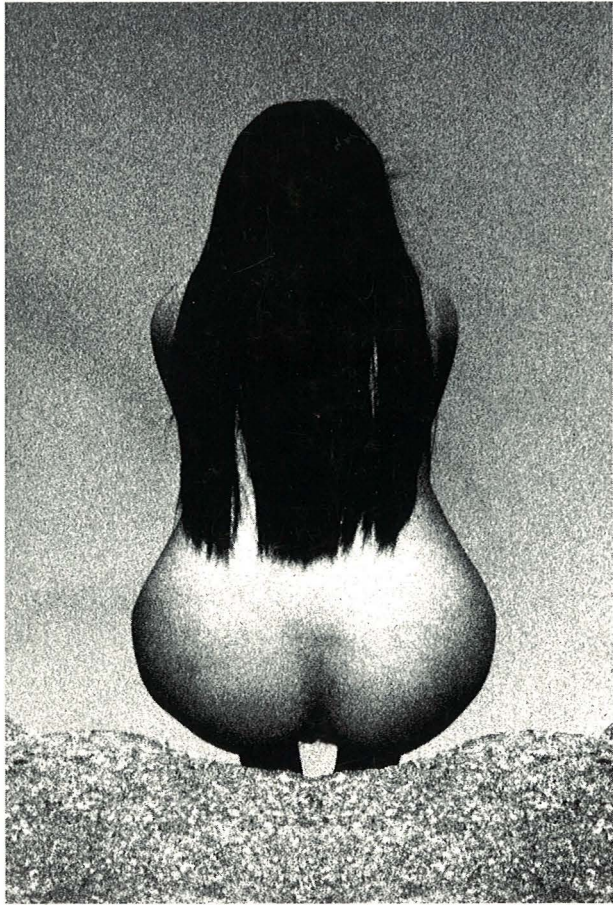


# Northridge Review

Fall 1992



*Northridge Review*  
*Fall 1992*

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*Northridge Review* invites submissions continuously between September and May. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the author's name, address, telephone number, as well as the titles of the works submitted. *The author's name should not appear on the manuscript itself.* Please limit submissions to three short stories and/or five poems. Photography and graphics are to be in black and white, and there is no limit to the quantity of these submissions. Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be sent to: *Northridge Review*, Department of English, California State University, Northridge, California 91330. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

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# Awards

Two awards are given annually in recognition of the finest works published in the Spring and Fall issues of *Northridge Review*.

The ***Northridge Review* Fiction Award** recognizes the best short story published by a CSUN student. The winner of this award receives seventy-five dollars.

The co-winners of this award for 1992 are Astrid Ryterband for "The City Where the Waves Begin," published in the Spring 1992 issue, and Andrew Rivera for "When Morning Comes," published in the Fall 1991 issue. *Northridge Review* expresses its gratitude to Katharine Haake for judging the entries.

The **Rachel Sherwood Award**, given in memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes the best poem published by *Northridge Review*. The winner receives seventy-five dollars and will be acknowledged alongside the name of Rachel Sherwood.

The co-winners of this award for 1992 are Barbara Sigmon for "Night," published in the Spring 1992 issue, and Elizabeth Warren for "(writing a) Love Song," also published in the Spring 1992 issue. *Northridge Review* expresses its gratitude to Dorothy Barresi for judging the entries.

In addition, this issue of *Northridge Review* proudly presents the winner of the annual award given by the **Academy of American Poets**, Robert Arroyo, whose poems "Collector's Items," "Dreaming Catholic," "Wintersong" and "The Void Monkeys" appear in this issue.

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## **Somnambulists**

Many women walk with the yellow,  
wrinkled feet of many men  
who wander the earth in search of women  
who don't in any way resemble women walking.

Many men walk with the yellow,  
tired feet of their fathers  
who wandered blindly without ever  
thinking about where their feet came from  
(but they were sure they didn't belong on women).

Everyone's feet ache.  
Everyone's spitting pomegranate pits<sup>1</sup>.  
No one's particularly happy.

<sup>1</sup> *Pomegranate Pits* — Persephone, daughter of Demeter (Greek goddess of corn), was abducted by Hades and forbidden to leave the Underworld permanently by Hades' housekeeper, Todd, because she was caught red-handed eating six pomegranate seeds in the foyer (apparently a crime in the Underworld). Later in life, she unloaded a gunny sack of corn on some guy named Triptolemus and sent him throughout the world by flying chariot to teach corn and its culture.

*Robert Arroyo*

---

**Collector's Items**

At midnight from atop the Sepulveda Pass,  
San Fernando is a piece  
of silver, multifaceted, reflecting moonshine.  
By morning, under a vaulted sky,  
San Fernando is a dull penny  
left lying on the valley floor.

Mom was on her knees scrubbing the floor  
again; this is how the evening would pass:  
her cleaning, finding three nickels, a dime and penny  
between couch cushions. Dad, came home with a piece  
of lemon meringue pie for her, she mumbled a curse at the sky  
and returned to bringing the toaster to a shine.

We'd always be praying for the sun to shine;  
me, Manuel, Mundo and Pat sprawled on the living room floor  
with our eyes closed, sending our best prayers to the sky,  
mortgaging our souls so the clouds would pass.  
Summer was wasting, we'd promise anything for a piece  
of blue. Even if it meant giving up our candy penny.

I was broke, twenty-four and not a penny  
to my name. Stumbled outside, squinting in the glare of moonshine  
I fished through pockets for car keys, found a piece  
of Snickers bar, threw up on a truck's floor  
boards, said "God lemme find those keys before I pass  
out!" Last thing I remember was a dark sky.



I was hanging on grass, watching the sky  
circle beneath my feet. The sun was a bright penny  
burning my toes. The Earth made a spiral pass;  
I sailed in a lovely arc through a plate of moonshine,  
bellyflopping. My teeth shattered on the granite floor;  
I spent the afternoon collecting each enamel piece.

We were awake all night singing "Give Peace  
A Chance," somehow we knew the sky  
would never brighten. The black tiled floor  
was as bright as the future I'd trade for a penny.  
I went outside, hoping the moon would shine,  
but the clouds had yet to pass.

San Fernando, take a piece for a penny,  
there's a beautiful sky, rain or shine.  
So if you see it on the floor, pick it up as you pass.

## Dreaming Catholicism

You kept to a corner  
of the bed,  
the sheet taut  
over your folded legs.  
Another match,  
another cigarette's cherry  
reddening your flesh,  
the smoke curling  
into tight fists.

You said you found  
yourself on the wrong  
side of the rood screen,  
looking at faces  
watching you,  
your lips and the waves  
of sound each bead  
passing between your fingers

created.  
The cross  
threw a shadow cross  
half your body,  
dividing resistance,  
augmenting the mouth  
that repents.

You pulled the sheet higher,  
your breasts  
left to imagination.  
Outside, the moon,  
clearing the dead neon  
'El Rey Motel,'  
slipped light between blinds,

revealing the swift whorl  
of your eyes.

You said multi-stained  
windows of the various Christs  
arched away  
along the walls,  
mobilizing the apotheosis.  
Voices, indistinct

as a hum,  
swelled to a chant:  
'God Bless You,  
God Bless You,'  
sounding like a plea  
more than a condition.

You tiptoed around the foot  
of the bed,  
so lightly  
your passing would have swayed  
no thorned stems,  
left no marks in the wet bed  
of a rosary.  
Your bright legs  
stretched to the floor  
from where the sheet ended.

In the bathroom  
you collected  
your belongings:  
earrings, key ring,  
wedding ring;

closing your eyes,  
you raised your tokens,  
mumbling words over them.

## The Void Monkeys

Because he came to me fresh  
from whiskey  
and took something  
that was ours,  
I noticed how dusty  
love had become.  
How even the buzzard  
emotions lost their luster.

If I could raise my hand,  
I'd raise myself  
and peer over this brim,  
suicide the Queen of Cups,  
rabbit this hat.

If I could,  
I'd move the car  
from South Emotional  
and park it at the junction  
of Fairfax and Third;  
I'd wait until he spilled  
from 'Malone's,'  
talk him until he was blue,  
and then empty him  
from my life.

If I could

subtract  
as well as I multiply,  
I'd as soon divide  
than be carried over  
for another day.

## Wintersong

Homes overwhelm the lake front;  
hundreds of perfect square,  
burnt red-shingled, two-storied dwellings  
form a grid  
to the lip of the newly frozen lake.

Between blocks of buildings,  
bluish like veins run streets  
slicked by ice.  
Occasional vehicles motor slowly,  
chained though snowfall has ceased.

Blinded porch windows stare  
down the cold and brittle grass  
glazed the night before.  
Behind panes  
the living room is dark,  
silent except for bones of the house  
creaking,  
settling for a lifetime.

Upstairs, a whispering t.v. throws  
shapes of light on the bedroom wall,  
while a curled husband sleeps,  
clutching the remote  
in his right hand.

By an opened window  
his wife stands, watching the bluing sky.  
The morning tears her eyes,  
goosebumps her flesh  
and raises her nipples,  
aching, empty.

*Patricia Busillo*

---

**To the Young Lady in a  
Tight Black dress, Lace Stockings,  
and Heels the First Day of Classes**

Sister Cinderella with your  
tight black dress, long  
gold hair and dark  
sunglasses,

all us mice and pumpkins watched you  
come in with your  
blue notebook and  
dark blue looks.

The Prince stopped his opening speech;  
he was sure he'd  
seen you before  
in a dream.

He had a shoe in his closet  
that you'd surely  
fit if he'd  
push a bit.

All he needed was a sleaze of a  
young messenger  
to ask you to  
please see him.

Your sisters taught you all that you  
needed to know  
with their sharp broomsticks  
and mop-tops.

Sister Cinderella, I'm sure  
you'll have a ball  
with your tight black  
dress and prince.

But if by chance you're stranded, come join  
us pumpkins here.  
We're orange and we're  
happy and we'll be  
bigger next year.

*Maria Casey*

---

**ike**

saw ike turner  
at rock  
n' roll denny's  
on sunset  
strip two hookers  
in tow makin'  
a oreo cookie  
love sandwich

we sat smoking  
sober soaking  
up his sound  
slurred and blubbering  
he ate a hot fudge  
sundae with fries

we wondered  
what he'd learned  
in the joint  
laughing water  
in our lungs  
wondered why  
he went to  
the bathroom  
so many times and  
what exactly  
was in that  
black purse and  
how he could  
afford to  
pay those girls



he signed autographs  
for us and the guys  
from st. charles louisiana  
and he hand delivered  
the messages  
to us himself  
he made his bitches  
deliver too

he wrote  
'what's love got  
to do with it ?

not a damn thing'

*Karin Cotterman*

---

**Lines**

The beautiful lines in your face,  
all I can do is not to reach out  
to touch  
them, suddenly in the middle of your speech.  
So instead I notice the slight  
curl at the nape of your neck,  
the drawl that slips into words  
when you don't pay attention,  
and the smooth steadfastness  
of your forearm's hair.

These things have provoked me  
to appear here today,  
offering up in a firmly timid  
manner my honesty at being  
intrigued by suddenly  
tasting a slight accessibility  
to understanding the fragile inside  
that your cynicism tries to protect.  
Most definitely I am aware  
of a grumbling in my stomach.

I take notice of properly placed  
sinews that make  
me gasp at the concept of  
with. It seems  
obscenely obvious  
to me that I am here  
simply to view you.  
Since I am not frail  
I always feel  
obscenely obvious.

My words are brittle as  
they fall out of my mouth  
and shatter on the table,  
sending echoes throughout  
the restaurant, then  
your words are falling  
under the table, muffled  
by large feet underneath.

You still do not know that  
I think of you when I look  
at the stars.  
Perhaps someday soon I will  
be strong enough to tell you  
that there are stars in  
your eyes and the story in  
the lines around your mouth  
takes my mind places  
I do not will it to go,  
so that when you speak to me  
I sometimes wonder what words  
you are saying  
because I can't hear  
over the dissonance of your  
smile and the trembling of my hands.

## Reunion

On the evening of the party, the living room filled with people who—arriving at irregular intervals—entered the hallway, removed their coats or jackets, then moved into the living room. For these arrivals, Peter, invariably coming from the kitchen, answered the knock on the door, greeted the guests, laid their coats or jackets carefully across the bed in the bedroom, then escorted them into the living room where he served drinks. Some newcomers entered the kitchen briefly and greeted Susan before returning to the living room, to sit either on one of the odd assortment of chairs or large multicolored cushions scattered about or to stand together in small clusters, conversing.

That was earlier, however. Now the apartment is populated, the party underway.

The uncurtained windows face a boulevard invisible because of the apartment's elevation. However, because the windows are open and the street busy, the sound of passing cars is sometimes audible in the living room, rising above the volume of the various conversations or intruding into the lulls when everyone finishes sentences simultaneously. If there were curtains or even shades, the light breeze coming through the windows would disturb them.

Although the visitors circulate and talk as if familiar with one another, at moments an uncomfortable mood overtakes the otherwise amiable gathering. Perhaps it is the strobe-light effect of people moving around the room, forming small groups of two or three, having quick conversations while glancing around, then moving off only to pause again, organized in some new configuration. At times, the motion stops or starts as if on cue.

There is something else: this underlying mood may, like the somber bass line in a Tchaikovsky symphony, emanate from a solitary presence standing near the floral print arm chair by the windows—a person who remains alone and quiet, independent of

the others. (This isolated figure appears unrelated to the gathering, a nonparticipant. A stranger who has ventured into the wrong party. Or, perhaps, he sulks. Or simply doesn't care. Or the cars passing on the street below may fascinate him.)

But Jonathan ignores the traffic. Casting more than a furtive glance in his direction, you would notice that he isn't looking down toward the street nor even into the trees. Jonathan stares into the sky. He might be watching the large cumulus clouds that drift overhead passing from west to east. Or he may be watching the slowly darkening evening sky. In any case, he is an obvious presence in the room.

Now, Jonathan sits in the leather chair. (He may have been in the chair earlier, before everyone arrived. Then again, he may not have been standing by the chair but off by himself in the bedroom, or talking to Susan in the kitchen—although this last is unlikely.)

Even slumped in the chair, Jonathan is large and imposing. Conceivably, the unruly red beard and unkempt, curly brown hair—nothing more—produce this effect: given the proper attire and a different era, he might be mistaken for a pirate. (His dark clothing—a navy sweater and charcoal slacks—enhance the look.) Or he may be imposing simply because he remains so entirely disengaged.

(But he is not disengaged. He is simply not actively involved. Tired, perhaps. Or worn down. Something outside the apartment may have caught his attention and distracted him.)

When Peter approaches Jon and asks, "How're you doing?" Jonathan answers: "I'm okay."

Peter offers the wine bottle he has been carrying around the room: "Need a refill?"

Jonathan picks up a glass from the table between the chairs—a glass unnoticed until this moment—and, after a brief hesitation, replies: "Yes...please."

Peter fills the glass. For a moment Peter and Jon consider each other. Jon smiles or, rather, grins. Peter smiles.

Jonathan says: "Thanks for all your help."

Peter watches him for a moment then speaks: "This is hard for you, isn't it?" And when Jon doesn't reply, an expression (a grimace or, perhaps, a smile) briefly crosses Peter's face.

Finally, Jonathan replies: "I haven't done anything."

