



NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

SPRING 1990

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

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Cover art by Marjan Nirou: "Jabeh" (front) is an oil charcoal on plywood. "Golden Box" (back) is charcoal, graphite, pastels on paper.

# Awards

Two awards are given annually in recognition of the finest works published in the Spring and Fall issues of *Northridge Review*. The winners will be announced in the Fall 1990 issue.

**The Helen Helms Marcus Award**, established by Helen Marcus, is given in recognition of the best short story published by a CSUN student. The winner of this award receives two hundred dollars.

**The Rachel Sherwood Award**, given in memoriam of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes the best poem published by *Northridge Review*. The winner receives fifty dollars from the University and will be acknowledged alongside the name of Rachel Sherwood.

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**Poetry**

*Ronald Pape*

## **The Just Away Songs**

He said

I begged her  
To leave with me that night  
The darkness at its fullest  
The coyotes deep soul sleep

She said

He came to me with juniper berries  
Should I have refused?  
Should I have turned my head  
To his asking eyes  
While his iris's small circle of green  
Within the deep blue  
Burned so bright?

Her mother said

My husband returned in the evening  
He hung his coat  
He sank into his seat  
He told me nothing

He said

We flew through the desert  
The wading white moon in her hair  
The shadows of yuccas spearing the night  
We ran to mountains  
The green taste of pine nuts

She said

The desert night can grow so cold  
I lost my heels to gopher holes  
A joshua tore the coat off my back  
Everything had thorns or hard sharp leaves  
And always he ran ahead

Her mother said

We found her bed empty  
No letter no note  
My husband dressed and left  
I stayed behind

He said

We will not stop  
For fire or lights  
We will not stop  
For snakes or pain  
We will not stop  
For stones or cold  
We will not stop  
For dirt or dust  
We will not stop

She said

Where are we going?

Her mother said

I waited  
My stomach thick and hard  
My blood cold and slow  
I locked the door to my daughter's room

Her father said

Where was I to look  
At midday in the desert?  
I saw nothing but lizards  
The distortions of false heat water  
On the hot soft road  
Always just ahead

*Patti Scheibel*

Imagine how snails make love;  
do they crawl out of their shells?  
They must. Do their eyestalks  
glisten and wave in passionate  
abandon? Do they leave  
silvery mucus trails  
all over each other  
so their entire bodies shine?  
They must do it slow...  
intermingling their soft  
brown bodies in a snail ballet.  
Do they make a sound?  
Can a snail sigh or moan?  
How do they find each other  
when they move so slow?  
When they see each other  
from a distance of maybe a foot,  
do they hurriedly ooze through  
the damp morning grass  
wishing they were faster?  
Or do they give a languorous  
seductive little glance and  
weave obscene endearing patterns  
with their eyestalks from across  
the distant inches of green?

## Ghost Dance

The big bellied  
stick legged  
fierce faced woman  
in the mirror  
would run away  
from me  
the first chance  
she gets,  
leaving me  
to spill out  
across the universe  
like hot water  
from a flimsy  
paper cup.  
She's taken up  
falling as a hobby  
and twitching out  
frowns in code,  
always trying  
to tug attention  
to herself.  
It's turned  
into war.  
Her pale hands  
flutter out  
of my control.  
I weave feathers  
in her hair and  
paint her face,

forcing her  
 into the drumfire  
 patterns of this dance  
 that I choose to do.  
 I cling to her  
 like smoke  
 while she blows  
 and bucks.

## The Return

Home again from another failure and  
 everything's the same,  
 Mom and Dad,  
 hoses in hand forever  
 in the yard watering thirsty dirt  
 while accusing one another of  
 the usual atrocities  
 (Father brutalizes the roses and  
 Mother floods the plum tree).

This oasis of sharp  
 brown grass and frowsy weeds  
 will always belong to me though.  
 The old bug jars, holes punched  
 in their lids, are still lined up  
 waiting in the shed  
 like an army.

A person can never give up being  
 an empress of insects;  
 Lady of the Locusts, sleepy-eyed frogs  
 and earthworms softer and pinker than  
 any human lover's lips.  
 I grope my blind toes  
 into the loving mud.



My parents begin to screech,  
neither has noticed me yet  
(they're both getting old and I'm  
still below eye level.)

I listen to the welcoming hum  
in the air far under their voices.  
All the winged things sing to me  
and bless me unseen.

*Mary Harris*

## **Snowfall in Southern California**

So cold it snowed in the San Fernando Valley  
when I was too young to go to school,  
too sick to go outdoors. My mother  
dashed outside with a muffin tin  
to catch snowflakes to show  
my brother and me. Through  
the window, Tommy and I watched her,  
stocky as a snowman but transformed  
from matron into that spirited girl  
we never knew who grew up in Iowa  
where snow fell every winter,  
deep enough to block the door.

Thirty-odd years later, it snowed again.  
Like a figure in a snow scene paperweight,  
I stood amid flurries of flakes and remembered  
my mother romping on the lawn, pictured  
her grave like a sheet cake frosted with icing.  
Because she shared rare beauty with me,  
snow touches me more now.  
For the first time since her death,  
I felt the glacier of grief within me  
thaw as the cold front moved on.

## What She Kept

My mother never put much stock in things,  
collected pennies in a Waterford vase  
beside her jewelry box, disappointing  
young daughters rifling its contents,  
tangled rosaries and baby bracelets.  
We were her treasure, she said, buffing  
us with hands like silvercloth.

A decent interval, we cleared her room,  
the forlorn assortment she left, new  
hat worn once to see the Pope, defeated  
shoes old ladies wear. Our yellowing  
First Communion dresses huddled on hangers  
round-shouldered as schoolgirls, starched  
organza choked with dust. None of us  
kept her faith intact, but we salvaged  
the dresses from charity, resigned  
them to the closet's dark interior  
and sealed the door.

## Living Near a Fault Line

That desperate month  
earth quaked in Los Angeles

the stock market bottomed out  
and my mother dropped dead

heart attack. Back at work  
in the newsroom, I rallied

with editors and reporters  
around a TV monitor

as rescuers extracted a child  
from a well in Texas.

This is the story we write daily  
the depths we go

to bury love  
or retrieve it.

*Jennifer Wolfe*

### **Easter 1989**

I have no voice for my  
father, no memories  
of how his skin feels  
or what he smells like.  
I know that he plays  
darts, cards, shuffleboard  
games of chance  
and that he used to work  
for Fiat, for the Navy,  
for a pantyhose company.  
He is convinced that the phone  
is tapped and doesn't  
write letters.

He sometimes has a beard  
and sometimes doesn't,  
has two tattoos; one  
for each arm, two wives;  
one for each life.

We drove to San Francisco,  
me sick with love and fear  
and you tight, watchful;  
both wanting me  
and wanting me to go away.

It was called a vacation.  
In the middle of one of those  
endless curves on the coastal route  
I mentioned, I said, I  
told you that my father  
lived up there and then held  
my breath, sat, waited.  
And you, on cue:  
Does my baby want  
to go find her daddy?  
Yes, I nodded, mute.  
On the second night  
I looked him up  
and you were surprised  
that I found him so quickly  
until I pointed out  
that what I was looking for  
couldn't be found in the phonebook  
and you held my hand  
the whole way there.

I'm in your house now  
Daddy, I see your  
children and hear your wife  
in the bedroom  
waiting for me to leave.  
You look at me,  
and then at the man  
who brought me here  
and I want to laugh  
at the invisible thread  
that lies broken between us,  
the one your feet stumble on  
as you go for my coffee.  
I know I'm the strangest  
girl you'll ever meet;  
your eyes peering out

from a face you married  
over twenty-five years ago.

Somehow you got us out  
of there and back on  
the freeway; away from  
the broken cups, the piles  
of piles, that smell.  
I'm breathing hard, tight  
against the door  
and you pull me over,  
combing your hand  
through my crazy hair.  
I know I've been hit,  
that I'm hurt, but all I want  
is your thighs in that hotel room.



*Susan Weiner*

### **I Dreamed Mr. Eliot Was A Maid**

Here is a mop and pail and a cake of soap,  
Clean, clean, the house is unclean,  
I will take my sponge and grope  
Behind the appliances for dirt;

Here are hands that bleed and are raw,  
Clean, clean, the house is unclean.  
If you knew what I have seen  
You too might throw down other work:

Crumbs and lime, rot, and grime,  
Harbor where company never looks,  
Quietly breed the brackish slime  
And things that scurry in the dark.

I am privy to untold matter  
That gathers in the creviced gloom,  
I have learned to ignore a tidy room  
And check under the bed.

Because these eyes have looked too close,  
Clean, clean, this house is unclean,  
I struggle with my heart to lose  
Knowledge of that darker space;

Hence I sink back in disgust,  
Clean, clean, this house is unclean  
And grow unquiet when I deem  
Even a chair has slipped its place.

*Kristina McHaddad*

### **This is Not Purple or Red -- #1**

This night is conducive to almost any scene, I think, as I balance her hard against the stone wall behind her, as though I know some secret she does not. And she believes me.

### **This is Not Purple or Red -- #2**

I remember the thin slice of orange moon falling quickly into the Mexican ocean, the rough weave of the blanket between us and the cool ground, and the strength of her arms. She says she wants a word somewhere between like and love. I could hand her the fogged windows of my car and she might define it accordingly.

### **This is Not Purple or Red -- #4**

She says, buy me a red shirt with a pocket on the front, as though it were that simple for me to buy some things red: a book, a hair ornament, cherries. She does not know red is a color I can wear only outside where there is enough air to diffuse it. I still fall in love with women who drive red cars and do not see me.

*James Leishman Etchison*

## **Between Ice Ages**

An ice age thawed today.  
Imagined Borders heave and spark.  
Coins roll into cracks.  
And a dancing man throws curses  
At my passing car.

I'm driving clutch,  
With no shoes on,  
In a fine white rain,  
Behind a long grey meadow,  
Where muskrats live in holes.

