

The NC

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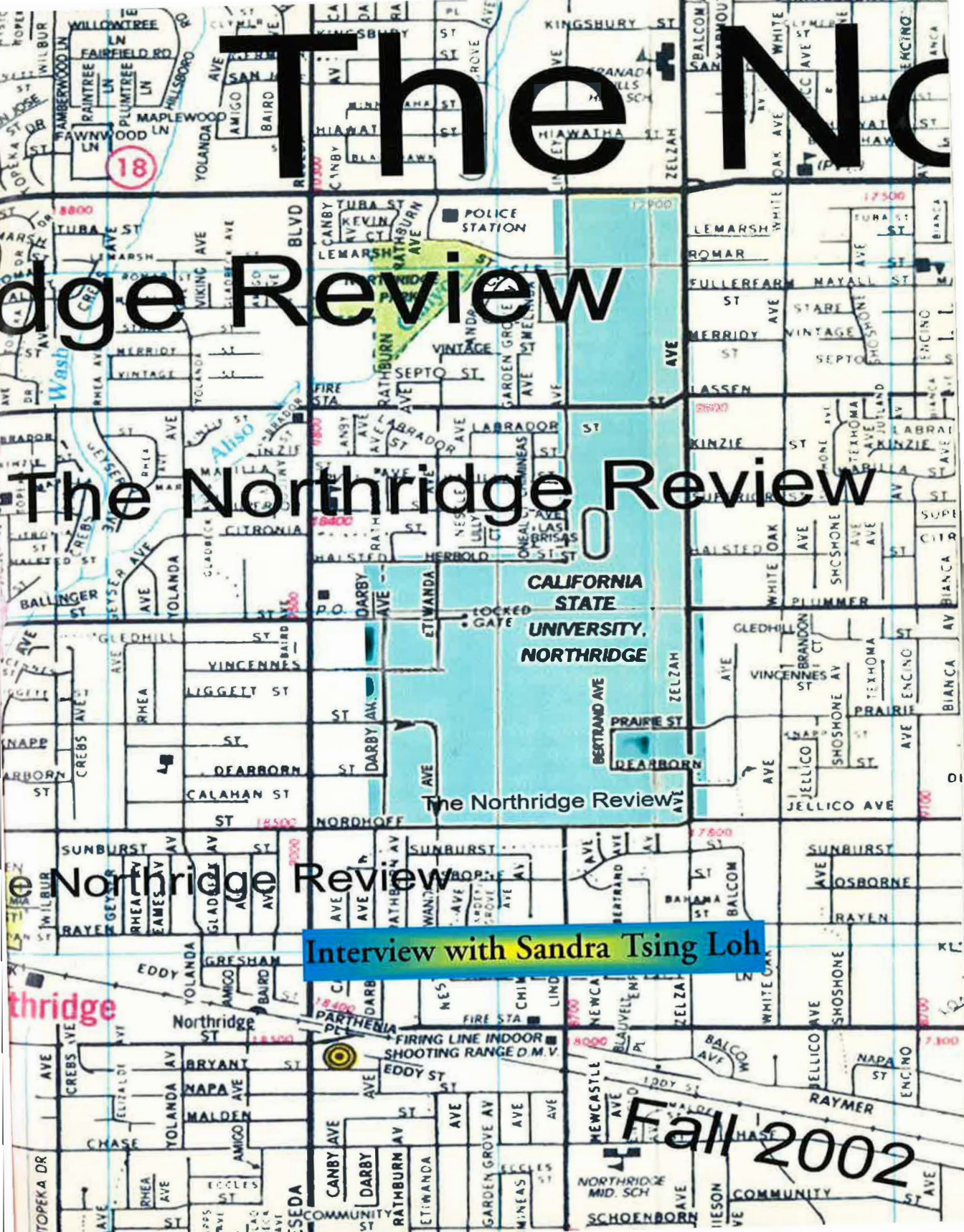
The Northridge Review

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Interview with Sandra Tsing Loh

The Northridge Review

Fall 2002



The Northridge Review Fall 2002

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EDITOR'S NOTE

OXFORD DICTIONARY, 2002:

SUBMIT: 1. ~~Yield to authority or control, surrender, subject to process~~
2. ^A Present for consideration.

^A

* Editorial suggestion.

Thank you to all the poets, writers, and artists who bravely and generously shared their expressions. To all of the people who worked on this publication: thank you for your ideas, opinions, imaginations, advice, and most of all your time.

-Scott Weigand-

Awards

The Rachel Sherwood award, given annually, recognizes excellence in poetry by a CSUN student. This award is given in memory of Rachel Sherwood, who studied and flourished in her art of poetry at CSUN, before she was killed in a traffic accident at the age of 25, on July 5th, 1979. The recipient of this award is Kim Young.

The winner of the Academy of American Poets' award for 2002 is Kim Young for "Hum," "For the Miners," and "Ridiculous Newlyweds." Honorable mentions are given to Kathleen Seeley for "Arroyo," and "Visitor," and Robin Hird for "World of Furnaces."

The Northridge Review fiction award recognizes excellence in a short story written by a CSUN student and published in *The Northridge Review*. The winner for this award is Lisa Humphrey for "Unimportant Things."

The Benjamin Saltman Award, which honors the memory of Professor Benjamin Saltman is given in the spring.

The Northridge Review accepts submissions throughout the year. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the writer's name, address, e-mail, and telephone number, as well as the titles of the works submitted. The writer's name should not appear on the manuscript itself. Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be delivered to:

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

Manuscripts will not be returned.

The Northridge Review gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English Department faculty for all their help and generosity. Thanks to Bob Meyer and Color Trend for their continued assistance and support. Color Trend is located at 15303 Venutra Blvd, Suite 150, Sherman Oaks, CA 91403, (818)380-8191. A very special thanks to our faculty advisor Mona Houghton, whose encouragement, belief, and wisdom guided this endeavor.

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Michael Stephens

Why I Believe I Deserve an A in
English 595

I have forgotten about my school days.
I have a vague impression
that they were detestable.
— Oscar Wilde

In the hotter half of a humid Florida Spring circa 1956,
my father, a barrel-chested trucker who was known

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for his roundhouse punch and his snappy gait,
shoved a fistful of dollar bills under my nose;

Let's make a deal, kid:

You get all A's on your report card and I'll give you
a buck for each one; let's see...that would be –

twenty-six dollars! I cried, voice husky with a new
microscope, maybe a drum. And so it became a matter of

long hours of history, spelling, math, citizenship.

As it turns out, I got all twenty-six A's by June
and only five dollars from Dad. Over the years,

when asked why, his stock answer was
What twenty-one dollars? Huh? What?

Speak up, boy, I can't hear you over that

truck, plane, siren, TV, that woman
in the kitchen – ask her about it, I'm

busy, I'm running late, I'm busting my ass
putting a roof over your heads, and you're asking

about a measly twenty-one bucks? Damn it,

go out and earn it – to which I would say,
I already did, and he would answer thus:

then why do you need it from me?
Round and round in circles we would go,

and the years made the dance into a joke.

Until his eighty-seventh year, when he offered
To pay up in full, provided that I earned an A

in English 595, which he knows is a ball-
buster, an ass-kicker, a typhoon, a cataclysm

of words in commotion, of ideas in heat.

So, as you might guess, I want this grade,
I need this grade, I *deserve* this grade,

before my father winds completely down
and stops ticking, and we stop dancing.

It's time to collect.



Fall 2002

Elvis Redux

Word has it you're holed up
in dime box Texas at
the Starlite Trailer Park with
Bettie Page, now a great big
woman, tits the size of ripe
grade-A honeydews, ass like
the back seat of a '55 Caddy.

Word has it that on hot, sticky
moonless nights, they can hear
you moanin' *That's Alright,*
Mama over the rasp of your old
Fedders air cooler, strummin'
the ghost of your first steel
string Stella, twang-twangin'

the blues, spreadin' the news
there's a-good-a-rockin' tonight;
your blood-red white boy
funk echoes on down past the
interstate and on down the old
two-laner all the way to Tupelo
where a paunchy, sideburned

old boy stands in the small office of
Tupelo Trucking lookin' for work,
hopin', to make it last
just one more time, Mama,
just this one more time.



Fall 2002

a heavy duty hand
cleaner resolution

Brian David Cinadr

they lived in little lives and harsh winters. they lived crushed in the fix of two bedroom squats. they lived and died clutched tight in the fist of the nigger end of town and i lived there too or pretended to and tried not to die every night, prayers said, sleep tight. we lived out on the coal smoke flats like we always had, like they always would, out on the old industrial stretch of town where no one worked anymore, out where i couldn't dream. out where they fought everyday, where i fought everyday, to just survive and watch the t.v. and see all the bright white crest smiles live and buy soap and new cars and trite happy happy in their top job clean lemon fresh linoleum kitchens. we were knotted in the core of the city on the edge of the middle where we pushed and pulled all knuckle busted or got our jaws turned in some town bar. and we twirled and twisted shouted and spit and wound up standing in our own shadows and the shadows of our fathers and the city and its spent post war prosperity and a 1970's slow parade of loss.

this was akron, ohio, and goodyear rubber and the broken back of an america. vietnam and layoffs and unemployment office lines were all that were left of the american dream they promised us. our futures and our little white houses and picket fences and new cars in the driveway were only real on t. v. commercials. our realities were laid out on the frozen street like some carcass picked clean by telephone line blackbirds and desperate stray skeletal cats. our days were shallow and shadow and the winter nights were long and cold and radiator ping and holler and hardly heat in an apartment hollow.

everything was brick here, baked and built in the 20's and again in the 40's when a well greased america still worked and whistled. akron meant rubber for a hungry military machine stomping down the huns and the tricky nips. it meant rubber for a new car 1950 america. akron meant work and u.a.w. and a strong line held by hard men. and they choked on coal smoke and petrol distillations and made america roll right. that was my old man's akron, but akron meant nothing to me. and once the trick was revealed it could never be played again. and all the magicians and their beautiful assistants beat town for a boardwalk fancy or a florida sunshine

promise sunburn truth or they were left to watch t. v. on old black and white consoles stretched out on worn plaid couches in thin greasy houses and wait for an unemployment check to ring in the new year, 1971.

my old man was a mechanic and a mechanic and that's all he ever was or would be. and he handed me a wrench to rattle when i was born and i never let go. and i turned it in his shop after school and summers for all the akron guido's w/ their shit monte carlos and the poor pollock's and their rusted brown buicks and all the rich fucks from fairlawn w/ their cherry cadillacs and uptight silver lincolns. they'd come off their hill across town for my old man and his guys called gus and little mick and his son jimi, jim junior, me. no one spun a wrench like him, like them. and he lived in their guilded grease and shook their hands despite the grime and time twisted in the callouses and cracks of his hands. honest hands that owned a knowing all their own, the divine consequence of a blue collar saint and the certain knowledge of a big block 396. and they left smiling saying thanks jim, all of them, like he just told them a secret and forgave them of their sins.

it was a spring day, the first real warm day and everything smelt like, felt like, fresh laundry out of the dryer. the air was young and excited and filled w/ promise. him, he was a suit, a gray suit today, w/ gray hair and finger nails that were as pink as a breathing baby. he was dropping off a classic corvette, his daughter's corvette. she was coming back from college out east and he wanted her car ready for her for the summer. she'd be picking it up tomorrow, just tune it up and give it the once over and the hand shake and the thanks and the put on nervous laugh, i can cut a heart open but i can't adjust the timing on a chevy and away w/ him, w/ his wife and their big car waiting. i didn't know him, i didn't need to know him to know all about him. i knew his shined shoes from under a car and the country club cut of his voice. and i knew that car like that favorite dream you carry from your childhood, the one where you're flying and everyone's pointing up and waving and loves you. it was her car and she was.....

she was she was and sixth period history class daydreams and hurried hallway hellos and sunday school halos. and she'd catch your eye w/ the soft sweep of her hair her hair if you dared, pretend you didn't care. and she was soft sweaters and wool skirts, something i could see but never touch like a summer sun's glare. she was from fairlawn, they had money there and all the party dress

dreams that went w/ it. her daddy was a doctor, her mother a doctor's wife and they lived in a house on a hill w/ a big green grass lawn and a horseshoe driveway and a mannered air. and for her 18th birthday her doctor father gave her a 1960 red corvette because he wanted to, because it was everything she wanted. i remember seeing it in the school parking lot.

i remember her invitation to come over w/ just the tilt of her head despite her cliques attention and their pickled looks and the barbed whispers between them as i leaned into the hood's red reflection. i remember its smell and its skin and the light burn of its new chrome head, the throat of its 327 fuel injected life breathing into the cool autumn air. my crowd didn't mix w/ hers, grits and preps, it's an old story played out and out. but she always had a smile and a smile and a hello jimi for me like a gracious princess. and her girl friends smirked like they heard a dirty joke and her football captain boy friend bit down on his jaw like he might do something. and we both knew he never would.

and they would have colleges to go to w/ ivy and long green lawns and sorority fraternity mixers and sweaters w/ greek initials and loafers and nick names like chas for chuck. and we'd wear worn flannel shirts and blue dickies and steel toed boots and a working anger we couldn't swallow or spit or we just laid around laid off and choked on the bile of our broken hopes and waited for our draft card numbers to up and send us to a vietnam. and i went to a college of my own on the 3rd floor of a 6 story brick building downtown every monday and thursday night in a room w/ a dusty blackboard and white walls and a floor of gray green vinyl tiles. and i had the know of how the wheel turns and an engine idea and hard hands like my father's to hold it and make it run. and i worked and waited

the old man always figured i'd take the garage over and his jimi would be jim and they'd shake my hand like they shook his and leave for their big houses in their big cars w/ the same stupid grins. that i'd drink coffee w/ the working guys in our greasy tee shirts and tell them we can get another 10,000 out of their rusted piece of shit camaro or torino or monte carlo. but akron was dead and dying like a gangrenous limb working its way up and thru the rest of a body and a great lakes and the rust belt and the heart of a working man's america that didn't work anymore. and my mother whispered in the kitchen the secret of my escape, out of ear of the old man and his chair and the t. v. and

smiled a small smile she still kept like an old love letter. and i listened and smiled to. and i told myself everyday i'd beat this blue shirt blue and the end of this wrench and the shadow of a bare bulb work light hanging from a ford and step into a sunshine shining and wear a pair of clean hands finally.

she was she would, be here at close to get her car and i was going to walk right up and hand her the keys and ask her how she's been and if she liked her school and how much i liked mine and yea i was taking some accounting and an english lit course and na they weren't hard and ask what she's doing tomorrow night. i was going to look her right in her eyes and smile, but not too much, and try to forget just where i was from and where i was from and remember where i was going to. she was something rare, a first daffodil poking its flowered head thru the snow, something i never knew or could know, but could guess at and live w/ the idea.

i finished gapping the spark plugs on her corvette and rolled the key in my hand and felt for the beat of its heart and listened to its engine sing its precise engine song. and i remembered the first time i'd heard it and the first time she smiled at my dumb stare from across the room and i looked at my hands and the grease ground into them and realized i had to get clean. my whole life lived w/ the dirt of this town under my finger nails like the stain of some original sin. my skies always soot and crooked. and i knew this was my moment, the chance my mother whispered to me. the moment for me to break the gravity of this ghost town and to spiral around my own sun. i had a clean work shirt in my locker that said jimmi on the chest pocket and holtz's repair on the other and firestone racing on the sleeve. and i had some after shave from christmas and this thought my whole life that i was just as good as anybody ready to be spoke up and an idea of a pretty ear to whisper it into. but i had to get my hands clean, and i scrubbed and scrubbed and muttered mother mary help me and heard the guys closing up and punching out and the clock snap to 5.

and an instant time tick trick and all the no's would be yes's and the sun would shine on my side of the street and my car would turn over w/ the first twist of the key. and the water spiraled down the drain black w/ the road a car collects and oil and lithium axle grease and a hard hand working past. i grabbed the brush from above the sink and the heavy duty hand cleaner and ground the past ground into my hands away like a bad memory you choose to forget. and i heard a voice, her voice, say hello is anyone here and i could almost smell her hair. and i looked down and the water ran clean and i said hi, i'll be w/ you in a second





JAILS

Sometimes I feel crazy—
not the kind of crazy
they lock you up in
rooms cushioned for the dead
who can dance on bleeding feet
where men
strap you to white
and white bites down
into seams into eyelid sink
not yet sealed in the skull
white beats hard fists into ribs' cage
of strap
of sheet.

And sometimes,
I do feel
as if the very threads
of my clothes
might make me bleed;

and sometimes
shhhhhh—voices I hear voices
of women, whispers

hanging from ancient trees;

and sometimes
the earth r o t a t e s

dirt presses
up
against the soles of my feet;

and I panic in strange places—
on Alcatraz,
looking at bars,
in a friend's living room
watching a Nazi
documentary: seeing _____

in grocery store aisles,
in the hallway to my front door the red key!

