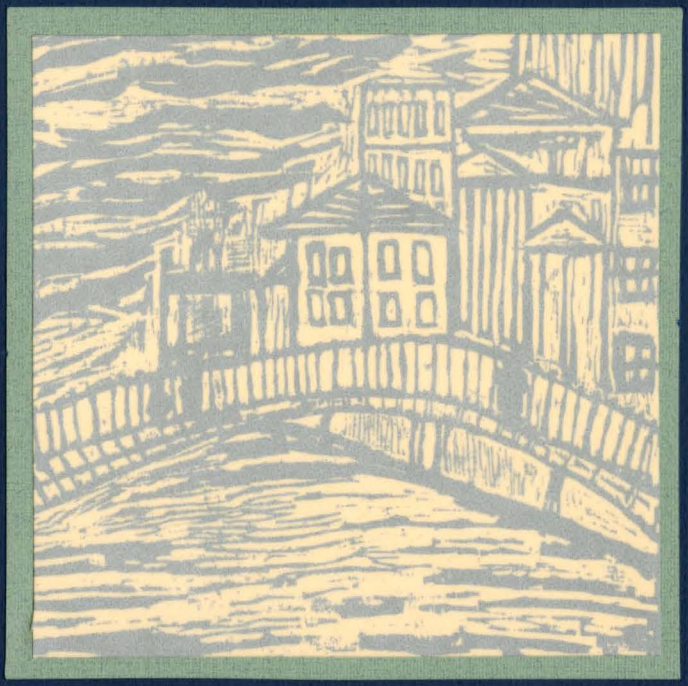

the northridge review

hold

t m a n e d e r m o n d s e l i n i

e s e c g e a l a c h b u w a n c h ā n

a h y a r e a h y u e l i a n g l u c i n e k

e r t a l m a a n l a l u n e l u n a m o o n

d b u l t s u k i

y u e t o n d s e

j e s u w a n

h y a c i n e k

r t a l m o o n h o l d

a n k u u k i l u a y

m a n e l i i m j e

a l a c h a a h y a

y u e l i a n g l u c i n e k a m e r t a

l a l u n e l u n a m o o n h o l d k u u m j

c t s u k i l u a y u e t m a n e

o n d s e l i n i m l u c i n e k a m e

t a l m a a n l a l u n e l u n a m o o n h o l

FALL
1998

the northridge review

awards

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

The Northridge Review Fiction Award recognizes excellence in short story writing by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. The winner of this award for 1997-98 is Julie Coren for "blue." *The Northridge Review* is grateful to Rod Val Moore for evaluating the fiction.

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given in memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellence in poetry writing by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. The winner of this award for 1997-98 is Rebbecca Brown for "why you shouldn't be a poet." *The Northridge Review* is grateful to Robert Wynn for evaluating the poetry.

The winners of the CSUN Photography Competition were: 1st Place tied by Michael Waxman and Daryl Glinn-Tanner; 2nd Place to Dora Herzog; and 3rd Place to Alan Peters, whose artwork is featured in this issue of *The Northridge Review*. Winners were selected by their CSUN peers.

The Northridge Review invites submissions between September and April. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the author's name, complete address and telephone number, as well as the titles of the works submitted. *The author's name should not appear on the manuscript itself.* Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be delivered to

The Northridge Review
Department of English
California State University-Northridge
Northridge, CA 91330-8248

Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope stamped with sufficient return postage.

Cover art by Ramona Martinez.

The Northridge Review gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English Department faculty and staff for their support in making this issue happen. Special thanks to Dr. Katharine Haake for her time and knowledge.

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editors' note

You have in your hands an artifact of sorts. A thing loaded with the creative energies of many different people: writers, photographers, editors, the teachers of these people, the teachers of those people, mom, dad, etc. Thank you to all these people for giving part of their lives to *The Northridge Review* (even if they didn't know they were doing it).

We would like to thank Dr. Katharine Haake for letting us participate in the ongoing exploration of group process. Her pedagogy continues to teach even when she is not around. It is the kind of education that you never quite get over, and we are grateful.

We had a fantastic staff this spring semester. Everybody's contributions were important in developing the character of the magazine but special thanks must be given to Alex Frixione, Josh Filan, Rebecca Baroma, Debi Iacono and Canan Tasci for continuing to work on this issue during the summer and to Daryl Glinn-Tanner for her willingness to solicit, coordinate and prepare all the photography submissions.

As it has been said before--no work of writing is ever finished, only abandoned. Finally, our summer runs into fall and we must abandon this artifact and send it out into the world. Enjoy.

Susannah LeBaron
Alene Terzian
Desiree Wold

contents

poetry

photos

proses

manifesto for myself

Know by these presents

1. Wherever
2. I
3. go
4. I carry the sorrow of my country
5. its memory of water
6. its calendar of inclemencies
7. If my voice sounds far away
8. if I argue with the logic of ideograms
9. I insist I can't help it
10. this is the language
11. I speak in my dreams.

Whereas

12. I carry the light of all countries
13. everywhere I go
14. I declare myself responsible
15. for the upkeep of their bridges
16. their poor their balconies
17. the fading lamps
18. and evanescence of dawn
19. I claim you as my burden
20. the you I will never meet
21. I bear your music

22. and your histories
23. and your children begging in the streets
24. and your mothers
    counting the bullets
    in the hollow nest of corpses

25. I am that one made of copper of ash of salt
26. I have asked my poems
27. to bear the weight
28. of all conversations
29. unheard prayers
30. the insatiable murmur of the penitent
31. the two faces
32. of joy and sin.

33. Everywhere that a man
34. goes hungry
35. is denied his speech
36. is driven from his home
37. I am the one who must accept
38. his bitter music
39. his silence
40. his terrifying oracle

41. Wherever I go
42. I remain who I am
43. I bear the weight
44. of light passing
45. over the cemeteries
46. the ripening fruit
47. and the nails

48. yanked from the hands
49. of the crucified Christ

50. Keep this under your hat
51. and when they ask about me
52. tell them he knew
53. a lot of things
54. but he never learned
55. to shut up.

costa calida

I've lost them a long time ago,
everything that's cast back on this shore,
the moon of honey and minerals
and the waters of rare
and maleable metal.

Because I wanted them so much,
because I dreamt too hard,
because I said all the wrong words,
because I've worn out
the disconsolation of prayers,
the undertow of longing.

I know there is a logic
far more human
than the sea,
although its lamentation
finds no shore,
although it breathes
like an immovable being
whose compassion
we are only beginning to understand.

I must have known this
long before I came here,
I have always been drawn

to the impossible alchemy,
the silence with which light
turns water
into memory.

***

The next morning,
after a storm,
the mist reveals
the jagged peaks of the Sierra Cabrera,
like images awakened
by the silver of daguerreotypes.

Everyday it is the same,
the ancient *cabrero* crosses this path
with his billy goats and a shaggy dog
nipping at their heels.

I have come to rely
on their presence,
marking time by the tinkling
of bells and the red dust rising

and the way the newborn one
always hobbles away,
amazed at the earth
that has just begun.

***

This will be the time of miracles,
all we have lost
will be revealed in dreams,

in water, in the desert,
in arteries, in stones.

We will understand
the persistence of trees
and the agony of rivers,

we will wear the silence
of eclipses,
and in our poverty
there will be much to give
and more light than we can imagine.

ERIC
GAMALINDA

casida of the souvenir postcard

Lorca was walking down Cuesta de Gomerez
when he saw a group of young actors
moving a platform. They were hoisting it
over their shoulders, and all he could see
was a headless army of two dozen bodies,
forty-eight upraised arms, forty-eight legs
inching slowly up Alhambra Hill,
and all he could hear was the sound
of their shuffling feet, and the green wind
playing tag with the moonlight. And this,
he knew, was a vision of death. He walked
down to the curve where St. John of
the Cross was born, trying to recall if what
he had seen was a dream. For the past two weeks
he had been dreaming incessantly, so that

at some point, perhaps yesterday, as he drank
his third coffee, it became impossible to tell
where the dreams stopped, and where
his normal life began. And so he kept walking,
and along the way he met strange apparitions:
black - veiled women assaulting him with
crucifixes; dogs made of lead; iron roses;
a masturbating Christ; his face in the bottom
of a well. Finally, at the end of the road,
on Plaza Nueva, he saw me. Only this is
58 years later, and I am looking not for Lorca
but for a cold *tubo* of Cerveza San Miguel.
And at this point he realizes he was right all
along, that death defies gravity, that our bodies fly
in our sleep, that only the sound of water
will outlast all memory. He thanks me for showing up
in his dream, and attempts to embrace me, but
his arms pass through my body (not surprisingly)
because he and I are phantoms, and Granada,

at this instant, and only then, does not exist,
or is something he and I dreamt up. He and I,
however, are not dreaming the same dream.
And before it gets too complicated
I tell him, Lorca, you'd better be on your way
And I'd better get my beer.
And then something strange happens.
I realize I'm not talking to Lorca
but to a *postcard* of Lorca in a *tienda*. And
the man
selling postcards is looking at me
with a mixture
of wonder and pity, and asks
Estas loco?
And since I think he wants to know
if I need a stamp,
I reply
Si,
un sello, and he says *Para donde?*
And I don't know what to say, I have forgotten
who I want to send it to, or where I come from,

or what I'm doing there, so I say:
Quiero
lancear el
corazon del mundo,
quiero lo
arrancar

del ombligo de
sueño.
And he looks at me
and shakes his head
and gives me my stamp
and my change
and I know he understood, or maybe
I'm still dreaming, and I can walk away
before he finds out
that I gave him dream money,
and these words were never said.

CHRIS
HERRERA

ode to the oil on my face

Take this Kleenex from my back pocket.
I don't want it anymore.
Look at the tattered tissue
unfold in my foreign hands.
It's greasy & brown like my skin.

I've clung to it since that
afternoon in the 5th grade when
Tommy Showalter laughed at how
my nose & forehead shone in the sun.

I've carried it to jr. high dances,
high school homecoming games,
college classrooms,
my job in Encino, &
on dates with Oil of Olay-skinned girls
at fancy restaurants not in Van Nuys.

In restrooms & dark corners, I'd take
out my tissue & free my pores from the
oil my grandpa earned
working in construction because a
grade school diploma wasn't enough.
I'd wipe away the same oil that glistened
on my great-grandma's cheeks as she
browned homemade tortillas on a skillet.

I have since found
I don't need this tissue.
I have learned to praise the oil that
illuminates my face
under the hot American sun.
I have learned to be proud of
the oil that soaks clear through this
white shirt on my wet back.

a h i m s a :

Simple monk, I'm saying it's not a question
of what you see every time you stare at her eyes,
that opal gaze she inherited from her father,

but rather: what is this slippery and infinite thing
weaving 'round the childish fingers of your soul,
fumbling for what some androids refer to as Love?

With all the noise, all the smoke, all in a cold
whirling wind-dance, how can you accommodate
her mysterious space?

Even now, as she sits no more than six feet
from your strongest hand, what language
will you choose to confess in?

Lama, I know about such violence and poetry:
I, too, have been there.

Leave her, then, to her private midnights,
knowing she will never desert you.
Let no banality awaken either of you.

r e s t

In four years' time I sense my own smallness
among the silence of lonely planets, adrift and cold.
I think of the footsteps and ghosts you planted
across your life: like stars, in a single flash of memory.

What, indeed, did you know of the world,
enduring the torments of trite and childish dramas?
I imagine you often prayed to ambiguous angels.

I then figure your mind can never be mapped,
your secrets as infinite and winding
as the roads and rivers of your face, crookedly sad
latitudes and longitudes,
as you shriveled slowly in your bed.

Yes, you taught me poetry and the rhythms of a breeze,
yet I sit here, still speechless, feeling little more than
exhausted things; all I can write so far is that
your forehead now reminds me of swaying wheat fields;
that I strangely wish that your palms would still rebuke me,
that the words you read and wrote for me were branded on my flesh,
next to the storm-shaped scar by my heart.

Only now am I getting what it means to be wise:
after all, you loved my old self-centered child,
and I'm still amazed how you were compassionate
toward the lost women who murdered you.

Much time has passed, mother of my mother,
and let me tell you
that your photograph almost finds Jesus for me.
And though, alas, I don't believe in God, I invest
in your immortality: you sing in my bones, will sing
in the wind as my dust elopes after I join you;
I choose to recall:
the lamb-like bass of your mourning, your tears
like a terrible desert rain. . .
but I'd much rather prefer
walking like the best of friends in the park at Evanston,
up and down inviting emerald hills, contemplating
fried rice and eggs with 7-Up; soaring through the beige sea
of the American countryside,
traveling toward San Diego, San Francisco,
through the southwest to Chicago, looking for New York,
Manila still in your heart as you would
compose songs with your sure and steady pen. . .

Back now in my state of fragile logic, and I feel the sickness
I suffer when I smoke too many cigarettes. . .
Gratitude is now just a banal joke.
I have nothing more to say, except:
Here you are.

I can only promise to do my best,
to believe that we'll meet again,
that we are never less than alive, that the earth
saves great inheritances we will both one day enjoy.

MICHAEL D.
BLODGETT

to a waitress

It's one in the morning
I feel like I've died and someone forgot to tell me
You put a cup of coffee in front of me
    And I admire your perky, upturned eyes
    And your benzidrine smile
    Under your I-just-got-done-with-twelve-hours-of-the-best-sex-of-my-
        life-and-I-was-in-such-a-hurry-I-didn't-have-time-to-brush-
        my-hair curls
You ask me what I want.
    You, I thought,
    Covered in a light strawberry glaze,
    With some strategically placed chocolate swirls
    And some crushed almonds on the side.
I order the cheeseburger and fries instead.
God, I'm a coward

a

looking at myself but not in the mirror
in my bathroom but a mirror in a
public place (not a public bathroom)

I look different with my clothes on
(almost like you)

and move at a better pace
slower more calculated
healthier and more productive

under these clothes
my nerves want adventure.

I want to say things like
if I have a penis then I should use it
but these pants get in the way
so I only say things like
I'm so confused by the way I feel

then I trade eyes with people
who catch me in the mirror
pretending I can define my life
by things I can't do (just like you).

b

(she had love beads too
but nobody loved her)

The Albino Cheerleader

doesnt have much
to cheer about when shes
got the same tigerprint
bell-bottoms that growl
when she walks but
cant wear the matching
see-through vinyl coat

because the sun doesnt
make exceptions and
wont stop following her

C

the sun drools heat but can't kill my
straw-bottom chairs

but it can kill a flat bunny
w/out its jacket that's stuck in the
same dry heat that dogs love inside
her cage her mouth was shut & her
eyes were overcooked (too hot) & I
thought she was joking around because
she almost laughed when I shook
her to death.