The cool wind and rain roars in.  
I am a steamboat captain.  
I should start smoking a pipe.  
I'm looking off the road at the holes,  
Because roads lead to other roads,

Other roads punctuated by  
Circles and squares of light  
Flecked grey by passing feet  
Splashing rubber to mud  
Metal to rock.

Circles and squares,  
But holes lead to matted leaves  
And musty smells with half shells.  
Let the car watch its own roads.  
An ice age begins tomorrow.

*Barbara Sigman*

**brushfires, September '88**

orange magic  
in the mountains,  
one-thirty a.m.  
I breathe ashes  
I gaze and giggle,  
losing my balance  
on the tilted sidewalk  
(the cement baked warm  
beneath my tennis socks) —  
careful, Dad says, reaching for me  
but I'm not afraid because  
it's groovy walking down our street  
so late, the fire far enough away  
that we don't hear anything —  
we just watch, silent red and blue  
lights flashing below the flames  
the town sleeps inside  
its glowing womb  
but Daddy and I creep  
along the pavement —  
we could walk all morning  
in this silent soft show —  
we could walk forever

*Norman Buchwald*

### **Tongues in Earth**

In soft mud, frogs sleep all winter while  
clouds, bruised by sharp winds, surprise  
the earth with lightning. Below, red lava  
cuts through rocks while unaware and asleep,  
the frogs remain in their cool bed.

Burned by smoke, their eyes open and throats  
burst as soil lifts them into air, scattering  
into shadows, thick in the mist. Spring  
arrives, and in red clay, traces of tongues  
sprout upwards towards the sky.



*Eve E.M. Wood*

## **Root**

Nothing grows except a root  
crusted over,  
breathing slowly.

A woman holds it like her child  
then casts it out like the wind.

She says the root is rotting.  
She says the sun must shine upon its head  
near a clear falling stream  
somewhere far off  
along a rock path not made for her feet.

But the root did not grow in the earth.  
The root, covered with her skin  
is alive in her palm.  
The root is immobile.

I say the root is her own  
until it slips between her fingers  
into the earth.

*J-son Ong*

## **Ching Ming**

On April fifth,  
showers sprinkle the whole day  
on the living and the dead.

All dressed in white  
like apparitions, relatives  
stroll toward Kong Meng San Crematorium.

Pink umbrellas and black wet shoes  
line the walls outside the temple doors.  
Four dishes of half cooked food are offered

before grey walls, ashes and bones,  
rows and rows of small urns,  
inscribed with the names of the deceased.

A monk in golden robes walks between devotees,  
sprinkling chrysanthemums, murmuring blessings.

When the evening ends, a monk digs  
a hundred blows to the temple's gong.  
At the front door, a haloed street lamp  
shines on silver drops of rain  
spearing into darkness,  
pattering a wet courtyard.

*Kevin Owen*

### **Aubade**

Sleepy poem.

Unknot those morning morphemes.

Yawn and stretch those syllables like sinews,  
popping some joints, rattling the spine.

Poems should make sense:

smell the pasty breath,

see the window glare through the eye's first-film,

feel the sandbag muscles and the sliding separation from the sheets,  
like some sweating mummy,

a weird new gift to life from the dead.

The shower stutters, then hisses and sprays —

breath-catch at cold drops,

then pausing and filling regularly.

The musty smell of old tiles first, but then

you fill

the morning forest air

with your damp skin and new-shampoo hair.

All poems should be alarm clocks.

## Sweeping

I think of mother and bump the ceiling with the broom—  
(she wasn't neat) stucco clouds the room  
and chalks the air you yell through.

I will not sweep with these straws as you brew  
the linguini in the saucepan. The pasta's yours  
to boil; I'll keep to myself with granola bars.

My father's job made him paternally unhappy,  
a rancher at a computer. We bought a Husky puppy  
who crawled with worms when we didn't scoop her shit.  
It was cheaper to sleep her the second time, and thrift  
was always first. "Keep to yourself! Don't talk,  
but work. A divorce in this house stays in this house."

Our sink reeks: dishes grow fungus  
and worms from old cheese. Silent, I balk  
at your transaction of cleaning for the new meal.  
My talk and hygiene are weak, but I'll irritate you well.  
Now my powers are fully inherited  
from a family of lifetime suicides. I've merited  
with shut mouth the skill to wreck  
this roof with this cleaning tool behind your back.

## Manuel as Symbol

This weird Guatemalan,  
I think he's Guatemalan,  
named Mizael or Miguel,  
is always getting drunk  
with us, on Miller or Lucky Lager,  
(we student artists have no  
money, and have to sacrifice  
the quality of beer, proudly  
wearing our thrift store paisley),  
and has this quaint Spanish way  
of saying "my friend"  
all the time or when he drinks.

So one time, he fumbles a ten-spot out  
and burns it with his Bic.  
A pretentious, but amusing, performance art bit,  
and Glen wryly notes disjunction of expectations —  
he's into theories and modernism.  
Miguel is only an illustrator,  
symbolic Orozco suffering stuff,  
but his real art is his life:  
that little smoke is a needed vertical  
in his hunched composition.  
The ink-stink's acidic  
and we giggle and cheer, thrilling at the federal felony:  
the black spot spreads  
but disappears behind its border,  
a red empty eye eating as it opens.  
The last of the green winks behind his thumb

and the black curls like a tongue.  
He mutters in this sloshy Spanish slur  
“fucking American money, fucking American guns n’ shit,”  
like a pure proletarian mural, way down  
in LA by the freeway. Mizael’s a refugee  
of some war or another.  
Nicaragua, Peru, El Salvador, some Mexican name,  
I don’t know. Here in Santa Barbara  
we have higher surf, mundane Republicans, and dickhead cops,  
and an old-guard formalist art department.  
I elect Miguel as comrade-leader  
of TARP—The Artistically Revolting Peons.  
But he’s so smashed  
he doesn’t even laugh,  
and his wide-cheeked face and buttoned white shirt  
make him into a somber art history professor  
lecturing on representation and perspective.  
So I tell him he looks like a history professor  
and he flicks a bottle cap at us and laughs  
too hard, like some drunk in a Dutch painting,  
except for his brown skin and scars.

*Carrie Etter*

### **Photograph of a Man**

and a woman, who is not captured  
here as a woman but the blue heron  
or a brass coatrack.

There is nothing about her  
to claim femininity for that  
tight stance, pursed lips,  
graying hair in its own yoke.

There is nothing here that defines  
for fear of iconoclasm that defies  
any title of subservience.

That would keep him from carrying  
this picture in his wallet for show.



*Davi Loren*

## **Stopping with Nana**

At first, Nana says nothing at all.  
We stare up into the clutching twigs,  
trace back through branches, through trunk,  
the gnarled fists of root at our feet  
"It looks poured into place," she says  
And in a way, it does: A shard of energy  
piercing the vacuum  
plummeting toward the planet;  
slowed to liquid in thickness of air  
thickened to stone at touch of earth  
shackled at last to root

Nana is much younger in my photo of her,  
an ordinary-looking woman, I suppose,  
wavy dark hair in a knot  
She holds my mother and aunt in her lap:  
two squirming daughters nearly her size  
Her spine presses stiff to the chairback,  
eyes in shadow, body thick  
from the mulelike strain of nurture

You wouldn't know her to see her today  
as she studies the swirling bark  
Like a sheet over last summer's furniture  
her flesh drapes her bones,

thinned to a rosepetal peach membrane  
Through it gleam the overlapping edges of organs  
threaded together in trails of blue  
tidily packaged in ribs, ready for travel  
When she opens her mouth, the breeze  
trickles and bobs through wind-chime chords  
Wispy white hair, more breath than fiber  
shimmers around her skull  
and her characteristic darkness of eye  
has given way to reflection

Already she weaves in and out of the form  
She no longer lives in organs,  
in face nor fingers,  
heart nor mind —  
she draws her breath  
from between

And she turns to me now and she smiles  
and her hand drifts upward without displacing  
a single particle of air  
I feel the awakened anticipation  
in her heart's swift beat  
Ready        At any moment  
to slip into light

## Theropods

How they would have laughed—  
if they could have perceived the joke

those walnut-brained claw-toed  
two-storeyed carnivores  
with barely the smarts  
to spot a good meal

how could they have guessed?  
though the possibility  
stalked through the sludge along with them  
ever-ready to emerge  
*ta-da* into the spotlight

they never would have believed,  
laying boulder eggs  
in clay-thickened swampsoil,  
rolling cozily in saunabath air

Even if they had possessed the intellect  
of orangutans or elephants or men  
and had been rounded up, herded into  
the UA-6, given a slide show  
with Pepsi and popcorn  
3-D glasses and snowcones on the house

and presented with Verifiable Scientific Proof,  
lectured at by paleontological experts,  
while they fidgeted and clawed,  
belched and bullied

till they wanted to eat their chairs  
out of sheer cognitive frustration;

even if the brightest of them rose,  
tail smacking right and left along the aisle,  
to approach the microphone  
Even if this precocious Prehistoric  
took the time to explain to the others  
carefully, slowly, repeating the tricky parts

and even if a few leapt from their seats  
flinging their popcorn and singing "Eureka!"

too many would have hissed and hooted,  
railed at the ushers, stampeded the manager  
to protest  
the ludicrous suggestion

that eating and mating  
and the press of time  
would transform them to  
needle-beaked sprites  
darting between leaves, disappearing  
here, reappearing  
there, turning the air  
to a hum

drawing life not in carnage  
but in droplets  
from the clear liquid nectar  
of a bloom

## Three Views of a Painting:

### “Madame Cezanne in the Conservatory,” c. 1890

#### 1. As a Still Life

“Does an apple move?”