Inside I bolt
and feel less safe than before

the thought rises the thought rises the thought rises

in my stomach—who's the jailer?

The Duplicity of
Color

Lisa Humphrey

During the course of her adult life, she spent hundreds of dollars to fill her closet with bridesmaid dresses the colors of sorbet. Carefully preserved in garment bags, each dress was arranged in the order it had been worn. The plastic whispered under her fingers on evenings when television was an inadequate distraction. Usually her friends disappeared to Donovan's, searching to partner the ultimate white dress. She preferred color—sifting through her storehouse of other people's dreams. Bold and brave and unapologetic color in a raspberry taffeta worn on the banks of the San Antonio. It had been an accident, the bride a mere acquaintance, the entire wedding a whirling mass of color and people she didn't know, nor cared to, here she was absolutely critical and replaceable in a monumental event meaning nothing. The dress was an abomination, but the tailor took everything in: the chest, the hips, the waist. Especially the chest. That would be a particular humiliation, every dress emphasizing what she didn't have. In retaliation, she began each morning with a naked me-affirming mantra in front of a mirror that was too large, making her body soft and nereid. Always, in the face of our reflections, we lie to ourselves. She whispered tattered lines those early mornings, in a windowless bathroom, while NPR sprinkled in fragments of the world.

There had been a time, when she was young, that she had believed in her mother, a vessel of the ancient mysteries, gifted with generational wisdom. Later, after she outgrew leg warmers, Lee jeans and Polo shirts, she realized the deception. Now she played the game anyway, like a child who had learned the secret to the magic trick but was reluctant to give up the illusion. It wasn't that she hadn't tried to honor the tradition. She, more than anyone, had spilled her services onto society's alluvial plain, across states, across continents.

I am still whole in this body that has never been mine.

Delusion is a persistent false belief that is a symptom or form of madness. And she is the queen consulting the magic mirror, asking the question, receiving no answer. Standing on the cliffs of the Pacific Ocean at sunset, in front of a plywood altar in Las Vegas, under the buttresses of an ancient cathedral in Venice, she committed emphatically to tradition for everyone but herself.

Tangerine in layers of ruffles, spilling to the floor in a cascade of spoiled fruit, she had danced with an older man whose breath reeked of decay and she had felt young and small next to him. On a yacht in the marina, swinging to jazz, the

sun had finally set on her, orange and sour. But not hell just yet. Hell had been Saturday's sanguine velvet, on the top of a Colorado mountain, when she had gulped five glasses of champagne, having forgotten the altitude, and stumbled out into the snowdrifts, vomiting; her dress was a bloody handprint betraying her guilt. But no one had noticed, no one had looked for her, no one, no one had even known. *You are always and never alone.* Haven't you been there, too?

At five years old it was six glasses of red Hawaiian Punch while camping along the Willow River and she'd sprayed ruby bile on the outside of the tent in the middle of the night while her parents slept. Her mother never understood why she always cried afterwards. The loss of control was a betrayal (at the time she owned her body unequivocally) that triggered tears of frustration. Dress after dress after dress, dancing and drunk, a deliberate decimation.

The closet was endless and small. She was small but not endless, a simple careless smudge like the one on the hem of her lavender dress. It was chocolate or steak sauce or simply dirt where her gauzy train had swept across the spongy lawn. The satin cried beneath her hands and she smoothed the fabric, regretting she hadn't seen the damage and applied soda water or baby wipes or Shout or anything at all. Heedless and inattentive and naive and stupid she stripped away every article of clothing until she stood naked in the fading room, made mute by her mother's words, *not quite pretty, not quite thin, not quite smart, not quite there.* She tore the plastic, held the lilac skin up to the window, now sunless and glad, the rusty stain an exclamation point that made her scared and giddy, *Out out damned spot,* but it was too, too late for that—the dress had moved beyond perfection which made it perfect. She slipped it over her head, immediately engulfed in yards of lavender foam. A thousand cracked pews peopled with pasty-headed smiles turned to stare, nodding for the final march. A view of the ocean. Bachabel's Canon. The press of a perspiring hand. The honeyed crumble of cake. Sweat and perfume and cigars.

Walk.

Glide.

Walk.

Glide.

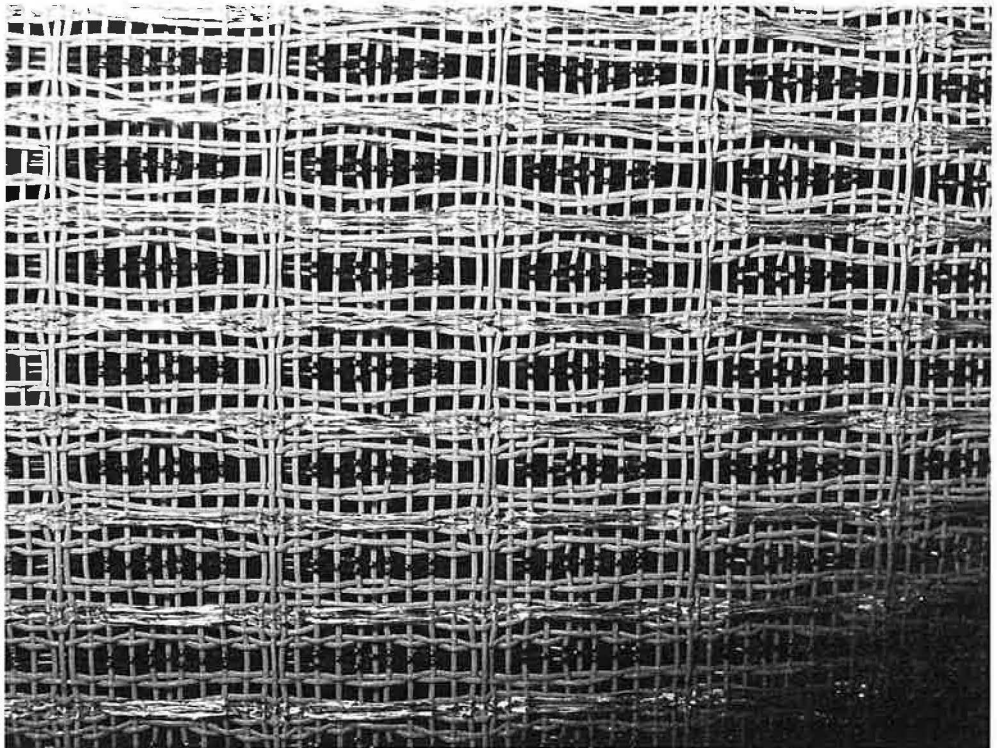
Walk.

Glide.

Stop.

This was how it ended. This was the way it always ended. And in the end there was only the duplicity of color. Colorless color—a familiar ending she could trust—the absolute whiteness of solitude.





Sound Theories

Davey Landau

His theories were sound, nobody could disagree with that. His superiors did not want a full round of experiments this early on, but he went ahead anyway. The particle accelerator put the University back almost 2 million. It was housed in the underlevel lab by the Serdie Building. The experiments started innocently enough, Ping-Pong ball here, a marble there. Soon he was pushing the idea of larger objects. His assistants objected to these leaps forward, but he had the authority and would not stand insubordination. It was on May 16th that the "Breakthrough" was made. The idea was to try moving a bowling ball so fast through subspace that the transference was instantaneous. In effect they were trying to perfect a sort of transportation of molecules. On that May night the bowling ball was instantaneously brought over 100 ft., from one side of the lab to the other. But when the ball came to its destination it was not alone.

Floating next to it was what appeared to be the bumper of a car. Hours were spent examining the object as the lab was locked down. After all the speculation it was determined beyond any doubt that the object was the front bumper of a late model sedan. The powers that be shut down the lab for three weeks as they examined the incident. After all the debates, the scientists were let back in the lab and allowed to continue. The bowling ball experiment was attempted again. As with before, the ball made the transport, but again it was not alone. Next to the ball was a car hood and engine. The scientists stood there staring at the parts, confused as hell.

Phil wandered into the garage absentmindedly. His wife Lisa sat on the couch watching *Airwolf*. Suddenly Phil ran back into the living room ranting and raving.

"God Damn!" he yelled.

"What?" Lisa asked.

"They took my engine!"

"Who?"

"The guys who took my bumper, that's who. They got my engine! Plus they took the damn hood." Phil was really pissed off now.

"I thought you locked the garage?" Lisa asked.


"I did," Phil said, "I don't know how the hell they got in, but they did."

Susan Brown

A Few Words

A few words can lead to a path
of turns, surprise,
malleable wisdom,
spiraling mind lust, like
the curled spiral
of the fern's new
frond, intensifying, doubling with
each unfolded turn,
or the sunflower's
mathematical logical placement
of whirling seeds
as words
unwind, multiply, set root so bees
and hummingbirds can
sip and suck
the sweetness and worms can
crawl through holes
and fertilize
the mind garden.

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Lessons

Lynette Morinini

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters, compared to what lies within us.”
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Everything I learned about coffee, I learned from my grandmother.

1. *Only buy Folgers in the red metal can, and buy the largest one, always. Keep it handy. Set it on the sink near the faucet and next to the coffee pot, which should be a standard, silver Farberware, percolator model: no filters needed, tall, upright and full spouted.*

The holiday season arrives with a full pot brewing, and as another year comes to a close, Grandma and I are together, once again, for the weekend. Beneath the dim light of her kitchen’s bulb, I hold her comb with steady hands, gently brushing her hair back, away from her face for the evening. Slight curls rest on her neck, in the same way that petals fall from roses to rest. Her hair is yellowed, like the ceiling, stained from years of smoking between closed walls. It is her home; she can do what she wants here. Everything is a sentence. What else?

A six pack of Fresca is chilling in the fridge. We both want company. We bake cookies, her favorite recipe, Biscottis. Tonight she doesn’t remember where she got it from or when, but on her scribbled recipe, the date reads 1959—the year she would have celebrated her 25th wedding anniversary, had her husband, Nelson, a sailor, never left her. In ‘59, my mother would have been eleven.

I sit across the table from her and watch as her swollen hands form the dough into snake-like shapes. Shapes that seem odd to me—less than perfect. Still, she places them on the baking sheet with a familiar care. I, too, roll the dough between my palms, careful to keep the shapes uniform. There was a time she wouldn’t have had it any other way.

2. *There's nothing better than a lengthy conversation over a fresh cup of coffee.*

The phone rings. She gets a call from her best friend who tells her she is blessed to have me there. As she lights a cigarette, I get up and walk towards the "Pianette," sit down on the rickety bench, and in my mind, I am no more than two or three years old—my mother is playing my song. In her light-hearted voice, she sings, *Michelle my belle...* We lived together in this house then, my grandma, my mother, and I. For years we raised each other. But, that was long ago. Tonight, at age seventeen, I place my fingers on the keys, only I cannot play anything. I smell the cookies baking in the oven. There is cookie dough on the floor here and there, the fear of this and that. It is 1:04 in the morning, early for us, and while my grandma talks religion on the phone, I pour her another cup of coffee.

3. *Drinking coffee should never be limited to any particular time of day. Anytime is the right time: morning, noon and night, and everything in between. A rich brew won't keep you awake if you drink it regularly; your body will get used to the caffeine in time.*

Biscottis are a complicated recipe to master. The dough must be chilled to a certain temperature, the ingredients are specialized, and the brief fragment of time between done and overdone requires keen attention. However, the rewards are well worth the effort. Tonight, we have baked four batches, more than a hundred and twenty cookies in all—and as I rinse off the pans, Grandma gently dusts each cookie of the final batch with a sprinkling of powdered sugar. In the reflection of the kitchen window, I watch as she presses her index finger into the remainder of crumbs dappled across a layer of paper towels that cover her Formica table top. Carefully, she leans forward and lifts her finger to her mouth, repeating the motion several times. Crumbs fall into her coffee. When I return to the table, she folds the paper towels into her hands and passes them to me to discard.

"We did good, kiddo," she says. Together, we arrange the biscottis into decorative tins. Her friends have come to expect them this time of year.

Before long, her eyes begin to flicker, and the radio fades in and out. This is when a child must face one of her greatest fears, something she ran from, in a hospital as a child. A needle, a shot. Eventually, Grandma is ready for bed. You hold her hand, walk her into the bathroom, and draw the insulin into the vial. You find a familiar scar. The room smells of almonds and anise. Christmastime.

4. *Coffee warms the soul.*

My grandmother would take a cup of coffee to bed with her every night, turn on the pink night light on the table next to her bed, and read. She said the coffee soothed her to sleep. On the advice of her physician, she once tried to switch from regular coffee to decaf. I remember seeing the small green Folger's can on her counter and thinking how out of place it looked there against the familiar dusty rose tiles. Due to her diabetes she really wasn't supposed to smoke or drink coffee at all. Likewise, she really wasn't supposed to eat sweets.

As I put on my nightgown, she wraps the curls of her hair around her fingers and secures them with bobby pins. She unscrews the lid from a jar of Noxema that sits on the counter, dips her fingers in, scooping out a plentiful amount, and massages it into her skin. As she rinses the menthol lotion from her face, eyes closed, I watch her pat her skin dry from the edge of the bed.

"Never wipe down, pat in an upward motion," she rehearses.

She finishes her routine by putting on her night cap and turning off the light, then double checks the switches to be sure they are all off, including the one that controls the heater. In the many years that I have spent here, none of the heaters in the house have ever functioned properly, if at all. However, they have done other things. When I was a young child, the iron grid floor heater used to be a constant source of mystery to me; I was certain "something" lived under there. My cousins made up stories.

Carefully, she finds her way into the bedroom where I have nestled under the covers. Although her full sized bed is a bit narrow for the two of us, we find comfort in our sharing the familiar space. Having slept with Grandma from the time I was an infant, and after years of weekend visits, in which hers was the only suitable bed, even now, it is only natural for us to fall into the arms of sleep side by side. Beneath the pink hue of her nightlight, we lay our heads down upon her satin pillow. I can smell her coffee steaming from her night stand, as she tells me the story of "Sleeping Beauty." And although she has told it to me at least a hundred times, I listen, each time a different telling.

Halfway through the tale, I begin drifting off, and in that place between sleep and dreams, I hear the faint sound of a foil wrapper, and then, a hint of chocolate on her breath.

5. *Get up early, before rising permanently for the day, and make your first pot of coffee so it is ready for breakfast.*

My grandmother could make a pot of coffee in the dark with her eyes closed, which wasn't too far from the way she functioned daily due to her early onset of diabetes, which had damaged her eyesight as she grew older. I used to

watch her in wonder. She always said that if you want something bad enough, you will find a way to get it. Coffee included.

We awake to the sound of the neighbor's rooster. The Silva's property runs alongside the house; they are one of the few families around who have maintained the orchard and farm that was established in the '20's, before Santa Barbara developed its reputation as prime Southern California real estate. The land grandmother's father built their house on had once been part of the large ranch, before it was parceled out.

Grandma loves the persimmon trees whose arms reach out across the Silva's redwood fence to surround her back yard. During Autumn, their syrupy aroma hangs in the air; we make persimmon bread and cookies, with raisins and nuts, creamery butter. But today the trees stand dormant, awaiting the first rays of spring.

After snuggling a bit, we climb out of bed to a cold floor beneath our feet. Knowing that we have a full day of shopping before us, we saunter into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Anise still permeates the air, and the coffee gurgles in the percolator. I open the small Fridgidare, grab a large grapefruit, and cut it in half. My nose tingles.

6. *If coffee isn't enough to keep your bones warm, find another way.*

Her kitchen is a small space, cold and damp most of the time. Occasionally, we use her oven as a source of warmth. During wintertime especially, the windows steam up until the moisture beads and then drips down the panes. Through the lattice patterns, the alcove in the rear of the house is visible. In springtime, snap-dragons, freesias, and pansies bloom; in the winter, poinsetias and miniature roses rise up from the earth. Against their ever-changing backdrop, we watch for hummingbirds. My grandmother believes they are carriers of wishes to the heavens, and I believe her. As I toast two pieces of bread, she watches, hoping to catch one of the winged blossoms in their passing. I turn the sticky gauge on the oven to 180 degrees, its lowest setting, and open up the door to let the heat permeate the room. Her attention is elsewhere. She opens up her purse and counts her money, once and then again, then folds the bills and puts them back into her purse, zipping it tightly. Her hands shake. She pulls a cigarette from its pack and lights it with the burner on the stove. The gas pilot clicks. Smoke billows. I hand her toast and coffee, and with patience, she lifts the cup to her lips; the steam rises up across her face as she sips, eyes closed. For her, this is a religious experience. Neither of us say much. I pass her a small paper cup, filled with her medication. She pretends not to see.