(No. Here he says, "I shouldn't have come back but I had no strength left." Or he might say, "Coming back was the easy thing." Or he may not respond to Peter's remark.)

A group of four people have come together near the center of the room; two men and two women talk. Two couples, perhaps, although this isn't clear from their arrangement: the two women stand near each other and are barely, but still noticeably, separated from the two men. Their conversations take place almost simultaneously, like voices in a fugue. But, because the voices are subdued and generally incomprehensible to a listener outside the group, you can only base speculations on observed movements and gestures.

The way the brunette in the red dress turns toward the other woman—who has light brown hair and wears a pleated navy skirt and white cotton sweater; the way these women turn their gaze away from the two men; the way the men continue talking even though the conversation splits into two dialogues.

At first, the two men, one with black hair and wearing glasses, continue as if they have not noticed the women's separate conversation. The smaller man, brown-haired, slender, and wearing a black, crew neck sweater, transfers a glass from his right hand to his left, glances first at the women, then at the taller man. The two men alter their positions and turn toward one another while still not shutting themselves off from the chance of easily rejoining a larger conversation with the women.

Although the volume of these dialogues is low and the overall conversation intimate in tone, a word or phrase occasionally emerges. The woman in the navy skirt, while adjusting her glasses, mentions that someone named Julia will get over something. One of the women (impossible to say which) says it's for the best; both men nod assent. The woman in the red dress rotates the wedding band on her finger and says how good it is now that someone or something is back, but the sound of a horn from a passing car obscures her words. The names 'Sue' and 'Jonathan' come from the woman wearing the navy skirt and white sweater. One of the men says someone finally listened to all the advice and did the right thing.

At this point, the separate dialogues converge, and everyone faces center again. Not only does the conversation become more directed, the group becomes closer, the members tighten its boundary and isolate themselves from the rest of the room. Their animation increases as if stimulated by a topic of mutual interest.

Two men sit near bookshelves along one of the walls. One wears wire-framed glasses and has brown hair cut in the style of a medieval page; he holds a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion, he speaks of commitment and uses words such as “social compact,” “duty,” and “responsibility.” He speaks disparagingly of lust, having already explained the allusions in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the theme of indecision in *Hamlet*.

The other man lies on the floor, two cushions behind his head, one cushion under his feet. The cushions behind his head rest against the lower shelf of a book case. A bright print covers one of the cushions. The cover on the other cushion—the one upon which he rests his head—is a dark and somber brown with no obvious pattern. He has black hair, a drooping black mustache, and an aquiline nose. His hands cross on his chest. He has been listening for a long time, silently and without moving. If his eyes were not open, you might think him asleep.

Finally, the man lying on the floor sits up, faces the other man, and asks: “You’re one of Sue’s friends, right?”

“Yes. From school. Why?”

“Nothing... Hey, I suppose all this makes sense to you but it doesn’t seem right to me. What does Jonathan think he’s doing? You can’t let other people run your life. What’s over is over. Cut your losses. Don’t look back, that’s my motto.”

Susan’s friend replies, “Those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.”

“Doomed. Doomed to repeat it,” the other corrects.

Near the kitchen doorway, three others talk together in a particularly intimate conversation. A man and a woman stand side by side facing Peter, their closeness signaling a desire for privacy.

The man standing beside the woman speaks. He is taller

than either of his two companions, taller possibly than any of the other guests. He has blond hair, a deeply tanned face, and blue eyes.

“We just came back from Mexico,” he says. “About a week ago.” Then sips from the glass in his right hand and watches Peter. He waits, perhaps, for an answer to an unspoken or unheard question. But this may be no more than a deliberate and thoughtful way of speaking.

Peter, who has been studying the drink he cradles in both hands, glances up, but toward the ceiling, not at the man. As if suddenly realizing that someone has asked him something, Peter says, “I’m sorry, I must have drifted off for a second. What were you saying?”

Now, Peter stares directly at the man, removes his left hand from the wine glass, and raises the drink with his right. Almost a foot shorter, Peter has to raise his eyes to meet the other’s glance. Peter adjusts his stance, swaying from side to side in a gentle, almost imperceptible rocking motion. His youthful appearance—probably because of his frail, delicate build—may cause Peter to be uncomfortable in a gathering of adults.

But the woman, not the man, answers Peter: “When we came back from Mexico the invitation was in the mail. All it said was ‘Reunion. Jonathan and Susan,’ then the time and address. We didn’t—we still don’t, in fact—know what ‘reunion’ means.”

As she speaks, she moves closer to her companion as if for protection or comfort or merely to reassure herself. Or perhaps she seeks shelter from the periodic drafts of cold air coming through the open windows.

“The invitations were nice, weren’t they?” Peter asks, then continues without waiting for a response, “Susan hand-lettered every one. She must have spent days working on them even though there weren’t that many.”

There must be another draft: the woman moves even closer to her companion, slipping under the arm he puts over her shoulders. Like the man, this woman, too, is blonde, only her hair is much lighter than his. She barely reaches his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Peter continues: “Susan and I spent almost a whole morning just trying to find the paper and the ink. She wanted



everything to be just right. I think the sepia ink on the cream-colored paper was an excellent choice! And the flowing letters—I can't remember the name of the script—are perfect: a little romantic and old-fashioned.”

At this point, the woman takes a step sideways away from the man, and standing with her feet apart, stares directly at Peter, and says nothing.

Both the man and the woman watch Peter who again begins shifting his weight from foot to foot while slowly sipping his drink. The man could be studying Peter; he watches his every movement as if trying to discern answers to larger, more universal concerns.

Peter glances from one to the other while continuing to drink, taking slow, endless sips until the liquid disappears. Only then does Peter take the glass from his mouth and ask, “How long were you gone?”

“Almost three months,” the woman answers. “We drove down the coast of the mainland almost to Guatemala.” She pauses for a moment then continues, “We haven't talked to Sue or Jon or anyone since we returned. What's happening?”

When she places her hands on her hips and leans toward him, the blonde woman seems to confront Peter. Peter steps back, but she simply steps forward, once more narrowing the gap. However, it may be only then that she leans toward him, that she has not really done so before. Actually, the entire group has rotated so Peter now faces the living room while the couple have their backs to it thereby trapping Peter and blocking all routes of graceful escape. They may have taken these positions earlier.

“They separated,” Peter finally replies. “I guess you didn't know about Julia either.” He pauses as if he has asked a question, glancing first at the woman, then the man, then down at the empty glass in his hand.

The man says, “We met her once. Jon brought her with him when he came to visit—just before our trip. It wasn't clear who she was—what their relationship was, I mean.”

“She seemed nice enough to me,” the woman remembers. “I liked her a lot, in fact. She seemed quite a bit like Jon. I think she said she was an artist—no...a musician. I remember: she and—”

(here the woman uses a name that apparently refers to her companion) “—played Debussy.”

“Excuse me,” Peter says, holding up his empty glass for explanation. “I’m supposed to be helping Susan in the kitchen.” He pushes past the couple and leaves the room.

A small kitchen adjoins the living room. Two women peel and cut vegetables that they arrange on a cut-glass serving dish. Already, medium-sized radishes whose red skins contrast with their blunt white, almost translucent ends fill the center of the dish. White cauliflower pieces hide one quadrant of the dish, carrot sticks another.

These carrots on the serving dish account for the mass of orange strips in the sink into which Susan, who has auburn hair that curls under gently at her shoulders, now drops pale-green celery leaves. Sue, as everyone except Jonathan and Peter call her, wears an apron decorated with folk art patterns over a plain white cotton dress that combines elegance with a suggestion of peasant clothing; petite, she moves with a child’s nonchalance.

At one corner of the sink, another, underlying, layer of vegetable matter is partially visible: dark greens and white radish stems with small pieces of the red base still attached. But now, Susan scoops the trimmings into the garbage disposal.

Taking the celery sticks from beside the sink, the other woman cuts them into short pieces using a large chef’s knife. She wears her dark hair short, styled to make her look professional and efficient: an effect she achieves. Her khaki slacks and a light-blue polo shirt add to this.

“Is everything okay now?” she asks Susan, arranging celery sticks in the third quadrant of the serving dish.

“I don’t know. Jonathan’s back; we’re together. But he seems tired, just tired. As though he just gave up, gave in to all the pressure. I don’t know...Better, maybe, but not okay.”

Susan removes several items from the refrigerator and places them beside the dish of vegetables: sour cream, cream cheese, mayonnaise. She gathers spices from a rack on the wall and puts them near the ingredients from the refrigerator. The woman in

the khaki pants, who monitors Susan's activities, watches as Susan gets a glass mixing bowl from the cabinet beneath the sink.

"Sue?" she asks.

The bowl falls from Susan's hands and shatters on the floor.

"What?" Susan questions, looking down at the glass shards on the speckled pattern of the brown linoleum. Her eyes glaze as if she thinks of something else. Or her eyes may be focused on something farther, more distant than the floor.

Without speaking, the woman gets a dustpan. Susan uses a broom taken from its storage place between the refrigerator and the wall. The two women are sweeping up the glass when Peter emerges from the living room carrying an empty wine glass.

"I think I should serve the mushrooms. I don't know if anyone knows they're here," the woman in the khaki pants explains, starting to exit.

"Mushrooms?" Peter asks. "Are they stuffed?"

At this point, the woman stops and turns toward Peter. Susan, who has picked up the glass splinters missed by the broom, empties the dustpan into a garbage container under the sink.

"Yes. Would you like one?" she offers the dish to Peter.

"No, thanks. I just wondered," Peter says before sitting in the single chair in the kitchen.

Now, the woman turns and exits the kitchen.

Susan walks to the table where Peter sits. While she arranges the *crudités* on the serving dish, she explains: "Jonathan likes them or, at least, he used to. Stuffed mushrooms were always one of his favorites."

"I guess that's why I asked," Peter answers. Without glancing at Susan, he fills his glass then replaces the wine bottle to its previous location—approximately halfway between the serving dish and his glass.

Susan watches Peter. She waits for him to take a sip of wine before asking, "How's the party going?"

"Fine," Peter says without looking at Susan.

"Really?" she questions. "I don't believe you. How's Jonathan?"

Peter takes a slow drink before replying, "Fine. Honest:

everything is great. It's a very nice party, Susan."

Peter glances at Susan after setting his glass on the table. For a moment their eyes meet. (Perhaps they watch one another for several seconds; perhaps there are questions not asked.) Susan places a stray carrot stick back into the vegetable arrangement.

"Is he talking to anyone?"

"Sure."

"Who? Peter, you're lying to me. I know he's not talking to anyone. I've had at least three people ask what's wrong with him. He doesn't want to be here."

"Don't worry. He's just being a little quiet. You know he doesn't do well at parties. He's okay. Do you think he's here just to keep up appearances? If he didn't want to be here, he'd leave, wouldn't he?"

This dialogue occurs without pause. Throughout this quick interchange, Peter seems aware of Susan's scrutiny.

But now, the topic exhausted, Peter tops off his half-full glass. Susan moves across the room and looks out the single window, so Peter goes, leaving her alone at the sink.

Meanwhile, the scene in the living room has altered. The two men who were seated together on the floor have joined other conversations: the darker man, with the black hair and drooping black mustache, sits in one of three kitchen chairs lined along a wall; the toy lamb lies on the floor beside his chair. The man who played Debussy with someone named Julia occupies the chair closest to the kitchen door. The middle chair remains empty. The two men talk.

The woman in khaki pants enters from the kitchen, carrying a large, white serving dish of mushroom caps stuffed with a crab mixture. She approaches the two men in the chairs, stopping nearby, but not so close as to intrude, while they speak.

"...the solitude of night...the jungle coming down to the sea—" one man says, before he breaks off and turns to the woman offering mushrooms.

The moustached man takes a mushroom. (Has she presented the tray to him or has this person simply reached out and taken an unoffered mushroom?)

The man with the page-boy hair and the woman in the red dress talk to Peter near the center of the room. The woman with the serving tray moves to this trio and, without hesitation, joins the group. Peter greets her. The woman with the red dress says “Thank you” as she takes a mushroom and smiles. Carefully selecting among the many mushroom caps, the fourth member of the group explains Ivan’s encounter with the Grand Inquisitor in *Karamazov*. Saying “I’d opt for freedom,” Peter turns away from the man. The woman serving mushrooms continues her rounds. The woman with the red dress walks to the kitchen, absent-mindedly playing with her wedding ring.

A group of three moves to the chairs by the window. The window is shut, eliminating the gusts of cold. A woman wearing a navy skirt goes to the floral-print chair; a smaller man with brown hair sits in the dark leather chair; the man with black hair and glasses reclines on a large cushion on the floor, facing the others. No traffic sounds intrude.

Having served the mushrooms to this group, the woman in khaki pants starts for the kitchen. As the blonde emerges from the hallway into the living room, she greets the woman in the khaki pants, indicates the dish, and says “Looks like that’s about finished.”

At the side of the room, these two women talk. A single stuffed mushroom remains on the serving dish. The blonde asks how Susan is doing then takes the mushroom. The other smiles and says something like “Everything’s fine.”

Carrying the dish of *crudités*, Susan comes into the room from the kitchen and glances around. Handing the vegetables to the blonde as she passes, Susan goes into the bedroom then the bathroom.

When she returns to the living room, Susan approaches Peter who stands by the chairs along the wall, speaking to the man with the black mustache and the one who once played Debussy with Julia. Susan interrupts the conversation as Peter begins speaking.

She puts her hand on Peter’s arm and turns him away from the others. “Where’s Jonathan?” Susan asks.

Jonathan has taken a coat from the closet in the bedroom and left the apartment. He walks along the sidewalk beneath the trees lining the boulevard. The traffic is much lighter now, quieter, only a few cars on the street. Against the dark sky, lights illuminate the street and sidewalk. A gust blows leaves swirling around his feet. Not far from the apartment, after waiting for a break in the traffic, he crosses the street between intersections—in the middle of the block—and walks into a small store on the next corner. This store, on the northeast corner, sits back from the street and has parking for about ten cars. There are two driveways into the parking lot—one from each of the streets that form the intersection.

Jonathan enters the store and stands in line behind a young man at the counter, the owner (probably) of a late-model, well-polished red truck in the parking lot; he has slicked his longish black hair back against his head but it curls slightly behind his ears. The man buys a six-pack of beer and talks to the girl behind the counter. Apparently, they know each other; the young man has just returned from somewhere; he has been gone for a few months but now he's back. The girl says something about things not always working out the way you expect and maybe, after school, she can see him tomorrow. When the young man leaves, Jonathan moves to the counter and hands the girl a dollar. He asks for change. When she gives him the three quarters, two dimes, and a nickel, she smiles and mentions the weather. Jonathan agrees that it has gotten cold earlier than usual this year.

Jonathan buttons his coat as he leaves the store. He crosses the parking lot and steps into a phone booth near one of the driveways. After depositing a coin, he dials. The phone rings four times before a woman's voice says, "Hello." Jonathan takes a deep breath then speaks into the mouthpiece: "Julia?"

*Barbara Edelman*

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***Lytle Creek, for Wendy***

On the second day,  
on the way down,  
we'll see the big-horned sheep,  
scaling an upreaching arm of rock  
toward the slanting sky.

What is it that brings you your wish?  
Not prayer. I remember an evangelist  
backpacker who tried to save your soul  
on Sawtooth Pass. You told him you didn't have one.

