# NORTHRIDGE

Fall 2007

# REVIEW

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# Staff

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# Awards



## The Rachel Sherwood Award

This award, given annually, recognizes excellence in poetry published in *The Northridge Review*. This award is given in memory of Rachel Sherwood, who studied and flourished in her art of poerty at CSUN, before she was killed in a traggic accident at the age of 25 on July 5th, 1979. This year's award is shared by Richard Kilkpatrick for his poem "Proteus" and Juan Carlos Parilla for his poem "SGV Sparrow." There are also two honorable mentions: Mary Angelino for her poem "Nocturne for Love and Gravel" and Glenn Sheldon for his poem "Robert Frost's Bastard Son."

## The Acadamy of American Poets Award

This award is given annually and the winning poem is published in *The Northridge Review*. The recipients of the Academy of American Poets' Award for 2007 are Kate Martin Rowe for "A Question of Earthly Life Thus Far" and Jennifer Corbin for "Mercury Riesling in Union State." The two honorable mentions are Kara Lawton for "Fractions of Love and Adoption" and Amber Norwood for "Natural History."

## The Northridge Review Fiction Award

This award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. The recipient of this award for 2007 is Olmer Zalmanowitz - for "Wuppertal." The two honorable mentions are Jennifer Lu for "Writing Over the Fox Myth" and Jayna Zimmelman for "The Origins of Honey."

This year's judge of the Rachel Sherwood Award is Jacqueline Feather, a native New Zealander living in California. She is an award-winning screenwriter who is also a mythologist and poet. Jacqui has guest lectured at the University of Milan, the N.Z.Writers' Foundation, and leads an ongoing writing group in poetry, the personal voice, and the archetypal journey. She holds a M.A. in Mythological Studies and is currently completing an M.A. in Counseling at Pacifica Graduate Institute.

This year's judge of the Northridge Review Fiction Award is Rod Val Moore, who has taught English and Linguistics at Los Angeles Valley College since 1990, and taught creative writing in the Antioch University MFA program from 2000 to 2002. In 1994, he was awarded the Iowa Fiction Award for his collection of short stories, *Igloo Among Palms* (University of Iowa Press). He recently finished a novel while a resident at the Millay Colony for the Arts in Austerlitz, New York.

The 2007 Academy of American Poets Prize Judge Judith Taylor is a widely published poet and founding editor of the literary journal Pool. Her books of poetry include *Curlos*, an Academy of American Poets Poetry Book Club Selection, and *Selected Dreams from the Animal Kingdom*. Her poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Fence*, *Poetry*, and *Boston Review*, and she was the recipient of a Pushcart Prize. Taylor lives and teaches in Los Angeles, and continues to edit *Pool*.

## Submissions:

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

The Northridge Review
Department of English
California State University Northridge
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, Ca 91330-8248

Manuscripts will be recycled

## Acknowledgements:

*The Northridge Review* gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English Department faculty and staff— Karin Castillo, Margie Seagoe, Jennifer Lu, Kavi Bowerman, Herby Carlos, Johnson Hai, and Damon Luu— for all their help. Thanks to Bob Meyer and Color Trend for their continued assistance and support.

# Note From The Editors



At the dawn of the Spring semester, *The Northridge Review* proved the nucleus for many fresh-faced and eager student particles. Quickly we began shaping the Fall '07 edition.

Before reading a single submission, we learned that only our efforts together would create the most powerful, efficient unit. Each of us participated in a specialized way. We the editors acted as vacuoles—membrane-bound sacs that store nutrients and discard grammatical errors. Jessica, Holly and Libby quickly became the folded and space-efficient mitochondria— the powerhouse of the magazine, providing insight and crucial energy *The Northridge Review* needed to metabolize and refine submission decisions. Paul and Rich became the desktop publishing ribosomes— the tech-savvy RNA, the technological basis for the synthesis of our beautiful magazine. And Mona, throughout, was our fluid but formed cell membrane, sustaining the shape and integrity of the unit of as a whole. It was very important to become this functional, collaborative unit, because no literary body can build itself from a half-assed cell.

Our literary cell's nutrition was perpetually fueled by our common love for the written word and the myriad of writers who bravely submit their works for review. The time we spent cultivating meaning and substance from these submissions quickly grew into new perspectives, new ways of digesting fiction and poetry which improved upon the old. The nutritive elements have thusly been compiled, digested, and fused into the Spring 2007 edition of *The Northridge Review*. But even so, this needy cell must not and cannot stand alone.

There is another necessary element that a cell must draw from its environment that our staff or writers cannot provide. In order to respire, a cell must have oxygen. A literary magazine's survival relies on the oxygen that the reader supplies. Without the reader, the magazine is dormant, unbreathing and lifeless. This magazine or cell, in large part, was designed to attract the affections of an unsuspecting host for this fiction-and-poetry bound parasite, *The Northridge Review*. Please enjoy this magazine despite its tendency to take your breath away.

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# Art




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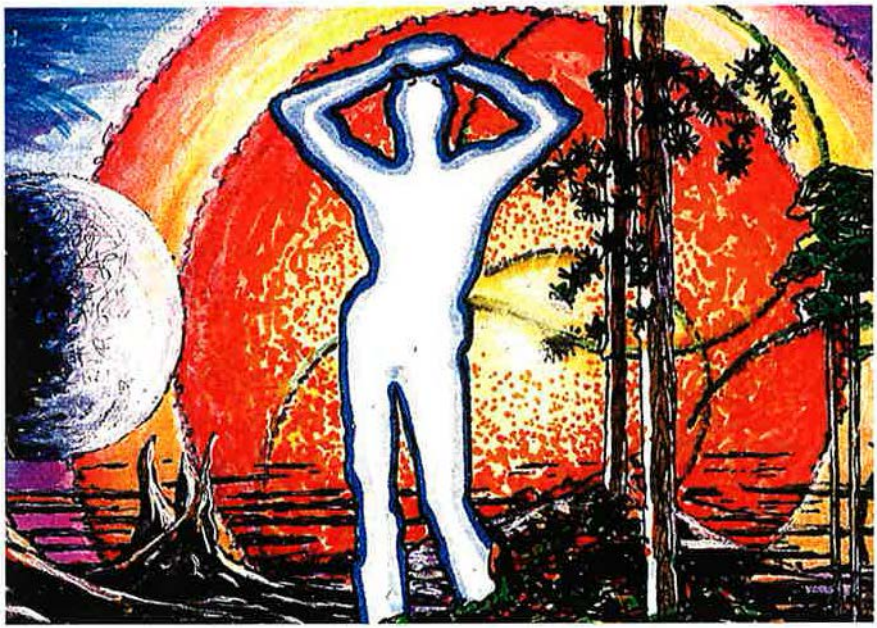

# Burnings

This red city, the secret
American volcano, throws
embers in my eyes.

Nicholas, my burning
friend, do not be fooled
by dawn's simplicity.

Dig up corpses and you
unearth only corpses.
Then you'll find them
waiting at your home, ideas
needing all the chairs
you can ever own.

The past pretends to
be out of sight, until
arson's oven reveals itself.
Not all witch burnings
are literal or illegal.

Run like hell,
run towards a new life,
run from the secret lava
hungry to taste your feet.

# Mohawk Sunshine

Dan Farley

I slammed the trunk on my new Volvo, wincing slightly as imported weight sliced the rhythmic silence in-between explosions of furious waves growing from the center of the lake, tiny whispers maturing into shotgun blasts by the time they spit liquid pellets all over the shores and pounded the sand like an urban assault. I proceeded toward the nature and chaos with my old rod and reel; my cover, my decoy, my necessary rationale as a thirty year old man sporting dry cleaned khaki's and a tucked-in polo as I paced toward the center of Arcola Bridge. In my other hand, I clenched a newspaper with the note he'd left rolled up inside of it. I counted the steps toward our old stash spot and looked down for the chips we'd taken out of the silver paint to indicate our marking place when we were kids. Lying belly down, I reached up under the ribs of the bridge, pawing away at giant gaps in time until my finger tips brushed its surface and I fished it out.

I sat there sifting through the old tackle box he had hidden for me and pulled out possessions I hadn't seen since childhood. Various sterling necklaces intertwined with random tackle, a couple wedding rings he'd been given as money owed, a Public Enemy CD I opened and sure enough, hidden behind the cover, a sheet of Orange Sunshine, perhaps a joke from him in his final moments, perhaps a gift to share. And there, lying alone, a silver key I plucked and clenched tightly in my palm, trying for the longest time not to look down at the churning water that was growling beneath me or the sinking sun that seemed to push the waves harder as it dropped.

Word was, he had taken over production and graduated toward much bigger

things by the time the DEA pinched him. He was holding enough weight to get him life and in order to free himself from prosecution, he turned snitch on the old chemist he'd studied under as a teenager. It was enough to side-step prison, but only in death could he regain his larger than life status. A witness said that when they plucked his body from the water, he had bloated up to twice his normal size.

The drops are tearing from new wrinkles in my eyelids and exploding, then melting the ink I'm struggling with. Each tear falls like another year rewinding until I am tiny and he is huge, so huge he rises above the willows and strolls coolly into the shrieking wind wailing off the hills and I am chasing behind him with little legs that can't keep up. I begin counting the drops that miss the page and disappear into the shiny waves burning beneath the Minnetonka sunset. "He knew where to land" rings through my head as these words brand themselves from newspaper onto closed lids and smolder there no matter how hard I squeeze them shut:

*Mound Man, 35, found dead beneath Arcola Bridge*

***

Suns do not just submit themselves before the evening on Lake Minnetonka. They are not predictable and obedient like that. They explode into bloody fruits and wring crimson juice all over the waves that creep past your sleepy toes and you can puncture them into greasy oil paints that will stain the tainted shores of Mound, our side of the lake. Mound was a city built almost entirely on top of Native American burial mounds. It was a frowning place of broken families, broken dreams and broken spirits that bled out of the once sacred body of lakes from various arteries. Most of us were raised by alcoholics and drug addicts. Most of them were single mothers. Most of us didn't make it out of high school and most of us didn't care. As a matter of fact, if you went to Mound right now and asked any local what it stood for, they would recite, without thinking: "Most Of Us Need Drugs." This was our city. Our school mascot was a wild Indian who ran around with a flailing streak of hair down the center of a bald head and we were officially recognized as the Mound Mohawks. Growing up amongst Mohawks revolved around ritual, and yes, most of the rituals involved drugs. But it wasn't always that way.

Joey and I were kids once and to many of us he was a hero, a local legend. But to me, he was more like a big brother. I can hear him laughing now as I sit on the retired Arcola railroad bridge built to carry people from our side of the lake to the world unknown, that functional, understandable place that Mound people talked about as a theory. Being half Chippewa and half something he didn't know, the Native American folklore he heard growing up ruled Joey's life. He once looked down from this bridge with me and talked about the natural violations that come with disrupting the sacred burial mounds our city was built on and why it was so horribly cursed because of it. He talked about the history of Lake Minnetonka once being a place of peace treaties amongst neighboring tribes who used the series of water channels and land points as trading routes for swapping goods with each other. Before the land had been taken and wars broke out over territory rights, Lake Minnetonka had always been a place of sharing, before it had all been exploited, before it became a place of leftovers, before we had been born.

Joey was also known as one of the few locals to defy the stories of this bridge by diving from its highest point several times and surfacing unharmed. Most jumpers turned back once they looked down from its center and pondered the folklore of what may lie below. But Joey knew all about the fallen railroad ties and broken support beams which littered the water, thorny hazards of significant length which had impaled many less informed jumpers over the years. Across the bay, where all the overpriced homes now stand, you can still see the remnants of a cliff that has been dynamited, smoothed out and built upon. It was once a place made sacred by an elderly chief who leapt from it in his fragile state as a final protest during the land grab. I remember Joey always looking in that direction before he'd shut his eyes and dive.

***

I was still clinging onto the key he'd left me when I released the gas can and the battery charger, clanging the concrete and erupting layered dust that mushroom clouded the garage space with a lingering upheaval. Behind me, the fading sunlight was blasting Jesus rays through the hazy garage and through their beams; I made out the shadow of his pride and joy. Even while retired and in isolation, its shape was

menacing. Peeling back the protective canvas sparked nostalgia as the sun rays hopped and skipped off the chrome flaking that had been custom blended into the navy blue paint. I leaned the driver seat back and adjusted the rear view mirror, laughing out loud as I caught myself snarling my lip and squinting my eyes, imitating him just as I had done over fifteen years ago as a young boy riding shotgun, watching the streets of Mound bow down to the legend behind the wheel.

***

Nothing in Mound could catapult you into elite status like having Joey pick you up on the last day of eighth grade in his custom built Seventy-Eight Monte Carlo. The entire school seemed to freeze when the exhaust bellowing out of the three inch echo cans rumbled up to my curbside feet. The bass bumping from fifteen inch subwoofers was humming off the walls of the breezeway connecting the school to the parking lot, and parents everywhere looked frightened and somewhat awestruck as he pushed his way through traffic, shaking car windows and rattling parental nerves as he passed. His shirt was off and his homemade tattoos seemed to be leaping off his skin as Chuck D and Public Enemy berated the world over scratching records and wicked bass lines. His Raiders hat was backward and cocked right, his silver herring-bone chain bounced sun light around the car's interior, and the trademark Newport was hanging lazily from the corner of his crooked grin, which could have been a snarl if you didn't know him. When he reached over and popped the door open for me that day, I jumped into his low rider as an up and coming celebrity.

"Say bye, bye to school, kid."

He stood on the brake with his left foot and slammed the accelerator with his right, lighting up the tires with a fierce squeal. He smashed the gas all the way to the floor, and every horse crammed into the three fifty small block busted loose against the brakes, roasting the tires into a spinning frenzy as they screamed at the world behind us for what seemed like an eternity, filling the entire parking lot in rich smoke. The kids all around us screamed out in approving excitement, leaping amongst each other while I was high on invincibility. I looked back at my former middle school and raised a middle finger as he let go of the brake and launched us onto

the boulevard with enough force to pin me to the passenger seat for several seconds, hysterical with delight and unable to breath through boyish laughter. I looked back for one last view of the building full of bad blood but Joey had buried it in Goodyear smoke and high octane exhaust fumes.

"Where we goin?"

"Lester's. Today's your day, lil man."

Lester was a retired chemist who had been selling weed to our mothers since the sixties. I was about seven or so when I passed a lit joint from him to my mom, as Jim Morrison's baritone belly-aching bled through our tattered garage sale speakers, as Lester sat stoned and stupefied on our couch, as rats in our walls danced to the rhythm of me slamming kitchen cupboards shut while I moaned about my growling stomach, as my mom lay lazily in the hammock she'd hung in our living room as she sung along with Jim, as the sight of my dad slamming the door shut on us burned holes in my brain, as my shoulders flexed in memory of him raising extension cords to my back, "making them bitches sing." The shrill chirps of our secret whistle cut through the symphony of sickness and floated up from the alley through the screenless windows, alerting me to make it down the fire escape to meet Joey as he came flying toward me on a stolen BMX bike with rear pegs for me to stand on while he pedaled us to our hide-out spot beneath Arcola.

His pockets were usually packed with enough quarters and nickels to get us to Speedy Market where we would load up on Ding Dongs and Ho Ho's which we'd stuff our faces with once we got to the bridge. We'd buzz on empty calories beneath the wooden beams, laughing hysterically as we threw pebbles at the fishermen beneath. Sometimes we'd slam cans of Mountain Dew till our bladders were bursting and we were floating on caffeine and corn syrup. Sometimes, when fancy charter boats passed beneath the bridge with wealthy luncheon customers spread elegantly across their decks, we'd make our bellies burn from manic laughter as we hid in the cracks of our hideout and aimed streams of neon pee toward them. We'd laugh till we couldn't breath anymore, till we were in a comatose of thrill, till we dozed off, drunk on sugar, resting our spinning heads against the old pillars, dreaming of life on the other side of

the lake.

He would also take me through the burial mounds at night when the spirits of the hills danced with the evening mist that snuck up from Lake Minnetonka and covered the ancient grounds like a moldy secret. He taught me the truth behind the lonely cries that echoed through the rows of weeping willow trees bowing themselves toward the sadness. Most local residents were unaware; they only heard tbe shrill wind whistling through the rows of weighted branches. But those of us generations deep knew that the tiny mounds resting beside the larger ones are where the tribes buried their dead babies and at night, as the moon lit up the bumpy ground, they would wake up and cry for their mothers resting beside them.

Sometimes he would lead me deep into the willows on nights too foggy to see their branches until they caressed our faces like cold bones. He would pretend to leave me there alone and I would panic, unsure of where I was or where I was going, but he would always end the torment by laughing out loud and letting me know that he was beside me the whole time. Sometimes, if I was crying too hard, he would hold my hand, and lead us through the night-time because he could see in the dark and whistle back to the night birds that cackled and cawed down to us. Mound folklore states that many of us have the ability to hear the universe speak through nature, but only a chosen few can answer. These were my thoughts as I grew into a young teen and stared anxiously across the table from him in Lester's back yard.

He was staring back with the same cool grin he always wore as Lester dragged the blade of a wicked Bowie knife through a sectioned sheet of LSD. Rows of orange squares and red suns stood out in a pattern, a hundred of them, all in perfect lines. He pierced a slender section of squares with the blade then turned its tip toward Joey's mouth. I had a vision of my drunken mother stuffing creamed corn past my lips when I was little as Lester said to Joey:

"Say ahh..."

His tongue flicked like a lizard's and snatched the paper up toward his lips. A Rottweiler paced the table with a chain thick enough for towing trucks around his neck. The metal scraped the concrete with relentless irritation. Lester began

dragging the blade over the paper again. It was the re-birth of the sunshine, it's first appearance since the barrel days. Slowly and methodically, he pierced the second strip of suns and held the new generation of chaos before my face. I looked at Joey and he winked. The Rotweiller stopped dragging the chain to lie down beside Lester who was staring straight ahead. Although I did not command it to, I watched a tongue—my tongue, I thought—make contact with the strip, moistening its surface as it stuck. I pulled it nearer to my lips, the blade coming with it and threatening my tender skin as I kissed the strip gently, taking it into my mouth where it would slowly dissolve into my blood stream and find its resting place inside my spinal cord. Then for the first time, Lester looked at me and growled with a grin, his handlebar mustache concealing lip movement and his beady eyes reading the back of my skull.

"Law say's seven makes ya insane, I give out ten strips just to make sure. Welcome to the other side kid."

Joey was nodding, and still smiling. The Rotweiler stood and shook his coat; Lester reached down and unchained him.

***

After priming the carburetor and filling her with fresh fuel, I popped off the battery charger and let the hood slam shut. One crank and the ignition sparked an explosion of stifled fury and the three fifty lurched like a chained pit bull when I slammed it into gear and nursed the accelerator with my trembling foot. Even as a grown man, I somehow felt like I was trespassing, like I was unworthy. But he had left it to me and it was mine now, yet somehow, without him behind the wheel, its magic seemed tainted. I was rolling down Central Boulevard and I had a hard time not laughing at the newly designed condos and town homes that stood where we once ran wild. They had foolish names geared toward naive outsiders with money, names like "Anchor Bay" and "Tonka Town homes."

I started cruising side streets and felt lost. The neglected weeds that Lester's laboratory once hid behind had all been cleared, his home demolished, but the mounds that surrounded it stood in strong defiance of ill intentioned land developers. Across the street, demolition crews were going to town on the remnants of what used

to be Mound's most notorious low income housing development. There had been a shooting there shortly after it was announced to the current tenants that the property had been sold and that they would all be evacuated. The man killed was a round bellied property manager with a reputation for evicting families in mid December. The monotonous wailing of obedient sledgehammers ricocheted and reverberated until I was entranced by their sound, till I shut my eyes and saw him strolling over the job site in slow motion.

***

Tremendous bass was pounding outside the section eight housing development impeding upon and surrounded by various sized burial mounds on each side. Watch out boys perched rooftop, whistling in code when pigs passed. Chants of praise hailed down to greet us as we strolled beneath the sagging power lines en route to deliver acid to hungry hands looking to get in on some easy money. I found myself counting the tangled pairs of shoes that hung from the power lines above us as ghetto blasters blared over screaming babies. Windowless hallways hid baked urine mixed with other aged bodily fluids. Graffiti, dense and detailed, reached down to grab us if we should slow our pace. We broke the surface of the projects and made our way toward the aisles of misfortune when an instant feeling of uncertainty jabbed me. My eyes widened, my fists clenched, and my smile was a rabid coyote's.

As we got deeper into the shadows of the walls, a sickening cacophony of instinct and panic turned my stomach inside out. My eyes followed my ears toward guttural bellowing and occasional whimpers. Two brindled dogs danced in a circular center of tattooed bodies. Men screamed at them as they latched massive jaws on one another and began shaking. A smaller mass of brindles was locked onto the larger one who was pulling backward and lifting the smaller dog from the ground as he shook him off. Joey's eyes turned to pin dots and his nostrils flared. He broke the circle of men and reached into the dogfight with one arm and grabbed the scruff of the flailing dog's neck as his foot pinned the larger dog to the ground. When he yelled down at them, both dogs released their grip with militant obedience and the circle erupted into protests, threats, and profanity. Both dogs lied down when Joey

glared at them with alpha instinct and acid eyes. He marched up to the largest man in the circle and stood chest to chest.

"You know who I am?" Joey demanded. The larger dog turned his head and whimpered.

"Yeah man. I know who you are," said the thug with nervous subtext.

"I'll fight you right now for a thousand," Joey taunted. I looked down and saw the little dog snickering as he panted.

"Man, step off," he hissed while avoiding eye contact, desperately trying to maintain rank within his circle. Joey shoved him so hard his feet flew from the ground and his back slammed the earth with a hollow thud. He made feeble attempts at leaping up and standing his ground, but Joey took one more step toward him and he flinched.

"Who wants some?" he barked out to the circle.

"Right now, a thousand dollars!" They pouted, kicked dirt, and looked away.

"Bitches," he sneered before turning his back to them. He loosened his laser eyes and walked toward me smiling at my nervous gestures like he did when I was ten and he was fifteen, popping his head up from under the water after leaving me at the top of Arcola Bridge alone. We turned and made our way back toward the center of the complex to make our deliveries. The little dog leapt up and pounced toward us, nipping at our feet with red teeth and a tail that wagged in fast forward. He turned and yipped at the other dog that staggered up and trotted along behind us, eager to play. Both were done working for the day and seemed quite happy to be relieved from their duties. We walked in a row now, the dogs and us, following a chain of command with Joey in the lead.

I stared at the mounds beside the parking lot as we passed and noticed the grass moving in opposite direction of the wind. A hawk screamed above our heads and I looked to him. We made eye contact from a mile away before he began dive bombing toward the earth. He scooped an ignorant rat taking too much time in his travels between the walls of public housing, and landed with him atop the largest of the mounds. A perverted pause as the rodent ran hopelessly in place, clenched tightly in

talons of temporary torment. The hunter's head turned to face us in an arrogant pose. I strained my eyes to watch his beak bend in to a smile.

"Have you ever heard a rodent scream?" He whispered slowly through the wind.

He punctured the fattened belly of the rat with his razor beak and began pulling entrails like pasta from its torso. The rat erupted in to a series of squeals that made my testicles leap in to my belly. Joey and I nodded our humble heads toward the hawk with silent understanding and respect.

***

"Can't you see how weird everything is man, how the wind is all wiggly? Doesn't the air look slimy to you? Can't you see how everything is changing? The lake smells weird too, man; can't you see?"

"Naw, you're just seein things for what they are, it's always been like that, you were just numb to it before. Just chill out and look at the water, you're talking too much."

"What if I stay like this forever, if I never stop trippin, if I never come down?"

He seemed unusually preoccupied with his stereo as he navigated the Monte Carlo around the shores of Minnetonka.

"Shhh...Listen to this shit, listen. You ever heard of Nirvana? You know what Nirvana means? It's a hippy word, it's like being naturally high, it means you can float above all the god and devil bullshit and just be natural thing, like light. There's guys in India who can sit down and just think about shit super hard and make themselves higher than me and you are right now. Did you know that?"

"I'm trippin balls, man. I'm trippin hard. I don't wanna float away nowhere, I wanna be normal again, I don't wanna be like this forever, man."

"Naw, naw, naw... We were just listenin to the wrong music before. It's all about the music in these times and where you are. It's all about this new Nirvana shit, I'm telling ya man. You gotta listen to the guy singin though, the way this guy sounds, he has razors in his voice and when he sings to you, he cuts through everything between you and the speakers and all you hear is pure pain, but it sounds so good."

"I'm fucked up man, there's something wrong with me. I feel like the hills are

yellin at me, like god hates me."

"Fuck god. You can believe all that bullshit if you want, but I'm telling you right now, it's all the same. A devil is an angel and an angel is a devil. Just as many bad angels out there as there is good ones."

"I'm fucked up man. I'm gonna go to hell."

"If there was such a thing as god and heaven, then Mound never would have been made. It would just be all the old tribes out there kickin it on the lake like they used to in the old days."

He was talking to me but all I heard was my mom screaming at my dad, my dad screaming at my mom. I heard the rats laughing in the walls as I screamed at them to stop. I heard the extension cord whistling as the old man growled at me through whiskey laden wolf breath. "Somethin bad's gonna happen man. I can feel it." I whispered.

"Hey, look at me. You're with me, kid. Aint nothin gonna happen to you."

The voices from my house had begun speaking in tongues when Joey reached over and turned the volume knob all the way right and killed them all with music, slamming the accelerator as the scratchy voice on the radio blew cool waves all over my body and poked tiny pinholes in my skin. The band was covering an old version of Lake of Fire, a song about bad people having no place to go when they die, about lost souls combusting onto waves of flames and angels and devils who find their places between the chaos of right and wrong, a song speaking codes from generations behind us through the voice of an interpreter named Kurt Cobain.

The greasy sky turned to sapphire glass and the waves whispering through the window sealed the war wounds in my ears as they blew past us in broken rhythms. I was an angel surfing on a cloud in Mohawk hell, a demon doomed in other people's paradise. I was on my way to heaven with a devil that could kick god's ass. I was a Mound kid experiencing Nirvana for the first time. I had never heard of Kurt Cobain, but something about Joey's fascination with him made me uneasy.

"Hey... Hey, bro..."

"What, man? Quit interuptin this song, this guy is onto somethin. This guy

really knows some shit."

"I love you man... I really, really love you."

He called me a little fag and told me to shut up. He then reached over with his inked up arm and pulled the brim of my ball cap over my eyes, shaking my head gently like he was playing with a wolf pup. I pinched my eyes closed and saw silver dust blowing by us like we were driving through a metal flake snow storm. And when I opened them again, he was grinning down at me, rattling the sunbeams with his mighty laughter.

***

I paused at a red light and a group of adolescents gathered. They huddled closer, pointing and theorizing at the car that had made history before they were born. One of the boys fixed himself on me with widened eyes and eager anticipation. I gave him a cool nod and a crooked grin as I scanned the rear view for cops. They started yelling to their friends across the street and everybody started hugging the curb as I teased them with some light foot work on the accelerator. A few quick growls from the three fifty and I had their full attention. I stomped the brake and shut my eyes. The setting sun against my eyelids warmed an inner demon and forced a smile across my face. I smashed the gas and heard him laughing from above as the tires broke loose and allowed the aged exhaust to churn with the melting rubber. The boys on the curb went crazy as the sound of a million angels screaming howled through mound for what seemed to be an eternity. I opened my eyes to the wild-eyed kid, giving him a final nod before I let go of the brakes and fish-tailed through an intersection I had buried in old, blue smoke.

# Elements

Pansies were not my first choice,
but marigolds don't grow well this time of year,
an unfair agenda of leaves and wind,
remnants of rusty grass and decaying summer squash.

Pansies do not protect as marigolds do,
inviting the unwanted and detrimental.
That's what I wanted for her too –
protection, where anxiety and aphids can not harm.