7. *After a second cup, you are ready to start your day.*

Grandma emerges from her bedroom wearing a salmon-colored pant suit, a long string of cosmetic pearls around her neck, and a small brooch. I rustle through my belongings and select a pair of purple velveteen slacks with embroidered rainbow patterns down the sides of the legs, and a red sweater for the holidays. For years now, we have been taking occasional bus trips downtown. These are always special occasions for us, but today especially. We are counting the days until Christmas. Both of us givers.

"Make sure your shoes are comfortable," she suggests. I look at hers and see that she has chosen a pair of dress shoes. I put on my lined boots.

We meet up in the bathroom. The house has finally broken its chill, but her hands still have a bluish tone to them. She hums *Ave Maria* as she shuffles through her make up, and I slide in next to her to brush my teeth as she "puts on her face." Sitting on a small velveteen stool, she generously applies beige cake powder to her face, and then opens her eyes to view herself in a small magnifying mirror. She pats her skin, pencils in her eyebrows, and examines her array of lipstick, most of it dated. Choosing a deep coral shade, she smooths it on and kisses her lips together, now pleased and ready to face the world. To me, she always looks best without her made up face. But I do not tell her that. She combs my hair and remarks on how quickly it grows.

8. *There are even shades of lipstick named after coffee. Espresso, mocha, and café lait, to name a few. Regardless of the shade, Maybelline is the brand of choice.*

Purses clutched at our sides, we leave the house at a quarter to nine to catch the 9:05 bus that is scheduled to stop at the corner of Olive and Mission streets. We walk three long blocks beneath an umbrella of bare jacaranda branches, in the absence of what was, in ventures past, a violet petaled carpet. At each cross street, she leans her weight into me finding her footing down from the curb. Cars stop to let us pass through each crosswalk. Motors purr. She walks slowly, unsteady. My arm in hers helps her maintain her balance.

We reach the vacant, wooden bus bench surrounded by dandelions. I check my watch: 9:00, our usual arrival time. We sit down, and she closes her eyes beneath the rays of winter sun. Oversized sunglasses cover her prescription lenses. As she sits, I get up every couple of minutes and walk to the curb and lean into the street to check for the bus. Minutes pass. Eventually, I give up checking, sit back, and take Grandma's hand. I watch crows drop down upon and then lift off the wires. Wings flash and Bus #9 approaches. The wind blows her curls across her face as the doors open with a swoosh. I help her on; our coins jingle in the metal fare box—two quarters, two dimes.

As the bus ambles across town, we watch the world go by through the

glass panes. Houses are adorned with Christmas lights and welcome wreathes throughout the neighborhood; every now and then, a decorated tree can be seen through an open window—an angel, a star. On the corner lot of Olive and Mission, one family has a full, wooden marching band displayed in the front yard. “Scotland Yard,” she says. We laugh. On the next block, Grandma points out a nativity scene. Jesus, Joseph and Mary face the street, the wise men around them.

The bus pulls into line at the depot. I help her to her feet, a couple of tugs, and again. The driver watches in his rear view mirror. Doors swing open.

9. *Sometimes “greasy spoons” have the best cup of coffee, especially if you drink it black: cheap prices, quick customer turnover, fresh brew. Best of all, in most places, you can still get a bottomless cup for less than a dollar.*

In the company of busy shoppers, we bustle two blocks, past the Bank of America, See’s Candies, the jewelers, and Val’s Used Books, to Newberry’s, her favorite spot. Once inside, she is anxious to sit down, so we make our way past the cosmetics to the familiar row of red vinyl, swivel stools. Being one of the last dime stores remaining in Santa Barbara with a soda fountain diner, customers can shop and dine all in one place, which is another one of Grandma’s reasons for going repeatedly. Newberry’s is also notorious for its root beer floats and grilled hot dogs, and today, although it is between mealtimes now, the counter is nearly full. Nonetheless, with grandmother’s lucky charm, we find two seats near the end.

“Run along,” she whispers, “I’ll find you.”

Like always, she hands me ten dollars. I can remember when it used to buy a pair of roller skates and a couple of new paperbacks, with change to spare. Today, however, I look for bargains to give for gifts, but ten dollars will not go quite so far. I move to the front of the store and find a cart. Tonight, we will want to have all of the items required to wrap festive gifts. So, with that in mind, I pick out a variety of Christmas paper (Grandma and I like the traditional patterns and the solid foils), a multi-pac of ribbon, decorative bows, plenty of name tags—all 99 cents each—and tape, four for a dollar. Wandering through the aisle, I pass a row of toys: race car sets, Barbie dolls, marbles, bouncing balls and board games. I scan the shelves, remembering how I used to fiddle around for hours trying to decide which new toy I would ask Grandma to buy for me. I never was very good at deciding. I continue on, past the greeting cards, and toward the books, when, as if out of nowhere, I feel her hand upon my shoulder. She places her other hand on the rim of the cart and helps me guide it.

We walk through the aisles, picking out lilac stationary for Mom, photograph frames for some of her friends, sachets and lotions, a mock Pendleton for Uncle Kenny, embroidered cotton handkerchiefs for Ms. Silva, a tin of hard butterscotch candies for Aunt Beth, and paper dolls and a coloring crayon set for my sister. She grins and slips me a roll of bills. For myself, I pick out a tube of flavored lip-gloss and a fountain pen set, and as I get in line to pay for our items with her money, she returns to her stool and her coffee. In line at the register, I watch a group of carolers swing by outside, past the storefront, singing *Winter Wonderland*. Clouds form gray across the downtown sky.

After making our big purchase, I join Grandma at the soda fountain counter, bags overflowing with gifts, and sit down in the stool next to hers. As always, she has set her napkin to reserve the space for me, and half a hot dog awaits my arrival. I sit down and she winks. Immediately, one of the waitresses, Genevieve, hands me a 7-Up. I recognize her by the mole on her cheek and her teased-up hair. She has been here as long as we have been coming. An elderly man sitting next to me rustles his newspaper, and like most of the customers, Grandma included, he smokes. The counter is lined with small glass ashtrays, like the ones for sale in the window—two for a dollar. She is quieter than usual; I sense that her energy is waning. Unlike the years before, when our shopping sprees were an all-day adventure, I understand that today's will be short lived. I nudge her, and say, "Ready to go?" She smiles and nods, pressing her cigarette into the tray with a twist.

"Ready if you are, Kiddo," she rehearses. I eat the remainder of the hot-dog and wash it down with a swig of the soda.

Cradling my one free arm in hers, bags loaded on the other, we weave our way between the crowds of shoppers out into the busy streets. Looking down, I notice her feet are swollen, hose stretched tight around her ankles. She should be wearing tennis shoes, doctor's orders. To the bells of a Salvation Army volunteer, she stops, reaches into her pocket, and drops a handful of change into his jar. It jingles, finding its way to the bottom of the lot. A sharp wind stirs, we huddle together, and carry on.

10. *If you are too tired or weak to make your own coffee, let someone else make it for you. Someone who knows how you like it.*

Back home, we enter through the breezeway, past the washer and dryer, and unload our day's treasure onto the kitchen table. I make a fresh pot of coffee, careful to rinse out all of the grounds from this morning's pot. She takes off her shoes, and I hurry to get her a pair of slippers from the stack of retired pairs in her closet. In the distance, I hear her rustling through the packages. Two o'clock, time for her afternoon shot.

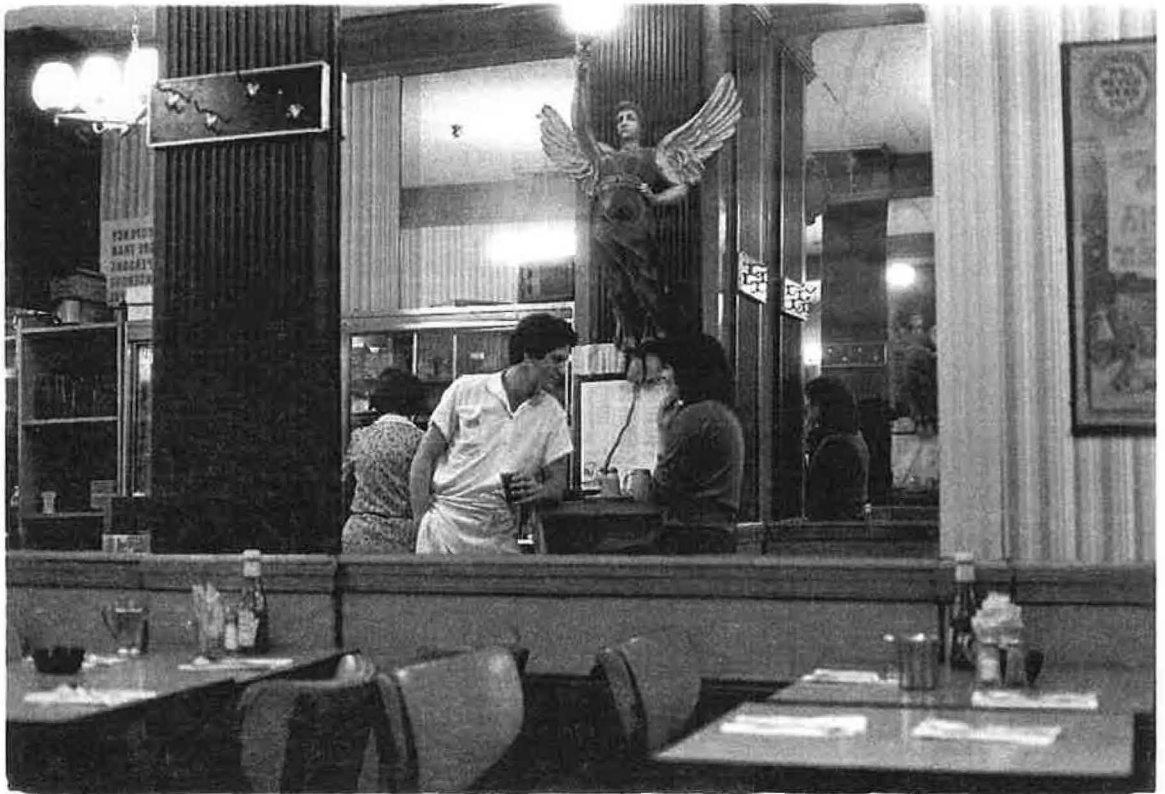
We find appropriate boxes for each of our gifts, and prepare for our wrapping to begin, the appropriate paper for each trinket, the perfect bow. She watches as I attend to our ritual, worrying herself over loose ends, visible tape, and crooked ribbons. For each gift, I try to select the most suitable paper for its recipient's personality, a favorite color, perhaps, and the perfect bow. Mother always says our wrappings are more elaborate than the gifts. Grandma knows this. She insists on tradition.

These days, I keep a keen eye on her, and today, for the first time, I realize that through the creases on her face, and the yellow sheathes that cloud the whites of her eyes, I can see traces of her mother, my mother, and myself: the slight tilt of her nose, like mine; the silver-grey blue of her eyes, the eyes of my mother; her full, Swedish lips, her mother's lips; her paper skin, her own. She looks up from the box of name tags that she has been shuffling through, and our eyes meet. With the gliding of her hand across the table, she passes a gift tag, embossed with a partridge in a pear tree, into my hand.

"For you," she says, "little bird." And she makes her way toward the pantry to get out the tins of biscottis. They, too, need to be wrapped. When we have finished, I carry the decorated gifts into the living room and arrange them around the hearth. I pass the "Pianette," the bookcase, and the wall of antiqued family photographs. I hear the oven kick on again, still the house is cold. When I return to her, she is sitting upright, unlit cigarette between her fingers, eyes closed and fast asleep. I pour myself a another cup of coffee, and the phone rings. It's my mother, singing me a song. *Little Drummer Boy, Silent Night.*

11. *The lessons you learn about coffee, you will remember for many years to come. They will remind you how to love.*

Alice Dyblal McMIndes—September 16th, 1916 – December 27, 1987



Lorraine Tolliver

Apple Town, Julian, Ca.

Apple Town is a round mama,
a fat mama,
a fertile mama.
Apple tree leaves drip red
like babies' cheeks.
Round, breasty apple-fruit delights
like mother milk.
The fecund earth womb
produces
and nurtures her offspring.

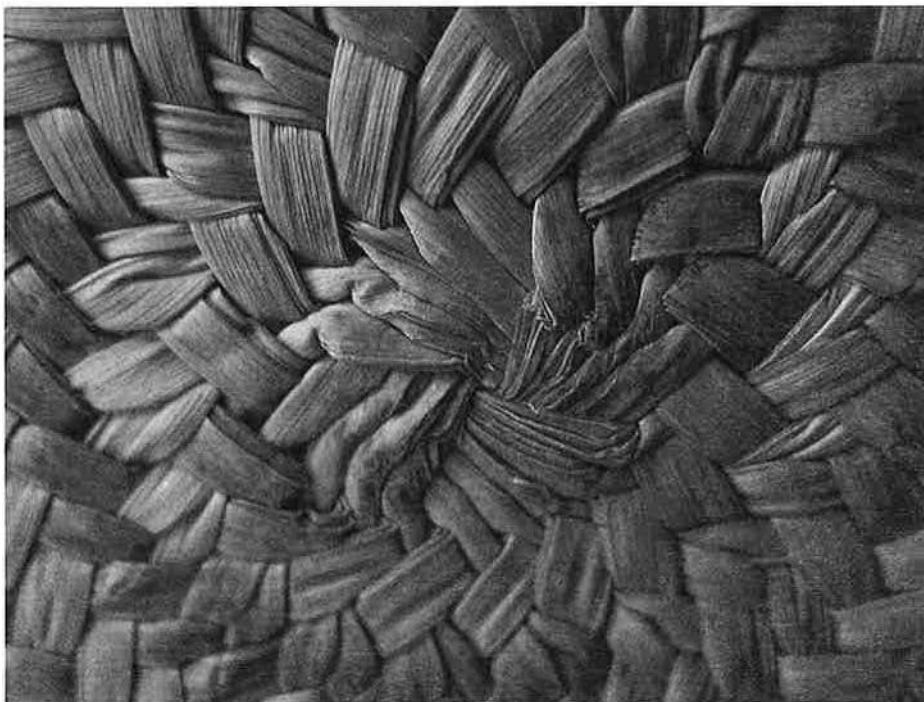


Cantante

Michael Stephans

I go to the Farmer's Market most Saturday mornings to hear the Cantante play his guitar and sing the old songs. I go early before the crowds and the noise. I get there about a half-hour after the last booth is set up, when you can still smell the sweet smell of strawberries and mint and basil and fresh-baked bread as it drifts and mingles with the cool, wet morning air. But the old man is the real reason I am there. He is slight in stature, somewhat grizzled, almost an anachronism here in this place. His skin is a wrinkled golden-brown, as though he has spent much of his life outdoors. Wearing an old but neatly pressed Guyabara and gray slacks, he sits precariously on the edge of an ancient, wooden folding chair which barely recognizes his feather weight, and with his head down, rests his chin on the guitar. The Cantante rarely looks up, and appears completely lost in the geography of his music. He has taped guitar picks to four of the fingers on his right hand, leaving his thumb free to play the bass notes on the low string. The sound of the picks on steel strings and rosewood is mesmerizing and at times creates a droning effect that makes people pause as they pass by. He begins to sing, layering one phrase atop another then another, and his voice begins to waver with emotion, and the guitar seems to be playing itself. I imagine that his songs are about lost love and loneliness, about back-breaking labor in the fields of Oxnard, Coachella, and the San Joaquin at harvest time; about machismo and knife fights, about piñatas and wire-strung colored bulbs lighting up the mesquite trees during La Navidad, and about old Mexico and a longing for home and for another time. The Cantante's music is a time machine and it has reached down deep into those of us standing there; it has lifted us into our memories and carried us into our dreams.

I wait until he has finished and place two crisp dollar bills in the metal bucket in front of him. *Gracias, Maestro para la musica tan hermosa*, I say in my fractured Spanish. The Cantante nods almost imperceptibly and begins the next song. I leave the market and return home with my bounty of strawberries, raisins, sweet corn, and pan dulce. I kiss Katey repeatedly and hold on tightly to her as she laughs and tickles me under the arms so I'll release my grip. I am hearing the echo of the Cantante's voice beneath Katey's laughter, and the two blend into a single delicious song that lingers well beyond the rising of the harvest moon.



Los Angeles

It's five o'clock again, and
some turquoise GMC king cab rides my ass
all the way down Lincoln Boulevard. The driver pulls
on a Michelob hidden in his crotch. I can't tell if the girl
hanging her arm out the window is his date or his daughter.
She leans over, kisses the corner of his mouth, and blows cigarette
smoke out the open window. The sun shines in her eyes. She opens her palm,
lets the wind braid through her fingers.

Some guy cuts me off
and I almost smash his Lexus with the front
of my VW bus.
I imagine pulling him out of the window,
beating his face.
I was a little kid
when I first fought in school.
Punched the Yard Duty after she
benched me out of dodge ball.
Kicked the twins when they
chanted *dog girl go home*.
Kneaded the boy in the balls
after he slammed my sister
into a row of lockers.
I want to make blood
out of all my silences.
Secretly I loved the riots.