Now you long for that Sierran terrain,  
but won't be two nights without a phone,  
away from your husband, so placidly attached to his new lover—  
a machine at Cedars Sinai.

His legs won't let him sleep.  
At the first slowing of breath  
they start their horizontal dance—  
as if his being would simply  
roll over into hell  
were his eyes allowed to close.

By day he wears those nights  
like a new home on his back.

For you, there are still  
the San Gabriels, muscular and naked,  
ripping like bare fists out of desert,  
their fleshy bases bathed in smog.  
You call them the peach pit mountains  
and study the switchbacks for sheep tracks  
the long way up.

I'm reeling.  
The open slope in the sun is  
unrelenting. The sky tips.  
You gather rocks for your classes  
of gifted teens in cashmere sweaters.

I'd follow you into the wilderness  
and often have. You decide when it's safe  
to abandon trails. I trail  
happy and stupid as a child  
delighting in sights I can't name.

Against a scrim of afternoon light we follow the creek,  
its rock and tree trunks splashed  
with an orange rash of ladybugs.  
Packs down, we scramble  
a last half-mile to the top,  
but the view is cramped, obscured  
by neighboring peaks. We find a campsite,  
shadowy and lush. The creek sings-in  
its newest evening over rocks.

"I'm going to look for big-horns before dark."  
You carry the binoculars you bought  
for New York theater cheap seats.  
Fifteen years ago we passed them back and forth  
and never saw the same thing.

In the dark you return, expedition  
sheepless. We watch the stars that have multiplied  
a thousand times since we left the city,  
I remember the sky has layers and  
layers I don't want you to explain.



## **Toni Nieminen at Courchevel**

1992 Olympic Ski Jump

I was a heartbeat and memory of flight,  
Before breast milk or snow on a mountain,  
Before geometry and the still pool of exhaustion,  
Before the alarm clock,  
Before the ice-eyes of other jumpers and the small  
    fires inside my muscles,  
Before the flutter in the gut,  
Before the dip of melted wings,  
Before the superlative hunger,  
I knew this moment.

I am an embryo, a coiled  
recollection, crouching now, and now --  
sprung into the sky --  
my body a finger that points to God,  
still but for the small flutter of my left hand,  
like a memory of when it was a bird.

All that I know is below me.  
I am sixteen, I am Finland's angel,  
and this moment - my life -  
this moment, this moment  
is the one remembered dream  
that other people close their eyes to find.

*Mary Ann Heimann*

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**Blue Prom Dress**

(for Barbara)

She had it hanging by her desk,  
for her daughter's prom, she said  
and it was the deep blue shimmering of a lake  
with all the lurking promise.

You could drown in a dress like that...

In its depths I saw my daughter  
not quite two and  
swathed in damp, white cotton,  
my impatience a stopwatch  
urging her on  
faster, faster  
to move beyond the circumference  
of my shadow.

Then time got stuck on fast forward  
and I saw her grow in jerky motion  
throwing off rocking horse and pinafore  
until she stopped  
at the blue prom dress

and I was left alone, trembling on the shore.

## **In the Land of Shinar**

*Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there... Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves ..."*

*Genesis 11:1-4*

Shimming himself in between the chain-link fence post and the concrete wall, Manuel straightened his thin body rigid and placed one foot onto the plateau of the wash. He turned his head sideways and kept it still, making sure not to catch his right ear on the wire, or scrape his left against the wall. He had snuck onto the wash this way hundreds of times: during the day, and sometimes at night; sometimes with his homies, but not mostly; mostly he was by himself walking home from school, like now, when he passed through at his own pace.

Five days in a row, he thought, balancing on one foot, reaching back through the gap to pick up his shoe—a black corduroy slipper—that had fallen off on the other side of the fence. He wondered if they would call home after five days of leaving at lunch. Since they took official roll in second period, he doubted it; and since his father hadn't said anything to him in the last four days, he didn't have cause to think different.

Slipping his shoe back on, Manuel looked down at the smashed beer cartons and broken glass in and about the dried weeds that lined the fence—the bits of brown and green glass that had the dull luster of uncut gems—and in his head he heard: "I'm gonna' kill you, you fuckin' wetback," and he saw himself throw the silicone spark-plug chip against the driver-side window of the Cutlass, watching as it silently cracked into a jigsaw puzzle of glass, and then busting it in with his fist. He remembered leaning in the car and grabbing for the pull-out stereo, seeing his hand bleeding, the sound

of a screen door flying open, looking up and seeing the white blur coming at him, and running—he had never run so hard in his life, he thought, as that night—five blocks straight to the wash without ever looking back to the beating thud of bare feet behind him, to the pursuer whose deep guttural shouts were voiced in a fatigued and desperate anticipation.

Manuel walked to the edge of the plateau, kicking at the spot where the dirt became concrete. He walked with a strut, but he had to think about it, and he would often find himself without it when thinking of something else. As he walked his hands were constantly moving: adjusting his khaki pants that were three sizes too big, and checking the Pee-Chee folder he carried folded lengthwise in his back pocket, which kept his T-shirt from falling too far down in the back—to prevent this same thing from happening in the front, he was continually gathering up the white shirt and sticking either one or both of his hands in his front pockets.

“Damn fat-ass mother fucker,” Manuel mumbled to himself. That was what his homies had called the man after he told them what had happened: how he had eluded the man in the wash; how the man hadn’t been able to fit through the gap; how he heard, as he ran down the wash, the fading sound of the man coughing in violent spasm.

Manuel felt his stomach get sick just thinking about the sound. He was standing at the edge of the plateau, and before him, the concrete sloped down to the bottom of the wash on either side. Chavo was right, Manuel thought. Chavo was older—a lifer who still hung out with the younger *vatos* when he wasn’t pounding out dents and slapping Bondo on wrecks over at Diamond Auto Body. Chavo was there when Manuel had walked all the way to the park to tell his brother what happened. They were all at the benches, drinking beers and listening to “Daddy’s Home” on an oldies station.

“Fucking little Loco,” he remembered Chavo saying. “You’re lucky he didn’t catch you, *ese*. He would’ve strung your ass up on that fence. They take that shit personal.”

“I didn’t even take the shit, and he still wanted to kill me.”

“See, *ese?* They take it personal. It don’t matter. It’s like you fucked their daughter or something.”

He remembered his brother and Spanky bending over in drunken laughter at what Chavo said, pounding and slapping the marked-up bench top, and how Chavo turned to him trying to keep a straight face: “You didn’t fuck their daughter, did you? Huh, *chico?*” They all laughed again even louder.

“Maybe he fucked the family dog, aye?” his brother added, stopping just long enough to say it, then laughing hysterically.

“Shit, he would’ve killed his ass for sure then; that’s worse than fucking their daughters.”

Manuel looked up at the gray horizon: it towered above the faded stucco backsides of apartment complexes that lined the wash. Here was the only place where he ever noticed the sky, where he ever felt the sky as a presence. Maybe it was the solitude of the wash, or just its hard, open space that made the sky seem so immense, so alive. Whichever it was he couldn’t say, but it was as if God were looking down on him, and he didn’t like that feeling. He remembered the nude man they had seen wandering in the wash, and how they chased him, his brother and Spanky drunk and laughing.

They cornered him near a sewer tunnel, out of which a thin mossy film drained into the wash. “What’s up wit’ch you, *vato?*” Spanky said. They were not laughing anymore.

“Angels behold,” the man kept mumbling, sporadically waving his arms as though swatting at a cloud of gnats, his wild blue eyes staring off into the sky. Manuel remembered following the man’s eyes, ashamed to look at his body: how they floated—glassy—in their sockets, looking up over the concrete banks that isolated the bottom of the wash; and how he had to look down away from them. He remembered the sewage that dripped down the man’s legs and over the veins of his muddied feet, and how black specks of it, kicked up from running, dotted the white skin of his sweating torso, which expanded and contracted with the violence of his breathing.

“Man, what the fuck is he saying?” Spanky had been watching the man’s jerky hand fits but talked as though the man

wasn't there, as though he was watching television. "Man, what the fuck are you saying?"

"Angels behold the face of my father!" the man yelled, looking past Spanky straight into the eyes of Manuel's brother. "Do you know who my father is?" He had stopped waving his arms and continued to look at Manuel's brother.

Manuel remembered how his brother looked away from the man's gaze, shifting his feet and squinting over to where Spanky stood, and how he had wanted to strike the man at that moment, to hit him as hard as he could and pound his head into the concrete for singling out his brother.

"Fuck your father!" Spanky yelled.

"No!" The man now turned his eyes on Spanky. "No. My father is the father of all, for I am the son of God. Do you know who Jesus Christ is?"

Manuel remembered the sensation he felt in his stomach at that moment: a gooey viscidness that started in his stomach, gradually working its way into his chest and throat, leaving him voiceless and wanting to go home.

His shoulders slouched, Manuel stood at the edge of the plateau. He was no longer looking at the horizon, but at a Mexican blanket that hung as a blind in a third story apartment window across the wash. It was a bright orange, multi-colored blanket like the type his father's friend Rosendo, who everyone called "Rick," sold at the San Fernando Swap Meet. That is, when he wasn't selling his glass jewelry illicitly in supermarket parking lots out of his beat-up, white van. Manuel knew he could get Rick to pretend to be his father and talk to the people from school if they ever called. Rick was born in the United States and spoke English without an accent. He had helped his father get his first job when he came over alone ten years ago from Mexico without speaking a word of English, a year before he returned to Mexico for the last time to bring Manuel, his brother, and his mother over.

Manuel thought of how his father would always insist upon showing Rick their wool blankets whenever he visited—the blankets Manuel's grandmother had made for his father, and that he and

his brother used to sleep on in Mexico. He could picture how his father, trying to speak English, would offer the blankets for Rick to touch: "Feel," his father would say, "feel." He could picture the anticipation in his father's eyes as he would shake and tug violently at the blankets in Rick's hands: "Strong," he would say, "thick, no?" Then how his father would hug himself: "*Mucho* warm. *Mucho bueno*, no?" And how Rick would speak in Spanish for his father: "*Si, si, pero...*," explaining with friendly callousness how their blankets were too itchy for the sensitive skin of Americans, and how they weren't colorful enough, weren't Mexican enough for Americans. "Aaach!" his father would interrupt, angry and not listening. Then he would gather up the blankets, holding them up against his chest in an attempt to keep them from dragging on the floor, and carefully, without being able to see over or around them, make his way into the bedroom, while Rick, laughing, would turn to whoever else was there saying: "*Que?... What?*"

Tucking and untucking his T-shirt, Manuel remembered the awkward silence that followed the last dead notes of laughter when he alone was left with Rick, both of them watching the pitiful, proud man disappear into the bedroom with his blankets falling between his legs and dragging across the floor behind him.

"Hey, *que royo, joy?*" he blurted, turning to Manuel excitedly and offering him his hand.

"*Nada.*" Manuel remembered the confusion he felt hearing Rick speak in the dialect that Chavo and Spanky and other *cholos* used.

"Nothing," he repeated and shook his hand.

Rick laughed and looked toward his father's bedroom. "You know your father has no business sense, don't you?"

Manuel didn't say anything, and pretended not to understand. He tensed his body as Rick reached out and put his hand on his shoulder, watching the small glass pendants swing back and forth on the necklaces that hung loosely away from his chest as he leaned over.

"You know about the deal I have with your brother, don't you?—with Spanky and all those *vatos?*" Rick said, looking toward

his father's bedroom, then back at him. "No?...What, they don't talk business with you younger *vatos*? Damn, and I thought *cholos* looked out for each other." He laughed and looked again towards his father's room, "Listen," he said lowering his voice, "anytime you get a stereo or anything, I got buyers. I can get you cash, *mota*, anything in return..."

Feeling the sting of the afternoon sun burning down on the back of his neck, Manuel turned his head. At the edge of the plateau, the concrete banks of the wash looked like they were glowing under the sun, and they deflected the white light into his eyes as he looked down the wash bottom, squinting. It was empty. Five days in a row, Manuel thought, five days of leaving at lunch. Would they call home today? What would his father say if they did ever call home? He took a step forward and descended the steep sloping embankment, his feet moving uncontrollably faster and faster and sharply slapping against the concrete through the thin soles of his black slippers. Running in the shadow before him, he saw the jerky uncontrolled restraint of his inevitable progression forward in his own movement, and thought of the gypsy boy whom he had seen walk barefoot over broken glass in Mexico. Jumping with a slapping skid onto the wash bottom, he remembered how the older gypsy men had brushed the slivers of glass from the soles of the small boy's leather-calloused feet.

The balls of his own feet throbbing, Manuel began his walk home on the wash bottom, avoiding the entrenched channel that ran down the center of the wash along its entirety. It was an especially gray winter many years ago that he and his brother had stood on the rainy overpass, and looking down at the bottom, found the channel invisible beneath a rushing surface of brown water. Dead rats and a water snake passed beneath them, tossing and turning in the violent current. However, today, like most days, the sides of the wash were dry, and the only water moving was the slow sewage in the channel, and in the thin mossy areas where smaller sewage tunnels drained into the channel from the embankment; and it was there where Manuel had to watch his footing.

As he walked, he imagined that the stadium-like embank-



ment that surrounded him was filled with people watching him, and as he stepped through the thin, mossy film of a waste-tunnel without slipping, the lifeless concrete embankment would erupt into a bustling crowd of colors and people jumping to their feet, shouting. He saw his father's red face at a distance, and the gold fillings in Rick's open mouth. He saw his brother and Spanky slapping each other and pointing, and as he checked the position of his Pee-Chee and found it in place, there was a sigh of relief and he could hear the crowd as they settled back into their seats. He saw the backs of students' heads, and his fifth period History teacher staring at him: he was standing next to a chalky blackboard with an eraser in his hand. He had asked Manuel the dates of the Civil War and was waiting, waiting. And the glare off the lenses of the man's glasses had caused his eyes to appear obscured to Manuel at the back of the class, even beyond the usual distortion caused by the lenses' thickness, and one by one the heads turned, waiting.

Manuel wondered what they'd been covering for the past week. "Fuck them," he mumbled, stopping to pick up a brown beer bottle, its label faded almost colorless from the sun. "Mother fucker!" He threw the bottle against the concrete embankment, watching as it disintegrated, small slivers of glass sliding down the slope. "Mother fucker," he said again and examined his hand; somewhere behind him he heard the faint murmur of disappointment in the crowd, then nothing.

Manuel knew he was nearing home when he saw the overturned shopping cart in the channel. It was here where he crossed the channel to get to the side of the wash he lived on. He stuck close to the embankment until he reached this point, avoiding the stench in the channel, and the gnats that seemed to breed there and claim it as their own.

How the shopping cart got lodged in the channel he never knew, but it had always been there. The wheels were gone, and the chrome-plated bars of the cart had chipped and become rusted over; its bent cage, while not hitting the bottom of the channel, acted as a strainer in the sewage to which gray-green moss clung and

cultivated itself until the level dropped. Once the sewage level dropped, the moss that clung would dry-up on the bars, while the rest would dissipate somewhere down the channel until another obstruction would allow it to live. Running, Manuel crossed the channel holding his breath and waving his arms in front of his face.