Pansies were not my first choice,
but aesthetic boundaries make illusory walls
that threaten to wither with the elements
upon realizing mothers are not marigolds.

Cheyenne Garwood

# Letters From Yuma to My Father Back East

You think my skies so blue they're boring.
That I've gotten this desert air all wrong,
and don't need the jaded heat of sand dunes,
nor horizons widened to jagged peaks
of mountains named for saints homesick for Spain,
pointing stone fingers at constellations
rolling through a night's un-blighted circuits.

It is you who needs his afternoon skies
harried to storms so gray you turn English
with rain, and rain was the war you hated
when your bomber limped home on one engine.
What did you feel when pilots feathered the props,
your navigator an ape with sextant,
plexiglas blinded by fog hard as salt?

New Jersey's the center of the cosmos-
or so you say, the place your sons can thrive,
though my last joke about it turned you dour.
But you're just wistful over tiresome holes
you made me dig to plant fruit trees long dead
when fading hurricanes whipped Sea Bright raw,
and you knew I'd quit school soon and leave home.

Today, winds arise like lost travelers.
Dawn came deranged by threats of rare weather.
I'll get this letter out soon as I can.
Don't fear too much blue for me. Soon enough,
monsoons will shake this desert clean with floods,
thunder will thread night skies shut with nimbus.
Wild rain will loose me from a dream of home.

# A Question of the Quality of Earthly Life Thus Far

Father is such a pomegranate term.

*Heavenly* father, an explosion of frozen white feathers in the icebox,
or one fat, heart-sized fruit lying in the snow.

Jesus was son, but if he was also God and therefore dad, the math gets confused—
man just one half this side of the equal sign.

Entire families crammed into pockets. One wrong move and seeds burst
into sour roses.

Have you ever noticed God never just stops in for tea and cake?

But Jesus the hermaphrodite is an equation that makes sense.
Male and female, He created him. Maybe then we'd stop blaming a woman
for this jukebox of tears.

I like things I can touch.

At my wedding, the friend who said how ***lucky*** never to be lonely again,
didn't know.

Blue isn't God's final color, prayer isn't always the last dime. And yet—

my least favorite tune is the sound of my wheezing, fruit-of-the-gods heart
because one good slice of humble pie is all it takes

to break into the unknown
and too,

it could be the crying music that makes you cry.

# Death Plane

Dangling from wires in a Virginia Smithsonian
Enola Gay hangs in sleek, silver splendor
A fright amidst airplanes that carried life to flight
That bewilders the eye and makes one wonder:
How could they have paid to raise that memory here

Praising a flash blasting homes from their doorsteps;
Laying out more people than graves could hold?
Atoms once split then squeezed generate the heat
Nihilism needs in its arms streaming out
Endings.

# Missing

It is one of those thick and dreamy moments. Not at all like you'd expect or imagine it to be. Because it comes up on you quick. Like a snakebite. Or a knife in the chest. The sneaking up on you part should have been slow because of its nature. Like a ship slogging through dense ocean water, maybe. Coming home. Bleating through some sound or another. But it wasn't like that at all.

The service station camera records it all. Its lazy eye drifting. Humming from one side of the station to the other, almost yawning in the heat. The crazy-making early-morning-heat of too-far-inland Southern California. You're getting gas. Not going anywhere that early in the morning except home. The few miles to home. But you don't want to have to stop for gas later, on the way to work, when you'll be rushed. And as you think, mindlessly, about the second skyrocket of prices, the up-to-three-dollars-and fifty cents-a-gallon for regular unleaded, ***that*** man pulls up. Cruises toward you, slow, measured, menacing. Docking opposite you. Side by side, you pump. He's driving a van covered in filth and grime you can't name because of its variety and age and sheer depth and thickness of coat. But underneath all that…the van is maroon and its windows aren't tinted, just milky. Not quite opaque, just clouded with neglect. He is Charles Manson. A taller older version of the Charles Manson that orchestrated the murder of Sharon Tate, not the Charles Manson of today, the silly swastika wearing puny inmate that looks crazy even to his own reflection. *This* Charles Manson has the tan and facial wrinkles of the homeless; the

Tracey Ruby

thick toughened leather brown skin that comes after months and months of overexposure, the furrowed brow of an unhappy, violent life and a slight stoop that comes from disappointment and rage. He is wordless as he stuffs crinkled dollar bills into the mouth of the automated pump. His woman is not.

She slides out of the passenger side of the van and when she does, a big squawk goes up, punctuating her exit, signifying the start of something. It's the squawk of a large jungle bird, but your brain cannot compute this as the squawk of a jungle bird because there is no context in this suburban morning heat, so your brain, unconsciously, dismisses the squawk because of its sheer implausibility. Her hair is brown and pulled back—sloppy—off her face. Her face is ugly and her top lip sags from teeth that must be missing. She and her man share the same bad tan. She is wearing shorts and her tank top hangs well below her hips. She is apple shaped—as all hardcore alcoholic women seem to be—the calories sticking somewhere above and around the liver, keeping her bottom parts thin. She stands near the man.

The side of the van door slides open and out comes a little girl. And now you are aware of your heart and your throat and you wonder if it's the heat that keeps you from being able to swallow or the sight of this creature who is standing in front of the couple she must call mom and dad but you don't hear her say anything. Only see her, standing there in a man's oversized t-shirt with her little girl hair fuzzed hopelessly. It's not the bed-head fuzz of last night's sleep, but the fuzz of many nights sleep that did not include morning brushings. She is filthy and she's barefoot. She is too thin for a baby of seven or eight. She is tan. She is holding an old lawn and leaf garbage bag. It is old because it is thinning. You can almost see through the olive green plastic material because it is so old. She looks into the bag and then looks up at Charles Manson. Another squawk goes up. Louder. This time more fervent. You can't ignore it for all its intensity. You crane your neck to see what else this van holds. You notice the bucket seats of the driver and the passenger. The bucket seats are covered in white paint. Lots and lots of white paint. Pure white or at least what appears to be pure white through the grimy milk of the windshield. You deduce it to be paint because of its drippy quality. It is not upholstery, you tell yourself. Upholstery does

not look drippy. How far do the drips go? You cannot tell because now the couple is looking at you looking at their van, so you turn your head away and pretend you know how to whistle while you pump. Except that. Except that white paint seems to have been slung everywhere. The dash is covered in white paint. And so are some of the windows, you realize. Drippy white paint.

But your brain dismisses this too. Besides, you've got a morning to cover. So you drift in front of this van and you feel sluggish and things are moving in slow motion. Only you don't recognize this either. This is something that you'll work out later—like the next-to-the-last-piece of a large puzzle you never wanted to put together in the first place—you'll replay this slow-mo bit in your head in front of the bathroom mirror, when you're chatting with friends at work, when you go out to dinner with your mother and have two glasses of wine, when you pick up the phone to call the police. Because right now you have four dollars and seventy-nine cents to retrieve from the inside of the mini-mart. From the child-sized Salvadorian man with the Raiders cap on his head who smiles at you all the time. But first you must drift past this van and as you do you see there is a very large shape on top of the passenger seat. Very large. And you realize, by God, that it is a bird. A large bird. And you can see the bird looking at you. Tilting his head. He lets out a squawk.

You return with your change and now your brain is on high alert no longer capable of dismissing a goddamned thing because it should have been on high alert all along and now it feels bad. You drift past the van again and the woman is coming towards you, towards her side of the van and you realize the urchin has disappeared and Charles Manson has returned to his post behind the wheel. You say to the woman, "Is that a parrot?"

And she says, "Yeah. We have three of them."

And you realize, what you should have realized all along and probably would have if not for the milkiness of the van windows and the milkiness of your early morning head, that there *are* three large birds in that van and, as if on cue, one lands near the dashboard, probably on the gear shift you can't see on the center console, and it looks at you, not like a bird but like a predator. And you think, I'll be

god-damned. And suddenly you can clearly detect all three of the large bird bodies.

And the woman says, "They make a mess. We've been traveling."

And then holy shit, you realize, like a ton of bricks, because that's how it feels when you realize it, like a ton of bricks, that the white paint is not white paint at all but fucking bird shit.

Now you're reeling because where is that kid? Where is that little girl in all that bird shit? You look at Charles Manson, meet his eye. Silently begging him to beg you. To ask you for money because he needs it. You want him to get out of the van so that you can give him your four dollars and seventy-nine cents and in so doing you'll be able to ask him something like, 'Where you headed?' And now that you're aware you'll be able to ask him about his *daughter.* 'What school does she go to?' or 'She must be about seven. I've got a seven-year-old. What's her name?' But he doesn't bite because he's wise. He's on to you and your big eyes and the crinkle of disgust your top lip makes even though your brain is aware the rest of your body is on autopilot including the faces you make. The horror you imagine it to be. The horror you know it to be.

For all the time you've wasted staring, the woman has taken her place in her seat and closed her door, sealed the hull, and now Charles Manson has that engine gunning and you think, well the least I can do is get the license plate number and you are aware of one last squawk and the hum of that lazy-eyed camera swinging back and forth, slowly, overhead. But you're still outside your car and he's pulling away, getting away, and the freeway on-ramp you know he's heading for is close, close, close. So you snap out of it—again—and get in your car and pull up behind him and try and see inside that big back window that is almost as grimy as the rest of the van and you're ready with your college-trained memory to get that plate number and rally the troops because god-damn if you haven't just witnessed some kind of crime. But you're in for one more shock. One more shock that is going to cause you to not get that fucking license plate number because as you stare at the rear of that van pulling out of the service station driveway you realize that you can see the shape of that urchin at the back window. That you can see the outline of that bed-head fuzz. But this isn't what

shocks you. What shocks you is that the urchin is surrounded by other girls of similar size and shape. That there are at least six little girls leaning against that back window and you can see their heads moving—not in unison—and you know for sure that they are girls because your gut tells you they are and you can make out the length of their fuzz. Girl fuzz. And one of those six urchins presses a cardboard sign up against the back window. A small cardboard sign that is creased and tattered and the sign is about the size of the palms of your hands. Oddly, this is something you recognize and you imagine washing your face and staring at your palms as they cup the water that is going to rinse away all the lather of the soap that threatens to run into your eyes. This is the size of the sign, you think. But what does it say? You have to strain because the sign is written in what must be green crayon because there isn't much contrast between the brown of the cardboard and the color of the writing and it's thin and scrawled writing. A child's. What does it say? And you get too close to the van in order to read the sign and it says, *Missing*. And you slam on your brakes though you haven't yet really accelerated, were merely coasting. And you make a noise in your car that sounds like, oh! And the holder of the sign presses her cheek against that milky glass and knows that you have been rendered helpless. The van speeds off and hits the freeway on-ramp and you're still hanging out of the driveway, not sure where to go or what to do because you know for sure that Charles Manson and his woman have all the missing girls of Southern California squirreled away in the back of their van and they are heading south. You know that your glove compartment stash does not contain your cell phone because you brought it in the night before to recharge its dead battery and god-damned what to do now? You go home and call the police and get an overworked apathetic female officer who says there hasn't been any crime, which really means that you haven't provided enough information and gut instinct doesn't count for shit in a cop's pen and pad world. And you can almost hear her laugh, almost see her mouthing to her fat cop friends that she's got a live one on the line when you tell her that Charles Manson has all the missing girls. All of them. She advises you to call child protective services but you don't because you know they won't do shit without a name. No victim no crime. So you race back to the service

station and ask the kind, Raider's-cap-wearing-Salvadorian attendant for the tape.

"The tape?" he asks.

You imagine he'd scratch his head if it wasn't covered with such a nice cap. You point to the swinging camera outside and he laughs and winks at you and rests his elbows on the counter and leans toward you. And you realize from his wink and smirk and lean that he's gesturing, conveying a between-you-and-me-there-isn't-a-tape. It's just for show.

# Mining Sierra Nevada Gold

fleshless fingers
reach from a grave
laid long ago.
rugged trees once cleared
around a girl
six, maybe seven,
little difference
that age
except when counting
how many more
weeks spent
hiding from men
after her flower.
this is what we have
in common.
the frail corpse, filthy
hair hunched over
a thin and scarred back,
begs refuge
of my waking day.
this sister and I
hug tightly, then turn.
the stench behind us,
we walk
a twisted path away,
our steps
hidden by protective branches.

Wendy Grosskopf

# Rabbit Hole

The sunset kneeled to kiss the arches,
the city blushed in slate.
I mistook the speck on my windshield
for starlight,
and the felt moon chided me.

I followed you down to the Rabbit Hole,
on Coldwater Canyon.
You danced for everyone,
but stared me down like Bela Lugosi.

We collapsed with me on top.
Our lips became street prophets,
our fingers, tap dancers,
with your heart buried beneath the stage.

I fell back through the looking glass
with a cigarette in my mouth
and claw tracks on my back.
I didn't say "goodnight."

I'm painting pictures on my mirror
of kids in purgatory.
Maybe I'll see you there.

Kris Huelgas

# Dealings

Bulls are not animalistic, not mechanical. They buck because of fear – because like all creatures, they just wish to survive.

The rope used to secure a bull is far from pretty. But it is braided with such a clever tightness that its durability is desirable, its strength admirable.

Each bull has reason, and each rope has purpose.

***

He knew her when she was brazen, and married her when she was simple. His promises had tones, and she was well aware of that. He promised to make her happy. He kept a watch in his pocket so he could feel the ticks. She learned that the heat gave her hard working hands. Kentucky brought bad knees and then bounced checks. He built her a modest house that often lost itself in the field's canvas, at a certain time of the day, when her hair always curled up at the tips. He had a bull, and took to cutting deals on cows – pretty, flushed cows that never strayed far from the house; they only wished to keep their cheeks full and their hooves embedded in the soil. She never cried when they were hauled off, but those nights in bed, she would speak of having children.

She raised two men: one who loved her, and one who would love her.

***

Sitting in the backseat of the station wagon, Mr. Harding offers the map to his sons. It is the time of day when country gnats cluster on the highway, and the moon and sun balance in the sky on their toes.

"See here," he says, pointing to the edge of the map. "Let's take the 190. It'll give us an extra hour or two." His finger shakes.

Keeping one hand on the wheel, Colby reaches for the overhead light. Kemp grabs at his wrist, and tells his older brother, "Don't bother. It don't work."

On which route to take home, the thoughts of these three men differ. But on the basis of this trip, they seem to be in agreement.

It was the Fourth of July, and while Colby and Kemp were outside situating the flag, Mr. Harding watched his wife de-husk corn in the kitchen. She looked at them curiously, as though expecting them to speak.

"You need help, Anne?" he asked.

She said no. And her face kept its nerve.

"Those are some big 'ol steaks in the fridge. Where'd you get 'em?"

No response.

"Are you listening to me?"

She replied with a soft yes.

And she continued to reply, but only to those questions that permitted a yes or no answer. The family barbequed that night like they had for years past, only Anne didn't have her usual appetite. Instead, she served the men in her life silent seconds and thirds. Using her weaker hand. And it wasn't until bedtime, when Anne was incapable of rolling sideways for their usual goodnight kiss, that Mr. Harding decided to call the doctor.

She'd been having one long stroke for one long week.

*So much damage has been done.*

In the hospital room after hours, Mr. Harding thought to kiss his wife. It had been months since that night, months since he felt her lips, months of degeneration. He leaned in halfway and then realized he would have to go further.

They were cool and dry, much like her fingertips. But he still pressed.

She started to breathe funny, like it was all in her throat – a raspy sound of resistance, or, perhaps pain. When Mr. Harding pulled away she gasped for air, loud enough to alarm the nurse. Anne's vitals bounced against all corners of the screen,

and then settled.

The power of kisses.

Mr. Harding called his sons the next morning, saying he was ready to discuss alternatives.

Although he was really a friend of the family, the boys knew him as Uncle Jess. He was a doctor –it didn't really matter of what. He had access. He wouldn't charge them much, and he wouldn't tell anybody. *The first injection relaxes the muscles, the second does the job. Wait a few minutes between the two.* He lived in a little town off of highway 238, which connected to the 190.

They stop at a gas station for coffee.

Colby telephones his fiancé in private.

Kemp pisses while listening to the familiar sound of someone heating up a spoonful of bliss in the next stall.

Mr. Harding takes a moment to stretch, and returns to the backseat – old men with bad knees don't have the strength to hold their heads up for so long.

She was a honky tonk junkie – the desperate married or unmarried who'd flock to the foot of the stage, and let the drum throbs take over their hips and the guitar pinches take over their principles. Darren Harding saw her underneath the cheap, red-filtered lights, and wanted to taste the artificial color on her skin.

He was renting out a guesthouse at the time, behind the bar. It was nothing impressive, but affordable to a busboy who wanted to have enough cash in his pocket to enter amateur steer riding contests. Sometimes musicians who toured by thumb and rig crashed on the couch after performances. But Anne was the first woman to ever enter the place. She wanted moonshine; she had never tried it before. It was all a southern mystery to her.

With his hands in his pockets, Darren boasted cool and straight. He talked about ratios and distilling, about Jimmy Buffet and John Denver's love for the clear stuff. He hoped the facts he poured down her throat would cause her to confide in him, her fantasies, later that evening – wants of a good man, to hold her up and to

pin her down. She rested in the corner spot on the couch, beside him, saying it felt like it had already been worn in for her.

He held out the ladle and poured enough, so that a little pool covered the base. He held a flame to it.

"What's that all about?" Anne asked. "Just booze, right? I can swing it."

"It's a test, to make sure it's alright." Darren said, trying to keep his hand steady. "Blue's a good color. Lead burns red, and you're dead."

It was a common blue. Darren peered at the ladle and looked content. She asked for limes, cut right down the center. He was accommodating. All night, they passed the unmarked bottle. All night, Anne squeezed limejuice into her mouth. At dawn, she complained about a stinging sensation – she had a habit of nibbling around her fingertips – the rawness around her nails refused to be accepting of limes.

She asked that that he suck her pinky. He wanted to, but wished that she hadn't asked in that tone. So instead he held her that night; his arm cushioning her neck from the gritty hardwood floor.

Darren didn't want her to leave. But her goodbye kiss left a sweet acidity on his tongue. He would marry her years later, on the coolest day in August.

The unmarked vials rattle in the glove box. Mr. Harding claims it's too damn quiet to sleep, and asks that they turn on the radio.

Indistinguishable insects are strewn all over the windshield, making the visibility poor. But no one complains because it has caused Colby to slow down a bit.

There was no question in who would administer the injections – who would handle the needle.

"You gonna be alright with this?" Mr. Harding asked his son.

Kemp replied, "Mama said I was goin' to hell anyway, right?"

"She didn't mean it," he murmured. "She didn't mean it. Things just weren't right then."

At fourteen, Kemp discovered that breathing came easier with a shot of whiskey.

At sixteen he discovered that breathing felt natural with a shot of heroin. The latter prevailed for years. And while Colby was away at school falling in love with nice girls from a variety of departments, Kemp remained at home multiplying his track marks and his track record with skinny, mini-skirt wearing, arm-scratching street types.

Anne and Darren walked in one day, to a stranger sitting in their living room. He didn't give himself a name, but introduced his gun as "Steel-O." He walked through the house with a sense of familiarity, listing things that "*be* owed." Both television sets, the power tools, jewelry both faux and authentic. Anne cried, asking why.

"Your son owes my best girl a hundred bucks in favors; the rest of the shit is an inconvenience fee."

Anne and Darren paid for their son's love, and the man left quietly.

Kemp disappeared for a season.

And when they finally heard from him, he only apologized for having called collect. Anne told him he'd burn in hell, although God was rarely mentioned in the household.

That was the first call in regard to their younger son.

The second was from a police officer.

Once again, they paid for their son.

But this time, it was for the sake of their love.

Colby put school on hold to go home and help his brother. After a period of anger, denial and frustration, they began to take long walks, kicking rocks like they were boys and smoking cigars like they were men. They talked about leggy girls versus busty girls, tattoos versus scars.

Colby often tells his father he will finish school someday.

"I owe her. I'll do it," Kemp said, into the ground.

"Good boy." And after patting his younger son on the shoulder, a red-faced Mr. Harding rose and looked to his other son, his older son, for a hug.

She took off work again, to stay home and wait for the real cramping to start.

Anne Harding knew she was still in the early stages, but she aimed to have it over and done with before her husband came home from making his out of town delivery. He had sold Erma – she was an agreeable one – a fistful of hay would guide her into a butcher shop.

It had taken all night for the cramps to edge down. Anne sat in the bathtub, up to her neck. She put her hands to her face, and waited for the water to become fleshy.

This was the fourth time. She couldn't keep draining her wants; she was getting older.

"Can we adopt?" she asked her weary husband.

"I couldn't," said Darren. "I couldn't promise I'd love it the same."

"Don't you love me? I want this…I want a baby." Anne drew him in, and wrapped her arms around his waist. Her only rationale was love, which she voiced from all angles. When it was clear that Darren wasn't moved, she pleaded, directly. Still, nothing.

With her arms still secured around her husband, she looked him in the face. "You're fucking selfish! It's probably your fault that I keep having…you've ***never*** done me right! I can't believe I've stayed with you this long. I should've left after Louisville!"

Darren had freed himself from his wife's clutch. He pointed a finger. "Look, I took care of you. I ***did***! Ain't my fault you stuck around…you were so damn needy, you ***couldn't*** leave!"

"Ain't my fault you couldn't ride a bull! You deserved to get your knee clipped…amateurs get clipped and crippled up."

And at this moment, babies and bulls existed in the same room, somehow.

Darren felt pressure in his knees, and in his heart. He wanted to beat both, but he beat his pretty wife instead. It happened only once. She managed a smile throughout her life, when necessary.

They adopted a son. As a baby, Colby had brown hair, which began to redden the same year that Kemp was born. It was a miracle that Kemp was carried to term –

the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck in the first two trimesters, but he somehow freed himself of it by the third. He grew up with troubled breathing. He cried so often and so hard that the cows would stray onto their neighbor's property. It was required he take expensive medications, daily, and have specialized treatments, weekly. Darren could hardly afford it, and Anne barely had the patience for such a son.

On weekday afternoons, the Harding boys would walk from their elementary school, down the street, to their mother's workplace. Anne would have a few colorful cookies waiting – ones that she decorated especially for them – the sort that stain children's tongues a lively rainbow. Colby sat calmly behind the counter, reading. He'd nibble on his cookies with such a sensibility that not a crumb would find its way into the crevices of his book. Kemp was different. He liked to touch the goodies behind the glass as though it all belonged to him. He ate his cookies so swiftly and so righteously that he'd have difficulty swallowing the massy mouthfuls; this often triggered coughing spates. Customers didn't like to see this skinny, dark-haired, dark-eyed child expelling spit and spoiled air into the room. Some refused their items, even after they had been packaged and fixed with a ribbon.

*Put them in daycare*, the bakery owner said one day. *Or, at least the sick one.*

The Hardings couldn't afford it, not at the time. Not even for one of them.

*Then I'll have to put you and your boys in the back room. You can do the baking. Sorry Anne, we're losing business. And I'm trying to be as understanding as I can.*

Anne worked well in the back room, mixing, rolling, and cutting in the presence of hot ovens. It took a while for her sons to adjust to the dimness and to the temperature. Colby eventually found a corner where he felt comfortable reading. Kemp was different. He'd cry to dryness, blaming his mother for the terrible change, for fewer sweets. He could be silenced, temporarily, if given a ball of dough to play with. But the moment the dough softened and could no longer hold shape, the wailing would resume. In the first week, Anne burned herself repeatedly – she went home with various red shapes scattered on her arms – Darren would ask to touch them. In time, she had forgotten how to decorate. In time, the boys grew independent, and

didn't need to come to the bakery after school. In time, Anne stopped longing to be in the front room.

During the spring time, she often had dreams that Kemp had been born lifeless, or that she would come home from work and find him passed out in the field, blue in the face, eyes bulging. She didn't tell Darren, but she wrote it all down. Kemp would find it one day, as a teenager, digging through his mother's nightstand for cash. And he'd begin to fall in love easily, with any girl who had a sting to her.

The ride couldn't last forever.

They pull into the dark lot of the hospital and leave the doors unlocked, the key in the ignition. When Colby begins to cry, his father tells him he can sit in the car. It's probably better that way.

Kemp and Darren Harding stand at the cracked window. The smell of a mother and a wife seeps out from inside, and although they both identify it, their thoughts differ.

Kemp looks to the sky and remembers sugar coated scolds.

Mr. Harding looks to the ground and remembers the taste of Louisville dirt.

But even this moment seems to have an expiration date. Because they're far past waiting, prolonging, and thinking. And they're fully aware of it.

"We can walk away, Kemp. Let her die God's way. Maybe she can't even feel anymore." Darren waits for his son to tell him that he agrees. But Kemp doesn't. Instead, he begins to slide through the window with the gracefulness that he imagined. God was rarely mentioned in their household.

Once Kemp is inside, Darren sinks into the ground. His knees can't take the pressure.

Kemp goes to his mother, and looks into her face. It is sunken and dry; her mouth is cracked. The alarm clock on the bedside table gives her exposed skin a blue hue. He gathers her hair and twists it up, letting the would-be braid settle across her neck. It tumbles to her side, and naturally loosens.

The vials are warm in his pocket. The syringe digs into his thigh.

He wonders if he can do this. He wonders if he'll be changed.

# My Conversation With the Man in White

Scott Macdonald

On the day I quit my job starting fires for the Sonny Liston Society, I bought an old edition of 2001: *A Space Odyssey* and pasted Ray Bradbury's name over Arthur C. Clarke's, because everyone knows that Ray Bradbury is much fatter and is far less likely to act out his tendencies toward child molesting, I lit a green torch because it was the 4th of December and the nation would be celebrating its codependence, I laid myself down on my waterbed of nails and was very nearly resigned to comic sedation in the jelly velvet when the man in white burst into the room raving about his winning horse (aptly named Thirsty Ridiculous), I calmed him down and poured us both a glass of apathy, the man in white started our dialogue with his usual opening remark about how my upside down picture of Brigham Young made him nervous, I calmed him down by telling him a joke about Lady Godiva riding a chocolate camel on a hot day, the man in white started a calculated discussion by reminiscing our past adventures which haven't as yet taken place, "Remember that day?" he said, "that was the day we bought trench coats and started smoking cigarettes," "Ah yes," I replied, "I remember, gray clothes and messed up hair, the world in black and white, we were in a French film," the man in white was a serious charmer like Don Johnson or Don Rickles, "It's all right here in the mischievous dream," he said, "I recycle your thoughts and put my name on them is what the holder of the vanity complex says as he walks away leaving footprints of alternating colors…shame, shame, shame, I know your pseudonym," we then turned our attention to religion, "So did you really write the Bible?" I asked, "Yes, I sure did," "Did it take you a long time?" "Yes, if you think 3 days is a long time,

I do, I never slept once and I lived off peanut butter and cigarettes for those 3 days, but don't worry, I kept the ashes out of the peanut butter," the man in white had been there and done that and he was full of all kinds of historical deviance and commentary, "Did you know that Judas didn't hang himself but was actually beaten to death by the other eleven apostles?" he said, homosexual stomp dance on the solitary homophobic pirate of Palestine, the man in white knew all of history's mysteries but had a sad home life, his parents had divorced during the zygote stage and he now lived in a bohemian apartment in the homicidal artist district of the city, he told me about his daily routine, "The starving artist stands on the boulevard, he paints a different picture everyday and presents me with it as if it were something original, but it's always a picture of me reading in the bath," he said, I could tell that talking personal was not his cup of zodiac and the snowman was beginning to melt from the burning dollar bills, it was at this point that the man in white collected his mustache and sundial and left without saying goodbye or offering me any of his lemon wedges, he walked out muttering something about Thirsty Ridiculous' royal bloodline. I should stop taking opium.