You chide your beleaguered Hortense  
into holding the pose for the full afternoon

Obediently, she recedes into her pupils  
and wills her muscles to sleep  
She sinks into her chromosomes  
gropes for amphibian memory  
of blood cool enough to slow  
the splitting of cells  
She stretches wide  
the throat of each minute  
to swallow the inexhaustible hours  
of your brush

so that you may paint the face  
of an apple    Without seeing  
the weariness    Without seeing how  
rapidly she ages  
doing nothing

As if this orphaned straining moment  
could contain all of Hortense,  
and immortality could be touched  
through the stilling of a life

2. As a Landscape

A dark-robed mountain  
purples the shade of a tree,  
fertilizing dusty soil

Ochre wall and sky  
bleed through complexion  
The grass, reflected  
strokes the passive jaw

Arms circle through fingers  
in the valley of a lap  
and her face rises  
indifferent as the moon

3. As a Portrait

His subject is objects  
He has no interest  
in capturing the soul  
in paint

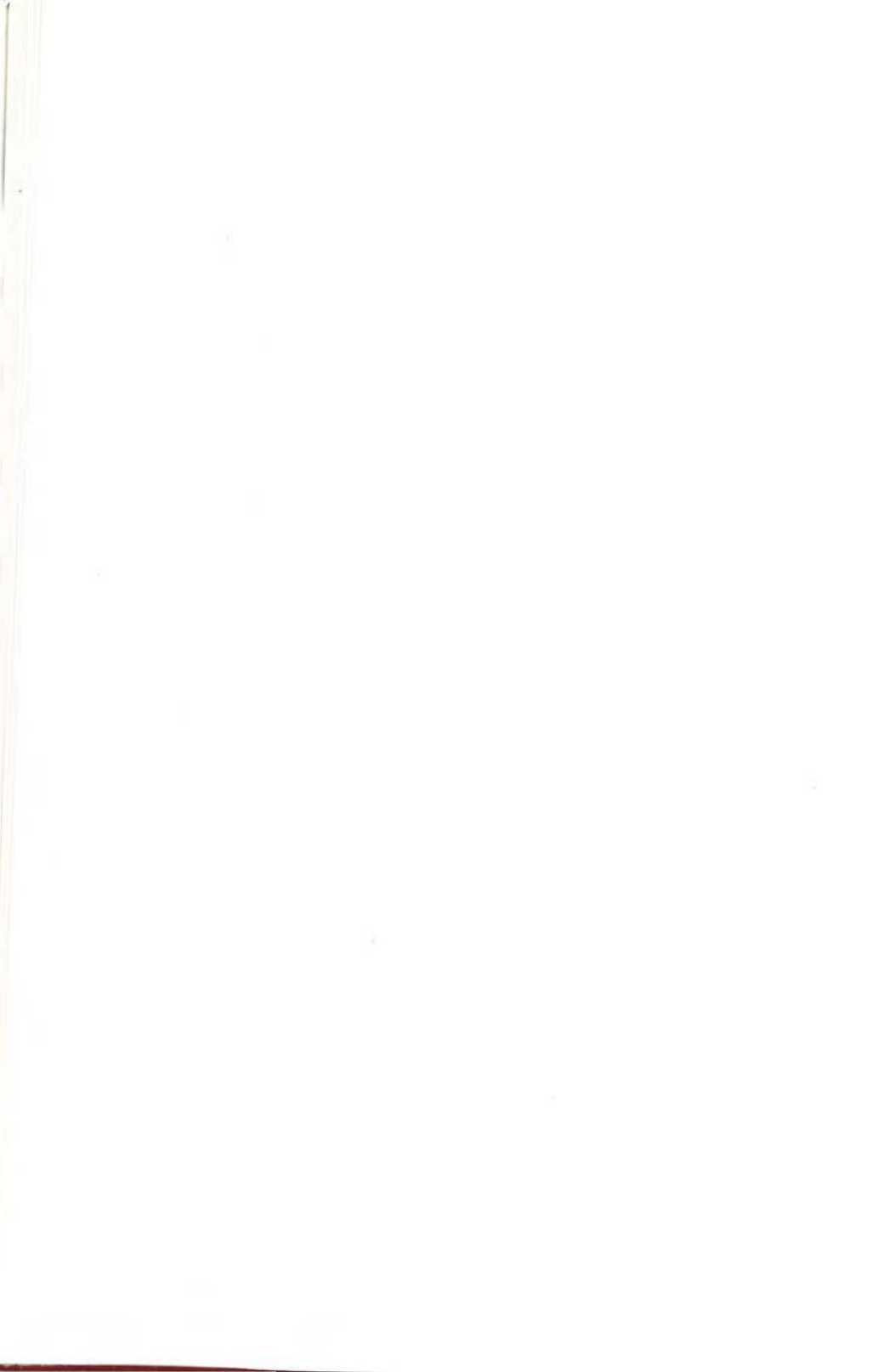
Which suits them both  
She does not wish  
to be caught

And yet, in marriage and art  
they are bound  
For decades she sits  
hands knotted, face tinged,  
mind on vacation in Paris  
while he labors to produce  
forty portraits

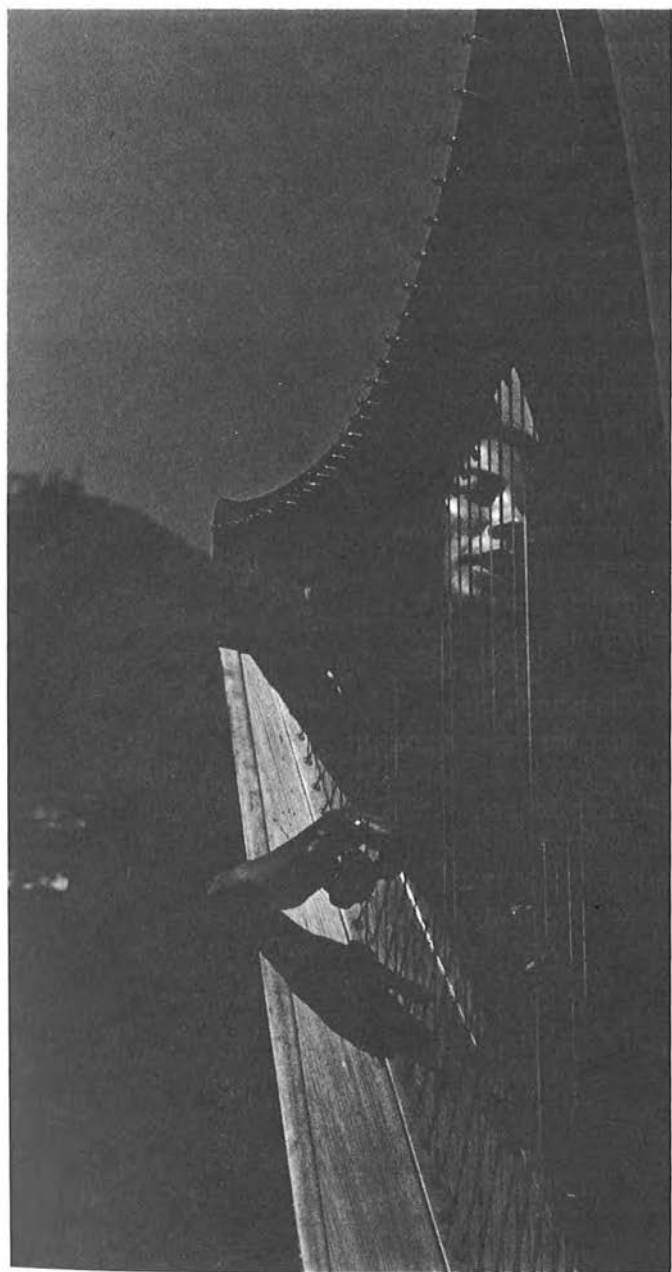
Forty chalky masks  
conceal the married woman  
Forty crisp and distancing masks

Only here, in "The Conservatory"  
she breaks the pose  
She turns her face  
toward his  
The brush, faltering,  
strokes the fleeting warmth  
which blushes at the edge of her ear

