water curves around the newly planted mountains. The currents slow down as the water level settles.

I stand beside Ba Nguyen, silent and unblinking.

"The Mekong Delta," he motions with his hand.

*

To get to the mountains we take a junk. The man working the oars is wearing a sun hat which hides his face. His black pajama shirt is buttoned to the neck though the sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. His forearms flex with each rotation of the oars, and a crop of veins surface thick and permanent from beneath the landscape of muscles and skin.

The weather is no longer what it used to be. The air is heavy with water. Humidity was what Ba Nguyen told me. Our shirts cling to our wet bodies, and we lean over the side of the junk to wring tight the sweat from our clothes.

"Maybe I should have left the weather behind," he smiles as he takes up a portion of the hem in both hands.

I can see his ribs, see where they have cracked, and the spaces between the breaks. Purple markings point out where these breaks occurred. Ba Nguyen balls up the hem in his hands and wrings sweat from it.

"But if I had, you would not get mountains as green as these," he points toward the horizon.

Drifting by our junk is what is left of trees. Tables and chairs, bottles and aluminum cans, clothes and children, men and women stay afloat and roll with the strong currents. Other Vietnamese people in boats cast out fishing nets to catch the debris floating by and haul them in. Their sons and daughters untangle the debris, keeping what is useful.

We make our way beneath freeway underpasses, and we have to lie

finding its way into my palm, so I might just

low because the water is too high. Cars are still on the exposed backs of freeways, stuck and waiting, useless and ridiculous. The man rows the boat between the twin towers of the Atlantic Richfield Company. Men in undone three piece suits and women in lace-collared dresses bang on the tinted windows as we pass by. The rower gets us past the skyscrapers and out into the open where the air is heavier. I have to take off my shirt and twist it, but when I look up I catch Ba Nguyen staring at my chest and ribs. He sees how thin I am, how the skin stretches tight over my ribs and how each one is spaced equally apart from one another. I put my shirt back on.

*

The rower ties his junk to the pillar of a wooden pier. Ba Nguyen gets out first and he helps me up. We walk hand in hand toward the other fishermen carrying baskets of catfish and buckets of eels from the boats to the backs of awaiting trucks. The ground is wet and muddy and littered with fish guts. Gulls and blackbirds waddle around eating off the ground.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Home," Ba Nguyen says.

As we walk away from the river, away from the stench of fish and salt, I turn to look behind me. The skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles stand in water, and the houses and apartments have long drowned and died and are now homes for eels and fishes and stray octopuses, squids, and sharks who mistook the salt of the Mekong for the ocean. The air is brown over there, brown and thick, and Dad is entangled in sleep.

*

We ride in the back of a motorized rickshaw. The driver winds through a shaded road lined with tall Mai trees in full bloom. Their pedals catch the light of the sun, and as we speed by the trees are ablaze. Mother is smiling the whole time. I don't know when she appeared. The wind loosens her hair she keeps in a bun. Thin strands wrap about her face and neck, and across her lips and teeth, but Mother doesn't clear her mouth of them.

explain my past to it, one of these nights.

We leave the tree-lined road and pull out into the open where stretched on either side are rice paddies. The stalks are tall and each blade is

stiff and golden in the sunlight. From above the tops of stalks, I can see the backs of men and women stooped over, planting. Their heads come up for a quick moment when they walk forward, only to stoop again.

We pass up other men and women walking alongside the roads with bamboo poles shouldered behind their necks. Hanging at each end is a basket filled with eggs, freshly picked mangoes, spike-skinned lychees, bunches of bok-choy, water cress, eels, squids, and catfish. We leave trails of dust, which veil the people we pass, but they keep walking with heads up, hands gripping each end of the bamboo shoots for balance.

The motorized rickshaw pulls into a small village of bungalows and two story villas with porches. Ba Nguyen gets out first and helps Mother out. He reaches for my hand, but I am already climbing out on the other side. The rickshaw drives around in a circle and heads back in the direction of the rice fields.

Ba Nguyen and Mother climb up the wooden steps and enter a home whose double French doors are already opened.

"But what about Dad?" I ask as I follow right behind them.

Mother turns around, and her lips quiver.

"But, we're home."

The corners turn up again, and her eyes widen. She turns away from me and walks farther inside the house.

*

It is the afternoon, siesta time, and for someone who is bent, broken, and scarred, Ba Nguyen walks well ahead of me. His hands part the branches, clear away the vines from his face. Although the mai trees are ablaze with yellow flowers, the jungle is dark the farther we walk. In a small clearing a hammock stretches between two tall banyan trees. Ba Nguyen climbs inside. It is big enough for both of us. He helps me inside, and the hammock sways from my effort.

"Remember this?" he smiles as he settles back into the meshing. "I used to take you here for a siesta. Remember?"

I lie next to him.

"Yes, I remember."

Ba Nguyen bridges his hands behind his head and sighs.

"Some afternoons you were awakened by the sound of bombings in the distance."

Just then there is a rumbling far off in the distance like pent up anger. The hammock still swings and I cannot tell if the Earth is moving.

"You were afraid. Do you remember what I told you?"

I frown and shake my head.

"No?" His eyes become round. "I told you. I told you, 'Do not worry.

It is only the dead playing in heaven's field.' Remember?" He smiles. "'The land south of the clouds is heaven's playing field.'"

I erase the frown from my face and say, "Yes. Now I remember."

"And you would stare up into the trees and try to see them in the sky.

You would always ask, 'Where? I don't see them. Where are they?' And I told you, you could not see them, but you could hear them. You fell back asleep trying to see them."

Another rumbling comes. This time it is closer. I stare up and I can barely see a part of the blue sky through the trees' leaves and thick branches, branches so huge they hold up the sky.

*

"Stir. Keep stirring," Mother commands me.

The stove is too high and I'm standing on a stool in order to look inside the pot to see what it is I'm stirring. The broth, thick and dark, parts from the ladle I grip with two hands.

Mother is in the living room, surrounded by Ba Nguyen's mistresses all standing still as flowers atop foot stools. Tape measure dangling from her shoulders, a red pencil tucked behind one ear, she moves from one to the other, inserting pins in frayed hems, measuring arm lengths, cutting patterns from different fabrics, fitting sleeves, tucking cuffs to expose their thin white wrists, measuring seams, drawing lines down the length of the gowns, cutting away excess material, darning buttons, stitching clasps and hooks, and all this she manages to do without tripping over the floor strewn with unfurled rolls of satin, silk, and cotton, tomato-shaped pin cushions, and spools of thread.

"Stir," Mother says again. "Just stir."

I keep stirring. My arms tire from the thickening broth. In one rotation of the ladle, a fish tail surfaces and sinks, the severed head comes up, the puckered lips swallow broth and disappear, and plucked eyeballs stare up at me.

*

Evening, and everyone is gathered at the dinner table: Ba Nguyen, Mother, myself, and five mistresses. Ly Van and Thanh as well as the others are dressed in their newly made ao dais, their tunics buttoned. With chopsticks in

hand, Thanh lashes at the food in the center of the long table, never failing to pick up marinated sliced pork, slices of cucumber, clumps of rice, strands of fried limp noodles, and she does so without excusing herself for crossing over someone, or snatching a piece already in the grasps of another's chopsticks. Ly Van sits there with her bowl of rice cupped in her palm, waiting to take after the melee is over.

I ask, "When are we going back? I miss Dad. I miss home."

Mother and Ba Nguyen look at each other from across the table.

Mother opens her mouth wide to speak, but Ba Nguyen intervenes and says, "Tomorrow. We go back tomorrow. We have two homes. It is only fair."

Thanh dips into the tureen and plucks an eyeball from beneath the dark broth.

*

The noises Ba Nguyen and his mistresses make keep me up. Their hands smooth over each other's skin, reshape bones, and arms and legs twine like rope. Their disjointed hushed breaths fuse into hisses and finally there is one breath rising and falling, one breath fills the room. In the dark, they start off as three; they twine and become one swathed in sweat, saliva, semen, and sheets.

I go to the kitchen for a glass of water. In the dimness of the kitchen Mother is at the large chopping table, cleaver in hand. A child's clothes are on the floor. She wipes the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand before turning the child onto his back and begins. Blood covers the whole table and drips onto the floor, collecting in large pools. She sees me. Mother stares at me for a long time while she tries to catch her breath.

"He always bothered me. He was a bad child," she explains.

She grips the boy's wrist, holds up his arm so that she can get a clean swing at his elbow. She hacks at it several times before it gives. Still holding the forearm by the wrist, she turns it over in her hand, observing the meat, the blood. Tossing the forearm to the floor, Mother takes the stump at the elbow, and chops at the boy's shoulder.

*

Home, and we share a bed again. The moonlight shines through my bedroom window and the geckos are swollen from eating so much. Ba Nguyen and I sit facing each other with our legs tucked underneath us, only he has his hands on his knees to support the weight of his voice carrying him forward. I

lean just the same to see him in the dark and to hear him whisper.

"We ate sugar cane out on the porch. When you were three, we'd eat them out on the porch. Remember?"

I think of sucking the sweet thin strands from between my teeth. Before I can answer him, he continues.

"Of course you remember. Remember the marketplace?—the buckets cramped with eels, crabs, fish, and squids?"

The words pass from his lips, contorted to accommodate syllables and inflections of a language he just learned, and always his lips yield to the limits of what his crudely healed scars will allow him to manage. His voice grows harsher with excitement, and spit collects at the corners.

"No," I cut him off. "No. No, I don't remember doing such things. I am not allowed to. Mother told me never to dream of you. She told me I was too young to remember you, so I don't dream of you."

Ba Nguyen's eyes remain wide open as he sits up straight. His mouth is open. He leans forward again insisting I remember them. Words spout from his mouth so fast that the spit at the corners of his lips begins to drip on his shirt, and I want to wipe them. Instead I shake my head.

He begins to wilt and turn pale. His shoulders slump within his pajama shirt and his head lowers until he falls over onto his side and curls up. Both knees come up until they touch his chest and his arms wrap around his ankles.

*

Mother screams, "They're here! They're here!"

Ba Nguyen and I join Mother out on the front patio. Down below on Silver Lake Avenue men in black pajamas and pith helmets tote machine guns. They march down the center of the street, stop in front of a house and go inside. There are shots before they come out with men, women, and children with hands behind their heads. And I recognize them—Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese people we pass up on our way to work. They continue down the streets rounding up everyone. Still, shots are fired but no bodies lie in the streets.

Coppola stands beside a cameraman, directing him where to point the lens. He cups his hands around his mouth and shouts down to them, "Don't look at the camera! Keep moving! Keep moving! Don't look at the camera, goddammit!"

"When you brought Vietnam, you brought them also." Mother says. She slumps down on her knees and cries in her hands.

The men in black pajamas continue to run down the streets and tram-

ple through gardens, break windows with the butt of their machine guns, and burst through front doors. They come out with more people surrendering their hands to the air. Black smoke escapes from the windows of a few houses before blazes eat them from the inside out.

"Ba Nguyen," Mother looks up at him from the patio ground. "Make them go away. Make them go away."

Ba Nguyen turns away from the ledge and stares at the black mailbox. He walks to it and pulls down the door. Bending over to look inside, Ba Nguyen reaches in and feels around, head turned up to the sun. But he reaches in farther and puts his head inside. He wiggles his body. Slowly, he is swallowed whole by the mailbox.

The men in black pajamas run up Montana Avenue. Their arms barely swing as they hug their machine guns close to their chests. Mother stands up and wipes her eyes as the men jog up the steps.

"That's it, that's it. Keep moving," Coppola yells. "Keep moving, but don't look at the camera."

Without stopping, they run to the mailbox. Like smoke sucked through a vent, they funnel into the mailbox. And with them follows the Mekong snaking its way up Montana Avenue. The mountains melt into the rice fields, and with the low clouds, they drift across downtown Los Angeles and pass through the mailbox. Even Coppola, the man who claims he is Vietnam, passes through.

Everything. Everything Ba Nguyen brought from Vietnam is gone, and there is only downtown Los Angeles: the Bonaventure Hotel, the Sheraton, the twin towers of the Atlantic Richfield Company, First Interstate Bank, other mirrored skyscrapers, the knotted freeways and a sea of cars. Mother is not standing next to me, crying. She is gone.

Love, Loss and Other Feathers

DeAnn Jordan

1. You cannot help the absence or the want, the odds of death
tongueless warriors sailor's deadeyes, what the living do—
I laid her body down in the boat
she's the Lady of Shalott now, Joan of Arc now. Gravity's purge point,
consonants of love and loss bone house ringing with death, with light
flight among tombs, you soar, your lady's gowns in corals and mauves and reds.
Someone laughs through clenched teeth, the city is scarved against cold and plum
blossoms snowing tiny angels tracing the path of their fall
like birds, and human they burn beautifully with a blue flame;
when they cry out no one hears it.

2. Portrait in sepia our wedding photos captured many tiny angels falling
dots of spark in the trees of December: twin moons in your eyes,
my smile, dressed in crimson,
a wind like omen— things and flesh to come through us on our wedding night
my dress not yet torn, bloodied with life or better yet, knowledge. Except that I loved
you fully despite what the living do, with all of their arms
with all of themselves held tight in wombs. Bring her back to me;
show me that you love me, and more, life enough
to say I want my life growing in you, little bruise, little pear-blossom,
little pea.

3. The gods will lay in bed with us, the goddess will tear a fist of hair,
make me scream in life and death (birth of more cells
than I can handle) hold tight.

If the warriors come to guard the gate, my cervix closed shut nothing to say;
battle over, but not won a cosmic draw luck of timing, little pea is gone
gummy bear slid out and down,

then we will live alone, just you and I with angels small gods
and broken
feathers.

*A few phrases taken from the following sources, pieced together with my own words, in my own order: *Things and Flesh*, Linda Gregg; *Difficulty*, William Logan; *Flight Among Tombs*, Anthony Hecht; *What the Living Do*, Marie Howe; *The Tormented Mirror*, Russell Edson; Various poems of Bill Kno

Manifest Destiny

Madeline Osborne

Fallen red leaf
swept up by a warm breeze.
Violet peace—
Venus in a clear dawn sky.

Swept up by a warm breeze,
dandelion seeds float.
Venus in a clear dawn sky
watches from afar.

Dandelion seeds float,
infesting fertile lands.
Watcher from afar
remains quiet.

Infesting fertile lands,
a spider outstretched on an invisible web,
remains quiet,
waiting to pounce. Unsuspecting.