(for my sister and her hotbunny)

pandemonium scum

tomorrow on the next "Horton Rubbish Show"

World renowned psychic senses out missing children of parents on the brink of a 1,000 pound mother unable to move her kids out of the ghetto because she can't even get herself out of bed without the assistance of a forklift to get to her ex-boyfriend's defiance to take a paternity test for my father's sister's cousin's brother's best friend's girlfriend's husband's mistress' former roommate is the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and it's tearing my son daughter father mother brother sister husband wife lover friend dresses like a slob or slut and desperately needs a beauty makeover so they can reunite with their one-night stand who had sex with them yet never called back about the gay man admitting to having a secret crush on a straight school chum who became enraged from humiliation shooting him drop-dead gorgeous I am and everybody's just jealous and intimidated by my girl you may think you're the cat's meow but you ain't nothing but a classless bimbo in heat dogged by a 10-timing jerk who screwed you over for sex money jocks 'n' ho's and you want him back paleeez to see how you picked on me in kindergarten calling me a geek nose uncle butt fat so dork now I've lost all the weight and altered my face so check out what you'll never have baby baby oh baby porn actress breaks record by having sex with over 300 men in 10 hours for the world's biggest gangbang though the pain still

remains packed with ice but baby baby oh baby what an accomplishment in life while girlfriends fiancees wives confront their significant participating sons of bitches for startling confessions of a man discovering his girlfriend of 18 months is really a guy in drag out war over a woman cheating on her husband with his 12 year old nephew who worships Satan is the (beep) (beeping) around on his (beep) wife with their (beeping) Chihuahua while undergoing a sex change operation and marrying himself so I am a lesbian Nazi hooker abducted by a U.F.O. and forced at phaser point to listen to 2 weeks straight of John Tesh music as part of a hideous intergalactic experiment for approval ratings all on national T. V.

So my Final Thoughts on tomorrow's hot topics are:

I don't care who's right who's wrong who's honest who's lying who's real who's acting who's good who's bad who's straight who's gay who goes both ways just as long as I'm granted another season with 75% pay raise so if you're a man who went in for a vasectomy but instead came out with a hysterectomy frontal lobotomy silicone breast implants and no testicles please give us a call at (213) WASTE IQ and you may be a potential guest on an upcoming episode

hangover lovely

"I'm particularly afflicted by my allergies today," he said,
like some Victorian tragic
or tragic Victorian heroine
and popped some Benadryl.
"I hate to pollute myself with this stuff. It makes me jittery and stingy."
Whatever the hell *stingy* meant.
He washed down the pink and red pills with his favorite snack:
coffee
thick and syrupy with sugar.
He washed down the dark semisolid coffee with a Newport Light.
"Those Marlboros are just too strong" he once told me.
He rubbed the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.
He was hung over.
I most definitely loved him when he looked like this.
Black stubble clawed at the inside of his t-shirt as he pulled it down over his head.
"Sun's down. Think I'll head to the store."
He glowed as he walked out into the dusk.
I knew he'd get me some cheap whiskey
or malt liquor
so I didn't ask.
The dull hum left with him.

That night we drank to accelerate our rotting.
We slept soundly

except once
around three
when he awoke with a start that roused me.
He mumbled something he thought profound about George Lucas.
His breath was popcorn and beer.
Better than cigarettes.

Morning rolled onto us
into us
and I grabbed at my face
trying to halt the coming day.
He rolled over and pillowed his head.
Not much could wake him.
I got up and poked at the funny pages.
How many more mornings would I hear his snore
skidding down the hall
into my morning-funk-shell.
It was a sound that blinded me
and I smiled.

pizzeria

The subtle joys
of a man throwing pizza dough in the air.
Centrifically driven
round.
The pounding is over.
A slight, silent puff
of flour
as a crust is carelessly
carefully
flying upward
and around.
It spins.
It might come down.

Ellen
Kelley

great aunt cosette

Across the table she sits
wick-thin, brittle as a branch
ringed and cuffed with silver.
She slips a bit of roast
onto the fork
we wait politely
for her first bite
but no, she's recalled a morsel of family history
far more delectable than the gravy laden beef
dripping forgotten, mid-air.

I want to say
please! pass the forklift
so she can get this food to her mouth
but instead I wait and
wait
until at last the fork
wobbles
toward its wrinkled destination,
where three bites
take as many hours,
between stories unraveled
like an old sweater, burying plates and glasses
under stringy fuzz heaped so high
I can't see around, but only hear her voice
rasping through the cracks
of our endurance.

Much later
I can't find my lemon pie.
Her languid drone has wounded its meringue,
and, crust leaking syrup, it falls.
She's taken dessert prisoner,
she and that waving fork
who commandeer
our Sunday dinner.

mama's kitchen

It's black beans again.
(I'm not complaining)
It's just the same dish and
spoon I ate from

twenty years ago.
It's the same chair
I stood on, when I dropped the
ceramic bowl on her porcelain
floor and caused a crack,

like the one on her face that
splits her in two, as
she bakes her black beans.
She stares out the window

rippling green hills slowly swallow
the large orange pill — a barren back
yard.
Maybe she hasn't noticed, yet
tonight she's

serving black beans again.

opening up coffee cups

For Mom

This thick, sour flavor engulfs my tongue.
I can feel the grains hide between the layers of my skin
on the roof of my mouth.
My mother makes coffee
and tells me my fortune.

(I flip the cup over to dry. I wait for the thick syrup to cover the inside.)

My mother says to me,
"Ne biliyorsun yatigin saman nereye gittigini?"
Though I'm not sure why she said what she said.
What does it matter where I go in my dreams?

She says,
"Kizim, the bottom of your cup is heavy." (She turns the cup.)
"Your heart is suffocated
and you have many sorrows."

How does she know these things?
She tells me I will travel,
that I will be successful,
that I will marry.
She sees hope in these dry crusted black grains.

She says,

"Thumb the bottom of your cup and part the coffee,
open up your heart."

I grew up with this tradition,
traveling through distant lands in my cup.

My mother says,

"Everyone is different."

Though my cup is always thick,
and my heart is always being
suffocated,

She says,

"Inanmack"

"In what," I tell her, "It's only in my head."
"In yourself," she says, "Kizim, in your cup."

replenishment

the daughter gives
her mother
wrinkle cream
for her birthday
in hopes of
erasing the fear
that each new line
announces the
inevitable death
of both

come to me

Unworthy children
play religious hangman
on the cathedral steps,
filling in the blanks
with words —
mass,
love,
celebration.
They await an
invitation to dine
on the body and blood
of the Son whose
image hangs
above the table
of sacrifice.
They wait
while adult
singing muffles
the gentle call of the Father
who has escaped the golden tabernacle
and plays on the steps
of the cathedral.

el sueño the dream

No había nadie en las calles
cuando te fuí buscando
Por cada parte
Por cada lugar
Te busqué
Llamé tu nombre

There was no one on the streets
when I went looking for you
In every part
In every place
I searched
I called your name

Allá en la esquina
Ví a la vieja
con sus cajas
y el suéter harapiento
El pelo estaba sucio
y tenía un olor fuerte de cebolla

There in the corner
I saw the old woman
with her boxes
and the tattered cardigan
Her hair was dirty
and she had a strong smell of onion

Estaba cantando:

She was singing:

—Los gatos se han comido
toda la comida;
y los ninos han matado
a sus padres;
El reloj se ha parado
y los ojos no pueden ver—
oscuridad
Sin luna, sin estrellas
El pasto negro
Las flores de hielo

"The cats have eaten
all the food;
and the children have murdered
their parents;
The clock has stopped
and the eyes don't see a thing--
darkness
No moon, no stars
The black grass
The flowers of ice

Andense, no miren para átras	Get away, don't look back
Nadie les puede salvar ahora —	No one can save you now"
Y con eso empezó a reírse la vieja	And the old woman began to laugh
Loca, por supuesto	Crazy, of course
Pero había algo	but there was something
En sus palabras	in her words
Me cubrí nariz	I covered my nose
Todavía te necesitaba	I still needed you
Empezé a gritar	I began to yell
— Vente para átras	"Come back
No me dejes	Don't leave me
No sabes, no entiendes	Don't you realize, don't you understand
Qué nada ha cambiado —	that nothing has changed"
Nunca volviste	You never returned
Todavía te busco	I still search for you
por la noche	at night
cuando los coches pasan	when the cars pass by
y la luna está sangrada	and the moon is bloodstained
Las monjas rezan	The nuns pray
a un díos que no existe	to a god that no longer
no más	exists

Scott
Struman

absolutely nothing

I often
become
overwhelmed with rage
overcome by sadness
and depression
when I begin
to think about
the fact
that I can
only do
two things
in my
life
write poems
and make
sandwiches as
I stand and
stare
in the deli
I work
and watch
other people
doing so many
different things
with their lives
but I can
hardly do
anything
just stand here
and stare
into space
and make
sandwiches

and watch
other people
fix cars
cook hamburgers
hug each other
laugh and
smile while I
do nothing
because everything
is impossible for me
some might say
I come
from a
dysfunctional family
or a family
without a father
as a role model
or post traumatic stress disorder
or other linguistic
renderings of
my overpowering
unbalancing
pure and sheer
incompetence
if there was
something I could
jump into to get
out of this nightmare
I might
jump into
Jungian spotlights
in a second
and then out again
archetypes and
common pasts
and presents
to be able to
do anything and
picture myself

as something else
if I lived
in another era
a tribe might
have provided a
role for me in
their group
or cooked me
in their soup
but all these
wonderings
are moot
I am stuck
here
I have
no escape
and if I
smash the wall
it will not
budge
but my hand
will break
like Antonio
Gramsci stuck
in a prison
surrounded by
facists
or I could go
back to school
whatever that means
divorce hatred
war father
no more
like grilling a
child why
did you spill
the milk I
don't know again
why did you

spill the milk again
I don't know
he answers
as he sits
and stares
as his father
disappears as
his mother loses
her mind
words don't help
me anymore they
never did
or could
get me out of
this nightmare
of incompetence
and total
inability like
falling down a
steep cliff
and landing in
a deli
if I think
too much about
my poems I
might forget
to put mayonnaise
or mustard on
the sandwich
which would
cause me great
distress because
then I would
be too sad
to write
poems about
absolutely
nothing.

sibling heat-poem

When we were kids
you were Adelanta,
the princess with raven black hair.
When you ran, your legs were like wings.
I would watch you move like a great horse.

When we were kids
you hit the girl who fingered my pride
over the head with a bag of rocks;
I watched you walk home
while I could not leave.

I thought I was supposed to protect you,
so I tried;
instead I led us to bedrooms,
dank and stinking of gin.
I didn't hit the boy on top of you with a bag of rocks;
I closed the door as I left.

And when the man
wearing the baby boots
stuck his little gun in your mouth,
I wasn't there to protect you
so I closed my door
and wished it had been me.

I moved twelve-hundred miles away from you,
got phone calls that you were dying,
that your face was growing puffy,
that you howled in the evening
and picked bugs from under your skin,

I came to get you,
picked your body up
and took you to the trees
away from Los Angeles
from the heat
and the streets,
so you could hear water move
and drums play.
But I couldn't keep you alive.
There was a hole I couldn't fill;
something kept leaking out,
seeping through,
I couldn't keep up,
so I left you
shoeless
with a bag of ginger.

I couldn't stand to watch you roam the streets,
your limbs falling from you,
first your ear
then the eyes.

I came back to a house where you were supposed to be,
erected a memorial,

placed flowers
and offerings on your bed,
tried hard to remember freckles,
eyelashes,
us combing tide pools in the summer.
Even now I wonder where you hid your bag of rocks
and why you stopped running.
When I saw you again,
you told me to look up at the sky.
I walked around for days,
head up,
running into street lights and mailboxes.
You had dreams of battle fields,
of hiding under tables
dodging gunfire,
dreams of coming home
to a mirror, attached to the front door,
and a house of dusty glass.

Scott
Maizland

my security blanket

Blue was the color
of my blanket.
He had no name
but he was by my side
night and day.

My sister kidnapped him
while I was napping.
No ransom note was left.
She dissected him
using his skin for a dress for Barbie.

I found him in his grave
with the rest of the garbage.
Pieces were missing from
his tortured soul.
But together we were complete.

famous?

Called my ex-
girlfriend. Poet.
Wants to be
rich and famous.
Don't we all.

Writes about
stars, rain, and
new lovers.
Bought her break-
fast, cd's, and
birth control.

I was a poem.
When I stop saying,
"I love you."
A stanza.
When I cheated.
A line.
Now...
nothing.

relationships

for John

My friend likes this girl.
I tell him that she is no good,
like the soft-side of Velcro.
Too clingy and helpless
without her plastic counterpart.
Useless when filled with lint,
thread and other junk. Besides,
Velcro went out years ago.

My ex-boyfriend was
a snap. Cold and metal,
forceful and hard. He'd
push himself onto me
and stick until I finally
had to lose myself so that
he couldn't come snapping
back again. You don't ever
want to date a snap.

I tell my friend that
it would be best to find
someone that is of a soft
fabric because he is like
a wooden button -- antique

and unique, beautiful and
nice to touch. All he needs
is to find a cotton, or maybe
a felt, with just the right fit.

I warn him to stay away
from those neurotic zipper-types.
I wouldn't want him
to get caught up in anything
he couldn't handle.

why you shouldn't be a poet

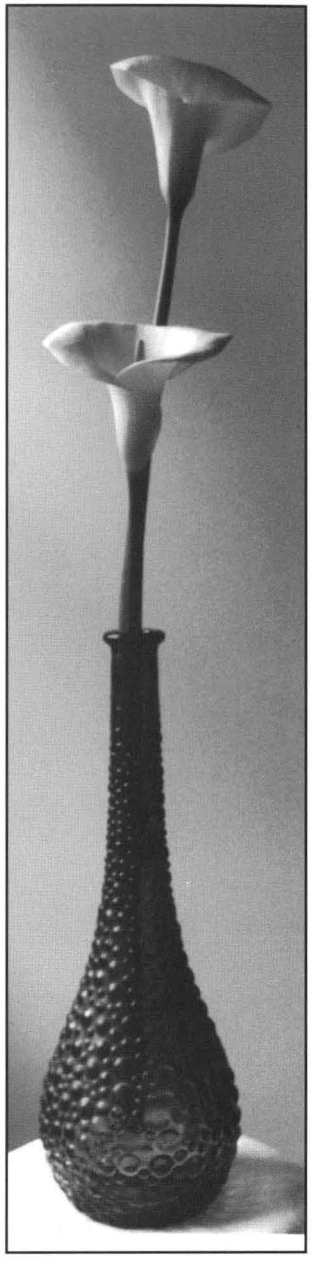
I tell my father
I want to be a scientist — that
I am infatuated with the language... *Good*
he says

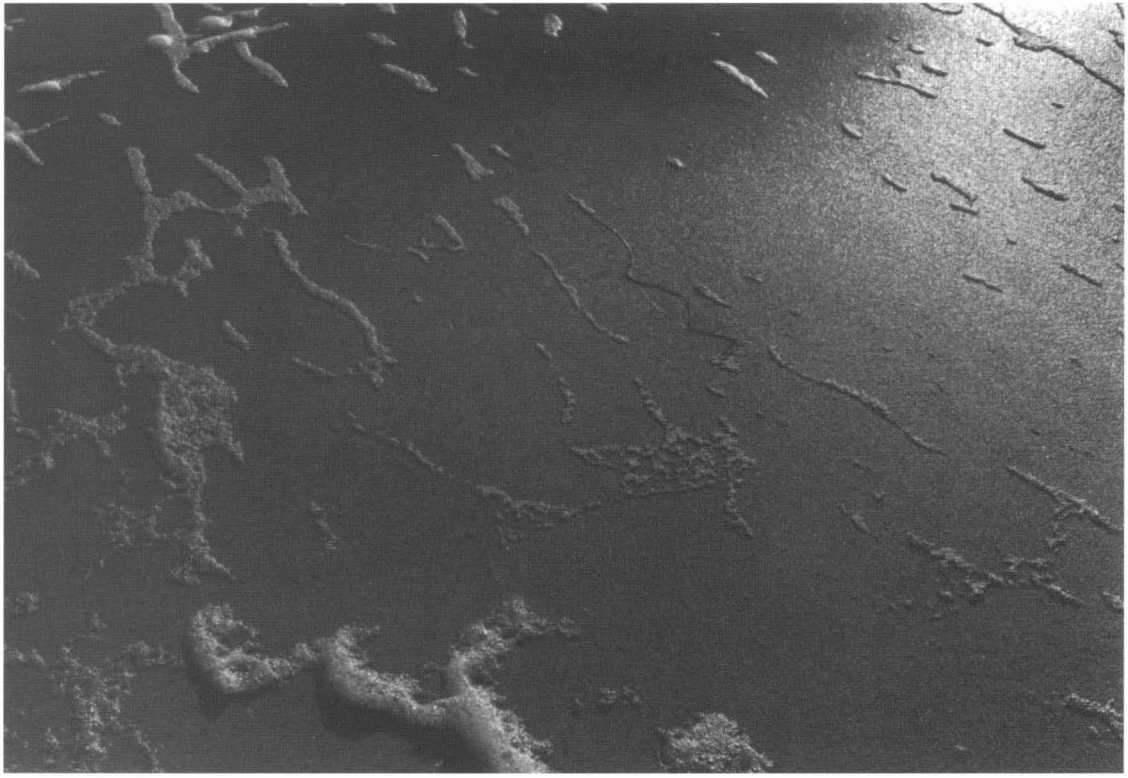
I tell him that we are
triploblastic coeloms, doesn't that sound great?
triploblastic see-loams ... *Great*
he says

I am able to tell him how chloroplasts
color a plant's leaves green and that
water and nutrients are transported through
the xylem and the phloem...
dad, say the word,
it floats in your mouth ... *Floam*
he says

I don't tell him how I think his eyes
are like root systems and that
I feel he's antithigmotrophic:
unresponsive to touch.
In this case the substitution
wouldn't be enough.
Instead, I say
plants live together with insects,
in mutual symbiosis.