His sympathy for their bondage  
glimmers in the pigment  
of her eyes



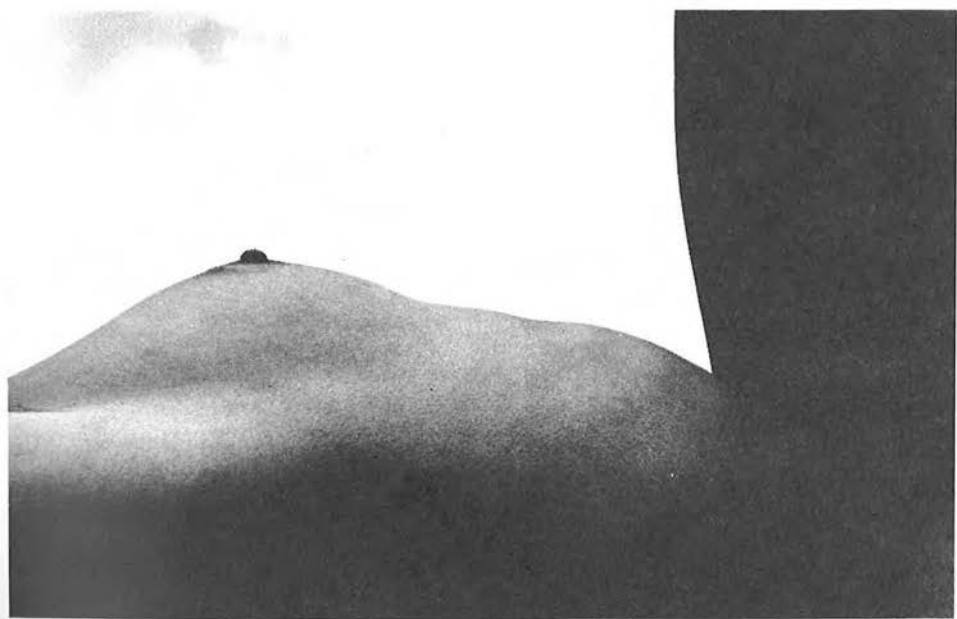


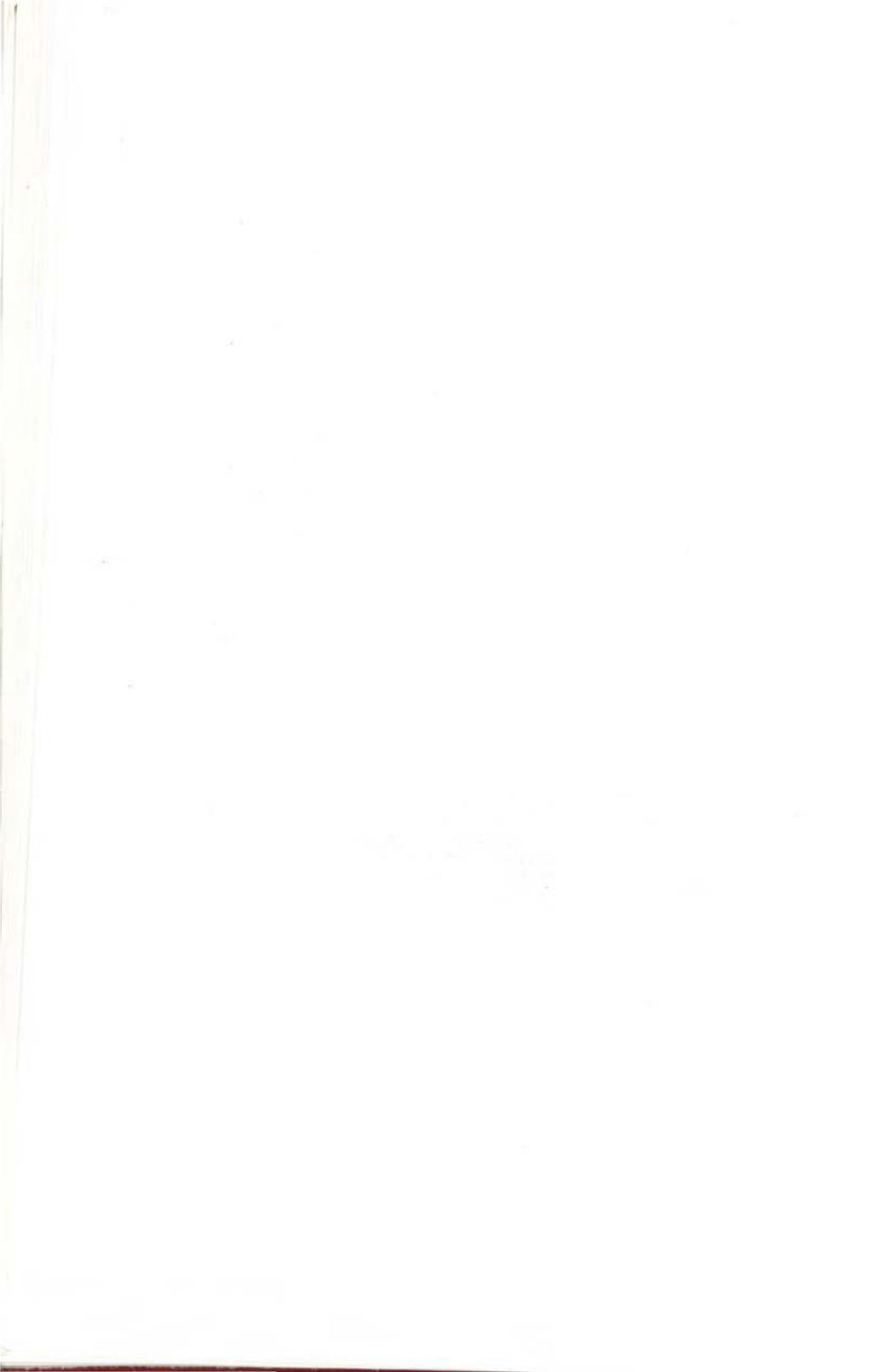












**Fiction**





*Hart Schulz*

## **The Purple Distance**

At noon the guards go through the door and behind the wall. It is when the sun is hottest and when El Paso in the distance is reduced to a murmur in the dry air. The man watched anxiously as the last American disappeared through the little door. The green shirt with its emblem, its official star, made an imprint on the man's mind. He did not fear it exactly, but it had an effect. What he did fear was the wall itself. Forty feet high or more, it makes up one side of the quadrangle—the internment lot. That day the Mexicans played soccer in their boots, better for river mud, and in their dark, plaid flannel shirts and cheap American jeans. The other three sides of the lot are bound by chain link fencing, also forty feet high, with round steel-rod supports at ten foot intervals parallel to the hard ground. All around at the top of the fence and running flush against the brick wall are coils of barbed wire. It is not a high security lot; in fact, that very night the green vans would come through the swinging gate at the opposite end of the wall to take the men back. A younger man perhaps would have little trouble scaling the chain links, at least until he reached the coils at the top. But this man was not so young. He was at the age where he would do better to simply enjoy the view southward through a small rise of dust, to watch the stubborn, stiff sage cut the wind there. He would do better to wait at his destiny.

Instead the man had made a mental note of the missing bricks high up on the wall just where it joined the fence, just at the level

of the barbed wire. When at noon the last officer left for lunch, the man began up the fence using the small diamond links for footholds and handholds. The man had no emotion since something like this was what he had expected he would have to do. When he reached the third support bar he rested his feet there, kept one hand clawed on the chain link and let the other support him against the wall. Just over his head were the missing bricks that would allow him to sidestep the coils. These look like notches for guns in a tall fort. Younger men had finally noticed him from below and laughed. He was a ridiculous spider where the wall met the fence thirty feet above their soccer game. He rested for what could have been ten minutes, then noticed in the purple distance the lazy Rio Grande, shallow, motionless and in-between America and Mexico.

From the top he could see behind the wall the corrugated aluminum buildings in the desert and the green trucks, and, on the side from which he had come, the game and its small plumes of dust lifting from heels. He thought for a moment that he had never seen any collection of ants that were not moving. Was it possible for living ants not to move? But having already rested on a lower rung, he would not allow himself further luxury of revelation. A star of reflected sunshine blazed from the officers' building and another from the silvery hub of a wheel. Having put a foot in each of two holes in the wall there, he was able to pull himself to the top of the wall, despite a moment when his belly stalled him precariously on the edge of the wall. He was no young man. He could crawl at best on the narrow walkway, the width only of a hearth-sized brick! Thus he avoided the spiral of barbs. He had anticipated all this, so he was consumed less by fear than by the ache in his shoulders supporting his weight on the way down. Then again as he staggered across the looser sand outside the perimeter he became aware of his fatigue. His heels stuck in the sand and pulled back against his calves. Behind him was no cheering, and though the players had witnessed his demonstration, he had become no hero, and their game continued.

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Between the town and the internment are several junkyards, entanglements of dusty old cars. The man, wearied from his escape,

made his way from one to another. He reached through their driver's-side windows and down under their dash boards into webs of frayed wires. This he knew was a game of chance, but he had calculated the odds of finding a car he could start. He expected his own fatigue too.

It was dusk, and behind him flood lights had been turned on in the internment. Once as a child in Mexico, he had walked through the desert at night to a circus, its lighted cages a beacon in the blackening horizon. Its exotic possibilities were protected from small, barefoot boys by the hiss of rattlesnakes. There are few times when boys are braver than men, but that had been one of them. The man climbed up onto a pile of scrap metal and bound down into a plot of loose sand. A surprised rattler whirled for cover to an old refrigerator there. Its colorless door hung doubled over on one rusted hinge, and inside the remnants of wire-grate shelving guarded the snake. The snake must have seen all the world outside as framed by the opening of the refrigerator and obstructed by the doubled-over door. And the sifted light of stars must have flooded the junkyard scene—with its heavy, awkward man in the deep sand. For a moment the man noticed the snake, but he had no notion of avoiding it, nor of confronting it. Instead he twisted together the ignition wires of old cars into the night. Finally he came upon a big, black Plymouth, its outline faded into the darkness. The Plymouth jumped when he hot-wired it, and its treadless tires jerked the big car from a sandy bed. A cooler, moister wind came up from the south with the smell of Mexico and the promise of rain.

The road felt flatter and smoother than he had expected. He drove north and west and slept in the back seat in Las Cruces in the parking lot behind a 7-11 store. The clerk gave the tired man some Hostess cup cakes. The next day he drove all the way to Sacramento.

*Patti Scheibel*

## **Home**

Outside on the porch Chris sits on the steps and smokes a cigarette. She traces something with her white tennis shoe in the dirt where the grass won't grow. I stand in the doorway behind the screen breathing in her smoke and the charred smell of barbecuing somewhere near on this warm summer night. All up and down the street crickets chirp and the lushness of people's gardens lingers in the air.

By the set of her spine, I can see she is thinking. I would go out and sit with her on the steps, but she seems restless and my presence would only be an intrusion. Still, I like to watch the way she holds the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger, and the way the glowing orange tip flits through the darkness like a firefly.

So often I wonder if she ever thinks about me or if she's threading together all her memories and abstractions like beads on a string. I think about her a lot and how I love this house with a porch to sit on and talk or laugh. Chris manages to weave in passersby, either to talk about or to call up to sit with us. I never invited anyone; I'm awkward with strangers.

Even the first Saturday after we moved in, she invited the mailman to sit with us and have a beer. He came stumping up our walk way gleaming with sweat, his blue uniform sticking to his stocky frame. Chris said, "Take a break for God's sake! You look like you need a beer. Why don't you sit with us and catch your breath?"

I resented her invitation because he looked to me like a pain; like the kind of cocky guys who ask me in department stores where the automotive section is. They always act offended when I explain I don't work here and I don't know. I swear I must look like a typical saleswoman, although I can't imagine what a typical saleswoman looks like. Chris laughs about how often it happens and tells me it's because I go around with the same slightly dazed expression that she sees in salespeople's eyes during half price days. That's the kind of person she is though, the kind that stares into salespeople's eyes and remembers them.

Anyway, the mailman dumped his letter sack on our steps and personally handed our mail to Chris with a big grin. Then he thrust out his big hand at me to shake. It was hot and sweaty and I made a point of wiping my hand off on my jeans. "I'm George," he told me happily. "Glad to meet you."