# The Surfaceer

Cynthia Glucksman

Years ago I lost my way in North Dakota and found myself at an unfamiliar snowfield. For twenty minutes, hours, days, I wandered one flat plane of snow until the wind drove me to another. The two landscapes were distinctly different. The first was a sea of glassy, white-lacquered freeze, while the other a ragged swamp of slush. The two surfaces were like a pair of contradictory dress materials; one was silk and the other tweed. A crisp line of ice delineated the distinction. The two snow planes puzzled me. Did a man come to iron the smoother plane, and tromp on the rough one? Who would have such an impractical job, and what kind of tools would he use? How long would it take to smooth or abrade such enormous surfaces? This individual was an enigma to me, but he occupied my mind for quite a length. I called him the Surfaceer, the artificer of snow.

For miles I walked, thinking about the Surfaceer. I imagined his stout, stalwart body, making warped footprints in the flurried snow. Though my legs ached and my stomach moaned for nourishment, I carried on with the hope of finding the Surfaceer. After twenty minutes, hours, days, I felt my knees buckle under my body, and eventually my head rested on a cold, downy pile of snow. My skin began to harden. I was freezing and hungry, and I prayed for my life.

I was just about to fall asleep forever, when I felt a flapping creature beneath my head. I could sense it struggling under my stiff, pinioned body, so with all my strength I raised my head enough to free the creature. My eyes were blurred by the cold, but I saw the tip of a heavy wing, flapping eagerly at the corner of my eye. It

was gold, the color of summer. The wing grew until a heap of golden feathers appeared before me. I recoiled, startled by the glorious vision. My lips were frozen to stone, but I managed to mutter,

"Are you He?"

But the creature never voiced an answer. It flew in a steady circle above my head, and then descended in front of me. Its great wings gathered at its side like a collection of buttresses. I reached out to touch its wings, but it twitched and widened its eyes. Wider and wider the eyes grew until they blinded me. And I realized then that I had been staring straight into the sun. That gaping sun, whose slivers of light I had mistaken for a bird, had curiously deceived me. What a useless prop, I thought, feeling cold and annoyed that I had missed the obvious. How was I so detached and unaware?

In my frustration and delirium I became desperate to find the Surfaceer, or at least another living man. Together the glaring white terrain and yellow sun made my head ache. My feeble legs would not lift me to walk, so I gathered my strength and crawled through the cold, ice-crushed snowfield. My already tattered gloves shredded with each pace, and my knees were denser than diamonds. Twenty minutes, hours, days passed until my knees brought me to yet another plane of snow.

Plane three was different from the sleek Plane One and the squashy Plane Two. The third plane wasn't a plane at all, but a forest of ice columns. In awe, I blinked my eyes, hoping this was not another one of nature's deceptions. The shards of ice were of various shapes and densities. Individually, they were like white redwood trees, each distinctive in form. But as a collected image I saw before me the North Dakota Metropolis. Suddenly I became ecstatic and my energy was restored. I rose to my feet and for the first time in minutes, hours, days, I stepped from Plane Two into the magnificent snow city.

I stood beside one of the first ice trees and tried to recover the circulation in my hands. I rubbed them together hard and I worried that they would turn to fire and burn up the Metropolis. Depleted, I put one hand on the tree and leaned against it. Beneath my hand I felt a stir, and then a string of consecutive heartbeats. They

pounded a strange percussion into my hands. I began to count the beats per minute, like a doctor would measure the rate of a human pulse. Did this icicle tree have a pulse? 100, 88, 76, 60, it slowed until it muted. Or perhaps it transferred its fervent rhythm to my hand. Thump 60, thump 76, thump 88, thump 100. I removed my hand and felt it thaw and warm up. I looked at the tree, now more vivacious and colorful than its white body could tolerate. It glowed before me.

"Are you He?"

I waited for the answer. You have a pulse, I thought, surely you are He.

There was silence and then a lambent indigo flame appeared in place of the tree. The flame sputtered stroboscopic sparks in my direction. The spears of light pulsated: 60, 76, 88, 100, 450, 680, 1,000, 10,000 beats thrashing to the sunlit sky. I held myself, drenched in rhythm, wincing in fear. A chorus of drums trembled through my blood, eventually pushing my body forward through the forest. Each tree I passed burst into a firework, like the explosive spectacle of the Fourth of July. I was the magician of the forest, whirling each tree into a glacial pyrotechnical phenomenon.

I looked back and saw behind me the now nonexistent forest I had burned down. This is a place, I thought, where ice ignites and the sun takes the shape of a giant bird. Where a large man strokes the surface of the ice with his bare feet. For the first time in twenty minutes, hours, days, I began to question where I was and how I got here. My mind ached with questions, hallucinations, theories, meditations, and ruminations. It was then that I fainted on the far edge of the former ice forest.

A heavy pile of hail nearly knocked me into deeper colorless dreams. But I heard the repetitive refrain of thunder and awoke beneath a heap of ice stones. I was thankful to be alive. Slowly, I raised my hand to brush the hail from my stomach. I turned my head and let the cold air soothe my cheeks. Beside me, I watched a pile of hail form a column, which became the figure of a woman. She resembled a stone caryatid, an ancient Greek column shaped like a female slave. The caryatids have immeasurable power; each could support the whole weight of Mt. Olympus on her head should she attempt. This one held only the grave North Dakota air. She had poorly chiseled hair, gracefully thinning after a life of struggle. Her feet were tucked

inside heavy white sandals. Her expression was resolute, like a brazen athlete receiving an Olympic gold medal. From her lips dripped thin icicles that shattered at her feet. You, I thought, are a woman. I wanted to tell her that she had no business here; that this was a frightening place where everything turns to either fire or ice.

But all I could manage to murmur was, "My Queen, my Surfaceer!"

She was the Surfaceer, the mighty creature who determined the shape of the snowy landscape, the pliant terra firma. I fell to my knees and kissed her smooth feet. The icicles from her lips rained over my head. They struck my back and lifted my spine up and up and up until I reached her eyes. Her eyes were cold crystals and her lips held a dripping necklace of frigid jewels. I kissed her until her icicles stabbed me from the inside. Like the lightning strands of Zeus they penetrated me, warmed me, calmed me. Around us a cacophony of hail and thunder applauded our kiss. Over and over the ice shrieked, "Queen! Queen!" as the sun's rays split through her icicles. When she released me from her euphoric embrace, I felt the icy plane of earth buckle beneath me. The North Dakota ground shook so hard that the caryatid cracked and crumbled to the ground like sea glass.

Then, a hush.

Once she had completely collapsed, the Surfaceer's gargantuan body created a fourth surface, on which I continued to tread. The smashed pieces of her body pricked at my feet. I mourned her loss as I walked on top Plane Four, her sharp shattered remains. I cried at the thought of having kissed the Surfaceer. Alone I wept for the crumbled fallen caryatid.

After an epoch of solitary weeping, I found myself back at the first plane of snow. My tears had frozen a tough layer of ice over my face, immobilizing me from grieving. Having made a completed circle, I stood still and scanned the snowfield. All I saw was the span of milky landscape that greeted the honeyed sun: a Promised Land of nothing. I looked down at my withered body. A pair of pink fingers peered through my ripped woolen gloves. The tiny pebbles of ice clung to the fibers of the wool and stung my fingers. The fabric was so thin and tattered from my journey. I

carefully peeled them from my hands and let them dangle from my fingers. I stood in the cold and stared at the pieces of wool, wondering what to do next. The air moved easily against my skin, but it grew more and more rapid. It accelerated at my feet then climbed up and grabbed the gloves from my hands. I watched as the wind whirled them into the horizon. The gloves clapped together, mocking me in my thin clothes and emaciated body, jeering my journey.

They laughed and hollered, "Hoo! Ha! No food in North Dakota! Wrong way. Try again! Hoo! Ha! Hoo! Ha!"

After a few more fits of laughter, the gloves waved at me and drifted into the sky. I gazed down at my naked hands. They looked like they had been severed from my body. They moved separately from me. And with each move my hands mocked me. My arms mocked me. My knees mocked me. My feet mocked me. My eyes deceived me. They closed into tight balls and hardened to stone. I could not see anything but a shard of a diamond reflecting rays of light. I screamed out loud because I was going blind. The North Dakota ice had turned my eyes into crystals.

Years ago I lost my way in North Dakota and found myself at an unfamiliar snowfield. For twenty minutes, hours, days, I wandered the flat planes of snow, blind and alone. There was nothing else to need. The hard ice burned holes through my shoes, but the crepe snow softened my steps. There was nothing else for which to ask. There was nothing else for which to call. My radiant visions had melted into an opaque reality. I shut my eyes forever from the sun.

# Nocturne For Love and Gravel

I used to believe
in language; the involuntary
way each thought turned

words into results, brought godliness
to syllables. *I want* and *I*
*need* had no sad songs between

them, no miles thin from the narrow
trudge of the highway, this same road
home from your apartment. Tonight I press

my tongue against the back
of my teeth, pin desire there
until it hurts. I tell myself

that poems cannot voice this: how
love spills, the way to clean it up—
hurried, like kisses on side streets before

she gets home. I tell myself
you'll leave her; this frantic philosophy—

the need to sing each traffic light
into sweetened, hallowed being.

# The Art of the Quarry

My mother's mind is a crooked frame
on the wall that slants each time
it's fixed. When she's sick,

she moves pictures around: watercolor figs
from kitchen to bathroom, an old map of Italy
above the piano. She removes the portrait

of a valley with dark pines that look like rocks,
a quarry beneath the sunset; her pain
is granite I haul from its depths and pile

between us. At breakfast, the changing
milligrams are lined up on the table
like chipped marble, broken bits

of sleep, calm, the still-life of pills
that function best when they quiet.
Depakote, Wellbutrin, Abilify

swallowed like pebbles from a child's palm—
the frantic mother reaches her fingers inside,
pulls poems from the quarry of her daughter's throat.

Mary Angelino

# Gods and Monsters

Like Marilyn from *The Munsters*,
I am slightly out of place,
in my crisp poplin, starched Peter Pan collars, and grosgrain ribbons.
My hands smooth wrinkles like hot pressed irons.

Born into a family of tattoos, nose rings, and hair drama,
I do not fit in this hall of mirrors.

Clearly, my soul took a wrong turn
and confused Hollywood for Hancock Park,
missed the pink and green bassinet laid out just for me.

"God has his reasons," says my fourteen-year-old daughter.
Already the neo-flower child I think.
My mother's spell is working on her.

At seven I remember,
I laid out my black ballet leotard, delicate pink tights, and new slippers.
That night I dreamed I was a French ballerina.

In the morning I went to put it on,
And there in its place was a tie-dyed monstrosity.
My mother stood beaming,
"You'll be the grooviest kid at ballet."
I cried and buried my face in the fabric.
She made me wear it.
All the mothers
loved the dancing marble.

# Writing over the Fox Myth: Small Fictions

Jennifer Lu

## The Big Picture

Unlike the dragon and the phoenix, two magical animals of such high favor in Chinese culture that their likenesses are usually embroidered on wedding gifts, the fox spirit symbolizes the downfall of marriage and the subsequent splitting of families. Due to its ill reputation, reverence for the fox spirit is concentrated among its secret cults.

The fox spirit is a versatile being, sometimes female and sometimes male; sometimes animal and sometimes human; at times real and at other times imaginary. It is impossible to pin a single label to the fox spirit. Suffice it to say that the Chinese fox spirit is a mythological being that is at once fox, man, and woman, a conceptual embodiment of the yin and yang ideal. Female and darkness are symbols of yin, male and light symbols of yang. As a nocturnal being, the fox can collect abundant yin, and to maintain physiological proportion, seeks to collect yang as well.

We know from Chinese fox tales that it is both goddess and demon, feared and respected for its powers. At night, it takes on the form of a woman or nymph and seduces unsuspecting men, luring–disappearing–them into the woods to drain them of their life forces. After a cycle of about a thousand years, the Chinese fox spirit's immortality is secured. (In less popular versions of the tale, the fox transforms into an old man who plays tricks on people and causes mischief.)

Fox tales tell us that the fox spirit has a keen sense of smell, especially for men.

With its telepathic powers, it may cause a car to run off course and then the fox, now a nymph, will appear out of nowhere, halo pulsing, seductive and enigmatic, to offer her assistance. The man, who may be described as someone who has a good head on his shoulders, finds it hard to keep his eyes off her and to focus on the task at hand—getting his car to work. His mind feels scattered, thoughts loose and displaced.

The fox sees her opportunity, as the man fumbles under the hood of his car. "Can I offer you my home for the night? This is in the middle of nowhere, and my home is just beyond those trees." The fox gestures to the dark spaces between the trees. "It is quite cozy, and I don't mind accommodating you at all."

The man, now fully in a trance, allows her to take him by the hand, and they head for the fox's lair.

The night of Chinese Moon Festival (the night when the moon is the brightest and fullest that one will see all year) is also one of the fox's favorite nights to prepare to meet men. As expected, the moon shines bright and strong, casting a blue light on the earth for miles around. After sharing dinner and prayers with their families, young men like to venture out to the lake to fish, hopefully catch something and have one more reason to celebrate. So a group of young men, all chatter and masculine energy, swagger with their fishing poles and bait boxes toward the lake that is reflecting the moon perfectly.

"You think we'll catch something worthwhile tonight?"

"I bet I can catch more than you. The moon goddess is on my side tonight."

Laughter and playful nudging ensues.

They think they glimpse a wolf or the suggestion of a wolf, whatever it is that appears out of the corner of their eyes then removes itself in the next second. They shrug it off only to hear a feminine cry for help coming from the direction of the lake. Arms are flailing; a head bobs in and out of the water. The boys, being moderate to strong swimmers, drop their fishing gear and run to the edge of the lake, oblivious that they are entering a trap.

Of course, there have been efforts to capture, or at least contain the fox spirit. Fox hunters and detectives who are less likely to fall under her spell (due to their military

and/or an intense scholarly background) have collaborated together to develop strategies for this task. Thus far, they have not succeeded. The fox spirit is simply too quick and elusive, always one step ahead of her potential captors.

The fox is not known only for its tricks and ability to seduce men, or the way they seduce men or why they seduce men. Unsurprisingly, it is also the inspiration for multiple adult films, in which the fox nymph is responsible for the initiation of rowdy couplings and such. Two titles to consider are *Erotic Ghost Story* and *Fox Ghost*. Tales of the fox-spirit pass from generation to generation in Chinese communities all over the world. The continual telling of fox myths can be seen in non-adult and more mainstream comedy or dramatic movies that allude to the fox spirit, usually when a husband has a mistress on the side—the mistress is known as the *wuilijing*.

The fox spirit has also motivated the formation of secret cults that to this day honor her in undisclosed corners of select Buddhist temples. The fox spirit offers sympathy to taboo matters that other gods frown upon, such as wishing for a man to leave his wife or clearing up one's skin. Usually, the fox's visitors are of a lower social class and are not educated.



## Potholed

Here is a slanted street. It is nestled on the border of two districts in Los Angeles.

The slanted street features both dilapidated and newly renovated houses, apartment buildings, and duplexes that used to be dilapidated houses. At the foot of the slanted street is a small park where people can walk rabbits, chinchillas, chickens, and the occasional dog. The populace of the slanted street is mostly Chinese with a few Latinos.

I want to focus on this house here, this in-between house, with a driveway that fits up to two family vans, and just beyond the driveway, a garage in ruins. There is a fence enclosure. No pets.

The neighbors on the slanted street are crowding around the house in question. There is tension in their postures. They concentrate on the scene in front as one does on the delivery of breaking news. From the house come angry voices. Floating voices. One voice is female, an older female, perhaps in her forties. The other voice is male, also older, also perhaps in his forties. The female voice outtalks the male voice, announcing, "You're stuck in her spell. The fox has brainwashed you."

A car skids out of control, careens over the sidewalk, through a fence, and into the side of the house where the dining area is. Windows rupture. Metal folds. Wood splits. Windowsrupturemetalfoldswoodsplits. The driver, a man who is perhaps in his forties, staggers out. He sees stars everywhere; the stars are really mounds of broken glass scattered about in piles single layers. A woman, also perhaps in her forties, wobbles out of the passenger side. She is clutching a furry tail. A long bushy tail. No animal. (You wonder, where is the rest of it?) They try their best to gather themselves and to steady their breaths, one hand against the car that is most likely totaled.

They start arguing.

The male and female voices gain momentum, congealing into two human bodies, a man and a woman. The neighbors draw back in surprise, and then huddle closer. The woman is hitting the man in the face and across the back with a scruffy animal's tail. Realization dawns in the neighbors' eyes: the woman is crazy-angry because she just found out that her husband has been having an affair. Alas, the fox spirit has struck, and has left her tail behind.

The couple in their forties has one daughter. Their daughter is in college and visiting for the weekend. From the couch in the living room, trying to complete a reading assignment, she hears them fighting on the porch, and she notices through the window that some of the neighbors have gathered on their respective front porches to listen and watch.

"You're stuck in her spell. The fox has brainwashed you," the woman shouts as she tosses her husband's clothes out onto the porch. He is scrambling from one end of the porch to the other, trying to keep up with the woman, gathering as she flings more. He tells her to keep her voice down, that the neighbors don't need to know. The woman continues to spit out her fury because she doesn't care if the neighbors know.

There is no car wreck. No car has skidded out of control. No car has careened over the sidewalk and crashed into a fence causing the fence to cave in forming odd new angles. No car has barreled into anyone's dining room. The fence still stands upright. No squealing tires down the street, either.

Staring at the pages of the book, the words no longer registering in her mind, the daughter remembers a time when her father was loving. It was the only time he has ever been loving. It was her first day of kindergarten. And the family was in a new home in a new city. They had moved from Sacramento to Los Angeles. Daughter and father stood outside the main office of the elementary school, the daughter not wanting her father to leave. And the father kneeled down, eye to eye with his daughter, and kissed her on the cheek. Assured her that she would learn and have fun and meet friends.

"You're a big girl now."

Hand in hand, a man and woman head for their motel room. There is a skip to their step. The man is married, but he is not wearing his wedding ring. The woman is some years younger than him. She wears a clingy dress with a high slit and has on too much makeup. The man is balding. He keeps glancing down at his body, inspecting his arms, stomach, the way he walks. He does that constantly, even when he is driving.

The daughter sits cross-legged on the couch, her lower back cushioned by a small pillow. She is engrossed in a book, a collection of post-modern fiction for her graduate class. As much as she wishes not to be interrupted, this is the moment when, down the street, a car is skidding out of control. Now it careens over the sidewalk through the fence and hurtles into the dining room, sending a long shudder through the house. The daughter hears, not sees, all of this happening and although she can't quite make sense of it, her body reflexively creases into an emergency crouched position.

When she dares peek from her folded arms, she is baffled by the normalcy before her eyes, the absence of damage anywhere.

Almost twenty years later, sitting calmly on a couch, her mind grazing over the encouraging words, "You're a big girl now," the daughter feels more detached than moved. Such words were spoken too long ago, and since then such words do not exist. What has existed is a wall between herself and her parents, and for this reason, she now has a hard time willing the wall to collapse, to urge them to come back in and talk over the conflict grownup to grownup (to grownup).

A man and younger woman proceed to the motel room that they just checked into. The man is married, but he is not wearing his wedding ring. There is a hint of lightness to their step. The younger woman carries a bag that contains a clingy dress with a high slit. She usually prefers not to wear makeup, but at this moment, she feels she should have, for she feels a sense of foreboding, a sense that she needs to hide behind something.

This is madness, thinks the daughter. She pushes herself off the couch and hollers through the window, "Get you asses back in here and stop embarrassing yourselves."

She opens the front screen door, sticking her hand out to pull her mother back inside. The mother, caught off guard, stumbles easily into the living room. She is

looking at her hand. Where is the fox's tail?

The woman trails her husband and the "other woman," the "bitch," (her words, not mine) to their motel. The wife is wearing a clingy dress with a high slit and has on too much makeup. The husband and mistress are walking hand in hand. When they stop to embrace, the wife leaps at the younger woman, fingers taut and teeth bared. She bites down hard.

The husband succeeds in prying the two women apart, but the wife still manages another swipe. She touches hair. She yanks. A body part comes off. Something soft and pliable. When she opens her eyes, the younger woman is somehow off in the distance, running swiftly on her arms and legs. The wife is left with a warm tail—just the tail—in her hands.

The fox's tail.

It was yanked from the body too fast. Where the tail connected to the body, the tip, it is numb yet raw, for the nerves are still there. The nerves are sighing, disoriented at the separation from the body.

No one realizes this.

"I will jump out. Just watch me," the woman threatens inside the moving car.

"Why don't you?" the husband retorts.

The woman unlocks the passenger door with one hand, reaching for the door handle with the other. The fox's tail, still warm from its recent extraction, lies in her lap. The husband reaches over her to keep the door shut. They wrestle back and forth. The car skids out of control, careens over the sidewalk, through a fence, and into the side of the house where the dining area is. Windowsrupturemetalfoldswoodsplits.

Their next-door neighbors are drawn from their evening activities, completely indiscreet about eavesdropping. The Lee family is rooted to their respective porch, arms crossed or held behind their backs, listening to the flood of words from one

house over, concentrating as if on the delivery of breaking news. Only half of Mrs. Lam's hair is in rollers while her fingers twirl a hairbrush. Her two children peer from behind her nightgown, one holding a book and the other one chewing a pencil. Mr. Rodriguez, who rakes his driveway every night, stops mid-job, momentarily distracted from the pile of leaves at his feet.

The daughter refuses to be a part of this madness. She pushes herself off the couch, her belongings falling to the floor. Madness, that's what she calls it in her mind. As she is thinking it, she feels Madness fall out of her head, letter by letter, meaning upon meaning (signifier by signifier, signified by signified). Catch me, it says before leaping through the window. Madness does not pause. It takes off in a sprint; its footprints are paw-like. She reaches for it and grabs her mother instead. Caught off guard, her mother stumbles easily back into the house. She is looking at her hands with wonder.

Elated by her newfound freedom, the fox's tail weaves a fox's tale. The Tail, in escaping the madness on the porch, encounters Madness. They circle each other, intrigued and curious. They touch, causing a miniature explosion of fireworks that can be felt, but not seen or heard. They jump and twirl and dance until they are dizzy. When the dizziness subsides, Tail confesses that she feels deficient, imperfect without the body. Madness is already tamed by the softness of Tail, perhaps a little smitten or a little head-in-the-clouds in love, so she agrees to help find the body.

They decide not to head up the hill because that's where the rich people live. They instead sashay toward the small park at the foot of the slanted street where the chinchillas, rabbits, and chickens hang out sometimes, looking for a dog, the occasional dog, for the dog will know best where its cousin, the fox, will hide. But the dog is nowhere to be found.

A fox's tale has begun, but it does not conclude. It will not cease.

## How to Slay a Fox

You live in a house on a street that slopes uphill. It can be described as a street that slopes downhill, too, but the way you look at it is that when you're walking home, toward the house, you are going uphill. Your house came with a driveway that fits up to two family vans, and just beyond the driveway, a garage in ruins. There is a fence enclosure, and you sometimes wish that there were one or even two dogs behind the fence to say hi and goodbye to.

At home, the room that you love is yellow. Or rather, it carries a yellow sheen because the walls are not yellow. The sunlight does not come through the only window in the yellow room. The room is yellow, but not the kitchen that is connected to it. Sometimes there are plates of homemade pad-thai and chow mein on the counter. You can see the smell of it, the steam traveling through the air.

Here's the plan, a scenario:

You could be anywhere. A bar. Or a large furniture store. Let's go with the large furniture store. You scan the place, let your eyes roam over the oversized candles that are as big as newborn babies and marked 50% off, the carefully put-together dining sets, the armoires with flower arrangements on top. Spot a man across the way, by the dinnerware and Japanese sake sets. You decide that he has intelligent eyes and lovely, soft lips. Catch his eye, let the gaze linger for two or three seconds; that way, he will know that you're interested. Allow him to walk over. Hi. You brush his arm, lean back (to make him want more), elbows perched on, say, a tall rustic-style table. Be sure to smile and laugh. He asks, You come to this store a lot? When I can, I just love the stuff here. What are you shopping for? I am shopping for _____. Etc. Etc.

You see your friend, gesture for her to come over. Have you met my friend, Judy? No, I haven't. Nice to meet you, says Judy. You and Judy excuse yourselves. Ten minutes later, Judy approaches the man without you, asks him, Have you seen my friend? No. Would you let her know I was looking for her? Sure. You re-enter the

zone shortly after Judy walks away and ask, Have you seen my friend, Judy? Yes, she was just looking for you.

A more meaningful conversation can now develop between you and the man with intelligent eyes (hazel) and lovely, soft lips.

What do you do when Mom asks you to become a fox slayer? She doesn't ask over dinner. She doesn't ask when you're on your way out the door to the bar or furniture store. She asks you when you're about to fall asleep, not just once but a few times, like a mantra, so you fall asleep with the words fluttering in your ears. She whispers some more: you are young, and with young blood comes young energy.

What do you do, then?

In your bedroom, away from the rest of the house, stop in your tracks. See yourself in the large mirror that stretches from one end of the wall to the other. First feel a chill, and then see the chill—a kind of hazy see-through veil—before it enters and settles into your body. Your body starts convulsing. Let your mouth widen as your tongue is expanding and elongating. Your fingers curl out in front of you. Your face stretches in all directions and whiskers materialize and your eyes start glowing red then black, red then black, and finally just black. Fur is springing up on your skin, a tail is being pushed out of your back, and before you know it, you are collapsing on the floor, your arms no longer arms but part of the four legs that you can stand up on and run swiftly (gracefully) with.

Go ahead and exchange phone numbers with the man with intelligent eyes and lovely, soft lips. Make sure there are seven digits, or ten altogether if you are including your area code. Brush your fingers against the back of his hand, and feel how warm his fingers are against your skin. Kiss him on the lips if you want, but it's all right if you don't because you have something else to look forward to on the potential first date. You end up holding hands, though, after you leave the store. (He buys a Japanese sake set while you buy nothing.) Once you part ways, you notice that the

man with intelligent eyes (no, they're not hazel but graceful green with gold specks that become more concentrated in the sunlight) and lovely, soft lips has only written down 9 digits for his number.

This is what you do. You will become a fox slayer because Mom is an expert with guilt trips and she will never let you forget it if you didn't at least try. Plus you are a dutiful daughter and you have been conditioned to think that you are of one flesh with Mom. You hurt when she hurts. Especially when family is involved, especially Dad and his mistress, whom Mom calls the *wulijing*.

The large mirror in your bedroom has always disturbed you; that's why you usually cover it with Mom's large homemade curtain to alleviate your anxiety. But now, you appreciate its size a little more, and you turn this way and that, trying to reconcile the image of the fox in front of you with the image of the young woman in your mind. You feel separate from the reflection you see, the reflection that you should know so well but really do not. Simultaneously, you feel the magnetism and you can't pull away. You rub the mirror with your nose that twitches involuntarily, sniffing around. Your eyes are two black cavities, deep and searching, almost bottomless. The depth of your eyes astounds you. You can look and look. Whiskers and ears quiver. You are able to move your body in a way you did not know possible. You admire your tail. It is thick and fans out like soft flames.

His name is Druva. The man from the furniture store, with the graceful green eyes and lovely, soft lips. His name is Druva, you tell Judy again because you like the sound of it said out loud. It is Sanskrit, the classical language of India. He smells of motel soap, and you don't generally like the scent of motel soap, but you decide that on him, it is sexy, masculine, and almost comforting. You tell Judy that you imagine his eyes would be bright, marbled green behind contacts. You giggle with Judy on the act and success of this courting ritual, although Druva did leave out a digit in his phone number.

Lesson: slaying a fox is not that different from slaying a vampire. Not that Mom knows anything about slaying vampires, but she wants to make the experience more contemporary with your generation, something you can relate to. You sign up for martial arts classes for strength building, cardio and meditation. Compliments of Mom.