Spider, outstretched on an invisible web,
—Violet peace
waiting to pounce on unsuspecting
fallen red leaf.

the earth breathes

alex lee

sleeping in darkness
if only to wake to a furious

itching of people. people who rise and fall,
with traffic and work and sleep.

we visit different places in the night,
have different lives in our dreams.

under every new sun,
we forget our dreams as

we forget living. and memory.
childhood friends, and cities

and personal visions.
if we want to come back, we do.

with the gray and yellow sunrise
we rise. our spirit descends,

manifesting in flesh
and we wake like lazarus.

the dead are dreaming.
they don't come back.

are they happier?

Wild Velvet

Jody DiSalvo

breathing better after leaving
heavy feathered air of the

coop until I saw her standing
all furry spots and eyes tethered

by the weathered mailbox above
leaves perched on their towering

appendages stems erect ready
to rustle she

kidnapping my breath with
eyes larger and browner than

the lashes pulling them open

Claudia a gentle man, husband
to Rosie Breeze hap hazarding upon the

orphan day before us arriving at their
chicken ranch just inside the Arkansas

border other side of Oklahoma
my mother ignorant of wild things

always screaming to my father's
chant about me scaring to death the

wild creatures rifle hoisted on his shoulder
a couple of limp fox tailed squirrels in hand

a snicker in his eye neither one noticing the
fawn was as out of its element as I

her spots whispering camouflage run
both our hearts about to explode

her velvet nose kissing my out held hand

Pecking Order

Annamarie Midtlyng

A certain fast food chain changed its name to an acronym because some CEO somewhere decided customers might perceive the restaurant as more healthy if “Fried Chicken” were not part of the name. That was the first deception. The second was my official job title, Team Member. There was no team, just a hierarchy in which speaking English and a high school diploma were suddenly irrelevant in the social order. It was my first job.

The order was tri-level as follows: The store manager, Thelma, was on top, followed by the shift manager, Javier, then came the cooks, and myself and the other team members. In theory I was on the bottom, the same level as the cooks, but I didn’t speak Spanish so really I was off the chart somewhere below all the order. I had tutored seniors in math skills during my freshman year of high school, but I wasn’t permitted to count out my own drawer at night.

Thelma trained me during my first week. Afterward, she was the mother of us latchkey employees, stopping in every so often to make sure that the store was running correctly and that we were staying out of trouble. Thelma was round, had dark hair and olive skin. She seemed gentle and understanding, but wasn’t afraid to pull out the belt, so to speak. She adored me for the excellent job I was doing, especially after I received a bonus when the corporate offices sent a mystery shopper and I passed.

Javier was the shift manager every shift I worked. He was tall, slim but muscular, and had olive-yellow skin. His smile gave him a childlike quality undeserving of fear, however his frown could intimidate a pit bull. His eyebrows scrunched together so that they looked like one and his lips adhered to each other in a downward arc. The tone of my shift was determined by the expression I noted on his face when I began my shift each day.

First I learned about selling and appearance, the duties secondary to what was most important. I learned how to work the register and what words I was supposed to use when taking an order. These words were meant to be rehearsed, but sound like a personal greeting with each customer.

“Hi. Welcome to KFC. My name is Kim. May I take your order, please?”

I couldn’t figure out how I was supposed to deceive the next person in line when they’d already heard my dialogue. I also couldn’t figure out how I was supposed to maintain the grotesquely huge smile that Thelma always wore when she helped customers. I never saw anyone else smiling around that place, so when Thelma wasn’t around, I gave my own speech, minus the corny grin.

“Can I help you?”

I didn’t quite understand why we fussed over proper order taking procedure. This fast food restaurant was ill-defined as it was. It could take up to twenty minutes for

a basket of chicken, especially during a dinner rush. Besides that, most customers wanted to cut all the bull crap, order, and get out with their chicken, cole slaw, and biscuits.

Second I learned to make side orders. The big secret was the recipe for cole slaw because if it weren't for the cole slaw then our customers would probably have gone to our competition. The recipe for cole slaw was a short list of ingredients: one box of cabbage, two large onions, three to four carrots, and two bags of sauce. The sauce was the secret, and even the boxes carrying the bags to the restaurant listed no ingredients. I'm not sure even Thelma knew what was in it, only that it should be prepared a certain way.

Making cole slaw requires mounting a large shredder on the industrial sized mixer (which normally combines the mashed potato powder with the hot water). The vegetables are no less than quartered. The cabbage is the green kind, but most of the time I was employed it was off season so the cabbage was white. The carrots are not skinned of the brown stuff I'd normally peel off at home. There is supposed to be some order, a few heads of cabbage, then one carrot, then half an onion, then repeat until all is gone, but everyone made it their own way when Thelma wasn't there. When all the vegetables were shredded the two large plastic bags of cole slaw sauce were poured onto the vegetables. Then, because the only spoon in the whole place was used for the baked beans, I put my hands in plastic gloves to play with the mixture until the white sauce covered the vegetables.

Biscuits were simple and the only side order which didn't have a particular way it was supposed to be done, even though the method only mattered when Thelma was present. Place twelve frozen puck-like objects on a cookie sheet and place it in the timed oven, another pre-packaged, pre-frozen item with unknown ingredients. I could have all the biscuits I wanted, even when I wasn't on break. I would sit on the back counter where I prepared side orders and eat biscuits with strawberry jelly. I loved the biscuits, soft in the middle, hard and crispy on the outside but nothing my teeth couldn't get through it. I could guess as to what the ingredients were, the main being butter.

Except for the chicken, everything else was heat, mix, and serve, but I wasn't responsible for chicken. It was cooked in vats full of grease. In it's former state the grease was a block of white lard, that is until the heat was applied and the lard became like syrup on hot sausages. The chicken was dipped and breaded, then greased until it was no longer raw.

One night Javier pulled some green chicken out of the fridge.

"Hey, come here. Does this smell bad?"

"It's green, I'm not going to smell it."

"But it looks bad to you?" My answer was insignificant.

"Cocinas este pollo, Marcelas."

He called me to the back later.

"Can I still sell this?"

Javier made the cook fry the chicken so that the breading hid the green color. It still had a nauseous tint. The whole store smelled like green chicken.

"You can, but I won't," I replied. He didn't replace the grease in the fryer and exposed the rest of the night's sales items to the grease of the green chicken, though he eventually gave up trying to get me to agree that he should sell rancid meat.

I didn't look up to Javier, not even for job guidance, but he did defend me twice during my six month stay as Team Member, though I sensed he felt somehow obliged to keep me safe from harm rather than simply holding a sincere concern for my well-being. Customers can be angry and inflict horrible punishments on you for things which are either beyond your control or just plain silly. Once a man bought hot wings for his son and, by some error of the fryer, the hot wings were red in the middle. The boy had not eaten in days because he'd had the flu. His father returned with the chicken, very little of the red meat on the bones, yelling that his son had been poisoned.

"I'm sorry sir, let me get my manager." I wasn't going to take responsibility for this one.

I went back and told Javier what was going on, but instead of following him to the front I hid behind the food warmer to listen. Javier asked the man why he'd give a boy fast food buffalo wings after the stomach flu, and why he let the boy eat so many before stopping him, and why he was back here instead of at the hospital. The man never contacted the store again.

Javier walked back toward the cook, mumbling.

"Pinche juera."

He started talking to the cook, and I went to check the lobby for dirty tables.

The second time Javier defended me against a customer regarded condiments. The sign on the drive thru board read "Request Condiments at Pick Up Window." I was working drive thru and a man in an off-white Cadillac had asked for condiments at the board when he placed his order. He never asked again and I never placed the sauce in his bag, as I was already taking the next order while packing his order, a task which can lead to forgetfulness. He was very adamant about his sauce. I saw his Cadillac five minutes later. I stood still while he parked, but as he ran, trench coat trailing behind, toward the window, I slammed it shut and yelled for Javier. Thanks to movie images trench coats make me think of rifles and men who don't get condiments are angry men. Javier redirected the man's attention from me to the sign he should have read while ordering.

When Javier was finished he turned to me. "You should have just given him his condiments."

"He didn't ask at the window and I didn't remember." I walked to the back to find something to clean. Javier was talking under his breath again. Something about una muchacha terco y estupido.

Outside of the occasional raging customer and the dipping of my arms into huge buckets of cole slaw, the job was under stimulating. Sometimes, when it was slow, I

would do my homework in the back, but that practice didn't last. I wasn't a manager like Javier, so I wasn't supposed to be within answering distance of the phone, leaving the office desk off limits. This limitation of my position left me standing over my trigonometry problems or a physiology diagram at the side order preparation counter. If Javier wasn't busy (he usually wasn't), he would make fun of me for being a nerd.

Another thing which delighted Javier in his free time was talking to the cooks about things he thought I didn't understand. I knew enough Spanish to pick up the general topic of conversation, but I never revealed this fact until the night he was talking about his latest jaunt to the strip club. Javier must have had a desirable lap, because he always got the best lap dances for free.

"Do you tell your wife you go to strip clubs?"

The question stuck in the air until Javier digested the moment.

"Hablas español?"

"I understand a little, but speak less."

"Comprendes todos los conversaciones de hoy?"

"Maybe today, but you'll never know, will you?"

I didn't realize it immediately, but that day I had at least secured myself a place within the hierarchy, even if it was still on the bottom. Javier spent less time talking about me, around me, and over my head, and more time talking to me.

"Going to the strip club tonight?" I asked once.

"No, I have to work."

"Strip clubs are open after closing time."

"No, my other job," he said. "I work as a driver for Pepsi."

"Oh."

"See, my goal was to save up enough money to quit this job, because the other one pays more. I was going to invest in stocks and go back to school. Then my wife had the baby and we needed more money." Javier was stuck. The most he'd ever be able to do is manage another fast food restaurant or drive or take orders somewhere. Thelma was likely stuck as well. In a few months I'd be graduating from high school and would be quitting fast food for the rest of my life. No matter how far below the hierarchy I'd been, nothing was as low as being on the top.

Swimming

Hollie N. Stewart

What is this touch, this unseen hand
contained like liquid glass
in gas?

Holy water.
Heaven's vodka. The
embryonic rebirth in a
womb of blue.

I try ripping the wet, but it
tears my hand, shaping fingers.
It tickles my guitar nails.

I giggle
as I lose thirty pounds,
and discover how graceful
skin can be.

I shouldn't be able
to label
silver spirit sensation.
It glows white inside
through tiny pebbles,
waves, and chipping paint
staining my painted toes.

No earth-bound
flesh-bound mind,
no swimmer understands
cool lava. See-through
blood. God's tears.

I close my eyes,
tip horizontal,
trust something larger.

'For
women
are roses,
whose fair flower,
being once displayed,
doth fall that very hour'

from
William
Shakespeare's
'Twelfth
Night'

rose

Tiffany Austin

the moment telescopes
like a movie's horror shot
and down this rabbithole you fall
a tunnel of silk flagging
upward in a warp of whites and roses

you've made yourself an orphan
an earthless moon you
are a pale flame
a trembling streak of white
petticoats and rosed hosiery layers
which make us cry
out in the tarred dark
for you Ophelia

A Self-Enclosed Sorrow

Olga Vaynkof

People become smaller, you know.
Some don't realize it,
sensing only that their fall will hurt less
the closer they are to the ground.

There is less to hurt;
small stones don't shatter
like boulders do.

People grow smaller. Careful,
or not, they slip between thoughts
and are gone.

Like rings: petite treasures
are lost only once,
ending up tucked away in the night's jam,
unfound forever.

One might gleam them in the grass
or among glass shards small enough
never to be broken again.

They're survived by bastard intestinal pits
and waxed smiles, leaving us to roam
indifferent days, lonely as dial tones.

People grow smaller.
They do.

The Buyers or The Home Owners

Rachel Myles

JASON

KATE

PROMPTER/REALTOR

SETTING: A rather empty room which is well lit, but looks like it has natural lighting. There is dark wood paneling on the stage left side which looks fairly old but in good condition. There is a large blank white wall upstage which has some slight outlines of dust remaining due to pictures and furniture which stayed stationary for much too long. Close to the stage right side there is a doorway which leads to the hallway. There is no actual door for the doorway, more like an archway...well now it is anyway. Stage right there's another blank white wall but this one looks newly painted. As lights come up we see JASON and KATE standing center stage admiring the room. JASON is staring particularly hard at the stage left panels as if the one odd wall confuses him. He pauses, comes out of it, looks around and begins.

JASON: This has all gotta go. (*Waves his hand around indicating the entire room*)

KATE: What does?

JASON: All of this shit. (*Motions again*)

KATE: Be specific will you?

JASON: I am.

KATE: No, you just keep saying "this."

JASON: Exactly!

KATE: Exactly, what?

JASON: Huh?

KATE: Let's try this again.

JASON: Why?

KATE: I'm lost.

JASON: Aren't we all?

KATE: You're lost too?

JASON: No, of course not. I never get lost.

KATE: But, I thought you just said we were all –

JASON: -Forget what I SAID. Listen to what I'm SAYING!

KATE: Okay, so what were you saying?

JASON: When?

KATE: Now.

JASON: Now, now? Or before?

KATE: Just now!

JASON: Well now, now I'm saying now, and ... uh... now, I'm saying now
and...uh... now I'm saying -

KATE: Stop it, stop it, stop it!

JASON: What am I doing? (*Innocently*)

KATE: You sound like a broken parrot.

JASON: Don't you mean record?

KATE: No! I'm sure I meant parrot.

JASON: But how can you sound like a broken parrot?

KATE: I don't know, ask yourself, you were the one who sounded like one.

(*Silence*)

KATE: So, are we gonna take it?

JASON: Take what?!

KATE: This! This all of this! (*She motions broadly to the entire room*)

JASON: All of what? Be specific.

KATE: I am being specific.

JASON: No you're not, you're just motioning around.

KATE: Exactly!

JASON: Exactly, what?

KATE: Huh?

JASON: Let's start over.

KATE: I thought we did

JASON: Did we?

KATE: I thought so. Didn't you say my lines and I yours just now?

JASON: Did we really?

KATE: I thought we did.

JASON: I don't remember. Can we bring on the prompter?

KATE: I guess we can.

JASON: Then let's!

KATE: Do you think she'll be okay with it?

JASON: Who?

KATE: The author?