I ask my dad if he's ever heard of
the stomata — it's what makes the plant
breathe. It's easier than asking him
if he loves me.



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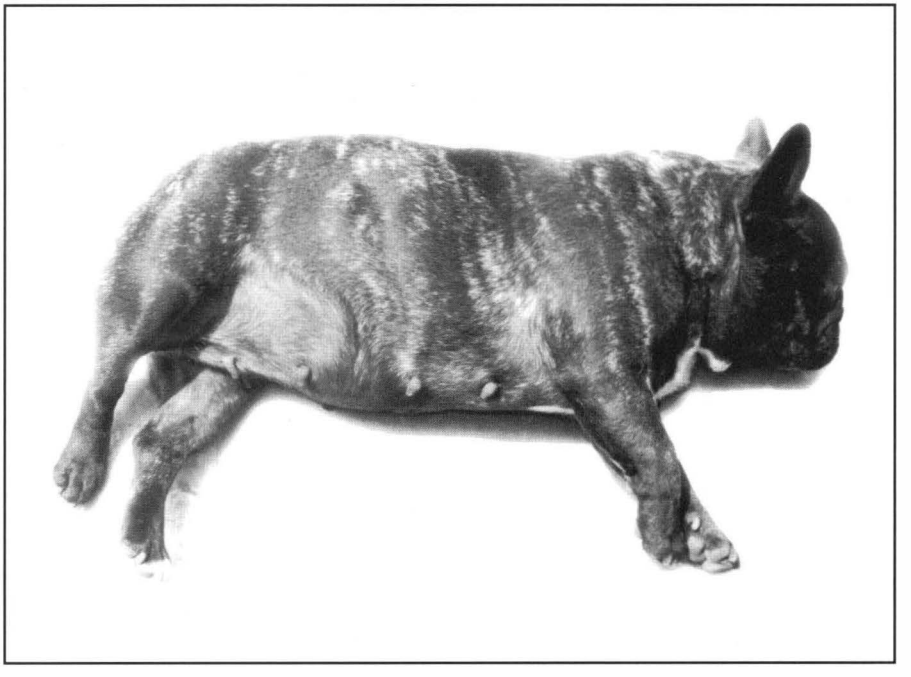
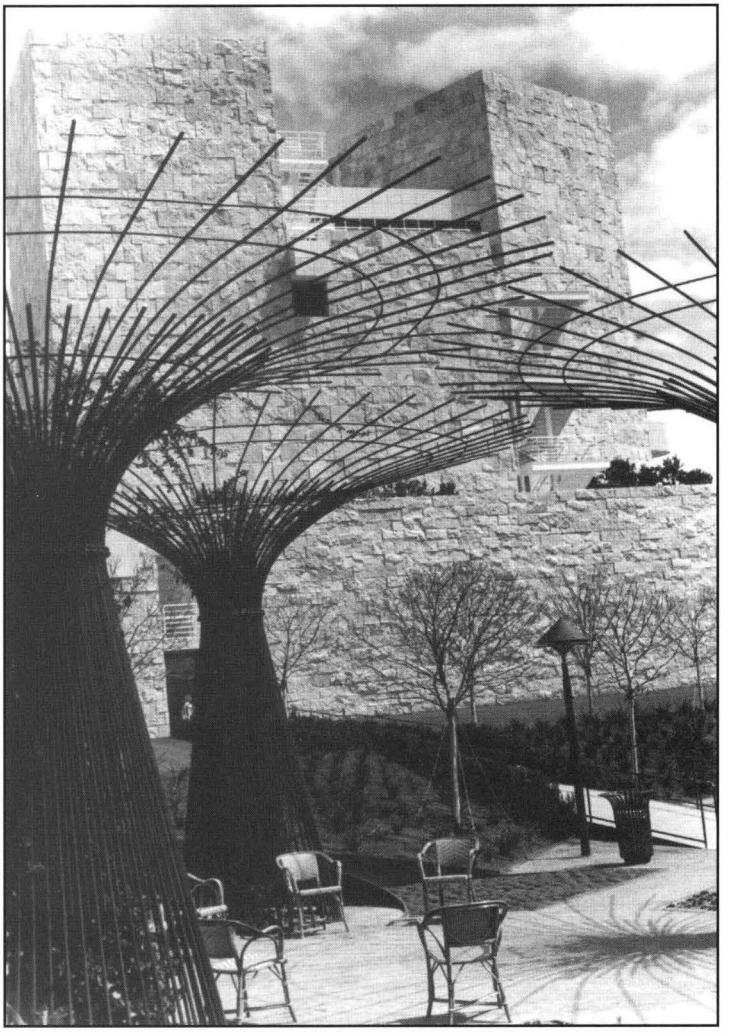
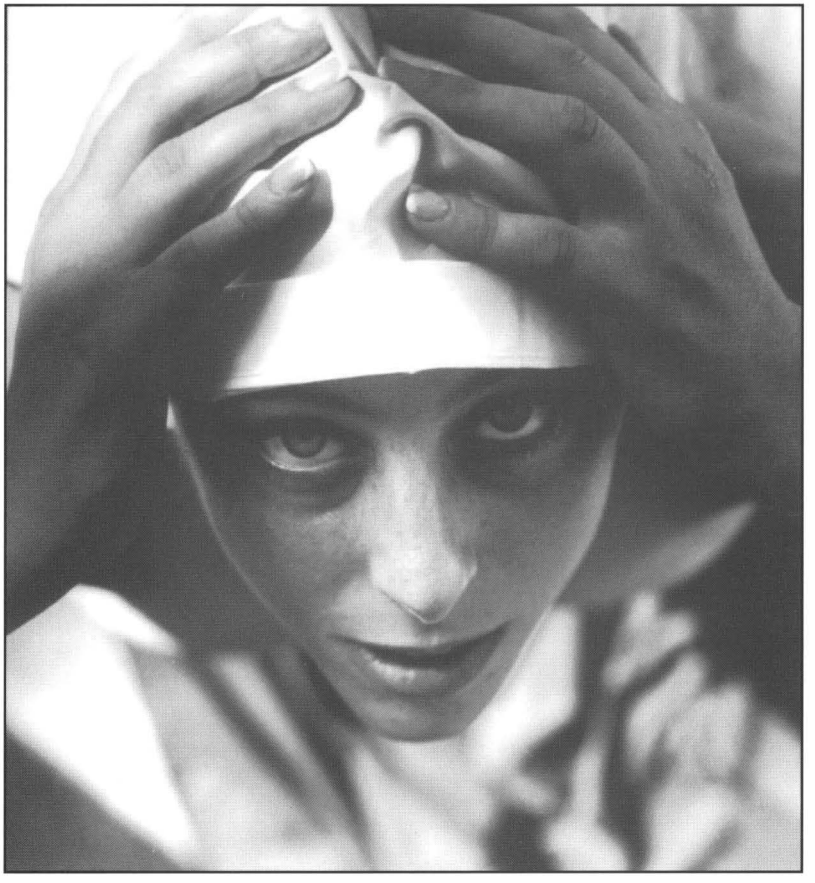






TERI
CHAVKIN

gifts

It is Christmas, 1976. Mom is stringing lights around the plastic Christmas tree. The tree is maybe an inch taller than she is, with thin plastic needles that are mashed down from months of storage. A plastic angel with messy blonde hair and a flattened songbook held in two horrifically deformed arms sits atop the tree.

"Lights first, then garland, then ornaments," Mom says emphatically every few minutes. She is reminding herself.

It must be easy to forget. I am sitting cross-legged on the matted gold shag carpet, the garland in my lap. It is silver and snakelike and unshapely. It's not particularly shiny and it smells like the basement. I have been untangling it with my hands, absently, watching Mom circling the tree with a strand of fat, bright-colored bulbs. She stops and looks at me. Her head is cocked to one side, her long, straight brown hair falling over her thin shoulder in a river.

"Garland next," I say.

"Well, yeah," she says.

She is staring at me now. I shift and finally have to look away. Mom's eyes are so tired. Her skin is ashes. She is withering away.

"You look so small," she says finally, her voice far away.

"I'm eight," I say. "S'posed to be small, I guess."

"I have no toys for you," she says.

I look up. Her heartbreaking eyes are on the tree now. Or maybe they're on the angel. She flips her hair over her shoulder, down her back; a million times a day she flips that long hair.

"I don't care," I tell her. I will not cry. I pull shredded plastic silver from the wiry, tired garland.

"I care," Mom whispers.

I wish I was a kid that could play violin or turn perfect cartwheels or color the best picture for the Fourth of July coloring contest at the Winn Dixie grocery store. I wish Christmas was over. I wish Jesus was never born.

"Good job on those lights, Mom," I say. She shakes her head, frowns. The legs of my polyester red pants are covered with dusty silver threads. I stand up, brush the threads onto the floor, offer the garland to her like a gift. "Garland next."

***

Mom is holding a handful of Merry Money. Her other hand is holding mine, pulling me along at top speed as we head for the entrance of St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church. A man, seeing the bright yellow photocopied dollars in Mom's hands, directs us to the stairwell. Up we walk, or run, rather, as Mom dodges in and out of other hand-holding couples of moms and kids on their way down. The kids have Barbie dolls and Hot Wheels and Fisher-Price xylophones clutched to their chests, their pinched faces intense as flames. Merry Money.

When the woman from St. Martin's came to our apartment door several nights before, the yellow dollars were tucked neatly inside a white envelope which she pulled from her leather satchel.

"Miss Mason, we understand that you might appreciate a bit of help over these holidays and I'm here in Christ's stead to see that such help is given." The woman spoke to my mother, reading from a memorized script. The Baptists had a similar speech when they'd come last spring, just before Easter, two of them in chunky brown pumps and starchy cotton dresses, drab as winter grass. They brought a plastic Easter basket filled with jelly beans and chocolate eggs—"for the child"—and an invitation written in loopy handwriting imploring us to celebrate Jesus coming back from the dead at their church on Easter Sunday.

"In Christ's stead," Mom repeated.

The Catholic woman nodded enthusiastically. "We know how hard these times can be for a woman in your situation."

"I see," Mom said. She scratched at a grease spot on her blue jeans.

"Do you have a job, Miss Mason?"

"Mmm-hmm," Mom replied. She had fried exactly 714 doughnuts at work that day. She always counted, always told me.

The Catholic woman tugged at her collar pulled snug against her neck with a frilly white bow. "Good," she said, drawing the word out into three or four syllables. Her pronouncement hung in the air.

Mom turned and looked at the clock.

"Seven-thirty," I said.

"Almost bedtime," Mom said.

It wasn't, of course. I left the room. I heard Mom's voice, hushed and strained. Soon the Catholic woman was gone, the door slamming soundly.

Today, the sprint up the stairs of St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church leads us to Santa's Workshop where toys are spread out on long cafeteria tables. Magic Marker signs direct us: Boys on one side of the room, girls on the other. Merry Money is clutched by moms of various sizes and expressions, some sallow and devastatingly sad, some round and bright as balls on the Christmas tree. Santa is sitting at a card table near the door with a cigar box full of yellow bills. He is skinny and his brown mustache shows from underneath the white mustache-and-beard get-up he's wearing.

"All right, Allison," Mom says directly into my ear. "Pick out whatever you want. We're loaded." She laughs hoarsely.

I don't want to pick anything out. I want to turn off the Bing Crosby Christmas album playing on the old record player in the corner. Mom pulls me through the crowd of kids in coats either too big or too small for them, shoving me gently towards the tables covered with donated toys, unwrapped and marked with small, red stickers displaying their price. A disembodied Barbie head complete with makeup and brushes and bows for her blonde, plastic hair—ten dollars. A jump rope—two dollars. A Coca-Cola can transistor radio with a speaker where the pop-top would be—fourteen dollars.

"I don't know," I say, turning to look at Mom. She isn't looking at me; she's looking at the other moms. She shoves the Merry Money into her coat

pocket.

"C'mon, Ally," Mom says. "People donated these toys so you could have something for Christmas besides a hot dog and a can of Seven-Up. I've got twenty dollars of this phoney money. Pick out what you want."

What I want, I think. I want to tell Chris Randolph from my school who is over by the boys' tables that I don't really belong here.

"I guess I'll get these," I say, picking up the two boxes closest to me. Chinese checkers—seven dollars. Watch 'Em Grow terrarium kit—fifteen dollars. A girl in a blue fake fur coat next to me gasps. I have her treasure now. Mom looks down at my presents.

"Shit," she says quietly. I suddenly remember. Twenty dollars.

"Lemme put this back," I say. The blue-coated girl looks hopeful. Let *her* watch 'em grow, I think.

"No!" Mom yells. The room is quiet for a moment, only Bing dreaming of a white Christmas. My face is hot. I will melt if we don't leave this very instant.

"No, Ally, it's okay," Mom says, stroking the top of my head. Her voice is soft and sugary now. She takes the terrarium from my hands and nudges me towards Santa.

"I can pick something else," I whisper. She doesn't hear me. She's digging in her purse.

"Well," says Santa, "what do we have here?"

I am praying that he doesn't say ho-ho-ho. Please, if there is a God.

"Nothing," I say. Mom has pulled two dollar bills, green and so very wrong, from her white vinyl purse. Two dollars buys six boxes of macaroni and cheese. Two dollars buys a pair of mittens at K-Mart. Two dollars buys a jumbo box of crayons and two pink erasers for school.