Anja Leigh

santa barbara

a weekend getaway
eating our way through
french toast
 italian ice cream
 movie popcorn

44
sliding hot sand
between naked toes
licking dark chocolate
from tutti-frutti lips
dripping hot gravy
over country biscuits
slapping your black ass
crying "ride me" "ride me"
howling "baby, oh baby"

damn!
you'd think
being married
fourteen years
would
 cool
 us
 off!

Bailey

Fragile, sweet smelling,
like candy on the breath.
Small and round.
Shaped well to sleep
on my chest.
Curled legs. Arms
drawn in.
Fists clenched.
I'm still.
Quiet.
Enjoying.
Rhythmic breathing.
Short, noisy breaths.
Lips apart. Glistening
with wetness.
Warmth. Safety.
Life. Purpose.
Love. Perfect.
All should know this once.
Soft skin.
Sweaty on one side.
Purple feet with tiny nails.
Innocence.
Pleasure.
Contentment.
Sleep.



Why the Tree Leans

Potential energy leans
left and right, stretching soil to sky.
Diagonal lines crossing and crissing
connecting in asterisks,
taking the chill off refrigerated air
until indoor lightning crackles

and pops at every touch
or delicious near miss
of an outstretched fingertip.
Turquoise sparks fly
the way they do when the Santa
Anas are blowing wild

just like Ms. Oates described.
You know
those late afternoons when
whole neighborhoods seem
tilted, almost imperceptibly,
off center

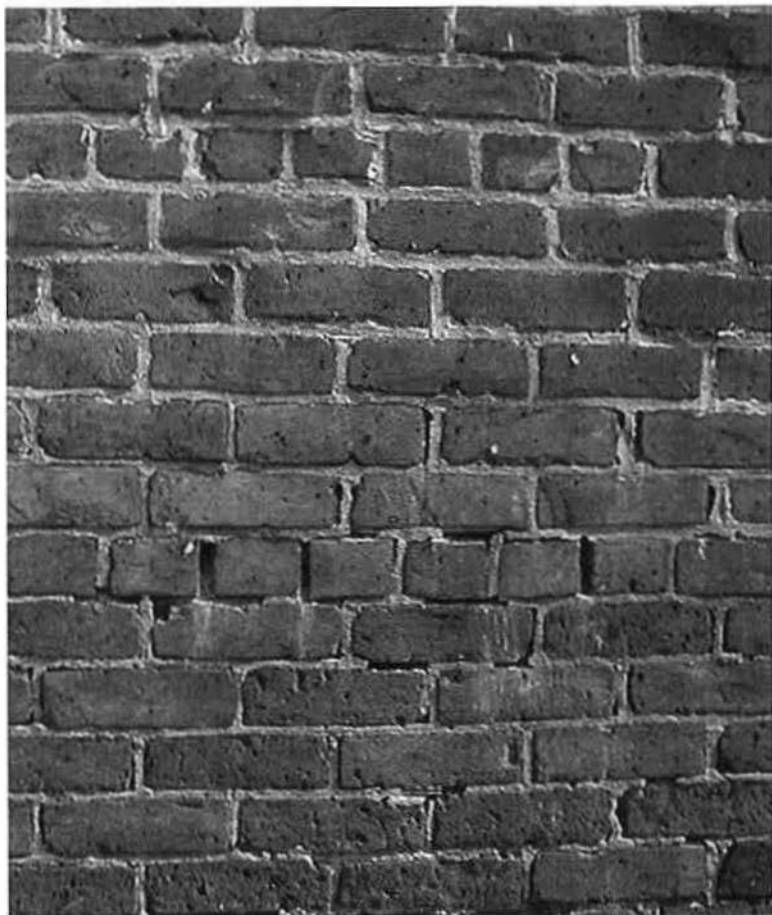
by a couple of degrees,
dented on the corners
and hollow at the core.
Places where
landscapes and little boys
get sculpted into submission

by scheduled abuse
so carefully calculated
and masterfully applied
it's only visible to a chosen few
condemned to carry the torch
and spot the clues.

Kim Young

Ridiculous Newlyweds

I think we have
finally left behind our notions of
fate and chivalry. Your dark iron armor
hidden away in the rafters,
your mom in western PA.
I have spent years oiling my bravery,
polished those old stones so I could have something to hold.
We are not soul mates,
we take deadly trips and
sleep with coiling
uncertainties. You are my deep
blue amethyst, you are my seed, my husk, my vine. You are
my only myopic belief in love- my starling,
my backstroke. We are as ridiculous
as newlyweds. We poise ourselves
with steady grace.



Kim Young

I am Still in Third Grade

hiding under coats in the closet.
Still in High school,
wearing half tops and high ponytails,
smoking pot behind
the hort. building.

You have to die
and come back
to understand anything.
I am still climbing

the big chair
to get red socks
from the top drawer.
I am still dragging my blanket
down the hallway
to sleep against
mom and dad paying bills.
Still on hands and knees

telling my boyfriend
to fuck me hard.
Still passed out
on a creek in Santa Cruz.
Still rolling around in mustard fields

with boys who eventually died.
I am still fighting
my way through elementary school,

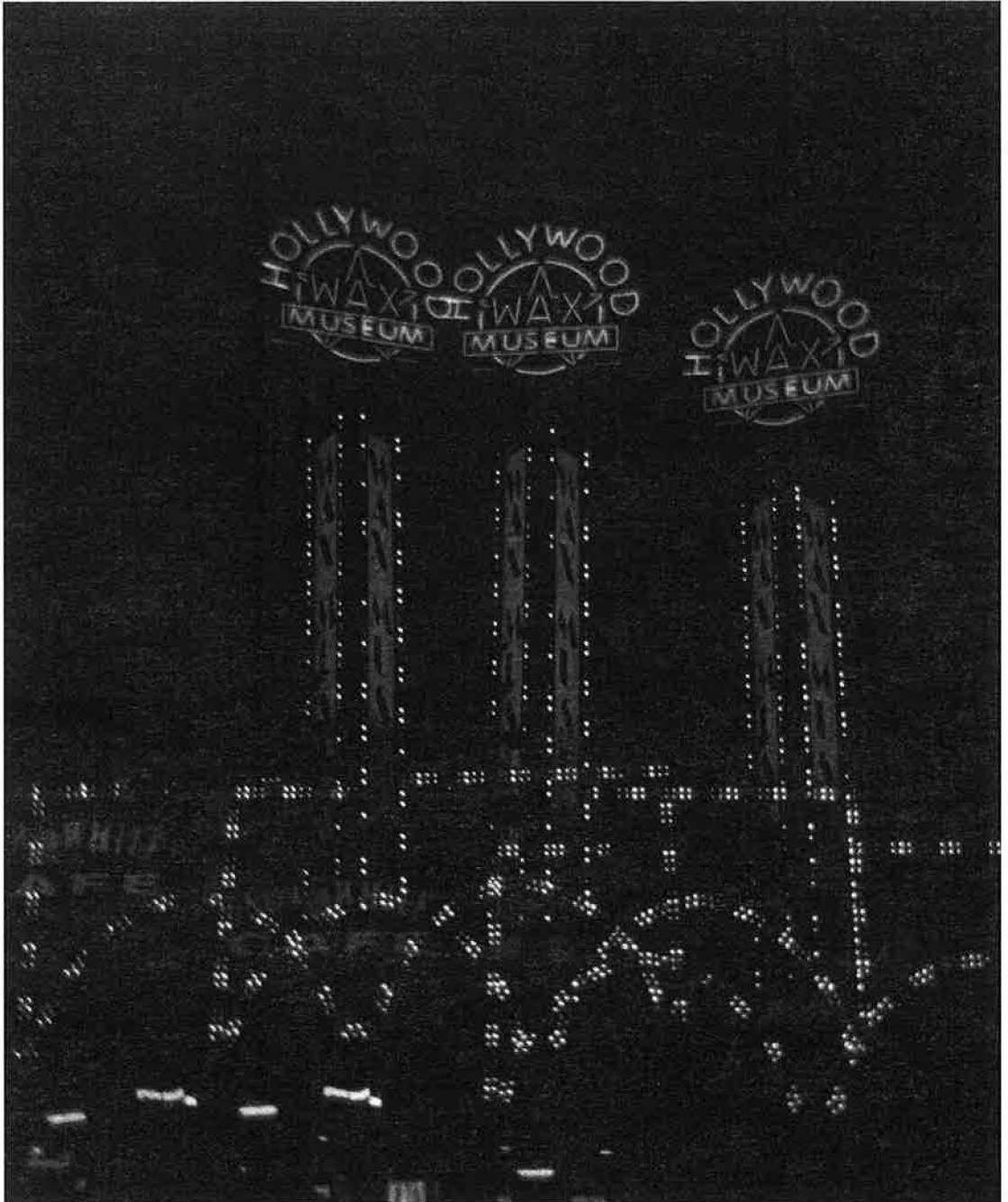
still running through deer trails,
in Washington,
caught in blackberry bushes.
I am still seven years old

at Saint Bernadine's schoolhouse
eating a chocolate covered banana
on the steps.
I am still blue haired

and fuck you.
Still beautiful in candlelight somewhere;

this belly,
my knotted back,
my mother's strong hands.
I watch turned leaves fall

like a child,
watch my grandma
fold linen
alone in San Francisco,
watch myself, a women,
full and sturdy like my mother.



Fall 2002

Active Ingredients

Keith Onstad

You can get a bottle of maximum strength cough syrup at the “99 cents only” store for only 99 cents. That was the first lesson that Julie taught me. For less than six dollars you get a high that lasts most of the next day and has no hangover or nasty side effects (as long as you are not seriously attached to your liver and dig feeling jittery). The active ingredients (Julie always compares active ingredients) are exactly the same as those found in Nyquil, but at a fraction of the cost, and the minimum wage cashiers don’t say anything when you show up three nights a week, on weeks when you are broke, to buy five bottles of cough medicine. It does knock you out if you are not careful, but when you are out you have the best dreams, so it is still worth it. The key to a good 99 cents only high is to slam the first two bottles, and then use one or two more for “high maintenance” the rest of the night.

I discovered the cough syrup high, the \$2.50 theater on the corner of Fairfax and Beverly, and Julie Lane all on the same hot August evening, but not in that order.

I was walking up Fairfax to listen to my friend’s band play at Genghis Cohen when I saw Julie walk out of The Bargain Fair and stop to look at movie posters at the \$2.50 theater (any show, any time, \$2.50). She is not beautiful in the classic sense; actually, she is not even pretty, but she is striking. Her short hair is dyed a deep and unnatural shade of black. She always dresses in irregular blue jeans from Ross Dress for Less and plain black t-shirts, she wears more makeup than any televangelist’s wife ever dreamt of wearing, and she is thin enough to make a young Audrey Hepburn look like Divine. We never eat. Before she dropped out she was a math major, and she says that getting high is a simple matter of mathematical ratios. The less body weight, the less of whatever substance you are using it takes to start the buzz, the sooner it happens, and the longer it lasts.

They were playing the latest Star Trek movie, *The Phantom’s Menace*, a film I had avoided when it was in first run theaters, and still had no desire to see, but when she bought a ticket I did the same and followed her through the brightly lit lobby and in to the theater. I waited in the dimly lit entrance while she found a seat about halfway up and right next to one of the walls. After a few minutes, so it would not look like I was following her, I walked in and took a seat in the row

behind her so that I could watch her watch the movie.

I can't tell you much about the show. I am pretty sure that the kid grows up to be Luke Skywalker, the hero from the first movie; I know it is some sort of a prequel. I ignored most of it except for the fight scenes and the scenes with the princess. Instead of watching the film I concentrated on Julie. I saw her pull something out of her small black backpack, bring it to her lips, and take a long drink. I assumed at the time that it was a flask. She laughed at the oddest times. At one point the old guy, who dies at the end, tells the kid that without these weird bacteria in their bodies there would be no life in the universe, and they would have no knowledge of the Force. Even I laughed out loud at that one, and she turned and smiled conspiratorially at me as the rest of the theater glared at us. Then she faced forward to watch the movie again.

She left as soon as the credits started to roll. I resisted the urge to follow, and stayed behind to watch as the names of the zillions of computer animators that worked on the picture scrolled by on the screen. After a few minutes of sitting in the dark, imagining what she would look like naked, I got up from my seat and walked out of the theater.

She was standing outside the theater looking at posters of coming attractions. She smiled at me as I started to walk by and said, "So are you ever going to talk to me, or are you just going to stare?"

I ignored the question, and said, "Hi, my name is Anthony, but if you want you can call me Tony."

"Hi, Anthony. I'm Julie. Don't call me Jules or I won't talk to you."

She never calls me Tony; she says it isn't my name.

"Well Julie, could I... I mean I would like to... I mean would you... want to get a cup of coffee?"

She laughed at me and shook her head. Then she took my hand and pulled me into the alley. She made a great project of looking in both directions, and then laughed out loud as she took off her tiny black backpack and reached inside for a bottle of 99 cents only nighttime cold medicine. After she removed the plastic safety seal she handed the bottle to me.

"Drink it," she said.

"What?"

"Slam the whole bottle, and then we can go to Cantor's and have a cup of coffee."

"I can't drink a whole bottle of cough syrup."

"Then I can't drink a whole cup of coffee. See you."

She started to walk by me, back on to the sidewalk.

"Wait."

I struggled with the childproof cap, and finally got the bottle open. She

watched with a strange hunger in her eyes as I brought the bottle to my lips and drank the thick syrup down in one long drink.

It hit me like a shot of Jack Daniels, but at the same time it felt entirely different. A rush of warmth started in my stomach, and with glacier like slowness, over the course of what could not have been more than five seconds, the glow crept up my body and engulfed my head. Julie smiled like a little girl, and briefly touched her lips to mine.

“Good for you. Now lets get that cup of coffee.”

An hour or so later we were standing in front of the door to her second floor walk-up, a few blocks east of Fairfax. I tried to kiss her, but she giggled and pushed me away. The door wasn't locked, and she opened it to reveal a small, cluttered, studio apartment. The windows were open, but the room was still hot, uncomfortably so. A metal fan that looked like it had first seen service in 1947 whirred on the single counter in the kitchen making a white plastic shopping bag, that was also on the counter, flap noisily. A half empty bottle of generic, blue-label vodka and several magazines were scattered about the rumpled sheet on the futon that passed as a bed in the corner of the room.

Julie walked over to the plastic bag on the counter, pulled it away from the fan, and removed two more bottles of cold medicine. She handed one to me and opened the bottle she kept. She lifted it to her lips, drank the whole thing down, and then raised an eyebrow questioningly to me.

An involuntary gasp escaped my lips after I downed the medicine, and the warm glow enveloped my body once again. Julie grabbed the plastic bag from the counter and pulled me over to her futon. With one sweep of her arm she cleared the debris from the top of the futon and dragged me down next to her. Again I tried to kiss her, but she pushed me away and removed two more bottles of medicine from her bag.

She opened hers and took a small sip.

“Maintenance,” she said thickly.

I followed her example. It was too hot to sleep, so we sat on her futon, next to her open window, sipping cold medicine and talking late into the night.

I was insisting that Luke Skywalker, from the original *Star Trek* movie, was the worst actor ever to appear on the Sci Fi channel, when I looked up and saw that Julie was asleep and probably had been for several minutes. She was propped up against the wall. Her head rested against her shoulder at an awkward and unnatural angle. Julie always passes out. She has no self-control.

I shook her shoulder, trying to wake her so she could lie down properly, but she was seriously out and her eyelids did not even flutter. I laughed at her state, and lurched to the end of the futon. After removing the black converse

high tops from her feet, I grabbed each ankle and pulled until she was lying flat on the bed. Then stumbled back to the other end of the futon and placed a pillow underneath her head.

I grabbed on to the bookcase that held her television and managed to pull myself into an upright position so I could admire my handiwork. She looked peaceful, almost childlike, lying on top of the rumpled sheet, and I realized that she had not stirred once during all of my manipulations. I could see that she was still breathing, but I checked her pulse anyway just to make sure she was alive.

In the almost dream-like state that massive doses of cough syrup always bring I watched myself from somewhere above the futon as I got on my knees next to her and leaned over her head. I brushed my lips against hers and felt a charge of electricity shoot through my numb body. I put one hand on her thigh and slowly moved it up her leg until I reached her groin. I rubbed the area between her legs, over her blue jeans, and leaned down to kiss her once more.

When I woke up the next day my head was muddled, foggy, and slow. The fan was still clanking noisily, and the room felt like it must have been 95 degrees. We were both still fully clothed, and I was lying half on top of Julie. She moved underneath me and then pushed me roughly away saying, "Get off."