(*Silence*)

JASON: I knew the author once. I remember how she created me, just like the way Adam was created by the priests and Jews. I was standing in this line, because of course we're always waiting in lines. This darkness surrounds all of us in this line. And I'm standing there... blank... Nothing in me, on me...no me. That's hard to fathom, no me, but I guess that's how it was. Anyway, there I am standing...well I suppose

I could have been sitting...or laying down...or standing on my head. *(He giggles)* Yes, let us say I was standing, on my head *(Giggles again)* Yes, that image makes me giggle. Anyways, there I am in this line and suddenly I see this very bright light on me. If at all possible it continues to grow, and grow and grow. Then I feel these scratches which is strange since I have no body. But, just as I think this I begin to form, I feel hundreds more scratches and rubbing and then suddenly. I was here, in this place with you, a person whom I've never met, but I know is my wife of three years.

KATE: Amazing.

JASON: Pardon?

KATE: Amazing!

JASON: What is?

KATE: We forgot the prompter.

JASON: We did?

KATE: Yes. Completely.

JASON: Well, why do you care?

KATE: Well, he's waiting in the wings I'm sure.

JASON: Who is?

KATE: The prompter! Honestly, you're so thick headed!

JASON: No, I'm not! I'm rather shallow, honestly.

KATE: That, I know! *(Pause. Beat)* Shall I call him?

(Pause)

JASON: Who?

(Pause)

KATE: The prompter?

JASON: Why?

(Pause)

KATE: Why not?

JASON: I can't deal with this!

(Pause)

KATE: With what?

JASON: You...him...it...all of it. *(Begins to sob)*

KATE: *(Crosses to him and smacks him)* Take it like a man!

JASON: I am! *(He continues to cry harder now)*

KATE: Much better.

JASON: I can't bare it anymore, I want out!

KATE: Shut-up! *(Turns to audience)* My name is Kate...that's all I know so far. When I get a middle and a last name, I'll make sure you're the first to know it. *(Pause)* It's a very generic name don't you think? I guess our

author has no originality then does she? *(Giggles)* No I guess not. So...what else can I say? Oh I know, I'm sleeping with the prompter. I almost forgot that. Oh, and my husband, the blubbering mess doesn't realize that the prompter isn't a he. No, no it's an it! Completely sexually androgynous. Not a he, not a she, just an it. *(Appears the sexually androgynous prompter. This should be played by both a man and a woman at the same time. Their dialogue should be spoken simultaneously and their movements should mirror one another)* Oh there you are! Oh my prompter, my prompter, hold me!

PROMPTER: I can't.

KATE: Why not?

PROMPTER: It's not in the text.

KATE: But surely it's in the stage directions.

PROMPTER: I'm a prompter, not the director. I don't read stage directions.

KATE: Oh, dear. Then I shall hold you. *(She puts her hands around the prompter's waist and hold it/them)* Oh, I love you!

PROMPTER: *(Moving away)* Please, don't touch me like that.

KATE: Like what?

PROMPTER: Like that!

KATE: How did you move away if you didn't have it in the text.

PROMPTER: It was implied.

KATE: I see. *(Pause)* Could we imply that you and I are having sex?

PROMPTER: Of course it can be implied.

KATE: Oh goodie!

PROMPTER: Your hair looks beautiful tonight. *(It/they run hands through Kate's hair very mechanically)* And you're eyes shine like stars.

KATE: Oh yes. *(She rips open the prompters clothes and starts to undo her blouse.)*

JASON: Hey!

KATE: *(Stops, so does prompter)* Oh, no! It's my husband, quick, we have to do something.

JASON: *(Crosses in front of Kate and the prompter)* Kate why did you leave me behind?

KATE: I didn't leave you behind!

JASON: Then why did I have to cross in front of you? *(Notices that her blouse is undone and that the prompters clothes are ripped open too)* Kate you're hanging out *(To the male half of the prompter)* How do you do buddy? *(Extends his hand to the prompter. Prompter doesn't shake hands)* Well come on man, shake! *(The male half does)* Good. What's going on here.

KATE: Nothing.

JASON: Nothing?

PROMPTER: Nothing.

JASON: You expect me to believe that?

KATE: Of course I do.

JASON: Am I that thick?

PROMPTER: No, you're rather shallow.

JASON: *(To the female half only)* I didn't ask you!

PROMPTER: I know.

JASON: Then why answer?

PROMPTER: That's my job.

JASON: What is?

PROMPTER: To answer questions. All day long people ask me "line?"

"What's my line?" "Could you give me that line again?" I've had it!

How is it, the fact that I can have both of your lines memorized and you still need to call me in with "line!" Well, that's it! I've had it with the lines and the stupid text. I just want to be free, to write my own stuff, to move! I want...to move...to...to *(PROMPTER goes into an interpretive dance piece)*

KATE: Look what you did to it!

JASON: Pardon?

KATE: Just look at it! It looks like a humming bird on coke.

JASON: Do you mean crack cocaine?

KATE: No, I mean Coke, like the drink.

JASON: Oh that's terrible! It must have thought it was nectar.

KATE: What?

JASON: The humming bird.

KATE: I'm not talking about a humming bird! I'm talking about the prompter!

JASON: No thank you.

KATE: Excuse me?

JASON: No thanks.

KATE: In what regards?

JASON: Lines, I don't need any.

KATE: You sure?

JASON: Yes, I find it best not to know them and just say what I feel like saying when I am presented with silence. I fill the void with my creativity.

KATE: How ingenious.

JASON: I know!

KATE: Well, I don't know about you, but I love this place!

JASON: I love this place too. I think we could settle down here.

KATE: I love you so much!

JASON: And I you.

KATE: So we'll take it?

JASON: I think so. *(They approach the PROMPTER who has settled down now and is the REALTOR)*

REALTOR: So what do you think folks?

JASON: We'll take it!

KATE: We love it!

REALTOR: Fantastic. Let me go and draw up the paperwork. *(The REALTOR turns to the back wall and starts to draw on it)*

KATE: I love it, thank you so much honey.

JASON: Me too.

(Pause)

JASON: Just one thing is wrong with it?

KATE: What?

JASON: This has all gotta go. *(Waves his hand around indicating the entire room)*

KATE: What does?

(Blackout)

Dreaming with Angela

Amber Norwood

She would sing softly to you when she put you to bed. Any song from any period involving the words “sleep” or “dream” became a lullaby. Now you know “The Music Man” by heart. Your mother’s soft, warm voice was your introduction to music, and your first love.

You have no children of your own. This is not by accident, or some horrible twist of chance. Families, as near as you can tell, are more trouble than they’re worth. You’d rather spare everyone the trauma. But, as a result, you have no child of your own to sing to in the dark rooms. The dogs are not responsive. The stories about plants growing well to song are lies.

So it is a mixed blessing when your brother’s girlfriend has a daughter. Julianne is too young to do it, and both families are appalled. Your parents weren’t having any part of it. So you invite Michael, Julianne, and the baby into your guestroom. This is supposed to be a temporary arrangement. Four years later, however, small Angela and her moderately employed parents are still there. Your rational sensibilities want to make them leave. You never got any free rides. Is this what responsibility means? But at the end of each day, you look forward to time alone with Angela. Her mother, still not your sister-in-law, waits tables at night. Michael is exhausted after a full day caring for his daughter. He spends weeknights passed out with a beer.

So this cannot last. But these are also the kinds of years that you’ll never have again. You love the girl like she was your own. And that is enough. Though this cuts into your social life, you have someone to sing to sleep.

By age four, she is old enough to request songs from your repertoire. She wants to start with the one about the butterflies. She wanted to finish with “Dream A Little Dream.” The first time she hums along in her half-sleep, it almost breaks your heart. And you don’t know why. She is a very demanding little girl. Too much time with Daddy without any discipline. She needs attention. At the same time, she is terribly precocious. Michael, to his limited credit, never speaks to her like she is a child. Consequently, she is like an adult, speaking from a child’s body.

Sometimes she wants you at the foot of the bed. Other times she wants you close. You lie beside her; she hums along to songs you’d sing into strawberry hair. Sometimes she crashes before you hit the second chorus. Other times she lays awake and calls you back for hours before falling asleep. She tells you stories.

She tells you, one night, that she wasn't really a little girl at all. She tells you she used to be the wind before she was a girl.

You ask if she means she had been dreaming.

No, the four-year-old says. I was the wind before I was a girl.

After your mother left you to sleep, after the songs, you would dream. You'd have nightmares. You'd wake fearing oozing things would come from the foot of the bed. You feared they would swallow you whole. You'd know

for certain that you'd wake to find your mother gone. There would only be traces of blue-green slime where she'd been the night before. Other nights, you'd feel yourself rising out of the bed very, very slowly. You'd put your small hands on the wall to keep you still. Then you'd crawl into bed with your baby brother. He always slept so soundly. Nothing bad could happen to you while he slept so soundly.

Early on you were convinced there was something wrong with you. First you thought it was possession. You hadn't seen *The Exorcist*, but you knew about it. Then you thought you were an alien. You knew things you shouldn't have known. You couldn't say now what those things were. But you knew them then. Once on the play yard, you got in trouble for scaring the other children. You told them ghost stories; when you raised your hands, the wind would blow. You had super powers for a small girl.

You got older and learned about other things. You determined that this wasn't your first time in this world. But you didn't think you used to be an animal. Or a rock. Or a tree. Maybe a gypsy.

Maybe a witch. You operated under this assumption for years. You found other kids who were weird like you were. And you convinced them they were as special as you were.

You got older still. And you had all but forgotten about your secrets. You met boys, guys who liked more normal girls. In the beginning, you believed that they were attracted to those secrets. That they were compelled to you by something they couldn't see or even understand. Then you learned the truth. That they were attracted only to things that they could see. A body that developed, and wasn't afraid to get into trouble. In the begin-

Throwing
Salt

Karen Barkant

I drowned
a tiny red spider
who crawled into my
blueberry tea.
I felt very dreadful,
though I did
deliberately.

ning, you still believed in your invincibility. Then, you found faith in your apathy. And forgot about your secrets entirely.

You went away to college. You got some life experience and a degree. You got a job managing a small corporation. You made good money, and you were still young. The job was fine, and you found a small house to rent with your dogs. There was a yard, and a patio from which spider plants could hang. You hadn't married; you hadn't wanted to. You had been dating someone, which had been going okay. That is, until Michael, Julianne and the baby moved in. You were living an adult life, with adult concerns. You had groceries to buy, and a brother to nag about getting another job. You didn't have time for super powers. You barely had time for T.V. You had forgotten about your dreams. Until Angela told you hers.

You sit up a little from your recline against your niece's bedroom wall. To your surprise you find yourself holding on to it. A little. Perhaps the floating feeling you sense is the wine you had with dinner. She is quiet while you remember things. You are quiet while your breathing slows. When the room stops spinning you ask her what she means. She only repeats herself. I was the wind before I was a girl. When you ask her how she knows, she says she just does. And she tells you because she knows you understand.

You are still. She asks if tomorrow you can push her on the tire swing. When you get home, before dinner. You kiss her strawberry hair and tell her fine. She asks for one more song. You sing "Goodnight, My Someone," and you feel your voice shake. It fills the room. You are stuck for a moment in which you can't tell which girl you are. The words coming from your mouth are not your own. The voice in your throat is your mother's. The dreams Angela dreams tonight are yours. You finish the song, and wait. Her breathing becomes that slow inhale, exhale of sleep. You let yourself out of the bed.

You go back into the kitchen for another glass of wine. It is darker than usual outside. The kitchen light is a strange orange glow. You stare at your own reflection in the window over the sink. Your hair is shorter than it ever was. You have more lines on your face, but you still look young. Though you'd always hated the prospect, you really do look more like your mother. You remember thinking that was never going to happen.

The television in the living room barks sports announcements. Michael grumbles in his sleep, and drools on the cushions. He doesn't sleep as peacefully anymore. The cat clock on the wall reads 8:37. It's another three hours before Julianne is home. They will be wide awake and you will need to be asleep before then. You pour yourself another glass and sit in the living room.

You pry the remote from your brother's sleeping fist and wonder about genetics. What other sorts of things are passed down? As kids, you were mistaken as twins, despite the five years between you. He had your father's height, and you your mother's tired face. You had the same light hair and dark eyes. Though you flip through the channels, you are looking out the window. Did he have dreams like you did? Did he, when he got older, crawl into your bed for comfort? Funny that, as close as you thought you were, you never discussed this. He'd put on weight in the last few years. You'd lost more weight than what was healthy. You only remotely bore any resemblance to each other anymore. The little girl in the guest room had your coloring, his coloring. She had her mother's nose. Your dreams.

Angela will grow up. Her hair will get longer, and so will her face. She will grow into her mother's nose. She will not be as concerned with her past as her aunt once was. She will not focus on how different she is from other children. She will not ignore her nature, and she will not forget her dreams.

Her parents will separate. Her sixth birthday will mark the last day she spends with her father. Her mother will not speak of him. She and her mother will live in a small apartment in Hollywood. Her father will think of her daily for a few years. Then he will try to forget her because it hurts. Angela will remember him vaguely, for a few years. She will forget him as well. One day, she will buy groceries from him; they will not recognize each other.

She will be a bright student, with an eagerness for learning. Angela will play handball and teth-erball. She will wish her mother could put her on the soccer team. She is good at running, and in high school will join track. She will attribute it to the wind in her bones. She will teach herself to paint, but will prefer her sketches. She will prefer black and white to color. She will prefer landscapes to human figures. This she will also attribute to the wind.

Angela will have friends who think she has a beautiful voice. In chorus, she will be picked to sing solo. Her mother will wonder where it came from. Angela will only know it's another one of those things she can mysteriously do.

When she will sing, people will feel uncomfortable. The voice will never match the body. Though it will be beautiful, it will cause the audience to shift in their seats.

She will finish high school, and will not go to college. She will wait tables at night to help feed the family. She will sing in bars for petty cash. She will be beautiful, and somewhat terrifying. She will color her hair black and her nails red. Angela will have boyfriends who adore her, but cannot name why. It has something to do with her eyes and her voice. She will know why they really adore her. She will marry the man who impregnates her. She will have sung lullabies to her brother, fifteen years younger than she is. She will not have time to sing to her son.

She will remember the songs her aunt used to sing. She will not remember her aunt. When she closes her eyes, she will remember the house she grew up in. She will remember a tire swing, and "Dream A Little Dream." She will call her mother one day, and ask her where she learned the songs. Her mother will lie, and tell her it was the wind. It was the wind who would sing to you. She would sing softly to you when she put you to bed.