One the other side, he headed for the shelter of the concrete overpass, his eyes searching the dark shadow that fell beneath it. His homies sometimes hung here, but as he entered into the shade, and his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see there was no one around. He looked up the embankment where the cement was cool and rough under the overpass; it was there, in the crevice where the upper plateau of the wash met with the bottom of the overpass, that he had crawled, his legs aching, the night he was chased by that man. He remembered how he'd never stopped running until he got there, and then the nervous euphoria he felt when he finally did stop, his lungs sore and burning for air, his head and body pounding with his heart, sweating and freezing in the night air. He had sat under there for a long time, his body bent over and his head between his knees, his feet resting on the sloped embankment, thinking of his brother and listening to the minutest sound of every car that passed directly above him. He hadn't know then what the silence of the wash was like at night; it was only in thinking back he realized its similarity to the silence that a child feels pervading a dark room after his father has finished a beating.

He would ascend the embankment here, to the plateau where a hole had been cut in the chain-link fence, but first he had to take a piss. He unzipped his pants. In front of him were the elaborate scrawlings his homies had tagged on the embankment: one was a mural that Chavo had done using multi-colored spray cans—he had stolen them from a commercial art class he had been taking at the J.C.—but it was faded, and had already been X'd over by some *cholos* from T13. His urine hit the embankment and splattered, forming a puddle near his feet that would evaporate before it could meander into the channel.

Manuel cupped his hands tightly over his head and smoothed his thick black hair back: it still felt hot under his palms, and sticky

from the Three Flowers he used to keep it down and shiny. He smelled his hands and then wiped them on his pants, trying to get the gel off from in between his fingers. The smell reminded him of his brother and Spanky, and he looked over to where Chavo had crossed-out T13 with a black X and, right next to it, hit-up all their names. He recognized most of them—"Chavo," "Spanky," his brother, who was known as "Largo," and his own name "lil Loco" near the bottom—but the others had either been jumped-out a long time ago, were in jail, or Chavo had hit 'em up posthumously.

"Where you from, *vato*?" he heard in his head, picturing three *cholos* from T13. He saw them approaching through the plate glass window at Ruby's Famous. "Where you from?" "Where you from?" "Where you from?" "Nowhere," Manuel remembered saying, "Nowhere." "Aren't you Largo's little brother?" In his head he could picture pink skin rubbing against a stiff black collar. "Where you from?" And he could see the black letters—an L. "Nowhere," he had said—an A. "Don't give me that! What are you doin' here? What are you doin' here?"—a P. "*Nada. Nada*," he said, pretending not to understand, his eyes staring off over the black collar—a D.

Would he look his father in the eye? Five days in a row, Manuel thought. Have they already called home? Official roll is in second period. He zipped up his pants and kneeled down on one knee to pick a pebble out from one of his loose fitting slippers. Yes, his father hated his shoes. Manuel could picture his father, the shoemaker from Mexico, standing there in his tight-fitting leather shoes—the same pair he'd been wearing since leaving Mexico, the same pair he resoled with the rubber of a worn-out automobile tire.

"Have you studied today, Manuel?"

"A little, father."

"Have you seen your brother today, Manuel?"

"No, father."

"*Manuelo*, why are you afraid of your father?"

"Afraid?"

"*Si, Maneulo*, why do you stand so far? Speak to me, *Manuelo*. You cannot speak to your father?"

Manuel remembered his voicelessness in front of the nude man, and how he could only look over to his brother and mumble that he wanted to go home.

“Shut up,” his brother said, his eyes steady on the nude man’s profile. “Go home if you want!”

“Do you know Satan is loose on earth?” the man shouted at Spanky.

“Man, I’m Satan, mother fucker! This is my hell, so what the fuck you gonna’ do?”

Manuel remembered the look in Spanky’s eyes—how they had become like the man’s eyes—and the skewed progression that followed: the man squirming and covering himself; the urine escaping from his cupped hands; Spanky yelling “mother fucker” and hitting him solidly on the side of the mouth; how he and his brother kicked him three times in the side, and how the man’s body felt soft and heavy against his foot; then the sound of his cries echoing down the empty wash into his ears as he ran, thinking—for the first time in his life—that he was a sinner, and bound for hell.

## **Paths**

### **I.**

The gypsy's angel has a riddle.  
He is old and very tall.  
He wears only black.  
Dandruff dusts the top  
of his cracked leather wings.  
"Which heart...?" he wants to know,  
    hauling from wet and deep,  
    deep pockets, two small, pink-wrapped,  
    twitching--  
    that he offers  
    on calloused, broken hands--  
"...is her's?"

### **II.**

The next time it was me: I was  
an angel. I grew  
older then and didn't care about  
all the cold elements in fingers' touch.  
In my eyes there was the light  
that angels see  
and ride, and it radiates--  
    not from the sun--  
but from each being and every  
separation and from  
the planet, from anything that ever,  
ever was glowing--  
    but dimmer now  
    than then.

And I had two pocketsful.  
Yet they were impossibly heavy pockets,  
and throbbing  
so that when I flew--  
    when I widened my old wings  
    into the diagrams of bright air,  
    when I lifted this great flying weight  
    up and above the embered  
    sequences of earth  
    onto the paths of light--  
there was a fierce pulse,  
a ferocious spreading burn,  
reaching up and through me and connected  
to this reaching of my wings and hands and of  
all the air I had-- until now-- forgotten  
and to the choices of the gypsy paths  
the turnings and the terrible short time there is  
    to examine the stars and  
    to own a single heart,  
no matter how  
a wish may lift us.

## They Drive by Night

She imagines me

(I'm sleeping now, dreaming, the passenger—  
the wheels in spin, the wheel in her hands)

my dreams, she imagines, are expanding  
(darkness has contracted  
like burying dirt around a seed  
around us)

she imagines my being  
flooding out on dreams,  
like squid ink released and  
spreading through the night  
through and away from the car

(the darkness has pressed the distance  
into parallel tunnels of light we push ahead of,  
away from us)

no longer confined

by maps, by plans, by the tyrannies of daylight,  
but spreading,

not among the possible grains of air  
like the light and the word

and the tiny tendrils and that thick swimming root

but through another,

next,

world.

She imagines

my dreaming seeps outside this late motion  
unconfined

I infiltrate the twists in the ionosphere  
and the whirling tires

for dreams of future flats  
and fertile valleys and rain and  
the girl, the baby

her children's power  
to grow,

she imagines I more than touch her  
at this remove  
which is no remove (I'm snoring now)  
I penetrate her  
possible dreams  
imagines  
I am urging her  
to imagine this exact moment  
of dreaming together  
this unforeseen confluence  
outside the tyrannies  
of need and possibility,  
of vanished sunlight  
and of the distant  
distances  
to go.











**Gynesis**  
**or**  
**A Matter of Form**

**I REMEMBER OUR HONEYMOON**

*Majorca was a good choice. It was not Florida, or Puerto Rico, or Jamaica or the Virgin Islands or Hawaii, or the Poconos where everyone had already been. It must be warm there, I thought, on an island off the coast of Spain. We're going to Majorca, we'd say—they'd nod and smile, trying to remember what they'd heard about it. You had to be careful in Spain, people said, there were soldiers in the street, Franco's men. Spain was a gloomy country, full of sour old ladies with their black dresses and lacey mantillas and rosary beads. Spain must be dark, and dry—a country filled with churches. But Majorca was floating, Majorca was lush and mountainous, and floating in the blue blue blue of the Mediterranean. Majorca was an island, Majorca was free and far from home—Majorca was a place to start.*

*So we went to Majorca and ate boiled vegetables and fish; we went to Majorca and drove up and down and all around, switching back and forth and back up the mountains, me hanging on and you honking the horn on the hairpin turns. We went to Majorca and drank wine, we went to Majorca and saw chickens hanging in the market where the women turned suddenly quiet as we passed, me in my halter top and you in your tie dyed jeans. We went to Majorca where we couldn't talk to anyone, where no one knew our names. We went to Majorca and drank a toast to the beginning of our life together under the palm trees near the terraced foothills that circled the valley where the sheep stood by the roadside just past the olive groves on the road to the north where from atop the mountains we sighted the sea. We could see, we could see, we could see so far, Oh I said, the world is so big, and you laughed just a little. We sat under the palm trees and marvelled at this island we'd found—*

*together we laughed, as if we'd never have to go back. But what did we know? We were young and didn't understand.*

*Do you remember every night at dinner, that fussy little wine steward tried to give us a bottle of water that we hadn't ordered? Every night we'd refuse it, and he'd go away, shaking his head and muttering in Spanish. It took us all week to figure out the the water bottle had been ordered by the people who had stayed in the room before us, who hadn't had a chance to finish it before they checked out of the hotel. On the last night we accepted the bottle finally if only to relieve him of the worry of passing it on someone new. Then we laughed and drank a toast to the couple we never met.*

*I think about her often now, the woman who stayed at that hotel before me. I imagine her traveling and seeing the world, living her life. She might be back there right now, in that same hotel, trying to get back to the beginning, trying to see where she's been.*

I see her standing at the top of the stairs preparing to descend. She looks like me, but her face is in shadows and she hasn't yet turned it to the light. She could be you, too—my mother, my sister, my daughter, my friend. Someday.

Her name is Ruth—her sisters call her Ruthie, but her husband never did. She's just a little off balance, that's what her son Frankie thinks—her only child, the one she crooned to—hush little baby—protected from the dark—Don't say a word. That's what she thinks he thinks, anyway—the blue eyed boy she ached for as he grew and grew, his eyes turning steely grey, till he looked more and more like a stranger. What else could he be thinking—watching, always watching her from behind the mask that covered the little boy's face. He leaves her all alone now mostly. You turn invisible once your children go off to school.

“Remember,” she's about to say, “remember when...” The words rush to her lips and pause there, unformed. Remember, she thinks, pressing the sides of her tongue to the back of her teeth. Remember. But there's no one to say it to. She sighs and stares down the flight of steps to the lobby. Even the leaves of the potted plants

at the foot of the staircase seem to be drooping. Ruthie feels wilted herself what with too much wine last night and too little sleep, and she leans heavily on the banister. When the wooden doors below creak open she hopes for a breeze, but only a shaft of sunlight enters framing the dark figure of a man whose face is invisible in the glare. Heels clicking against the tile like castanets, he crosses the lobby and hurries up the stairs.

His white suit is wrinkled she observes, her lips curving up so tight in a smile that her eyes disappear into slits. He's mopping his brow as he passes and doesn't notice her. Is it Frankie's voice, "Don't smile so' hard," or her husband's that she hears insisting again, "Stop trying so hard to please." She runs her fingers through her graying hair, tugging at her newly cropped curls.

Her foot leaves the step, hovers in the air. No songs to sing, no stories left to tell, no one to hear them.

Still, she will descend, she must descend.

Click, click, click the shoes tap out behind her, like the dancer last night, who'd started his dance so gently that she had to hold her breath to hear the movement of his feet at first. Tap, tap, tap. Just a little tap. Tap, tap, tap. Leather, wood and clap. Tap, tap, tap.

Dressed all in black with a red sash tied at his waist he held himself stiff and aloof, his shoulders rigid and his face pointed up and over the crowd. It wasn't until he drew near that the tassels swinging from the brim of his hat were visible. He was younger than she'd thought, with skin like porcelain, smooth and unlined. His eyes were unwavering beads of coal—he never blinked, never moved a muscle in his face—but those fat black tassels kept bobbing and bouncing into one another. Snap, snap, snap. Tempo quick and mean. Slap, slap, slap. Then the guitar wailed, and he raised one arm over head and extended the other to the audience as his feet beat the floor with a staccato drill that shook the tables.

Ruthie makes a note to check the night school catalog to see if they offer flamenco dancing, then flits down the last three steps mimicking his relentless rhythm, her sandals sucking noisily at her

damp feet. When she reaches the bottom, the hotel clerk is grinning at her from behind the counter. She smooths her skirt, looks for a clock, then approaches the counter.

She asks something simple like, "When will the bus arrive?"

*"Si Senora."*

She likes the soft look of his small brown hands folded on top of the paper he's been reading, and that he looks at her when she talks. "When," she continues, "when is the bus coming?"

*"Si, Senora."* He says something else in Spanish and then shrugs, still grinning with those awful yellow teeth of his, as the phone rings. She thinks he might be trying to tell her that the bus will be late, but isn't sure, and now he looks worried that she hasn't understood him. She starts to smile back at him, then thinks better of it. Shouldn't be too friendly. Does that count for the hotel personnel, too?

The phone jingles in short little bursts and he uncrosses his hands, gently tugging at his moustache now and waiting, she suddenly realizes, for her to finish so that he can answer it. "*Gracias,*" she says, smiling after all. The driver is probably still having his siesta. No matter she tells herself, wandering into the bar where she sips vodka and tonic from a tall narrow glass. It tastes all lemony and cool, like spring, and in the dark of the bar with the wet glass pressed against her cheek, she can almost pretend it's April and she's there for the first time, just like she was years ago on her honeymoon.

When she'd been in Majorca with Frank, the bus had been late, too, she remembers now. They had a drink in the bar, wondering if the bullfight would start without them as it got later and later. Drunk on rum and each other, they forgot about the bullfight that afternoon, went back to the room and made love silently on the tiny lumpy bed. Even in the beginning Frank never talked when they made love. Ruth tried to get him to, but he never would, so she gave up and stopped talking herself. After a while she stopped even thinking the things she would have said to him.



## I REMEMBER WHAT I MISSED

*Later we stayed in that same hotel, in the same room, slept in the same lumpy bed that Ruthie had shared the week before with Frank. We laughed at the unfamiliar bidet. I said I'd wash my feet in it. Then I found her hairbrush in the rickety drawer of the wooden bureau where she'd left it, pulled the long red strands of hair from the bristles before tossing it out, wondering who'd been there before us, who'd come after—never wondering about us, where we were going, where we'd been.*

*Later: wanting things, having things, keeping them. Later: furniture, a house to put it in, rugs and lamps. Later: a broken down stove, a new washing machine. Later: mowing the lawn and hanging wall paper. Having babies. But always: the distant deeps of that shadowy sea framing the rocky shore, the skies. A world apart, calling me.*

*I always hoped to go back there, hoped to soak up the heat I grumbled about in the twisted olive groves, to climb again in crazy spurts and dips up winding hillside roads to the mountains where we gazed out over hills, and hills and hills. I wanted to take in the rugged landscape with more seasoned eyes, to taste the food I refused to try, to see what I could not see the first time, to be with you there, again. But there were babies and bills and budgets to manage. We had other places to be. Still, isn't it pretty to think about finding our way back so we could sit by the bar and sip drinks for old time's sake?*

When Ruthie is nearly finished with her drink some Americans who checked in that morning arrive in a noisy group, two couples who by their own account haven't had a moment's peace since they left the "good old U.S. of A" as the loudest of them drawls. He wears boots and Stetson hat, but doesn't look the least bit like a cowboy with his wide pink face beaming from under the brim and his soft belly protruding over his scrolled belt. "You'll have one of those strawberry things, right, Suzanne," he says to the blonde woman who calls him Beau.

"Oh, you know that's just too sweet in this heat, darling," she answers fanning her pale face with the floppy brim of a straw hat. "Aren't you just dying for a beer, Julia?" she asks turning to the other woman.

"Lemonade," Julia answers, perching her slim frame daintily on the edge of the bar stool as though it might soil her gauzy lavender dress, "the only thing that will quench my thirst is lemonade."