Santa will not take Mom's dollar bills. He does, however, tuck the Merry Money, all twenty yellow dollars, into his cigar box and gives me a wink. "Watch 'em grow, kiddo," he says, handing me my gifts. As Mom and I scurry out the door, I can hear him ho-ho-hoing.

***

"Ally," Mom says, telephone in hand, "it's your dad." It's Christmas morning. Mom's wrapped up in her flowered bathrobe; I'm still in my pajamas, my head hovering over a bowl of oatmeal.

"Now?" I ask.

"Ally, you heard the phone ring. Now come on." Mom's got her hand clasped over the receiver and her face is stern. I get up from my chair with a creak and take the phone from her outstretched hand.

"Hello?" I say.

"Ho-ho-ho! Me-e-e-erry Christmas, little girl!"

It's Dad, all right. His voice is deep. I hear cars driving by, scuffling footsteps in the background.

"Where are you?" I ask. Mom has left the kitchen where I stand, my bare feet freezing on the linoleum. The bedroom door shuts quietly.

"Well, Merry Christmas to you, too, Allison," Dad says.

"Where are you?" I ask again.

"You know, Al," Dad says, irritation growing in his voice. "I'm around."

I am wrapping the green, stretched-out phone cord around my wrist. "Oh," I say. There's a long silence.

"So, did you get the Christmas card I sent you?" Dad asks, his voice hopeful.

"No," I say. I didn't get the birthday card in August either. In my mind, I see white birds with brightly colored envelopes in their mouths. They are circling, around, around me.

"Damned post office," Dad says with a sigh. "You know, you pay your taxes and what do you get? I'm sorry, Al."

"Yeah," I say. "Me too." My hand is turning purple now, the cord wrapped tight around me. I unwrap it quickly.

"How's school going?" he asks.

School. I think of the snowflakes Mrs. Shanahan taught us to make,

cutting tiny triangles out of folded paper. I think of the colorful lunch boxes with pictures of H. R. Puff-n-Stuff, Hong Kong Phooey, Holly Hobby sitting alongside brown paper sacks with names scrawled on them: Brian, Chris, Marty, Allison. I think of the smell of new reading books, sweet and papery, and the half-circle table where Mrs. Shanahan sits with our reading groups: the Jets, the Rockets, the Flying Saucers.

"Fine," I say.

"Well, listen," Dad says, "I've got to get going, but you work hard in school and listen to your mom. Okay?"

I nod my head.

"Okay?" Dad repeats.

"Yeah," I say. "Okay. Bye, Dad."

"Merry Christmas, Allison."

I hear a click and then a dial tone. I hang up the phone. On cue, Mom appears from the bedroom. She is fully dressed now, blue jeans and a red sweatshirt, with her hair pulled back neatly in a ponytail.

"So," she says, leaning against the arm of the worn gold couch. "You have a good talk?"

I shake my head. I'm still frozen to the linoleum.

"Where was he?" she asks.

"Around."

Mom nods and bites at her bottom lip. I don't mention the unsent card.

"Let's go out," Mom says suddenly. "Before the church ladies start coming with their fruit baskets." She laughs. Her smile is broad and red with lipstick, red like her sweatshirt, red like the lights on the tree. "Go get dressed."

We leave the apartment and walk out into the cold. Jet black birds, away from home on Christmas morning, circle overhead in the gray air. Mom holds out her hand to me, a gift of warmth that I could hold as long as I wanted.

b l u e

part one

i. blue beginnings

in the green leaved crowds of trees, by the water near my home, i feel a child. i write this wild unruly woman and a river story.

> when i was young, i stood by the window on wintery nights. i thought i saw the darkness curve, the flatness round, earth's broad expanse thicken. i loved night's thickness, the wading trees in pools of darkness, the nighttime ripples.

i see her in blue water. i write the mountain stream she wades in daylight, the riverbank she walks, barefeet, beneath a canopy of trees.

> plush misty mornings came before the cool of darkness slipped away and i'd lay silent, i'd lay hungry for blue river to seep inside of me. inside my pores.

i think the river has always been her map, nighttime compass in a wicked world, her grid in wilderness, an azure wilderness.

> inside of me blue river's stirring. inside of me blue river's churning. inside of me the water's blurring, filled deeply blue with longing and unfolding.

i write this wild unruly woman and a love song to a river story, but feel a silly child, with endless need, unwriting story. what is the story?[1]

---

1 the most important thing is to remember what a river means in the life of a community. how does its flow effect their daily rhythms? how does its smell and taste and look seem to the eye hungry for connection and sustenance and commerce? how can its torrents soothe the sometimes brittle harshness of the onslaught of life and love, the civilizing force of civilizing, the brutal storms of nature? what does it mean to build on the shores of a river, to wade in its freshness, to feed on its nutrients, to bridge its expanse? can a community exist without trying to contain its river, to hold sway over its wildness?

in the life of a community a river must mean something. but what does it mean? and how, how must we live with it?

ii. blue history

i grew up in the colorado plateau. it is a restless and wild area of colorado, utah, arizona, and new mexico, which is filled with jagged rock canyons and endless seas of mesas whose rims are cut by wind, and rivers, and time. often, when the land is not inscribed with canyons and mesas, it is dry and parched, embedding miles of stark almost barren earth with only sometimes, sagebrush. at other times, the land waves slowly with rising hills and thorny weeds which sway into the wind.

i hold this memory of blanched, bleached, growing wild, high tall grass blowing, but write a story of blue water, a woman, and an unknown river flowing.

> i try to imagine, and try to remember, but memory plagues me,
> and i've misplaced the past. i cannot speak in some fundamental
> way and so i hide, and i sing, and i write the sunlight. please turn a
> muted wash of deep blue dusk so i can bathe. i draw the water to
> me. i wrap it all around me. i am blue, blue, blue. i sing to
> waterdrops that echo silence.

i remember exploring on the rocks near my home, tracing the timeless, aging worn remnants of someone else's past. i felt a whimsy of waving arms, weaving on a ledge, until the summer hungry wasps began to chase the flowers on my dress. they frightened me. they scared my balance on the rock. the ancient cliff dwelling ruins. the rubble rocks of summer in a field where the indians used to live.

> i used to plunge into blue river. i used to rinse myself in song.
> but now i feel this endless need, an empty blue, an aimless flower
> petal.

ever since that summer day, the wasps and wild grass, the breeze and ancient rocks, i write about the indians near my home. i don't know why. i think it is of subterfuge sometimes; perhaps my way of hiding. and yet, i have this memory of a little girl who felt so strong and free, who felt so scared of losing balance, and then i write that rock. those canyons. a field. someone else's past.

> i need to find my way back home. i need a map that will trace me.
> i am not numb. it is not that.[2]

2 if one were to dig along the shores of a river, trinkets and tools and memories would certainly be found. a history of half-lives measured by the progression of decay, the silence and passage of time.

iii. blue songs

the arc of sky that embraces the colorado plateau is unforgettable. it is vast and deep and blue, with dark blue, pink, purple sunsets that storm in quiet silence. in the distance, there are mountains. beautiful, seemingly blue ranges of earth jutting up into the horizon; the rocky mountains of the north and east, the sierra nevadas of the west, and the cascade mountains of the northwest.

i hear her in those mountains. she stands beneath a raging waterfall whose purple petaled wildflowers sound like stories telling.

blue river of my body.

in the mountains that surround the colorado plateau there are hundreds of streams, green lush forests banked by moving water. water that carves through rocks and is filled with rocks. water that rumbles to the trees shimmering on the shores. water that flows and spills into larger rivers which surge and travel down to the plateau. water on the plateau always comes from somewhere else.

blue river of my soul.

she sings blue river. she thinks it is a song by which to chart herself, her edges overflowing. and uncontrollable.

i am blue, blue, blue.

she is the echo wash of memory — a woman's troubled yearning. she is inscribing me, she is inscribed by me, with restless wandering, an endless searching. i need to search for her. i write her in the past and trace old legends and old maps. i think i'll find her in the small mountain ranges within the plateau itself. the la sal mountains of utah, the san francisco peaks of arizona, and the zuni mountains of new mexico.

i feel a cavern cool with dark blue pools. i feel a rushing
waterfall that bellows raindrops, and beating water.

blue words are lapping through the shores of my mind, and i wonder if there ever was a time, one time, when her story mattered. pretend her story matters and imagine blue. deeply blue.[3]

3 winter sometimes reinscribes a river. cloudy, dark gray skies compel windy storms. raining water sinks into the shores, unearthing banks. thunder often rumbles, lightning strikes, and when a rainstorm quells, a river often drifts.

MATTHEW
DEIBLER

they come carrying everything

The Trailer Parks

Our trailer park wedged into a fringe niche of a small logging and refinery town in the Pacific Northwest. People got by, they got to know their neighbors, and they stayed a long time. I am always "from Chewelah," not California, Dallas or Kansas. We moved away but not because we wanted to.

Four of us wedged into our vinyl-sided mobile home; we were a humble, struggling, preacher's family; we were happy. Twenty families, or pieces of them, wedged into our trailer park, with little grassy yards to barbecue on and little views of the Curlew Mountains to squint at. I, at least, did not see it as inferior to any other neighborhood, our neighbors no different in my mind than the rich people over on Mortgage Hill.

My brother Nate and I had a dirt pile at the other trailer park across the thistled horse field. We raced our yellow and black hand-painted Schwinns there almost every afternoon. The dirt was dark, rich, moist with a touch of sand, and all ours. It caked in the cracks of our palms, under our nails, in our teeth, sneakers and dreams. We played loggers, miners, and road construction workers with our Tonka dozers, skidders, loaders, and graters, lacing our pile with highways, logging roads, and anything else we felt like digging or plowing or inventing.

I never knew the name of the other trailer park—it didn't have a sign. The rusting, sad way the garden furniture begged for a picnic, mangy dogs fought over trash cans, and tired, loud people drove in and out, skidding on its gravel road, I don't think it cared.

The Ones Who Move In

Palmer Little and his parents moved into the lot directly opposite our dirt pile in the fall of fourth grade. Nate and I watched the preparations and labored breathing from the safe vantage of our pile. Far as we could tell, Palmer was the only child. He looked our age, with an almost perfectly disguised mischieviousness in his roundish face, a little pudge left over from babyhood, and a solid green John Deere ball cap pulled down onto his thick, dark brown hair.

They moved in one day, a Saturday in mid-October when the sun shone through the blue-white clouds in such a piquant, gold-glinting, marching band and football way. Nate and I reveled in the rumble and the coughing, upright exhaust of the short-nose Peterbilt as it inched its skinny, flat-roofed, beige passenger into the mowed lot and onto the waiting stacks of cinder blocks. We always got excited when new people moved in, anywhere. I thought how adventurous and noble it would be to drive a big semi some day:

"Hey Don, get this chain untangled here. I gotta find that other jack... Will ya hurry, dammit! "

"Yeah man, I'm working on it. Y' know how hot it is in the cab—all the way from those loggin' camps—I can hardly swallow!"

"Shut up and work."

"Well, I'm not the one who slipped the axle going up outta the creek!"

"You leave the driving up to me."

"If I do that, we both be in the clink for your DUls."

"Watch it...you don't see how easy it is getting fired or causing firings in this joint...Did ya hear about the layoffs?"

"Yeah, some. DNR restricting the state lands cuz o'the soggy ground, I think."

"Yep, that's right. Bryan Oliver was saying yesterday that twenty or thirty of his boys might be sittin' the next few months, waitin' for the roads to harden up."

"Damn wet winters—making everybody suffer 'cept the ski resort." Bill

Little stopped in mid-lift, staring hard at them.

"Hey, just three more trailers to haul off that ol' landslide and we'll be home free for the big blackjack night at Chief Joe's."

"Man, I can't wait. I'm gonna whip your ass and have a girl before you can pull the first tabs...Bill, you gonna be there this weekend? Upped the lottery by 4K, I heard."

Bill Little glanced nonchalantly at his wife. "Well, I guess we'll hav'ta see about that. Can't say one way or the other. Might like to just get settled in here, though. It'd sure be nice to fix up the furnace and maybe put in a little wood stove 'fore too long—don'tcha think, Joan?'

"Yeah, I s'pose," she shrugged, the most she had said in an hour.

The Littles had both their vehicles stuffed to the brim, Palmer and Mr. Little riding in their green Ford pickup, Mrs. Little following in her stark yellow Datsun. They carried everything they owned over in one day. Their furniture looked like ours— their beds and curtains made of straight forward pine and cotton.

Two buddies of Mr. Little's, we presumed, had chugged up in a Willie's Jeep near the end of the wheel and axle removal. Thick-skinned and bushy-haired, their beards grew in patches, long and stringy. They seemed to know how to hold beer bottles in one hand or wrist or crook of the arm and lug furniture or cardboard boxes in the other without much trouble. Spitting tobacco, they grumbled jokes that Mr. Little tried not to laugh at. Nate and I shrank back under our skin but remained, half-mesmerized by their roughness.

Mrs. Little sounded exasperated a lot, calling out instructions which got brushed over, ordering her son around when his hands were already full. She once or twice put her palm to the side of her head and just stared. She looked to be in her late twenties—looked like a regular mom. She carried an intriguing, round grin. One time, she let her husband carry her to the red Coleman cooler for beers.

Mr. Little looked a few years older. He carried a little spare tire under his flannel shirt. He carried nervousness by consciously trying to look at ease—something about the quick smack of their kisses or the shuffling way he carried

boxes. He joked a lot, even over simple things. That made us feel safer.

The Perfect Times

The church Harvest Festival, homework, and chores kept us away from our dirt pile for a week. Riding over the next Saturday, we could feel each other wondering what might have happened. We threw our bikes down next to the pile and inspected our constructions and trucks—all there.

The Little trailer was much more in order. Some remnants of unwanted box springs and several broken dishes in newspaper wads lay to the side of the patchwork porch, a mauve armchair sat facing the rear, and gardening supplies stood in buckets around the front. Their green pickup rested in the gravely drive; things were quiet inside. Nate and I fought the erosion of our two-foot-long tunnel diligently.

Their front door opened and closed. Palmer walked toward us, carrying an impressive looking miniature yellow loader and John Deere combine in his largish hands.

"Whatcha doin'?"

I, older and always the initial spokesman, replied, "We're working on this pit mine. Brbrbrrrrrrm. Takes a long time."

He plopped himself down to our right. "This is a great dirt pile. I been digging some around the edge. Mom said not to bother anything. She tells me to go out here when her and Pop hav'ta be alone."

Nate gazed at his trucks, pointing, "Those are pretty nice Tonkas. I betcha got 'em at McMurtty's Hardware." We rode there almost as often as the dirt pile to look and look, and feel strong, piney, and polished as the shoppers bought plywood, sod, and household repair kits.

Palmer grinned back at him, grinned at the dirt, "Oh thanks. They're from my Dad's work. He drives logging trucks for Mr. Oliver—know who he is?"

"We saw his float in the parade this summer; it was really cool."

"Must be pretty great, " Nate added.

"He says it's okay. I don't see him mostly 'til after dinner. I think he has

a long shift. He says maybe he'll go back to community college soon."

"We're making a track for a demolition derby. Wanna help?" Nate asked.

"Yeah, sure. I betcha I can plow up five worms by dark."

"No way, you're crazy." We liked him. I asked him his name; he said it was Palmer; I answered that mine was Arny.

"And I'm Nate. We live over at Ridgecrest. Ya know where that is?"

I don't think so. We haven't come into town much the last few years."

Nate continued, "Where'd ya live before ya came here?"