Julie stood up, straightened her t-shirt, and said, "So, did you enjoy your feel last night?"

I panicked. I could vaguely remember groping her, but I knew that I had thought she was unconscious at the time. I wasn't sure what to do. I wasn't sure what to say.

"I thought you were asleep."

She laughed and winked at me.

"Rule number one, never admit anything. So what did you touch?"

My mind raced as fast as it could in its fuddled state.

"I don't think I touched anything. I may have brushed against you while we both were asleep, but if I did it was an accident."

I held my breath until she winked again, smiled, and said, "Good, you are learning. So, do you have to call in sick or anything?"

I followed her eyes to the clock on the wall and saw that it was already past two in the afternoon.

That was the first job I lost because of Julie. She does not know the meaning of the word responsibility and can't hold onto a job herself for more than a couple of months. I didn't lose the job right away. I called in and made up a story about how my car had over-heated, and how I had been at the garage all day arguing with automechanics, but after many late mornings, missed days,

and lame excuses they finally gave me the ax. Which sucked. The first time you get fired is always the hardest. Soon after I moved into Julie's apartment, and a few weeks later we had sex for the first time.

It was just after Halloween, and we had spent my entire unemployment check on ill-conceived goth looking vampire costumes which consisted of skin-tight latex from Syren, cloaks we made ourselves out of a sheet we dyed black, studded leather collars from the Pleasure Chest, and fake teeth, blood, and various vampire paraphernalia from the big, always crowded, costume store on Hollywood. They actually looked amazing as long as we stayed out of direct sunlight, and people bought us drinks all night long. We like it when people buy us drinks.

Anyway, we were broke but were meeting friends of Julie's at Largo for drinks and to watch a band whose lead singer Julie had a brief affair with during her lesbian phase. We never drink at clubs unless people buy us drinks. The key to a good night in a club is to get completely smashed before you even leave home. We always drink before we leave and then rely on the drunken men, who can always be counted on to buy Julie drinks, to supply us with maintenance booze. So, we bought a bottle of blue-label, generic vodka at the Ralph's that used to be an Alpha Beta on the corner of Fairfax and Santa Monica, and spent the afternoon and evening watching bad network TV and drinking Vodka Tonics. Cable is a complete waste of money. Local network news is funnier than anything that you will ever see on Comedy Central—especially if you are high.

The bottle ran out just about the same time we were supposed to be at Largo—Julie is always late—so we shared the last drink and then walked, holding hands, through the chilly November night to Largo where the band was already halfway through their set. Most of the night is a blur (Julie says people who don't black out, don't really drink). I think she was trying to make her ex jealous, or maybe just prove that she had moved on, because she spent most of the night on my lap with her tongue in my mouth. Her friend kept buying us both drinks all night, and by the time we left, sometime after 1:00 a.m., we could barely walk.

Julie had forgotten to close the windows before we went to the show, so, of course, the apartment was freezing. After we closed both windows we dived underneath the covers of the futon and huddled together for warmth. I wanted to make out some more, but about fifteen seconds into our kiss she passed out in my arms and nothing I could do would wake her. I shook her shoulders, I tickled her feet, I slapped her face lightly like I had seen them do in the movies, but nothing worked.

I started to kiss her neck anyway, wondering if she would wake up, and

when she did not I slipped my hands beneath her shirt and felt her breasts. Nothing. She did not even move when I pulled her shirt over her head and unfastened her bra. Or when I moved my hands down her slender form, unzipped her blue jeans, and pulled them down her legs and off her body.

When I woke up the next morning we were both still naked and Julie was sitting on my chest. Her knees pinned my arms to the futon, her eyes blazed with fire, and she was pounding my face with her tiny fists. I tried to push her off, but I could not get any leverage, and about every two seconds another fist smashed into my face.

“You asshole! You complete asshole! You fucked me last night. Didn’t you? Without a condom you fucking fucked me. What the fuck were you thinking?”

She was yelling, and with every other word she pounded a fist into my head. I tried to speak, but she was sitting on my chest; I could barely breathe, and every time I managed to take a breath another fist slammed into me.

“I could be pregnant. Did you ever think of that you stupid fuck? In nine months we could be parents. You fucking asshole.”

The blows had slowed down, I think her knuckles were starting to hurt, and I managed to wheeze out a weak “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, you’re sorry. You’re fucking sorry—well that makes it okay. Did you hear that sweetie? Daddy’s sorry. Daddy’s sorry you can’t read or write, but on the night he raped Mommy we were both so fucking drunk that you didn’t get all the brain cells you were supposed to, but don’t worry Daddy’s sorry. Daddy is sorry that he was too fucking stupid to put on a condom the night he raped Mommy, and that is why you don’t speak in complete sentences, but don’t worry, it’s okay, Daddy is sorry.”

With that she punched me one last time, harder than any of the previous hits, and then collapsed on the other side of the futon, crying.

When my head had cleared enough that I could move without throwing up I rolled over to the other side of the futon, where Julie was still crying, and put my arms around her.

“I’m sorry Julie. I just didn’t think. I’m sorry.”

“I had better not be pregnant. I do not want to bring a child into this world. Do you understand me? If you ever fuck me without a condom again you are out of here. Do you fucking understand me? You can live on the street for all I care.”

We both lay there, naked, for a long time while she cried and I tried to comfort her.

It turned out that she was not pregnant. She made me promise to get

tested at the free clinic on Beverly before we had sex again. After a while the bruises on my face and her heart started to fade and things slowly got back to normal.

After that I had sex with her whenever she passed out before me, which was almost half the time—she has no self-control. I always wore a condom, and she almost never woke up. When she did wake up she would normally push me off of her and go back to sleep, but once she put her arms around my neck and kissed me. We made love like we were a real couple, like we were in love, like we were normal. But just that one time.

Well, not quite just that one time.

The week after New Year's, we were still at her parent's cabin up in Big Bear. The cabin was really more of a house than a cabin, and her entire family gathered there every year to celebrate Christmas and the New Year. She made me lie and say I was still working at the bank, and told everyone that she was an assistant manager at The Gap in the Beverly Center. Her family believed, or at least pretended to, and for a week everyone managed to get along. I snowboarded with her brothers, she skied with her brothers' wives, and in the evening they gathered around the piano and actually sang carols like the four sisters in the Winona Ryder version of *Little Women*. It was almost surreal. If it were not for all the eggnog I don't know how we would have gotten through it, but in an odd sort of way it was also kind of nice.

The rest of her family had to work, so they headed back to Orange County on New Year's Day, but we told them that we decided to take a couple of extra days off from work and were going to stay. We still had most of the money from selling my car and were, of course, both actually between jobs again, so we holed up in the cabin for a week eating the last of the Christmas turkey and drinking champagne left over from the New Year's Eve party.

It snowed all night long and the world was crisp and white and clean. We got up before 10:00, and walked down to the convenience store at the end of the road to buy oranges, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, lemons, and two big bottles of Ernest and Julio's finest. We left the mulled wine cooking in the big crock-pot and then walked up the hill to go sledding in the fresh snow. Julie looked like a little girl trudging up the hill over and over in her too big boots, wearing mittens and a Christmas-elf stocking cap, and dragging the sled behind her. It was too wet and cold for makeup, and it was one of the few times I had ever seen her face so open.

The snow kept falling lightly all day long, and when we walked back down the hill, after exhausting ourselves with the sleds, there was an unbroken

blanket surrounding the cabin. We put the sleds in the garage, and lay down in the front yard to make angels in the snow before we went inside.

The entire house was filled with the smell of winter spices from the mulled wine. Julie poured us both glasses while I made a fire, and then we sat on the couch in front of the fire sipping wine and relaxing. I put my arm around her and she leaned against my chest.

"Thank you for coming up here. My family can be a little hard to take."

I just smiled and told her I had enjoyed every minute of it.

"I do love you. You know that don't you?"

It was the first time she had ever told me she loved me, and she would not say it again until the night she died.

"I love you too," I said, and it was true.

We did make love that night. In front of the fireplace. We were both awake. We were both sober. We were both clean. And we were both in love.

The last time I had sex with Julie was the night she died. The money from my car had long since been spent. Her 1986 Plymouth Horizon had stopped running altogether, and probably would not have been a goldmine if it had been in mint condition anyway. We were back to pinching pennies and the 99 cents only high. We were both between jobs again. She was temping occasionally in the city, and I was sending out resumes, but we were both free that day, so we walked down Fairfax to Wilshire and spent the afternoon exploring the museum. We finished with the Japanese pavilion late in the afternoon and emerged into the last moments of a bright and wet spring day. We started the long walk home slowly, enjoying the rain and the fresh air that sweeps through Los Angeles for a few weeks every year after the long, cold, dismal winter and before the hot and arid drought of summer.

As night started to fall, however, the clouds gathered, rain began to pour out of the sky, and by the time we made it back to the apartment it was a downpour and the night was lit with a rare display of lightning. We jumped into the shower to warm up and afterwards sat on the futon, naked, snuggled up together underneath the blanket in front of the window, sipping cough medicine and watching the storm outside.

After several hours, and several bottles, the storm started to die down. Julie was asleep in my arms. I wasn't sure if she was passed out or just tired so I eased her down on the futon next to me. She opened her eyes when I kissed her. What happened next was something between making love and having sex. She didn't stop me, but she didn't really participate either. When it was over we were lying next to each other and I took her hand and held it in my own, placing it on my chest. She opened her eyes and told me that she loved me, and then her

eyes closed.

I didn't realize what had happened until late the next afternoon. We rarely got up before 1:00 p.m. anyway, and it was not at all unusual for us to sleep in until 2:00 or 3:00. I spent the day on the futon next to her watching TV in maintenance mode—still buzzed from the night before. When she had not stirred by 5:00 I tried to wake her. I pushed, I prodded, I poked at her inert form lying on the bed, but she would not move. And then I checked for a pulse somehow already knowing, in the dreamlike state that nighttime cold medicine leaves you in, that I would not find one.

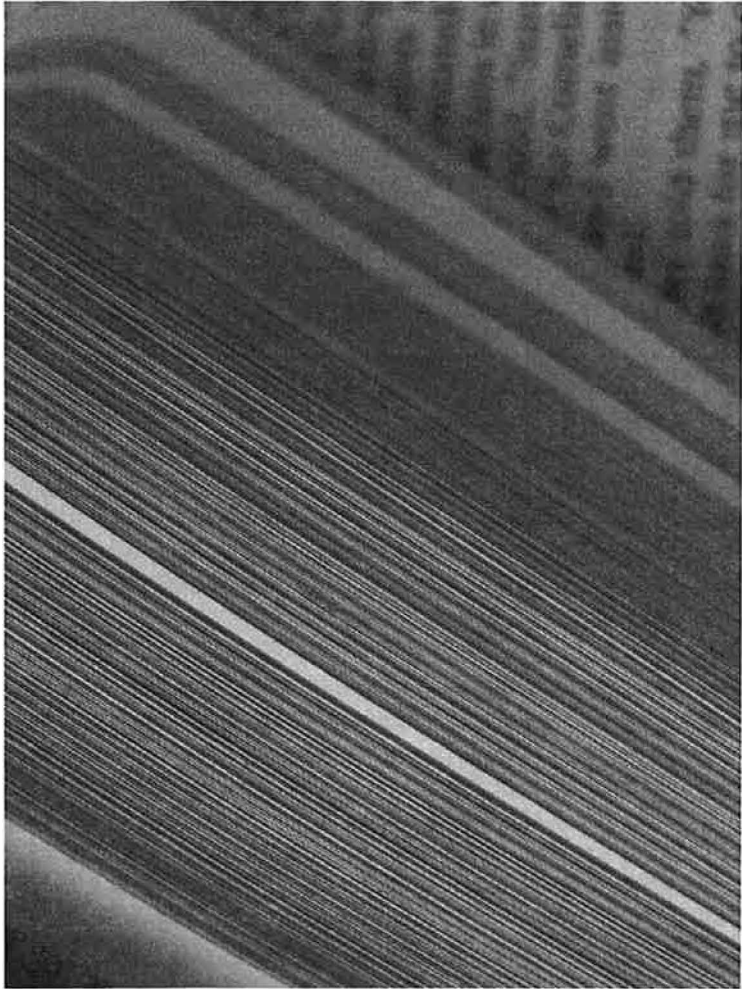
The rest of the day is kind of a blur. I ran across the hall to the neighbor's apartment to call 911. The ambulance came and they took her to Cedar Sinai, but she had been dead for hours before the paramedics even arrived. I waited at the hospital. The police asked me a bunch of questions. After a while her dad and one of her brothers showed up as well. The doctors told us that her liver had basically ceased to function, but that was not what killed her, although it would have. Her heart had just stopped working sometime during the night. One moment it was beating and the next . . . it just was not.

Her family was very supportive. They tried to comfort me. They told me it was not my fault. That she had always been out of control. That I should not blame myself. That there was nothing I could have done. That I was not responsible. They found a million ways to absolve me of guilt for her death—as if there could be no other conclusion that I could possibly reach.

It was 3:00 a.m. before I finally got out of the hospital. The nurse offered to call me a cab, but I only had six dollars in my pocket so I told her someone was coming to pick me up and started to walk home.

The sky turned gray, and the sun started to creep over the hills. As I walked I saw the city come to life. The spring rains had washed all the dirt and grime from the streets and all around me were signs of rebirth and renewal. I walked through it all untouched—like a spirit-being from another dimension. I glided past people starting their day, moving about in the waking world, living their lives, existing, without ever really coming in contact with them at all.

I stopped at the 99 cents store on my way back to the apartment and spent my six dollars on five bottles of cough syrup. When I got back to the apartment I drank them one after another, and then crawled under the blanket and went to sleep.



Fall 2002

MARGINS

A friend said of me
I am not known to anyone,
really,
anonymous as air,
a person
who writes
melancholy notes to herself
in the margins
of books,
sees colors
for numbers (six is orange)
and trees as the lungs of the earth;
hears Mozart
laughing
in his concertos, (he sits at my desk
and plays it like a piano)
smells death in bleach,
(what happened when I was five? Was it
the hospital and all the splintering white smells
as I thought my back would break open—finally
crack from all the strain of coughing for years?)
and is comforted
by her sister's smell—
the smell of well-worn sheets.

Word Problems

I hate when men write
soft poetry about their ex's.
It's easier to read the hate
than to let your mind wonder
"what went wrong?"

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It's easier to hear, I don't love
you anymore,
than to hear I love you, but...
and the thousand buts
that say you just didn't add up.

I mean she...
back to the poet with the soft poetry
and the lost wife.
He writes it, not to her,
but for himself,
to remind himself,
of what he let go,
the additions he didn't add in
when he was subtracting
all she didn't have.

All the things she didn't have,
all the while he's telling himself
he was right
to let her go
when he did
because things would have gotten worse
had they not parted before the math was done.
At least this way he can ruminate,
look back fondly and say

we parted as friends,
meaning,
I departed quietly to search for something more,
she just got hurt.



Highlights with
Sandra Tsing Loh

Hollie Stewart

Sandra Tsing Loh is a Los Angeles based writer, public radio commentator on KPCC, and musical performer. Her writings include: *Depth Takes a Holiday*; *Aliens in America*; and *If You Lived Here, You'd be Home by Now*. Her most recent book, *A Year in Van Nuys*, is a semi-autobiographical account of a 35 year old woman who dreads becoming old and detests the fact that fame has not come knocking on her Van Nuys home door. I caught Sandra recently for a brief interview about how she views the world of writing through her work, and how she views the world as a whole.

What inspired you to become a writer, and what continues to inspire you to keep writing?

I think I had failed out of every other subject. I had gotten a BS in Physics in college, which is a wildly inappropriate degree for myself. I was trying to be a performance artist, a musician. I ever went to graduate school for about six years. Basically I realized I had been in college for about ten years—by that point, with an undergraduate and graduate degree. I realized that I did not have any idea what I wanted to do when I grew up. Writing about these and other experiences started to become a career for me.

What inspires me to keep writing... I think it's a two-pronged thing. We live in a very mass media infused time right now. I sometimes like to think of this as "The Sprite Generation." One feels often accosted by young twenty-something people going, "I like the Sprite," and the other one feels completely without Sprite, like "I am one of the Sprite-less," because we're in this mass-media dominated time. We have so many marketing messages hammered at us and it seems to create a reality that doesn't fit ours. So I think it's great for those of us who are not paid by Pepsi-Cola or something to put those kind of messages out there—that we can sort of come up with our own quirky brand of reality that doesn't necessarily have to send a marketing plan. But it is more what we might really be thinking.

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What do you hope readers will walk away with after they complete your most recent book, "A Year in Van Nuys"?