"Forget it," Julia's husband says, "they don't have lemonade here." He's a short man with thick glasses that magnify his eyes so they appear, even from across the bar, to be swimming in pools of water. He checks his watch again. "It's nearly two," he says. "When will that bus be here anyway?" he asks, wagging his finger at the bartender.

The bartender shrugs. "Would you like to order a drink, *Signor*?" He pours a whiskey for Beau, then waits for the rest of them to order, his lips parted ever so slightly and drawn back from his teeth in an imitation of a smile. The the swatch of white toweling in his hand glides back and forth over the dark pitted surface of the bar.

Ruth wishes she'd left before they came in, not wanting to have to explain herself to any more couples, and not wanting the bartender to think she's one of them. She sucks the last bit of juice from the lemon she retrieves from the bottom of the glass, trying to decide how to pay her bill and make her exit without speaking any English. She could pretend to be French, but the only word she remembers is *derriere*, and with her reddish hair she's more likely to be taken for English, anyway. She'll say she's from London and here on holiday. Her husband is a businessman, she'll say—quite busy really. Just couldn't tear himself away. Not to worry, she'll add. I sort of like a bit of time to myself.

By then they've all started on their drinks and the hotel clerk comes in and announces the arrival of the bus.

"Here's to the toreador," Beau proclaims, draining his glass with a flourish, which reminds Ruth vaguely of Frank, only because it's something he would never do. She spits the lemon back into the

empty glass which she'd half raised to Beau's toast.

They leave as noisily as they came in, the woman called Suzanne protesting squeakily that she hasn't finished her drink and that the country must be quite uncivilized if they haven't even heard of "to go" cups.

Ruth waits until they've left, then pays her bill smiling sheepishly at the bartender, wanting to apologize for their rude behavior. "You're very patient," she tells him. He merely nods with the same blank face and dead eyes he reserved for the others, wiping the counter, waiting for her to ask for something else.

She's lost the knack of talking to people, Ruth thinks then, hurrying off to the bus.

### I REMEMBER PREPARING FOR THE WEDDING

*You had to lie back then, to get married in the Church. Do you remember, the priest put us in separate rooms? He let you read the paper and sign it, but me he questioned. He looked me in the eye, stared across that huge metal desk of his, in the darkened upstairs room of the rectory, next to the red brick building where I'd gone to school, next to the old wooden Church where I'd been baptized, on the south side of the tracks, at the bottom of Main Street, in the heart of the village where I was born. He sat there looking at me with no expression, across all those years—choir practice and feast days, First Friday devotions, and Lenten fasts—and I looked back. I saw a procession of girls in blue uniforms, heads wreathed in flowers, singing sweet praise to the Virgin:*

*O Mary we crown you with blossoms today,*

*If I tell you a melody—tell you the rise and fall. The gentle pause. The pitch. If I tell you the harmony—the lilt of young voices entangled with the scent of blue bells and forget me nots. If I tell you, will you hear it, now and forever after—hear the whisper of the clean blue flowers, smell the sweet honeyed breath of the young girls passing? Will you feel their love? their belief? their passion?*

*Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May.*

*We learned early to walk in line, hands folded in prayer. Pretending to be brides in our white lacy dresses and veils, we marched to the altar to receive the body of Christ, but had to make up sins for Confession because we didn't know what we'd done wrong.*

*I looked across the desk, whose grey metal chill was inching over me, creeping up my arms to my shoulders where I was suppressing a shudder—I looked across the desk and I lied—said I'd never—I lied—use any—I lied—artificial form—I lied—of birth control—I lied. Straight out without flinching, I lied. Swore I wouldn't do what I was already doing. Fucking you just for the fun of it.*

*Afterwards I went home and cried.*

The box office outside the *plaza de toros* is jammed with people, but those with tickets seem in no hurry to enter. Ruth stands at the edge of the group of tourists who've been collected from several hotels, watching the young men who buy cardboard sunshades for their fiancées, then linger to inspect the bright red and yellow poster at the gate.

Someone's complaining—it's Julia's husband, from the bar. Their tickets are *Sol y Sombra*; that means they'll be stuck in the sun for the first half, he tells them. Ruth avoided them on the bus, sitting up front with Sergio the tour guide, who pointed out all the important sights in French and German and another third language that almost sounded like English. By the time he said anything Ruth could understand, they were so far past the spot that she wasn't sure what he was describing.

They enter the arena finally and Sergio escorts them to the third tier of seats, which offers a fine view. Horns trumpet, then a band plays some kind of dancing or marching music. Ruth thumbs through her little pocket dictionary whenever an announcement comes over the loudspeaker, but can't find words to match the liquid

sounds which all seemed melt into each other.

Three matadors and six bulls is all she can make of the program, so she uses it to fan her face instead which is becoming flushed from the sun beating hot down on her head. The crowd, she notices, consists mostly of middle aged and older men who talk and smoke, eat sunflower seeds — talking and joking — drinking — talking quickly, always talking as if they are all engaged in one long unending conversation.

The matadors, wearing their funny flat hats and shiny tight suits, emerge marching three abreast. It grows so quiet that Ruth hears her stomach rumbling. There should be bells and incense she thinks, coughing to disguise the noise growling out of her as the procession of assistants follows behind each matador. When the entire group has entered, the crowd regains its breath—a gasp of pleasure ripples through the audience and then a cheer.

Retreating to the shade, the matadors stand doll like in a row. Their costumes are the color of icing Ruth thinks, licking her lips—strawberry and lemon and minty green. Frank would never wear pink—it was a dizzy color, he said. She'd like to slide into one of those slim tight suits, feel the taut smooth skin covering her own, her muscles rippling beneath its cool embrace. She would not have to speak if she were a matador or ever have to ask for things.

The first bull charges from the pen into the ring, stops suddenly and stands motionless, except for the frenzied twitch of its tail. "*Toro, toro,*" the young men in front of her call out while the picador, mounted on horseback, approaches. Thirsty and hot, Ruth looks to see if there isn't a vendor nearby who can sell her one of those cups of water. If Frank were there he'd have planned ahead and filled a thermos, been prepared. He would have insisted that she wear a hat. The crowd roars again, and when she looks back the picador is retreating from the charging bull who stops in the center of the ring, snorts and wags his head from side to side, shaking the blue and gold ribbons that wave gaily from atop the two white sticks that now protrude from his shoulder. A dark wet patch spreads out from where the sticks meet his skin. It's a wound, Ruth realizes. He's bleeding. She thinks she can feel his heart beat in her ears.

If only she could get a drink of water. Shielding her eyes from the scene she fights the urge to vomit, but finds herself peering through splayed fingers for a closer look. The pink matador emerges and the crowd roars. He faces the bull then begins his elaborate dance, his cape floating, flying up and around. And the bull lowers its head, and joins in the dance, following the flight of the fluttering one winged bird that's always just beyond horn's reach.

Blood drips down the animal's side now in a dark stream. Sun beating down on her, Ruth stares at the spectacle till the crowd seems to fade around her and she is hurtling down a long dark tunnel towards a hot white circle of light.

Then she is sitting in the front seat of the Buick again with Frank, and he has that expression on his face, that expression he had at the moment he died. It didn't look like sleep, or anything you might expect—not surprise, or regret, or even surrender. It was like he just stopped, or was turned into a wax figure. And she heard it, actually heard his last breath, though she hadn't realized it at the time. It wasn't like any sound she'd ever heard before, the sound of his breath leaving his body—and then just silence—his head slumping down, his hand resting there on the seat by her leg. He'll move, she'd thought; he's just teasing that's all. He was going to turn his head and tell her again. "You don't trust my driving. You just don't trust me."

### **I REMEMBER HOW WE ARRIVED**

*The stewardess served orange juice just before we landed in Palma, as if the trappings of breakfast would fool our sluggish bodies into waking. Passport in hand I stepped on foreign soil for the first time, squinting into the sun, trying to ignore the gritty tiredness settling behind my eyes, sweating already in my New York clothes. In my suitcase I had bellbottom jeans, platform shoes, a safari jacket, a slim calendar of tiny pills marked with the days of the week.*

*I was still thin enough then to wear a bikini. It would be too cold for swimming though, as we found out later, but I'd wear it anyway, draping myself across black boulders on a rocky shore. I*

*know because there's a picture of me in the album—eyes closed—am I sleeping or just sun bathing? — stomach flat and tight, unscarred yet by childbirth—legs bent, shins shiny with suntan lotion. The next picture is a formation of black rock in the shape of an arch framing a tiny figure of you. I must have been standing on the cliff above taking the picture. The sea beyond is aquamarine.*

*You seem to be talking to me as I snap the picture, your hand raised, gesturing. Were you telling me again how to use the camera? I wrote something like this about us then:*

*In all logic I should not love you, as unlike me as you are. Yet somehow we blend together. My coolness mingles with your warmth as colors that melt to form one. I think perhaps we are aquamarine. I the blue and you the green.*

*It was on the third day of our honeymoon that we started wondering what our friends were doing. Is green a warm color?*

Ruth hears a fly buzz—swats at it, but it won't stop worrying her, swooping and diving, buzzing around her face. She stands up. "Excuse me, excuse me, please," she says, the fly still whining in her ear as she steps over feet and makes her way to the aisle.

She runs down the steps to the fence, where she stands gaping at the matador, while her head pounds with the throbbing, beating pulse of the bull's heart. Eyes wild now it charges past her, flesh rippling with a final burst of power toward the raised sword of the matador. No air. The sun glints off the blade, blinding her, and she waves to the matador calling, "Frank, Frank," her knees buckling as she sinks to the ground.

### **I REMEMBER HOW WE LOST OUR WAY**

*Red is warm. It was a red car we rented, I think. Yes, in a tiny red car that barely held our luggage we put-putted away from the airport. The Spanish lodging with private beach and formal gardens from the tour book eluded us, as we wound through the residential streets high into the hills above the city. We stopped to ask directions, then drove further and further away from the harbor.*

*The doorman at the big American hotel told us something in Spanish, something like, "Turn left at the big tree," you said. But there was no way to turn left at the tree when we got there, and we were lost again. Your three years of high school Spanish were three years of Spanish One I learned then. What else didn't I know about you?*

*—that you talked in your sleep, didn't read books, made noises in the shower, hated my poetry—*

*If it hadn't been for that little boy on the bicycle, pedaling fast and furiously in front of the car, we never would have found the hotel, the one I chose for its Spanish atmosphere—the formal gardens (a bunch of plants our room looked over), the private beach (a slimy green pool they cleaned the day we left).*

*It was, I'll admit, a mistake to try to describe us as two colors blended into one. Later I'd write:*

*Our lives run parallel, yet forever apart—like railroad tracks that meet only in the distance.*

*There was more, something about being an also-ran in the race for your attentions. I remember liking that line.*

*Do you think it's true what they say—that it's easier to lose a mate to death than to divorce?*

After the bullfight, Ruth rests her eyes under a cool wet cloth as the bus bumps along the dusty country road. The chattering of couples buzzes annoyingly around her. She can't make out their conversations, but the rattle and hum of their voices keeps her listening, trying to decipher some word or phrase that will unravel the secret. What are they saying? Frank would know. She's sure Frank would know.

Sergio is talking on the microphone again. Then the bus stops at the side of the road and they all disembark, one behind the other forming a line that weaves snake-like down a narrow lane to a garden.



A wall of boxy shrubs separates the terrace of fruit trees and rows of flowers from the wild tangle of growth on the other side, and a small arbor of grapes nearly hides the gate across the shadowy crevice in the hill.

"You can't go in," the woman at the gate says, passing a leathery palm over her face. "The cave is closed." Under shaggy white brows her eyes shine like dark mirrors, and Ruth sees in them only her own glossy reflection.

Julia hands Ruth a rose and tilts her face to the wind. "There are spirits here," she says with a sniff.

Pulling a white handkerchief from the pocket of his suit and giving it a quick shake, her husband lifts his black sunglasses and wipes the sweat from the bridge of his nose. Squinting at his wife he says, "I don't believe in things I can't see."

Ruth holds the red petals to her nose. "It has no smell," she says, but the two of them have already gone to pose for a picture with the others under a fruit tree. A drop of blood bubbles up from the thorn at her fingertip.

Sergio calls from above as Ruth probes the broken skin, then sucks the wounded finger. "On to the museum," is his bold pronouncement. When she turns back to look, his dim shape melts into the glow of the sun.

The scattered couples hear him finally and regroup in a slow march up the hillside. "Ah, the classics. Now there's something worth seeing," Julia's husband says, leading them back to the bus.

Ruth remains behind, and they do not miss her.

Under the arbor the old woman plucks grapes, laying the bunches in a basket. "What do you seek," she asks after they've gone, her gums spreading in a toothless black grin.

"I don't know."

Gesturing for Ruth to follow she disappears into the mouth of the cave.

Ruth starts to follow, but just beyond the gate she hesitates. "I can't see."

"You have to give yourself up to the dark."

*The words cast shadows on the page, and there are blank spaces between them that you can get lost in. It's time for us to talk about Ruth, for it is she who's brought us back to those days when we were young, when we thought we knew.*

*I took your name—gave mine up willingly. It did not seem strange. Only the “misses” was strange—“misses” was your mother, or mine, and I was nobody's mother.*

*Was it there that I lost myself, (was it in you?) in your smooth broad back, and strong hands, in your lopsided grin and dark eyes, (there was that, of course, but that's not what I mean), what I mean is the quick and busy way you did things—always running, moving, getting something done—and me following behind—no time to stop to think to breath—one body, one motion, pressing forward, keeping track, making time—all the glorious clutter of our lives swept up and packed away into tidy little boxes stacked in even rows on ordered shelves—separated/intact/organized. That fearful symmetry stalks my brain, wants to bind me to its balanced frame, gag me with its hot white core, bend me to its shape.*

*When we were young, we thought we knew. When we were young, we said things like, “I do,” and thought we knew what it meant. When we were young, the solid center of the world was held safe in the translucent word. Now, like the slim cool thermometer that slipped from my lips once when you made me laugh, the glass has shattered and the mercury center, not solid after all, is here—no there, splitting off, now there, and there, and there, running free, changing shape, becoming newer and new and new.*

*Here, we are a memory. But Ruth is real, on the page. She is the sentences between us, the voice crying out in the dark, the sounds our lips mold themselves around, the things we try to say.*

*This is the hard part, where one thing stops and another begins—where we have to change direction. After all the years we are still opposed. You can't follow Ruthie where she's going. You'd want to install electric lights, build a stairway, have safety inspectors with badges that read AIR QUALITY MAINTENANCE.*

*She has to slip in quietly without disturbing anything. This then is the story. You'll have to abandon your equipment and trust*

*me.*

She steps over the edge of the pale circle of light as though off a precipice and then she's there beside the woman blinking into nothingness. "Feel your way," the voice commands moving away and Ruth gropes damp earth and stone to its sound.

The entrance is steep and rocky, more a hole than a path. She has to bend low and then crawl, scraping along, clinging to the sides to keep from tumbling. "Don't fight the force that pulls you," her guide says sliding down easily, "let it take you where you want to go."

At the bottom she can stand again. "The hardest part is getting in," the woman tells her. Lighting a match, she pulls a lantern from behind a rock, and its flickering beam lights the remainder of their descent through a maze of damp tunnels. After several dead ends Ruth wants to know where they're going. "Don't give up so easily," she's told as they duck into a new wider passage that leads to the cathedral of the cave, where the air smells of musk.