Brrrmbbmmm, he answered mostly. He was an avid diesel man. We learned that they had lived way up Burnt Valley for the last five years, in the houses for loggers and drivers—a big heap of joined wood houses that didn't work too well sometimes. I sheepishly tried to whisper, "Can you see if there's a TransAm under your leg?" Palmer squirmed around until he felt the antenna and then dug up the car. "How'd that get in there so deep?"

"It's Arny's fault—he always losing stuff in the next projects we start," Nate joshed. We laughed the laugh of busy, working men.

Nate and Palmer fell into a sort of echo, call and response system of working together. They were closer in age and mechanical curiosity than I. I was content, though, to follow their orders and let my truck be the first one eliminated from the demolition derbies and "Baja" races.

We didn't need to fight that fall. No one bothered us. Dinner never came too early and our Tonka trucks didn't rust. We didn't have to care about anything else. We wanted to work on our dirt pile for the rest of our lives.

Coming in on Cold Afternoons

If we felt a thrill, a joy, staying out in the cold, it was the warm smells and piping hot cocoa, the relief, of coming inside again. Blowing on our cupped, dirt-lined hands, rubbing them vigorously, Dad's magnificent, high-C whistle would peal for half a minute into the falling dusk, telling Nate and me to come home for dinner. Nate would usually ask Palmer if he wanted to eat with us. He almost always wanted to. His Dad was often still returning from delivering his

last load of cut logs, giving his Mom another hour to watch soaps on the rust-brown loveseat.

We barged into Palmer's mobile home one such afternoon, still making plans and calculations for our Tonka's demolition derby, making too much noise for Mrs. Little.

"Palmer, don't you get any mud on my carpet, hear? I have a hard enough time with all the crap your father tracks in from work." She yawned big.

"Okay, Mom." Laughing and jostling, we took off our hats or ear muffs, coats, scarves, and sneakers. The warmth was simple, delicious—made us smile and joke without knowing it.

Scowling, Palmer's mom complained, in a bored way, "Will you please shut up, Palmer! How many times do I have to tell ya to stay quiet when I'm watching my show?" Palmer tried to shrug it off. He bit his lip a couple times; a soft sadness almost wrung the centers of his eyes. Then he gallantly looked at us again with his expectant smile.

"Sorry, Mom, I remember. Know when Dad's comin' home? I can't wait to show him the freeway we designed today!"

"No, but I hope soon. He told me this morning he would help me paint the laundry room." She yawned again.

"Uh huh—Hey, y'guys gotta see my new G.I. Joes—they're totally awesome! Back here, c'mon!"

"Weelll, I don't know," I stammered. Dad's whistle meant don't wait. I still hadn't lost my periodic fastidiousness. Nate was already halfway to Palmer's room, so I happily gave in. We shot each other to smithereens for a while, forgetting all sense of time.

"Hey, you guys wanna see something funny," Palmer suddenly asked, with that fun wrinkle he got in his eyebrows. We did.

"But ya hav'ta be real quiet, 'kay?" We promised. Quiet as the purple thistles in the horse field, we left his bedroom and padded down the hall to his parent's room; Palmer closed the press-board door soundlessly behind us.

"I'm not allowed to be in here," he whispered, grinning mischieviously. "Mom and Dad say they don't want it getting dirty or me leaving Transformers

on the floor." A small bedroom, as ours were, with a nice double bed, two dressers, a closet, and one full length mirror, it smelled of polyurethane and mint Scope. "Look at these!" He pointed at several large posters of shirtless, good-looking men tacked on the walls, mostly his mom's side. Some were signed. I recognized Tom Selleck and Don Johnson, though they looked much younger than the TV shows. A lot of them said Chippendales at the bottom. They looked strange, kind of fake, stuck there.

We stared at them, perplexed, for a minute or two, then broke into giggles, trying hard to swallow them, clutching our stomachs.

"Sometimes, I hear Mom and Dad talking in here, sometimes pretty loud. Dad'll go, 'Why don't you get rid of these fuckin' posters? Huh? Joan, y'know I hate 'em. You fantasize about 'em all night, I bet! Why don't ya let me make you happy, you fuckin'fat whore?"

"Then Mom'll go, 'Ha, yeah right, Mr. Universe. You can't make me happy, Bill You-never-have! I am bored of you—been carryin' it around since Palmer turned two—don' know why I haven't left you yet. You can't get it up and ya hardly have enough to even kiss me when I come to bed. Yeah—I know ya hav'ta work a lot for these loan payments...But I'm telling ya right now, if the posters go, I go with 'em!' But hey, aren't these guys funny, huh? Look at that one with his pants unzipped—like he hasta pee real bad!"

"Yeah, he's the best. They're so serious and moody," we answered, in mock seriousness, losing it to giggles once more. "Hey, was that Dad's whistle again?" I looked at Nate.

"Wait...yep, it is." Our ears were well-trained. "Palm, we gotta go. Sorry. Dad doesn't like us being late for dinner." We exited as quietly as we had entered, helped Palmer clean up his room a bit, and ran into the living room. Mrs. Little was sitting in the same position, hovering slightly forward. Palmer piped up, "Hey Mom, can I go to the Leestons for dinner?"

"Yeah, sure, be my guest," she said, hustling us past her line of vision with her eyes.

"We'll ride back here with 'im, Mrs. Little," Nate and I assured her. She nodded.

"Thanks, Mom." Palmer called over as we put on our coats and hats. She might have said goodbye; the TV was loud.

The angry-sounding music thumped through the green vinyl walls, jiggling our stomachs, as we rounded the corner past Palmer's trailer park.

"Thanks for asking me to come over, guys. I really like your family. Your Mom and Dad hardly ever argue."

"Yeah, they do. Just don't let us see it too often...It's fun to have ya over, Palm."

"Why's your Mom watch those shows all the time? Those people are always yelling," Nate blurted.

"Oh, I guess she likes 'em. Says they keep her busy. I just wish she'd let me watch Thundercats."

"Yeah, man, they're awesome!"

The Weekends

Mr. Little worked ten or eleven hours every weekday. Saturdays and Sundays were his favorite and Palmer's, too. Mr. Little would come out to the dirt pile and talk Ford doolies and logging with us. He liked the progress we were making, liked to see us industrious and having a good time.

"And your Mom, Palmer, thinks they're pretty nice, too."

"Uh huh." Mr. Little patted his son on the head, or rather the John Deere ball cap, and smiled at us.

One Saturday that November was surprisingly, enterprisingly warm. After helping us get the sound just right for the downshift from fourth to third in a skidder, fixing what could be fixed on his green Ford pickup and what couldn't on the harsh yellow Datsun, Mr. Little asked us if we wanted to cool off for a bit in the house and have some lemonade. We cheerfully accepted and jumped up. Mrs. Little just then opened the screen door and called pleasantly, "Come in for lunch, huh? We're having spaghetti and meatballs."

"All right!" we echoed one another. Mrs. Little cooked deliciously, when she cooked. Palmer asked if we could stay for lunch. Our parents had already

said it would be okay, so she agreed.

Us four men washed our hands and sat down noisily, bragging. Mr Little asked the blessing and we all plowed hungrily in, making small talk between bites and slurps. The chompy, spicy meatballs and sauce went down tooth-tingling with the cool, fresh squeezed lemonade.

"Hey hon," Mr Little said after a while, "Did I tell ya that Ned Oliver is expandin' his fleet by five in the next month? I think I might be in good running for one of those new Kenworths."

"Mm hmm, that's nice." She smiled, far-away like.

"An' I got some new bushings for the Honeybee at the junkyard the other day for only ten bucks. Put 'em in this this mornin' and now the chugger's riding smooth again." He got up, plopped more sauce and noodles on to her plate, and sat down.

I really like those geraniums you planted out front, Joan— look real pretty with the dew just comin' off of 'em."

"I'm surprised you noticed. Yeah, they're doing all right."

"Hon, how 'bout bringing out some of the garlic bread your brother gave us. It'd go great with this." Turning to us, "You guys want some?" We said yes please and thank you, that'd be delicious.

Mrs. Little looked at him flatly, "Why don'tcha get up yourself and slice it for 'em?"

"Uum...yeah, sure, I'll get it." He shifted and wrinkled his paper napkin and fork and knife around in his hands, standing up with chopped-up little quips about her brother, about unhumorous things—a touch nervous.

A few more minutes went by then she looked at him again. "By the way, when are you gonna fix the hot water heater?"

"Soon's I get the pipes wrapped so we can have water at all this winter!"

"I hope so." Our table rested in diffuse silence for another serving of sauce.

"Bill, I'm probably going out to the casino tonight. Harvey called earlier and asked if I wanted to go along with the gang."

Mr. Little's face tightened like a horse tail flicking deer flies. We studied our angel hair noodles intently. "Palmer, why don't you guys play at your dirt pile for a bit?" His hands shredded his napkin.

"Sure, Pop. Let's go, guys." We carefully walked out and shut the door.

The sun outside poured sweat on us, made our hands clay-ey and strong-smelling. We didn't talk much. Loud voices, like the ones Palmer had used in his parent's bedroom a while ago, thudded into the green vinyl walls. Palmer said, more at the horse field and its empty barn, "I want it to stop, just wanna stop them now." We plowed with less diligence. I felt uncomfortable and afraid but couldn't leave Palmer.

Everything, Including the Posters

We were playing on another regular, chilly, blue-ears afternoon; the dirt of our pile was hardening slightly. The days were too short, driving us to plow or dig or fill in with more urgency. Palmer's eyes, dress, and diesel noises reflected a mellowness, almost a subduedness. He talked in smaller, quieter measures.

"My Mom's getting a divorce. She said it's because Dad hit her. But I remember—that was a long time ago. Dad said he was sorry over and over, asked her to please, please forgive him. And I haven't seen 'im hit her, or shove her or slap her anything like that—ever again. I remember she told him she forgave him, too. Just once...so long ago...I just don't get it. I don't understand why she wants to get divorced from Dad now!" Nate and I didn't understand either. How could everything change so suddenly? If my parents got divorced, I'd go crazy, stop functioning. How could I go on after that? I would run far away and never talk to anyone again. We sat with him, patted his shoulders, even prayed with him. He cried.

"She says she's movin' out—takin' everything that's hers—the posters, the dishes, the Honeybee, even my baby clothes...I just don't want her to leave." Muddy tears rolled down his roundish face; the mischieviousness was gone. "And there's this guy who's come a couple times to help her get her stuff out--I don't like him. He always just stares at me—kinda far away and blurry-like. She

hasta fill out lots of papers. That's what she's doin' right now." His eyes wandered to the yellow Datsun behind us.

She sat in the driver's seat, writing, occasionally tapping a finger or two on the steering wheel. I thought I could hear old jazz threading from the car. Her face was concentrated, hair pushed behind her ears, lips pursed in determination. She looked happy. I couldn't stand it.

One Less Trailer Park

Nate and I still rode our Schwinns to the dirt pile that spring, but the dirt felt less rich, moist, and sandy. Mrs. Little had gone, leaving it up to Palmer where to live. He refused to decide, for a very long time. He wrote, late one afternoon in the dirt with his largish first finger, that he would never get divorced. We never erased those sandy words at the edge of the pile. Somehow, the finality of divorce, with the unutterable complexities of its papers and interviews and settlements made us get used to it.

A few Saturdays, Palmer and Mr. Little came over to take us out to his company's property. He didn't get laid off; instead, Mr. Oliver put him in one of the new Kenworth's. We liked to sit in it, pull levers and switches, blare the horn. The first time they came, Mr. Little looked hollow. He had lost his spare tire. He had a hard time keeping the tears from his eyes as he joked with my Dad, saying everything was okay, that he and Palm here were carrying everything just fine.

Out at his work, Mr. Little showed us the mill, the garages, and the chainsaws of his life. He drove us all over the criss-crossed logging roads. We didn't say much through the dark green, secretive stands of second-growth tamarack and spruce. The forest carried a deep, cool silence that meandered moist and free in our lungs. He would drive and drive, until dusk settled.

pere noir

Night is falling — plummeting really — and the fog is getting harder to see through. You can barely make out a small, orange light on the island east of you. The only light other than the firebugs. You look around, hoping to catch a glimmer from somewhere else, anywhere else. Nothing. You steer the boat toward the light, realizing for the first time just where you are. A strange feeling creeps up on you as you get closer to the island. It looks like a photograph. No, a dream. You're heading for the old man's island; you're heading for Songecreux. You cut the engine, and drift closer.

You still heard the rumors about the missing girl. It was close to fifteen years ago, but it was still news. She had strayed from her father's boat and lost her way. She would never be found. The immediate suspect was Pere Noir; he was the only one out there, other than the girl and her father. The police had gone through every inch of his property, but found nothing. Yet, people remained suspicious of him. They thought they had seen the girl walking on the island; some say you can still hear her call out for her father. But, only after sunset. You didn't believe the story about the girl. It was just a way to frighten children from going out there alone. Your grandmother said she'd seen her. She died the next year. You didn't believe the stories — until you saw the girl.

The small pier leads right up to his front door. You could sleep out in the boat and take your chances with the bugs and the cotton-mouths. You could turn the boat around and try to find your way home. You could swallow the fear rising in your throat and knock on the front door. Your legs make the decision for you. As you get closer to the withering house, you notice a string of alligator teeth over the door. They're smiling at you. You knock three times, pushing splinters into your knuckles.

"Who do there?"

"Eugene Simone."

The door creaks open, and white eyes stare out past you.

"Mabel's boy? On y vas."

Your grandmother's name surprises you. No one calls her Mabel. He steps aside. You move through the door quickly, in case he changes his mind. He grabs your hand, causing you to spin around. He holds your knuckles up to his cloudy eyes. After almost thirty seconds, he looks up.

"Hurricane drops."

He walks into the back of the house.

Rumor had it that the old man was a voodoo priest. No one knew where he came from, or when exactly he'd come to Songecreux. But, after six weeks, he was the only one left on the island. People would steer their boats away from it; there was supposed to be a curse on the water. Some said the old man was blind, and that's why he never left. Others said he was the devil, and the island was the only place he could evoke the evil spirits. The others thought that he came from the tree, the one in the middle of his island. That's why, they said, no birds ever nested there. It was a sacred tree.

You start walking around the large room. A pungent scent hits you. It's overpowering; you cover your mouth and nose. You catch a glimpse of the source. In the corner, in a porcelain basin, sits a small mound of entrails. He walks back in the room, carrying a blue bottle and a gray rag. He tilts the bottle, letting the rag soak up the liquid that trickles out. He picks up your hand, checks to make sure it's the right one, and gently taps the rag across the scraped skin.

"Chiggers."

Your knuckles begin to burn from the liquid. You pull your hand out of his.

"That's good enough. Thank you, monsieur."

"Pere Noir. Pas 'monsieur.' Pere Noir."

"Merci, Pere Noir."

You look up at him, and see his face for the first time. There is a memory

trying to come through, but it lingers, and fails. The porcelain basin now rests on the table in front of him. You move closer, disgusted, yet fascinated. He pulls a long piece off the top, and stretches it out in front of him. The chanting begins.

Your grandmother will die in three weeks. That will be the first time you will see Pere Noir. You will stay at the cemetery after everyone leaves, and he will be there. No roses, just thirteen violets. He will smile at you, and wish you a happy seventh birthday. One violet for you. You will thank him, and walk away. It will never rain that hard again.