For
all
your
2000
parts.

Useless

Olga Vaynkof

People have parts.

Some parts cater to concubines
and wield shovels after a wire hanger
childbirth stains the ecru carpet.
Ol' benefactor apparently noticed
some weight gain and pinched that gal's
plump- left an anomaly of a scar.
Her parts were scared he'd leave.

Stronger parts keep weaker ones
barefoot in the kitchen
while they warm the room indifferently,
waiting, patient as a savage, for the word.
Any word.

But some don't have those parts.

Other's parts have been spun
by some centrifugal force
and now stare at the ceiling
waiting for the stars to be gone -
and the cicadas are squealing and the
crickets have machine guns and the rest
is right on its way -

Still others love their parts
safe as loneliness.

Some lose parts rolling down hills
when they think mom's not looking.
They're just playing till their ear
latches on to what used to be a sapling.
It's strange when cries mimic laughter.

And when moms have parts that hurt
in ways I never can,

I wish I had her parts
and she wishes
she had mine.



VOTE FOR
STEVENSON

PLEGED TO ACTION ON SCHOOL
CONSTRUCTION AND CHILD WELFARE



Exchange Last Day of May

Hollie N. Stewart

Watch the crumbs fall
from my cracked brain—
snapped in two

to a place called
familiar love song,
played in the air of
the Ross Dress-For-Less,

less pleasing than
the ingrown toenail
plucked from my crying foot
by rough, male hands.
I bled two days straight.

"I don't know how you do what you do."

I shuttered when you grew,
as my heart opened walnut-style,
piece next to virgin piece.

With scared, sweaty palms,
I priced you among
various blouses, jeans,
plucking you from the hanger,
calling you mine.

"I'm so in love with you."

I dressed up,
painted my face,
dropped you down my throat
whole.

You hired the interior decorator
to recreate the meat of me
with pink Nair, with short skirts
of red plaid.

"It just keeps getting better."

You reached extra large,
your tongue chopping my heart
paper-thin.
I continued walking
until you dropped me,
tearing skin, bleeding me
in red, translucent colors.

Tea Talk

Anja Leigh

She sits with her back
against the high,
hand-painted ceilings
sipping Ceylon tea
on New Year's Eve
recalling past lovers,
young, old, discarded.

The chase more passionate
than the catch.

She leans forward and confides,
"Men are worthless;
maybe I should try women."
Then she pulls her changeling eyes
from daytime dreams,
reaches for a raisin scone
spread with clotted cream,
takes a deep breath and
modestly licks her fingers.

In the middle of the afternoon,
tea is served with reservation
at the Biltmore Hotel
by Armando who lives in Sylmar
and rides the Red Line Metro downtown
to Pershing Square.

The table is set with stories stained
like raspberry jam on white linen tablecloths.
One tiny cake crumb lingers on the
corner of her mouth.

Radio Waves

Brandon Lee William Willcox

There is a love affair to be had with
Old wooden radios.
In their midst, crackling static air
Seeps into our lungs and blood stream,
Trickles into our brains and floods our minds
With the glow of a warm vacuum-tube ocean.
It saturates us, a lover's communion,
In the torrent of twentieth century seas.

dedication

alex lee

my work is not sex
ual

she would say

of flowers & it is

a different place. it is

a steer's skull, with

angels, with figures a

perspectiveless

SKV blue, measured

by modulations of dry-bone

the ground is

rust. with that, your worlds,

are complete. photographs are slices:

jumpcut

hands

jumpcut

naked

jumpcut

torso,

jumpcut

that dark hair,
windswept framed with white.
and dark eyes

in the museum,
still-life. another world

Georgia

your husband loved you.

An Uneven Playing Field

Melanie Wudl

The Moore's worn brick walkway was shrouded with iceberg climbers, the full midsummer display a tribute to the right mix of water, sun and an occasional dose of something toxic applied by the gardener. The house, dimly lit, offered the silhouettes of Marilyn and Bill through the windows, through the coastal fog. "You were gone a long time," she said.

"Four weeks. Asia is a long way away," he replied.

William Terrance Moore had never taken a trip without a specific itinerary. He told Marilyn he wanted to go to China, the real China: Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai. And so on May twenty-first at eleven-thirty PM he boarded Cathay Pacific's direct flight from Los Angeles to Hong Kong with no particular plan. He traveled coach.

After a week on Hong Kong Island, traversing the city on foot -- outdoor escalators, night markets, public squares and ferry terminals all cast in the shadows of architectural towers that defied the laws of physics, not to mention American building codes -- Bill lost his spirit for adventure. Unable to envision himself driving around mainland China on his own, he took a day tour to Guangzhou with a group of equally cautious Americans, convincing himself it would be the easiest way to see the south. It was only a matter of signing up with the hotel concierge the night before. He told himself this would be his point of entry, provide an overview, allow him to get his feet wet in unknown territory. In recounting his trip he told Marilyn that not even *China Tours* could get a group in and out of the country without endless line ups under the scrutiny of humorless officials checking and rechecking documents.

It was a comfortable home, the Moores', in a tightly manicured Los Angeles neighborhood. Bill and Marilyn had shared the house together for fifteen years. They had become alienated from each other over the last two.

Staring at Hampton, the dog lying at Marilyn's feet, Bill said, "Anyway, it's ugly there, polluted, decrepit. The snakes in the free zone market were displayed in red plastic bowls. Red is a good color in China, but it's weird seeing snakes swimming in a mixing bowl."

Marilyn rearranged herself in the Mission armchair, lifted her legs onto the footrest and settled in. Hampton let out a sigh. He was *her* dog. She was good with dogs, sometimes taught obedience classes. That, plus managed the communal garden in Ocean Park. She did these things in addition to her brokerage job. Marilyn grew heirloom tomatoes, four kinds of basil -- Persian, domestic, lemon and pepper, French green beans, white corn and didn't travel much -- not long trips anyway. Her plot was at its peak in spring and summer and she often told Bill that *it* nurtured her more than *she* it. When Bill brought

up the trip she thought it would do him good. Maybe even bring back the man she had trouble remembering: the one with ambition, drive and charm. The one she had, for thirteen years, compared against all others for his intelligence and wit. "You go. It'll be an adventure. Take a month and wander, you've always wanted to."

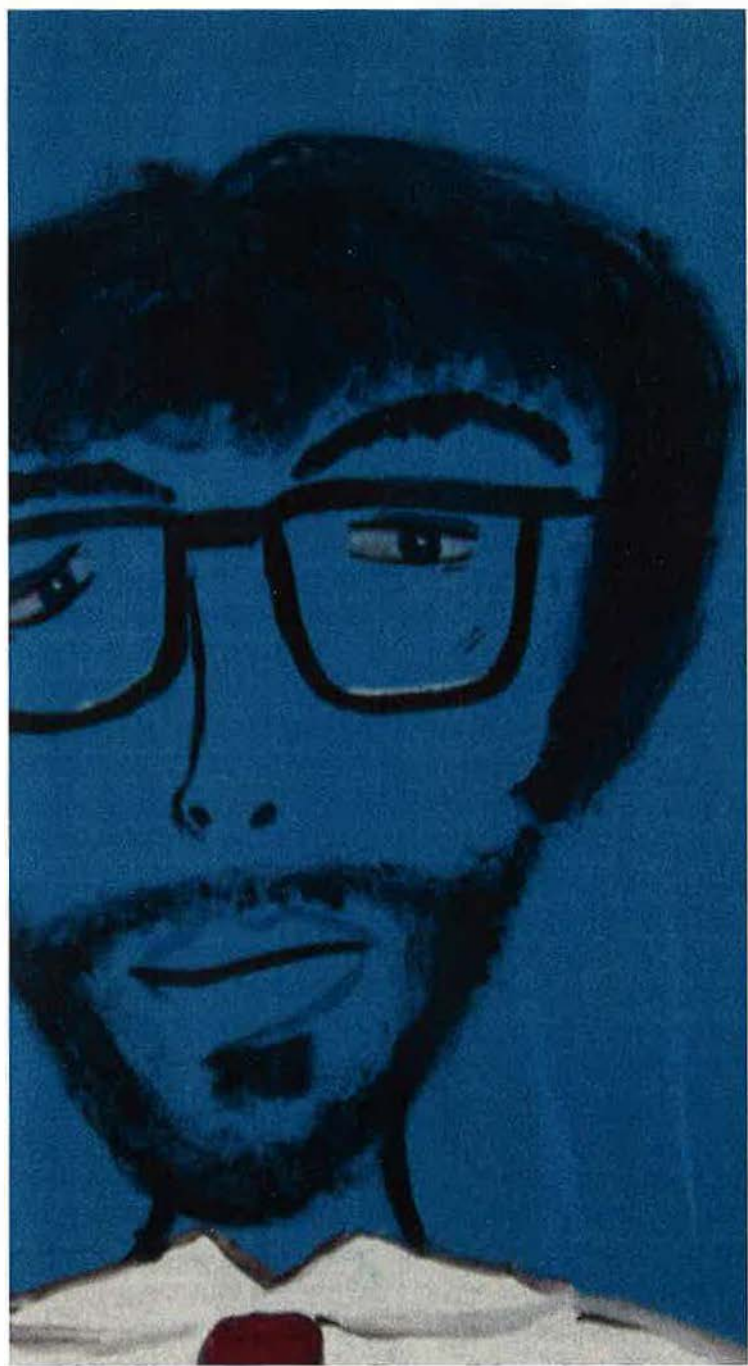
Bill hadn't worked in two years, not what Marilyn considered work. He lectured, part time, business and economics at the University of Southern California. Marilyn wouldn't mind his extended trip, wouldn't miss the sound of his slippers shuffling across the wood floor, his constant presence in the house. And she wouldn't miss the dinners. Bill had taken to watching the cooking channel on television. He had his favorite chefs, "sure bets" he'd say, and dishes he relegated to the "worth trying" category. He liked meals centered around specific food items, like a dinner starting with cold artichoke puree followed by grilled artichokes on a bed of bitter lettuce and finished with artichoke hearts braised with, say, lamb shank. He described the tour.

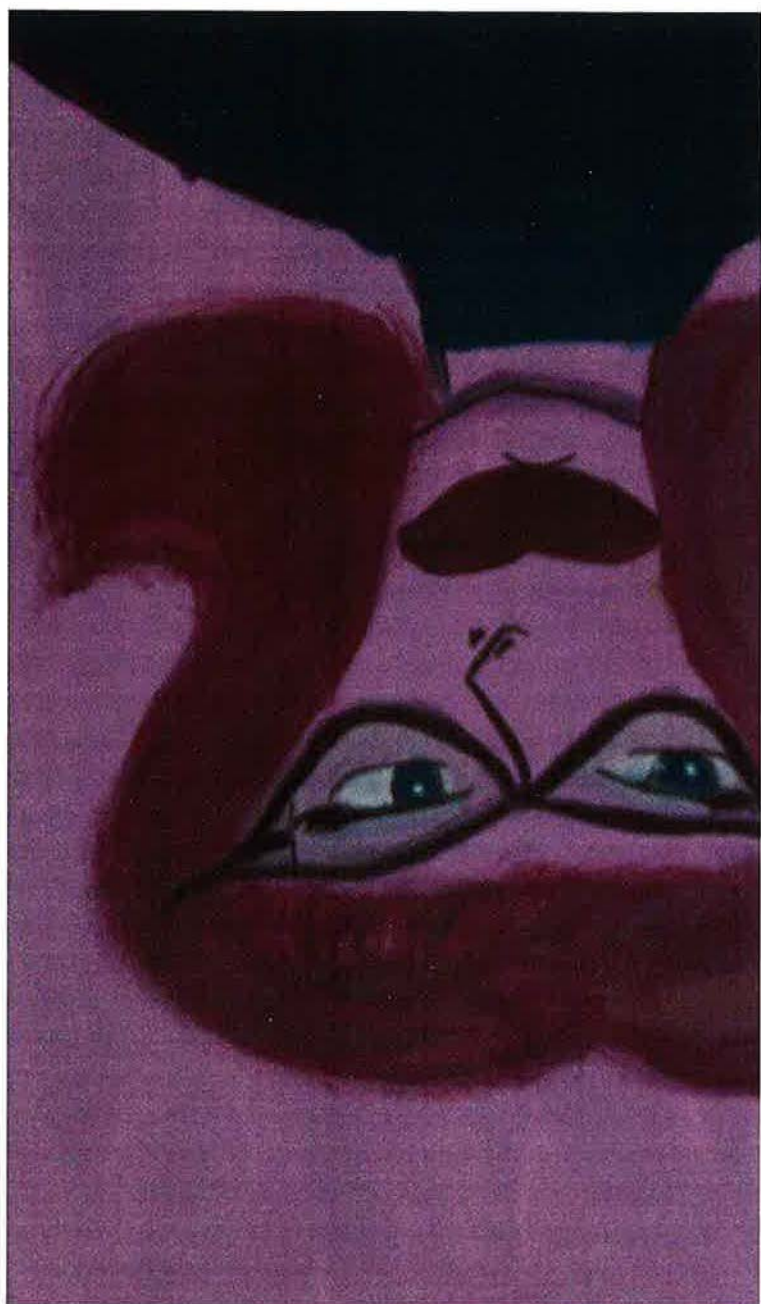
"We were taken to a really touristy section of Guangzhou for lunch. The restaurant was packed; downstairs diners Chinese, upstairs reserved for foreigners. We were served a veritable banquet: boiled beef soup that I kept my distance from — solidified masses of fat floating on top of absolutely unidentifiable bits of flesh — and a pale steamed carp — slippery and fishy looking in that pungent spoiled way you find with silty river fish." He said the waterways in Southern China were murky and slow moving and that the backwater shantytowns they traversed were primitive and dirty.

Marilyn watched him as he talked and thought it hadn't hurt him to miss a meal or two. Even Bill's six-foot frame had trouble handling the thirty pounds he had gained over the past two years. "Then what?" she asked.

"Back on the bus and hauled around to more predetermined sites. Our tour guide was from the north, Manchuria. A young girl, early twenties I'd say, very pretty. She told us she wanted to get a management job with one of the manufacturing companies in Shenzhen and find a sponsor for a visa to the west. I think she'd jump at the chance to leave China and never return."