I said, "I'm Nina," but I didn't say I was happy to meet him. He flopped down into our new white wicker lawn chair. I thought his weight would break the delicate weave, but it didn't. Chris introduced herself and asked him what it was like being a mailman, as if it were some rare and highly sought after career.

He rolled the open can of beer between his hands for a moment. He said, "Well, I don't really consider myself a mailman. I mean I know I am, but it's not what I really want to be." He was aching to tell someone whatever it was that he wanted to be, but Chris didn't ask and I couldn't.

She said, "If it weren't for ferocious dogs and lugging all that mail around, I'd like to be a mailman, or mailwoman, or do you say mailperson?" He shrugged helplessly. "Well whatever. You get to be outdoors and see where people live and what their names are. You could even read all the magazines you wanted to without having to buy them." Chris always could sidetrack a conversation. Not that she meant to ignore George, although he did look like he was about to burst a blood vessel all over the fresh green paint on our porch, she just gets caught up in an idea and can't control herself.

In a rare fit of mercy, I asked good old George what it was he wanted to be doing. His round face seemed ridiculously angelic



when he said, "I want to play the cello."

Chris smiled and asked, "You mean you want to learn how? Or do you already know how?"

"I know how to play already," he impatiently explained. "I want to make a living at it though."

Soon they were knee deep in arpeggios and intermezzos so I quit listening because I didn't understand. I watched their faces and listened to the humming of their voices. George's face grew soft and his voice dropped to almost a purr. Chris's face had that aura of distant interest she gets when she talks about something she knows but she hasn't touched or seen yet. She's beautiful, or maybe not beautiful in the sense most people would think, but beautiful in the way ideas make her face move and her hands wave as if she could touch and make personal the things I don't understand. Things I can't understand that leave me watching lips move.

After that George sat with us every Saturday and had a beer. I didn't mind him taking up so much space anymore because he loved the cello. Once he even brought it over one evening and played for us. He looked like a different person without his uniform, almost a stranger. The music was dark and bitter but lovely, and it made me glad that it was summer outside, not winter. Chris stared at him so hard through the half light of an early dusk that the black pin points in the center of her eyes grew and enveloped the brown. I couldn't watch George playing. It seemed too personal, worse than watching someone make love.

We have a new mailman now, an old frail looking guy that isn't very sociable. He won't even stop for a beer. We lost contact with George. One Saturday he simply didn't come, and this new guy showed up. I wasn't very sociable either. I asked if George was sick, and he shrugged and dropped our mail into our letter box instead of handing it to me, even though I was standing right there. "What happened to George? Where is he?" I yelled to make sure he heard me. He shrugged his spindly old shoulders and scurried away from me. He didn't say hello or goodbye or anything at all.

I admit I cried. Actually I cry quietly at least once a week, and usually I'm not even sad when I cry. Sometimes just reading the newspaper makes me cry. I used to think I was crazy, but Chris told

me sometimes a person's body takes over and skips over emotion to get rid of built up toxins. Probably my body needs an outlet for the dust that blows in my eyes from the patch of dirt where nothing will grow in our front yard. But that time I cried up a storm in the bathroom with the door locked so Chris wouldn't see. The deep purple she had painted the walls made it the perfect place to cry in. I never told her how horrible it looks though.

She must have unlocked the door from the outside because she was just suddenly there, asking me, "What's the matter?" When I told her I missed George she laughed and held my hand. She said, "What does it matter? I'm here."

"But he didn't say goodbye."

"Maybe he didn't have time. He probably got accepted into a symphony orchestra and had to leave right away. Can't you just picture him in a tuxedo? It's where he belongs. Here, blow your nose." She held out a single square of toilet paper. I felt a little silly clutching her hand and blowing my nose, but then she smiled at me; and I realized how easy it is to get lost anywhere at all if you don't have a map.

I suppose I've always been greedy. I remember how I'd spent weeks steaming the labels off of cans to paste up on the dull white kitchen walls: Hunt's tomatoes and Birdseye beans along with the rarer peaches and beets -- things I didn't really like that I bought strictly for the labels. Chris would have nothing to do with it at first because, as she told me, "There's such a thing as good taste." Later though she'd bring home an occasional can of lima beans or something she hated, explaining to me that she'd never given them a "proper chance." She pretended not to notice the new labels I pasted up whenever I got around to it. But one night I found her in the kitchen squinting up her eyes at the half finished wall and muttering, "Green Giant corn here or maybe some pretty yams...." After I'd covered up every bit of white wall, it looked so cheerful I swelled up like a turkey with pride.

But Chris wouldn't admit it looked good, not even when I said point blank, "We sure did a good job, huh?"

She said, "It's a kitchen. There's not much to say," as if a single good word would magically transform her into one of those strange

women on television who bliss out over waxed floors.

Watching her there smoking, I know instinctively she isn't thinking about houses or anything in them. I put my hand on the door frame just to reassure myself it's solid and real. I know she's smarter than me. The last big think I had was back in school, right before I dropped out, when I concluded that someone should have given Kafka a kitten or a puppy. It's penicillin for syphilis and puppies or kittens for existential depression. Dr. Peterson told me not to be so fucking cutesy. I never heard a professor say fuck before. I only meant that watching a puppy yap at a sprinkler or a kitten hunting a stink bug might have been better for him than locking himself up in a room. There's a joy anyone can see if they look, but I wasn't sure anyone there wanted to look. Dr. Peterson also told me only an intelligent person should tackle Kafka. When I told Chris about it, she couldn't stop laughing. She told me I should have known scholarship is like a football game of the mind. She even got me laughing when she said, "Did you dig him up and bring him into class before you tackled him?"

We both work at the same factory stuffing cotton balls into the tops of aspirin bottles. We wear surgical gowns and surgical caps and even rubber gloves, which is a little inane; because people are always rubbing their eyes or picking the sleep out or wiping their noses. Instead of using unclean hands they use germ free gloves though. Chris tells me she enjoys the job because it gives her time to think. Me, I don't think as the aspirin bottles pass me by on the conveyer belt. Sometimes someone says something and it startles me, because I realize I'm standing there doing nothing, and the elastic gathers in the surgical cap are digging into my forehead, and I don't even know how long I've been there. Chris always tells me no one can stop thinking for even a moment, but I can never remember what I've been thinking about. It's like waking up without remembering any dreams.

Chris remembers all her thoughts and sometimes she tells them to me; like the way Buddhist monks shave their heads and wear orange robes the color of poppies instead of dull black or brown like Christian monks. She thought it would look like Halloween if all the monks could be gathered together. She told me Buddhist monks



used to set themselves on fire during the Vietnam war in protest. We were digging holes in our garden to plant bulbs. She stopped digging and told me this thing very carefully, and I knew I was supposed to remember it. Why, I don't know. What does it mean to her? Certainly it was a tragedy: people killing themselves for peace. Maybe she meant they weren't killing other people for peace, but killing one's self doesn't seem very effective either. I dug into the soil concentrating on monks in orange, burning. I planted the hyacinth bulbs so close together they never bloomed.

But sometimes, like now when she sits with her back towards me, I know she won't tell me what she's thinking even if I ask. Probably she's thinking about wide open spaces, fields or deserts where the sky stretches out so far there's no way to avoid it unless one looks straight down.

She's been so many places I've never seen: Pakistan, Japan, even New York City, which she says counts as a foreign country. She told me the people in New York city are like chickens in factory farms where they have to cut their beaks off because the chickens are so crowded they go crazy and peck each other to death. She said that's why New York has gun laws; but they need ice pick laws, and tire iron laws, and so many laws, soon people would be living in empty buildings. She told me about a temple sand garden in Japan. Sometimes a tourist would leave foot prints, but the next morning the sand would be as smooth as glass again. She told me how she saw a young monk whistle, and birds flew down from nowhere and lit on his skinny outstretched arms. She told me about the beggars in Pakistan who would follow her around and show her their children with missing limbs or distended bellies. She lived cheaply in a hotel that used to be a palace. She broke her arm there, when she fell out of the four foot high bed on to the marble floor. So many nights I've curled up on the lawn chair and traveled inside her voice.

She never said anything about it to me, but I heard her one time out on the porch say to Mrs. Zilas, our neighbor, "I feel old and done in." I was making iced tea, and I heard it through the window screen. For a second the beautiful walls of our kitchen seemed hideous and gawky. It made me want to make some fun for her, loud roaring fun like people in Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Chris is only twenty-seven and Mrs. Zilas must be at least seventy; but Mrs. Zilas would never say a thing like that. Underneath her orthopedic shoes and frowsy moth eaten sweaters beats the heart of a mad woman who'll never give up; who'd never admit to it even if she felt "old and done in."

When I came out to give Mrs. Zilas her iced tea, she calmly informed me that she stretches her social security check by eating sparrows and robins. "I spread crumbs out on my ledge and kill them while they eat." She seemed rather smug about it. Chris nodded in understanding and asked Mrs. Zilas how she killed them.

She replied, "With a bow and arrow." I saw how shaky her frail hands were when she lifted the full glass to her lips to take a tiny lady-like sip. Chris was very amused. She egged Mrs. Zilas on by asking which bird tasted better and what was the best recipe to use.

I like Mrs. Zilas because I could really imagine her with a bow and arrow if her hands were steadier. I asked, "Wouldn't it make more sense to shoot whoever is in charge of sending such paltry social security checks?"

She looked lost for a moment, but then she said, "I wouldn't be blabbing about it if I had, now would I, Missy? Besides, you shoot one bureaucrat and another pops up right away, just like toadstools. Believe me, I know." She gave me a very dangerous look. I liked her even better.

Sometimes though, like that time she was talking to George about music, Chris sounds like she drank down an entire dictionary like buttermilk. Then conversation turns to static inside my ears, as if I were caught between two radio stations. Words crackle. If I listen closely enough, I can faintly hear a ghost of meaning, but it fades so fast.