He still hasn't agreed to let you stay. You look around and wonder where you could possibly sleep if he does. He motions you over to the table. A small, red puddle has formed around the piece of meat. He points at it, as if it should mean something to you.

"Read it, Simone."

"I can't read the future."

He looks disappointed. He pulls the outer layer apart, and pushes his thumb inside the flaccid tube. A small pebble, and a chicken bone. He smiles. The chicken bone is placed in a jar with the others he's found.

"Donne-moi le main."

You put out your hand and wince as he puts the pebble in your palm. You close your eyes and think of a question only the spirits can answer. The pebble is handed back to him. He moves it closer to the light—closer to his face. He pops it in his mouth, and after a few seconds, pops it back out.

"Heaven is in the eyes of a woman, Simone."

You wipe your palm against your pants, smearing a brown line across your thigh. The putrid odor remains on your hand.

You don't see her walk in. An angelic voice reaches Pere Noir, passing you along the way. You stand up so quickly, that you almost knock her down. She is close to you in age, and in height. She steps back a few inches, and looks past you. The old man holds out his hand.

"Simone, presente Jole Blon."

"How do, Madame?'

The old man shakes his head.

"Pas 'Madame.' Jole Blon."

You look over to her for permission to call her by her name. She still won't look at you. You hold your hand out.

"Cava, Jole Blon?"

She takes your hand. Somehow, you know she's smiling. She turns your hand over, and looks at the palm. You walk over with her to the table,[oo] and sit across from her. She still hasn't looked at you. Her blond head shakes from side to side, softly.

"C'est grave. Plus grave."

"What's wrong? What do you see?"

"Three love, but only one."

Her English is worse than Pere Noir's. She gets up and leaves the room. You almost follow her, but the old man is watching you. White eyes looking through you. While you have been with Jole Blon, he has cleaned up the entrails from the table. Not one drop of blood to give away the earlier reading.

One week before you lose your way, you will have a dream. You will be standing in the middle of Songecreux, alone. A white bird will fly over you with a black snake in its mouth. Then a red bird. Then black. You will ask your mother what the dream means. She will squint her eyes at you.

"Three love, but only one."

You will laugh at the way she mocks your grandmother. The dream will be forgotten until the night you happen on Pere Noir.

You remember the old man mentioning your grandmother's name. It could be possible that they knew each other. Your grandmother would do readings for the islanders. They were poor and, consequently, superstitious. You can still hear the islanders chanting at her funeral.

"Pere Noir, how do you know Mabel?"

"Fine woman. Good vision. Plus forte."

"Did she come to Songe...the island?"

"You look like her. The eyes."

He was being evasive. Of course he knew her; everybody knew her. You try again.

"I remember you at the funeral."

"C'est vrai? You was a small boy. How you remember Pere Noir?"

"I remember the violets. You gave me one."

He smiles now. It reminds you of the alligator teeth over the door. You shift uneasily in your chair. He walks over to the small bookcase near the door. You watch closely as he goes through four books. He finds what he's looking for, and comes back to the table. He hands you a picture.

"Mabel ask me to give this to her boy."

It's a picture of you.

You had fallen in love with two girls before. The first time was in high school; you were fifteen. She was the daughter of a police officer. Her father was transferred to Baton Rouge. The second time was the summer after high school. You would spend every hour of daylight together. Eight weeks later, she would leave for college. You would start working in your father's hardware store. You'd forgotten details about the girls. Sometimes, they would seem like the same person. In two years, you would meet your third, and final, love.

You don't hear her walk in. She stands over you, and slowly pulls the picture from your hands. She traces the face of the small boy.

"C'est toi?"

"Oui. I mean, yes. It's me."

She hands the picture back, and walks away. Pere Noir sits in the chair next to the bookcase. He whispers something to her, and she leaves again.

"Mabel gave this to you?

"Vrai chose."

"How did she know you would give it to me?"

"Because I have."

Jole Blon comes back, carrying two blankets and a pillow. She pulls out the sofa cushions, and hits them against the table. Small insects. She sets the blankets and the pillow at the end of the sofa. She will not make the bed; you

have offended her. You walk over to the sofa.

"Jole Blon, what's the matter?"

"Rien."

"Jole Blon, qu'est-ce qu'il passe?"

She smiles at the floor.

"Nothing."

She looks at you; for the first time you see her eyes. They capture you. You can't stop looking at her. Pere Noir watches you the whole time. He stands up slowly, and walks over to you.

"Heaven is in the eyes of a woman, Simone."

The newspapers will pronounce you dead. You will be missing for ten days; your body will not be found. The police will question the old man, again. New rumors will start. The old man will die in four months, leaving you and the girl. You will tell your children about Pere Noir. You will raise them on his island.

*Punctuation irregularities are intentional.

JOSIE
TORRES

dry butterflies

The dogs still bark at night. No sirens or spirits needed. When the sun goes down and dust rattles, Mamma puts her caged birds in the house and covers them with a blanket. She protects them from hungry rats. Her single foot canary can't stand to lose another foot. And she can't afford another cat, not another mouth to feed. Siesta, our gray cat, serves only to frighten evil away, not to kill rats. We've had him for five years and in that time Bisabuela's ghost has kept away. She wasn't evil, but her ghost was eerie. I can still hear her creeping through the porch and feel her long lashes resting at my window.. But I know it's only the wind, the still sound of the hot winds.

I was thirteen when I last saw her melting face. Her long, black dress dragged after her feet. A brown sweater draped over her hunched back. She sat, as usual, on her chair, on the porch and slept. Uncomfortable. Her mouth, an opening into her wordless world, wide open. Only moans dripped from there. As a cloud of gnats hovered over her head, she snored. I tried to give her a pillow, but her response was a slap on my wrist for waking her. She never spoke; nobody did, not to each other. She didn't wake from that sleep and I'm still watching her.

Bisabuela lived with us and it was my job, three times a day, to put the spoon to her mouth and try to feed her. Try feeding a wounded bird. She'd spit it right out and sometimes onto my face. "No, Bisabuela, no." With a wet cloth I wiped her sagging chin and watched the rough wrinkled skin stretch back to its molded place. Labyrinths of deep lines mapped her skin, all connected. Like we were. Her bottom lip shook in desperation: she wanted to move, to move and speak. No more pudding. I'd stare into her hump and know that it was hollow. Instead of flesh and bones there was a whole universe. A hole. Blue, purple, and

pink lights radiated its darkness. There lie undiscovered constellations waiting to explode. Be explored. On the moon sat a forgotten astronaut with pale skin and teeny-weenie little eyes. Shooting stars darted around the sun and guided its path. White horses trotted to the heavens pulling empty chariots. And she slept.

There were many times I wished she didn't wake and our routine would finally end. But there was a reason God let her live for so long. Was it punishment? Mamma said, "God does not punish." So then, why did I get ugly feet? I watched Mamma change Bisabuela's diaper with patience. Her naked caterpillar skin hung tightly on to Mamma. All three of us, in a room with yellow floor tile, silenced. They were me and I would become them. Our pale-brown skin, lined with green veins, all connected. I, one day, will be a baby again. That is punishment.

Two days before Bisabuela's death, clouds wove over the earth and cramped the mist in our lungs. Mamma worked as fast as her machines. Her tiny garage garment factory wove silk costumes for those who could afford to be what they weren't. Mamma didn't care so long as bills got paid, mouths got fed and birds sang with the rising sun. But they couldn't fly. While Bisabuela slept, I clipped all the loose strands of white dresses. Clipped wings. Puddles of thread formed at my feet. I gathered them and placed them on Bisabuela's bare head. She awoke and didn't feel the nest above her. I had given her hair. Mamma walked out to the porch and accused me of tormenting Bisabuela. "But no Mamma listen." I had to spend two hours in the bathroom, locked away from our dry green garden and my Bisabuela. It is no wonder I now search for comfort in that single, cold tiled room. When Bisabuela awoke, I heard her screaming. She thought the white horses had come to take her. The threads fell from her scalp and on to her lap. She was bald and not ready to climb in the chariot. Nobody ever is.

That same night I lit a candle to Saint Lourdes with Bisabuela's picture above it. Her face glowed with orange rays and a grin began to light her face. She smiled. She was ready. I asked the purple sky to take care of her. Take her. Let her love her hunched back as much as I do. Let her die. I was thirteen and knew punishment.

In the morning, I crept to her room and held on to the walls. I balanced on the cracks of tile, but she wasn't up yet. A thick smell of death penetrated my eyes and let me believe. Long legged mosquitoes hung dead from the spiders' webs. I pulled the sheets from her face and let the light illuminate her. An even stronger stench permeated the room. In her sheets lived lost moths and dead butterflies. No breath. She opened her left eye and glared at me. She knew I wished her away. "But it's for her own good." I can't remember if it was relief that comforted me that morning or the empty feeling of disappointment.

Bisabuela asked for Mamma to feed her that morning. I stared in envy as Mamma cleaned Bisabuela's thick chin. "That's my job." I took Bisabuela's shoes off and began to wipe her feet with a hot towel. Her crippled toes mounted on to one another and her yellow crusted nails needed a trim. As I dashed for the clipper, she put her shoes back on and asked me to leave the room. Her mouth opened while she was awake. I heard her tongue touch her palate and wish me away.

I went to bed and asked St. Mary, queen of all the heavens, to lift my heavy curse and relieve me from further punishment. "Let her live. I love her." I lit another candle and blew the old one out. The more air my lungs allowed, the brighter the flame grew. Until finally, the flame darkened and drowned in its own wax.

The next morning St. Mary had failed me. Bisabuela lay rigid as a board on an overused mattress. Her soft skin was colder and more yellow than ever. I asked for it.

"St. Mary grant me peace. Make me cry."

She had given birth to fifteen children, twenty-two grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. I walked to the coffin and watched her dry body sleep under the glass; she was beautiful. Nobody cried.

I felt her musty skin years after she died. One night, while laying on my back, I saw her shadow. The dogs went crazy and the cat's back hunched in fear. The room filled with butterflies and webs formed at the corners of the room. Bisabuela's shadow roamed with brightly colored wings attached to her back. I

spread my right and left arm out and gathered my feet close together. My body lifted from the sheets and floated for a while. Bisabuela's back straightened, floated over me, spun around me and melted into my bones. She enclosed me in her dreams and in her memory. As I dropped, the butterflies came down. The shadow flew and has not been seen in years.

I hung a braid of garlic on my door the next day and swept the dried butterflies from the floor. With the same broom I cleared the wall of webs. I could not clear her spirit. Mamma doesn't sew clothes anymore, but she still keeps cages. In the hot winds, I can still hear the dogs howling. A deep, dark sound from inside the gut trembles in their voice. It's a cry, a cry I couldn't force or didn't feel. Bisabuela lives in that howl and flies with its darkness.

a death at sea

My great-grandmother, Ma, was a strong woman who never feared to speak her mind, but she was full of life and laughter. She was articulate and loved to talk, challenging, arguing and gossiping. She ruled her twelve children with a regal hand and, even after they were married, her seven daughters would gather at their mother's house almost every day. But she could be a troublemaker in the family. She liked to tell everyone how to run their life, and their children's. She never hesitated to share her opinion, and if she heard or saw that a man was out with someone not his wife, she always made it her business to let the wife know. She loved to tell stories and had no qualms about making them more exciting by embellishing the truth.

This woman was my grandfather's mother. She had green eyes and brown hair like me, and here am I telling stories and embellishing to make them more interesting. I wonder what else I inherited.

When Ma hit menopause she kicked Pa out of her bedroom and never let him back in. He was a quiet, honorable man who never drank and made his money by buying and selling real estate futures. Sometimes, when Ma's temper got the better of him, he would move out for a while but, separated or not, he always provided a nice home and a maid for Ma. The maids frequently left after a lashing from Ma's tongue, but she claimed it was Pa who drove them out with his womanizing ways. Their friends and relatives knew better, but they never contradicted Ma because her wrath was formidable.

Ma and Pa's oldest daughter, Mabel, had married a ship's captain, Harry Smith, whose uncle owned the Reardon Smith shipping company. It was a

good marriage but, when her youngest child was just eight months old, Mabel became ill and died at sea.

When I was eight years old, I remember looking at my mother's passport and discovering that next to her picture was a name with which I was unfamiliar: Mabel. My father and his relatives called her Molly; her brothers and sisters and parents called her Girlie; but here on this official document was another, unused, name. When I asked my mother why she never used Mabel, she explained that it was hopelessly old-fashioned and she always hated it. But her father had insisted that had to be her name when she was born a few weeks after his beloved sister died at sea. After that, I watched and listened as the name Mabel began recurring in her life as we moved, first to Canada and then to California, and official documents listed it as her given name. Eventually Molly faded into memory as my mother allowed the people she worked with to use her real name. And when she died at fifty-three and I had to choose a name for her headstone, it was easier to write down the name that she used in the last part of her life, the one that represented the sister my grandfather loved so much, Mabel.

On a visit to the Santa Maria, California house of my mother's sister, Mary, and their cousin Reg, to whom Mary is married, I met for the first time with Reg's older half-brother, Harry. We talked all afternoon, but it wasn't until the evening that he mentioned that his mother had died at sea. He said that she was my grandfather's sister. I asked him what his mother's name was and he said, "Mabel." I suddenly realized that he was the son of the woman my mother was named for, my great-aunt Mabel. I felt a strange connection but it was time for us to drive back to Burbank, and he flew back to Britain the following day.

I never saw Harry again, and a few years later he died in England. On another visit to Santa Maria I asked about the history, and my Uncle Reg handed me a newspaper clipping written in 1940. It told of my great-aunt Mabel's fatal voyage. It has haunted me. I cannot get the vision of her and Captain Harry out of my mind.

The sun shone brightly as Captain John Henry (Harry) Reardon Smith's ship pulled out of Cardiff harbor. The screeching of seagulls frightened his son,

young Harry, who clung to his mother's skirts as they watched the land recede. Mabel shifted baby Jack to her other hip as she took a last look at her native land. The weather promised to be mild all the way to Rio de Janeiro where they were to deliver a large cargo of coal. She glanced at the bridge where her husband, just twenty-four, performed his duties as captain. She was at peace. With one more gaze at the vanishing land Mabel returned to the captain's cabin. It was time to nurse the baby and young Harry needed a nap.

Whenever the little ones slept, Mabel spent time with her husband on the bridge. Evenings were best when they could walk on deck to the splash of the sea and the hiss of the breeze. Their talk was of the future and the past, of their plans and their memories.

Harry was from a long line of sailors. The ship he sailed was one of a fleet owned by the Reardon Smith Line where his uncle was managing director. This was a small command but he aimed to get a larger one. He was proud of fathering two sons and he hoped they would follow him to sea. Young Harry was not quite three but already had learned to walk about the rolling deck, using a campstool to steady himself. And the baby promised to be as big and as healthy as his brother. Life was good for Harry as he smiled down at his wife.

How do I tell the story? It was so long ago and I know nothing of the people involved or of ships on the high seas. How can I make meaning of this tale from across the years? When I look at my Uncle Reg, I see Captain Harry, his father — a man of the old school, wise and strict, but with a kind heart; someone who faces life with courage and humor; someone whom it is easy to trust, admire, and love. The newspaper description of Captain Harry also describes a tough little scrapper, but my uncle is not like that. He said his half-brother Jack, the baby who was torn from his mother, inherited their father's toughness.