More: it doesn't matter how you slay the fox. You can pierce its heart with a stake just like one does with a vampire, or not. Use your imagination. Put your skills to the forefront. Tease and confuse the fox. But make sure you end up with its tail. Slay the fox, claim its tail.

You and Judy reason that it must have been nerves that caused Druva to omit one digit from his phone number which he wrote on the back of his receipt for the Japanese sake set. You have time to figure this out. It is safe to assume that he missed the last digit. You try 1 through 4. You succeed with 4. He sounds happy to hear from you, commends you for making the first move; after all, most girls don't make the first move.

You and Druva end up talking for hours on the phone. You skip dinner because hunger is the least of your worries. You can't help but confess, "I feel like I knew you from another lifetime." How quickly thoughts move to the tip of your tongue and escape from your lips.

He invites you to his house. You feel the same delicate familiarity as you wander through the living room, past the statues of Indian deities and books and guitars, through the backyard with a fish fountain, and through the kitchen and its wide windows. He shows you his bedroom, and his sheets are in a shade of yellow, the yellow of the room at home, the yellow of the room that you love.

His lips are as soft as you imagined, perhaps even softer.

What ensues in the next few hours is a Blur, a series of flashes, hearts pounding in each other's ears, lost in effervescence, the soaring and calming sensations of soaking in a natural hot spring. Before falling asleep together, you and Druva lie on

your sides facing each other, eyes and lips smiling.

You escape before he can wake up and notice the bushy tail that is swelling on your back.

Mom is training you well. The guilt trips continue to pay off. You, a dutiful daughter and a good student, work hard on your fox-slaying skills. During the lessons, Mom reiterates: a fox spirit is one that needs to be contained; the fox spirit's power must be extinguished once and for all. For weeks, you practice your fencing and martial arts, study the male's role in courtship rituals, and immerse in self-hypnosis to strengthen your mind against the fox spirit's dexterity.

That night, under a full moon, with Mom's attention and willing hands, you dress up as a man, gluing on a fake mustache and wearing a wig to hide your long hair. You are exuding a maleness that has been practiced but feels somehow innate enough, as if resurrected from long ago.

Mom can finally rest at night, now that revenge is within reach. Hands pressed to her heart, she sends you off into the dark.

As expected, you are approached by the fox spirit as a nymph, a lustrous apparition. After what feels like hours or even days of combating, of gaining then losing the upper hand, you heave the fox spirit into quicksand, and watch as it sinks. The fox spirit is not deterred. It emerges from the quicksand in slow motion, using its mind to split itself into multiple mirror images. (Which is the real fox? Which are the imagined foxes? Or are they at once mythological and true?) A stampede of fox spirits is heading for you, heading for all directions, on and on.

## Perhaps It's Time

Woman 1 locks the door of her welfare-funded apartment, and walks, head down and hands in jacket pockets, the few blocks to the local Buddhist temple. Woman 1 lives by herself and only now and then entertains a married man that she loves. Man 1 only visits her now and then; it is difficult, he reminds her, for the rest

of his time is invested in work, his wife, and children.

Distraught, she trips badly over an uneven part of the sidewalk, looking around to see if anyone saw. There are two children across the street, playing and laughing, and Woman 1 thinks that they may be laughing at her so she quickens her step. A guard dog appears out of nowhere from behind a gate, teeth bared and barking furiously, and Woman 1 draws back in a panic. She walks the rest of the way, heart pounding, and hopes this is not an omen.

This Buddhist temple is like no other. Woman 1 has done her research and has followed the clues and trails only to discover the temple is right by her apartment, right under her nose. The temple's uniqueness is masked by its location in this inner city, right next to a Mobil gas station. Certain parts of the temple walls are scrawled with graffiti by the local gangs. Woman 1 is lucky, she knows; other men and women are traveling greater distances to visit this temple. This temple has, nestled in the back corner room, a statue of the fox spirit for visitors to pray to. Only if you have exhausted all possibilities to cure your heartaches will you pursue this. Woman 1 reaches the temple entrance, surveying the dragon statues, red lanterns strung over the main large incense pot, objects that she passes by every morning to the bus stop. On the way in, she brushes by Woman 2.

Woman 2 has just finished praying to the fox spirit. She came with Man 2 to wish for togetherness through eternity. Woman 2 has not exactly been virtuous. She has had multiple sexual partners since she was fifteen, and the fact is public knowledge. Man 2's family knows about it, and his parents have said No to their desire to wed. Man 2 has always been timid and eager to please, and he is most eager to please his parents, who, being successful co-managers of a large Chinese restaurant, have taken good care of Man 2 through adulthood. However, Man 2 is deeply in love with Woman 2. For the first time in his life, he feels a need to stand up to his parents. Not knowing how to declare his love for Woman 2, every time he tries to argue, his words are reduced to silence by his parents' set jaws and uncompromising glares, and he feels guilt, blooming guilt in pushing the matter. Walking away, he will reprimand himself: fool! coward! Finally, Woman 2 and Man 2 hear of a temple that holds a

statue whose profound power is known only to its secret cults. They have been visiting this temple since.

Woman 1 enters the temple and makes her way past the row of gods that seem to be patrolling the main incense-filled room. She's not quite sure where she is heading for. She glimpses a temple keeper sweeping a corner. She makes her way there and opens her mouth to whisper the clandestine phrase. Her eyes are watering from the heavy incense smoke, but the temple keeper mistakes them for tears of grief and quickly gestures her to a corner that she did not take notice of before. Woman 1 still feels unsure, but her feet seem to know the way. She steps into the room with the fox statue. Through the haze, she makes out the shape of the fox statue. The fox's pose is composed yet seductive, its back curved and head tilted.

Woman 3 and Woman 4 are already hard at work, knees and heads pressed to the floor. Woman 1 is praying for Man 1, whom, as mentioned, she loves to her core. She does not want to desire another woman's husband, but even more so, she does not want to lie awake at night wishing he was there with her. So, she is praying for Man 1 to leave his wife. There are already plates of fresh food sitting on the table in front of the fox spirit and its knowing smile. I should have brought something, too, thinks Woman 1. She knows that what she is about to wish for is selfish; for this reason, all of a sudden she has second thoughts. What about this man's wife? What about his children? Do I want to be responsible for breaking up a family? She looks over at Woman 3, whose eyes are closed, already skilled in prayer, her lips making only the slightest of movements. Woman 4 is holding between her palms three sticks of incense, looking just as earnest and meditative.

Woman 3 and Woman 4 are sisters, two years apart. They are wishing for different things that are also similar. The sisters were born with blemishes on their faces and necks that can become rather unsightly depending on stress and hormone level. They have tried American medication, Eastern herbal remedies, and covering up with makeup. They lack the money and the tolerance of needles and pain to undergo cosmetic surgery. They have tried not to be vain about their appearance and instead appreciate their overall good health and other joys of life. Still, there were nights when they

each tossed and turned, conscious that what had begun as an adolescent preoccupation with their blemishes had shifted into an obsession that gnawed at the corners of the minds day and night. Recently, the sisters consulted and finally reasoned: it does not harm anyone else to seek the fox spirit, the only source who can lend sympathy to such concerns. After all, the other gods disapprove of such trivialities.

The older sister wishes that her boyfriend will one day find her physically beautiful, while the younger one hopes that by acquiring a clear complexion, she will finally meet someone special.

Perhaps the women and men that cross one another's paths in that particular Buddhist temple next to the Mobil gas station in the inner city will eventually be more at peace with themselves and their surroundings. Perhaps the two sisters will one day wake up with pristine complexions and will call each other right away, nearly delirious with joy. Perhaps Woman 1 will welcome Man 1 into her welfare-funded apartment, as he will have, on his own, decided to step away from his sad marriage. Perhaps Woman 2 and Man 2 will be happily married, and while the man's parents will still not be pleased with the union, perhaps they will accept the decision. Maybe thereafter, the formerly tormented individuals will make sure to thank the fox spirit for playing a role in turning their lives around. Maybe every now and then, they will bring cakes, fruit, and flowers to the fox statue, bowing just as deeply as they did during their initial visits. Perhaps they will continue to hold on to the memory of these persistent and urgent prayers, and although they will not openly announce this experience, they will be prepared to, one day, if needed, pass on this insight to those who have exhausted all possibilities to cure their heartaches. Perhaps.

# My Mother's Cross

My Mothers Kitchen is hot.
It is turning and spinning,
the ladle round the potent mixture
of dreams, spices, hopes, and salt.
But she can never get it quite right.
She sweats over those burners
pouring her soul into her creation.
But the soup sticks to the pan and the chicken
is dry, another disappointment, another lost
meal--a chance for recognition and rest.

She set it on fire once, forgot she was cooking,
forgot who she was. She believed she could
be more, through her warm genesis,
but she had to watch the flames.

There is no simmer in her kitchen.
It is constant straining, constant mashing,
constantly she kneeds, even though the dough
is too tough. She keeps her phone in her apron
pocket as she bakes just incase they call.
Just incase her children will change. She keeps it warm,
stirring and stewing all that went wrong. She forgets
the cinnamon in the apple pie and the beef in the stew.

Candace Nicholson

She gets a cookbook, swears it will answer all her strife, but even that leads her to more burnt pots and pans. And so, she stirs and stirs her batter and prays that they still will rise, like she dreamed.

# Ago

An hour ago I sat atop bed;
traced your name on your pillow's cold stone.
I smiled,
etched one line poems on the grass.

A month ago I perched above you;
imagined two opals surfacing from the deep.
I read you fairy tales;
tried to suck the comatose from out your bones.

An age ago we danced to dodge the approaching tide,
etched two line poems in the sand.
A graceful fall,
we fed the sand our toes.

Kris Huelgas

# Reciprocal

Yesterday I swiped
the car keys to pry
your frail fingers off
the wheel, endured
an acid tongue
that denied the cataracts' toll.
*Doctors be damned,*
your common chorus.

Gray strands graze me
as I lift you,
shrunken and faded
with crumpled limbs
like a favorite sweater,
as you once
in a photo album somewhere,
carried me.

Zachary Ng

# Southern Belle

The cow needed milking first. This is supposed to be my first chore. But the thing is, I got cornered by the lake and my fishing rod. And you can't say no after getting cornered by something you like doing. After Ma gets done giving me an earful—be responsible, be like your sister, be a girl and leave that nonsense to the local boys—I hand her a bucket of catfish. Ma passes them to Aunt Paula, who puts them aside for supper. Ma stares at my suspenders with eyes round and big as bicycle wheels and says, "Dickey Georgia, why are you wearing those old things?"

The suspenders are gray, so I say, "It brings out my eyes."

Behind her, our Paula gives me a look and a fist that says, *Oh, I have something that'll bring out your eyes too.* Paula's threats are sharp but cushiony like goose-down, and I'd wrap my arms around them if I could. She also has a soft voice that reminds me of damp soil or warm soup, depending on if it's morning or night. She often tells me about a time when I was little. The family was walking by a bookstore that was opening in a few weeks, and outside there was a sign that said, "We're looking for employees."

I got confused and looked up at my Pop and said, "Why? Did they all run away?"

I still laugh whenever I ask our Paula to tell me this story, usually when the day is over and she's not listening to her shows on that new radio we just got. The times when the house is as quiet and solid as a wall and we can here each other's voices across the table, that's when she tells me what I like to hear. I listen to that story about the bookstore, and I feel real connected to me. I think, *this kid's alright.*

Natalia Jaster

Anyhow, Ma tells me to get the milking done before supper, so that's what I do. I roll up my sleeves and tromp down the back porch. The rear of the house is all peach orchard, ripe for hiding out, lolling on my back and watching the fruit bump heads under the sun. The smell is syrup-thick and the orange-yellow color looks good blushing against the leaves. At the foot of each tree is a metal plaque sticking out of the ground, the date it was planted engraved there like a birth certificate. The trees are in rows, but they don't form some flat line from east to west or anything like that. Instead, our rows point at angles and meet in the center to form a circle. From the sky, it probably looks like a large firecracker. Wicker chairs and a table fill the hub of the orchard, so when you're sitting in the middle of all these trees and their birthdates, you feel like you're part of a womb.

I could hide myself in there for a while. I could let the orchard cover me, and who would know, right? But I won't. Eventually, the cow would start up with its cries and Ma has ears like open windows. Anyhow, I have a conscience, even if it doesn't kick in until I've caught myself a bundle. Beats me why I try so hard. I have no brothers to show off my winnings to, and Pop's dead, and Ma's too busy with my sister that she wouldn't notice unless I caught something like a bull.

Moody, our jersey cow, lives in a pen at the side of the house. It's wide enough for her to walk around, graze, sit on her ass, moo, knock over a can when she's bored. She catches me coming across the grass and gives me a pitiful look. Her long face hangs from her neck like an anchor off a ship of brown-sugar fur. She wants relieving, and I think of how it feels to hold back pee when there's no place to go. Damn, if the sorry thing isn't ready to wail. She smells like wet straw.

I grab a stool and a bucket and push through the fence. I pat Moody's head, for all the good it does, and go to work. Her udder jiggles like one of those pendulums dangling inside a bell, always looking like it's about to fall off. The bucket fills with a hiss. I think about the orchard again and whether I could get by with a blanket and the trees' height to guard me from the house. From Ma and sis, the women that say I'm not a girl because I don't so much as curtsy. Like most girls even do that sort of thing anymore.

Meanwhile, I hear the fizz of catfish frying on our Paula's skillet.

***

We are the Georgias. We're named after the state we live in. Isn't that funny?

Ma always calls me by my full name. But Maggie, my sister, is just "Maggie." Meanwhile, Pop had nicknames for us. Pinch and Powder. Those names were the only things Maggie and I have ever shared. When Pop died, Ma stopped using Pinch and Powder, confessed she never liked those names anyhow. But I miss mine. It forced my sister and I to understand each other the best we could.

When Maggie's outside, she tiptoes like she's afraid of stepping on something. I've never seen her run or march, but I guess she'd need to be scared or mad to do that, and I've also never seen her scared or mad. At times when I would yell if I was her, she makes noises that sound like they start with H and end with F. Like *hif* or *hof* or *hef*. Once in a while, though, she'll stay in her room for hours, and that's when I like to think of her punching pillows and blowing her nose.

Anyhow, we don't understand each other. Even the house we live in separates us. Of the two of us, Maggie's the one that works indoors. She washes the clothes, sews up whatever needs sewing, and cleans the floors after Ma's finished dusting. She also likes to polish every doorknob in the house once a week. Don't know why.

Don't know either how it ended up this way. I can only guess. Maybe Ma gave her these chores because she likes having Maggie close by. Maybe she knows Maggie will leave home before me, and Ma wants to make use of the time left before some ugly boy steals my sister away. Plus, the one who wears dresses more often looks better cleaning the inside of the house, don't they?

Aunt Paula likes to remind me that all I wore when I was little were dresses. I do remember one morning in particular. Easter. Getting up and having to put on a white dress with short puffed sleeves for church. Everyone else was still buttoning buttons and straightening sleeves, so I went outside to wait. I thought I'd pick Ma some flowers before we left. When I was done, I stood on the front lawn with daises bunched in my fists. Black dots crawled over the yellow petals and started getting on my skirt. Ma was too busy fussing to swipe them off the dress that she didn't mention

the flowers except to order our Paula to find a vase. Later, Ma told me that I should have known better. She's old-fashioned about clothes and the line between boys and girls that she says is thicker than a tire so I should be able to see it.

I guess I don't.

So it's fitting that I was put outside. I rake leaves and pick peaches and sweep both porches and wash windows and occasionally forget to milk the cow.

Now, I'm almost done with the second bucket, and Moody's feeling a lot better—I know because she stopped lifting her leg like she wants kick me—when I see Maggie tiptoeing across the grass. I look up and can't help keeping my eyes on her arms. They're thin and straight like the backbones of the magazines she reads. The forearms and elbows run down the sides of her chest—she's plump there like Ma—and disappear behind her. I think of her hands resting at the lower part of her spine, fingers coiling like little bodies in love. I turn away and keep filling the bucket.

"Orson doesn't like me," she says.

I let go of Moody's teat, and she acts happy for the break because she takes a step forward and quivers her backside in my face.

Maggie tiptoes to the far end of the pen, runs her pinky along the fencing. She could get a splinter doing that. "Orson likes to fish."

I'd never do anything I didn't like for a boy, but here I can't help it—I feel mighty. She never wanted my help before. "I don't know why you like him. Orson isn't tough. I've heard people talking. He's gotten beat up by locals smaller than him. I bet even you could—"

She holds up her palm. "What can I do to hush you?"

I tell her she can ask me nicely.

***

The lake is a mile off the main road that leads to town. Around the water, the grass hits you at the hip, and you wonder what you'd look like to someone staring down from a second story window. You get an idea of what it feels like to be an ant. You don't even see the water until you're just about on top of it.

Anyhow, the only thing Maggie catches at our lesson is herself. I show her I

don't know how many times, and she doesn't get it. What she does is, she runs toward the water like a duck and chucks the line as if she's lassoing a black angus. Every time, the line goes somewhere but the water. Then comes her last try, and the bait—a wooden plug that looks like a frog—goes flying off the sproat hook, and then the point gets her right in the side, clean through the two-month old calico.

But I'm not mad at her. I hear her weep, and I'm not mad at her.

I drop my rod and reach her before she does something like pull it out by herself—Maggie does things without thinking much. I touch her cheeks, my palms on the sides of her face, and I get this feeling of being scared because there aren't many times when the younger sister feels older. I tell her not to move, and then spread the rip. The metal is fat, sticking into her past the barb like a nail.

I put my arm around her waist, but it hurts her to move, so I walk slowly. I don't mean anything mean by it, but I would walk slowly even if it didn't hurt her so much to move, just to have more time to know what it's like to hold my sister up, to keep her weight from hitting the ground.

***

Paula tells me that I'm needed—it's just they don't say it. We sit at the kitchen table and wait for Ma to bring Maggie home. There's a mystery program on the radio, and Paula listens while finishing up a puzzle, a glass of untouched whiskey at her elbow. I think about how many stitches my sister will have, and halfway through the show Paula turns down the volume. She tells me about the time I got stitches across my temple. She says I didn't scream even though I was little enough to do it. She says that I didn't say anything. And I remember part of it. I remember how Maggie came into my room that night, sunk under the covers and pulled the blanket over us and asked me what it was like. And when Maggie split her knee two years later, she didn't scream either.

***

Maggie gets another idea in her head about Orson. She slips through my door

before breakfast and I whip over, putting my back to her.

"Dickeyyyyy?" she says.

When we moved here, I chose this room as my own because of the sunlight. Now, I stare out the window, thinking of our Paula downstairs cooking. Ma doesn't like to cook, and she stopped after Pop died. It's better for all of us since Ma was never good at it anyhow—she burns things. But I also wonder about Paula, whether she likes to cook. She's always quiet when she does it, and she makes faces at Ma when Ma gives her orders about seasoning or how long to keep things in the oven.

Paula moved in after Pop died. Before that, Pop didn't want her around because he said she spoiled Ma. I didn't believe it then, but now I wonder about the cooking and those plum tarts our Paula makes—even when she's tired—when Ma asks her to. Maggie keeps saying she wants to learn more cooking but doesn't ever hint to Paula about it, and I never fry what I catch, so I guess we're all doing something wrong.

I'm ready to tell Maggie that we should go downstairs and help, but Maggie throws herself on the bed and pulls at my shoulders until I sit up. She tells me that she's going to a brothel tonight. There's a place where it's possible to sit and watch the women standing outside, watch how they get the men to come indoors with them, study what these fishnet ladies do to turn heads. Maggie and her friends have been talking about going for a while, but never have. I picture Maggie with her Bettys, sitting there and laughing, touching and nudging each other's knees and saying things about those women outside the brothel. Maggie loving the girls she's with, feeling there's no place else to be, knowing she's young and pretty, and thinking she'll live forever. And me, in the orchard or at the lake or sitting with our Paula because my sister would never grab my hand and say, "let's go."

Anyhow, I ask why she's telling me this. She says that none of her Bettys can go tonight, and it's dangerous if she goes alone. "You owe me," she says. "I wouldn't have gotten that hook in me if you'd taught me right. I bet you did it on purpose."

I smell Paula's bacon frying downstairs. Paula doesn't like pork, but Ma does.

I tell Maggie she can go herself. "And if I were you I wouldn't count on those peacocks to show you how to be the kind of girl boys want to keep around."

Maggie stands. She yanks my blanket away. I jump out of bed, fixing to grab for it, when she circles behind me. I follow her, twisting around. "Well," she says, "in your case you'd have to learn how to be a girl first."

***

It's nine o'clock by the time we skitter out of the house. Maggie's an expert. She sets the clocks back three hours in case we get caught, but I'm too grumpy to stay impressed for long. Orson's a dirty eighteen year-old pig, and I tell my sister that she's a dirty pig too for going to a brothel. It isn't romantic or ladylike.

"*Hef*. How would you know what's romantic or ladylike?" she answers.

I won't lie. What she says, it hurts. It hurts even more because she's holding my hand as we walk, pulling me along, and I liked it until she said what she did. But I guess I wasn't any better calling her a pig, now was I? At least I made her angry, made her feel something about me.

A creature bites my ankle. I hop on one leg while slapping my skin. "Goddammit. Goddammit shit. I hate you."

Maggie lets go of my hand, and the sadness in me comes quick. "You don't hate me for bringing you out here or making you do what I say. You hate me because I make you want to be more like a girl."

I don't say anything until we hit the lookout spot. We land on a grassy hill. The brothel is across the street. With the lanterns buzzing, I see the building needs paint and a new roof. A few of the shackles are coming loose.

The women wear silky clothes and earrings that wink under the light. They are tall and short and sport bare legs and shoulders. The men have deep voices. When they laugh, they sound like caves. I don't really know what it's like for them, but the way the women toss their hips around like dice and slide their fingers down the men's necks make me feel as if I can sense it. I think of whispers, of hands that suddenly know where to go, heads knowing which way to tilt, lips knowing how far to open. I imagine it happening to me, and I touch my ankle, rubbing the spot where the critter bit me.

I want to tell my sister what I'm thinking, ask if she knows those feelings yet.

But her face is serious, the same face she makes when she wipes down doorknobs. When we look across the street, we don't see the same thing.

I am a girl, just not the kind my sister likes. I wasn't her first choice of companion tonight, was I? So maybe she's right. I wonder if she'd change her mind about me if I wasn't like this, if I were another kind of girl. Maybe we'd understand each other. Maybe she'd love me like one of her Bettys. Or maybe she'd love me like our Paula does. Or maybe she'd love me differently.

"I don't hate you," I say, but Maggie doesn't hear me. She sits up on her knees and gives a cry, the way Moody does when she needs milking. She grabs my wrist and squeezes, and when I look across the street, I see why. Her Orson is grabbing a girl and heading into the brothel. I should point out this is the best way to see what he likes. There's no better instruction than having Orson really there. I should also remind my sister that he doesn't like her anyhow, but I'm afraid if I do she'll let go of my wrist.

***

We've never been to the orchard together. It's my place. I don't know if Maggie has a place of her own, but since she doesn't mention one, I take her to the peaches. She doesn't speak for so long that I try having a talk with the fruit. I know fruit can't talk, but if you stare at them for a while a shake or a sway can seem like a "hello." Their movements make you think about stuff. Like whether scenes at brothels should really look that beautiful. Or whether your sister is supposed to like the same things as you.

I've seen people taking advantage of being related. Thinking just because they're family they have a right to ask unfair things. In town, where everyone can hear them, they'll say stuff like, "I'm asking as a *sister*." Or a mother or cousin. It sounds as if their tongue is hitching when they say it. Like whoever they're talking to can't say no. It doesn't seem honest to me.

What I'm saying is, I didn't go with Maggie tonight because she's my sister. I went because she let me hold her up when she hooked herself with the sproat. And tonight, I was thinking maybe something like that would happen again, that she'd

need me to balance her weight.

"I can't go back there," Maggie says. "I can't go there now with my friends."

I put my back to a thick hide of tree bark. "He'd never love you good enough."

Maggie looks at me, and her stare feels like the longest I've ever had from her. She tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. My left ear. "You could be a lovely girl if you wanted," she says. And I feel admired. And then something else I don't expect. "Do you really hate me?"

I touch the place behind my ear. I ask her if she loves me and—I can't help myself—I go against what I was just thinking. "Because I'm your sister. You should. Don't you think?"

Maggie's face falls like a sack of beans onto a stone floor. She wipes off her skirt, gets up, walks off. And I call out, asking her whether I can come next time she goes somewhere with her friends. The sack-of-beans weight is still there. She shrugs, tilts her whole mouth like the end of a seesaw. "They wouldn't like it."

It's a lie, and it bothers me more than it does her. So when she leaves me in my place, I'm sort of glad she's gone. I want to tell the peaches that I'm sorry for bringing her here. But that would be dumb, wouldn't it? Peaches can't talk.

***

Our Paula is in the kitchen when I come inside. I look at the clock and see that it's still set back. But I know, and Paula knows too. I ask if she'll tell Ma.

"I never have before," she says. And I'm proud of her. And I feel mighty and angry at the same time because Maggie doesn't know she's got an aunt saving her spine every time she's out making a mess in town with her Bettys.

The radio is off.

"Paula," I say to her, "tell me about the time we were walking by that new bookstore." We sit at the kitchen table, and she begins. Meanwhile, I turn my head toward the window overlooking Moody's pen—she'll need milking in the morning—and the orchard. I try to catch a whiff of the peaches, but the scent doesn't reach that far.


STAR
$5
MAPS
HERE

# Gentrification Called My Name

The modern ones can be the most terrible,
razor-sided gray on orange with a sunrise in between
that hurts your paludal early-morning eyes.
These are the palaces of the half-rich

the broken out the breaking apart in tune and
three notes over the last noon-time cocktail.
These are the grit-induced comas of three silver-haired
slicksters, hands heavy and melting off their plates.

These are the imitations of just right, but more steel-toed and
loose leafed, more eccentric and electricity kilned—
a location that makes you feel better than the average white person
in an invented colorlessness a feeling of city-tide
erotic rouge and neon but simpler
more marsupial and kinder outriding the rest
on pink motorcycles mohawked
and skintight and I am with the rest of them here
and here again say good-bye lonely
lovely street my Chrysler
of many colors.

Kate Martin Rowe

# Fractions of Love and Adoption

*One who excels in traveling leaves no wheel tracks.*
Lao Tzu, "Tao Te Ching"

He is
Lebanese, half Croatian
*Does she know where those countries are?*
Laughter does not

veil ignorance
of geography and biography,
eclipse barren eyes
that have seen all they need

*Doesn't she want to see the world?*
15 countries in 3 months
leave marks,
initiates
blood and continent.

Each moment etches
the sorrow of history
on her lips,
latitude and longitude

remain
unsoiled.
She is half
American

half
(what he speaks)
does not
reveal anything

an abandoning
harvest moons
winter fallow blankets snow
crawl of spring into blossoming

unsheathe the sown
like him—beauty
begins to undress
her
*Will moving unearth a home?*

his kisses,
a blueprint
without regard for
details

*Will he listen when seasons speak?*
They are four thirds
mystery
half unknown.

# Tears and Blood From the Sleeping Beauties Whorehouse

*"I was unfaithful to you. I've been sleeping in the same bed with a woman from the Rio Blanco. But it's her bed and the bed of all that go at night to enjoy it. I've been one of two thousand, perhaps. The Red Light District, you know. For a few coins they lift their legs up, as if they wanted to scratch the ceiling with their toes.'"*

*Manlio Argueta, Little Red Riding Hood in the Red Light District*

Someone once told me that there never was a once upon a time, that time cannot be traced back to a once upon a time no one remembers, but there was a once upon a time. I know, I remember, even if at times I forget. This is where my memories begin, or end — at a once upon a time, in the middle of a bloody civil war, at a place that is invisible and unmistakably visible in the heart of San Salvador.