Then there are times when I'm alone with Chris when I have something important to say to her to bridge the gap between my ignorance and her, something to wash it away. It flashes through my mind like sunlight bouncing off a mirror; but words aren't fast enough and then it's gone as if it were never even there, leaving me propped up like a rag doll against these walls. It's almost as though I'm a foreigner with no native language; no way to tell her.

I breathe in Chris's smoke. Maybe Chris writes what she's

thinking about in the dust with her tennis shoe. Maybe when the sun comes up I could see her thoughts spread out like a diagram in the dirt. Maybe my mind or this house is too confining for her, who has been so many places, and I'm too stupid to know it.

Cats somewhere unseen yowl into the night, probably copulating. I choke back a giggle; and Chris turns and looks at me through the mesh of the screen door. Always, I make sounds when I most desire to be quiet. A tiny stream of smoke flows from the corner of her mouth and drifts up into her short curly hair. She says, "Come out or go away, but don't just stand there. You make me nervous."

I go out and sit besides her on the porch, ignoring the wicker furniture. I hold my words in. Chris grinds out her cigarette into the dirt under her shoe, obliterating whatever she traced. We sit in the dark heat filled with the chirping of crickets. Chris brushes a gnat away from her face and says, "Do you ever get lonely?"

I want to say, why should I when you're here, but something in the set of her square jaw stops me. Instead I say, "Maybe we should get you a dog."

She looks at me from the corner of her eye and laughs. "Nah, with Mrs. Zilas two doors down having a pet might not be a good idea." I'm not so dumb as she thinks, perhaps. A dog lives a long time; years and years in which it's blindly and faithfully loyal. People shouldn't leave them behind when they move, but they do anyhow. Then the dogs go wild; snarling and snapping at strangers, knocking over trash cans for scraps. Maybe they even have vague doggy dreams about the door no longer opening when they bark and bark until they're hoarse. Chris lights another cigarette, and I watch the orange glow as she draws on it. Ribbons of smoke curl around it, and I breathe it all in.

*Jeniffer Wolfe*

## **Pincushion**

They walk into the alley, his arm around her neck, elbow pointed forward, his other arm poised distinctly at her side, glinting, dangerous. Their shuffle, their awkward dance into the murk of the alley tell exactly what will happen. The way her feet move, stumble and step, unfold the scene faster than it can unfold itself. There is a noise and she is down, with a thick hand on her mouth.

I ran into the alley

Let me tell you about alleys. People keep trash in them, other people sleep in them, dogs piss in them; they are used as shortcuts, or they are blind; it is always night time in an alley; when I walk through one, my nostrils flare. Wherever you go you will find one and it will be the same as the last one you were in. This could be anywhere.

I walk into the alley with you and know that something is wrong. I don't know what it is yet but I know it's bad, I already know that it's the worst thing I'll ever have to see, and then something clicks and I cry out.

What about the girl with the hand on her mouth? She is still and small as a cat. The man and her Judas feet keep on unfolding; soon his pants are unfolded, then her dress, and then her legs and soon the

whole damn thing is just all unfolded and laying out there, left for anybody to see.

and let one huge flying kick sink into his ribs and lift him, lift him off and up and over where he landed with a thud, with a great satisfying grunt. I stood there, watching him stand up, reach into his pocket and show me the most beautiful knife I had ever seen; the only one ever meant special, just for me. I told him that I was a pincushion, that his gorgeous knife couldn't hurt me and then I kicked the thing out of his hand; told him to zip up his fly and kicked, hard. Now I had the knife and I showed it to him, asked him if he was a pincushion. Kicked some more.

You're going to jail, I said. You're going to jail because I saw what you did and I'm telling. You'll go to jail and they'll find out what you did and one night they will line up around you and rip you apart and no one will save you.

I said, You're going to jail.  
and kicked.

Until he was unconscious and the police came and pulled me off of him.

Even as I am crying out, I run into the alley, shouting for you to call the police, and let out one huge flying kick. I pick her up and carry her off to the side. She weighs as much as a cat. I pull her dress down and put my coat around her shoulders. We throw her underwear away, which are ripped. So is her dress. She is all blood and snot and vomit. I hold her like a cat and croon over her small body, her hair, her face. I tell her that she is beautiful, so beautiful and brave, and I'll always love her and nothing will ever hurt her again. We cry together like ancient sisters; unceasing and locked together forever.

The police come and try to fold everything back up. They pour the unconscious man into the back of their car and slowly walk toward the sobbing woman, pulling coaxingly along the edges of the whole scene.

I don't know what happens later. The police come and separate me from the girl and you take me home and I take a bath and go to sleep. Or maybe I have to go down to the station and explain why I kicked the shit out of this guy and they will give me cigarettes and shake their heads. I could ride in the back of the police car with the girl, all the way to the hospital, and hold her hand while she is on the examining table and shout at the doctors when she cries out. I probably never leave the alley again, become locked in a place where there is only holding and crying; never ending and never moving on.

*Scott Sandler*

## What Bob Knows

Irene puts the index cards into three piles: what Bob knows absolutely, what Bob knows kind of, and what Bob doesn't know. The middle pile, what Bob knows kind of, is the biggest one. He generally knows his stuff, and Irene tells him so. "You're almost there," she says, touching his shoulders reassuringly.

Bob picks at his chocolate-sprinkled maple donut, then stops. He centers it on a sheet of waxpaper and stares at it as if it were an art exhibit. He hums the chorus of "Love Me Do," and then drifts off to a polaroid of Irene and his father which is stuck beneath a refrigerator magnet. In the picture they are leaning against a porch railing. The ocean is blurry behind them. Bob's father's got a look on his face like he's just been kissed all over.

His father's smile is so big that it almost seems as if he knew that this would wind up on the fridge and Bob would wind up looking at it. Irene slams her hand down on the table and says, "C'mon, let's go. You think this is fun for me." Bob slides his chair away from the table.

Bob doesn't tell Irene, but he is grateful for the middle pile. If it weren't for the middle pile, more than two-thirds of the cards would go back into 'Bob doesn't know.' Irene wouldn't need a middle pile, Bob thinks, and feels stupid.

"Who said, 'Give me liberty or give me death?'" Irene says, rolling her R's in Liberty, making it sound like a foreign word.

“How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Roll your R’s like that. You’re not Spanish.”

“You don’t have to be. It’s just something you’re born with. Either you can do it or you can’t.”

Bob goes off into tangents when he doesn’t have an answer and Irene knows that. She repeats the question and says, “CONCENTRATE!”

“Oh, I know this, I know this. It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“First initial P.”

“Oh, I know this.” He slams his fist on the table for dramatic effect and waits for her to give him the second initial. Irene tells him and then he curses and slams some more.

“Of course, Patrick Henry, of course, fuck!” he says. “It was on the tip of my tongue, fuck!”

And just like that he would make it to the middle pile. Just by saying ‘it was on the tip of my tongue.’ Just by saying ‘fuck.’

“You would have come up with it eventually,” Irene says.

Bob’s mom once told this joke in which a cat dies, but in order to cushion the death part, you say it’s on the roof, and this is what Bob thinks about, this joke, when his mom calls and says that Harlan was looking at the cat, and the cat he says might be very sick. Felt around the neck and the nodes, he said, feel very swollen. It might be lympho-...lympho-...” She puts her hand over the receiver and yells to him, “What is it, lympho- what,” as if she were doing a crossword puzzle. “That’s it,” she says, back on the phone again, “lymphocarcoma. You know what that is, Bob, it’s a kind of cancer and your cat could have it. It’s more common than you think.”

“Tell your boyfriends not to touch the cat.”

“He’s a doctor.”

“Tell him not to touch my cat. He’s not a vet.”

“Okay, listen, don’t get uptight. I’m real exhausted, tired, beat. I’ll see you soon.”

When Bob hangs up, he’s not thinking of the cat. He’s thinking—exhausted, tired, beat—Why can’t she just settle on one?



While he bubbles in his last name on the test, Bob pictures Irene's word, **CONCENTRATE**, in big-block letters across a movie screen. He pictures a huge middle pile growing bigger and bigger, bigger than him. What Bob knows kind of, he thinks, and soon that is all he thinks about.

He remembers the initials P.H., but can't remember what they stand for. He thinks of pickled herring, pubic hair, pot holders, and Pert hair shampoo. And as he's busy thinking, ten minutes pass and Rebecca Math shakes out her fingers because they have cramped up on her.

Fifteen minutes into the test, Bob is panicking, because no one's there to give him clues. He thinks, "Fuck." He thinks, "It's on the tip of my tongue," but it doesn't help. He fills in the whole thing ABAB and turns his sheet over.

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*How are you like him?*

In the way that you stand in the back row at dance try-outs and don't look in the mirror. In the way that you feel light-headed looking at the women in their navy blue, white, plum-colored leotards, stretching, warming up. In the way your heart races when the instructor cues up "The Dark Town Strutter's Ball." In the way you walk out before your number is called and afterwards throw your taps into the dumpster and curse. In the way you don't know what to say when asked, "How'd it go?" In the way you need to rest. In the way you can't fall asleep. In the way you sit through kung-fu movies, one o'clock in the morning, with the volume turned all the way down. In the way you don't know what to say when asked, "What are you doing up?" In the way you don't know what to say when one night, he rolls over in bed and says, "I'm leaving." In the way you'd like to believe him when he says, "It's not you." In the way you think you've put it all behind you.

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Bob heads on over to the store where Irene works—"Monkey See, Monkey Do." It's a pink stucco building and it's full of stuffed toy monkeys: chimps, orangutans, gorillas, and everything. It's got Planet of the Apes coloring books and a row of chocolate-covered Barrel of Monkeys sets. All of the employees wear

"Monkey See, Monkey Do" t-shirts. But it's got more than just monkeys. It's got butter knives with silver elephant tips, greeting cards with fish that say, "I decided to send you this just for the halibut," posters of dogs and cats, stuffed frogs who lean their chins over red hearts that say "Kiss the Prince," pencils with dolphin erasers (if you have a tough math problem, you rub off the whole back fin), and tins filled with cinnamon animal crackers.