Captain Harry was just eighteen when he first saw Mabel Pugh dancing at his cousin's wedding. She was from a large and raucous family with long roots in Cardiff. She refused to dance with him, but he wouldn't give up. He was only

in port for three weeks, then off to serve with his father for two months, and he knew he had to move fast. He persuaded his uncle to speak to her parents for him and was granted permission to call on her.

We grew up with legends of the Pugh family of Cardiff. My mother's father was the oldest of twelve children, and the second oldest was his sister, my great-aunt, Mabel. Their father was in real estate and they lived in a grand house just outside the city limits. All the Pughs had "the gift of the gab," I was told. It wasn't until I entered my teens that I realized that the gift often masked some questionable activity. But all of them also possessed good hearts, and family occasions were full of laughter.

Mabel Pugh was smitten the moment she saw Harry Smith, but she had heard about the exploits of sailors and she was determined not to be made the fool. But when he came in the door of her parlor that first time with his hat in his hand, his collar tight around his neck and his hair swept back off his browned face, she knew she was lost. He was so unlike the pale and pasty suitors who had called on her in the two months she had been eighteen, that she knew she would never find another man quite like him.

As they stood on the bridge, they laughed about that first time, and his awkward attempt at polite conversation while she had longed to know about his life at sea. And then they spoke of the walks in the park in sight of her younger sister, Elsie, who was totally enthralled with Harry and had legislated on his behalf to the family. Elsie plotted to "get lost" at various times during their outings and the young couple quickly fell deeply in love. They were married within the year.

My Uncle Reg followed in his father Harry's footsteps when, as a young man, he returned from sea and saw my mother's sister Mary. Although she was his first cousin, she was a sweet and beautiful woman and he fell instantly in love. Mary, like her Aunt Mabel before her, saw a handsome worldly sailor who swept her off her feet. They had to fight the furor of both families, and the prohibitions of the church, but eventually

they were married. I learned early from their story, and from that of my grandparents, that rebellion in love has a strong tradition in our family.

Mabel took to the captain's bunk with a pain in her side. At first she thought it was just the change of climate, but as the days wore on she grew hot with fever and the pain grew worse. Harry watched her when he could and worried when he couldn't. When she rambled on about the trees just outside the porthole, he knew it was time to summon help. He radioed a Royal Mail ship with a doctor on board which was close by. They sailed to a rendezvous.

The doctor climbed up the rope ladder and hurried into the cabin with his bag. Harry paced outside carrying Jack, while young Harry sat on his camp stool and watched the serious face of his father. The doctor called them in after a few minutes and told them he would have to take Mabel with him. It was her appendix. He would do what he could in the limited surgery on the Royal Mail ship. Captain Harry paid for his wife's passage back to Cardiff and they prepared her to leave.

The sailors lowered the stretcher so young Harry could kiss his mother's cheek. He cried aloud when they lifted her up and away over the side of the ship. His father picked him up and all three watched as they carefully lowered Mabel into the waiting boat. Captain Harry wept that night as he rocked the baby and watched the little three-year-old call out in his sleep.

The next few days were a blur. The first mate took sick and there was double work for Captain Harry. He set up a safe area for young Harry to play and hurried about with Jack on one arm. When the baby was hungry he mashed the food and gave him water and broth to drink, but Jack tried to suck as the unfamiliar cup or spoon was thrust into his mouth. Harry managed to get little bits down the baby's throat so he knew he wouldn't starve. When the little ones were down for the night he hauled boiling water up on deck to wash the nappies and clothes, and he hung them to dry in the engine-room. He ironed them in the galley when the cook was done for the day.

One night they were hit by a howling gale. Captain Harry turned up the paraffin lamps in the cabin to keep young Harry warm as he slept in the big bed

surrounded by settee cushions. He carried the wailing baby Jack next to his heart underneath his oilskin as he made his way about the ship in the violent storm.

The newspaper account from 1940 told me more than all my years of living in the family had done. A stranger looked at Captain Harry Smith, the sailor, and reported what he saw and what he heard. He saw a small tough man, master of British tramps for thirty years, who had many tales of subduing drunken sailors, listening to opera in Buenos Aires and Venice, visiting music halls in London and Cardiff, and being caught sailing with a German crew when the Great War broke out. He was not a man given to fantasies.

Captain Harry set a course for St. Vincent and piloted her into the harbor himself with the baby crying beneath his oilskins. There he received a telegram saying that his wife had died at sea and had been buried just off Fernando Noronda, the Brazilian convict settlement.

When they finally reached homeport, Mabel's mother and sister Elsie came to the ship to take the children. Harry had wired them the sad news from St. Vincent. While he was in port, the Royal Mail wrote to him refunding his wife's passage money. They also sent a copy of the log entry where his wife was buried. It was mid-June 1913.

Captain Harry continued to sail merchant ships in his uncle's company, and two years after that fateful voyage he married his wife's younger sister, Elsie. They had three more children, including Reginald, my uncle. During the next thirty years Harry sailed all over the world often accompanied by his new wife and also by one or more of his sons, apprenticing at sea. He was a tough master who ran a tight ship. On one voyage he sailed with a wild Arizona cowboy who slit another sailor's throat from ear to ear. They locked up the cowboy, then the Captain carefully sewed together the jagged edges of the sailor's throat, his hands slippery with blood as the sea rolled their ship about. They landed him in Fayal, in the Azores, where the doctor admired Harry's work.

Over the years Harry often carried coal to South America. One night

just after midnight, when Harry worked out their position, the longitude and latitude seemed strangely familiar, but he just couldn't remember why. He retired for the night but tossed in his bunk chasing the elusive memory. Suddenly he heard a woman's voice speak his name. He looked up and Mabel was standing by his bunkside. She was young and beautiful, just as she had been when they set sail from Cardiff. She was not an apparition but a whole complete person present in his room. He sat up and spoke her name, but she vanished.

Agitated, he dressed and went out on deck to watch the dawn. On a hunch he went down to the safe where he kept the ship's papers. Amidst old souvenirs he found the log entry of Mabel's burial place sent to him by the Royal Mail twenty-eight years before. The latitude and longitude were the same as theirs that midnight. Dawn found the tough captain, for the first time in his adult life, on his knees in prayer.

I am also not given to fantasies but when I read this account told by my great-uncle Captain Harry to the newspaper reporter, I felt a cold shiver. 0His story was so simple and so powerful that I was driven to set it down.

And the story won't fade from my mind.

the day our president died

(For John Fitzgerald Kennedy)

It was after lunch and they'd just announced he'd been shot. I had that same feeling I got when I first rode the elevator.

"You're the biggest boy I have," said Mr. Peas, looking at me. "And there are three girls missing from my class. Could you go and find them please?"

I remember how quiet the room was. I couldn't even hear my own shoes walking away when I left to go get the girls. It reminded me of one of those silent movies I was in, like the time my mom, dad, brother and I were eating fried chicken after Uncle Nat died, and no one was saying anything.

I went out into the hall to look for the three lost girls. I didn't have far to go before I found the first lost girl. She was wandering down the hall, coming my way, kind of, and going from one side of the hall to the other like she was drunk, covering her face with one of her arms. All I could think to do was hold her elbow gently, the one that was raised up in front of her, hiding her face a little, I guess, so I wouldn't see her tears, and I used it to steer her back to the classroom. Then I held the door open for her and she seemed to sleepwalk her way inside.

I went back out into the hall. One lost girl found. Two more to go, I thought. I felt good. And this was much easier than being in class listening to the news slowly come in on the transistor radio Mr. Peas was now playing. I opened the hall doors to the two rows of buildings. They glared back at me in the sunlight. In the first of two long rows and in front of our library, I saw another girl. When I got closer, I knew she, too, belonged in our class.

She was just sitting there. She didn't move or say anything. I didn't even know if she saw me, because she looked like she was so far away, and when I spoke to her, she still didn't do anything, as if her eyes couldn't bring her back

from wherever that place was inside her. I held out my hands and told her when she was ready to go, I would help her. Finally, she held out a hand like a paw and sighed, and I helped her get to her feet. And then I walked her to the hall doors, and I swung them open for her, and we went inside. And then I took her to the door of the classroom like I did with the first lost girl.

The third lost girl was harder to find. It seemed I had been everywhere and when I was about to give up, I saw her. She was on the hill of grass in front of the cafeteria. She had a blond ponytail and a white cotton dress of flowers. The flowers seemed to droop in the grass like they'd gotten too much rain. "Just go away, just leave me alone," she said, angry-like, when I went up to her. But her crying didn't sound like she really meant it, so I sat in the grass beside her and looked up at the sky and the few clouds that were sitting in it.

I could feel just how upset she was. She was shaking next to me and yet I could still hear her heart pound as I sat beside her. And then she looked up at me. And then I knew what they meant by whole teardrops, because there were these big drops of water filling her eyes and finally, they would spill over and roll down her face to her chin, and then they dropped into the flowers of her dress. They were like the saddest pearls. And then I saw how close her eyes were to mine, right in front of me, like the color of my cousin's pool in L. A. And now her tears became that same kind of blue filling again in her eyes, only now there were pieces of blood swimming in the corners of them.

And she put her head on my shoulder and let out these cries that sounded like seagulls. And I put my arm around her. I mean, it was nothing, I just kind of did it. I mean, it just kind of happened. And on the grass, we just sat there like that for a while. And I watched the clouds gather around the houses beyond the school. And I listened to her cry and shake against me. And I felt my shirt getting real wet. There on the grassy knoll of the hill.

I think I'll always remember her name. Peggy McCullough. And how we just stayed there together on the grass while she cried. And I saw her lots of places, too, after that, the library, lunch, in the hall, and once at a pep rally and sock-hop. But we never did speak to each other. And when she looked at me or I

looked at her, we would both look away as if there were something too horrible shared between us, some giant thing that would last forever and that we would never be able to explain.

In spite of everything, even that sick taste my stomach gave me, I felt pretty good about the day. I got all the girls back to class and all. And Mr. Peas had a forced, big smile on his face when he put his arm around me, telling me, "You did a good job. The class and I thank you."

And as sad as everybody was, and even when we knew for sure he was dead, I still remember thinking that somehow everything would work out and it would be all right.

That is, until the next day, when we heard that Oswald had been shot while he was still in jail. We were watching the evening news and we'd just finished dinner. And then mom got real angry, because she got up and stood over my dad, and in a real loud voice was saying, "Something's rotten in the State of Denmark, did you hear me? Something's rotten," saying it over and over again like the world was a mad bird that had committed some terrible crime against her and that she wasn't going to let it get away withit any time soon.

Anyway, a couple of weeks later, I told my mom about the girls and what I did. She told me I had done a good thing and that I helped Mr. Peas by bringing all the lost girls back to class, and that I had comforted them. "Comforted." It's what she said. I think the only other time I had done anything like that was when my uncle died and mom cried so hard she lost her balance and fell right on top of his grave.

Mom was right. The whole day had been a lot like that. And I still think of Peggy McCullough and the two of us on the hill. Every time November comes around. And sometimes, more often than that.

traffic

A loose galaxy of half remembered narratives. . .

Imagine slipping out of yourself, out of your language, the language of your thoughts. Imagine that briefly you step outside of your most treasured ideas, your steadfast convictions, your precious opinions. You are still you, but without the weight of the seriousness of who you think you are. Learn how to play, relax more with the words. Language is so much more clever than those trying to discover it. Listen hard for the clues. It comes to those who listen. Open up to the silence. Open up to the struggle between speech and silence. It takes a long time, a concerted effort to hear the syntax of your own language.

He pounds on my door, I hear my name through the thick wood. The need is urgent. The pounding persists. I pretend not to be home.

But here, as elsewhere, babies seem to know more than the linguists can explain. Babies are born with some feeling for or understanding of language on both the phoneme and the sentence level. But children aren't learning language from experience. They learn words from experience. They bring the sentences with them, and perhaps too, a loose galaxy of half remembered narratives.

We open a book; we begin to read.

I ask myself this stuff all the time now. This language stuff. How does language work in the mind? On the paper? In my writing? Pull back. Look at it objectively. Through the eyes of a child. Language is the most intimate part of

our lives. We do it all day long, and don't understand the magnitude of what we do.

He swears he's really clean this time. This time this is it. He found out that he has feelings, knows what it is to be vulnerable without the drugs. Says he couldn't even squash a bug now without crying. He wants to go into classrooms to tell young kids to stay away from junk and rock. Tell them straight and harsh, let twenty-four years of sickness speak for itself. But I can smell it coming out of his pores, his eyes swallow me up. I blossom into his dream and swirl around the vortex of his denial right here in the rust and mustard yellow hallway. Right here in the twelve feet between our front doors. I close my eyes to get my balance. I blink and watch Tom's bulky frame limp down the stairs, his black hair flowing down his back. I swallow air and lock my door.

"Language is a tool," he said."The tool has no limits—in the sense that we commonly create and understand sentences that we have never heard of before. How do we do it? Language is like a hammer: it can be used in many ways, and what it does depends on the person using it."

We engage in the politics of retreat.

Perhaps merely a process of asking myself questions. Which is just another way of problematizing the concept of knowing. In turn this becomes a discussion of the problem of writing, the role of the writer, asking who is speaking? The textuality of identity, I like how that sounds, how it rolls off my tongue. It is sensuous and seduces my intellect, my curiosity. The textuality of identity, of self, of selves. Can I identify what I am doing in this text? Or why I write?

My neighbor lives in a cloud of conspiracy and paranoia, damaged from the war. Somedays he's lucid as a balmy Southern California day filled with

light breezes that flutter leaves across pale blue skies. Or he's an eighteen year-old boy out of his element; afraid, confused. Other times he's at war; crawling through fields, hiding under the bridge, waiting in the trees. He's bloody and filthy, pumped on adrenaline and dope. Mostly, he lumbers up the stairs, past my door, crippled, stuporous with a high-tech mix of anti-depressants. I make the mistake of being too sympathetic, too kind, talking with him for over an hour. This conversation leads to a stream of favors, requests, things needed, items to borrow. This goes on for months. The requests become absurd.

"Can I plug my extension cord in your apartment? I want to watch TV. The manager says it's OK,"

"Will you boil water for me to make coffee?"

"Can I plug in my vacuum in your apartment so I can clean my carpets?"

Linguist Max Weinreich states that the only difference between a dialect and a language is that a language has an army and a navy.

We are frightened by the words.

Why is it so difficult to drop past my defenses toward a deeper level of honesty? Why do I constantly defer the pleasure of making something I don't know anything about?

It's not really the favors or coffee to keep warm. Tom's head nods forward, his mind dips into an opiate paradise. He wants to bridge the gap, move in, take over, consume what's mine, make it his. My apartment decorated with his bows and arrows, knives he's picked up at pawn shops. Puts up his poster of Jesus ascending into the clouds. We will live like the Indians he says. He'll teach me to collect food, dye baskets with the seeds of pomegranates, skin the kill, make wampum. He slips on his moccasins to go hunting, crawls between the cars parked along the street; no one hears him approaching; he will shoot to

kill. The neighbors call the police. I cannot explain the absence of my presence of mind.

The question is no longer "How is language designed?" but "How does language reflect the way we are designed?" What part of our essential humanity is expressed in our ability to communicate with language?

The author must not speak.

I am still in a void of sorts—waiting, pondering, fishing. Things seem slow, my writing is in hibernation; it is winter. I can't tell you why. I am troubled by the issues and questions I am asking about my writing, my self. Where am I located in the text? Why am I writing? What does this story do? Nothing makes much sense, the pieces aren't really fitting together yet. I float about in a sea of fragments.