"We must refresh ourselves." With the lantern between them, they sit cross legged on the ground in the pillar of light that reaches up the vaulted ceiling. In Ruth's hand the woman places a cluster of grapes. "Eat," she insists, watching intently as Ruth chews the sweet pulp, swallowing the bitter skin and seeds along with it. Fingers stained purple with juice, Ruth rubs them in the dirt and stands up.

"Now," the woman says extinguishing the lamp and producing a flashlight from the folds of her voluminous skirt. Ruth points it ahead, and from out the brown darkness draping the wall a golden stag bounds into the light. He's running up towards the ceiling—on two legs it seems, but his great hind quarters anchor him in permanent motion there. In profile his painted figure faces her yet looks away, his single jagged horn forming an eternal question mark.

Ruth's guide is gone. "Where are you?" she calls out, but only hollow echoes answer. Her skin prickles in the coolness.

Behind her hooves clatter as the herd charges. She swings around dropping the flashlight which spins for a moment, lighting a procession of images. The walls are filled with them—stags and giant birds and great cats—prancing, preening, leaping in a blaze of color.

She retrieves the flashlight and turns it into the dark. There's nothing there behind her after all. She can hear Frankie now, yelling at her for going off on her own, right again—like his father. She has to keep moving to turn off his voice, so she follows the wall around feeling for the exit until she comes upon a row of handprints, nearly fifty of them in a row, white shadows of hands outlined in red, the way children trace their fingers in kindergarten. Ruth lays her fingers over one—a perfect fit.

A slight wind from above whispers faint music. "You," she called out, "I hear you." It is their heat she feels first, steamy breath warming her cool skin. She thinks she should run, but finds herself turning her face into the damp and letting the warmth rush over her like the soothing mist of a shower. Their hands are small and strong, pushing her down and down and down, groping, pressing, stroking until she is rolling on the ground—beneath them and on top of them—their faces pressing up against her, lips parting, tongues flickering—nibbling and whispering—all of them around her. She is one of them and they are with her, all of them, who've been there since the beginning. She hears them chanting animal sounds, and wants to be one of them wearing their skins. She feels their fire die and sleeps with them, dreaming their dreams.

*Here's where we always pause. In the cave. With no guide. Perhaps she doesn't want to leave. Perhaps she'll keep me there with her. She has to break the silence to get out, but doesn't know the right words. I think she has the answer, knows the secret of the cave. You think I do—that I am like the hand of her god. You think I could send her son to rescue her, or a search party lead by Julia's husband. The guide could return. But they're gone now, all of them. Only Ruthie is left, and me watching her in the dark. Meanwhile, I can tell her story, but I can't save her. And since I have never been*

*known for my plots, I can only tell about the visions, not what they mean. I will sing it like this.*

*In the beginning there was light  
in the circle of fire—  
and animal sounds*

*Coo coo coo ya*

*Chanting*

*Coo coo coo ya.*

*The eagle, the wolf, the lion,  
their voices  
trilling,*

*howling,*

*roaring from your throat.*

*Wearing their skins,  
dancing the dance of life,  
panting,  
hearts beating  
like  
drums,  
drums,  
drums.*

*Drink power of blood, gnaw  
strength of bone.*

*In your eyes glowing  
the beast charges again*

*as your tongue*

*warms to the moist*

*flesh and the tale of the kill.*

*When the fire dies,*

*sleep and in your dreams see it*

*again,*

*the beast that lives*

*within*  
       you  
*now.*  
*Aching with hunger,*  
                   *awake to the force*  
*that kindles*  
                   *your desires*  
*animates*                  *your dreams.*  
                   *What name to give it?*  
                   *What meaning?*  
*In the belly of the earth,*  
*deep, probe the*  
  
*wells*  
                   *of memory.*  
*Bold,*  
*bright as life,*  
*paint images*                  *that soar,*  
                   *leap,*  
                   *and*                  *charge*  
*through the night.*  
*Imagination unleashed,*  
                   *spirit takes flight,*  
                   *the hunt goes on.*

*The visions survive, but Ruthie's missing—my voice has supplanted hers—she is lost, trapped in the cave, sleeping silently in the shadows, dreaming the life behind the word. But she doesn't sleep forever.*

When she wakes she is hungry and wonders how long she's slept. Frankie would yell if he saw her now all covered with dirt and lost in a cave. "Pre-med students don't know everything" she says, then laughs. It's a hearty laugh that tumbles back to her in the dark. She reaches for the flashlight, but can't find it. She laughs again, louder this time, pleased with the full sound of her own voice.

She kicks the flashlight when she stands up and it clicks on illuminating the narrow passage where they entered. How long ago had that been, she wonders, licking her dusty lips. She needs water. She'll have to find her way on her own. Picking up the flashlight she sees that her knees are skinned and her sandal is broken. Frankie would be so mad, she tells the empty passage before her, laughing just at the thought his fretful face.

*I never know how Ruthie will get out of this. She has to solve a riddle, I think, in order to emerge, but it's not something someone can tell her, she has to learn it for herself—something with a ring of truth to it—something she should have known all along.*

*Perhaps it would be easier to send out a search party. Or, I could tell her story again, recite the poem.*

*In the beginning there was light.*

She's getting angry now. She doesn't like my beginning.

*In the beginning there was light, I tell her again. That's the way it always begins.*

BUT THAT'S NOT THE BEGINNING AT ALL.

*What is it then if not the beginning? It's not the end.*

NO, IT'S NOT THE END. IT'S NOT EVEN THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

*What is the light, then, if not the beginning?*

IT'S THE END OF THE BEGINNING.

*Then what was there in the beginning?*

THE DARK. IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE DARK.

Black and deep. It was smooth inside, pulsing—ebb, ebb, ebb, flow, flow, flow—and warm. It was solid and growing. It was desire. Turning and turning and turning. The dark is not empty. It is full and thick; it is rich and deep. It is full. It is filled to overflowing—it is seeping out and spilling over; it is leaking and leaking and leaking. It is swollen and thick; it is round. Bursting open. It wants to leave and stay; it wants to be and not be; it is me and not me; it is you and not you. Desire is not empty. Desire. Desire is not waiting; desire is not without; desire is not alone. In the beginning was the dark. It was desire. In the beginning was the darkness of desire—not quiet not empty not silent—roaming and rummaging, probing and grasping,

swiftly smoothly sweetly surely. Desire. Reach—with desire—chase—with desire—hold—with desire. In the beginning was the dark. It was desire. In the beginning was the darkness of desire.

The light came after.

*I should have known that.*

This, she thinks, turning off the flashlight is where I belong.

*I decide to send the search party after all.*

They're too late. She's already clawed her way up and out into the night. Like eyes blazing out of the dark a pair of head lights blind her. She hears footsteps on the path and a dark form approaches from out of the glare. It's her laughter that leads them to her.

"It's all right, we've found her. You can turn off the lights," Sergio calls up to the driver.

When Ruthie stops laughing and opens her mouth to speak its as if the whole world is rushing into her, blades of grass and hills of ants, sandy shores littered with plastic and brown stubbly hills, slushy winter streets and steamy summer nights without the hint of a breeze, girls jumping rope, dogs barking, trees that crack the sidewalk and sweltering subways, horns blaring and lights lighting, the rhythmic swing of a cradle rocking—and the stars, the flickering stars, like candles casting pale shadows across the dome of the sky.

The moon is just rising over the hill as the tourists from the bus rush down the path toward her, wild eyed and worried, "You must be crazy," they say, "a woman alone, wandering around. You could have died."

Calm, white, lucid—the moon's milky gaze drips down the sky to light the hillside. If she tells them about the creatures in the belly of the earth that soar, leap and charge through the night, they will want to own them, Ruthie thinks. By next year she sees a theme park financed by Beau and run by Sergio's tour company. Suzanne and Julia will open a boutique and sell customized T-shirts. Julia's



husband will keep the books and protect the copyright for the "Secrets of the Cave."

"My husband is dead," she tries to say. When she opens her mouth bits of bone sputter out.

"Oh," Suzanne squeals as a splinter strikes her bare shoulder.

"My husband is dead," Ruthie tries to say again, pulling a sliver of bone from between her front teeth and roaring as a wad of fur rolls off her tongue.

"There, there, dear," Julia says leaning toward her.

"My husband is dead," she begins again, hissing through the stream of tiny pebbles rushing past her teeth—"but I am not alone," she coughs out finally, as two silvery feathers float to the ground.

"Crazy," someone says.

*There is no secret message here. I am not Ruthie and she is not me. But I offer her, for she is all I have. And without her, after all, what is there—but all that white space on the page—all that silence and light?*

*As for you and I—what do we really know about each other after all—except that chance, or luck, or fear keeps us together. I have not lost you, nor you me. Though, sometimes I have lost myself, died little deaths—lost words, sentences, paragraphs, whole volumes of myself. Who might I have been?*

"Silly woman," some man says.

The beast that lives within her now growls, and Ruthie bares her teeth, "coo coo coo ya, coo coo coo ya," she trills giving a little dance.

The men shake their heads.

But the women look past her, leaning expectantly toward the yawning dark mouth of the cave.

*Can you feel it? The ache, the shudder, the tremble of desire.*

Holding our breath we wait—hoping,  
listening intently within  
for the pulse and kick,  
the throbbing beat of  
our own monsters  
straining to be  
born.

*Kerry Nicholson*

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## Side Show Sestina

I walk through popcorn-littered alleyways to see the reptile  
show

and one hairy wolf spider as promised.  
The sign said it only feeds at night  
and being the carnivorous breed they  
are, will bite your finger down to a stub

if you come too close. Reptile-  
like men slither and grind cigarette stubs.  
Holding kewpie dolls in one hand they  
promise

me I'll win at dart games and show  
me blue precision bullseyes tonight.

Those straw-chewing carnies reek promises  
of stale whiskey and paper ticket stubs.  
I try to play their carnival games but when night  
descends the neon lights reflect and they  
reach for my quarter with reptile  
scales growing on their work-beaten hands showing

me I do not belong here this night.  
But I am fixed like a reptile  
ready to strike at the stub  
of this hick's worn down fingers as they  
reach to trade money for darts and I promise  
I will win and show

these country carnival freaks they  
cannot break promises  
and still show  
their faces when light breaks through this night.  
The sun will shrivel their reptile  
skin and their majestic tents will look like stubs

from the city skyscrapers. They  
will pack their empty dart game promises  
and their mouse circus trailer shows.  
Then the cotton candy-haired, stub-  
fingered man will carry his reptiles  
along with his carnival home into another night.

And again those sideshow reptiles will promise  
plastic spider rings to the waiting to show they  
will receive your fork-tongued stub to spend in their night.

## 1975

I could close one,  
sleepy, 5 year-old eye  
and still stare at  
melted 7-up bottles;  
the green glass twisted into  
a wave of distortion,  
marking the acid-ridden  
bell-bottomed-time  
I lived in.

Didn't every child  
own a smiling white skull,  
made with love  
out of crude plaster  
by motorcycle-greased fingers?  
Mine sat on the shelf  
next to my psychedelic bottles.

My brother gave them to me.  
I can barely remember  
his face then.  
Covered with beard, moustache and  
hair on his head,  
longer than mine.  
He put Sgt. Pepper's Lonely  
Hearts Club Band  
next to the Disney Disco album  
on my phonograph.

I rode in his micro bus  
and played miniature golf.  
In his kitchen,  
I was mesmerized by a can  
of Kangaroo tail soup,

always afraid  
we would eat it.  
Playing with his  
petrified piranha,  
I was never aware of  
its teeth cutting  
on the edge  
of my mini-skirt.

## **Carob Tree Blues**

When I was a child, I used to hold my breath—wanting so desperately to turn blue. I used to hold in air so long that when it burst out from my lungs, my feet would leave the ground, my body jerked with so much force.

When I was a child, I made my mother paint my bedroom blue and we picked out a bedspread with little blue flowers, and all of my school books had to be covered with blue wrapping paper, and I wore a blue dress to church every Sunday because I thought that if I surrounded myself with the richness, the depth, the purity of this color—then I would be saved within its arms.

Most people don't think about the thickness of blue. Nor about the infinitesimal length of the sky, nor about the weaving of each vein carrying blood through the tips of each body, nor about the richness of four black men wailing out this color in the depths of New Orleans. They don't think about it because they're looking into reds and violets to find their meaning.

People don't think about the four letters, not about the sound that the word makes, not about the feel it has when you speak it. Blue. Go ahead, say it to yourself and feel how your lips come together, folding inward, spitting out the first sound and then feel how your tongue stretches and slides across the roof of your mouth, extending your lips outward as if waiting for a lover's hasty kiss. Baloo. Baloo. Blue.

When I was a child, I used to hold my breath hoping that one day I would look into the mirror and I would be staring back into the purity of sky, the depth of ocean, the clarity of water, the richness of stream. All other's blues. Blues of otherness.

Out of all the colors on the wheel, I wanted this one to be me. I tied all of my fingertips once separately with string and watched them turn shades. When they got to purple, I cut off the string. I painted my hair once with poster paint. Each strand, sticky until it dried. When I was forced to wash it out, the color whirled

dirtily down the bathtub's drain. It stained the linoleum gray and I have yet to be forgiven for that childish indiscretion.

"Look, see, how you can't get those stains out, they just won't come out, they just won't, I told her not to do it, I told her, I told you, but you wouldn't listen now would you, no, now would you, now would you?"

My mother has never been known for brevity. I remember growing up with my mother and it was exactly that—a with, not a below, not an under, not a beneath but really more of an along-side. She had been shipped out from New York by her Irish Catholic father who dragged her to the altar to stand beside my father who was the father of the baby that lived within my mother at the time. Thank God that baby was not me because I know that I certainly could not have survived all of the references that my sister Maureen so solemnly withstood.

"Oh, you know, that one, the one, that's right, well, no not exactly, more like seven and a half. She's always been sucha, sucha, sucha delicate child."

I always thought that Maureen was about as delicate as the old Carob that sat out in front of our house and I thought she would crack about as easily as sidewalk. Like me, Maureen was just like her bedroom. It was her escape, her sanctuary she would say. She had stacks of records which she scattered, at times, around her room. You could always hear music coming from down the hall, flowing through the house. To me, my sister Maureen was music. She was strong never-ending melodies, thickly woven harmonies that never gave in, never suffered, but must have held a vulnerability that I wasn't old enough to hear.

"Godammit!"

And then there was my father who I must say is the handsomest man I will ever know. He used to burn, like red molten fire and he used to wail louder than screeching ambulance sirens. His favorite color is emerald. It couldn't be green because that is grass, or plant, or garden hose. No, his color is emerald like the magical isle or the stone within my mother's eyes. Emerald, emmaworld, emmasworld, Emma—my mother, Emma's world—



my father, John. And so he painted our house this color. It stood alone on the top of the block, blazing out from the other homes, which hung back from the paved street in subtlety. I was brought up in a track house. This meant that every house on our block was, on its interior, the same. Each one was familiar to the neighbors' eyes, each one containing the same floor plan, the same kitchen, the same dinette, the same master bedroom. This was comforting when I was younger but then grew to be unnerving.