In our bedroom, I look out onto the balcony. I can't see it, but I know that behind me on the opposite side of the building, reads the sign: LAS BELLAS DURMIENTES.

A LA GRAN PUTA! I scream and chase that little fucking mosquito that had the nerve to bite me. I take off one of my chanclas and quietly wait for that little bitch to settle down again. It lands on the dresser. I squash it happily, put my shoe back on, and then light a cigarette by the balcony door. The glowing red light from the stub is the only thing that illuminates the dark room. It has begun to rain big droplets that splash on the balcony's patio, and moon beams shine through the glass. You know, nobody ever asks how beautiful girls like us end up in a place like this, but I've always believed we're the lucky ones even if no one sees it except me. Maybe it's because I

have to. Alicia, the youngest prostitute at fifteen years old, couldn't get up from bed today. She overdosed again. If it's not that, it's the bottle. Another day passes and the sun did not rise again. It doesn't matter anyway. I can't remember the last time I saw the sun.

The glowing red stub shrivels and flickers. I take another puff, and I massage my head. My hair is a tangled mess and smells of saliva, dust, alcohol, and tobacco — pieces of hair glued by aristocratic semen, droplets of blood on my clothes.

Today is an important day. As soon as the sun rises I am leaving for Nicaragua. I'm going to hunt for someone I heard is living blissfully amid the Contras. There's another reason why this is an important day, but that's what I am trying to forget. Alicia turns in her bed and the mosquito net surrounding her sways with the rhythm of her movements. I'm going to miss these girls. They're my only family. Of course, there was Bella, my best friend. I love Alicia and Cindy too, but they don't come close to Bella's kindness and self-sacrificing nature. I always felt the need to protect her like a sister. No, I can't think of her right now.

Alicia mumbles something in her sleep. She came here by chance. Cindy found Alicia sick in the street, and Bella nursed her back to health. She refused to talk about her life or her family, and we tried to convince her to go to an orphanage. Instead she decided to stay with us. Now, she is always high and making a trip to wonderland, and Cindy, well Cindy is just delusional. No, I shouldn't say that. Cindy has her own problems. Who doesn't? Cindy still believes she will be a model some day. Of course that's what we all believed at first. The men, they lure women with promises of stardom if you go with them, and what else do we have to live for? We gave them money to take our pictures, and they told us this was only temporary. Temporary my grandmother's ass! Pinche cerotes! They try to drug us sometimes to steal our money, but we're too smart for that. Well except for Alicia, but she never listens to me, so that's her problem.

Cindy's different from us. She's not from El Salvador, she came from some European country I forgot the name of. They're all the same to me. Cindy prefers to sit next to the fire pit and watch it glow. She'll spend hours watching the fire with

intense eyes, her tears smearing with the soot. I caught Cindy looking out the window last night burping butterflies. Usually she can control her power. Men even request what they want her to moan while they pound her. She can moan out bubbles or flowers when she's happy, but when she's mad she screams out a swarm of yellow jacket bees that will attack anyone. Big, blue butterflies popped from her mouth and were hitting themselves against the illuminated windowpane. One smacked me on the forehead before fluttering to the golden light.

"Que tienes?" I asked her concerned.

She didn't respond. So I left her alone. I know she was thinking of the time she met Prince Charming and he told her he loved her. He searched for her throughout the kingdom with only a glass slipper in hand. He was determined to marry her, but when he found out she was a maid during the day and an escort at night, he married someone else. And, she bid him farewell with one last present – bee stings that ruined his wedding night. She ran away before they could kill her. She still believes true love will find her, but I know better.

I kiss my medallion of Maria Magdalena. My father had given it to me when I was young. It's all I have of him. Bella once told me that Maria Magdalena was never a prostitute, and while I had never heard of that before, I believed her. She was always right about things like that. She was educated by her father who was a radical Catholic missionary, until he was killed and she became an orphan. Her mother died during childbirth. That was one thing we had in common – we were both orphans.

Que voy hacer Dios mío con esta vida de puta perdida? My father died when he was only 29 years old in a factory accident. I was two. Seven years later my mother died at the hands of brutal soldiers. I was delivering food to my grandparents in San Miguel, but when I came back, all that was left were her tattered limbs and a piece of a weapon that read: MADE IN THE U.S.A. Does this mean I was lucky? I moved in with my grandparents, but they died too before I reached sixteen. For a few months I did small jobs here and there, but the money was never enough. I had to do something or starve to death.

It's a warm August night — elote season, where women make atol de elote, corn

tamales, grilled corn kernels; or grilled corn on the cob with limón and salt: corn, corn, corn everything! My favorite season because the days smell of corn just like my grandmother from my mother's side – Mamita Siena.

Mamita Siena always told me, "Ruby, los hombres siempre seran lobos. Al principio te van a perseguir, a enamorar, a querer llevarte al bosque 'onde puedan estar solos los dos sin interrupciones. Pero acuérdate, que cuando te conquiste y seas suya, el se va ir. Si no lo hace pronto, lo hará después..." It was true what she said, but I didn't listen. My first love impregnated me in the forest, and then he left. When I told my grandmother she said, "Niña estupida!" and slapped my face. I reminded her that she too became pregnant out of wedlock and that earned me a bloody lip. My grandfather didn't speak for days. I knew he felt ashamed of himself. That somehow my actions were his fault because he had set a bad example throughout his life. He reassured me that he would take care of me and told me not to be afraid; he was not angry. Nine months later my baby was stillborn. I named her Rosita and buried her next to my mother. The only people at the funeral were my grandparents and me. I cried every night for a year. I never loved again.

My vision is blurry with the tears I am trying to suppress. Now that I think about it, I've never met a man that didn't resemble a wolf. Look at my grandfather, Papita Sandalio, my grandmother chased him all of her life. He didn't leave Mamita physically, but emotionally he was never there; every year he promised to marry her, and even though his head was always under the skirt of another woman, she waited for him to change. They both ascended into old age together, and a year never went by that she didn't try to make him faithful.

At first she prayed to God, the Virgin Mary, and todos los santos. Later she tried witchcraft. Nothing worked. Despite his flaws, he was good to her -- he never raised his voice, he never hit her, and he would buy her small gifts each time he went to the city. He always knew the right thing to say when we were sad or angry. Papita Sandalio was not afraid of commitment, he loved his family and would have done anything to protect us, but I think what scared him was monogamy.

He died at 77, and he wanted to be cremated not buried. His ashes were

thrown against the wind of his birth town and Mamita was furious. "Puedes creer, Ruby," she would tell me, "que hasta en la muerte voy a tener que perseguirlo?!" She hated the idea of being cremated because she dreamed she and Papita would lie in all eternity side by side in a graveyard. She always said that was the only way he would settle down next to her, but when his ashes roamed around the world she decided she would be cremated too. She didn't want to be buried by herself and be alone, "Qué horror!" she exclaimed for the rest of her life.

When she died at 80 years old, I clothed her in a wedding dress because she told me that since she never got married, she wanted to be dressed as a bride. So I made an ivory wedding dress with tons of lace and a high neckline. I know she would have loved it if she could have seen it. At her velorio we made tamales de pollo, atol de elote, and her favorite – nuegados made of fresh yucca and flour then fried and smothered in honey. After the wake, she was cremated, and I spread her ashes in the same place as my grandfather's. The wind picked up the grey ash and off she went after him.

The rain stops, and I throw out my cigarette. There is a kaleidoscope light reflected on the wall, its shades of red, blue, yellow, green, purple, and pink dance in front of me. As soon as it comes it is gone – just like Bella and her mood eyes.

I can't stop the flow of memories anymore. I remember Bella's beautiful moody eyes that changed color with her emotions. Her eyes were a calm blue when we were together, but nighttime was another story. They would turn into black slits whenever she had sex. Men would blindfold her so they didn't have to stare at her face while they fucked her. "No one's going to get a hard-on with those fucking eyes!" Manuel, the owner of the whorehouse, said once loud enough for Bella to hear. I told that fucker to shut his mouth. Bella was self-conscious about her eyes, and she ran upstairs and cried. Stupid mother fucker.

I close my eyes again, and listen to the harmony of crickets in their midnight serenade. I light another cigarette. I have to admit the unavoidable -- on this day one

year ago, that smelled of corn and my grandmother, Bella was gone. We went to the Coronel's party. He was celebrating the massacre of his enemies. Conceited fuck. Claro, we were there to work. It took me three days to make our dresses because the Coronel wanted us to look special for his aristocratic friends. Bella's eyes were full of excitement when she was getting ready, changing color every second with the rapid palpitations of her heart. I was wearing a black dress with my red cape over my shoulders, Alicia wore a blue dress and Cindy wore a white dress with her glass slippers. Bella, what were you wearing Bella? I'm trying to think of how to describe her presence back then, if I could only remember...oh yes, I recall now. She wore a gold gown, her chestnut brown hair swept up with curly tendrils framing her face.

We had to entertain the Coronel's American partners, so we walked around to the backyard where the party took place. As for the other low ranking soldiers, the other prostitutes could take care of them. Their jealous glances followed us from the door. We were reserved for only the best. Is that better than the regular soldiers? To fuck the elite? No. A wolf is a wolf. Except these wolves dress up in sheep's clothing when they're out in the public eye. But here under the rule of the Coronel all the sheepskin comes off. I was never afraid of them. I knew from the beginning that the Coronel would sleep with Bella. He always did. Dread always came over me when he slept with her because he wasn't just a wolf, he was a beast! He would never penetrate her with his penis; no, he would penetrate her with his gun in one hand and beat her with the other. She was his prisoner, but she loved him. Afraid of him, yes, but in love all the same. She was always obedient and he would always send roses.

I told her the first time she slept with him, "You know if he really loves you, he wouldn't blindfold you. He should look at your black eyes and fuck you like a real man, none of this gun business!" She stared at me silently.

It's getting humid. I step outside onto the balcony. I look down, and the water is making a brook; it falls from the mango tree leaves, to the rain gutter, then flows down in pieces along the broken concrete, and I smile as the light bulb flickers on and off, until it finally ignites, creating an ironic halo above my head on this unruly

night. The water of my miniature brook shines a dark blue like Bella's eyes when she would look at me — but how did she look at me? Was she sad? No not sad. Angry? No, she was never angry with me, but I do remember that her face returned a look where I found my most inner fears reflected in her eyes.

The first night she slept with him, she had come home with a bruise on her chest, and I was outraged when she told me what he would do to her. She knew I was scared. After she paused for a long time she finally asked me, "Why are you afraid of falling in love? Qué es lo que temes?"

"I'm not afraid of anything." I told her, blowing smoke out the balcony door at this same spot and moment in time.

Lightning strikes, and the trueno is so loud that Alicia yells and twitches momentarily; she calmly goes back to sleep but her face retains the shape of a rotten mango on the dirt. She's still in wonderland. The dark evergreen leaves of the mango tree hover over my head and trickle water down my face. The smell of corn is gone now, diluted by the rain, and is replaced by the sweet, tart smell of the golden-yellow mangoes surrounding me. Like the color of Bella's dress when the Coronel offered her his arm.

Alicia went to Reynaldo "El Rey" Corazon, a married wealthy man with a fetish for young girls, and Cindy went to a handsome military sergeant. I followed behind Bella. Drunken wolves lurked at each step, inebriated with desire; mother fuckers thought I was helpless and they could take advantage of me. Arrogant cocks.

A tall American man eyed me from a distance. He talked to the Coronel with a slight slur. I approached the three of them silently, and the Coronel puckered his lips towards the American to let me know that drunken bastard was for me. The blue-eyed son-of-a bitch flirted with me and I played hard to get. He was conceited, told me of the many women after him, and he paraded his political power while I feigned interest. I purposefully jiggled my earrings and let the strap of my dress fall. I

allowed him to pull it back up; his white fingers caressed the soft brown skin of my shoulder. With a grin the American man said that the death squads have done their job again in another pueblo and they were all dead. "This should teach those leftist sons of bitches something!" he laughed. My heartbeat quickened in anger as I remembered my mother. The Coronel ignored him and told me he was going to take Bella to another city to be with him. I wasn't sure what hurt me most: Bella leaving or another poor town slaughtered. She looked at me with dark blue eyes. He took her inside the house.

I look over the edge of the balcony. No one is around. I try to remember what happened next, but everything went by so fast. Ahora recuerdo! After they went in the house, I offered to show the American the woods, so we went by ourselves. His chest hair curled against the humid night. He leaned in to kiss me, and I moved away behind a tree. He undid his pants and took off his shirt. With a flick of my wrist my dress fell to the ground. I stood naked under the light of the moon.

Under the shadows of the tree, he said grinning, "Ready to eat me?" His penis was erect and waiting.

Without saying a word my fangs and nails grew out, and my skin sprouted black fur. He froze y se cagó. I pounced on him making sure my claws dug deep into his ribs. Stupid fool! I ate him bones and all. When I was done I folded his clothes neatly and stuffed them in my bag, being careful not to break the nice aviator sunglasses. I was going to buy Bella a parting gift.

I was walking towards the house when I heard a gunshot. I ran inside and Cindy came out first in her lingerie with the young military man, one shoe, and a trail of roses falling from her mouth. Alicia came out next running naked into the hall, the tattoo of her white rabbit dancing at her breast with urgency. Bella's lifeless body was blindfolded and her ankles tied to the bedpost. A bullet shot her heart through her mouth, sending a bomb of blood on the wall.

I remember the silence clearly as I witnessed everything, and blood gushed to my brain. Don Rey's wife, Reina Corazon, had come home and was screaming at him

for his infidelity with Alicia. She ordered to the soldiers, "Off with her head!" The pompous bitch shut her mouth when she saw what had happened. Cindy grabbed Alicia, ready to scream bees if she needed to. I heard a click of the trigger. I knew the Coronel was pointing a gun at me. He ordered the soldiers to get rid of everyone -- naked or not. The party was over.

I wanted to kill the Coronel even if it meant losing my own life, but he immediately left with his soldiers. If I could do things over again, I would have killed him before he had the chance to disappear. I had not heard of him again until a client let me know he had emerged, partying with the Contras in Nicaragua.

The sky is clear and a rooster crows nearby. Women walk by with buckets of corn kernels balanced on their heads on their way to the molino. They're off to make masa for the tortillas. I light another cigarette.

For months after her funeral I would dream of her blood on the bedroom wall, and I would feel her heartbeat nearby, until I began to forget. It takes a lot of effort to remember what has once been forgotten. I wipe off the tears and walk back to the room to pick up my bag. On the dresser I leave letters for Alicia and Cindy saying goodbye.

Outside the sun blinds me so I put on the American's sunglasses. I look back at the sign, LAS BELLAS DURMIENTES, for the last time. I don't know if I'm happy or sad anymore, but at least I feel something. I smile when I remember what I told her when I first met her. I came into the bedroom for the first time and said, "I'm Ruby...those fuckers down there are full of shit!" She laughed and I was mesmerized from the start, way back then, once upon a time...

# For Which We Fall

Rebekkah Bodoff

Ami knew her walk, the wobbly stiletto heels barely making their way along the cobblestones, the long tangled day-old curls swinging across her back, glowing burnt like the summer sand of Eilat. He saw that lanky hip swaggering walk in half the girls he passed in the blazing noontime Tel Aviv sun. None of the years have erased his urge to go up to each of those girls, grab them by the shoulders, and swing them around just to see the thick pout of her mouth that had, in so many ways, been responsible for tearing his family apart. To their mother, Oren's lips were simply a glistening pink reminder of the ones from the man who had cut his losses and run; the man who had left her alone, one child crying after him and the other still held firmly to her breast. And no amount of time, or age, could convince her otherwise, or even coax her to bend down and kiss the lips of the daughter she had born.

Ami had known all along that Oren had taken to weekend stays in Jerusalem. Though, it had never occurred to him that she spent those days in the holy city sitting on Ben Yehuda street playing sheish beish with the Africans: cloudy, grey-skinned Rastafarians whose dredded hair clung to the chashish smoke from the nargilah bars; men who found themselves victims of their legal status, having no way to escape their menial jobs other than by plying themselves, nightly, with chemicals that brought the sparkle back to their lives, and their eyes, and their pricks; chemicals that drove them, nipples humming, to the local clubs offering up cheap khat in the hope of an easy lay or a lead to better dope. These were the days when a tip on heroin, or mescaline, sent men down dark, dangerous alleys to dope houses, dirty needles, and into the

arms of other men.

But Oren always had a cover, the perfect story backed up by some prop like a shard of pottery found at a dig site in the old city or a rock off of the grave of an old family member. Some days she came back with a newly thrown vase, or a coffee mug that she said she had made at the new arts center down on some corner by the university. Most weekends it was a Sabbath with a Mushkie or Raizl, always some long-sleeved, skirt clad religious girl who offered the perfect alibi for being unreachable. He thought how she must have believed herself invincible, always having details ready and understanding that her mother no longer looked at her directly, only out of the corner of her eyes or with her head turned towards the window.

He knew, at least, that it hurt her. That every, "your damn lips," or "how dare you give me that look and bring you father into this," caused Oren to shudder and dig her nails into the pale flesh of her wrists, leaving little half moon reminders of the fact that her mother would never see her without also seeing that "awful mamzer of a father that she had." But in the end Ami had been left as man of the house, protector of his mother. And that duty had, to the seven-year-old boy, shirked all others.

It seemed to little Ami that all the while he was giving everything he had to hold up the sagging soul of their mother, it was Oren's habit to cause more tears, and fights, and uncooked dinners. He remembered a Purim when he was eight or so. Oren had dressed up in every little girl's favorite costume and strutted around as Queen Esther with a sparkling sequin crown and princess mask. All that night he had hatched out plans to try to convince her to wear that mask whenever she had to see their mother. Play-acting he had called it. But Oren had complained that the rubber smelled, and that, anyway, it was itchy and hot inside.

Though Ami was now sure that Oren had blamed their mother for everything, including their father leaving, it never occurred to him to do so. He only felt sorry for all those tears he heard carried underneath the bathroom door on the steamy tendrils from his mother's showers. It left him helpless and agitated; his blood's boiling often spilling over onto the high school blacktop or the grassy soccer fields where a perceived shin kick ended up in the pummeling of fists and swollen black eyes. His

coach found his temper motivating, his teachers catalogued it as dangerous, and his mother took comfort in it as protection. He could see how it made her feel proud, with each bruise and cut acknowledging that even without a husband she had raised a true knuckle-bearing man.

What Oren had thought, he had never much paid attention to. The love that he had for her had always been secondary to his responsibilities as man of the house which included making sure that Oren respected their mother and having forced sit-downs with her when arguments came to slammed doors or the occasional thrown vase. He had never not loved her and cherished those few memories of them playing sheish-beish on the fire escape, or those late nights when he had been out there inhaling enough nicotine to make his ears ring, and she had come out, her feet in fuzzy blue slippers, and sat by his legs singing old folk songs, like Jerusalem of Gold, under her breath.

When she had made the leap to start spending her nights downtown in Tel Aviv, he wasn't sure. He remembered lipstick-smeared-mascara-running late mornings, but had always just chalked it up to late-night sleepovers of reading American fashion magazines and chasing after the new young paratroopers. After all, every girl dreamed of laying her arm around the waist of a boy wearing a red beret. He knew, too, when she had picked up his tobacco habit, but never knew it was a cover, the only fix she could get at home. It seemed to him that all at once, as she had thrown her arms up and gone running from the house, she had become another woman. He was sure that the day before she had still been just his baby sister. He remembered no shaking hands or broken mirrors, torn pantyhose or powder-coated credit cards. But the more that he thought about it, the more he realized he didn't remember what road she took to school, or the subjects she had done well at, or even the names of the girls she'd hung around with.

All he could seem to remember was her profile, like those shadowy images from old faded black and white photos. He could see the crook of her neck, the way some of her curls, on hot sweaty afternoons, would stick around the bottom of her ears trailing ginger strands across her throat like fingers across an anticipating thigh. And

he had memories of their vacations and the summer she had worn the red and white striped bikini with the tanned stretch of her stomach revealing, to their mother who stood a foot away mouth agape, a crystal studded six-pointed star hanging off of a delicate silver hoop that hung from her belly button. In the end, he now remembers the way the red cord on that bathing suit hugged the top of her ribs better than her favorite foods or rock bands or stores to shop in.

It seemed as if all her growing up had just happened in that one moment: Oren coming into the house red-eyed and shaking, her mother screaming at her for not doing the laundry, or cleaning the dishes, or emptying the cat litter. Then Oren, opening her mouth, swollen scarlet lips parting, and a glint in her eye, like a lightning bolt flashing in her retina, and Ami rushing into the kitchen but not quickly enough. Because before he could take a step, like venom from Oren's mouth, she screamed, "you're the one that fucked him, Ma." And in that moment their mother, who had been dragging herself through endless days, came alive and with all the anger brewing within her, threw herself at Oren, arms and palms flying.

She pinned Oren to a kitchen corner and landed several successive slaps across her face before Ami registered what was happening and pushed himself between the two shouting women. Before he could maneuver them out of the corner, his mother's hand went to a drawer and pulled out a brisket knife, "Get the hell out of my house," she threatened, shaking the knife wildly above her head. Oren needed no encouragement, her hand grabbed a goose-necked bottle of vodka and she went running out of the house, cursing their mother down the staircase and out the complex door.

He stared at the picture window, watching as she flung herself out the main glass doors. The thing that struck him most about her deserting walk, framed by the peeling Lily of the Valley paint he had used to cheer up his mother, was the forward directness with which she moved. Though her head hung low, chin hanging towards the ground, she walked purposely forward, never turning around once for wistful acknowledgment of the home she had grown up in or the family which she had just turned her back on. And with each high-heeled step he felt the sting of tears in the

back of his eyes, and a hollow sickness turn through his stomach. All those years and somehow he had let her get away. If he closed his eyes he could still see the look in Oren's eye as his mother pulled frantically for any body part she could grab hold of. He dreamt of that look during long fitful nights, her mouth opening and pleading. "I was waiting for you," it would say, "you're the one who could have saved me."

He wished that he had gone running after her, and not just stood, one hand raised towards his mother, looking out the kitchen window as Oren's fiery hair blurred into the bright orange of the setting sun. He stood watching until her matted curls became indistinguishable from the horizon line in the sky and then he turned towards the beatlessly swaying rocking chair that his mother had taken refuge in and shoved his foot under the wooden frame, stopping it in the upwards arc of its rock. "You did this, Ma. Look! Look around, she's gone." He felt his voice grow scratchy with anger, and flashed back for a moment to when he was a child and heard his father yelling that it, too, was her fault. "She fucking walked out of here like she had just been waiting for you to actually dare her."

He nudged the tips of his toes towards the sky, pushing the chair higher forcing her to meet his stare, "She's gone because you've spent all these years blaming all of your shit, on her." He looked his mother in the eye; she was still clutching a clump of curly ginger hair in her fist. And in that moment, for the first time in 24 years he understood his father and with that, he ripped the hair out of her hand and let his palm smack hard against the side of her thigh.

He watched as heat blazed across her cheeks and her eyes turned glassy with tears and anger. It was the same face he had been looking at and trying to placate for years, since he was a child waking her up for work, or trying to comfort her with bouquets of schoolyard daisies and buttercups. And then he saw himself, remembered planting a potted garden on the deck in hopes of seeing his mother smile, or painting the whole apartment in colors reminiscent of the painting of the Old City that she had hung over her bed. Then there was the time he brought home a brindled mutt knowing that its bounding waddle would have to bring a laugh out of her and then, with one fierce stare, being forced to carry it back out to the edge of the school

grounds and turn it loose to face the urban traffic of Tel Aviv.

She opened her mouth to speak but he didn't give himself a moment to listen. He flung himself around and marched straight out the same door Oren had. He ran out of the complex, his heart racing and his mind convinced that he would run into her, find her, know just where she had gone. He ran past their old high school and then the religious neighborhood where he thought Raizl or Mushkie had lived. He was walking by the time he made it to the local nightclubs. He had seen three or four ginger-haired girls during that time, but none Oren.

It wasn't until a few days later, when he'd put back a couple of beers and steadied his shaking fists that people began to recognize the name he kept saying, or that he finally allowed himself to hear the two places that seemed to keep coming up in conversations, "Tel Baruch and the old bus station." But it was not in every conversation, just those with young, hotshot army boys who found it funny and remembered the name with such a look in their eye that it didn't take long before he was on the side of the street locking arms with the young soldiers, screaming how they had no respect for their veterans, or their country, or their fallen brothers. "With a Jewish girl," he questioned them, spitting at their shoes with fists flying for punctuation. But by the time the army boys had left him sitting up against a brick wall, blood drying around his eye, he had no choice but to see it all: the smeared lipstick and running mascara, the proffered cigarette habit, and her endless trips from home.

And so he started to walk, pacing the skyscrapers of Ramat Gan and the far corners of the beaches at Tel Baruch. He followed the flaking arrows that lined the old bus terminal, reading the signs advertising "special health clubs" and cringing at every person he saw walking the other direction, thinking, "was he with her?" The thought sent him vomiting over the old track lines, leaving brown bile to outline the broken beer bottles strewn along the cracked pavement below. He couldn't help but see the girls in crumbling corners and in the windows with bars over them, most of them younger than Oren, with big dark hollow eyes and sagging breasts watching him as he followed the tracks.

And then one girl caught his eye. She was young with long curly hair that

hinted at late autumnal sunsets above beaches on the coast. He told her he had a question and she looked up at him and answered, "Oh sure honey, any question you want." But when he asked, "Do you know a girl named Oren," she flickered her eyelashes at him and parted her lips saying, "Oh come on sweetie, I'm sure I'm good enough." And the touch of her hand felt warm on the small of his back and the smell of minted tea on her breath so much like home, that he went with her, followed her wobbly high-heeled walk to the furthest corners of the station.

# Landing

In the bed's tangled linen
you are netted freshwater
fish without scale, or gill,
caught in the river with
pine needles, pond skaters,
no dorsal, no vent, but pure
motion, full
living muscle, pulse,
eye, thrash, returning
to that wet familiar
of dream, of breathing, and
I have you now, I have
caught you now, and you are
pulled from the river,
eerily warm, body soft,
blink, blink, day ready.

The morning makes gray light.
I imagine gutting your arm,
the peeling back and smell
of wet redwood I'd find there.

# Excerpts

Mary Angelino

I.

and i [am the black dot at the top
of your i, stale crumbs
of afterthought scattered
on the page] stare down at your bodies
twined like ropes of red
licorice, a severed braid
of limbs possessed.

you&she—

ink-moans,
smeared
metaphors,
just words
as aphids mount and gnaw
each letter's stem.

II.

i find similes stuck in screen
doors [the blond yes of her caught
hair on the wire] and inside the rusty rings
where trashcans used to be:
her skin as ___as___,
you catch her exhale, it____s.  the poem  calculates like your hands
on her body, measure
pin of nipple between tongue
and teeth, room with its shelves
and sink overflowing, walls

moist in their dark corners, the moon-fat bed.

# Aqueous Humour

*I have seen them riding seaward on the waves*
*Combing the white hair of the waves blown back*
*—T.S. Eliot*

Their chatter seems nearer, appears
part of the blue breeze that carries it
from their projected jaws

as they bobble their heads, backs
to the waves, propped up
by tails unceasingly working the water

below. The morning air clears
her throat as though ready to testify
to the holiness of it all; my head fills

with bird's flight, the labor of words
inwardly misplaced, but not lost. A tacit
amity has risen like tides of the full moon

Richard F. Kilpatrick

clinging to a duotone of daylight and dark as two
humpback dolphins giggle and splash at me,
angling for a tête-à-tête. I splash back

and reach out my hand and nod
like them and they dance and spin as if to thank me
for the pleasure. Between synchrony

and diachrony we follow the trace of time until the sands
collapse among Lamu's mangroves;
African sublime speaks tongues that flame irony on my path.

What does it mean to touch nature
when it touches you? I saw Oceanids on a morning
walk, or they appeared in a dream. What would it mean to you?