Tom can't win the war inside. Can't stop the voices. Can't fight back. I hear him talking to an invisible host while he fumbles with his key, "Goddamned bastards, mother-fuckers. It's bullshit. Oh yeah, bullshit." His place becomes a flophouse for addicts, petty thieves, hustlers, homeless vets, says they're all friends. Can't say no to a man when he's down and out. There is no gas, no electricity, just a phone. In the heat of summer the door is open wide to capture light from the hallway, and any breeze that stirs. The apartment clouds with cigarette smoke. Until he makes a habit of running long, thick-orange extension cords down the hallway plugged into the outlets along the wall. Usually, this only occurs at night for TV and lamp-light to sort through crates of papers, documents, proof.

For although language is an instinct, written language is not. Children must be taught to read and write in laborious lessons, and they do not uniformly succeed. Illiteracy is the rule in much of the world. But though writing is an

artificial contraption connecting vision and language, it must tap into the language system at well-demarcated points, and that gives it a modicum of logic.

Silence is not an option.

I am opening up to my silence. It teaches. Informs. Reveals. Silence has a double edge. Cuts off. Oppresses. Thwarts. Or reminds us of the force of language. Silence is like a hammer: it can be used in many ways, and what it does depends on the person using it.

Soon multiple cords run out his door and down the hall. AC, light, TV, radio, he has it all. Until, the owner inspects the grounds with the manager one afternoon and walks upstairs. Eviction laws favor the tenant in the state of California, and what ensues is a test of wills, and cunningness. This is the surprising quality about Tom; he knows when he is being fucked, regardless of impropriety, and he knows how to retaliate. The contention continues for some time, until the owner himself cuts the cords with wire cutters and screws on solid, electrical plates over the outlets.

Language is a logic system so organically tuned to the mechanism of the human brain that it actually triggers the brain's growth. An essential part of our physical development is conferred on us by others, and it comes in at the ear. For an intact, developed human being, the richest source of sensory contact is input from a fellow human being.

We can look into our hearts all we want.

What other horizons can we break through to by means of language?

I am sitting at the top of the stairs watching the old man come in and out of Tom's place. His hands shake, shake like a windmill. I think he's got palsy

or Hodgkin's. He drags out big green trash bags stuffed with clothes. They are too heavy to carry down the stairs, so he tosses them over the railing. Somehow I know it's his Dad. The white hair under his Minimart cap, his thick shoes, his heavy gut all impress me ever so subtly of Tom's carriage, his movements. The old man is resolute, matter-of-fact. I don't perceive that this is the final house cleaning, that he is here to pick-up any valuables while the police tag the body. He later tells the manager heart-attack. Days pass until a man I have never seen knocks on my door looking for Tom. Asks is it true about the overdose? Heard they found him two buildings down. When's the funeral? His eyes too, are like saucers, I see fields of poppies blooming, radiating in his pupils. I sway under the opulence of his habit.

The organization of our brain is as genetically ordained and as automatic as breathing, but, like breathing, it is initiated by the slap of a midwife, and the midwife is grammar.

*All linguistic and language information referenced from Steven Pinker and Russ Rymer; italicized narrative from Francois Camoin.

el retablo

There was this cattle rancher in Chiapas who bought some land adjacent to a village and he was very brave and not superstitious at all. And on the land there was this coyote idol before which women laid baskets of eggs. The people called the idol El Retablo, "The Altarpiece," because it stood at the head of a trail that led into the forest.

The body and neck of El Retablo was made of forty-three coffee cans and its head was carved from soft wood. It stood upright on its hind legs and tail and was over seven feet tall. Its mane was painted dark blue and its long snout was green. Its eyes were agate. Embedded in its open mouth in neat rows were hundreds of baby teeth collected from the children in the village. The man who made El Retablo was still alive. He was eighty-four years old.

It was the dry season and the rancher planned to clear the adjacent forest for pasture. He saw in his mind the fire he would set. He imagined the sound of timber shuddering the ground and thought of El Retablo. He said to himself, "If I leave El Retablo where it is, it will remind the villagers that my land was once a trail that led into a forest." This thought disturbed the sleep of the rancher and he resolved that the first thing he would do in the morning was remove El Retablo from his property.

But in the morning the rancher found that the old man who had made El Retablo was sitting on a chair, alone in the field, in front of the idol. The rancher thought, "This is most unfortunate. If I remove El Retablo now, I will break the old man's heart." Nevertheless, the rancher felt impatient, and though he hesitated for a moment, he was determined to take El Retablo down. He thought, "Whether this happens now or later, the old man will know. It may as well be now." So the rancher walked across the field with a heavy heart—but

walked nonetheless. He acknowledged the old man with a friendly nod, but still stepped between him and the idol. With a firm grasp and two quick circling motions of his arm, the rancher loosened the rope that cordoned off El Retablo.

The rancher took the idol by the neck and tried to judge its weight. "It's not so heavy," said the rancher, bluffing casualness, showing his teeth to the old man, rocking El Retablo back and forth. But the old man recognized the rancher and quickly discerned what the rancher was about to do, and so the old man started to cry. The rancher could not bear the old man's tears. He turned his back to him and looked up at the face of the idol. Lichen grew In El Retablo's mouth. It made the baby teeth appear rotten. The rancher's mind was a box of nails.

"I am a victim of false religion and needless sentiment," the rancher complained to himself. The rancher closed his eyes and leaned forward on El Retablo, trying to think of what to do next. He felt the coldness of its metal neck against his forehead. "This thing," he thought, "is not alive, and this old man, he'll soon be dead."

But at this thought the rancher heard a noise and felt a hard thump on his back. He straightened up, opened his eyes, and became aware that his cigarette had dropped from his mouth into a carpet of leaves. At first the rancher thought the old man had come up from behind him and pounded him on the back with his fist. He wanted to turn to the old man and push him to the ground and swear at him, and he thought that tearing down the idol was now fully justified; that the old man had been ungrateful (and thus undeserving) of all those years that El Retablo had been allowed to sit on someone else's land. But the rancher's body did not seem to want to follow the impulse to vengeance that was in the rancher's mind. A loss of strength in his arms and legs suddenly overtook him. The rancher looked down the length of his body and noticed a hole in the front of his shirt. He felt a throbbing in his chest. A warmth spread through his stomach.

The rancher leaned forward again on the neck of El Retablo, but now El Retablo's neck gave way and the head of the idol toppled to the ground. There was the noise of coffee cans and the dull thud of the rancher's body hitting the

earth. Out of the idol scurried a nest of mice. One of the mice brushed over the rancher's smoldering cigarette butt and caught fire. It scurried into the forest and soon the forest was on fire. The old man stepped forward to the open, hollow belly of El Retablo, peered into its shadows, and inhaled a dank, rusty smell.

contributors' notes

Allan G. Aquino was born, i guess, in the midst of the Me Decade, hit puberty come the Greed Decade, then decided to become a poet in the thick of the 90's, the decade when everyone is either claiming to be an artist or seeking therapy. A recent graduate of CSUN, he is multi-lingual, fluent in tree, wind and eagle. Oh-so-eligible bachelor, second generation Filipino American, loves his aunts and loves to say, "Only, wisdom, and, compassion, can, liberate, us!"

Michael D. Blodgett spent five years in the army as an Intelligence Analyst and Psychological Operations Specialist, leaving in 1986. He graduated from UCLA in 1990 with a BA in Political Science. He began working on a Master's Degree in Public Administration, but changed to pursue a Master's in History here at CSUN. He has one daughter, Katie, who is four years old. In what little spare time he has, he grows roses.

Rebbecca Brown is high on a hill with a lonely goater lady yodel lady yodel lady who.

To date there seems to have been very few sightings of the wild Salim Cain. Having never been extensively studied in its natural surroundings, not much is known of its habits or appearance. The creature is rumored to have sleep patterns that suggest narcolepsy, and a weakness for jelly beans, cheap beer and Hostess snacks.

Teri Chavkin lives in the northern San Fernando Valley with her husband and their three children. She recently moved to California from St. Louis, Missouri and is now working on her MA in English--Creative Writing at CSUN. She writes and

she writes and, when not writing, she is thinking about writing or reading other people's writing.

Julie Coren teaches and studies English at CSUN.

Matthew Deibler is a 21- year-old resident of Apple Valley, CA. He is a Creative Writing major at CSUN and will be graduating Fall of '98. He will then be attending the University of South Carolina, Columbia. He has written stories and poems for most of his life and would like to make it a career eventually. He is planning to get married after graduation. He is the oldest of 4 children. His family is a great inspiration to him as well as his fiancée and his savior, Jesus Christ.

Josh Filan compulsively cleans his shoes and chews gum. He wants to live in a world where he can talk to his dogs and breast feed his friends. He has issues with personal space.

Eric Gamalinda was born and raised in Manila and currently resides in New York City. He was recently awarded a Fellowship in fiction from the New York Foundation for the Arts. His collection of poetry, *Zero Gravity*, is this year's New York/New England selection by Alice James Books who will publish it in Spring of 1999. He teaches Conversational Tagalog and Philippine Culture at New York University.

Chris Herrera plays tennis and uses his t-shirt to wipe the oil off of his face and his truck.

Ellen Kelley is a wife, mom, student, teacher and compulsive writer. As a child, she visited Great Aunt Co in pre-cappuccino-bar Santa Fe, NM, a place of adobe, cottonwood, and violet skies where meals were lengthy, lacy affairs.

kat lamae has been writing for several years now. She is influenced by the writing of Tom Robbins, Sandra Cisneros, Ani De Franco, John Fowles and Kathy Acker. She also thanks her instructors Dorothy Barresi, Kate Haake, Mona Houghton and Jan Ramjerdi.

Scott B. Maizland gives birth to his poetry every nine months, but preemies are bound to happen. Sometimes the delivery is smooth and other times there are complications. But the end result is always worth the suffering for the love of poetry.

Mary Marca received both a BA and MA in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from CSUN. She owes much of her development to the support and encouragement of Dr. Kate Haake, and to her, she will always be grateful.

Gregory M. Meyer is not a pessimist, but he sure does feel like one. He just loves to push buttons, but more than that, he lives to entertain. He wants only to sculpt a silly grin on the world that'll last a lifetime. And even if he fails miserably at it, so what.

Grant Marcus shaved off his beard. He is missing.

Kitty Nard is a graduate student working on her Master's in Creative Writing. She lives in the High Desert with her 4 daughters and longs for the day when she can live by the beach.

Steven Iglesias Provoste is a first generation American whose parents came from Chile--the land of wine and poetry. As a child, Steve's mother would read both Latin American and Spanish poetry to him. This is when Steve's interest and fascination with surrealism and poetry began.

Scott Struman spent his first 18 years in Northridge. He recently wrote a novel (unpublished) called *Looking for a Kiss*. He worked at Bagel Nosh Deli in Santa Monica for three years where his co-workers called him seguitas (Spanish for the one who trips over his own feet).

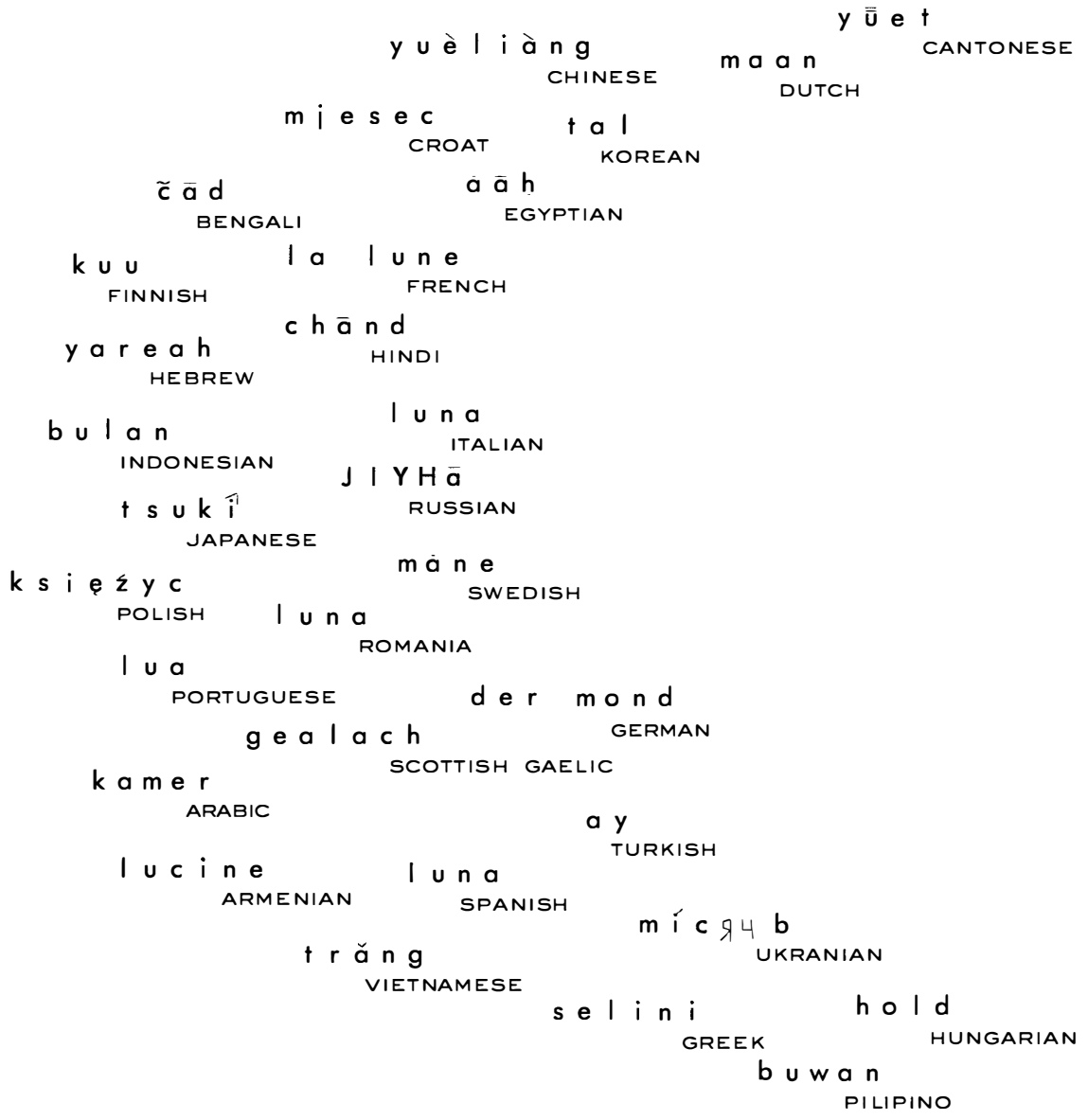
Skywriter: writes the smoky colors of your mind.

Canan Tasci is a Turkish olive female. She was born and raised in the "belid." She is the daughter of Fehmi and Selve Tasci. She now lives in a house down the street from a store that sells tall glasses of Coca-Cola on ice.

Santi Tafarella asks "who am I?" He used to tell people he was agnostic. Now he tells them that he's a gnostic; that is he believes that the creation is a fall, but the fallen world can be colored by imagination and memory. Like Jefferson and Thoreau, he believes passionately in small government and knows with a certitude bordering on the fanatical that the kingdom of God is within each individual. In short, he is an American.

Josie Torres is a student at CSUN.

Kimberly D. Young is currently attending Pierce College. She has been writing poetry for three years and self-publishes a small magazine.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