Bill did not tell Marilyn that the tour guide's optimism depressed him. That he'd envisioned her disillusionment with American business if she ever realized her ambition. That throughout the day Bill conjured up a whole story for the Chinese tour guide, her transition to Southern California, the minefield of interpretation she'd have to learn to navigate working at a place that would be called something like 'Dynamic Enterprises' or 'Precision Products' and located in an industrial center in someplace like Ontario or Fontana. "It's funny," he said, "but in the end it's the snakes swirling around in the red plastic tubs that I think about most, that, and all the things I missed."





"You might go back, see the things you didn't. It's not like it's a dangerous trip. You've taken greater risks," she said.

"Any rate, I left China and headed for Indonesia. Maybe it was the below the equator heat but the days all rolled into one another there."

He rented a bungalow in Ubud and befriended the groundskeeper, Wayan Eka, a short, little guy with a broad, toothy smile, one that made his whole face smile. Wayan explained to Bill that in Bali *all* first-born boys are named Wayan. Second born boys are named Made, third born Nyoman, fourth -- Ketut. He told Marilyn, "They've got this simple naming structure, set up for the common people, the Sudra caste, which make up something like ninety-five percent of the population. Everyone's got one of four names and if you're a girl they just add a prefix -- 'Ni'. There's a similar naming system for the upper castes, but I don't remember it."

Bill pursued odd facts with an appetite Marilyn did not share, his digressions an endurance test for her. "Do you want a drink?" she asked. "I'm gonna have a scotch -- I feel cold tonight, must be the fog."

"Yeah, sure. I'll get it, don't get up." When Bill came back into the living room Marilyn had lit the fire, a fake gas fire that would envelop the two of them in a favorable light, but there would be no pine smell, no spark, no sizzle. Hampton had moved to the couch, sixty pounds of mixed breed, and Bill sat down next to him, patted his head. He was not a complicated pet.

"I went trekking with Wayan Eka -- a back trail along the Ayung River - he pointed out all the native herbs and cooking spices -- you would've liked him. And we went on this great bike trip at dusk one day, through rice fields and really remote villages. He was great, taking me around the island, knew all the best beach cafes for grilled fish and water spinach. And the temple sites, Jesus, talk about stairs. I called Bradley Campbell, you know he lives there."

Her back stiffened, "What? No, I didn't... I'd... I'd no idea you'd kept track of his whereabouts."

"Well he married a Balinese woman who owns property. He's an exporter now -- ethnic knick-knacks, some art stuff. We arranged to meet at a restaurant, the Pearl Moon, a first rate place run by some Americans who stumbled upon it back in the sixties and never left."

*

Pearl Moon is located in the jungle, isolated and accessible only by dirt road. Wayan Eka knew it and agreed to drive Bill there.

The night Bill met Bradley Campbell for dinner the sky literally broke open and the rain came down in torrents. At the turnoff, Wayan said, "you'll

have to walk the rest of the way."

"Walk? It's dark out there, I'll get lost," Bill replied.

Wayan pointed, "It's about two kilometers, a twenty-minute walk. I can not take the car down that road in this rain." And he was resolute. Bill didn't blame him really, he had seen the currents gather force at two or three junctures along the way and understood Wayan's respect for nature outweighed whatever fondness he had developed for him over the past few weeks. Wayan was smart not to make the trip; Bill on the other hand, took off his sandals and stowed them in his backpack, struggled into his plastic poncho, stepped out of the car and into the tepid rainwater sludge. By the time he saw the yellow lights of Pearl Moon, Bill was unnerved. He knew that even with the place in sight if he had slipped and twisted his ankle no one would've heard his scream. Not much is louder than a tropical storm.

He remembered measuring his steps, checking for balance each step of the way and he remembered the twenty-minute walk as if an eternity. Drenched when he entered Pearl Moon, Bradley Campbell greeted him with sheer amazement.

"I've been sitting here all afternoon — reading up on world news — arrived before the deluge," Bradley said.

The place was an open-air pavilion with teak floors and high-beamed ceilings. Exotic birds flew in and out: Bali Starlings, their black wing tips and bright blue masks in dramatic opposition to their snowy white feathers, Orioles and Cuckoos. Bradley took Bill's poncho and had the waiter bring him a towel and a shot of tequila. Wearing baggy shorts and a tee shirt Bill noticed how built he was, something he didn't remember. Bradley Campbell talked about his business — it's success, his travels — they're exotic, his wife — she's beautiful and twenty years his junior. He said, "It's inevitable we'll have four or five kids, but she and her sisters will look after them." They ordered dinner.

Bill and Bradley first met sitting on opposite sides of the table during protracted negotiations for a Nevada land sale. As an attorney Bill represented the seller, twelve hundred acres, and as a broker Bradley was the front man for a group of investors. Bradley worked the deal hard. He was a quick study and Bill was impressed. To arrive at a residual land value they haggled over the cost of entitlements and water rights and they split hairs over assumptions like entrepreneurial profit, absorption and marketability. Bradley came armed with spreadsheets and self-assurance to every single negotiation. Bill remembered a touchy moment when Bradley stabbed, "The risk is in the lot development — anyone who knows anything about real estate knows that."

"Six thousand new homes in Washoe County, selling for, say, an average of one hundred fifty thousand and your costs — land, soft costs, sticks and

bricks -- shouldn't be more than sixty. We know what we've got here Bradley, and the planning commission's all over the project, chomping at the bit for the fee revenue. It's a slam dunk deal for anyone geared up with the right people," Bill countered.

Bradley smiled and set before Bill a complete construction budget for a five phased development and said, "Our offer stands, think it over." In the end Bradley secured the land for his investors at fifteen thousand dollars an acre and made ten percent commission on the deal, a handsome one point eight million.

Bill's business relationship with him had seen a ten-year stretch that began in nineteen eighty-two, one year after the Nevada land deal closed. With a couple of silent investors they'd teamed up and started a savings and loan they called Westbridge. Bill provided the legal expertise, Bradley the vision for a billion-dollar institution with ownership interests in planned communities and office parks all yielding double-digit profit margins. Up until the end Bill loved it: the corporate jet, the power, the game. So did Marilyn although more self conscious over the blatant spending. Bradley and Bill were arrogant and cocky and bought things sight unseen. After a ten-year run the acquisition prices soared, sales slumped, executive salaries skyrocketed and profits evaporated. In the end the federal government closed them down for fraud and embezzlement, sent Bradley to the state penitentiary for six months and disbarred Bill.

The food came to the table -- yellow curry with chicken and potatoes, Australian beer -- Bill began to dry off. "So is Indonesia permanent for you?" he asked.

"Only sure about one thing, I'll never go back to the states. Can't, I owe the IRS a bundle -- and there's the civil suits." The money from Westbridge was in Switzerland. "It's unbelievable to me, the government getting away with losing millions. Jerks staged a massive fire sale and got away with collecting fifty cents on the dollar. Our projects were solid, three years time and we would've been back in the black, fucking bean counters."

"You've got some settling up to do with me" Bill said.

*

"Do you know how many poisonous snakes there are in that part of the world, not to mention the *innumerable, incurable* diseases you can get from contact with the water alone? I don't know what bothers me more, your stupidity or the fact that you've so flippantly dropped Bradley Campbell back into the picture," Marilyn said.

"It was the longest twenty-minute walk I'd ever taken." Bill replied as Marilyn squinted at him, grasping for comprehension. He returned her piercing gaze, a look she thought scrutinized the lines in her face, noticed that without makeup she looked haggard, her lips thin. What Bill thought of her still mattered to Marilyn. For thirteen years she'd taken his adoration of her for granted, and now, the thought of losing it, the finality of it, was unsettling. Neither of them could foresee the outcome of things -- how their protracted impasse would play out. 'Pre-Bradley' they were methodical people, acting on impulse, a trait that had attracted them to Bradley but one they could not sustain.

"I'm surprised he's still built," said Marilyn. "Skinny little swimmer's frame," she added under her breath. "You know that's left over from prison. I'd heard he'd bulked up there, nothing else to do. I just can't believe you looked him up. He's slime Bill; I thought we were through with him."

"It was strange. Like being drawn to a thing without knowing, without any idea really of how it would go, only that without finding out I would never move on."

"And you brought up money? I can only imagine he didn't take you seriously. How much did you ask for?"

"Two point five. Five for the bonus I didn't collect the last year of operation and two for damages."

"You really think he'd write you a check? Jesus Bill, Westbridge died two years ago. You're a god damned *teacher* now." She said it, 't-e-e-c-h-e-r' so that it would reverberate.

The unraveling of Westbridge took its toll on Marilyn. And while stoic, her disappointment etched away at their relationship. She'd been patient with Bill. It was Marilyn who suggested the work at USC, Marilyn who made every effort to boost Bill's confidence by encouraging his gifts as a lecturer and Marilyn who'd carved out a quieter life style of gardens and dogs. But that Bill had somehow failed her undermined these attempts to rebuild their lives.

"He's not spent one day regretting his part in that debacle or what it cost you and me. You were *first* in your class Bill, *Georgetown* for Christ's sake. I'll never forgive him." She did not utter the words she felt; that within her depths she admired Bradley Campbell for his resiliency, that she found Bill's stagnancy a burden.

*

"I'll have to think about it. The money's hard to get. There are precautions to be taken -- some red tape." Bradley paused and added, "After all, I was the one who opened the Swiss accounts. As I remember you pretty much

cratered under the pressure with the Feds, became their answer boy."

"Your memory is selective. Without my credentials you'd never have gotten as far as you did. It's my law career that's demolished -- I want compensation."

The Federal regulars set up shop in the imported cherry wood conference room of Westbridge Savings for eight months and William Terrance Moore maintained the poise of a seasoned judge. While they gathered a case for regulatory violations, Bill shredded development contracts, revalued the portfolio and saved the culpable from a five-year sentence. All the while, Bradley Campbell sequestered more than ten million dollars in Swiss accounts.

Bill played to Bradley's conscience, "I'm offering you a chance to set things right," he said.

It was late and the rain had stopped. Bradley drove Bill back to town. They made small talk and avoided the subject of Westbridge the whole way. The day Bill was packing, his last day in Ubud, Wayan Eka walked Bradley Campbell across the grounds to his bungalow.

"There's an account that rolls over first of October," he said when Wayan left the room. "It has a balance of half a million that's being wired to one of my suppliers. But the truth of the matter is that you were handsomely compensated for your legal advice - I didn't take a bonus that last year either and you of all people knew exactly what you were getting into from the start - actually, *you* should be paying *me* for giving you the ride of your life."

*

Marilyn set her elbow on the armrest of her chair; put her hand over her open mouth, sunk further into a slouch. She thought about how it took Bill two years to make the trip, that for two years he'd probably recited the words, "You've got some settling up to do." She knew she shared common ground with Bradley. That she was more a warrior than Bill, calculated and cunning. And when she felt threatened or in a gray area, Marilyn could sink and think nothing of spewing monstrosities to anyone in her way.

"Shit, Bradley Campbell never once considered your credibility, always thought his wits alone put him a notch above you, that he was the real mastermind behind Westbridge -- you just a necessary evil. And you let it go down that way. Let him steal your integrity, belittle you. You're a shell of yourself, a man without a position on *anything*. You can't imagine how much I resent all this," she said.

Bill remained slow and steady, keeping his distance from her gaining hailstorm. "I know it seems like a betrayal Marilyn, but honestly, I didn't think I'd really do it -- track him down and all that. He's not sending money. He's sending some form of exports he said 'should have significant future value' and that he hopes this clears up matters because, as he put it, 'any further discussion would be very damaging to our friendship.' Do you want another drink?" he asked already heading for the kitchen.

Marilyn turned towards the fire, stewing. She stared, fascinated by the flames, how they looked so random and natural given their measured source and the permanent configuration of the ceramic logs. She thought how much they were like the Bill she'd come to accept over the last two years, steady, predictable and only an odd resemblance of what she knew to be the real thing.

"He still wins, the bastard beat you again. Christ, even the payback's on his terms," she said, adding, "the turd's still in your pocket."

*

On a Saturday morning in October a shipment containing an eighteen-inch stone carving arrived by special delivery. It was an elephant headed human form seated on a rat. Marilyn wouldn't allow it in the house. She resurrected her anger. "I'm not gonna live with this miserable deity casting Bradley's superiority over us. I can just see that smug smile of his -- twisting the knife from across the globe. It's pathetic; you thinking you'd get even. What was it that fascinated you in China? Captive snakes swirling in circles? Some metaphor. Just how many times do you, *do we*, have to be *fucked* by Bradley Campbell?"

Marilyn striking was Marilyn full of poison, spewing what could never be retracted. The man who wanted to go to China now just wanted a scotch. It was ten AM.

"And where are you in all this? I've been patient; god damned heroic, waiting out your crisis. You gotta accept your losses Bill; re-group for Christ's sake. You used to be so dynamic, assertive -- you had a vision for your life. I busted my ass in graduate school too you know. You think watching you shuffle off to the lecture hall has been easy for me? Seeing you so completely diminished? And it's not just the money, at least not the obscene piles of it you were bringing in. It's *you, you're gone*. I've hated myself these two years for being so superficial, so contradictory. I mean, I love my gardens and your themed dinners, the pleasure you take in them, but --"

"It just might be worth something Marilyn. It might be old. You can say a lot of things about Bradley Campbell, but the guy *is* shrewd and that's

what drives us nuts. The fact that he's my nemesis isn't really your concern, is it?" It somehow quieted her.

By afternoon they agreed to put Ganesha in the back yard, under a Japanese maple Marilyn had planted that summer, surrounded by ornamental ginger and star jasmine. "With any luck the vines will cover it completely over in a year or two," she said. Bill took the departure from her morning tirade as a sign of good humor. He followed her to the yard, carrying what the air bill had indicated weighed one hundred and fifty pounds. Marilyn sensed his eyes on her as she opened the kitchen door and guided him down three steps. She thought he might be noticing that her ass had flattened out over the past two years of near estrangement, their intimacy grown clinical, efficient.

While Hampton supervised them maneuvering the piece, steadying it on a pedestal made of broken pieces of slate, Bill and Marilyn resumed position in the separate corners of their lives. Ceremoniously they handled what might or might not be junk, what might become a humorous symbol for the worst two years of their marriage or the final marking of its demise.

This is it

Melanie Necktar Baghdassarians

It's my fault I know,, I was in a hurry just to wait again.
My eyes don 't want to tell you how much there is,,, so much, and
because if I could, I wouldn't mind crying for a while, and then
maybe laughing for even a longer while, and then staring..

Staring all of this in the face
But there are those eyes again

What is it?

WHAT IS IT?