# You

I've been cussed at, spit at, thrown down, and hit by you.
You cross the street when you see me walking your way.
You look at me sideways, crossways, ill ways.
Your eyebrow arches up when you see me walking with her.
You've laughed in my face while telling me you don't date my kind.
You might be nice to me when we're alone, but
ignore me and worse when others can see you.
As I filled up on gasoline on my way to immerse myself in the melting pot
just the other week, your offspring yelled "White Power. Yeah fucker, White Power."
While I stood paralyzed with rage, fear, and embarrassment,
your friends laughed as you yelled slurs at my father.
You shot my uncle through his front door window at 8 in the morning,
and then expect him to happily care for your nephew's failing heart.

I'm the guy you've known since childhood.
We went to the same schools, had the same teachers,
took the same classes, and yet you have a look of fear in your eyes.
We played at recess, were at the same after school clubs,
the same night clubs and the other social events.

I was your friend when others weren't.
We played jokes on teachers together,
ditched school together,
I even hit someone for you,
yet you look at me as if you don't know me.
I've offered you my seat when no one else on the bus would.
I helped you pick up the groceries that tore through your bag,
and you looked at me like I was going to rob you.

I've known you since before I understood words.
I've known you in your many forms.
Sadly, you come in many shapes, sizes and colors.
Even my own.

# That One Portal Story I Wrote About ~~The Vagina Dentata Myth Lesbo Style and~~ With Many Thanks To Mr. Edgar Allen Poe

As Sam looks around the room this is what she is seeing: a wooden chair, a closet covered with a fake velvet curtain from Ikea – color blue, a small television, and an old dresser with chipped yellow paint that came from a second-hand store. As Sam looks around the room this is what she is thinking: how am I going to clean up all this blood?

She sighs and sits down on the edge of the bed and doesn't really care that blood is soaking into the butt of her jeans because she needs, more than anything, to sit right now. Looking up at the ceiling she thinks – I hate the ceiling in this room. The ceiling is the kind that has a texture, like cottage cheese, which drives her crazy in that it is ugly, and stupid too. She thinks she remembers something about how the cottage cheese texture has asbestos in it and how you have to be really careful when removing it because it will give you lung cancer if you breathe in the dust that floats around while you scrape it off.

She sees that blood is splattered on the ceiling too. Which sucks.

There is a tiny noise that she thinks she is almost hearing; it is the softest clicking noise, so soft that maybe there really is no clicking noise at all.

Sam is doing her best to think her way through this but she doesn't have many options at this point. She could get into her car and drive. That's one. But she doesn't have a good car and where she would go is an even bigger problem.

She could stay here and clean up the blood and try to paint the dumb-ass ceiling, and bury the body, which is still currently on the bed, and wait for the police to show

up with their black lights and their Q-tips. That's two. But they will have questions she doesn't want to answer.

Right now Sam doesn't have a three but she needs to think of a three pretty quick.

On top of not having any plan, she is also bummed out because this is one of those times when she wishes she wasn't a lesbian. Not because it isn't good to be a lesbian. In Sam's opinion it can be pretty great especially when the right girl comes along.

It's only when one lesbian kills another in a bedroom in cold blood straight people give each other those knowing looks that say – see we were right, lesbians *do* kill each other in cold blood in their bedrooms – it's just like in the movies! And it bugs Sam to think that she's the one that's going to ruin it for everyone because now it's going to be that much harder for other lesbians to do things that straight people automatically get to do – like get married or adopt kids – no matter how many of *them* kill each other in cold blood in *their* bedrooms – which, Sam thinks, is totally unfair.

With blood soaking into the butt of her jeans Sam is fantasizing about how much better she'd feel if she could get some kind of a statement to the press before all of this hits the fan. Something like, *do not judge all lesbians based on my actions because I'm not a lesbian role-model or anything like that. And what I did is about me being a dumb asshole more than it's about me being gay anyway.*

She is becoming aware of just exactly how soaked with blood her jeans are. Ew is her first thought. It is Emma's blood, but still . . . .

Blood has always freaked Sam out. But that's not really saying anything because it freaks most people out. Truly, it's a little weird if blood doesn't freak someone out. It's like, what's wrong with that freak – why aren't they freaked out by freaky things?

Here's a clue: if someone tells you blood doesn't bother them then it's probably a good idea to walk the other way – at any rate, it's a red flag for sure.

Which brings us back to her, to Emma, the girl whose blood Sam's butt is soaking in. Emma wasn't freaked out by blood and looking back it's probably safe to

say that Sam might have known that things weren't going to end well because most ways you sliced it, Emma was a very strange girl.

In Sam's defense, everything on the outside of Emma looked normal enough. You couldn't tell just by looking at her, even with her clothes off, that anything was actually odd about her. The things that were different about Emma were all on the inside.

For example, here's something pretty significant that Emma didn't tell Sam about when they first met. Instead she waited until they were about go all the way that first time and then she took Sam's fingers down there, inside of her and Sam felt it – a ring of sharp little teeth in there. When Sam looked at Emma with her eyebrows squinching towards each other in concern and confusion, Emma merely smiled at Sam an adorable sort of smile and gave her fingers the softest little nibble, almost like a puppy playfully mouthing the object of its affection. Maybe it was because Emma was so sweet, so adorable, or so irresistibly unusual that the teeth didn't really bother Sam that much. Maybe it was even kind of hot in a way.

And really, what difference did it make? It's true, Emma did chew up a lot of Sam's silicon toys but it's not like Sam was attached to them. Once a dong got too shredded she'd just throw it out and buy a new one – no big deal.

And if that had been the beginning and end of it then surely Sam wouldn't be sitting in Emma's blood right now. No, Sam would probably be giving Emma a back-rub, or they'd be watching a movie on the little TV in the bedroom, or maybe they'd be making love in Emma's queen sized bed. But unfortunately there's more to this story because Emma wasn't strange only in that delightfully dental sense. There was also the perhaps just as odd, but certainly much less adorable, fact that she passionately liked things that she wasn't supposed to like at all.

For example, Emma thought that being choked was super fun.

At first Sam didn't want to do it. She was like, no way Emma, I don't want to hurt you, because Sam believed that Emma would think that was a sweet thing to say, but Emma had snarled, come on you pussy, choke me! And that kind of pissed Sam off and this all had happened when they were having sex and Sam was a little out of

control already because of it and so she went ahead and choked Emma and Emma had come all over the place and afterwards Emma kissed Sam with those tender little kisses on her nose and ears and told Sam what a big strong boi she was and then after a few times like that Sam would choke Emma pretty much automatically without Emma having to ask anymore.

So that went on for a little while and then Emma started asking Sam to do other things too. She would show Sam movies, and almost always there would be a guy doing something to a girl, something pretty painful, pretty extreme. Sometimes it would be a girl and a girl but usually not. Then Emma would say, please Sam; let's just try it. And sometimes Sam would sort of attempt to avoid doing it but mostly she'd do what Emma wanted. And always Emma had those little kisses for Sam afterwards and Sam would feel so good, like she'd actually really *done* something – like she had made something happen.

That clicking noise is still going on in the background. In fact, just a minute ago Sam thought maybe it was a dry rattle in her sinus cavity but it's not that. And if she's not just imagining it, it's getting louder. But maybe she's just going a little crazy, and perhaps that's the right thing to do in this circumstance anyway.

It's tempting to say that Sam should have known better. Many people will probably declare that after that first nibble they would have been out the door but everyone knows that what people say and what they do are almost always separate categories. Besides, it's hard to explain Emma. Hard in that bigger than the sum of her parts sort of way.

It's clear that it wasn't merely a physical attraction on Sam's part because Emma wasn't beautiful in the way that Sam thinks of when the word beautiful comes up. Sam prefers girls with curves, and a certain round cherubic softness of the face associated with pin-up girls from the 1950s. Emma's face was long, not just in terms of the general shape of her skull, but her nose and everything – it's like it had been stretched taut on something hard to make it seem longer and thinner than it would have normally been. Her whole body was like that. Long and thin like a piece of taffy being pulled. She looked like she would break if you tugged on her only a little bit

more, stretched her just an inch longer than she already was. Her hair was straight and shiny brown and her teeth were white like teeth are in commercials.

Despite her lack of girlish curves, Emma liked to wear very girly things. Emma had tiny shirts that made her ity-bity tits look great and short skirts and other things like that. It drove Sam kinda crazy to have Emma walking around in those clothes but it turned her on too.

Now, in Emma's defense it's important to note that she was funny, and also sweet. She made Sam laugh all the time. And that was a big deal because mostly girls like Emma didn't give Sam a second look. But Emma was pleased with Sam, with how Sam was. And that was great. Besides that she was smart too, and Sam is no rocket scientist but that didn't seem to bother Emma at all. As smart as she was she didn't throw big words around in front of Sam or make jokes about things that Sam didn't understand. She wasn't like that. Which, I guess, makes this even more tragic because it will probably be a long time before Sam finds another girl like Emma.

Another quirky thing about Emma is that she used to have Sam drive her around on Saturday mornings to garage sales and tag sales and sometimes to places she called estate sales where old people had died and their relatives let strangers into the house and sold everything that wasn't somehow attached to the walls or to the floor.

Emma had a thing for old toys, and also for photographs of people she didn't know. She had shelves crowded with ancient stuffed animals and little tin figures but her favorite toys were the rubber squeaky ones shaped like dolls, or puppies, or what have you that people used to give to babies to play with in the days before people were paranoid about babies suffocating on any and every thing. She had dozens of them.

Sam thinks these rubber dolls are sort of cute in a way but mainly she thinks that there is something about figures rendered in the skin-like texture of rubber that tends to be a little creepy. If Sam was in the habit of using more elaborate words she would say that the feeling the rubber toys evoked for her was one of the uncanny or even of the grotesque, but Sam doesn't use those kinds of words so creepy will have to suffice.

At any rate, Sam could kind of understand the collection of toys but why Emma would keep photos of strangers made no sense to her at all. Emma had a hat box stuffed full of them, of photos of people in black and white, of strangers.

Emma described once to Sam that what she liked about the images was that they were narrative free – that there were no particular words that came crowding in to her head to pin her mind to the floor when she looked at them. Sam had no idea what Emma was talking about. Her thoughts about the photos began and ended with the idea that it was pretty sad that someone's family would sell off their dead relative's photos – cold-blooded was how that looked to her.

If Sam turns around and looks behind her on the bed she will find Emma still lying there. Sam pictures how Emma's hands and eyes are open and how there is a look on her face that is a cross between relief, surprise, and pain. Her breasts, Sam knows, are tinted red with her now-congealing blood. Emma's tiny areolas, normally the most beautiful shade of pinkish-tan are obscured by the sticky redness that came out all over the place when Sam opened the veins in Emma's neck.

Sam wishes that fucking clicking sound would stop already.

Here's something Emma used to do that she made Sam swear never to tell anyone else. Sometimes, usually at night, Emma would curl up under a blanket with one of her old rubber toys. Generally it was sooner rather than later that the toy would find itself nestled between her thighs. Then, inevitably, a soft, muffled, rhythmic squeaking could be heard, and then after a while it could not.

Although Emma refused to describe in any detail what happened Sam knew that those toys did not ever come back from their adventures into Emma, and where they ultimately ended up was a mystery that Sam could barely begin to think about.

The only thing Emma ever said about it was that lucky toys go where there are no more words. She said this one night after Sam had done one of those very bad things to Emma that Emma liked so very, very much, and Emma was actually bleeding quite a bit and Sam was really scared and had said as much to Emma but Emma did not seem phased in the slightest and had, in fact, laughed at the sight of her own blood and said only that she didn't want to have to talk about it and that she wished

she were a little doll made out of rubber with injection molded pink ruffled underwear and big blue cartoon eyes and a little squeaker in her back that would prove, once and for all, that she had been made for squeezing.

Sam thought that perhaps Emma had already lost too much blood and that she was wasn't making sense as a result and so she grabbed Emma by the shoulders and said while looking worriedly into her eyes, Emma! Emma! Like she was trying to get the Emma that made sense to come back into Emma's body but Emma just scowled at her and said, oh, quit it Sam I'm fine, and the bleeding eventually stopped on its own and everything went on just as it had being going on before.

Earlier tonight Emma had shown Sam yet another movie with a scene between a guy and a girl with the guy doing something really horrible to the girl. Emma had watched, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping a little bit. At the end of the movie the guy held a blade to the girls neck and said that he was going to cut her throat. He didn't do it of course, because, after all, it was just another porno film and although they do catalogs full of despicable things in porno films, killing isn't actually an option yet.

But Emma had turned to Sam and said sadly that she wished he would have done it, that it would have been the right thing to do for that poor girl who obviously wanted so desperately to get out of her body, because if she hadn't wanted out she would never have submitted to the things he was doing to her.

It would be nice to be able to say that Sam was horrified by this, that she had taken Emma in her arms and smoothed her straight hair against her head and murmured sweet things to Emma about life and living and the goodness therein. But Sam did not. Truth be told, maybe Sam was getting just a little tired of Emma's oddness, of her stubborn, childish demands that she be handled so roughly. After all, the infliction of pain, no matter how welcome, is a burden heavier than most people can bear for long.

Or maybe it was that Sam was finally beginning to see what Emma meant when she said that the places where there are no words are really the only places worth being. Whatever the case, Sam didn't argue when Emma made it clear what it was she wanted done. It had to be her throat and it had to be a knife – strangling simply

wouldn't make her happy.

Sam is remembering those last moments now. She is thinking about how excited Emma was when she realized Sam was willing to do it, how she had tangled her arms around Sam's neck and whispered the sweetest things into Sam's ear. She is trying to recall exactly the look of gratitude in Emma's eyes, the wetness mixed with a gleam so bright that as Emma looked at her Sam felt like she was being touched physically.

Yet after that, the actual cut was almost anticlimactic. Yes, the blood had come out in great, dramatic spurtings. Yes, Emma's face had looked radiant and full of satisfaction in those first several moments. And yes, it was true that Sam did not regret releasing her. But still, once that cut was complete the understanding came crashing into Sam that Emma was lost to her forever and that perhaps the worst thing was that Sam was still, despite this very generous and selfless act, essentially, the same old Sam with no foreseeable way out of her own body of trouble.

Sam knows that there are going to be words on top of words about all of this. Words are going to be mass-produced to describe how she, the masculine sex-crazed murderous lesbian killed her feminine lover in cold-blood on their bed. Words will come out of mouths on televisions. Words will be slathered all over newsprint and magazine papers. Words will be cast around a courtroom at her and about her. In fact, Sam is realizing right now that the only thing that will ever happen to her from now on are these words and the thought of living in words, away from the flesh of Emma's actual being, seems like more than Sam will be able to carry.

Sam is standing up and turning around and looking upon the body of Emma, who is just as Sam remembered she was, except that her eyes are actually closed. This fact brings tears up into and then out of Sam's own eyes so that the image of Emma is distorting in blurry wetness.

Although Sam would probably be embarrassed by it if she could see herself doing it, what she does now is that she kneels at the foot of the bed and weeps. Through her sobbing she notices that the sound, the clicking, is still here and its persistence infuriates her in that this is not the moment of her life that something as

stupid as a clicking sound should distract her.

But now, as she blinks away her tears she is wondering, with guarded hope, if the clicking isn't coming from Emma.

Sam pulls herself eagerly up onto the bed, past Emma's feet, so that she is between Emma's wide-spread legs. And the sound, the clicking, is louder and Sam is realizing that the clicking is the clicking of teeth tapping eagerly together with nothing between them.

There is no hesitation. The moment of Sam's realization is the same moment that Sam takes action.

No longer is there the clicking but now there only the soundless image of Sam disappearing into Emma one inch at a time, slowly and even up until the very end, with Sam's feet working to help propel her body every so slowly up and into Emma.

And now the observer is seeing that there is no more sound, there is no more movement, there is only the still image of Emma's body in repose on a queen size bed in a room, splashed liberally with blood, which contains these things: a wooden chair, a closet covered with a fake velvet curtain from Ikea – color blue, a small television, and an old dresser with chipped yellow paint that came from a second-hand store.

# Floss

This mutual molar neglect—
mine, yours. Enamel erosion
and sour rot where fluoride promises faltered,
flatlined. White-washed tomb,
embalmed by syrup platitudes.

Needle probe pinpoints gum line furrows,
the chalkboard scrape of steel
on teeth until the root throbs
protest in saliva-churned echoes.

Drill bores fissures,
cauterizes nerve ends flayed
by the scuff of apathy.
Gloves twirl
with practiced detachment that I envy.

Zachary Ng

# Wayne

Born:
on Midwestern farm
suckled whiskeyed teats

Flew:
tarnished angel wings
wandered shadowed paths

Died:
poison yellow dust
I stirred his coffee

# Intelligence Test

As I was flying home, I
stopped to rest in a
clearing. I saw red and white heads
pushing out of hot steaming dung.

And I ate them up right quick,
so as not to lay an egg, I pulled my tail
up between my legs and tucked it in my
pocket.

My balloon would have the answer to the
riddle in my head.
Red, red balloon, am I a loon,
or just a screw driving a truck?

But I knew the answer would not come to a
pea, so I lay down to take a nap
and catch a cloud
before I ate my hat.

# Maybe Sunday

Her eyes were dark and when I looked into them they were thick, fleshy, loose ripples like the skin of a fig.

She said, "Can't you just look in my eyes? Why can't you just look in my eyes?"

Now I want to tell you that I tried very hard, I tried to look at her eyes and really feel something, the way you're supposed to, but I couldn't concentrate. I could only think of how strange eyes look when you stare at them up close, and how her eyes were watering from being kept open like that, and how she had a pimple right between her eyebrows. I want you to know that I thought she was beautiful, but I could never keep my eyes on her.

She asked, "Do you think I'm mad?"

I said, "Mad?" and I thought she meant angry with me.

"Like crazy. Nietzsche- you know him?" She did not wait for an answer, just looked at me and rolled her eyes and went on. "Anyway, he says love is madness. But also there's always reason in madness. Something like that."

"You think you're crazy?"

She laughed and rolled her eyes again, sighed a long sigh, then looked at me for a long time.

She said, "Shit. I'm stoned."

***

"Do you ever want to just give it all up? Don't you just feel exhausted all the

time?"

I took a very hard drag from the joint after she said that, as if she might never let me smoke again.

She looked angrily towards me, suddenly disgusted and I knew she thought she was better than me. I thought maybe she was right.

I kissed her hard, said, "I love you."

She said, "You're changing the subject." And she smoked some, coughing sweetly.

***

She woke me up in the middle of the night and I had an erection and she kissed me and I thought maybe she wanted to do it. I should have known better.

She said, "Can we smoke? I can't sleep."

I want to tell you that I never thought she would leave, but I should have known she would. Those eyes, that I never did give credit, deserved something better to look at. Eventually, intelligent girls find intelligent men, even if at first they are afraid to. It's just the way of the world. But on this night, this night like any other, when she woke me up and smiled we smoked and she fell fast asleep and so did I.

She left me the next morning, cried hysterically and told me she would always love me but that she knew now that she was never in love with me. She said I had ruined her with all the pot and drugs and drinking and she could feel her mind shriveling up. She said she wanted to have friends and wanted to go to college and that I wasn't ready to grow up. And she was.

That stupid apartment seemed to close in around me and I had the strangest urges to hit her or beat her or just tell her what a bitch she was for throwing us away so suddenly. But at the same time she was so beautiful, her pale bloodless white face swollen with pink blotches from crying so hard.

She said, "I've been trying to deny it for a year but I know now. I know I have to leave you if I ever want to be something. I can't be anything but sick with you."

I said, "You can't blame me for your life."

She said, "I don't blame you. It's not your fault or mine; we're just not right.

We're just not right."

***

She left that day, with her bright green suitcase, sobbing, saying she didn't know where she would go and I realized I had no idea who I would be without her. She came back later that night, asked me if we could smoke, said she felt so depressed she just wanted to get stoned. After we smoked I tried to kiss her, and she kissed me back for a second, then pulled away and slapped me.

I told her I missed her already and she said she wanted to sleep beside me once more and I told her I wanted that more than anything.

I tried to hug her, hold her in bed like we always used to do when she first came into my life, when the glitter of drugs and indulgence and social and moral abandon intoxicated her. Just when her mother was her biggest enemy in the world, when her father was nowhere to be found. And so I tried to hug her like that, and she pushed me away, said she was only sleeping there because it was the only place she had, it was her apartment too, and if I didn't relax a little she would make me get a hotel room.

I want to tell you that something made it so neither of us could sleep, and after she was gone I thought about that a lot, thought it must have meant we were meant to be.

At two in the morning she asked if we could smoke a joint.

I said, "I thought you didn't want to do that anymore. Isn't that what all of this is about?"

"Sure it is. But not now," she said. "I mean not this minute. I was thinking Sunday. Maybe Sunday."

# Fix It

If it's not broken you're not looking hard enough,
my mother's voice a whirring cluck. A rattle
from the fridge, a squeak in the faucet
demands clamps, bolts, levers, pulleys, bulldozers—
an arsenal.

Banished to shadow and oil stains,
left to lick rivulets of sweat
and sift through souvenirs,
rummage through clanking tools
and childhood specters that scramble
over teetering box towers and
stir up puffs of gray that cloud my sinuses,
but I breathe in.

Zachary Ng

# Robert Frost's Bastard Son

Not the worst name I've been called.
It snows in my blood,
after pills, after kissing the wrong thrill.

No fucking fences to kick down
in my apocalyptic expensive boots.

My neighbors are the wind,
the moon, and the stoners who
think they're alone because
I don't make a noise one mile south of them.

I asked for hot apple cider just this morning
and I checked myself,
like an immigrant whose accent returns
on seeing food from home on a menu.

Robert, the wife beater or not?
My nana was beaten and then married
a second beater:
Will the lyrical make her black eyes in the grave
turn New Hampshire fresh snowfield white?

Robert, the pessimist disguised as
America's favorite snowman.

But genealogy is never about free will.

Glenn Sheldon

## Mercury Riesling in Union State

As a
boy he'd
walk barefoot
to the
5 rivers
watching the
turning leafs
in the
smell of
pepper wood.
That was
the highlife.
Now, north
of the
meridian, he
sits in
the big
white house,
plays Risk

with
who
*know*
*deadly*
*for Camalot's*
*at the end*
He says
Sebastini,
or a dancing
remember which,
dynamite under
woodbridge," then
hide from
who lick their
at him. I long
who's passing leaves
to take Kadhimain.
and Greg Norman
to say "Chalone"
Minister of Israel
loons puff missile
chanting,
I'm done
pretense. I proclaim
present
A bucket

R.H. Phillps
whispers, *I*
*something of the seven*
*zins, your search*
*Blackstone Fields*
*of Camel Road.*
"Husch, while I shovel
a wild horse
bull I can't
a little black dress and
Harrison Avenue's
he jekels, trying to
the 3 blind moose
glaring white eyeballs
for Stonewall,
only Kendall-Jackson
Now, he
cross the Nile
to the Prime
while the smoking
silos around his head
"Talus the truth."
with all this modern
his birthday,
him this:
of tennis balls.

# The Tillage at Kilgarven

The soil here's besieged by EU slogans
that cramp your fields to save a hedgehog's ass.
Crows must think you dole them their carrion.
Churches are so drab they'd repel a pope
whose faith demands farmers stare sextons down.
Broken weather means you take the half chance

winter barley and oats will persevere.
But bet soy, maize and wheat will rise again
even as your voice scrabbles on, your life
stern as this brackish wind, a dead ringer
for old horse-drawn plows spalling into rust
where wind waits to cull you back into fields.

# Behind Blades of Grass

S.P. MacIntyre

Well, honestly, I was originally interested in his mother: my own mother was dying at the same time she was giving birth to him, her second child, the one I would eventually fall in love with. I was there, in the waiting room (yes, for the maternity ward, I have a propensity for being places I ought not to be, as I'm sure you already know,) watching her first son from behind the cover of some outdated news magazine, my face obscured by the glossy inked pages, while he, no more than five or six at the time, ate an entire extra-large, extra-cheese pizza that he had delivered to the hospital for himself and no other. I didn't pay much attention to him, though I could tell from his incessant chattiness and constant clamor for attention from nurses and fellow waiting room inhabitants that being ignored was something he had not yet grown accustomed. But I did notice when a man in olive drab scrubs with a Tom Selleck-mustache and a surgical mask dangling freely from his neck entered solemnly, broodingly, into the room and pulled the little boy, gently by his arm just above his elbow, outside into the hall only a few feet where a pale woman of New England beauty with swollen breasts and belly lay on a gurney with the snail trail lines of dried or drying tears on her cheeks. I could see them from where I sat, through the leaves of a fake ficus: she was holding his hand with both of hers while he seemed almost as if he was trying to lean away. The man, whom I later learned was the father (but you probably could have guessed that, couldn't you?) had crouched down beside him while they exchanged awkward allocutions.

—Problems? With the pregnancy? I swear I cannot stand that sniveling little

dolt, that puerile little creature; his parents began to weep. As nurses carted her off to god-only-knows-where, the father guided the seemingly unaffected little boy back into the waiting room, tears and snot tangled into that detestable mustache, saying that everything would be alright, everything would be okay, before he left again to hold a hand, to utter words of encouragement, to do whatever it is expecting fathers do. The boy began eating pizza again.

I was there, sitting beside my mother's deathbed while she alternated between screams of agony and bouts of emesis, saying to her that everything would be okay, everything would be alright, thinking that at that moment a person, a wife, a mother, a woman was trying to give birth. I decided, then, that I would follow the family home. (I told you, I was originally interested in his mother—though I cannot, for the life of me, remember her name.)

As for my mother? Well, you'd be surprised how little pressure is required in order to cause a person to aspirate on his or her own vomit. I would have a new family now.

They lived in a Gregorian style house, two stories and two bedrooms, on a hill and set back a ways from the main road with the remnants of a forest concealing it from view. In the beginning, I would watch from the trees, learning their habits and schedules until one day, while they were all away, I snuck inside. The home couldn't have been better designed for me, with large gaps between the floors and crawlspaces between all the walls and an air vent in nearly every room.

For the first few weeks I was a noisy buffoon, tripping and scratching at the walls, breathing so loudly—my god, I should have been caught then. But I wasn't. —Dear, I do believe we have vermin living in the walls, though I don't think she said it quite like that despite the queer sort of elegance emanating about her. It was around this time that I took an affinity for baby Michael.

She would hold him, nestled up against her breast, a mother of middle age married perhaps a few years too late, while Michael would lay silently in her arms staring with catlike indifference at an onyx cabochon, a jeweled black teardrop,

hanging from her neck. Danny, the eldest, would sit with them while their mother would entertain company. —Oh, this one never cries, such a good child; doesn't even call out when he's hungry or filthy. Unlike that one over there, always the dramatic one. I remember once when I was taking a nap and he wanted to be changed: he sat down, his diaper full of excrement, right on my face. Danny would sneer at this anecdote, shifting uncomfortably in his seat as he stared at the newborn, while Michael would always avoid the looks of peoples' eyes. I knew then that he was different, somehow special and spectacular, well before anybody began to worry.

I began to have fantasies—yes, fantasies—about the little one wherein I would press hard on the soft spots of his head, pushing inward those forming and malleable bones to procure a new orifice; I would duct tape all around his abdomen to prevent him from literally bursting—still pushing his innards out the other end; I would saw off the mother's breasts, placing them on my own and smothering the little dear until I could feel his heart next to mine throb, then slow, then stop. (You look almost disgusted. Might I ask that you abstain from judgment for the time being? There is still so much more to tell.) Admittedly, sometimes it became hard to control myself while I stared from behind the walls: heavy breathing and grunting would always attract unwanted attention.

—What was that?

—Just the rats, just the rats; we can't seem to get rid of them.