Bob went there once with his mother, before they officially knew Irene. His mother showed him a poster of a cat digging its claws into a tree, holding on for dear life. In yellow block letters, written across the bark, it said, "Hang In There Baby." Bob thought it was cute, but his mom said that it was rather sad. That's exactly how she said it, too. "That's rather sad," as if it were something she saw on the news, a piece about Africa, which she really wasn't too concerned about. But that's just the way she talks. In the car, she brought it up again. "Can't you just picture the photographer snapping away at that cat. When he doesn't get the shot just right, he sends his kid up the tree to throw it back down. He says, "Do it again! Do it again! Do it again!"

Today Bob follows a red-headed kid with Bermuda shorts into the store. The kid walks up to the man who sits behind a counter and asks him if he's got an album with whale songs on it. The man, who is smoking, says no. Bob thinks he shouldn't be smoking in front of young kids. The kid asks if there's any way to order it and the man takes down the kid's name and number, saying he'll call him when it comes in, but Bob knows he won't because right as the kid leaves, the man lights up another cigarette and turns up the radio behind the counter.

"Where's Irene?"

"She's on a lunch break."

"Y'know when she'll be back?"

"Sure don't," the man says, flicking the ashes of his cigarette in a plastic ashtray.

Bob holds up one of the stuffed frogs and says, "You shouldn't have lied to that kid. If you guys don't carry whale albums, then you shouldn't say you're going to order 'em. You don't even know what a whale song sounds like."

"I do too. Sound like a bunch of tubas, so don't bother me."

Bob's mom sits in a corner booth, the dimmest part of the restaurant. The shades are busted so that the light comes in, slanted, like an arm across the table, dividing it in half. Lately, she has been thinking a lot about how things are separated from one another. How the walls of the Mexican restaurant separate the inside from the outside. How the darkness is bottled up on the inside, save for the light from the busted shade, and how bright it must be on the outside. She sips her margarita, asks the waiter for another bowl of tortilla chips and waits uncomfortably, waits for the door to slowly open, for Irene to walk in. Bob's mom feels the need to get information from Irene now that Bob spends so much of his time with her. She wonders what there is to this funny-looking red head whose picture came through the mail one day, on a Christmas card. She was wearing baggy pants and a kelly green sweater. Her hand was draped around Bob's father's broad shoulders. Bob's mom had seen Irene at the funeral, her back arched against the refrigerator door. She was drinking a beer and was talking to Bob very matter-of-fact about his father, between sips. Bob had no need to ask his mother anything—he already knew that part. Bob's mom feels the sour margarita going to her head. She finds it hard to believe that this woman, who came out of nowhere, has such an effect on Bob. But Bob's mom knows she didn't come out of nowhere and that this is what draws Bob to her. The door opens. The shape flutters in the light beneath the door-jamb and hesitates for a moment, as if it were about to cross a border. Bob's mom smiles, waves her hands mechanically at Irene who smiles back and heads towards the table. When Irene sits across from her, Bob's mom no longer feels compelled to find out about Irene, but rather she wants to explain herself. She wants to talk about herself and Bob. Her knees bounce up and down under the table and she feels physically awkward, as if all her grace was thrown out in the dumpster, along with her tap shoes. Without looking up, she says to Irene, "Y'know in a lot of ways I'm just like him."

Irene picks up a menu and says, "How are you like him?"

The man behind the counter was the first one he told the lie to, just because he didn't want the man to know anything about him. But he kept it up in school, too. Not that he was ashamed of anything. It's just that they appreciate it more if his dad died in some plane crash over the Grand Canyon.

"It just went down, smack into the Colorado River. You mean you didn't hear about this? It was on the news all day long. The pilot they think, was an alcoholic, but they can't prove it. I'm surprised you never heard it. It made headlines."

The only one that didn't believe him was Rebecca Math. She said, "S'm'possible. I would have heard about it," which really surprised Bob, because who would question him about his own father's death?

The man behind the counter said, "Oh, wait, yeah, yeah, I think I do remember that," and then moved on to another customer.

Bob thinks that his lies are no more fantastic than his father's. His father had told him once that he could build a car engine out of nothing but recycled tin cans. He told him that he could, if he wanted to, lift five hundred pounds over his body weight. He was very good at convincing Bob that everything he said was true. He told Bob that he would teach him how to surf over the summer, and he didn't even know how to surf.

Bob goes over to the poster bin, shuffles past a few sunsets and dalmatians in firehats, until he reaches the "Hang In There Baby" poster. The cat is a siamese and her eyes are a clear sky-blue. Funny thing is she doesn't look panicky like before. She just looks worn out. Like she's been waiting for Bob to, one day, shuffle his way back to her and figure out a way to get her down.

Bob feels hands on his shoulders. He turns around and it's Irene, back from her lunch break.

"How long you been here?" she asks.

"Just got here."

And just by the way she smiles, the way she lets her hand rest on his shoulders, Bob knows she would have found a way to have gotten the cat down. She just has that ability. It's like rolling your R's. Either you can do it or you can't. She can. She can be trusted.

She is the only one Bob hasn't lied to.

"It's cold," Bob says as Harlan finds another place on his chest to stick that stethoscope.

"Stop talking. Breathe in deep... now out... now in."

"C'mon."

"Don't be an ingrate," Bob's mom says, turning off the t.v. "You know, most doctors would charge you fifty, sixty for this. You're getting this for nothing."

He holds the stethoscope against his chest for too long, as if he were trying to gain information. Bob pictures a safecracker with his ear to a vault listening for clicks. He pictures Rebecca Math, when she holds the side of her face to the ground. She says that if you listen hard enough you can hear if an earthquake or a train is coming. Bob wonders if he held this stethoscope up to his mother's chest for this long, and how much did he learn about her that Bob, himself, didn't already know. Bob thinks if he held the thing on her all night, she wouldn't complain. Harlan turns his eyes to the ceiling as if he can't hear a heartbeat or as if he is drawing blanks.

Bob says, "Enough already. I don't even feel sick."

"You never know, Bob," Harlan says. "These things can creep up on you."

Irene sits in a patio chair on the back porch, drinks a beer, watches him. Bob's father lies on his stomach, tracing his fingers along the edges of the wooden boards. The boards are warped and the edges curl up. His hand slides up the curve of the boards. He looks back and says, "The sun's warped 'em. Look at this..." He traces his fingers between the boards and along the slats, showing her how some spaces are wider than others.

"Does that look right to you? It doesn't to me. We should get someone down here to fix it."

"What good'll that do? It'll just warp up again, won't it?"

"I'm talking temporary," he says, getting up and walking over to the cooler to grab himself a beer. He brushes sand off a patio chair and pulls it up next to Irene.

He rubs his hands along the neck of the bottle and the neck of

Irene at the same time. "Can you believe this is all ours?"

"It's pretty great." She concentrates on the bottle, peeling the label off the sides and stuffing it through the top. Neither talks for a while. It's quiet.

"You think Bob'll like it here? He's always liked beaches and water and stuff. He'll like the arcade."

"You think he'll like me?" Irene asks.

"Yeah, I do. I think he'll like you a lot."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, he's my son. He's like me."

Bob's cat lifts her head slowly from the arm of the couch and looks directly at him. Her eyes are not sad or worn out like they are on the poster, or like Bob thought they would be. They look directly at Bob, twinkling gold, as they turn toward the kitchen light. She looks almost proud, as if she doesn't realize she's dying. She scratches her sides furiously, shedding grey fur, and then looks up, as if to say, "What are you looking at?" Bob has always believed that cats always land on their feet. Now he wonders if maybe that's just what they want you to believe. You look into their eyes, so calm, as if nothing happened—just something you, for a second, thought you saw.

Harlan sits in between Bob and his mother at the dinner table, with his stethoscope still wrapped around his neck. He scoops the mashed potatoes on to his plate. Then Bob's mom scoops some on hers. He puts on some poppy-seed dressing on his salad; she puts some on hers. And it's this follow-the-leader number that Bob is sick of. She waits for him to take his first bite, before she'll take hers. It's the same thing as when she's driving her car around. She won't put her headlights on until someone else puts theirs on. They make the decision for her. They let her know when it's dark enough to use them. Sometimes it gets to the point where she can no longer see the double lines. When Bob complains, she says, "Do you see anyone else with their lights on?"

Bob turns sideways in his seat and looks at his mother's eyes.



He notices how as they pass underneath street lights, the blue color seems to wash out into a sharp silver. Bob thinks about how vulnerable they look. They don't dare wander from the road. His mother's lips are parted as if she were going to speak. Does she want to talk to him? Bob wonders how Harlan's seriousness is now her seriousness. Bob doesn't have to ask where they are going—he knows where they are going. He knows which off-ramp his mother will choose.

She takes Bob by the hand. She knows exactly where it is. Bob's feet seem to sink slightly as he steps on to the grass. Bob doesn't understand his mother completely. She won't eat her potatoes unless someone else eats theirs, but she will wander through cemeteries at night by herself. She stops walking and then pulls a Bic out of her purse.

"Here we are," she says. She walks right up to the stone, almost on top of it. She holds the light up to each letter. Bob can see the first name—DENNIS. Dennis. Bob thinks about the name. It is more important now than ever.

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*What do you want to know about him?*

You want to know about his condo, third floor, two blocks away from the beach, carpets always damp, towels and shoes full of sand, laid out in front of the washing machine, always a damp, wet feel, always a damp, wet smell. About how he tans on his backporch where everyone can see him. About how the smell of his coconut tanning oil was his permanent smell. About how he likes the smell. About how I like the smell. About how the waistband of his skivvies cuts a deep red dividing line between his crotch and his belly. About how he was an innie and your mother is an outie. About how he finds significance in that. About what he does when he's not working for Anheiser-Busch, labelling bottles. About how important it was for him to play on the company's basketball team. About how he missed the free-throw that would have tied the game and sent it into overtime. About how I tried to tell him it's just a game and how he slammed the ball on the floor, clipping off the ends of my sentences. About how that night he had a heart attack on the pier and about how I did not know what to do. About how

I was the last one to see him alive. About how old he was when he died, so young—forty-two. About how much older his heart was.