WHAT IS IT! ?!?!?!? _____

IT'S THIS: !?!?!?!?!? ,

all the time

this!!!!?????!!!!????!!!!!!!?????!!!!?????!!?!?!?!?!?!?until these
are words I

I

I

I am sitting at the park after it has rained, excuse me, while it
is still drizzling, and there are other cars, evenly spaced out in this
parking lot, all of the cars look weird, they all look so out of place,
all of us do here, we look so out of place.

Rita Herman

Robert Moore watched it burn and I never did.
 It was my greatest fear, hope, prayer
 to watch red lick the dappling gray and
 strike a match on the clapboards
 odd pitched roofs, cold drafty hinges
 porchkitchenfrontandbedroomsbathroom
 suck in search of oxygen
 And I never did.

Flat. Mailboxless, across the road barrowpit coalash remains
 Gone. Legendary apricot tree pitted from grandmother's orchard,
 rhubarb, soft purple lilacs protecting irises
 Intertwined yellow roses, snowballs, gooseberry bramble
 Apple trees where farmers played farmer and fallen collar bones broke
 No more. Climbing through white picket fences for white balls in alfalfa
 baseballs, croquet, footballs, and once golf,
 upright guardian railroad ties
 Gone. Green flooded acres where I lay face down as my parents watched
 The stages of life
 and burnt in the burning barrel all the remains
 of passages from Heyburn, Paul and Rupert.

Flat. Where I took a picture three years after it had burned
 When nothing remained.

Except every day in the mirror I see
 the cut in my eyebrow from
 Louis and the croquet mallet,
 and inside David whispers "we were surrounded by love."
 Carl's stars may still have aliens
 and Lee and Curt and Dean and Eldie and Albie
 and I
 have freckles trying to tan like the
 bronze gods my brothers were
 from wide open spaces that a
 heartbeat never misses.

willie nelson
is singing You
Were Always
On My Mind
after lunch
at Wendy's
on friday
& all the cash
registers of the
world lock up
& go into
hibernation
the customers
stop chewing
& the waitresses
are all frozen
in their tracks
willie nelson
owns this
moment & i
pause & listen
as The Muse
puts her hands
inside my chest
& begins
the pounding
the pounding
the pounding
of the dough

You Were Always On My Mind

R. L. Greenfield

The Dress

Hannah Nahm

My sister says she wants a cake, anything with chocolate, lots of it. I make a mental list of places I can go to order a specialty cake, sugar-free, low fat. Maybe there's an imitation chocolate out there. My sister's at risk of diabetes and God knows what else. At five four, she weighs just under two hundred pounds. She tells me this. *I weigh just under two-hundred.* She doesn't bother lying about these things, things that I, if I could, would cover up even at my own funeral. I see her eat — a lot. A whole mound of apple pie, Salisbury steak, *kimchee cake*, anything she can get her hands on.

Hospital food gets you fat, she says. It's the hospital's fault.

I think, which one, there's been so many.

She's been wanting to die off and on since twenty-one. She's turning thirty in less than two weeks. Her recent diagnosis: bipolar with psychotic manifestations. She'll be facing her birthday at a psychiatric rehab facility, but I'm not moping over it. There were other birthdays far worse. At La Montana there's a mirror in the bathroom, a real one. At least here, she could close the door behind her to shower. In her teens, we used to call her "Cliff-hanger Sandy." We were talking about her chest. It dropped, straight down, no traces of budding nipples anywhere. But after cyclic years of hospital admissions and discharges and now a couple of months at La Montana, she is doughy like a sumo wrestler.

This time, she says, I want a whole cake. Don't have it cut into small pieces or anything. I want to be able to cut my own birthday cake.

But Sandy, I say, the hospital won't allow that. I'll never get beyond the check point.

There is static on the other line. I picture my sister thinking about what I just said. Maybe she's checking her left wrist. Maybe she's surprised at the many slashes she sees there. I'm Sorry would be nice.

Did you hear me, I say. You still there?

Talk to the doctor, Dee. He said he needs to talk to you.

What about the knife, Sandy? How are you going to cut that cake without a knife? Do you think they'd actually let me bring in a knife?

Sandy snorts into the phone. I'm not going to hurt myself with a plastic cake knife. I can't!

Well I guess you're the expert. But I don't need to catch myself because I would never say this. Instead, I say, I don't know, Sandy. I don't know.

When are you going to call the doctor, she asks. I want to come home. I'm good now.

I tell her I'll see what I can do. I say, listen, I'm coming near an overpass; if the phone dies, you know why.

There is no overpass straight ahead. I toss the phone on the passenger seat next to my work bag. The phone starts to ring. I press the end button. When the street light turns red, I pull down the vanity mirror and smile into it. My face feels waxy and stiff like a mannequin's. My work entails lots of smiles. I'm a "College Adviser and Tutorial Specialist" at Pro-Ivy Education Center in Encino. I read college admission essay drafts all day and hold up my head just so that my emotions won't spill all over the pages and besmear the faces of eager souls intent on getting into the best universities. These kids — or I should say, their parents — pay for my wages. I can't exactly say, *Look, this might do just fine if you submit it with a bottle of vodka and a letter of apology.*

Before I take the two flights up to the office I get three more missed calls. I guess Sandy will have her suspicions by now. Maybe she's sorry that I'm her legal conservator. Before me, it was Mother. But Mother was a total pushover. That's what Julie, the case manager, thought too. *Your mother can't continue to let Sandy do whatever she wants to. She's so easily manipulated. We need to do what's best for your sister, not what she wants.*

What's best for Sandy. The second time Sandy slit her wrists, I practically moved back home. Mom was a mess. The doorbell rang at a predawn odd hour, and I swallowed hard something that was trying to tumble out. At the door I saw Mom and Sandy. Mom stood there looking like an invisible gun was aimed between her eyes. Sandy had a chenille couch-throw wrapped around her body. *Show her, Mom said. Show her what you've done.* Sandy held out both wrists to me. Her left wrist had a powder-blue toilet paper wrapped around it. I could see no blood, a good thing.

Mom sank to the floor. *Which hospital do we go to, Deeyah? Tell me, and we'll go.* All the while Sandy said, *It's okay. The blood is dried now.* But she didn't struggle when I drove her to the emergency.

She was out after the initial 72-hour hold. The hospital couldn't move her to the recommended locked facility against the wishes of the conservator, our mom. *It kills any mom, even one with a stone for a heart, to hear her child saying, 'What kind of mother are you to put me in a place like this?'* That was all Mother could say.

It was either relinquishing Sandy to a public conservator, one of those faceless bureaucrats who had two hundred other "cases," or having someone else in the family take charge. Our father in Anchorage. He says, *She's just lazy. She has the lazy devil in her. All she needs is a month of hauling frozen salmon.* So that was that and I took over. And now Sandy calls me literally twenty times a day, mostly collect.

guess I could've told Sandy the truth, that unlike her, I don't have all day to kill. I have work to do, bills to pay and can't be taking calls at 8:45 in the morning and still clock into work by nine. Some days after a whole day of reading mediocre personal essays that run the gamut of wanting to save the universe and improving the lives of humanity as we know it, I just want to drop dead it's so depressing. I'm wondering, what the point of it all is. I can't tell my sister this. She's the one who's suicidal. She's the one, God, mental.

The top news item of the night is Winona Ryder's shoplift trial. Leaning on the arm of her bald attorney, she steals a glance at the cameras like a coy school girl. Before she's whisked away out of sight, the camera narrows in on her outfit, a pink 60's skirt suit that hugs her tiny frame.

The phone rings. It's Mom. Have you eaten, she says. Come over. I'm making calamari soup and abalone porridge.

The interviewee is a thirty-something looking woman with mopey blonde hair. The hand holding the mike before her asks in a theatrical voice, 'You flew in all the way from Kansas to watch the Winona trial? She giggles. Why, yes, she says. I mean we have celebrities in Kansas, but not like this. This is big, this is history in the making. And plus it's nice to go home and say, 'Hey, I was in Beverly Hills and I saw Winona up close.'

Oh please. Gimme a break. If tonight you not like calamari, Mom says in her thick Korean accent, I make *sundubu* soup. She coughs and adds, this time in Korean, I could make cucumber salad, your favorite. I have Persian cucumbers tonight.

Thanks Ma, I say. But I'm beat tonight.

I turn off the TV and throw in yesterday's left-over chicken in the microwave. I pull out a knife from the wooden rack and place the jagged edges in the palm of my hand. The stainless steel feels light and cool. One of the first things I bought when I moved out at twenty-two was a set of kitchen knives. No extravaganza, just a six-piece set from IKEA, under \$20. But it offered feelings of illicit pleasure, like teenage sex, to come home to a rack full of knives untouched, just as I'd left them in the morning. None of my knives would tax on human blood.

In Mom's house, there's only one kitchen knife. She has no steak knife or salad knife or butter knife. *It's easier to keep an eye on just one knife*, she says.

The only knife in Mom's house has

dull blade like all its predecessors. Tonight when she cuts the stringy meat of the squid, I know the knife will struggle like an old man's dentures trying to tear off a strip of rubber band. I offered to buy Mom some decent chef's knives — she so adores cooking. I said, Mom, use them for now, and when Sandy comes home I could always hold them for you.

She said, No, don't spend your money. I'm so clumsy, what if I cut my fingers with one of those sharp things?

Mom went on in Korean, I saw this infomercial once that showcased a chef's knife that can cut through metal pipes. *Imagine*, she said. *Metal pipes. Who would want a knife like that at home?*

My mom has a small flower shop down on Reseda. She could slice thorns off of a dozen long-stem roses in 45 seconds flat. With a razor so thin that when you hold it, it becomes an extension of your skin.

On Sundays, Mom and I drive to Long Beach to visit my sister. I'm not sure exactly whereabouts La Montana is on the map of Long Beach, but it's surely not by the beach because there's no sea breeze, just a faint smell of toxins from the factories and warehouses nearby. On Sundays there's only one on-duty front office staff and it's a different person each time. Some days we're allowed some privacy out in the nicer gazebo outside the main gate, and some days we're told, *No, Sandy has no level 2 privilege; she can't leave the premise.*

She's not going anywhere, I say. I point and say, See, we're going to that gazebo, right there, on hospital grounds.

The staff shrugs and says, *Hospital policy.*

I once lost an umbrella on one of these Sunday visits. It was a windy rainy day and the wind tugged at the umbrella like a suction machine. This umbrella, before it flew away, bent itself like a bowl, inside out. It landed on the other side of the gate, many yards out of reach. I couldn't get it because the gate was locked. The on-duty behind the counter said, *I have no coverage. You have to wait.* When I was finally let out, the umbrella was gone. For some reason, being on this side of the gate would always remind me of that flipped-out umbrella.

I have nothing to do during these two-hour visits, so I usually starve myself before coming here. But when we're locked inside the gate, eating's not easy. In the inner courtyard, there are some random park benches and a lone gazebo. This particular gazebo is filthy with age old crumbs and cigarette butts smoked to the filters. But it's to this gazebo we would go. Mom tries to make nice by spreading her plastic table cloth on the filmy table and setting it with her fancy cookery. I look around, hoping we won't be bothered.

During their smoke break, the patients come out. Some of them moon-walk to our table and stare. One would point and say, *What's that? Kimchee? It's*

hot, isn't it? Can I have some? Sandy, with a flat expression, would nod and say, *Uh huh, and point with her good hand for them to dig in. During these smoke breaks, these patients surround us like flies. When I can't take it anymore, I say, Can you give us some privacy? We want to eat in peace.*

But Ajumah, Sandy's Korean roommate, is a messy fly to kill, if you will. For one, Mom likes her. She's a middle-aged divorcee, like Mom, and Ajumah speaks perfect Korean.

When I first saw her, she was pleading her case with one of the ward attendants. *El bano. Quiero el bano, ahorita, she repeated.*

The attendant gave her a blank look. I chipped in. *I think she's saying that she needs to use the restroom.*

The attendant crossed his arms and winked. *I know exactly what she said. But what she means, now that's something you don't know.*

Later I asked her what she wanted and why the attendant wouldn't let her use the restroom. It turned out that she had indigestion all day, and it made her feel better to say the word *el bano*. *Bring me some Alka-Seltzer the next time you come to visit, she said. And she kept shaking the hand that held my shirt sleeve.*

Maybe it's not the *el bano* episode at all. Maybe what killed it for me was her makeup. When you look at her, what jumps out is her dark eyeliner. The black kohl encircles the entire circumference of her eyes. This makes her seem like she's forever frowning. The liner is over-defined and overdone. Her brows are as thick and black as Liz Taylor's. The makeup is so meticulous, so flawless, that you know right away that it's permanently tattooed into her skin. She'd probably gotten it done in her youth, maybe in her twenties.

The makeup would've been in style back in those days, making her look like a movie star even while scrubbing off dried urine in the outhouse. *All of my three children's poo-poo diaper I washed, this Ajumah later said, all the while picking at our lunch with her fingers. Sandy's Mom, you know, when we were Sandy's or Denisa's age did we even hear of disposable diapers? And who could afford them? I am right, yes, Sandy's Mom?*

Yet today, after twenty or thirty years, the eye makeup is garish and glaring on her prune eyes and sagging skin. It is the only remnant of what used to be a young face. Maybe even when she looks at herself in the mirror she is tormented by the eyeliner that reminds her of better days — not a tender and distant reminder but one that's in your face, literally.

This Ajumah jumps at the chance to eat with us. And she talks. She talks with her hands, her body, and her entire mouth. About her being here because she shattered the neighbor's window. About her college years as a nursing student at "the presti-

gious Ewha University." *I was a practicing nurse, a real nurse, an RN. None of this 'LVN' business for me. All of these nurses here, Sandy's Mom, I know more about medicine and patient care than they.* As if to prove this, her busy hand holds up Sandy's good wrist and takes her pulse. She grabs my sister's prescription slips and decodes all the BID's and QID's and the dosage. *Depakote 1500 milligram—this is so high!*

Mom nods. She moves the plate of *Chopchae* noodles closer to *Ajumah* so she could pick better with her spoon-fork. Mom asks, *Why are you here?*

Because I cannot go home. My sickness goes a way back, Sandy's Mother. This has stayed with me since I was twenty-nine. A flowery age, as they say, Sandy's Mother, yes? Since twenty-nine and it still has not gone away. That is the thing with this disease. Once you contract it, it just stays with you. *Ajumah* picks up the flat *kimchee* pancake with her fingers and raises it high toward her mouth.