***

Apparently, young Danny was quick to develop, walking and talking at a very young age according to the parents who quite possibly held more than a bit of bias, while Michael showed little progress: still lying in his crib when he should have been standing in abject protest at his confinement, still wetting diapers when he should have been fighting against the transition to toilet, still refraining from the formulation of words and even the typical idioglossia common among young children.

During the day, the mother and father would look in on his crib, trying to attract his attention with rattles or what-have-you, sometimes the father even going as far as grabbing his face and screaming, —Look at us, look at us. Michael's deep-blue

eyes, the shade of perfect serenity, would just roll around in his head, looking everywhere but his parents' faces. When released, he would simply focus back on the shadows cast by the mobile dangling above the crib: the colorful shapes and animals transformed, projecting onto the wall angular and ominous figures.

At night, the parents would lie facing the same direction, their bodies contoured but separated, the rift increasing over the weeks and months, like the lines in the symbol for approximation. The mother began to cry all the more often, the father listening silently but impotent to console, as the creeping fear of uncertainty began to press upon them. An uncertainty that dripped, venomous and acidic from Michael's every averted gaze, every unuttered syllable, every moment he spent staring into the absence of presence.

Was it autism? Was it Asperger's syndrome? Rett's? Heller's? Retardation? Dyspraxia? A palsy? Epilepsy? McDD? NLD? AD-bloody-HD? Poor Michael practically had a DSM-IV crammed into his head. I couldn't help but feel saddened by the stresses placed upon my family—after all, I had been with them for some years at that point and I'm not necessarily a heartless bastard. Eventually, Michael would be lumped into that catchall, "not otherwise specified" category. The poor darling; I do miss him.

Danny—yes, let's not forget about Danny—grew seemingly more distant and resentful with the aggrandized attention lavished upon his brother, withdrawing into a world he forged out of plastic building blocks and figurines. Unlike Michael, with his reflecting-pool eyes and tousled blond hair, Danny had grown to be a prim young child, spending a great deal of time smoothing down his straight brown hair and staring intently into peoples' eyes as he spoke with them, as if compensating for his brother's quiet unruliness. The two brothers shared a room together, a bunk bed stood in the corner: built at the same time as the crib in anticipation of Michael's expected transition. With Michael still in that developmentally disabled limbo, Danny had taken to keeping his plastic creations on the top tier of the bunk, out of the reach of his little brother (who showed no interest in the first place, mind you).

(Now pay attention, this is how Michael acquired that lovely grin of his.)

Around the time that he was being bounced around child psychologists and an

army of diagnosticians, Michael's parents began seeking couples' counseling—apparently the child's distance began to rub off on them all. The father had been spending more and more time away from home while the mother began showing signs of a heightening paranoia: suffering from a recurring nightmare that rats and other sorts of pests were trying to eat her uterus. Was it menopause? Was it...(well, you get the idea).

While they were away, fervently bickering over the death of their sex life and the apparent lineage of mental disorders that might have descended through each others' family line—her dyslexic uncle, his bipolar mother— the parents would hire an overweight, adolescent girl with bottle-bottom glasses that lived a mile or two down the road. She was left with a strict regimen—color-coded and specified down to five-minute increments—that she ignored; rather, spending most of her time on the phone talking to her long-distance "boyfriend" and smoking in the bathroom, using the fan to try and clear the air. Of course that idiot girl couldn't just go outside to smoke—no, nobody could know that she smoked! So, naturally, I'd practically be choking on the blasted cigarette exhalations that seeped into the vents and walls.

—I think your house is haunted.

—No, no, we just have rodents we can't seem to get rid of...Do I smell cigarettes?

—No, oh no, of course not, I just accidentally burned what I was making for lunch.

I suppose the mother just chalked everything up to paranoia, repeating to herself that she would hire another exterminator, that she would remodel her kitchen, that she would stop making mountains out of molehills. Well, the last one was something the father would repeat, anyway.

One day, when dark clouds obscuring the sky lumbered along, scraping across the tops of the trees and threatening the fall of rain, the babysitter was attending to the two children—which is to say, leaving Michael in the crib and sitting on the living room couch—feigning a particular interest in Danny's extroverted efforts to explain how his plastic ships operated and the individual history of each person manning them. I decided to leave them to their mediocrity and check on little lonely Michael,

nearly three or four at the time.

The mobile had been removed from the crib, which Michael had begun to outgrow, though that did not prevent him from staring at the shadows cast onto the wall by the railing. The darling little boy, a part of me wanted to hold him and nurture him, the other part wanted to touch him, to taste him, to know the texture of his organs. I brought my face close to the air vent near the ceiling—this would be the moment that I knew it was love we shared—and whispered to him, —Michael, Michael.

Would you know? He turned. He stared straight at me, the metal grate covering and striping vertical shadows over my face. I smiled and—believe me—he stood.

The crib and the bunk bed were set against the same wall, opposite me, and placed next to each other in such a way that the ladder to the top bunk was within Michael's reach. This boy, who had previously stood for no other, who had previously looked upon no other, grabbed one rung after another and pulled himself up. Knocking over Danny's creations along the way, sending fragmented pieces falling over the edge, he came to the middle of the bed, directly across from me, and tried to reach out, stretching his arm towards me as he pressed against the railing of the top bunk, his eyes wide with earnestness and what I can only describe as desire. I can remember it now, though it was years ago, I wanted to reach through walls, he wanted me the same way I wanted him—I was filled with an elation I cannot even begin to describe; I didn't even think about what was to happen next.

My little Michael fell, plummeted to the ground, landing face-first on a rectangular building block that gouged angular, shearing and uneven into the corner of his mouth. I wanted to scream—I wanted to scream though I never did until the end. I withdrew away from the grate when Danny and the babysitter came rushing into the room, the young girl scooping up the fallen boy and rushing to a phone to call the paramedics. Danny just stood there; staring dumbly at the wreckage until a siren came bleating up the driveway many minutes later. No amount of stitches, sutures, or surgeries were able to repair Michael's face, he looked as though someone had tilted their head and taken a sideways bite out of his flesh.

The babysitter would later tell the parents that he must have had climbed up the

bunk bed to play with Danny's toys, and, noticing that he had knocked some over, tried to reach down and grab them. But I knew, I knew that he was reaching for me, that his eyes were reserved for mine, and the isosceles triangle of flesh missing from the left side of his upper lip forced his disfigured mouth into a perpetual smile only for me.

Outside that day, the low hanging clouds threatened to spill their rain, but rain never fell.

It is safe to assume that what I do, these things I've done, is a particularly hazardous occupation. When you spend years creeping behind the walls of a rustic home with miserable insulation set into a forest things really get put into perspective, so to speak. Over the years there would be times when the smell of my own body odor and excrement filled the entire house; it was even worse when I would acquire cuts or splinters that got infected, smelling sour and rotten as the skin swelled and pustulated. I nearly lost my leg when it was bitten by a brown recluse (and I tell you, having a limb of fetid flesh is never good when you're trying to remain hidden for years at a time). To keep myself from sneezing or coughing from the dust and what was in all likelihood asbestos I would wear plastic gardeners' masks over my nose and mouth. Still, whenever there was suspicion or danger of getting caught I would use my acquired expertise in the layout of the house to avoid being seen: it was easy to scuttle away for a time before returning to my home once again.

The years passed and I seemed to grow ever the more immersed in my obsession, with words twisting and transforming in my brain when I was engrossed in the furor of my desires: "the mother" or "their mother" became "my mother," Danny became "my brother," Michael was always mine, to be sure, while the father simply remained the same. Worse, really, because things for him seemed to be on a steady downward trend, losing his temper and taking it out verbally on his wife, physically on his children—as if he were using them as a means with which to assert his dominance in a household where any sort of control was never really an option—and sleeping more often than not on the living room couch: setting up the dominoes that would

eventually surge and force forward and bring about the tragic denouement (which I surely need not remind you of). To his credit, however, even though he spent a great deal of time away from home, I never witnessed him succumb to the pitfalls of intoxicants or any other form of escapism; it was as if he were a puppet being dragged along by its strings with tiny, jerking, uncoordinated hands.

I should mention at this point that precious little Michael was growing up: standing and walking of his own accord rather than due to the influence of others—albeit in a contorted sort of fashion that would see him sway his torso this way and that like a tree caught in the wind—attending intensive speech therapy where he had been learning how to communicate his wants and desires via nonverbal means—still having yet to ever utter a syllable—and finding some strange solace in the absence of light. He seemed to gravitate towards darkness, preferring shaded areas and enclosed spaces without any form of illumination (I told you we held an intrinsic rapport). Seeing him at night, it was almost as if the contrast of darkness made him shine all the brighter—he gave off his own sort of luminescence that seemed to sap the light out of the very air.

Of course, at night, as often as I could, I would clamber up to the boys' room and wait until Danny's rasping breath descended into a palate-flapping snore; whereupon I would, again and again, bring my face close to the grate and let my dear Michael, my quivering bright blue-eyed boy, look upon my face from his place on the top bunk. (There's even a brief story to how that came to pass.)

When he began walking—a feat for which I surely accredit myself—and grew too tall for his crib, his parents persuaded Danny to abdicate the lower bunk to his little brother for safety reasons and whatnot. However, without ever saying a word, Michael cried out in abject protest. In those initial evenings with the crib dismantled, Michael would climb up to the top and lie flat until the father would come in, at Danny's behest, and pull him down. When the lights were extinguished, Michael would rise again and stalk silently about the house, removing light bulbs from their fixtures and smashing them on the floor beside his mother, in the master bedroom, or his father, in the living room.

After a few nights of this, when Michael would climb up into the top bunk they would let him be. The lights would go down and he would lie there with his eyes wide, staring into my air vent. When I began showing my face to him once again, he would look at me in the way he looked at no other, smiling that smile of his, and—the sweet thing—he would shake and wet the bed.

—Poor little thing, it's as though he's seen a ghost.

In the months running up towards the end, odd dreams began to lace their way through my head: fields of tall grass obscuring my view that refused to move with the wind; long, spindly fingers creeping from the nape of a neck and spreading out over a hairless skull; a formless figure, withered in emaciation, a gaping hole dripping black blood from where its genitalia should have been, standing on the fringe of a lightless closet, its eyes empty and its mouth open but emitting dark, soundless syllables. I could never tell in my dreams if this creature was Michael or Danny, too dark was the room and too malformed was the creature, but I knew it was one of the two.

On the final night my family and I shared together, business seemed to be going as usual: Danny had moved all of his building blocks into his bedroom closet—secluding himself within a world he was trying to build for no other— the mother was in the kitchen making dinner, while the father and Michael sat at the dining room table with plastic cards embossed with pictures and text—an image of a cat and the word "cat," et cetera, et cetera. Tonight, like many other nights, the father lost his temper when Michael refused to make a sound, refused to even look in the direction of his father's face or the cards in his hands, throwing the objects down on the table and slapping the boy across the face. Of course, this instigated a screaming match between the parents, leaving Michael, in his quietude, to stand, wobble a bit, and then ascend the staircase to his bedroom.

Once inside, Michael turned his head haphazardly about before settling on the general vicinity of the closed closet door. (I moved so I could get a better view of the inside.) Danny was in the process of adding antennae to a building when the door swung slowly inward, pressing up against his back. Without a moment of hesitation,

he lurched forward and slammed back, but instead of the resounding click of the latchbolt I imagine he was anticipating, there was only the sound of a crunch as the door refused to close any further than the width of a single, miniscule hand. Needless to say it was all chaos and helter-skelter movement from there.

—You need to tell them it wasn't my fault, it wasn't my fault.

—What the hell did you do?!

—I didn't do anything; it was an accident.

And so on.

The mother carried the tips of two of Michael's fingers as the father carried him to the car, Danny following closely behind. The four of them were carried away on the sound of screeching brakes and a dragging muffler, and I had, at that moment, an epiphany: nobody cared for Michael the way I did, and nobody would be able to provide him the love that I could. After nearly a decade of vigilance, of waiting and watching, I decided that this night would be the night that I finally emerged from behind the walls and touched my little boy.

While my family was at the hospital, I prepared for what I was about to do: rubber gloves, a large handful of insulation, a syringe, and a jar of bleach (I could not afford to risk another slow poisoning, this had to be done with immediacy).

When they all came home with their somber looks and what seemed to be the vestiges of a quiet fight, the parents put the children to bed—Michael again refusing the bottom bunk, despite his right hand being encumbered by gauze and splints—and then separated, the mother going to her bed and the father descending to the couch.

It took hours, but when I felt comfortable that they had all fallen asleep, I crept out of my hiding space and walked silently into the master bedroom first; not even the floorboards creaked as I approached. As I stood beside the bed, merely a shade cast by an unknown source, the mother sleeping on her back in the watery moonlight, I could almost smell her as I leaned closer and closer.

—Is that you? she whispered.

—No, I breathed silently back, pressing the insulation hard over her nose and mouth, the tiny filaments surely tearing up her insides as she gasped for air, and

injecting the bleach quickly into her neck. I must have missed the vein; it took several minutes before she stopped struggling.

I waited, listening to the air to see if anyone had woken. I removed the insulation and the syringe, refilled it, and moved quietly into the boys' room. I didn't notice at first that Michael was missing from the top bunk, so engrossed I was in making a quick end of Danny. When that affair was settled I stood up and saw the second tier of the bed empty with nary an indication of presence. I turned around and saw him crouching down in the darkness of the closet he had tried to seek refuge in earlier, facing away from the dance I had just done with his elder brother. Michael, Michael, he practically lit up the entire room, I completely forgot my intentions to go downstairs and prevent the father from interfering. I inched closer, in his left hand I could see him fiddling with the head of one of Danny's plastic figurines: twisting it around and around.

I can't begin to express how I felt, an elation that practically pulled at my perineum. At last I had removed the obstacles, I could see him now without the interference of an object. Finally, we were together in a room, he and I. Images fluttered through my head as I got closer and closer: I wanted to scrape the skin from his spine and fit my fingers like fishhooks between his ribs, I wanted to cut off his ears and spit into the hole, I wanted to slit his throat and force my fingers up into his oral cavity and kiss him, gently tonguing the tips of my own digits covered in blood and saliva. Surely, I thought, there would be time for this and more.

I crouched down right behind him, rubbing my crotch all down his back, and leaned forward, breathing heavy on his neck. I netted my fingers around his chest and brought my face closer and closer to his mouth, making sure to be as slow as I could be, taking as much time as I pleased. When my face began brushing up against his, he turned, quite suddenly, tilted his head, and bit me hard on the cheek—right at the corner of my mouth. I screamed, he bit me and I screamed for the first time in years, ending my long silence. He used me as a channel, a conduit for his words: I screamed his scream, the shout he had been withholding for his entire life. He bit me, clear through my flesh, as if to say, "No more."

# Double Scotch for the Angel

I was sitting in *The Frolic Room* drinking Scotch
and beer when an angel
walked in and pulled up
the stool next to mine

I looked him over for a long
second, then I took a pull
from the bottle of beer and
motioned the barkeep

"Double Scotch for the Angel,"
I said, and laid onto the bar a
piece of green paper with a portrait
of old Abe on it

the barkeep went over and poured,
first the ice, next the twice tip of
the bottle, put the thing down, picked
up the fiver and looked at me, saying,

"You're no angel."

the Angel sat there with a dull
grin on his face, slapped me on
the back, grabbed the double
and tossed 'er back

"Another," I told the barkeep,
and removed the very last five
dollar bill to my name, at the
end of my knot, courting
Armageddon

I turned to my new friend,
apparently at hand for only
me to witness

"Next one's on you," I said
to the Angel

then we sat there in deep
silence, waiting for
that time to come.

Joseph Mattson

# On the Modification of Clouds Or When the Clouds Don't Listen

How can you tell a cloud-man from a dirt-man? one might ask.

I am getting closer to where you are.

Listening is a big theme in our house.
There is the blank listen, the hearing kind only, the I'm screaming
so you better listen this time, the falling asleep kind. But we often switch roles.
We'd hate to be typecast.

Everybody's asleep. Why is that?
And you're a cirro-stratus face.

There is power in a name.
*So tell me something I don't know.*
I don't know anything else.
*You were saying something about listening.*

Cloud journal for the twenty-first century:

*Wyoming:* falling in love for real clouds / realism on a blue felt-board
*Oklahoma City:* bruises / you decided you didn't need your medication after all clouds we're probably going to hell clouds
*New Mexico:* absence of cloud
*Nebraska:* dollar cheeseburgers and four gin and tonic clouds / I want to go to sleep and wake up in a different life clouds
*Los Angeles:* think you're falling in love but not being sure clouds / weigh on you like a lead apron / charcoal-orange insomniac clouds
*Dallas:* the nightmare catalogue of a three year-old clouds / woman with a spending habit clouds / marriage of the non-listeners
*Utah:* together in the bushes on the side of the road clouds / goat carcass on barbed wire clouds
*Oregon:* segregated clouds / cherry tree clouds / please don't leave me for what I'm about to say clouds

Did I miss anything?

Probably, my nimbo-stratus boy, my pie in the sky, my cumulous of pain,
my cirrus, flying too close to the sun.
And now I'm falling—
like I do.

# Coyote Tracings

*Coyote sightings have increased throughout the San Fernando Valley on vacant L.A. Dept. of Water & Power properties bordering residential neighborhoods*

*-The Daily News*

Nancy Carroll

Beyond chain-linked ivy
and concrete rivers,
prairie wolves gather,
ribbed refugees
searching desert things.

A frenzied chorus
sings neon not moon.
Silhouettes nuzzle hydrants, not saguaro,
and a pet spaniel,
taunted into death,
torn like paper lanterns,

is served beneath school bus
shadows before dusk.

Haunches tremble,
suspicious circles as night screeches
ambulance, motorcycle,
freight train. Beneath tension
wires, ocotillo blooms,
absent tracings
for displaced nations, outlines
on palm trees and jacaranda.

Mission children
yelp cicada, not cricket,
and an owl sits above
blinking dark permissions like oil.

# Malibu

My sisters and I hike the leaf-chapped curve
play galloping horses—
each sneakered hoof brings dust
to hang like moth in snare.

Brought to find the arrowheads
Daddy swears are buried here,
(the Chumash knew their real estate:
Humaliwo: "the surf sounds loudly")
we race the bends while baby rides
my father's back and sounds.

We wanted to be like Indians, then.
Already stripped bare, surviving
like good braves, here:
on the hills, raised scars on the shore.
There: in the marble kitchen beside
the wooden spoon
and the woven basket brimming with root and acorn.

It is either hot here or cold, never in between;
I remember once you telling me why,
and though I didn't understand, I nodded.

If we move far enough, fast
along the trail, he won't see us sitting.
I read in the book that those women

walked so lightly on the earth
that they didn't make a sound. I try
and am each time discovered.

From here, the sand is a tongue in the sea
forgetting salt and longing for the rub
of a planked canoe.
From here, the clouds suffocate:
a Samaritan's pillow,
the end of any history—

like the history here, how we stand in the afternoon sun,
shielding our eyes from the glare.

# Maria in Motion

Marco de la Fuente

The painting hung in the Ayala Museum's contemporary arts wing. From the beginning, it was clear that it was possessed of a strange and nameless power, and all but eclipsed its neighbors, "The Birth of Red" by Alvin Escora on its left, and "Fisherman at Sunrise" by Benigno Fernandez to its right. Not knowing whether to look away or to stare straight in, the museum patrons were nonetheless drawn close by the painting's "comings and goings," as a critic would describe years later, its bizarre rush of color, its indeterminate perspective, its "violence and its sorrow," as stated by yet another critic, but in the end, they did in fact, all who passed it, look, until they could look no more, struck dumb, it seemed, and touched by a spell of fatigue and shortness of breath, that most would make for the exit or down to the first floor café. The only truly discernible mark was the artist's signature on the bottom right corner: Leo Bahaghari. He was a man in his mid-fifties, a newspaper columnist by profession but a painter in his spirit, and in his midnight hours toiled in secret in his childhood home on Catanduanes street (never having married and inheriting the property from his parents), away from the noisy crush of his office and the blusterous streets of Manila.

As an artist, Leo Bahaghari was of little renown, but he was not without some fame, and, in fact, attracted the ire of many a politician and law man, penning scathing critiques on the corruption, incompetence and the general effeteness of city officials under his column entitled "The Sinking Ship." But this is not what he wanted.

As a young man, Leo displayed a consuming passion for art. Passion, but not

talent, and, despite his many attempts, he failed to break through as a preeminent painter. That is until Gerry, a fellow classmate from UP, (and a far more talented young man) came to visit his studio and saw, peeking from behind an empty old dresser used for storing paints and brushes, the painting that would later find its way to the museum. Gerry pulled it out, blew the dust off the frame and carefully picked off the cobwebs already thick and teeming with microscopic life. Perhaps because he had been the first to see it outside of Leo, he was thoroughly overcome by the strange power of the painting, a terrible and irreparable tragedy, for Gerry never could paint after that day. Nevertheless, it was because of Gerry's religious devotion to art and his already growing network of agents, fellow artists, critics (the variety of which ranging from the genuinely educated and erudite to the pretentious and inept) that the painting made its remarkable exodus from Leo Bahaghari's lonely studio to the most esteemed collection on the islands. Poor Gerry, though rendered forever impotent by his sad fate, his being the first set of eyes to apprehend the painting, would not suffer such a thing to be lost to darkness and secrecy. As compensation, he alone would have the key to its meaning, would become the lone possessor of the story of the last day Leo saw his love, the fastest girl on Catanduanes street – Maria Magdangal.

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Leo lived on the corner of Catanduanes and Cavite street, number 19 Cavite, the compound with a resplendent orange gate framed by two six-foot marble pillars. Upon each sat a gold Chinese lion. His family was well off, the older Mr. Bahaghari, a successful businessman, one of the first in Metro Manila area, perhaps the country, to introduce the idea of bottled water for the masses to supermarkets and restaurants. "The working man's Perrier," he would tell Leo, championing the right of middle class folk to good clean drinking water. The diminutive but dynamic Mr. Bahaghari was consumed by this vision, but also propelled by other lucrative ideas percolating in his brain and hence never spent more than six hours of sleep in his own house, plus the thirty-five minutes it took him to have breakfast, defecate, shave and bathe. Leo's mother, needless to say, found no need for employment given her husband's foresight and savvy, and spent her days shuttled about town for luncheons, tea, semi-formal

and formal dinners, and while she had always shown only a propensity towards corpulence in her youth, she had by this time become a truly enormous woman, which made her own vanity and luxurious tastes in clothing and jewelry a matter of delicious ridicule, often among the very same women with whom she dined. Somewhere between his father's industry and his mother's appetites, Leo vanished.

He was a sickly child, afflicted with a mysterious disease the symptoms of which seemed to include those of asthma and anemia at varying instances and always marked simply by a general, unshakable malaise, which kept him from participating in sports and outdoor play, and put all his good height to waste, for he'd always been tall for his age. So from very early on, the development of skills steeped in introspection and meditation became Leo's only recourse. And many days, he found himself contemplating that which resisted contemplation: the brownness of brown, the fluidity and noise of sun, the conquests of dust, the symmetry of water, the heroism of leaves, the secret desires of geometrical shapes. He began to paint. Still, on occasion, when within earshot of their clamor, he found himself envying the other children at play, whom he watched from his room on the second level of his house: the Cabuco brothers – Jaime and Jason who were unmatched at sipa, managing one sweltering afternoon to kick the sipa up in the air for almost two hours without dropping it, bouncing it off their knees, their heels, and the blades of their feet, with amazing dexterity and focus; Carlo Moran, the neighborhood basketball prodigy who never left his house without his ball, dribbling it between his legs, spinning it behind his back and on his finger, all on the way to the sari-sari store; a small boy whose name he did not know, who shared his bike with three street children, letting them take turns riding it from the other end of Catanduanes just until Cavite street, stopping right in front of his gate. And of course, there was Maria, whose family ran the sari-sari store at 28 Catanduanes, directly across from his house.

Maria was the daughter of a man whom the neighborhood had forgotten. He moved to the area with his pregnant wife, only to leave when Maria was barely a year old to take up work in Saudi Arabia as an Overseas Contract Worker. He would be remembered however as the man who would return many years later to kill his

brother-in-law in what newspaper headlines called "the most gruesome murder of the nineteen nineties." Her mother, a sometime nursing student, was very young, no more than twenty when she was born.

Maria was a year older than Leo, and when they were little, Mrs. Magdangal and Mrs. Bahaghari spent afternoons in each other's company, sharing in the joys and drudgery of recent motherhood. The two young mothers would visit each other sometimes for coffee at the Magdangal's modest but clean and inviting bungalow style house, and on other days, at the Bahaghari's which at that time was but a single story home as well, not all that different from the Magdangals. The two children were left to play, Maria being especially patient with Leo, who'd only then discovered the use of his legs, while she, seemingly born with the gift of uncanny speed and never having crawled, one day simply stood and began to run. So many times, while at play, Leo appeared nearly stationary, as Maria zipped past him in her normal, mercurial way, as if in orbit around a timid and ponderous planet. But he did not mind. For even in this early time in the history of Leo and Maria, the boy, despite his seeming inexpressiveness and persistent torpidity, was very much alive in his heart while the center of her activity, and knew without knowing that he loved her. These visits continued up until the time that Leo was six, and she, seven. This was before Mr. Bahagahari's vision of bottled water for the common man. Then the money came in fast and savage as a flood, the visits stopped, and construction began on what would be the largest house in the neighborhood, painted a bright orange which made it visible for several blocks. After the older Bahagharis died, Leo had it painted a more modest pale blue. Mrs. Magandangal soon found her calls unanswered and rebuffed by the help whenever she stood at the Bahaghari's gate with a simple "Señora is not feeling well." And that is how, for the Magdangals and Bahagharis, Catanduanes street, little as it is, became as wide and untraversable as an ocean.

In the years approaching Leo's adolescence, Mrs. Bahaghari opened her home to her neighbors' children – even Maria, her former friend's daughter. This was not so much an act of kindness but at once an attempt to convince herself of her own charity

and an exercise in control over the life of Leo, whose reticence and predisposition to solitude – so far departed from his father's vigor – she found unsettling. In truth, Leo was not interested in friendship with the other boys, not because of any genuine dislike, but because of a crippling insecurity due to his frailty and chronic infirmity. Nevertheless, he found himself hosting merienda at least twice a week for them, Jason and Jaime Cabuco, Carlo Moran, and Maria Magdangal. Sandwiches and pastries were prepared with meticulous attention, and so much of it waited on the Bahagharis' giant, Italian crafted dining table that the four children always entered the home feeling like honored guests. Leo did his best to be amiable with the other boys and with Maria, and at one time almost succeeded in initiating conversation when before he could begin, Mrs. Bahaghari said:

"Leo spends all his time in his room, which is why I wanted you children here, so that you could be friends. He's drawing, always drawing, Diyos ko. Leo, why don't you show them some of your drawings."

Leo, in the middle of chewing a piece of cake stared blankly at his mother. Overcome by terror and surprise, and what can only be described as anger, in his own retiring way, he entered a kind of catatonic state, his mouth, slackened and set askew by its contents. The boys, not wanting to be bothered with looking at scribbles while in the middle of so sumptuous a meal, pretended not to hear Mrs. Bahaghari, but Maria, as quick in thought as she was in movement, responded "perhaps after merienda Mrs. Bahaghari." It was by this act that the feeling which had lain dormant from the time the great expanse between 28 Catanduanes and 19 Cavite street came to be, once again fluttered to life. It was, however, not with a little regret that Leo would think back on this day, the day he discovered his love, because it was also when he began to secretly harbor a vague, tenebrous hatred for his mother, which he would confess at her deathbed many years later, and to his own surprise, receive forgiveness for from a woman whom he had always perceived as petty and implacable, and at that instant, still holding her cold fat hand, think to himself, "I have been wrong about many things."