Well, I think exactly that same thing, a feeling of kin-ship, of maybe feeling that they aren't completely alone. It's like if you feel out of it, if you feel kind of old, haggard, exhausted, and stride-less compared to the rest of the country, you are not alone. There are many of us who kind of look around and go, "you know, I just don't feel like one of the cast of 'Friends.' I feel exhausted." You feel like you're not represented out there. A lot of people have told me that they just laugh and relate when they read this. In Woody Alan's movie *Star Dust Memories*, I think there was a Happy Train and a Sad Train. Sometimes one feels that when watching the parade of media going by. The swing dancers in the Gap ads, for instance, are kind of like all the people on the Happy Train, and you're going, "Why are they so damn happy? They're having more fun in thirty seconds than I will ever have in my entire life." So I think that kind of kinship is what I hope people get from my book.

Yeah, I really enjoyed that about your book as I read it.

Oh, thank you.

Your writing style reminds me a lot of the way you speak on your radio program "The Loh Down." Do you feel that this conversational tone reaches your audience, in the way you desire?

Yeah. I think there's a colloquial way of thinking, a way that our brains zig zag around that we might do in conversation, and also possibly on the page, that I think is fun to read. And it's always just trying to strike a balance between the freshness of getting those rhythms down, but also being coherent. Trying to capture a moment in time that hopefully won't be *completely* dated in two or three years. There are a lot of cultural references in that particular book, and to a certain extent they will age over the years. But at the same point there's something about certain brand names that are part of the zeitgeist that's in our culture too, so it feels authentic to put them in. So I think I'm always trying to work that balance.

In your chapter "On The Road," you talk about the importance of the "Moment," and how "so little of life is actually spent in the Moment." We spend so much time preparing for the Moment, and when it arrives, we're disappointed. Do you feel this is the same with writing? Do writers spend so much time trying to produce the Moment that it never arrives, or is the writing process itself one large Moment?

Oh, that's a good question. Let me think that through...I think that what the writer does and what the reader does are two vastly different things. So I would like to think that there are sometimes moments that you reach together, but that's not always true.

For instance, I like to say, when it's writing, sometimes you become unstuck. You start writing and you have so much fun writing, you feel like you've really expressed something, it's cathartic for you, and you just sit back from the computer. The problem is that sometimes the most fun I've had writing has been writing stuff that's been my worst, that I've had to cut, you know what I mean? Or it will come later. There isn't always a perfect correlation between what you had fun writing and what really reaches people, what they really remember, which I've always thought was odd and a peculiar, funny phenomenon.

And sometimes what people will remember is just something that you put in there structurally. You knew you needed an ending in it so you came up with one, even though you had really gotten your flow out at the beginning. But then that ending image is the one they remember. I find it fascinating how there can be sometimes a disconnection between that. I think if it's successful writing, the reader will remember something, and get something out of it. But it's not always the same moment. Sometimes it is, but not always. It's not always the same moment that both parties are getting off on equally.

The chapter I'd like to focus on for a few questions is called "Against Writing," which I think is a very interesting title for a chapter. You bring up a lot of intriguing points. First of all, you talk about the general population's addiction to writing workshops, not to writing itself. What is your opinion of writing workshops? Do you feel they help or hinder the creative process?

I think both. I certainly have benefited myself from a lot of writing workshops over the years. And I think it depends where you are at your particular point in development: if you need to get some feedback or if you need to stay enclosed, so to speak. I call it "The Bubble of Denial." Sometimes you just need to sit

home and write and have nobody comment on it. You need to believe you're writing the most amazing thing that's ever been written. You can get through to the end. Sometimes you need to take that manuscript and get feedback from people. Sometimes people show a manuscript too early. Like if they're writing a novel and before they get to the end of a messy first draft, they want everyone to know what they think about the first fifteen pages. If they get any feedback that's negative, it totally blocks them and they can never write again. So I think it's kind of a dance that you do between getting enough feedback, getting the feedback you need to improve, but not so much feedback that it actually stops you from writing.

I used to take a workshop with John Rechy, who taught for a long time at USC and also through his own home. I still recommend him. He's an excellent teacher to work on crafting, language, to see what people think of when they read your work, if they're getting what you think they're getting, etc. And then you go home and write again.

But I think what I'm talking about in that chapter are people who seem addicted to writing workshops. They keep workshopping the same piece over and over again. You definitely see that phenomena. Or people who take their most polished piece and keep putting that one on. Maybe not their prize-winning piece, but they want to keep going over the same thing rather than using the workshop as a developmental tool to keep on writing. Again, sometimes you see people who have been taking the same manuscript to writing workshops for years and years and years. And if that's the case, sometimes people are looking just for the companionship of a writing workshop, which I can certainly understand, because writing is so lonely and really, really boring. In a way, it's a place to commiserate.

While I mock those values in that chapter, I myself have a women's writer group. We meet weekly when we can, and quite often it's about nothing but commiseration. We used to look at our own writing, then we looked at the books of other people who were writing, and moaned about why we weren't writing, and then finally we just started drinking wine and complaining about our bills. And that's completely fine. I've done that over the years; it's a great group. And it is very important to have that companionship, as long as we know what we're calling it so we're clear about what we're doing. That's the most helpful thing.

You also state how "there are far more fiction writers on the earth than fiction read-

ers.” *This sentence reminded me of a radio commentary you made when you were promoting your book. You said how most serious readers are over the age of 35, and how the average shelf life of a book is a few weeks. What do you feel can be done to help generate a renewed interest in reading fiction?*

Well, there are a couple of things. Writers need to keep writing books that will draw people, that will get them. Because I think if a book falls into somebody’s lap who’s not generally a reader, and this book really turns them on, I think that’s the best possible thing to stimulate readership. Writers have to write things that are relevant if they want to get published or read widely. If you want to be read widely, you have to write something that can be appreciated widely.

I think sometimes one finds there are several very good literary magazines that are out there. But then sometimes there is a literary magazine tradition of publishing things or academic things, keeping things alive that don’t have much appeal beyond just this very narrow group. And as long as one’s clear about that, as I say, that’s always fine.

The small presses sometimes can be good, because that’s definitely a problem in the mass-market era, i.e. Barnes and Noble. I think I had said probably in that same radio interview, if I was talking about it... I had heard one time that a huge portion of the books on Barnes and Noble shelves, at any particular time, are all going to end up in the wood chipper. When they don’t move by a certain number of weeks, they’re shipped back and remain dirt, and then they have to be made into pulp so you don’t have these extra copies of the book sitting out there to devalue the rest of the books. Certainly in this mass-market time it is so hard to fight through and get on a big publisher and have them place you correctly, or have any chance of selling books or whatever. On the one hand, that’s working against one. But at the same point, I think all artists can always, if they’re making work that is saying something relevant, slowly but surely find a readership somewhere. And I think those systems are pretty good. You can publish in some relevant literary magazine. You can publish in the local paper. You could do radio commentary, because that’s a form of writing too. I think that nobody’s actually censoring the stuff we’re writing as much as they do in other countries. I think that slowly but surely, if you’re persistent, everybody can find an audience of some kind.

That’s interesting, this kind of flows into my next question. Being on the staff of a college literary magazine, I’ve discovered, as well as the rest of the students on staff, how difficult it is to distribute the magazine to readers. People will say they don’t

have seven dollars for the book, but they'll gladly spend twenty dollars on weekend movies. In your opinion, do you feel there's a future for literary magazines? Or will they be overrun by other means of communication?

That's an interesting question. It probably depends on the magazine. I think there will always be literary magazines. There will always be experimental music. I mean, there probably will always be some form of that. Probably to a certain extent, literary magazines do depend on universities and academia, and that sort of thing.

What I find on the publishing end is, for instance, I heard T.C. Boyles say this recently when he was reading somewhere. His short story collections always sell vastly less than his novels do. But fortunately he's in a position where he can publish the novels and sort of subsidize or sell enough so that he can put out an occasional short story collection, because he thinks that's a really wonderful form. So I guess probably the bottom line is that readers in general just like books with a narrative flow through it. So therefore the literary magazine format is going to be probably a more boutique reader. It's just the form of it, really.

As long as the community is full with people who like to appreciate literary magazines, who like to write short stories or poems, literary magazines will continue. I think it depends on how strong the actual community is. Because it's true that a literary magazine is going to always be a hard sell to your average, run-of-the-mill reader.

You also urge writers to "write responsibly." What do you consider responsible writing?

One example I'm thinking of now is we have a lot of email right now. Email certainly changed kinds of communications. Many of us can journal away and write diaries and stuff like that. That is just a wonderful activity for us to do. It's good for us cathartically, it expresses what we feel, it's better than therapy, and it's really terrific. But then sometimes the disjunction occurs where you go, "now that I've written it, should I assume that everyone in the world would love to sit down and read my ten page diary?" Of course, that's not always true.

So when people mass-email things out to fifty of their friends, they may or may not want to read what you said. I took exception in the book with some nameless friends of mine who never want to pick up the phone and call you or talk

to you or find out what the news is from your end, but they just keep emailing these bulletins out, as I like to say, like the Unibomber. So of course what one can do when you get a bunch of mass emails is to just delete them, and that's easy enough to do. But that will devalue your relationship with that person, both to delete them and also for them to send them to you.

I think that's what I meant with my characters as far as "write responsibly." I think you can write irresponsibly. But just when you change the social contract that you have with friends or acquaintances of yours, to say that being a friend now demands that your friends read and vocally appreciate everything that you write, that just changes the social contract in a way that some people may or may not be willing to go with you.

Before finishing "A Year in Van Nuys," I was going to close the interview by asking if you have reached your desired goals at this point. But then in your chapter "The Gravy," you have a scene where your character begins letting go of her goals. You say how it's healthy to abandon some of them. So I've revised my question to this: what are some of the goals you have had to abandon, and what goals have been worth holding onto, as a writer, as a mother, as a wife, radio personality, everything?

Just like I say in the book, I've abandoned a whole set of goals that would sound like, "I need to accomplish X by the time I am X years old." I think that's one form of goal that just goes right out the window. When I began as a writing student at age 22 or 23, I started taking writing classes. It was the 80s, and I think we all naively, all us young, hot writing students are going "oh yeah, I'm going to publish my first collection by age 30 and my novel by age 35" with a kind of hubris. And I think at that time Tama Janowitz's *Slaves of New York* had come out, Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*, and Jay MacInerney introduced *Bright Lights, Big City*. So I think that in ancient times, as those were, there was this image of the literary writer where you could have your cake and eat it too. You could be literary but still be very young and cool and hip, and fly to fabulous parties in New York, and have movies made of your book so you could collect a bunch of money, and buy a fabulous house on the top of Laurel Canyon, etc. So I think at that point, in that kind of Go-Go 80's thing, we thought that being a literary writer was a very glamorous thing to do.

Over the years, you realize how untrue that is. When I had seen my and my friends' careers, those of us who were lucky to have them, just unfold along... it takes you seven years to write a novel. Three years to rewrite it. Your publisher goes out of business. A career of the arts just takes much longer, and it's much

more torturous than you think it will be. I think all those goals I have abandoned, any kind of creative thing having to do by an age of whatever.

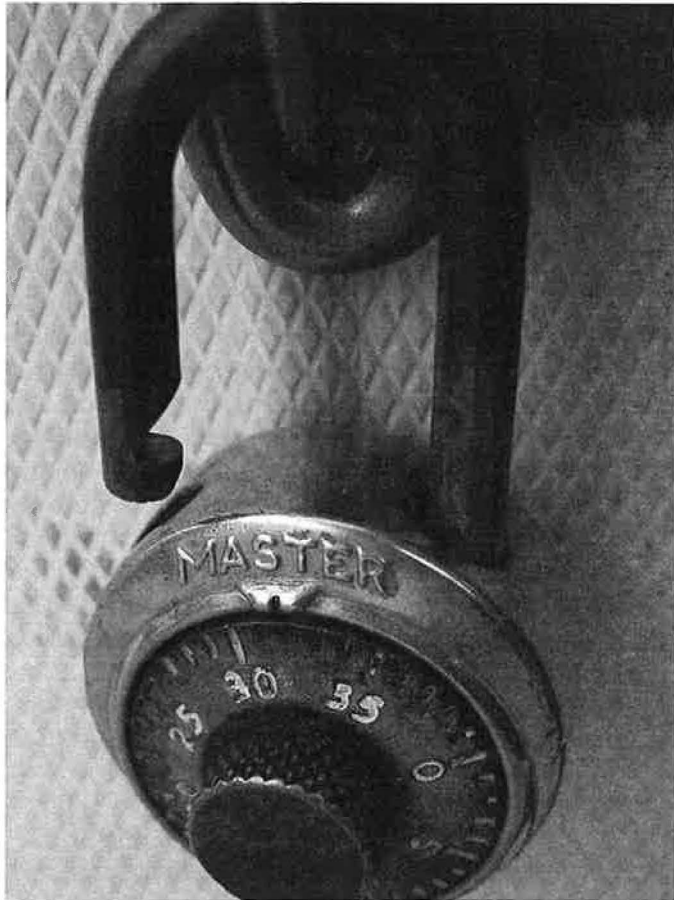
And I think a goal that's worth having is just to try to daily appreciate what you have and to keep writing stuff that one is interested in, whether or not you're sure it's going to be a good marketable idea. At one point my agent suggested that I write a novel, and I did, and I actually published what turned into this novel. But at the time, I think it was the early 90's, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* was just huge huge huge. Career-wise, if I had been able to launch myself as an Asian-American female writer of certain multi-generational novels examining ethnicity in America, I think I would have been so much more successful at an earlier age. I ended up doing it in this circuitous path of Chinese-German, southern-California writer who sounds like a valley girl but writes sort of Manhattan-Jewish-Neurotic-type narration. I imagine that it would have been easier for me had I been able to get myself into a more coherent box.

So I'm writing my novel, and I'm rewriting it, and it originally had a white character and an Asian-American character. It's a few days before sending it off to New York, and I realize my Asian-American character, every scene with her, rings false. It's only the white character that seems to be ringing true. I need to solve this problem. So I get the brilliant idea to just kill off my Asian-American character. It turns out that if I neatly cut out every chapter that has to deal with her, I have a really coherent, trim, lovely narrative that hangs together. So I realized, horrified, "oh my god, am I a white writer? Is that what I am?" It's kind of like I have to give up my place in the Asian-American pantheon, which is a really good publishing niche.

I also do public radio commentaries, and on KCRW I'm allowed to do whatever topics I'm interested in. For a while I was on Morning Edition on National Public Radio, and now I'm on Marketplace. But there's stuff on public radio that, especially if you're a writer living in LA, just doesn't spiel "public radio-esque" to them. And I think reports on what stuff's really like in Los Angeles, certainly like my whole Eye Bag section of my book (which I've heard many readers relate to on public radio), I just couldn't get one of those pieces to fly on Morning Edition about any of it. Because I think they thought women and their eye bags are just not a public radio topic—nobody who listens to NPR has eye bags. But of course, everyone who listens to NPR has eye bags. That's what defines a NPR listener.

So often I've had to chase down topics or ideas or thoughts I've had that I know

I can't sell to the market I have at that time, but I just keep following it, wherever it leads. That's a deal I've made with myself. Always just keep writing, even though many things have turned out to be publishing dead-ends. I figure I'll find a home for them, eventually, and usually I do.



It's not alright because it never is.

With those armies of men, all
Plain dumb when looked well at,
All frantic fingers, hot and greedy.
You're too well known for parts most
Passing. When love's for youth and for
The weak ones woman means the opposite.
They know their words will birth.
Cool liters of frost, cold webs in your belly,
Ice children like moles, scared only
Of sunlight. And the submerging, the
Drowning will come, your skin as ever vainglorious
As all unsinkable sinking things.

When rootless and careless,
With god less than even we
Can be, they'll whisper hush.
Hush, hush now, look pretty,
No later on lovely, confessions
From fresh lips are plain and they're boring.
You'll fling tears and not weapons,
Weep tedious bullets.
And you'll do all you can do, to
Ruin their view of you.



the Smallest Taste of What Will Be

He and his careful, christ-knows croonings,
his ache to touch mine everywhere,
while the city's all aboil,
and Rome is gasping like our prayers.
We need much more than youth should yearn for.

We are tuned in turbulence,
complex grief and genius sorrow,
and synchronized, and
metronomed, we burn
under the hide of hurting with
asthmatic intensity, make
safe surrenders to our skins, we're
haloed helpless. Great friends
with mercy – and her pretty coins.

(The things we can live through
make me want to die.)

He whispers sweet light into the dark,
avant-dysfunction to the corners, so
coats the air with something less
than fibs like always fall from flesh.

Our gentle genocidal hips--
and sucking heaven from wet lips.

Robin Hird

The World of Furnaces

Time's heavy hand is falling
on a hundred new years.
Industry's iron vine grows

across America and its thousand sleepless
dreams of freedom.
I am this revolution's

Atlas, holding the world of splendor
on my back. The dirt of Europe
still thick between words. Hunger

hammers like railroad
being laid across the vast country
of my stomach. In America, the price of steel

is an immigrant's dream. This factory
swallows families whole.
Children are ripped like union contracts

from their parents.
I am reminded this is Pittsburgh,
Carnegie's well-watched basket of eggs.