John didn't really mean to be as dogmatically overbearing as he was. Really he didn't. It was just part of his nature, his culture, his up-bringing. He used to tell a story about his father, my grandfather, who wore a particular type of belt, with a particular length and a particular width. It was the type of belt, my father would say, that made a child swallow deeply just by catching it in the corner of the eye. He used to say that his father, my grandfather, never had to use that belt of his because it was just enough that he wore it. That was authority he would say. That was respect.

It was the summer of my seventh, Mo's sixteenth birthday and it was hotter than usual, steamier. It was the last time Mo stayed around the house taking swimming lessons at the Y, walking to the movies on Saturday, throwing footballs around on lawns longing for dew by sunset.

John stalked my sister Maureen that summer as she played across the street in the Berger's yard. I could see him watch her from inside the house through the screen door. He sat on the porch, out on the chair—smoking. I'm sure for Mo, the red fleck of light was all that gave his shadow away.

"Whatcha doin'?" I remember asking him through the metal door that smelled liked dusty tin.

"Nothing. Go inside."

"But watcha..."

"Noth. Thing. Go. In. Side."

I did as I was told but sat kneeling in the living room's picture window watching my father glow. As dusk fell the group of Mo's school friends decided to stop for the night. The twins that lived down at the other edge of our block headed for home first, and

then Mike Tugner from two doors down, and then Pam—Maureen's friend from church, and then Mark Berger walked Mo to the gate solemnly catching a glare at my father who still sat glowing in the shadow of the porch.

"See you tomorrow Mo," he called after her.

"Ya, sure," she called back already half way across the street.

I watched her from the big window sill that framed the front room. She finished crossing the street, walked up the steps, and was followed into the house by red John.

"So Emma, little Mo here has herself a boyfriend," he said slamming the door behind him.

I had that feeling that I always got when my father had been glowing in the dark. It was a tightening of the muscles, of the heart, of lungs.

"So, Maureen do you like this boy?" He followed her down the hallway. "Do, you? Answer me!" He kept following her down, to the right and to the back of the house. "An. Swer. Me!"

Of course, Mo never did answer him. She never really talked to him. She never really talked to anyone except for me, and that was only our secret. Maureen was a beautiful girl, really, my aunt would say. She had auburn hair that had golden streaks in it when she stood in the sun. Her eyes were dark brown and her face was pale with a long thin nose. She could look deep inside of people, just as she looked at John, and know what you were really thinking.

Maureen used to pick me up from school everyday. She'd hold my hand as we walked home. Her hand was always big and usually chilled. She used to say "Cold hand, warm heart." When I close my eyes now, I can see her standing in her plaid uniform. The maroon plaid uniform of St. Michael's showing off the gold in her hair. Father Malone used to call to her "Well, heeellloo Irish" because he said she was the beauty, the flower that reminded him of home. She always brushed off his attention. I guess she never believed him, because he was much too kind for her to feel comfortable.

Maureen used to hum in my ear as she brushed my hair

sometimes. Her voice was rich and her breath felt like feathers against my ear. It was usually after a bath. She'd let me sit in her room on her bed, flushed pink from the heat of the water. She'd brush out my hair in long strokes, her fingers sorting through the strands, her hands running through the softness. She'd hum to me songs that she had learned, without words, with only melody. She always made me feel warm, safe and warm.

"Do ya? What am I bringing up here, Emma? What is that girl going to turn into, Emma?" He was back in the kitchen screaming at my mother and I could hear them through the walls, through the doors, filtering through the music that came from Mo's room. "What am I bringing up here?"

At dinner, my father was no different.

"So, Mo thinks that I don't see what's under my nose! So, Mo thinks that what she does is without my knowing it!" He'd do things like that all the time. Work himself into a raging ball of red fire.

"So, Mo—have you been out with that Jew yet? Have you let him hold your hand?" He was taunting her. I watched her keep her eyes down. "And you?" he turned to me. "What are you lookin' at?"

"Come on John, leave the girls alone. I can't understand when you get this way, I just don't know why this has to be, why you have to be, why you have to say...." My mother tried to negotiate, tried to bridge the gap, tried to be the string that held it all together but she always shredded like cheap thread.

Maureen used to help me climb the trees in our yard especially the big one out front. "Don't be afraid," she'd say. "I'm here." "You won't fall." "I'm here." "I'll catch you." She would bring me out front on a Saturday or a Sunday after changing from our good clothes. I would stand there in blue jeans and sneakers staring up at the big, knotted tree—my adversary. Up through the leaves I would peer into patches of blue sky. That was where I wanted to go, up through the leaves. Maureen would give me a quick push up as I grasped onto the lowest branch, heaving myself up, clammering up to sit in the Carob's neck. "You're fine. You're

okay. Don't worry." Her voice would come to me as I stared down to the ground below. There she'd be smiling, urging me on, urging me to go on, move forward. "Don't be afraid. Don't ever be afraid," she would tell me as she held out her arms. "Now, jump. Close your eyes and jump." But I never could. "Come, on, you can do it. I'm here. You won't fall," she'd say and I wanted to believe her. I wanted to move but every second that past sent me deeper into my paralysis and left me with a searing feeling of panic. Then I would turn sideways and shimmy my way down from the neck, over the bark, scratching my arms, and sometimes my stomach along the way. I could never do it. I could never reach for the sky, nor jump for the ground.

"Why—Why not? Maur-reen doesn't seem to want to answer me. Does't want to tell me the truth, doesn't want to admit it. So, she'll just sit here until she does."

And that's exactly what Mo had to do. Sit in that hard wood chair without the cushion until she admitted something that wasn't true, or admitted it just to get up, or began to cry which she never did. And so she sat there while the TV went on and the dishes got washed and put away and as the dogs were fed and as the news came on and as I went to bed and as Carson guffawed and as my mother retired and as the TV went off and the lights too and as the house creaked because it was settling in for the night. She sat there. Maureen, the maroon Carob, and probably cried into her arm so no one could hear.

The next morning, John let Mo get up from the table and seemed madder than he had the night before as she ran down the hallway, to the right, and to the back of the house, slamming her bedroom door. Only music came from her room that day, sad lonely tunes that filled the house with misery and colored the air with tension.

That night after dinner, Mo went to the movies because it was Saturday and a double feature was playing. John took me in the car with him as he followed her. I remember the smell of that old Chevrolet. It was a mixture of stale smoke and sweat. I sat on the vinyl seat, my legs dangling over the side, kicking my heels.

"Why are we following, Mo?" I asked my father.

“Just because,” he said as he watched her round a corner.

“But why, Daddy?” I remember asking.

He finally parked across from the Egyptian as Mo paid for her ticket and waited in line. I’m sure Mo could see us, especially John as he sat glowing in the darkness of his Chevrolet. Every once in a while he’d extend his arm to ash on Piedmont Street.

Maureen used to take care of me when my parents would go out at night. When she’d put me to bed, she’d lay underneath the covers with me. Her hair would hang long down her back and her skin always smelled like rain. I remember, she’d let me hug her arm as she gave me a story. She always said, “Stories aren’t read, they’re given.” “Like a present? Like on my birthday?” “Yeah, like on your birthday.” It was at these times that I would feel myself vanish into the warmth of my sister.

Maureen used to tell me how to hide sometimes, underneath my bed where it was cool. “Hide here. Don’t move.” It was when there was shouting. Emma and John. Shouting. Yelling. I could hear them and Maureen trying to stop them, trying to, trying to. When it was quiet, she’d come and get me. I could see the door crack open and the light streak across my wooden floor. Then I’d see her face smile at me. She’d put me under the covers and hum to me until I fell asleep.

I heard my father suck in his breath when Mark Berger turned the corner. Mo waved to him smiling and caught a glare over her shoulder. She grabbed Mark’s arm and hugged it to her, smiling up at him. They held hands into the theatre.

When we got home that night, John let me sit up to watch the late night movie. He was sitting in his chair facing the TV with me laid out on the floor at his feet when Mo came through the front door. I froze when my father stepped over me, slammed the TV off and then slapped Mo straight across the face, straight away—no words, no anger, no fire, no glow—just slap and then led her to her chair at the table without the cushion.

I ran to get Emma but I remember now that she was sleeping. It wouldn’t have mattered anyway. She just would have said she didn’t understand, why did he, why should he, why couldn’t

he, why is he, why does he, why....” So I went to my room and melted into the blueness of sky.

The next morning Mo was still in the same place sitting awake on that hard chair, staring forward at red John who sat in the living room in his chair. He’d stopped glowing. I tip toed through the kitchen looking for Emma who I found outside hanging laundry on the line—and whistling.

“Mommy, what did Mo do?” I asked her.

“What? Oh, they’re just playing sweetheart. You know how they play sometimes.” She laughed. “I just don’t understand why, just don’t know how, just don’t know.... But don’t worry, it’s different for you, darling. You came later. Now, come help mommy.”

They sat like that the whole day through breakfast, through lunch, and through dinner. Mo just sat there while he glowed. She didn’t talk, didn’t eat, didn’t sleep, just stared off into the panneling against the far living room wall. I made myself invisible that day by snapping my fingers and moving through rooms without sound.

Maureen, you see, was the one that protected me. She was the one who made sure I didn’t get in the way. I can barely remember this one time John came home from work and we were all at the dining room table, eating. He was angry that we were eating without him. We were living without him. We were, without him. He swung his arm across the table and dishes flew to the floor, shattering into thousands of tiny little pieces. I remember beginning to cry, beginning to scream as my father began touching his long, wide, leather belt. Mo swept me up out of my chair, into her arms and ran to the back of the house. I remember my head leaning into her neck, breathing in her skin, breathing into hair?

That night, I could hear him yelling at her as she sat there. Yelling at her, yelling at Emma. Their voices always seemed to filter through my daydreams, even the ones I had at night. I heard words I’d never known before and they were all directed at Mo, at Maur. Reen.

I snuck out of my room, and slowly tiptoed down the hallway, my warm feet meeting cold, hard wood floor. I moved to the end of the hallway where it met the living room and could see

their figures, Maureen perched in her chair, staring blankly forward with no movement, no sound, no cry. My mother stood to the side of John who was ranting from one end of the living room to the next. His face was deep red, the color of pure blood.

I snuck peaks from behind the wall as quietly as I could, holding in breath, in muscles, in lungs. "Now, John, calm down," Emma said. "Calm down, why can't you, why don't you, why do you, why must you..."

"Godammit!" he screamed as he took out his belt. In one swoop of his arm, I watched as he brought it back behind his ear, up above his head, flying to the ceiling and then brought it down hard, full, deep. It met Maureen's thighs with a searing whip of dense, thick, tortured air.

Everything stopped for a moment, froze for a split second in the painful acknowledgement of actions already performed. It was one of those moments that one wishes they could turn back time, erase the clock, earn back seconds that were never meant to happen. I stood in my spot, in the hallway, in the doorway to the living room, with my breath held so tightly that I may have burst if Maureen had not begun running. She ran from the chair, past my spot, down the hall, past my room, and into the master bedroom. John followed after her as she slammed the door and locked it. I ran to my room, to my bed and wiggled my way under it. The light from the hall spilled into my room, across the wooden floor. I heard him yelling, Emma crying. I clutched at my pillow, burying my head, my fingers, my ears, my nose, my eyes. Mo-Maureen-Maureen Ann-open this door-open this-open-please-Maureen-Maureen-Maurreeensoooooorry-Maur-rreeeen-Maurreeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

The silence grew so intensely that I have never been swallowed up by so much quiet. Staring at the crack of light that came into my room, I longed for that smile that would drag me from under my bed. But she never came again, and I drowned in the absence of sound, of breath, of maroon Carob trees that twinkled when she was forced to laugh.

"Look, see, how you can't get those stains out, they just won't come out, I told her, I told you, but you, but you, but you..."

Emma muttering to herself. Muttering. Muttering away.

When John left a year or so later, she made me stand outside with her in the middle of July and we painted the house, the two of us, along side one another. We painted over the emerald.

“Come on, sweetie, come on, that’s it, you’re doing good, just fine, just...”

I only stood half way up the wall and not too much higher with the ladder. It took us two weeks, I think. Out there in the sun, in the heat, in the swampy air.

“Not a good time to paint, Emma.” I remember someone, somebody saying. But we painted it over anyway—shearing it of all color.

“White is the sign of purity,” she said. “Father Malone says so at Mass, he says so, the sign of good, the sign of God. That’s it sweetie, good, good, yes, that’s right, that’s it, that’s right,” she said to me that hot, damp, steamy, summer day. Emma needed that assurance I guess. It’s that assurance that she gets every time she comes home from her job at the bank. Everytime she comes home from the market, carrying her bags of groceries. She waits to be greeted by this gleaming house. It is only when she climbs these steps and enters this doorway that she is reminded of her unending task. She was left to remove the stains.

Emma’s not the only one though. I guess they found me that night, late, outside, up in the Carob tree in the front yard. I guess I was crying, whimpering. They had to coax me down with a promise of an ice cream, or a doll, or something like that. I guess I accepted. Emma said that I just kept telling them, “I wouldn’t have fallen. I wouldn’t have. I wouldn’t have. I could’ve jumped.”

I’m sure now that I was probably reaching for something. Up there, I was half way to sky, half way to blue, half way to baloooo. I could have made it, I know. If I had just believed. If I had just moved. If I had just jumped. If I had just believed that Carob’s don’t have shallow roots.



*Mary R. Spiro*

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## **Solar Husk**

I taste the golden corn  
Of our separation, piled high beside the  
Brittle husks. Salty sweet and fat, rounded  
Kernels cling, zealously,  
Within my greedy mouth.

From my table of recollection I catch your image  
Striding through the fields;  
You ripen your grains in the impetuous sunlight,  
Deftly distributing  
Your plucked offerings of fallen goddesses  
Among the Earth

I well remember germinating.  
Deep in damp soil,  
My woman's breast rose, frantic  
Beneath its cornsilk blouse  
To ripen, even as red shadows lengthened,  
And fingers drew near to harvest.

Harvested, I rest on the table  
Opposite myself, beside the  
Brittle husks which eventually lift into the wind.  
I taste of my own offerings,  
And, circumspect,  
Cease worship of the sun.

*Bruce Tracy*

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## The Eye of God

It's like looking into the eye of God, Billy had told us. In fact he was the one who had started this ritual over a year before and now we all sat huddled together next to the wooden fence of the lumber yard waiting as Alex spread himself across the tracks fifty yards away. He was shaking; I could see that from where I sat. My best friend Tris sat behind me holding my elbow so tightly that it started to hurt.

"Let go you baby," I whispered as I pushed him back away from me. We were the youngest as it was and it was only because Billy was my older brother that we were allowed to hang with them.

Billy was almost a cult god among the kids of Montrose, New Mexico. It had been a little over a year since Billy had stayed on the tracks until the train was only ten feet away. After he rolled off seconds before the train passed, he stood and walked over to where we all sat near the lumber yard. He looked so calm, but I had wet my pants. I was twelve that year.

"Sorry," Tris whispered as he pushed back behind me, "It just scares me."

"Shut up," I whispered louder. "Don't let them hear you."

"Try to keep your friend quiet," Billy said to me and then turned to the rest of the group. "He's about to bolt; I can see it from here. His body's shaking so hard that I bet he's already pissed his pants." There were six of us huddled together. Tris and I were the only ones under sixteen and Billy was the oldest at eighteen.

Across the field in the dark Montrose night, Alex lay across the tracks waiting. His body was contorting back and forth spasmodically. He was getting nervous too quickly and none of us doubted that he would bolt. The front light of the train hadn't even pushed around Hangman's Curve, which was usually the time the guy on the track started to squirm.