Recalling my general Psychology class, I ask her if she'd received the ECT or EST, one of those things. She nods. I ask her for clarification, *You had the electric shock treatment?* She nods vigorously this time. *Endless times. They tried everything.*

Do you hear voices and things like that?

Ajumah turns to Mom with eagerness in her voice. *Yes! I hear voices.*

Does the voice tell you what to do?

Yes, it commands things for me to do...I can't go home because I get mad and start breaking things.

Mom wants to know where her husband is in all this. *Still in Paraguay,* she says, where they used to live together for ten years. *He'd cheated on me with this woman for five years. He still lives with her, taking care of her children. And I here, I am full of babbles.*

Mom says, *So it's because of your husband.*

Ajumah stares at me. *Why do you frown so? Be careful lest you develop premature wrinkles,* she says.

Sandy's thirtieth birthday doesn't fall neatly on a Sunday, but Mom and I decide the immediate Sunday preceding her actual birthday will do. It turns out Sandy wasn't bluffing. The doctor does want to talk. He says he's switching Sandy's meds and would I sign the consent at the upcoming action-plan meeting.

I take the Friday off and take the hour long drive to Long Beach. I take Beverly Glen all the way down to Westwood to save time, hop on the 405 to the 710, but I'm still ten minutes late to the 8:30 meeting. Sandy's even more late. She's not there when I rush in. The social worker points to an empty seat and says, Sandy's making good progress. She's good about her meds and goes to

some
of the day pro-
grams now.

Just then Sandy walks in, her legs
trailing behind her upper body. Her hair is neatly combed
and braided in two and she wears a pink lip gloss.

Hi Dee, thanks for coming, she says. I tell her she looks good this morning,
because she does.

Sandy's new diagnosis: schizophrenic disorder. When she reaches for my
hand I move it away.

I draw mental pictures, black nebulous wiggles, that my mind intuitively
be the face of despair. I cannot touch my sister's hand.

Out in the lobby, I ask Sandy again, You sure, Sandy, you sure you hear
voices?

She says, I want you to see something in my room. She turns to the black
attendant wearing red plastic glasses behind the main counter.

Is there any more apple juice left? I'm thirsty.
There's no apple juice, but we have orange Tang you want some of that?
The attendant hands her the drink in a mini paper cup.

This is my sister, Sandy says. You should give her some too.
I don't want any, I say.
I'm talking louder than I would've cared to when I say, You need to tell me
more about these voices, because Ajumah engines over from the sitting room.

We have the same disease, Sandy-shi and I. The voices speak to her too; I
am right, yes, Sandy-shi? Somebody has to put a stop to this woman. I fix a stare at
her coal-black eyes.

There's this interesting philosophy, Ajumah, that says, family wants to be
left alone with family.
Ajumah scowls, her stance askew, like an unbalanced scale about to tip
over.

I return the favor with a sour smile. I continue, I, for one, happen to
agree with that philosophy. A lot. Now will you please excuse us?
Ajumah retreats but only after her mouth gushes out spit and words.
Mean and ungracious thing. You think you have knowledge in your head, but what do you
really know?

Sandy stands there facing the wall that has the frame of a Picasso replica
with the words "Generous Donation of the Knitting Women's Foundation" in bold
white letters stamped on the head of it.

I need to make sure Sandy knows what she thinks
she's admitting to.

Sandy, everybody talks to
themselves some-

times. People say, 'I told myself this,' or 'This voice inside my head said that.' Plenty people talk to themselves when they're sad or lonely or generally bummed out. God, I hear voices too, when I'm dead tired. I swear I do. Other people do too. Does this mean they're schizo? Do I look schizo to you?

All those people are not me, she says.

Back in her room, Sandy hovers over her plywood dresser drawer. I smell Autumn through the dried flowers that make a halo around her bedside. The yellow daffodils from last Sunday have not fared well. All of them are droopy and bent like sad old people.

Sandy holds up this silver-gray material that is folded into a nearly-perfect square. I unfold the square and it turns into a sleeveless sundress. It is unassumingly simple yet gracefully cut. I like it. *It's nice, I say. Whose is it?*

It's mine. I bought it for five dollars. I think it's real silk.

I check the label. *Says 71% rayon and 29% acetate, whatever that is.*

Sandy pats the hem of the dress. When I get out I'm going to Jenny Craig. I'm going to try really hard this time.

I hold up the dress before me in the closet mirror. The length is in good taste too, I think, not quite a mini but not stingy about showing some legs.

I have a birthmark the size of a nursing mother's nipples on one of my legs, right where the knee joins the calf. The crimson shade has faded over the years, but in grade school, it was there, on my calf, like a blotch of fresh red paint. The more brazen boys would tease, "Why you have a chi-chi on your leg?" Then this caught fire and by the second grade, I became the "chi-chi girl."

I avoided dresses and never ever wore shorts. When school let out, I would often sit in the corner of the black playground watching my sister play tether ball or hand ball. Unlike me, Sandy was athletic and quick with her hands and legs. I remember this one dress, this royal blue dress she wore all the time. The fabric was soft, softer than this 71% rayon sundress. It was like touching the smooth back of a kitten. You could just see the softness even without touching it, like knowing a kitten feels soft just by looking at it. I want to say it was made of satin, this dress, but this is probably not true since our parents were poor.

The great thing was, my sister wasn't trapped in that dress. She *moved* in that dress. No, she made that dress move. She made that dress jump with one smooth stroke of her hand. The tetherball spun out of control like a crazy yellow planet and her opponent knew, even before the stringed ball went all the way around the pole that he was history. Sometimes she was so high in the air her underwear would show a crack. But she never minded this so long as she

played.

Sometimes I can't make the connection between that Sandy, my sister who beat all those mean boys in tetherball, with this Sandy, my sister who will turn thirty inside the locked gates of La Montana.

Sandy smiles at the other me, the one in the mirror, the one holding up the sundress.

The social worker says, *they have cardboard knives here, for your cake.* Sandy continues to smile at the other me.

I talk to the Sandy in the mirror. *What did I tell you Sandy. Told you they wouldn't let me bring in anything from outside.*

I want to see how that dress would look on you. Then maybe I could tell how it would look on me, not now, of course, but after I go to Jenny Craig and scale down some.

I change in the bathroom. Sister or no sister, I feel awkward about Sandy seeing me naked. The Spanish *gustar* is an awkward verb. The awkwardness is not innate in the verb — it's perfectly fine and normal in the Spanish language — but the awkwardness happens in the translation. *Me gusta este vestido* is not exactly, "I like this dress." It's this: This dress is pleasing to me.

This dress is pleasing to me.

I walk out. I think I look elegant, at least I feel I do. Sandy gathers her hands neatly before her and beams like a husband who's fallen in love all over again. *You look nice*, she says.

I thank her and check my side view through the mirror. Elegant from this angle too, except I see *Ajumah* sneaking in. Well, I guess this is her room too.

Ajumah crinkles her eyes and moves in closer to me. *That's my dress*, she says triumphantly.

I turn to my sister.

Ajumah, but you sold me the dress.

My dress, *Ajumah* shrieks, and reaches for me. I step aside and sit next to Sandy on the bed.

She's in this weird mood today, Sandy whispers to me in English. *Let's go out-side. Let her cool off.*

Ajumah follows us out. At the counter she yells, *Mira, mi ropa. She wear mi clothing!* Then in Korean, *I wore that dress when I was a nursing scholar at Ewha University!*

The attendant in red plastic glasses motions to me. She says, *Don't mind her. She's like that sometimes.*

I make a half smile. I stand there trying

to

decide what I feel. I'm wearing *Ajunah's* dress from college, a dress my sister bought for five dollars. My sister has paid for this dress, but I still feel like I've stolen from *Ajunah*.

When she repeats, *Mira, mi ropa*, I think I am glad. It's always nice to recognize your own.

IT TAKES COURAGE

WALLACE

HAS IT!

DO
YOU?

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Up for
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P.P.A. Wallace Campaign
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Bryant Tinsford, Chm.

Marie Calendar's

DeAnn Jordan

A family gathering,

someone's mid-life birthday;

not sure

why I'm here

muted by the hum in my head

—it vibrates on piano

strings

in the green and grey of the carpet, patterns shift into strange creatures

(bizarre gargoyles—half woman,

half winged beasts

eating their young)

wood chairs

solid, solid table I grip to steady, hold on for dear life,

banquet of homey foods—my mother's favorite sweet

cornbread, honey-butter balls,

eggs on my sister's plate.

I haven't eaten for seven days—a God's

week of creation

inverted.

Eggs and potatoes lay like terrible offerings down the table,

quiche with ham,

eggs benedict, crusted toast.

I'm a catatonic puppet

in my otherworld,

a string pulled

a small egg cluster

soft little planet

purged from my body

a week ago—a Goddess' prerogative—Kali's

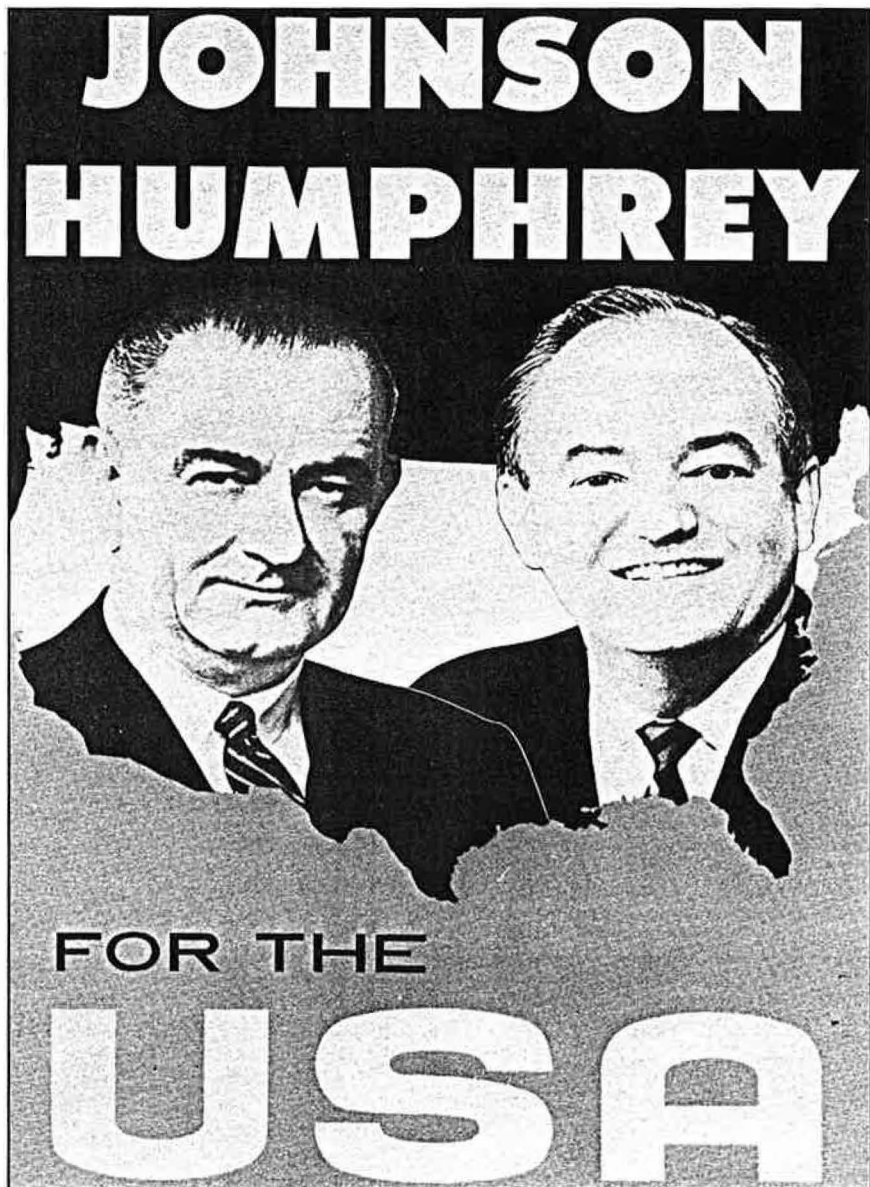
right of cleansing—the eggs

the eggs.

They are beating off to the Star Spangled Banner,
Statue of Liberty nude, boys with steel spines
and enough semen to populate a fourth world
sealing legacies in plastic cups.

There's the rub, you long to tell them. Peep show,
pure world of wanting,
silk stocking when it was really silk
is lost. What remains is the cupped palm,
gloss paper, suspended cross.

The tangible world of terror,
an American wet dream.



Waking Up in Sicily

Keith Onstad

I woke up that morning to the sound of the Iron Curtain falling all across Europe. I was in a field behind a low stone wall, and I knew exactly where I was, but not how I got there. I raised my head from the dust and opened my eyes as wide as I dared, but I already knew that Jeremy was gone. Gone. Off the island. Back to the real world. Beneath my body the box of take-out was smashed flat and the leftover calzones were squashed beyond all recognition. The bottles at my feet were empty, but when I turned my head I could see a full bottle leaning against the wall.

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We did not know, at first, that Mount Etna had erupted. We saw the mushroom cloud off in the distance towards the Naval Air Station at Sigonella, and everyone had a theory. Some thought it was a nuclear accident (although the official line was that we could “neither confirm nor deny” that there were nuclear weapons at Sigonella). Some thought one of Qadhafi’s terrorists had finally made it to the big martyr’s paradise in the sky. One man thought it was a test explosion in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. And a few even thought it might be Mount Etna exploding.

One at a time we slipped back into the barracks to grab our cameras. We might not have known what caused the sky to darken in such an unnatural fashion, but we all wanted to record it on film just in case it was the beginning of the end of the world. After I opened my locker and removed the camera I reached under the bed (in the new Air Force we don’t call them bunks) for a bottle of *Vino Locale*. The first thing I discovered upon landing on the island was the *Vino Locale* served in most restaurants. A bottle cost less than a dollar. Most of the girls mixed theirs half and half with Seven-Up to tone down the, often harsh, flavor that was an acquired taste. Quickly acquired. The alcohol level ranged somewhere between barely noticeable to kick-you-in-the-ass-and-knock-you-over-for-a-week, with a tendency towards the latter. The magic of *Vino Locale*, however, was that you would never know what you were getting from bottle to bottle.