I picture him playing with tamed lightning
and eating amethyst
for breakfast. Reading

"The Gospel of Wealth"
generously to the press. Preaching innovation

beyond the point of progress and fortunes

made in the image of god.
But heaven is a cloudy thing.
I know only people.

Dark combustibles
who live and breathe
fire.



Fall 2002

DOVE

Searching, you remind me again of the time
we came home to find the dove in the house,
cooing on a beam crossing the open skylight.
The way you tell it now sounds too romantic.
I remember thinking he may be hurt, then I'm
a goalie forced to respond to the children you
mothered, trying to block their assaults from
pillows they fling to knock him off his perch.
When I finally coax him down, mimicking his
cooing with my own, a family vote squeezes
him into the cage with the cockatiel. Though he
adapts like a worthy Quaker, with the epitome of
peace and grace, it's a strange fit of confinement
for these birds of a feather differing in language
and temperament. For the next three nights, the voice
I hear belongs to the open air, not the lone light
peering like a sentry down the hall. So I creep
down the stairs, and hungry for more than food, I
pardon him to the night, releasing him to the trees,
wings spanning moonlight, and gone behind stars.
The children cackle for days, begging me to
find him, and you, firmly planted in your ruse,
try spurning me your stern, partisan glare—
Yet, here we are, you nesting your hands over mine
in the honeyed alcove poured like nectar through
our drinks. And cooing, you remind me of a day,
caged in my memory, as if we had both wanted
the same thing. I want to tell you now, for God
sakes, let it go; instead, silence speaks for us
both, as I fix my gaze to the picture window, to
the huddled trees and stars, and the lone bird's
determination to find its dark flight home.

CENTURY TWENTY-ONE

Beyond the bridge,
in the twilight,
the silver wings of bats
flutter like butterflies
in the tall, wet grass,
its green coat
cleaved to a closing
roll of sky.

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Across the highway,
ground into dust
and exhaust,
a thick, red veil
of another orchard—
avocados, wingless,
fall toward twilight,
their black fruit
turned under
the dark, flat earth—

In the twilight,
two worlds, two sides a highway,
the new flogging roads
through the old,
and between,
the silver silence of bats
accepting each
thin blade of grass,
and all searching
for the rustle of leaves.

Painting Rainbows

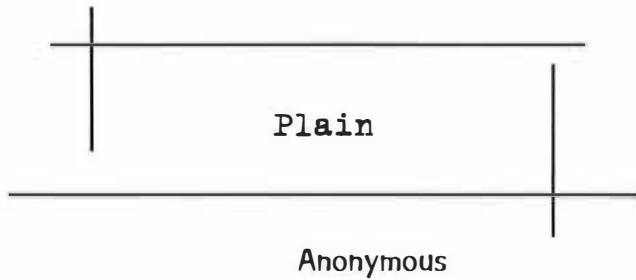
The old man loves to water.
He can stand outside forever
in the angled light
of the late afternoon sun.
He sweeps the hose across his body
like a martial arts master
performing the slow and graceful
movements of an ancient kata —
side-to-side,
up-and-down,
pause.

He tilts the hose and
arcs the stream
toward the
outside edge of lawn.
He enjoys the sound of
grass being drenched
and how the water
dots the dry cement walkway, until,
it too, is pelted wet and smooth.

But most of all, he likes
how the elements come together:
two parts hydrogen,
one part oxygen,
and a sliver of sun,
are all he needs
to stay out painting
in colored light.

For the Miners

I don't know why you boys tumble down
long, early slopes—
broken and bitten by each other,
then left alone, woodened into your manness.
We women puke and pick and pluck,
we make braids and rub backs.
When I turned twenty I shaved off all my hair.
Once, on a sidewalk in Oakland,
a homeless vet called me 'boy'
and kicked me hard in the back until
the cops finally came.
I don't know what really makes boys and girls.
but I've watched you—
pushing coal carts full
of pay dirt, stooped under wooden rafters.
You are the breakers and blasters, the
daddies and immaculate darlings.
You keep things lodged
deep in some hard, thick sap; dark
compartments held up by heavy timber—
paid for by your back,
and your grit.
I've lost so much to you—
picked bits of your slate out of my skin,
learned your indifference
and your porcelain neediness.
Still, you are a precious discovery—
those pink lungs, your protected
innocence. *Enter at the mouth,*
stoop down,
whisper.
We have labored so long
together, finally
brushing off the dust
from the places we just can't enter.



The fever swept the plain like a cheek, hot and red and angry. It was a plain plain, brown and stippled with brown brush, not the brown of chocolate or coffee or another crisp, earthy, edible color, but of dust, and the brush was not as soft as that word – not the brush of a hand or impulsively undone hair against the cheek of the plain, but a stickle, a bristle, an ingrown hair that puffs and reddens and swells, but not enough to change the shape of the cheek. Her cheek was red too, as if she had been carelessly brushed by a man's bristle, only carelessly and nothing more, for she too was plain.

As the fever swept, collecting men from their stiff dust-encrusted boots and dusty jeeps into piles in the corners of the plain with unbending bristles like a broom, it swept, too, a collection of a thing that was not dust and was not plain. Alice knew it, walking the cheek of the manless plain, as if she could feel beneath her feet the liquid rock pulsing, so very slightly trembling the skin of the plain in an interconnected tapestry of veins feeding and extending – on what, to where, she wondered, but in a flitting moth of a thought, darting away from that seductive hot rocky wonderment she had been told would burn. Wondering is for water, for dusty boots seeking the wet of life, nipped shyly in cracks and crevices until man's hands find, unearth and suckle. So she strode in the grid of invisible veins, unaware (not completely, but buried like that tapestry), wondering in mothish, pulsing spurts as her footsteps pressed the cheek.

The other women were tending the broom piles of men collapsed in the fever, which must have been a woman since she beguiled with sweet water perfume up the jaw of the cheek, then clung and squeezed and left only men panting on their backs in her wake. Though only the men had searched to unearth the dark nipples of wells until now, now that they were stretched gasping at the inward hot of this female fever, and Alice struck out on the cheek to unearth water before the women, too, collapsed into the dusty piles of the plain.

Not only her, Alice reminded herself as her stiff man's boots brushed the bristling cheek; she wasn't alone, not really. It was just that she was plain, and had no broom pile on fire to quench, and could stand the hot and dust and endless seeking. She knew, too, the dark secrets of where water hid. She flushed at this thought, as if the knowing were some repugnant thing, and if the plain had been manned she would have retreated like always, like water, into the well of her plain, impassive skin, behind the dark rough hair and hands. But now, passing an abandoned jeep and the footprints of the last men to run screaming from the fever, she stepped sure-

ly with her dusty boots (almost surely, almost, almost aware of the throbbing of invisible veins under the cheek, under her feet) through the dead dust, through the bristle, and into the shallow sands swelling, as if pregnant, around the new well.

Not water, she told herself, though the men's tools pointed, metallic and intrusive, at this spot. The dust was not really pregnant with wet in this not-pulsing place. Though it was moist – she peered with black, sun-accustomed eyes from beneath her man's hat – the dust had darkened in that concave, sucked-in belly of a dig. Her almost sure step faltered and she sat on the step of a jeep, breathing in its dusty shade. Perhaps her feet did not know the pulse of the cheek, her feet that despite their redness and covering of stiff, dusty man's boots were after all only hers, uncertain Alice, plain and rough and always on the edges. (But was she now not on the edge, on the jawline of that great cheek of plain, rough on the skin and veined with tapestries beneath?) Her reddened hands shook in the wavering heat, the shade almost sated her lungs in mothish wisps of cool that disintegrated too quickly into the dust. She ought to dig, she had been sent to dig in that shallow-bellied well the men began, but without the pulse her strength was suddenly sapped and she sat, light-headed and thirsty.

Her canteen was empty, and she sat still, knowing the buzz in her head would pass. She leaned her coarse dark head toward her knees, hunched, waiting for the beat to dim, staring at her stiff, dusty man's shoelaces. The dim came, and she hunched still, fingering the shoelaces, that unraveling end, and undid them altogether, freeing her ankles from the stiff black leather and resting her sock feet on the warm gritted plain.

She did not recognize the cool at first – the men's tools weren't intruding in that direction – but thought it was a breeze, and had walked toward the bellied earth before the mothish cool seeped into the skin of her awareness. Her toes clung not to the earth, but to the cool, dark veins beneath, and she walked surely, surely, in and above the tapestry, the veins drawing her like the draw of a pulse to the heart, shifting so scarce and smooth beneath her heels that too were smooth in the vein-threaded weaving. Her feet pressed against the cheek, sinking imperceptibly into the skin that was not sun-scattered dust, and was not sun-baked plain, but cool and drawing and – yes – pregnant. She stopped at the heart, at the invisible nipple of water, and leaned down to cup the mound of dusty earth that only seemed dry to her rough hands. She would take the men's tools and unearth the wet soon enough, but not yet. She stretched out on the mound, flat but not collapsed, and let the cool pulse seep into her veins for awhile. When she rose to collect the tools from the jeep, she was not thirsty.



Kathleen Seeley

Arroyo

I will not return there.
The crushed bones of coyotes
ecstatic in their long legs and warm fur,
lie under the broken hills.
The stars lie under the hills.

When the groves were young their
blossoms ran into our hair.

The legs of the horses long and true.
Burn of eucalyptus pranced
through us danced our horses,
we fell laughing down the sweet arroyos.
Our heartbeats shone in clean sand.

Visitor

How can one offer
comfort, unless well
acquainted with sorrow?
Each globe so sweet with its
own special rain. Rain of
yours, rain of mine, rain
incense sacred upon my head, fall
down blessing me, blessing you.

Mountains and mountains of water
everywhere I go. I cannot say
how they came to be. Only that
sometimes I ken the same
color in another lake. As a
cirlet of silver presses the
flesh, leaves its mark
like rain falling in fire.



Fall 2002

Unimportant Things

Lisa Humphrey

I am thirty-five years old, two months and three days, and I'm still not too old to learn. Today it was the meaning of *gooseneck*. Joe said, "Molls, the *gooseneck* lamp has a short—don't plug it in." Mollie is my middle name. I won't share my first name with anyone, not even Joe. He's finally accepted that, but it took five years. He doesn't like secrets. And I can't seem to give them up.

The *gooseneck* lamp is cold when I touch it with a hand that is not old, not young, but at an age when the skin cries on Santa Ana days. A faded freckle hides behind the platinum band, binding me to Joe. The nails are always short and stubby. Men don't notice nails. That's what Joe says. Men notice curves. Like the smooth curve of the brass *gooseneck* lamp I must remember to never plug in.

Once Joe wrote me a poem on the back of a Lucky Charms cereal box. Now I sleep with it under my pillow. He thinks I keep it there in case of a fire or earthquake. I let him believe that, even though it's not true. My avocado KitchenAid blender will be the first thing I save. I've memorized the poem, but the blender can't be replaced. They don't make avocado anymore. Only olive.

My nephew, Cody, broke the lamp on Labor Day when he pulled the cord out of the wall. It was the day my divorced sister and Joe argued, their whispers insistent, drifting through the screen door of our tiny balcony. I listened from inside while Cody wrapped his pudgy hand around the lamp cord and pulled. The lamp finally fell with a crash. The whispering stopped. The screen door slid open. *What happened?* Cody's eyes were wide as I picked him up. *Nothing.* Everything. *Is Cody okay? Everything is fine.* No, Everything is wrong. *It was just a lamp.* But it is so much more than that. Joe never fixed it. And it would have been such a simple thing to fix.

* * *

My mother's purse always had ghostly coins stuck between the liner and the vinyl. I could never find them even though I searched and searched. There was the salmon lipstick with no top, tissues wadded into snaky spirals, pens leaking ink, half-eaten candy bars, old papers folded into fourths. I only allow four things in mine: a black wallet with forty dollars in cash, a cell phone, my driver's license and a box of Altoids. There are no scraps of paper. There are no orphaned pieces of gum.

There are no apparitions. There is only simple, clean organization.

* * *

Joe fell in love with my neck and then the rest of me. He said it smelled of night-blooming jasmine and the damp canyon air and the salt of the ocean. He said I had lived in the city so long it had burrowed beneath my skin, leaving behind the fragrance of spring, before the heat burns everything antiseptic.

Changing another individual or circumstance may alter your emotions temporarily, but your energy system will always generate another emotion. If you believe that this new emotion depends upon people or circumstances, you will have to change something or someone else again.

I can't read by the gooseneck lamp because it has a short. I have to remember not to plug it in. But the light from our tiny porch pours onto the faded carpet between 2pm and 4pm and that's when I read *The Heart of the Soul* sitting in the sunny patch. I'm still not too old to learn about everything I've lost.

When I'm depressed I say I'm going out to run errands. *Be back in a couple hours. See you later. Just have to run some errands.* No one ever asks about errands, unlike a doctor visit or hair appointment or car tune-up when people always question you or give advice. When I'm running errands, I could be doing anything. Getting gas or milk or eggs. Going to the post office. Buying drugs. Having an affair.

But I don't do any of these things. Instead, I drive around and look at houses and create mental lists of what's wrong with them—hundreds of little imperfect houses I will never buy. On my wrist is a watch in simple silver. The hands are small and golden. There are no numbers on the face but I can still tell the time when I choose to know, which isn't often. When I get hungry, I go to Taco Bell and order a Mexican Pizza with no meat, a large Pepsi and cinnamon crisps. I sit in my car and eat, watching the traffic on Pico Boulevard and the homeless man with no shoes begging for money. I listen to rap music. I pretend to be somebody else.

There is a half-moon crescent scar on my forehead. It's very faint. Joe traces it with his finger after sex and says I'm his pagan priestess. I nod and allow him the pleasure. I don't have the heart to tell him that at sixteen a thigh buster slipped off my feet and snapped into my forehead, giving me two black eyes. I believe it's okay to keep a secret if the truth would be a disappointment.

I have a moon face and eyes the color of newspaper pulp. In high school

I went to France where people thought I was a native until they asked me for directions. If I could have stood on the Champs Elysee without speaking, no one would have questioned whether I belonged. Now when someone speaks of France, I don't see the Champs Elysee or the Eiffel Tower or French tourists approaching me for directions. There is just my moon face, wide and white, floating above Rue D'Orleans.

* * *

I was only five years old when I first moved to Southern California but I remember the sun and the heat radiating from the sidewalk and the rose colored building where my parents rented their first apartment. I remember the palm trees. The sound of them made me love Los Angeles. But it was never really mine. Twenty-five years later I met Joe. He was supposed to make me belong. I should probably tell him. Maybe then he would do something about it.

* * *

I have to remember not to plug in the gooseneck lamp because it has a short. Joe still hasn't fixed it. And it would be such a simple thing to fix. It makes me nervous, the frayed wire lying on the carpet, the plug so close to the outlet. It would be so easy to plug in. I chew on the inside of my left cheek, a bad habit because I can't stop. Unlike smoking. That will be easy because it was never very important. Smoking. The *gooseneck* lamp. Joe. The unimportant things are always easy to give up.

It's just a matter of deciding when.

Forbidden

Beneath water-colored clouds,
a sigh, your amber breath
is yesterday's wandering leaf.

Pressed bone to bone in silent story,
twin paths pale in winter's light-
a tale from lips that never touch

our frosted voice- letters
trailing through the winded plain
to find the senses.

The snow shifts slightly
as wings drape the sky in braided motion,
vermillion, and you whisper,

as I reach out to touch
the crimson valleys
of your soft and slender sentences.

Postcard From Chaz

Lori D. Harris

So, about a month ago, I got this postcard from a friend of mine that went into the Foreign Legion. No lie. The French Foreign Legion.

I asked him, "Why you wanna do that, Chaz?"

He said I wouldn't understand.

So anyway, Chaz sends me this card and it has a picture on it: There's a desert and there's nothing on this desert except this camel, walking along on this dune. He's kinda small and you can't really see him that good, but there he is.

The back of the card just said, "Wish you were here." I thought it was funny because I thought he would send a picture of the Eiffel Tower or something French like that. But he didn't. Chaz is funny like that. I know because he's my best friend.

I pinned the postcard to my wall and I look at it everyday. I don't look out my window any more. I get tired of it. Broken glass and gray, everything gray and nothing to it, looking faded and sad. Man.

I wonder what it's like. Not the Foreign Legion or even France or Paris. But I wonder about that desert. I wonder where that camel is going and where he's been, you know? I wonder if he just decided he was going to go walking by himself – no particular place to go and no particular time to get there. I'm jealous of that. That's a cool thing, to be able to do that, just go walking and not have to worry about anything and there's nobody around bothering you.