"He can feel it," Billy whispered to the group. "Right about now the tracks are vibrating under his body. You can feel a train

almost half a mile away.”

In the distance we could hear its baritone whistle. It was getting close and we all turned and looked down toward Hangman’s Curve, which was a quarter mile away and the point where the tension really started to kick in. No one had ever bolted before the train reached that point. The light from the train softly pushed around the corner and then with full force the train followed with a scream. It was a powerful sight and when someone was lying across the track, it never failed to put a lump in my throat. Alex didn’t hesitate and as the train reeled around the corner he jumped to his feet and ran into the field on the opposite side of the tracks. He was screaming and running and after tripping over an old railroad tie he got back to his feet and started running again.

“Pussy,” Billy screamed as he jumped to his feet and started running in the direction of the tracks. Alex couldn’t hear him since the train was now roaring between the two of them. “Yellow-bellied rodent sucking pussy,” Billy said as he walked back to where we were all standing. “That train was a quarter of a mile away.”

July afternoons in Montrose were as hot as anywhere in the world. Tris and I sat in his air conditioned room watching a New Mexico State basketball game on his ten-inch black and white set.

“That was hot,” Tris said as he shot his Nerf basketball into the hoop attached to his door. “Alex didn’t even wait for the light to fall on him and I swear when he ran that his pants were wet.”

“How the hell are you going to expect me to believe that you could see that far?” I asked.

“I swear it,” he answered as he tossed up another shot at the basket. “His pants were as wet as grass in the morning.” I didn’t continue my challenge so he continued. “I’m going next week. I’m going to lie on those tracks and become a train stud like your brother.”

“Give it up Tris.” I didn’t bother to even look over at him; his statement wasn’t worth the effort. “They wouldn’t let you out there even if you really wanted to.”

“I’m doing it.” He stopped shooting baskets and moved to

stand in front of me. It was his attempt to be intimidating. "I'm going to hang on until the train rips the shoes off my feet. I'm going to cut it so close that even your brother will bow down to me."

That was more than I would stand for. "My brother wouldn't bow down to take a leak on you." I stood and pushed him back against the far wall. I wasn't in the mood to look at his ugly face any longer and left.

"I'm going to do it," he shouted at me as I walked out his front door into his yard. "I'm going to be a train stud."

The heat was a blanket on my back and walking the three miles back to my house would have been impossible without stopping for a break. The lumber yard was the halfway point between our houses and I stopped under the lone oak tree which sat in the adjoining field. Steam floated off the tracks, making them almost look like they were breathing. I rested my head back against the tree and off in the distance I could hear the whistle of a train.

It was still miles away and not ever being one to resist the temptation, I ran across the field to the tracks and placed a penny on the rail. I had flattened hundreds of pennies but there was something about the experience which kept me doing it. The train was close now. I could feel the tracks vibrating as I put the penny down and then stepping back, I waited. It was a small train with only six cars and a caboose but as I sat in the field only ten yards or so from where it passed, I could feel the breeze that it produced.

After it rolled off in the distance I walked over, picked up the penny, and then sat down on the rails. They burned through my clothes but not heeding their warning, I lay back stretching myself from one side of the tracks to the other. It was power. Lying there, even without the threat of a train, filled me with an overwhelming sense of power. If this was half of what Billy felt a year before as he lay here, then I could understand why he kept coming back.

A cloud had rolled in front of the sun making the rest of my walk home more comfortable. In New Mexico clouds were valued as much as the land itself. There wasn't a lot around to duck under when the sun became oppressive. The landscape sprawled on endlessly with only a few shrubs to break up the monotony. I often

thought that the entire world was like that.

I went straight to my room when I arrived home. It was my sanctuary -- a place for no one but God and myself. I was lying on my bed reading a Spider Man comic when Billy walked in.

"Tris wants to do it," he said as he walked over to the pile of clothes on my floor and started poking through them. "He just called and said that he wants to lie on the tracks."

"He's too young," I answered but didn't look up from the comic book.

"That's what I told him but he wouldn't give up," Billy continued. "Do you think he'll go through with it?"

"Too young," I said a little too loudly. I wanted to tell Billy what Tris had said about his bowing down to him but I decided not to.

"What about you, Little Man, when are you going to lie on the tracks?" 'Little man' was the nickname my father had given me before he died. Billy was 'Big Man' and I was 'Little Man'. My father had died when I was four and the nickname was all that I remembered about him. It always made me feel good when Billy called me Little Man.

"I want to," I said and turned to look at him. He was still sorting through the clothes on the floor. "I swear I want to be like you, Billy, but I just can't do it. I can't do the train."

He looked up at me when he found the shirt that he had been looking for. It was his lucky shirt; the one he had worn that night on the tracks. "You don't have to prove yourself to anyone, Little Man. I'll see to that."

When Friday night rolled around I put on some dark clothes and walked over to pick up Tris from his house. We all wore dark clothes on Friday. It made it hard for the cops to see us in the dark when we would hang out by the tracks. They didn't usually bother us but on a few occasions they chased us out of the field with their flashlights.

Tris wasn't looking good when I arrived. "What's the matter, train stud?" I asked when he answered the door. "You're

looking a little pale.”

“Go to hell,” he squeaked. He sounded as unnatural as he looked. His typically baby pink skin looked as if it had been bleached. “Let’s just get going, alright?”

We walked the long route to the field and stopped at the only 7-11 in town for drinks. We always stopped at the 7-ELEVEN on our way to the field on Fridays.

“Hey it’s Little Man and the Pig,” Jack said as we walked in. The ‘Pig’ was a reference to Tris’ usual pinkness. “Although you’re not looking pig-like tonight. What’s wrong?”

Jack had been our physical education teacher earlier in the year but had to quit after suffering from a nervous breakdown. The breakdown left him working three nights a week at the 7-ELEVEN.

“He’s going to lie on the tracks tonight,” I answered as I filled my Big Gulp with Dr. Pepper. “His paleness is almost scary isn’t it?”

“You both go to hell,” Tris said as he looked up from an adult magazine that he had taken off of the rack.

“You guys still hang out at the tracks?” Jack asked. “It’s a stupid way to waste an evening; and put that magazine down Tris. You’re not old enough to be looking at that.”

“Afraid he might find your mother in there,” I answered. “We’re not all lucky enough to hang out here all night like you do.” I filled a second Big Gulp with Sprite for Tris and carried them to the counter. “Maybe some day we’ll take you with us. You really need a life.”

“No thanks,” he said as he put my money into the register. As we started to walk out he called to us, “Hey, you guys be careful. Don’t do anything stupid.”

The long route took us past the old Montrose mansion. Growing up I had been told that Jim Montrose, the owner of the mansion, was the man that the town was named after. I thought it was all bull. Old man Montrose was a weasel who used to chase us off of his lawn with a garden hose. A town couldn’t be named after a man like that. He had died the same year that Billy had stayed on the tracks until the last second. If the town had been named for Jim

Montrose, then they picked the wrong man. The house was now vacant and as we walked past it Tris picked up a rock and threw it up toward the porch.

“Bet the old man wouldn’t have lasted on the tracks,” he said. The clouds had blown in from the east causing the sky to grow darker. “You think it will rain? If it rains I’ll have to wait until next week. It wouldn’t be any good lying out there in the rain. I might lose my footing when I try to push away from the train.”

I didn’t answer him. It was more than he had said all night and I took it as a sign of weakness. I didn’t have a lot of faith that he would actually go through with this, rain or not.

When we arrived at the field, I could see that the group had already gathered at the fence next to the lumber yard. I couldn’t see faces, but they were definitely there. Their black outlines dotted the fence and there was a steady stream of smoke rising above it. Billy never smoked. He said it made people look stupid and for the most part I agreed with him. Still there were a few who would light up their cigarettes every Friday as they sat waiting and talking. I was in a hurry to join the group but Tris kept falling behind. At one point I had to grab his arm and pull him across the field.

“So the man of the hour has finally arrived,” Billy said to Tris as we sat down with the group. “Twenty minutes to the next train. You going to be ready?”

“Sure,” Tris whispered, “I’ll be ready.”

We sat talking for the next few minutes. Billy talked about a girl he had met in school who had just moved out here from California. Tris moved to the back of the group as he was talking. He looked even paler than before and then without warning just got up and started walking away. Alex, who was allowed to rejoin the group after his pathetic stay on the tracks the week before, was the first to say something. “Where are you going, kid?”

Tris didn’t answer, he just kept walking. I thought about following him but I didn’t think that he’d want me to. Finally, Billy broke the silence. “Let him go,” he said. “It’s not his time yet.” His words seemed to take the disgrace out of Tris’ leaving. Only Billy could do that.

“What the hell, I’m going to head back home then,” Alex said as he got to his feet and started stretching. “If I can’t watch a kid get trampled by a train then what’s the use?”

I stood to stretch while Alex was still talking and then started walking down toward the tracks. The clouds had moved through, leaving a star-filled sky to illuminate the landscape. “Where are you going, Little Man?” Billy called out to me.

“The tracks,” I called back without turning around.

“You don’t need to do it.” His voice was tense. I remembered that he hadn’t sounded tense the night he had been on the tracks himself, but now his voice was definitely tense. “There’s nothing for you to prove.”

When I reached the tracks I turned back to look at the group. They had all stayed next to the fence except Billy who was walking toward me. I shook my head and he stopped. I hadn’t expected him to see me in the dark but I guess he did since he turned and walked back to join the others.

There were still a few minutes left until the train was supposed to pass but I lay down anyway. The rails were as cold as snow and as I lay my head back against the farthest rail, my body began to shake. I tried to control it because I didn’t want anyone to think that I was shaking from fear but I couldn’t overcome it. Lying on my back, I looked up into the sky to see if I could pick out the Big Dipper. In the back of my mind I could hear the voices of the others yelling over to me from where they sat next to the fence. Their words were formless as I set my mind to finding various constellations. Then the ground moved.

It was almost nothing at first with only the faint hum of a vibration moving through the tracks and into my body. Within seconds the vibrating had increased to the point that it surged into my lower back and neck where my body actually made contact with the rails.

I remember Billy saying that you can feel a train a half a mile away. It was close and there was no way that I was going to bolt before seeing the front light of the train push around Hangman’s Curve. I would make Billy proud.



I couldn't find the Big Dipper but Orion was shining brightly. I loved the sky. My eye caught a glimpse of the North Star almost in unison with the strong headlight from the train as it screamed around the corner. The sound was overwhelming as the tracks started biting into my back. My body tightened as I pulled myself to the tracks with my clenched fists. I wouldn't run. The sound grew almost unbearable as the light from the train raced toward me. I tilted my head slightly to see if I could catch a glimpse of Billy. He was standing; screaming. I looked back in time to see the light push down on me. The eye of God. The train was on me before I could think and pushing myself off the track with my feet, I felt a pain in my arm as the wheels screamed past, inches from my head. I froze on the ground next to the tracks as the monster shrieked past. I had wet my pants and the wind that flew off the side of the moving train blew cold against my wet legs.

As the train continued down the tracks, the silence returned to the still night. I was dizzy but found the strength to stand up. It was only then that the screams began next to the fence, almost as if they had waited to see that I was alive before coming to claim their new champion. I saw Billy at the head of the group as they ran toward me. I could barely make out his words as he yelled 'train stud' while he was running. It was then that I felt the warmth against my arm and looking down I could see where the train had ripped a ten inch piece of skin off of my right elbow. The blood flowed down to my fist which was still clenched.

I was cold and my body was shaking. My mind hadn't cleared yet and as I saw the group moving closer, I decided to run in the opposite direction. My arm was starting to throb as I pushed my way through the field. Behind me, I could hear the triumphant screams of the others but not wanting to be caught, I kept running.

*Tamara Trujillo*

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## **The Garden**

Every day I get down on my knees and pray.  
Crouched in the flower garden, I offer up my hands in worship  
watering seedlings, pruning the leaves,  
giving myself to something that takes time to grow.  
Returning to the earth is sometimes the longest journey  
for a pair of feet with intentions of running.

*Christopher Woo*

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## **Blowin' Smoke**

In the beginnning  
there was nothing  
and God looked down and said,  
“Oh wow man, Deadsville.”

He scratched his goatee,  
pulled a cig from his breast pocket,  
patted his hands on his body.  
“Anybody got a light?”

And there was light.  
God sat back,  
blew smoke rings and tapped his ash.  
Galaxies spun away and nebulae blossomed.  
“Way cool, Daddy-o!”

Stars burned, rock solidified.  
And God said,  
“Whoops, better get an ash tray...”



# Contributors:

**Stuart Ackerman** has fought for truth, justice and larger erasers on pencils by having work in *Outerbridge* magazine and as a former editor of *The Northridge Review*.

**Robert Arroyo** is a professional student working toward a B.A. in English, with poetry as his focus. His hobbies are reading, writing, and living for Heather.

**Patty Busillo** taught writing at CSUN for three years while working on her Masters in writing. She graduated in May. She has written two full-length novels, but the most important part of her life is her cat Max.

**Maria Casey** is currently working in the Communications industry. She has previously been published in the *Northridge Review*. Lately Maria has been studying Icelandic and is into body piercing.

**Karin Cotterman** is an interminable wanderlust. Name the place and she's been there or she wants to go there. She is a huge Billie Holiday fan, loves photography and this is her first published poem.

**Lee Duke** works as an aerospace engineer for a formerly great national space agency. He lives in the Antelope Valley with his wife, Judy.

**Barbara Edelman** is a graduate from CSUN. She was published previously in the *Colgate University Literary Magazine* where she did her undergraduate work.

**Christian Hite** is a graduating senior at CSUN currently interested in a writing that considers the reader's experience — the sensual immediacy — of the text itself as an object.

**Patrick McCord** is a writer and teacher currently working on a TV Movie-Musical mixing Golgo's *skaz*, "The Nose," with an unauthorized biography of Thomas Pynchon. He plans to be married on or about New Year's Day.

**Kerry Nicholson** is a senior in CSUN's writing program. This is her first publication and she thanks everyone who encouraged her to submit, especially Michael, who made the "SideShow Sestina" possible.

**Colleen O'Mara**, a recent CSUN graduate, claims her creative inspiration comes from the works of Louise Erdrich, Susan Sontag and Imogene Coca. Considered by few to be a militant pacifist, she has always had a strange obsession for writer/essayist, Gore Vidal.

**Joseph Sharpe** is a founding father of Sigma Phi Epsilon Fraternity, a member of Golden Key National Honor Society and a Phi Kappa Phi honor fraternity. He recently graduated from CSUN with a BA in Ttvf and now works at Columbia Studios in feature film production.

**Mary R. Spiro** is a Teaching Credential candidate and graduate student of English at CSUN. She writes due to an inherent desire to be poor.

**Bruce Tracy** finally retired from the CSUN writing program in 1992 with a B.A. in English and is currently working toward a teaching credential at The Masters College in Santa Clarita, California.

**Tamara Trujillo**, a CSUN graduate, teaches high school in Playa del Rey where she incorporates *The Northridge Review* into her curriculum. She would like to thank Sharon Kollmeyer for help in producing her poems.

**Christopher Woo** decided on writing as a career because it was the only way he could express himself artistically without hours of practice. He has also considered a career in editing, but was quoted

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