Back outside I snapped a roll of film that would never develop properly, and then opened the bottle of wine, lifted it to my lips, and took a long drink straight from the neck. It was the kick-you-in-the-ass variety, so I made the requisite “god-damn-that-is-harsh” face before I passed the bottle to Gordon Bradley, a buck sergeant who worked in the Comm Center and had come in on the same plane as I did three weeks prior to the eruption. He wiped the mouth

of the bottle on his fatigue t-shirt and took a healthy swallow before he passed it on. In very little time there were several bottles making the rounds and a couple of little barbecues cranking out hot Italian sausage from the open air market in Comiso. Someone moved a pair of speakers outside the barracks and snaked the cable in through the window. We sat outside and listened to Pink Floyd tell us how they wished we were there as we got drunk and watched the mushroom cloud get bigger and darker and more real until it filled the whole sky like a storm hovering on the horizon just waiting for an excuse to let loose a torrent of destruction and mayhem on our peaceful little Ground Launched Cruise Missile (GLCM) base.

GLCM is properly pronounced "Glick-em" and the unofficial motto at Comiso Air Station was "Glick-em till they glow, and then shoot 'em in the dark." We too could neither confirm nor deny that there actually were nuclear weapons in the bunkers behind the triple layer of fences topped with concertina wire and constantly patrolled by both U.S. and Italian security forces carrying M-16s.

The consensus was that it had to be Etna, because if there had been any sort of *incident* there would have been a recall and we all would long since have been called to our stations. About half an hour later, as the sun was disappearing from the sky, someone heard from someone else that one of the guys in the Comm Center had told him that it was Mount Etna erupting, but at that point no one cared anymore.

It was the next day that I first spoke with Jeremy.

Looking back now it seems that my entire relationship with Jeremy was bracketed by events that could be seen either as massive forces of destruction, or miraculous opportunities for life and renewal. Depending on your point of view. The day I met Jeremy Mount Etna was still spewing ash and lava high into the sky above Sicily, and the last time I ever saw him was the day the Berlin wall came down.

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One of the first things you figure out about Air Force Dining Facilities (in the new Air Force we don't call them Chow Halls) is that if you order an omelet they have to make your eggs while you wait, but if you order anything else it comes out of huge, industrial, metal cafeteria bins where it could have been sitting for hours. Everyone ordered omelets. The cooks carefully measured out the ingredients using special ingredient measuring equipment designed in

top-secret ingredient measuring laboratories costing millions of dollars, so that every omelet received exactly the most efficient amount of ingredients to guarantee that our taxpayers were not being overcharged, but that our boys in uniform still received the nutritious portion of eggs, sausage, ham, and cheese required to defend our country from the communist hordes.

It was late in the morning, and there was no one I knew from the Comm Squadron in the chow hall, so I picked an unoccupied table in the corner and sat down to read propaganda in the *Stars & Stripes* newspaper and enjoy a late Saturday morning breakfast. A few minutes later the tall, blonde cook who already remembered that I always ordered a no-cheese, two egg omelet with mushrooms and onions, sat down across from me with a tray holding enough food to feed a small army.

"You're a vegetarian, aren't you?"

I nodded, wondering if he was going to play the "why do you still eat eggs?" game that so many non-vegetarians do to trick vegetarians into admitting that they really eat meat.

"How are the eggs? I cleared a section of the grill of all the ham and bacon grease before I cooked them."

"The eggs are okie doke," I said in a very bad imitation of the Swedish Chef in *The Muppet Movie* telling all his Muppet pals that the film was fixed.

I am not sure how I knew that he would get *The Muppet Movie* reference. Men in the Air Force are far more likely to get references to *Debbie Does Dallas*, which doesn't even have a cool soundtrack, but I didn't even think before speaking, and from the way he laughed I knew he understood.

For the next ten minutes we did bad impressions of Beaker, Fozzie, Professor Honey-Dew, Dr. Teeth, and the whole Muppet gang, and then he introduced himself. His name was Jeremy, but I called him the Swedish Chef, and before long the nickname caught on and every one in the Comm Squadron was calling him The Swedish Chef, and then The Swede, and finally just Swede. I don't know what the other chow hall people called him, because people from the Comm Squadron don't really hang out with people from the Services Squadron.

*

Comiso Air Station, Italy was a remote tour of duty. Remote means the tour only lasts a year, and you can't bring your wife and kids. For the married guys it was like a yearlong "get out of jail free" card. Most of them spent every weekend at the combination Officer/NCO/Airmen's club getting smashed out of their minds on American beer and listening to amateur DJs play a combina-

tion of 70s rock, country music, and bad 80s pop. Weekends at "the club" were interrupted by occasional trips to the third bridge in Ragusa. I don't know what went on at the first two bridges in Ragusa, but in a row of slowly disintegrating concrete buildings next to the third, married men could have sex with bored, middle aged prostitutes who would pretend not to speak any English and would never ask them to pick up the kids for soccer practice, take out the trash, or bring them to orgasm. It was the only time in their lives when most of these men were ever actually honest with a woman.

For the rest of us the island was like a Mediterranean playground. Jeremy and I went in fifty-fifty on a red and black, 1978, Lancia Fulvia. It cost almost a million lire, but that was still less than a thousand dollars, and that little car could move. They do have traffic laws in Sicily, but they only come into play to determine who is at fault after an accident. No one cares before it happens, but after an accident everyone always wants to know who is at fault. It was not unusual for us to be passing a Fiat on a two lane road on our way to the beach at Marina de Ragusa and be passed at the same time by a maniac Italian driver who did not care that it was a two lane road, or that there was a corner up ahead, or that there were three cars heading towards us doing exactly the same thing.

We spent every weekend, when we didn't have to work, driving all over the island to look at ruined temples that were hundreds of years old before the time of Christ, or explore medieval castles, or try and see the mafia trials in Palermo. We spent countless days at the beach barbecuing and drinking cheap wine, body surfing, exploring the World War II bunkers, and trying to pick up Italian chicks at the few "discotheques." I think we saw more of Sicily than most Italians ever did.

Did you know that there was a statue of a black man breaking free of his chains on Sicily? The plaque underneath tells the story, in less than 25 words, of how Abraham Lincoln single-handedly freed the slaves in America. I still have a picture of Jeremy standing on one side of the fifteen foot statue of a muscular black man who is holding his broken shackles high above his head.

Jeremy can read Italian and was walking forward to read the plaque when he tripped over a rock and smashed head first into the statue — but he never hit. His forehead was on a collision course with the hard rock base underneath the muscular figure when the statue leaned forward and caught Jeremy in his arms. Then he lifted him to his feet and they stood in the middle of the square shaking hands and looking into each other's eyes. The statue straightened up just as I snapped the picture, and, as far as I know, it never moved again.

*

There are no secrets on any Air Force base, and, even when there are, there are no secrets in the Communications Squadron. The Comm Squadron processes all incoming and outgoing messages for every unit on the base, and in the days before email this meant that whenever anything happened someone in the Comm Squadron knew about it. Which is how I knew, even before anyone in the Services Squadron, that Jeremy was facing a court martial on charges of homosexuality.

Of course he did not get the court martial, but he was taken into custody, and he did get an Article 15. An Article 15 is what they give you after they threaten you with a court martial. The difference is that an Article 15 is administrative, there is no trial, there is no federal conviction, and they can have you off the base and on a plane back to the civilian world in less than a week. They had him off the island so fast he did not have time to say goodbye to anybody. Anybody but me that is. We had time for one last night in the town of Comiso before we said goodbye forever.

*

The sound of the Iron Curtain falling all across Europe woke me that morning, and the clang of metal crashing to the ground echoed loudly in my ears as I looked around and tried to remember. I was in a field behind a low stone wall, and I knew exactly where I was, but not how I got there. I raised my head from the dust and opened my eyes as wide as I dared, but I already knew that Jeremy was gone. Gone. Off the island. Back to the real world. Beneath my body the box of take-out was smashed flat and the leftover calzones were squashed beyond all recognition. The bottles at my feet were empty, but when I turned my head I could see a full bottle leaning against the wall.

The label on the bottle read "Bianco" but the wine inside was red, and on the outside Jeremy had written "capelli del cane" (as if I could read Italian). I dragged myself to a sitting position against the wall made from stone, brushed the ants off the calzones, and opened the bottle of *Vino Locale*. I wasn't worried about Jeremy. He would not miss the bus to the Navy base at Sigonella, or his flight out. Jeremy was never late. He was always where he was supposed to be when he was supposed to be. Always.

I looked around and could see bits and pieces of concrete littering the ground and the events of the previous evening started to flood back into my mind.

The Lancia was in the shop again, so we hitched a ride downtown

with a couple of guys from Inside Plant and then walked to our favorite local restaurant. I am sure it had an Italian name, but we called it "The Mama Mia Pizzeria," because the first time we went there we spent two hours talking to the daughter of the woman who did all the cooking, and the only thing we understood, this was before Jeremy learned Italian, was that when she got frustrated with us she would actually say "Mama Mia!" like a New York Italian in a bad 50s movie.

We had an unspoken agreement to pretend it was a night like any other. We drank the local wine, flirted with the daughter and the mother, joked with the father, and when the evening was over ordered several bottles of wine and two calzones to go.

Also by unspoken agreement, we did not check any of the bars or restaurants to see if anyone was heading back to the barracks, but instead started walking down the cracked concrete road towards the base. By about three a.m. we were only a mile or so from base, and we stopped and sat down in the middle of the road to eat our calzones. To drink our wine. To talk.

"It isn't true. You know it isn't true don't you?"

"I know."

He took a long drink from the bottle and passed it back to me.

"This whole thing is a fucking lie. My roommate says he walked in and saw me blowing one of the fags from Supply, but it isn't true."

"I know."

"It doesn't matter anyway. The Article 15 doesn't show up on any civilian record. All it means is that I go home a few months before you. We're all going home soon. I heard on the radio in the Mama Mia Pizzeria that they were tearing down the fucking wall in Berlin."

"The actual Berlin wall?"

I opened a new bottle, and Jeremy tossed the empty over his shoulder into the field on the side of the road.

"It's coming down man. The cold war is over. Russia folded. We win. And, just like after World War II everyone will be going home. I guaran-fucking-tee it."

I could tell Jeremy was pretty drunk. He only swears when he has had too much to drink.

"You are witnessing the last days of the military-industrial complex. There is no way congress will keep throwing money at the military without the Russians to fight—they would have to invent a whole new enemy, and that ain't gonna happen my friend. That just ain't gonna happen. In three months you will be stateside and the U.S. will have an Armed Forces the size of England's."

I nodded my head, and for a few minutes both of us were silent.

"It wasn't me. I walked in on him, and he said it was me."

He leaned forward and rose to his knees to grab the bottle. I did the same and for a moment we were face to face—inches from each other.

"It isn't fucking true. If I were a fag I could fuck anyone I wanted. I wouldn't have to blow some Supply loser."

We each had a hand on the bottle. In the reflection of his eyes I could see my own.

"I could rape you right now if I were gay."

I could feel his breath on my face. We were not touching. An invisible force field separated us by a fraction of an inch.

"I could drag you over that wall and fuck your brains out and there is not a goddamn thing you could do about it. They're already kicking me out."

My mouth was dry and I tried to swallow but could not.

"But I won't, because I'm not gay."

I wanted to jerk the bottle from his hand and take a long drink. I wanted to push him away from me. I wanted to ask him what he thought he was doing. I wanted to tell him that he was my friend and he did not have to prove anything.

I wanted to force my eyes away from his.

A large object crashed into the ground next to us and the spell was broken.

A few moments later another object fell in the field behind us. Then something smashed into the pizza boxes, and we could see that it was a chunk of concrete about the size of a man's fist.

"It's the wall. It's the fucking wall."

Jeremy was right. All around us pieces of the Berlin wall were raining down on the Sicilian countryside. Something hit my leg and it felt for a moment like I had been shot. I screamed in pain. A small piece of concrete, about the size of my thumb, had smashed in to me, and when I looked down at the tiny rock I could see that it was engraved with the word, "Freedom."

Another piece hit right next to us, and Jeremy jumped to his feet, dragging me with him. He pulled us both behind the low stone wall and then went back to get the wine and calzones.

We huddled together in the meager shelter provided by the stone wall and waited for the concrete storm to end. Neither of us was hit again, and after a while the rain of cement slowed, and then finally stopped. When it was over I rested my head against Jeremy's shoulder and went to sleep.

submissions

The Northridge Review accepts submissions throughout the year. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the writer's name, address, email and telephone number as well as the titles of the works submitted. The writer's name should not appear on the manuscript itself. Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be delivered to

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BLACKHEADS "PET HATE"

Say Men, Girls in Choosing Date

What a "black mark" is the richest... according to men and girls popular enough to be chosen about dates!

"Nobody's interested!" "Nobody's date bait!" And that's not all that's said of those who are careless about blackheads. But blackheads ARE ugly! Blackheads ARE grimy! And they DON'T look good in close-up!

So can you blame the fellow who says, "Here, I meet lots of girls who look safe at first glance. But if, on that second glance, I see dingy blackheads, it's good night!"

Or can you blame the girl who writes letters, "I have to go out with a fellow who has blackheads. If he's careless about that you're sure he'll embarrass you in other ways, too!"

But you — are YOUR ears burning? Well, you're company and, and to say, good company. There are lots of other-wise attractive fellows and girls who could date anyone they like if they'd only realize how offensive blackheads are... and how easily and quickly they could get rid of them... if they want to!

"He-Man" Often Guilty of Blackhead Crime

Take your "he-man" — super as track, games, sports of all kinds... who thinks that after just a shower he's ready to go anywhere! And won't the girls all admire his muscles!

Sure they would! But not many dance floors are set up for hairy fists! You can't show off your muscles like book when only colors are in the ring. The "he-man" who's also careless, will get the breaks wherever he is!

Even Cute Girls Become Careless

Easy, too easy, for a girl to think that if she has the latest in clothes and hair-do she needn't bother about blackheads. A little more make-up, she guesses, will take care of that. BUT MAKE-UP WON'T HIDE BLACKHEADS! Not unless it's plaster of Paris, maybe! And even good make-up "slips" at a dance! So don't take chances, else though you may be!

TAKE THESE TIPS TO BANISH BLACKHEADS

Keep up clean by washing morning and night with warm, almost hot, water. Use good soap and plenty of it. And finish with cool water.

Extract every blackhead as soon as you see it with a SAFE extractor. Don't use finger nails. Don't inject. This may mean infection, infected pores, a wasted skin.

Just be clean! Be quiet! And be safe! That's easy! And that's ALL!

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