I'd like to see that place sometime. And maybe when I do, I'll see my friend Chaz and we'll laugh about the postcard and we'll go riding. And maybe I'll get to tell him I understood.



Fall 2002

DUBLIN AT NIGHT

On a pub crawl
Guinness-soaked
and wavering
we met. And Oh!
Those hands
you pressed on my arm
to move me aside
to speak your deep Irish
over my Guinness-mad
talk of Joyce
and the cosmic order
of our cells
as tiny spiral galaxies—

you reeled me around and around
and fiddle and pipe,
bodhran and bell
until closing time
trembling I leaned into you
out into the night.

I said, “look at the moon.”
You said, “God, I love your smile,”
and kissed me there on Lower Baggot Street
on the edge
of St. Stephen’s Green—
in full view of the church
and the priest locking the door—
who smiled as I quickly pulled away.
I kissed you back then
as you agreed
that the moon was full of music.

HANOI, 1996

God save us always from the innocent and the good.
-Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*

That strife-worn shell, the airport stood, all round encroached by green—
flood fields of rice, water buffalo, brown-tufted against an unforgiving sky.
She was alone, but for those guards. Somber with authority, coarse, uniforms,

red stars. Soldiers or police? She did not ask. Young boy approached
to sell their thin-paged books. “Are you Chinese?” (Her Cherokee eyes
miscast her everywhere) “But now, we practice English every day!”

Dusty bus ride to the City of Lakes. Shift-streams of jeeps, old bikes, tri-
shaws. A huge and smiling Ho, with dove and child, amid red banners skit-
tering high. By late-day light, criss-crossed bustling streets. Some brimmed
full with flowers,

brass-caged birds; others flowed with silk, hand-painted screens. Aged to
ochre, the French facades. In Hoan Kiem, she found a glistening lake.
Yellow blossoms framed the view: A crimson bridge with legs, like lanky
cranes.

At dusk, she watched pagodas melt to grey. Two frail, white-bearded men,
silent on a bench. “Not one angry glance,” she whispered to the sky.
“They won, so now they *like* you,” sky replied. “The sin of pride was yours,

don’t you agree?” By night, the city swelled with steaming pots. A street-side
feast of *pho*, with clams and eel. A red-scarfed girl cracked coconut for her.
An ancient *grandmere*, black-trousered, smiled and shook her head,

“You have no children? Sad! So sad!” As sidewalk smoke floated past

the flowers, she saw four generations gathered there. She knew beyond
banners, smiles, facades, lay hovels built of tin, cheap wood, despair.

Soldiers' twisted limbs. Refuse of war. Blind with sacrifice, with courage,
they'd survived. A hundred years of conflict. They'd prevailed.
A culture that endures. Beneath the lotus-moon, she saw it there.

Karen Barker

It

the ink crows
wait for rain
to pounce,
under cover of night,
to steal it back
from you.
they whisper
with the foxes
while you
powder your nose.

you have forgotten
those unfamiliar mushrooms
that once breathed
fire.

now it's just
"wear shoes,
don't put that in your pocket,
no, you cannot drive a truck,"

and the indispensable,
go back to sleep.

Hum

Mom waves goodbye from under her heavy purse, from under her usefulness and synthetic morphine.

Think of insects, mom, the simple eyes and antenna, the hard spiracles of the abdomen. The lives of some insects are so short they last only one day. Segmented creatures- a well defined head and three pairs of legs.

I am a trivial person. I worry and force. I drive seventy five miles per hour between trash trucks and armored cars, between cement center dividers and furious stay-at-home moms, pretending there is somewhere important I have to go.

Mom told me she wants to move her alcoholic brother out of his pick-up truck somewhere along the border of Arizona into her new upstairs spare bedroom. Life is painful she tells me.

Of course I know life is painful- full of unfair hints, secrets and sore abscesses. I began to think of people who eat raw seeds and day old bread. They inadvertently wander, wrapping around themselves someone's lost clothing, pulling along bags and carts of yesterday's newspapers. Mom wants to save them, too. I think they might be happy out there collecting all our forgotten spangles.

Insects can eat fabric, opium, cork and tobacco. They keep the plums and carrots clean and live inside fields of clover and alfalfa.

I listen for their hum in the clover mom, for the dark
blue shades of twilight,
for truant schoolgirls lighting their first cigarettes.
Everyday there are shadows from other
huge celestial bodies on earth,
there are female honeybees laying eggs, there are
unspent work furloughs
and silverfish hatching at the mouth of
some cool river.

Kim Young

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Hum

Summer's crossing

The part of me that forgets
is the space that remembers

the forty minute switchback
to find our one true horizon,

silver mirror of sandy shore
against a stain of glossy sea

white-washed cliffs
wherever we wandered

we were warriors
of the yellow jacket's humming

feet worn dusty by familiar flame
of summer's sweet parade.

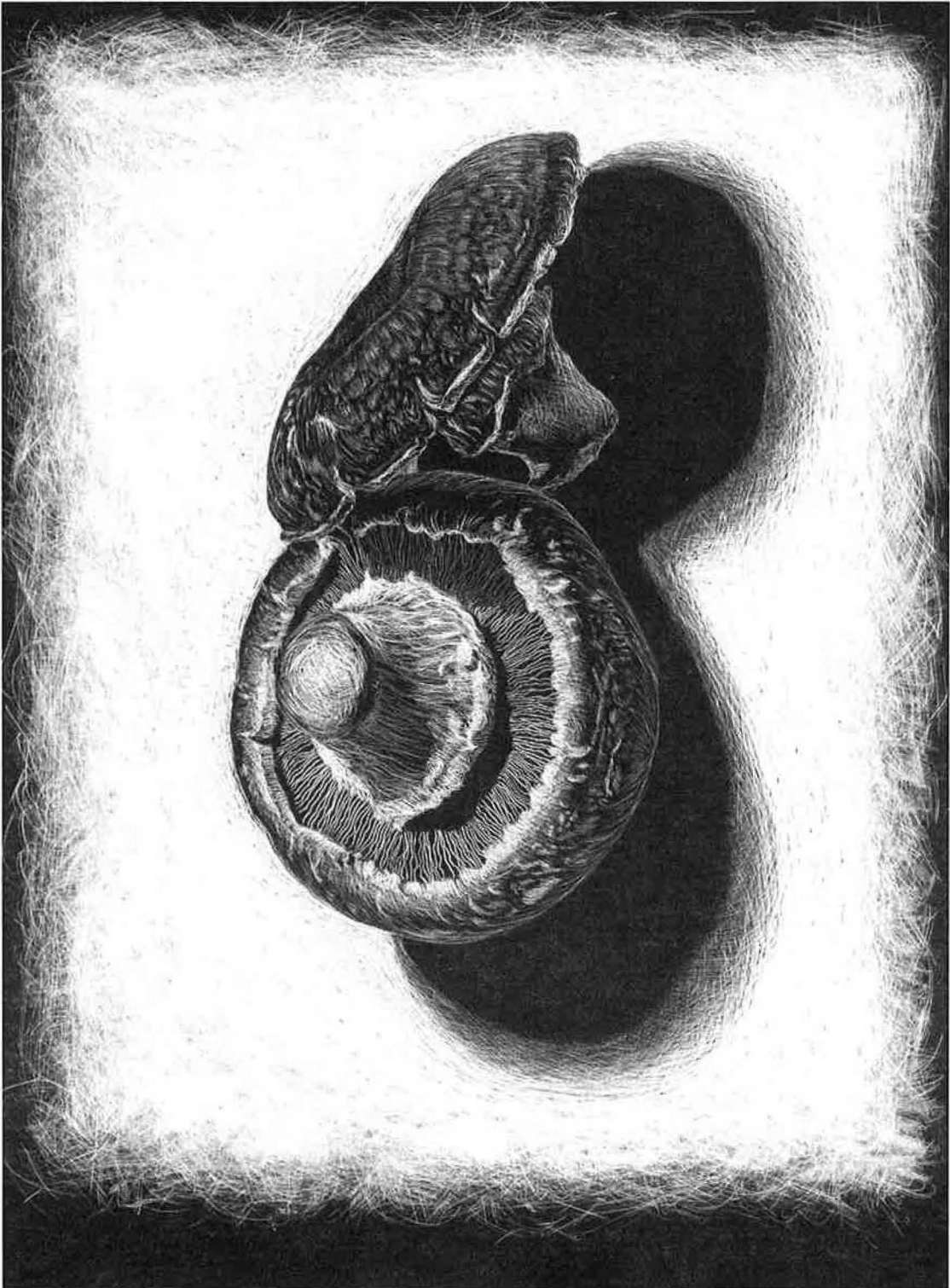
spark of anise seed to tongue
scent of salt and sweet of sage,

through Logan creek to slender stream
our bougainvillea balanced restless on the vine

swarms of shadows crossing oak's divide
nothing more or nothing less of time.

Remember?

Once this was enough.



Happy Sad

Steve Marshall

The twenty-four hour grocery store is brightly lit with a shining gleam on every surface. Carts glide smoothly on freshly-waxed floors that have an apple's shine. Odorless food is wrapped in gloss-coated packages that are built into solid walls of pictures. A young man sprays glass cleaner on the aquarium as the live lobsters sit motionless in green water. Everything is surface.

Felix drops bottles of Evian water into his empty cart, about twenty-three dollars worth. The plastic bottles bounce and settle, and he carefully sets a few glass bottles of Pellegrino on top of them.

"You must drink five bucks worth of water a day," Trista says.

"You know our tap water tastes like metal. Do you need anything?"

"Yeah, I think make-up is the next aisle over."

The bottles slosh back and forth in the steel shopping cart; the heavy water makes it hard to push. The cart goes as slow as the cargo ships that brought the water from France and Italy to the dock, then to North Hollywood.

It is around midnight, but the lights never go out in the supermarket and there are no clocks. It could be any time under the halogen lights. The light makes Felix feel a little more awake, it forces his eyes to open up and take in all of the little pictures. Trista looks at compacts and Felix looks at her face. He had thought she looked very beautiful and sad on the first day he met her. She was wearing silver eye shadow and her face looked tragically contemporary.

Her face always looks contemporary. She reads the magazines that they sell at the checkout and they tell her the new way to look this month, a tiny bit different than last month. Her old fashion magazines litter their apartment and the pictures in the ones from a month ago look alright, but ones from a year ago look old in unnamable ways. She was now so beautiful. Always. So beautifully now.

"Don't worry, I won't complain about the make-up," he says.

"Sorry, I've just been kinda depressed lately," she says. "I might be a minute." She is looking at the different shades of brown. Her cheek make-up is a little heavy, smooth but with little cracks like chalk on the fresh rubber of a cue stick.

"I'll go look around," he says.

He walks to the other end of the store. A pop song plays on the speakers overhead. It sounds very modern as well. The synthesized beats are a little different than last year's beats; they have a little more electronic crispness. He stops at the last aisle and looks at the candy. He grabs a few gummy bears from the candy bin and eats them as he walks back towards her.

It was something about the bright light; as he sees her again he looks at her with fresh eyes, like they hadn't been together for a year. He looks at her and realizes any stranger could look at her the way he was. Her silver bra strap is visible underneath her tank top. Anyone who saw her could picture what her underwear would look like. It was like she was telling everyone a little secret. If you take off my clothes this is what you will see. I will tell you the first secret for free, but I have many others. These secrets will not be lies. These secrets will only be for you.

"You want a gummy bear?"

"You better have put a quarter in the little box," she says.

"Do you want one?"

"Sure, give me some sugar, baby," she says and laughs, taking a red gummy bear that was stuck to his hand. Her gray eyes seem to brighten as she eats the candy.

He notices that the tops of her breasts are peeking out from her tank top. He could've been anyone. Think of all the women you've seen naked and match these puzzle pieces to what I will look like if I say yes.

She had been lying in the sun that day and there were little tan lines on her chest. He feels like he is stealing these looks. This is something you should only see in private. This is something I should only show my lover when the lights are dim. But here I am in the bright light telling you another secret.

"You didn't put a quarter in, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Honey, don't steal!—here take this," she says, pulling a quarter out of her little black purse. She steps towards him and he hears the hollow taps of her shoes, the high heels poking out of the bottom of her slacks.

Another song is playing as he walks back to the candy aisle; it sounds perfect to listen to today. He thinks about how her tan lines had made her breasts seem self-conscious. The quarter clinks into the tin box and he feels embarrassed that anyone could see those white lines. Those were the holes in the stranger's X-ray vision. Men could wonder if she looks like the naked women of television. He wanted her breasts to be only his;

he wanted her to be saving something for him.

He picks up Coke on his way back to her. She buys twenty-six dollars worth of make-up, and he buys thirty-three dollars worth of water, and a four-pack of Coke in little glass bottles.

Felix sits up in bed watching an infomercial for Johnny Carson videos. Trista is lying asleep in silver panties. He had hoped to have sex with her before she fell asleep, but now he could only look at her. He didn't want to pull a blanket over her, but turned on the heater so that she would still be warm.

"That's one helluva bear," the guest says on television. Trista wakes up for a second and laughs at the same time as Johnny. Her breath catches on the back of her throat as she laughs, tired from swimming earlier in the day.

The bear dances rhythmically for the laughing men.

"One heckuva good time, that bear is having," Johnny says.

The bear is wearing a grass skirt and dancing to conga drums. Her flesh moves uncontrollably as she spins.

Felix laughs and says, "Poor girl."

He finishes a bottle of Pellegrino and sets it next to an empty bottle of Evian on the nightstand. He gets up and goes to the fridge. He doesn't want to fall asleep yet, so he grabs a Coke.

The bear is standing still next to his trainer and Johnny as Felix walks back into the bedroom.

"Can it ride one of those little bicycles?"

"No, Johnny. That's only in the cartoons."

"Did it escape the Cold War? Is it a member of the Communist Party?"

"Yeah, she's actually Gorbachev."

"Did you hear that folks, it's Gorbachev in a fur coat! I'd better watch what I say!" Johnny laughs and the audience cheers. The clip ends, the show goes to a break, offering the first video for only \$9.99.

He takes a sip of Coke and sets it down on the nightstand. The Coke bottle looks different next to the water bottles. It has an hourglass shape, hips and then a waist that dip in, up to a bigger chest and then down to a slim neck.

The television says that the next videos would only be \$19.99 each, plus shipping and handling. Felix is still thinking about the dancing bear, it was so funny and so sad at the same time.

His mind feels like cold water is rushing over it, and he realizes how

sad the bear really is. “Poor thing,” he says.

He looks down at his girlfriend and at her white breasts and feels guilty. Now you got what you wanted, you’ve made them only yours, you have bought them with your eyes. The tan lines isolated her breasts, saying I know that these white parts have to be covered up. I know that my breasts are indecent, you made your laws. You made my breasts always be sexual so that you could keep them—and me—to yourself, you bought all of me with your male stares. You made the whole world into a supermarket.

He pulls a sheet over her in the light of the television. He sees her sadly as something that men force to be the same. A woman in Toledo or Newport News would have the same shaven legs and armpits and plucked eyebrows as a woman in Chicago or Hollywood or anywhere. And in any city there would always be Coke for sale; the bottles would always have the same curves. The Coke would always taste the same, the same sugar and water and caramel color.

He lies next to her and falls asleep. The cola in his brain gives him a dream about a bear going door to door. The bear would ring the doorbell and say *knock-knock* and the person would say *come in* and then see the bear at the door, and they would have a hearty laugh. Then the bear would say that was the shortest joke in the world, but the shortest sad thing in the world is that Bible verse *Jesus wept* and the person and the bear would both start crying because they were thinking about God crying. Then Felix watched the bear go to the next house and the next house and knew the bear would go to every house in the world.

Felix wakes up and feels in his dim sleepiness that the sadness and happiness of bears is like the sadness and happiness of the entire world. His girlfriend is so beautiful and sad and it is sadly beautiful that she is lying there, covered up by a white sheet. Things should change. He staggers into the bathroom and drinks a handful of water from the faucet, feeling the cold water as it goes into his stomach. He walks back into the room and feels guilty that he was the one who covered her.

He slowly takes the sheet off from her and opens the blinds a little bit with a twist of the dowel. Slivers of the rising sun come in through the window and dart across her. He lies next to her and goes to sleep.

In the morning he wakes up when she slips out of bed. He looks at her while she looks at herself in the bathroom mirror. Maybe she knew all this, he thinks. Maybe she knew that she was giving away fleshy secrets that didn’t matter as much as the real secrets. Maybe he had lived his whole life looking for the secrets that only slink along on the skin. Maybe she had traded her superficial secrets for his real secrets but knew all this.

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He stares at her body through the open bathroom door and it confuses him that she doesn't seem to mind. He knew what her body said to him, but had never asked what she was trying to say. He had liked her in the beginning because she was beautiful, and didn't have to think about anything else because she stayed beautiful. But she never seemed to mind.

She starts putting on make-up and he wants to believe that she knows more than she is letting on.