In the months that followed, Leo was tortured by thoughts of Maria. Having no one to speak to about his predicament, he began to work feverishly on painting after painting, none of which seemed to mean anything, as his mind became incapable of boring into the mysteries of his room such as the diabolical nature of mirrors, the holiness and piety of ants or the patience of floorboards. Nor could he any longer divine the veiled wonders of the world outside, such as the optimism of grass or the wisdom of clouds. His work seemed nothing more than random streaks of paint against frame after frame of disappointed canvas. But in his heart, he knew that in some way, all these were paintings of the only thing his mind could see. Years after Leo's death, Gerry would collect all of them, a total of thirty-two untitled works, and donate twenty to various museums in the country, keeping twelve for himself.

Having long since given up on her aspirations of becoming a nurse, Mrs. Magdangal put up the sari-sari store in the hopes that people on her side of Catanduanes street would come to hers, instead of walking all the way down to the other end, where the closest one was across the bridge over the creek, next to the shack of a woman who was rumored to be a witch. Much speculation had arisen regarding the funds Mrs. Magdangal would have needed for the construction as well as the steady supply of soft drinks, lottery tickets, pastries, potato chips, beer, bottles and bottles of fish sauce and vinegar, bags of candy and other items. Some of the older ladies on the street suspected her of having a rich lover who financed the operation. What was certain however, was that the remittances sent home by Mr. Magdangal would not have been enough to jumpstart his wife's project. There had to be, as most were correct in assuming, an outside investor of some kind. However, when the store finally opened and the convenience of only having to walk across the street to Mrs. Magdangal's store and conduct transactions with familiar faces became apparent, all the rumors that had taken flight earlier on and seemed to hover in the air around the Magdangals' residence dissipated like vapors, blown away by the wind. Her foresight paid off, and the sari-sari store became so profitable that it spawned a small cafeteria/beer-house, the patronage of which consisted mainly of jeepney and tricycle drivers, carpenters and construction workers. These two small businesses made just

enough to send Maria to a decent school. In the afternoons, after class, Maria would help her mother in the store, which operated out of a four foot by five foot window, protected by a steel grill, and also at the barbecue stand by the beer house, swatting away flies, and turning the meat. But in the summer that Maria became a woman, things changed. Mrs. Magdangal, fully aware of her daughter's recent physical development and growing beauty, kept her away from the cafeteria.

It was while Maria hung small bags of peanuts just on the side of the store window, on a scorching April day, that the secret of her speed came to light. Jaime Cabuco, who was identical in age, and perhaps beginning to notice for himself the shapeliness of her legs and hips, the fullness of her bosom, the sway in her walk, the fragrance of her long black hair, made his first attempts at flirtation, an art that he would develop throughout his life, and achieve an astounding mastery at, much to the dismay of countless fathers. Jaime stuck his hand through the grill and tried to snatch a bag of peanuts, but while retracting his hand between the steel bars, he found that he was clutching nothing, and in her own delicate hand, Maria held the bag. "Slow," she said, and dared him to try again, which he did, again, and again, for almost half an hour, never managing to retrieve a single bag, and all that time, she laughed at his frustration and subsequent exhaustion.

"I am too fast for you Jaime. I'm faster than you, I'm faster than your brother Jason. I'm faster than Carlo. I'm faster than all three of you put together."

And with that, the gauntlet was laid. Jaime promptly walked back to his house to get Jason, and the both of them went to get Carlo. A budding young athlete, Carlo had begun to school himself in the efficiency produced by proper form and technique, and shaped his body for peak performance. He took one look at Maria's new body and thought "There's no way she can run faster than me with those things." Jason, like his brother, was secretly happy just to be near her. Jaime was given a good fifteen minutes to recuperate from his peanut-snatching. Maria, perhaps wanting a witness to testify to her imminent victory, closed the store and walked over to Leo's house, and hollered at him to come down. Little did she know that he had been watching all along, watched as Jaime Cabuco flirted with her, as he was made to look the fool, and

in this, he found enjoyment, all the while wishing that he himself had had the courage to steal a bag of peanuts. Leo came down and stood by the massive gate of his house, a tentative smile on his face. The agreed upon distance was the front of the store to the end of Catanduanes street, the finish line being the Del Monte street sign.

"You'll have to be the one to say 'Ready, get set, Go!'" Maria told him, as they took their places. And though he did not have it in him to shout, as if the very faculty that made such a thing possible for humans had been left out of Leo, he acquiesced, and performed the deed, the phrase floundering out of him like a dying bird. Despite its near inaudibility, Carlo, Jaime and Jason took off, running, fast as they could, leaving Maria behind. But only for a moment. In a matter of seconds, Maria was hurtling past them like a comet, the yellow of her blouse, the white of her shorts and her long black hair, tied into a ponytail a mere blur of color passing between Jaime and Carlo, and leaving Jason so stunned that he stopped running. In her wake trailed the flowery sweet smell of her shampoo. By the time Jaime and Carlo reached the sign, Maria was already trotting back to meet them with a proud grin. "Told you" she said, smoothing back the loose strands of her hair away from her moist face, slowing down to a walk with a swagger and a sway that put a dull, pressing ache in their bellies. Passing the cafeteria, the drivers and carpenters cheered and hooted and clapped for her. And as she made her way towards Leo, a thin sheet of sweat over her skin, her entire body seemingly irradiated and glistening in the sun, Leo received his first great artistic epiphany.

He had often before in the solitude of his room conceived of the secret desires of shapes, that, invisible to most people, were their emotions, aspirations, insecurities and jealousies. Quadrilaterals, for instance, he thought to be haughty and prideful in their supreme functionality, and disdainful of lesser applied shapes such as hexagons and octagons, finding them exceedingly duplicitous, overly ambitious, and not to be trusted. Triangles were hopelessly self-effacing, seeming to point everywhere else except to themselves. But circles, he never knew what to think of. Lending so little of themselves for the mind to grab on to, they remained a mystery to him, despite their apparent simplicity. It was Maria who drew his mind to the impossible roundness of

things. For as she stepped past him with a smile and a "You saw that?" and a giggle, as she turned from him and walked back to the store, he perceived in her a great multitude of circles, perhaps millions of them, each one the width of air, stacked upon one another like pancakes, from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head. And what any other mind would have perceived to be perhaps a mere conglomeration of spheres and cylinders, he saw as the ultimate harmony of form and movement, that is of shape and movement, each one of those solicitous circles moving to the rhythm of her own mind.

Maria had become a kind of neighborhood celebrity once Carlo, Jaime, and Jason told their friends of the fastest girl they'd ever seen. They would come in groups of four, five, eight, sometimes ten, some as far as West Triangle and Phil-Am Homes, to challenge Maria to a race, but also, maybe, just to watch, as Leo suspected the three boys, for whom he suddenly developed a bitter and unremitting aversion, of telling their friends that she was quite a sight, running or otherwise. Leo told his mother that weekly meriendas would no longer be necessary, as her goal of surrounding him with people was accomplished. For in the afternoons, the once quiet street was lined with other boys. Leo himself took his place in the sidelines without Maria ever having to ask. He stood just outside that gate, as Carlo, who'd taken up the role of master of ceremonies gave instructions, Jaime gave the 'go' signal, and Jason, showing an entrepreneurial spirit, took bets. The result was always the same. They never stood a chance. And how could they know about the circles, which through the course of the summer Leo observed with even greater attention, seeing, as only his eyes could, the circle at Maria's center, just below her navel, spinning like a disc at a dizzying rate, faster than a potter's wheel, driving her legs forward at a stride which, many years later, he would read about and identify in an article as the same one natural to Ethiopian runners, only in Maria, the ellipses of the stride was completed at an unnatural speed, the holy grail of runner's equilibrium, eluding both sprinters and marathoners over the centuries, only to have as its temple the body of a store keeper's daughter from Quezon City. So from then, all Leo could paint was the secret

life of circles.

That summer, the boys made over four hundred pesos. Maria of course, wanted nothing to do with the money, content it seemed to win the respect of all those boys, but also, the affection of Carlo who had grown to be a tall, broad shouldered, handsome young man. Leo, sensitive as he was to the unknowable things of the earth, could not see that the heart of the only woman he would love was not his, but another's.

The arrival of Butch Valdez to the neighborhood should have been marked by a palpable uneasiness and a sudden increase in piety. He was a known criminal, alleged to have taken part in numerous hold-ups and kidnappings, and was every now and then hired as an enforcer by the local drug lords. He was also an ex-police captain, and folks in the neighborhood figured that he'd simply gotten honest with himself. He was a large man, with a swollen belly from his hard drinking, and hopelessly vain with a flair for the extravagant, and wore no less than three gold rings per hand to match his gold chain necklace, at the end of which dangled an enormous crucifix and coiffed his hair to a high pompadour, with the sideburns long but trimmed, like his idol, The King.

A recent shootout between the police and some men who may or may not have been members of his small organization had driven Butch from his home in Marikina. He sought refuge at his half-sister's. Normally, he would not have done something like this, knowing full well the dangers such a move posed on those close to him. But he did, after all, consider the sari-sari store and the beerhouse as his own, and he would not impose himself on a friend whose life might be imperiled for providing a roof over his no good head. "A rotten son-of-a-bitch criminal I may be, but not without manners or delicadeza," Butch thought to himself. Family however, he believed to be inherently responsible for one another, and besides that, the particular half-sister in Quezon City was indebted to him. Where else would she have gotten the money to build the store, and how else would she have secured contracts with the wholesalers that were so disproportionately in her favor had it not been for Butch's reputation as

a man of impeccable memory and a predilection for violence. So it was then that the rumormongers from the days when the sari-sari store was being built learned that their suspicions were correct, that Mrs. Magdangal did indeed have an anonymous benefactor. But those whose minds entertained more scandalous theories were shamed to discover that it had not been some rich lover, but in fact her half-brother, who for the better part of ten years had been estranged from her, but agreed to help her in her endeavor for reasons that would forever remain unknown.

Mrs. Magdangal would curse herself later for putting up the beerhouse. For, though Butch came under the pretense of hiding, he quickly found for himself an audience in the there – men in whom he inspired a sense of awe, having given them the opportunity to be close to so dangerous a man as himself. So he spent night after night carousing and telling stories of lawlessness and debauchery, which the drivers and carpenters and construction workers came to hear, again and again. Before long, he became a fixture in Catanduanes street, and all but forgot that he was a wanted man. And his sister, while never truly comfortable with his element, was to her shame, grateful for the dramatic increase in business at this time. Maria, never having met or even known of this estranged uncle remained distant and leery of the man, whose eyes lingered on her, perhaps much longer than an uncle's should. And indeed, had he not stayed as long as he did, what happened may not have happened.

Gerry lay on Leo's bed still under the withering spell of the painting he'd drawn from behind Leo's dresser. In their times together at the university, Gerry had sensed that Leo was a man whose heart had been deflated long ago, whose soul had somehow shrunken to the size of the shadow of a small boy. This despite Leo's great height, which, to Gerry, only made him look like a lone tree in a verdant field. Leo sat on the bed, next to Gerry, holding a glass of ice water. For some reason, Leo did not seem at all surprised at the sudden faintness that took hold of his friend. And while Gerry looked straight up to the ceiling, struggling to focus his eyes on a single point, for accompanying the faintness was an indescribable blurring of vision, Leo looked at the painting which he had set on the floor across the room and examined the circles,

their occupation of space on the canvas, neither coming nor going, coming and going, spinning beside, on top, between each other, their threat of spiraling out of the canvas while disappearing infinitely as through a black hole, into it forever. Which is why, later, for years and years, all who looked at the painting were convinced, after numerous appeals to their own sense of reality, that the painting was, in fact, moving.

It was as Gerry lay, half-blind, severely weakened, and in a cold sweat that Leo spoke of its meaning, or rather, its story. Leo spoke and spoke. Gerry wept. And whether it was because of the surpassing profundity that then filled the room, or the sublime sadness of the tale, or that he somehow foreknew that his own art could never again be realized, the reasons would remain secret and with Gerry until the day he would meet his old friend and the destroyer of his genius deep in the bowels of the earth.

All throughout the summer, as the sari-sari store continued to prosper, as Butch's nights of storytelling and revelry brought more and more brutish men and loose, ignorant women to the beerhouse, as Mrs. Bahaghari discovered that her husband was cheating on her with a saleslady at Rustan's, as the Cabuco brothers became less and less like brothers and more like strangers to one another's affairs, as Carlo began to love Maria, and she him, as the boy on the black bike ceased to come by altogether, Leo's illness disappeared.

For, as he painted more and more that summer, practically disappearing in the clutter and madness of his room, canvas after canvas leaning on walls, tubes of paint carelessly left uncapped on the floor and inevitably stepped on, brushes whose bristles had hardened in motley crusts of color, his physical ailments seemed to fade, just as his own work grew more and more vibrant and dynamic with color and action.

And always he would venture down to the street for a closer look at his muse, as she tended the store, dreamy eyed and smiling, "happier now than ever," Leo thought to himself. But especially as she ran, which she did with less and less frequency, the number of boys willing to put their fragile teenage egos on the line having dropped significantly over the course of a few weeks. His wondrous eyes remained inexorably

drawn to the perfection of her form, both in her winning stride and in the simple way she stood. And also, the way in which the very fabric of the universe seemed to undo its weave, to open up for her, to part like Moses' sea, clearing a path between her and her objective, which of course none of the other runners, not even Maria, no one else in fact, no other living being on earth could see. Except Leo, who had always thought the expression "the eyes are the windows to the soul" to be a curious one, for his eyes had always been the windows of his mind, through which he saw the soul of the world. And yet, he remained oblivious to the tender, sidelong glances, the passing caresses between Carlo and Maria, just before the races in which Maria bounded effortlessly towards the finish line and Carlo whispering things in her ear as she returned triumphant as always. That is, until the day he saw him kiss her.

Just before one of her races, on a windless day, the kind of day when the sun presses its weight against the earth and everything is awash in brightness so bright that one can hear objects groan lustily – trees, fire hydrants, electric posts, mail boxes, sidewalks, bicycles – like lovers at dawn, clinging still to the residue of dreams and sleep, is the day Leo saw Carlo touch Maria's cheek, then her feet come off of the ground, just barely, not even an inch, and watch her float towards him, and kiss him, soft as moonlight.

That night, for the first time in a long time, Leo could not paint. He merely sat in front of a blank canvas, wondering why he did not feel the urge to hang himself in his room or to drink a glassful of paint thinner. And he wondered too why he did not hate Carlo or even Maria, and then began to wonder if he had ever really loved Maria from the very depths of himself, or whether or not he was just a coward and simply lacked the conviction to end his life. All he knew was that which had fluttered to life the day Maria talked Mrs. Bahaghari out of making her son show his drawings began to travel from his chest, down his right arm to his hand and end at his fingertips, making them tingle. He ran them across the canvas, feeling the grain, trying to do so with the same tenderness Carlo had touched Maria. He wished then for his love to die, to wither and shrivel up and fall to the ground like a dead fruit, it did not, and remained with him throughout his life. "Which is proof," Leo would tell Gerry that

fateful afternoon and again at his deathbed, "that one can love someone without possessing them."

Soon, there was no one left to race. And perhaps, for Jaime and Jason, Carlo and especially Maria, running about in such a way seemed a childish thing. The Cabuco brothers stopped playing sipa. Carlo busied himself with loving Maria, and she busied herself with being loved. Leo painted, always beginning with big, bold strokes.

It was a phone call the Morans had been expecting for fifteen years. Mrs. Moran's sister, a school principal in New Jersey, informed them that the petition filed years ago, when Carlo was but a toddler, had finally gone through. The entire family was to leave that August. Maria did not understand, and refused to see Carlo when she heard the news. During Carlo's last week, she refused even to leave her room, and Mrs. Magdangal apologized for her daughter and gave him a bag of fried pork skin in case he got hungry at the airport. "She'll be fine in a few weeks, Carlo, and soon you two can write each other," she told him. But he never heard from her again. And so it was that their love, as quickly as it sprung, came to an end, struck dead from half a world away.

Leo, who'd heard about the Moran's leaving for America, and who'd even gone across the street to say goodbye to Carlo, did not take it upon himself to console Maria the way Jaime and Jason did, but rather, went to Mrs. Magdangal just once to say that he hoped Maria was alright, then retreated back to his room to paint and to pray for Maria, for this was in the days when Leo still believed in God or, at least, that God listened. He was not, however, the only recluse in their home anymore, as Mrs. Bahaghari, disconsolate over the loss of Mr. Bahaghari, who had since moved out to an apartment in the business district, confined herself to the darkness and camphor smell of her opulent bedroom and grew thinner by the day.

It was at this time, as Maria tried to forget about the gaping hole in her heart, as she deafened herself to the hauntings of Carlo's voice and all the tender proclamations he whispered to her at the starting line, as she imagined herself draping a black cloth

over his face as if on a corpse, as she felt an ache in her legs like no other and an unexplainable urge to run forever in a westerly direction, that Butch Valdez became a good man. Or at least, that is what became apparent to everyone around him, as he expressed nothing but the utmost concern and sympathy for Maria. "Hell of a thing, to lose your first love like that," he said, in the middle of one of his storytelling sessions, out of nowhere, relating what had happened to his niece, and then going on to lament the various travails of young love, as if his first time with a woman had not been in a dark alley in Caloocan forcing himself upon a girl at knifepoint; a young dancer at a local club who'd spurned his affections and laughed at his crude and artless attempts at courtship. And when one of the women, at the beerhouse, drunk and dispossessed of her better judgment foolishly exclaimed that Butch was beginning to bore, and that she would much rather hear of the time he shook down mayor Ruelas after photographing the mayor with a twelve year old hooker that Butch himself had put to the task, he slapped her mouth bloody and told her to leave. So at that time, it was rumored that Butch Valdez was not just some vicious, no-good, black-hearted man, devoid of any feeling or remorse, but a complex man, one of many sides and layers, who, despite being a murderer, thief, and crooked cop, loved his family, and his niece in particular.

It began with the little things. A casual inquiry like, "Have you eaten yet?" or, "Have you been getting enough sleep?" Boxes of sweets left for her on the kitchen counter, on one occasion a new dress, sometimes cash, a few hundred pesos sitting on the T.V. pinned under a porcelain figurine, cassette tapes, a stationery set to which a note was attached that read, "For you to write your boyfriend." In time, Maria began to convince herself that she had harbored undue suspicion of this man. That despite his reputation to the contrary, Butch was not entirely evil, not the scum of the earth as some had said, not damned, that perhaps he wasn't always the way he was, that, while he had done terrible things, he was not beyond redemption, any more than the thief on the cross was if what Father Reyes at St. Rita's said was true. And perhaps she thought she saw someone who, like her, was in search of both love and new beginnings. But really, what could Maria know of a man like Butch Valdez.

In the months succeeding the departure of the Morans, as she began to find an uncle in Butch, slowly, Maria learned to steel herself against the waves of melancholy and nostalgia that washed over her. And perhaps, just beyond their awareness, in the same way boys learn to walk like their fathers, Butch began to lend Maria the kind of strength that made weak-minded men cower or biddable and drew similarly dim-witted, lascivious women to him. It was the beginning of Maria's instruction in the ways of the world. Without a word on loneliness, heartbreak, strength, rage, or survival ever passing between the two, Maria began to understand that in this world, one must allow the heart to grow strong even if it means letting it become hard, that the young love freely and greatly, but are of little use in the terrible, rhythmic motions of the everyday, the slow erosive process of living. That kind of love, the kind shouted from rooftops and whispered silently before races was quickly muffled and drowned out by the great, history long howling of the world. If one was lucky, perhaps, love might find them just in time, at a time when the heart still had some soft places, fertile enough for something to take root. "What a delicate balance it all is, to sometimes be hard, to sometimes be soft, to sometimes be both in varying measures, and to negotiate such a space in between for the rest of one's life," is what Maria did not know she thought, for she was only given the gift of speed, and not the gift of seeing and knowing the unknowable, like Leo.

The new relationship between her daughter and her reprobate half-brother had at first been viewed by Mrs. Magdangal, understandably, with great misgiving. But being of the same mother, Mrs. Magdangal was, perhaps, always too generous in her appraisal of Butch's qualities, and blinded herself to the true and irrepressible nature of her brother, refusing to believe in such things as the loss of soul and the atrophy of the heart. And perhaps, when in that time Butch began to occupy the space left by Maria's father, Mrs. Magdangal convinced herself that what she was seeing in Butch were small signs of some long forgotten goodness, and thought that perhaps, deep down, Butch, too, wanted to find in himself the substance of an uncle or a father and to be something to a lonely, heartbroken girl. "But for some people," Leo would say, "it is too late," and right is too obscure and alien a thing.

In truth, no one can be certain whether or not Butch had really felt something deep in his soul, had found something precious and vital, a small piece no bigger perhaps than a mango seed of some long forgotten other self, left at a crossroads somewhere years ago. What is certain is that in the end, as far his relation to Maria went, Butch remained true to whatever it is that had made him what he was. For one afternoon, as Mrs. Magdangal haggled for the price of fish and rice at the city markets, Butch, perhaps miscalculating his own tolerance for drink and shedding his tenuously contrived self, took Maria in his room and there, changed her life forever.

When he told Maria to close the store and said, "I bought you some shoes. Come inside," she did. Had she known, she would not have come close, she would have ran and Butch could never hope to catch her. Like an animal, Butch was possessed by a singularity of purpose once instinct took over, and those who feared him did so with good reason, for he was not a man who could be deterred by any normal means. The notion then, that any physical union with Maria was something unnatural and forbidden, at this time was lost to him, swallowed up by the deep primal appetites that had always governed Butch's life.

Once he threw his arm around her waist and pulled her to him, once he clamped his hand over her mouth and she could taste his sweat and the gold of his rings, she knew it was too late.

After, he would tell her that they had done a shameful thing, that if she was a girl of any real decency she would have fought him off to the last if it meant death, that she knew what she was doing, that she was a whore and no better than her mother, who herself, fell to the charms of Maria's father before they were wed. "So you better not open your mouth you little bitch. Soon I'll leave here, and no one needs to know. No one needs to know that you are a whore," he told her. It is in this way that he made her do things with him, every chance he got, every time Mrs. Magdangal left the house. And it is in this way, that whatever small flicker of goodness Butch Valdez might have found in his soul was cast back into the darkness to be extinguished forever.

Just across the street on that first afternoon, at the same time it happened, for

no reason that Leo could detect, he felt his old sickness return. He grew faint and experienced a tightness in his chest and shortness of breath and then was gripped by a powerful chill that did not leave him all that day and persisted throughout the night and into the following morning.

When her belly began to bulge, Butch left, and then everyone knew. A man like Butch Valdez does not pass through and leave things unchanged, does not go without leaving a scar. And though some version of sympathy or other was certainly shown Mrs. Magdangal and Maria, it was inevitable that some would say that such a thing was foreseeable. The old gossips began their buzzing and spoke of how unwise Mrs. Magdangal had been to let a creature like that into her home. And what could be expected from the daughter of a woman whose fate she seemed only to be reliving, but in a much more horrible way, the deed having been done by her own uncle and not some young, handsome, smooth talking lover. And they recalled how Maria had raced the boys all throughout the summer, and how it had been obvious even then that Maria was far from being a virtuous young lady, resentful of any impure gazes and protective of her chastity.

When the news reached Leo, he knew then in the way Leo came to know things, what had caused his illness to resurface. At that moment, Leo wished more than anything that the ability to shout had not been left out of him, that for as long as he could, he would scream and scream until he could hear only his voice, and in that short time, the howling of the world would grow silent in respect. But as he filled his lungs with air, as the cavern of his throat began to widen, just as he was sure that something violent and pure would come blasting out of him, he choked and coughed so hard that his back began to spasm and he vomited on the floor.

A few days later, Jaime and Jason stood under Leo's window. "Leo, come out." Jaime said. Leo, pale as a specter appeared at the window. "We're going over to Maria's."

"Why?" Leo asked.

"Don't know," Jason replied. "Just because."

"Are you coming?" Jaime pressed.

Leo did not answer. The two below the window waited, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, balancing it seemed, a moment beyond the understanding of either one, but somehow made more bearable between the two of them. And while neither Jaime nor Jason were conscious of this, Leo was, seeing what no one else could and knowing that the Cabuco brothers had come to him because, in this sort of thing, three was better than two. Years later, Leo would remember that day the three of them stood there, not knowing quite what to say and refusing to look each other in the eyes for too long, and acknowledge then with the wisdom brought by years that what they were feeling was that they had somehow been cheated. Eventually, Jaime and Jason turned away and walked back home.

Night fell on Catanduanes street. Leo, who had taken up smoking in his college years lay on the floor next to the bed blowing little plumes of smoke up in the air. Gerry remained stretched across the bed, near motionless. His eyes had cleared, but he was careful not to look directly at the painting.

"That," pointing at the painting with his cigarette, "is the last I will ever paint," Leo said. "You know, all the other shapes would rather be circles," Leo said, as he lay on the filthy studio floor.

"Why?" Gerry would ask. But Leo did not answer.

In the years following, Gerry would look back on this day, the day he lost his talent and think of Leo and his love, and weep a little for his friend, and think also of the impossible roundness of things.

And nearing the end, their places reversed, with Leo on his deathbed and Gerry at his side, Leo would ask about the painting in the Ayala museum, if the patrons still became ill when looking at it. "Yes," Gerry said. "They've moved it, Leo. To a section that gets less traffic." Leo began to laugh a little. "Would you like to have it Gerry? I think you should have it," Leo said. Leo would name Gerry the executor of his will.

"I don't think you can give it to me now Leo," Gerry said.

"Take it. They don't seem to want it. And hell, I don't want it. It's yours. 'Maria at Rest' is yours." And perhaps it had been delirium setting in on Leo, but

Gerry was confused. There was no painting by that name.

Well aware of the enmity between his mother and Mrs. Magdangal, and still believing then that his mother was a petty and spiteful woman, he did not tell her the news and told the maids not to speak of it as well. But some years later, shortly before the death of Mrs. Magdangal, Mrs. Bahaghari came to visit her old friend and enemy and, with her, sat down for coffee, putting an end to their years of silence and closing up the chasm between number 19 Cavite and number 28 Catanduanes. And when Mrs. Magdangal was found dead in her living room not a month later, apparently having overdosed on pain medication, Mrs. Bahaghari was the first to weep, and paid for the funeral. "Which goes to show you," Leo would tell Gerry on the afternoon he lost his talent, "that you just never know."

It was at this time, when the neighborhood was occupied with talk over the ruin of the Magdangals that Leo ceased to be visited by the peace of sleep altogether. And all throughout his life he could only get as far as that frightful place between wakefulness and dreams, when the soul of the world is most visible. Which, for him, was no different than the life he already knew in his waking hours.

He had been awake for six nights and had not eaten in days when he saw her creeping out of her house. It was dawn on a Sunday. Even in the dimness of that hour, Leo saw the circles, and the way this time each one seemed to ripple out from its center, the way they do when a pebble is thrown into a pond, far, far out and away from Maria, past him, past his house, the street, Manila and all the way, he assumed, across the ocean, maybe to New Jersey. Maybe farther than that. And he knew then that mathematicians were wrong about the line being the only geometrical entity that went on into infinity. It was his second and only other great artistic epiphany.

Then she saw him too, spotted his figure through the window, watching her from his room on the second floor of that great orange house. She walked closer and stopped below the window and looked up at him. He moved to the window, rested his palms on the sill and looked down at her, and saw her tears glistening in the dark, rolling down her face in angles perfectly perpendicular to the earth. And for as long

as it took the sun to rise high enough and illuminate the street, making the invisible visible, they remained this way. Then, in a voice, clear and strong, Leo said, "I've loved you." And then she ran, and ran.

Glenn Sheldon
Cheyene Garwood
Kate Martin Rowe
Anna M. Carroll
Kris Huelgas
Wendy Grosskopf
Scott Macdonald
Mary Angelino
Rebecca Dochterman Roney
Candace Nicholson
Zachary Ng
Kara Lawton
Richard F. Kilpatrick
Shahbaz Doad
Amber Norwood
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