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Bob's dad has no sisters or brothers, and his mother and father are dead—so only three wooden chairs are set up on the grass in front of the casket. The third seat is for Harlan, who sits next to them in support. Bob looks up as a man he has never met extends his hand and says, "He was a good man." Bob nods. What else is there to do? A line forms behind them of people waiting to pay their respects. Bob looks over at his cousin Pete, who he met only one time, at a brunch. Pete sits away from the group underneath a lemon tree, scooping up dirt. He touches a pillbug with a stick and watches it curve into a little ball.

Bob blurs all of the handshakes with the funeral party into one big handshake. Out pops another hand in front of him. "You must be Bob." A head of red hair bends down and kisses his cheek.

A lady in a rainbow-colored blouse says she's dying for a Coke. Bob finds that there is no room to move in this damp, sticky place. The reverend sits awkwardly in a corner, eating a turkey club sandwich. Bob weaves his way through the reception, heading towards the kitchen.

She is there, leaning against the refrigerator, drinking a beer. She looks up at the ceiling, then down at her shoes. She clears her throat. "How are you doing?"

"Fine."

"Your father said you were coming up for the weekend. He said you like beaches."

"Yeah, I do. You must be Irene."

There is a silence. She gulps some of her beer and stares back up at the ceiling. Bob stands in front of her, waiting for her to look down again. Bob looks expectant. She looks at him through strands of red hair.

"What do you want to know about him?"



*Ken Siewert*

## **A Touch of Winter**

The family had moved to southern California a long time ago to get away from the cold, but he had picked a place in the mountains to live, a place where he could have a little touch of winter, a little snow every other year or so.

He had built a bird feeder outside the bedroom window so that she could watch it, watch the sparrows as she drank her morning coffee. She had meant to buy seed, but every time she was in town the thought of it escaped her. Maybe, she was gazing out the window and maybe a single bird flew to the edge of the feeder, fluttered its wings and landed.

"Move the car," she said. "Move the car."

He opened one eye long enough to see her sitting up in bed with a pillow propped behind her back and a vacant look on her face. He promptly shut his eyes.

"I know you can hear me," she said. "It's snowing outside. Move the car."

He opened his eyes again, raised his head the inch or two it took to see over the comforter and glanced out the window before he let his head fall back to the pillow.

"If you don't move the car to the main road we'll be snowed in. We have to go to work. Now move the car."

He was enjoying the afterglow of a mildly pleasant dream. It was warm under the covers and he knew it was cold in the bedroom, even colder outside, for he had seen the big wet flakes of snow in

the morning twilight. With his eyes closed and his mind trying to recapture his dream, he searched for something to fit the moment.

"Enjoy the snow," he said. "It's beautiful."

"Move the car," she said.

"Let's stay home and enjoy the snow," he said. "I'm allowed a day off. You're allowed a day off."

"Move the fucking car," she said.

He couldn't maintain the glow any longer. He sat up, put his pillow behind his back and pulled the blankets up under his chin, exposing the white sheets at the bottom of the bed and letting a stream of cold air slip under the covers.

"All right, I'll move the car. But bring me a cup of coffee first." He could feel her tension ease as she slipped from the bed, hurrying for the kitchen, her feet bare on the cold hardwood floor.

He was staring out the window, lost in the whirls and eddies of the falling snow when she eased back into bed, handed him his coffee, then lit them both a cigarette.

"You have to hurry," she said. "Soon you won't be able to get the car to the main road."

"How long have you been sitting there staring out the window?" he said.

"I don't know," she said.

"How long have you been staring out the window?" he said.

"The snow was just beginning to stick and now there's three or four inches. That's why you have to hurry."

"How long," he said.

"Over an hour," she said.

He didn't want to think about tire chains, scraping the windshield or the walk back down the hill from the main road. He didn't want to think about why she had been sitting there for over an hour staring out the window. He didn't want to think about the cold. He didn't want to think about anything.

He slipped out of bed, hurried into the kitchen and poured another cup of coffee. Another cup of coffee or two he thought, and then the time it takes to shower, to get dressed, and maybe the snow will get deeper, too deep. He was thinking these thoughts as he walked back into the bedroom.

"I know what you're doing," she said. "Now move the fucking car."

He didn't say a word, but pulled on his clothes, his boots, and went to the closet and took out his down filled, camouflaged, coveralls. She had always called it the pickle suit.

The blue Honda was a mound in the snow. He cleaned the windshield with his forearm and started the engine. He was disappointed at how easily the car took the slight incline up to the main road. When he got back to the house she was waiting at the door. She had on a long grey dress and under that, her blue jeans and cowboy boots. She carried a pair of grey pumps in her hand.

"Don't walk in the tire tracks," he said, as he put his arm about her waist to steady her. "The snow is compressed and slippery."

"We never once bought them a sleigh," she said.

"Yes I did," he said.

"No, you did not."

He thought about it, trying to remember whether he had or not, and then he remembered the silver disk they used to slide down the hill on shrieking and giggling, trying to make each other crash, fighting over whose turn it was.

"I bought them one of those silver snow saucers. Remember?"

"No you did not," she said. "They stole it from one of the neighbor girls."

He had been trying to enjoy the snow, the freshness, but the life was going out of it. "Oh," he said. He knew her memory about such things was precise.

In clumps, snow fell from the limbs of trees and telephone wires and wet flakes dabbed at the windshield. Twice they spun out in the blue Honda with hood and roof piled with snow. The luggage rack kept the wind from sweeping the car clean. As they drove down the canyon, the snow fall became less and less and he could feel her tension subside. When they had lost enough elevation, reached the snow line where it was too warm and snow refused to stick, she began to cry.

He knew what she had been thinking, she was thinking about the schools, how they closed when it snowed and how the neighborhood children would be home and how today, they would be on her

hill with sleds and plastic bags. She would be, all day, at the window watching them. She was thinking, he knew, how she would not be able to stand it.

"Do you understand?" she said. "Do you understand why we had to leave?"

"So call them," he said. "Invite them home for the weekend."

He thought about them, how they used to run in and out of the house, getting warm, getting cold, hanging their wet socks, wet mittens by the fireplace.

"It wouldn't be the same," she said.

"We can't run away every time it snows," he said.

"It was like a ritual," she said, "the way the kids would be at one house and then the next, drinking hot chocolate, spiced cider. Remember the year we got cabin fever?"

He thought about that week, then that one afternoon when all the mothers got together and started sipping chardonnay and when that was finished, out came the peppermint schnapps. He remembered how the gang of them took to the streets, walking through the neighborhood like vigilantes pushing over snow men, kicking carrot faces.

"You have to remember," she said.

"I remember."

He eased the Honda, luggage rack full of snow, into the parking lot of 7-11. Children had gathered there accumulating bits and pieces of snow from cars coming down from the mountains.

A young boy, all baseball jacket and blue knit cap, knuckles red from the cold knocked at the window. "Can I have your snow, mister?" he said. "Please, can I have your snow?"

He looked at the young boy and said nothing, but as he walked into the convenience store, he yelled back over his shoulder, "It's all yours."

He stood in the doorway of the 7-11 with a cup of coffee in each hand, watching her, sitting in the front seat of the car with a smile on her face. Surrounded by children, the blue Honda was rocking back and forth as a dozen boys and girls climbed upon it, pulling at it, pulling at the snow, making snow balls and picking out targets.

*Grant Cogswell*

## Collectors

Now I tell people it was Frank's idea, because he's living in New York and it will probably never get back to him (and may improve his stature there, with what he does, should word find its way out), and because although it has given me the money for an incredible improvement on the way I was living after college, I am still ashamed. No one else is, but I am. And I feel the presence of all those people we have on film and tape, whether as ghosts in actuality or just from watching all the clips a hundred, a thousand times, I don't know.

But I am getting too far ahead here, because the interesting part is the time around when we were making it, the tape. If you haven't seen it, the videotape is *Real Life Intensity*, and it was our baby, our brainchild. For about six months it was very hot, and then the excitement died down and maybe people were finally disgusted with it, and it disappeared very fast. It's not hard to find, but you may have to try two or three video stores in any town before you can get ahold of a copy, these days.

I came up with the idea three summers ago when I was poor and trying to finish grad school, donating blood and sperm and being an extra for beer commercials and living in the Valley. Frank was in his first job out of UCLA, editing videotape at one of the smaller TV stations on Sunset. I would come visit him nights after class, usually bringing beer, and because neither of us had girlfriends at the time and we were getting towards the middle range of our

twenties and were scared we weren't having enough fun anymore, we would get drunk in the control room and laugh about things, dumb things, anything, until morning.

I woke up at home one afternoon that summer and watched the news on the station where Frank worked. There was a story of a boy in Michigan, ten years old, who had accidentally shot his teenage brother to death with a hunting rifle, while they were getting ready to shoot rabbits. They showed a picture of the boy and his dead brother when they were both quite younger, arms around each other's shoulders, in front of a blue-sky photography studio backdrop. Below that were the graphics of a reel-to-reel tape machine playing, and subtitles. Then they played the tape of the call the boy made to the emergency operator.

At first there is just him, screaming a blur of words and barely able to catch his breath. The operator tells him to slow down several times and to breathe, and then he says, in a voice full of panic and grief and guilt, "I shot my brother." The operator says, "We have an ambulance on the way. Now take a deep breath. Now, try to calm down. Where is he shot?" "In the head (and this is suddenly a scream), I shot him in the head but I didn't mean to. Please don't die. Please, please," and here his voice becomes a long, shrieking litany, half a prayer and invocation against death and half a wish said aloud that the day would start over again, and they would leave the house instead of hunt, and go far away. The operator says, "You have to calm down. Now, is he bleeding?" "Yes. Yes, there's blood everywhere. Oh! He's not breathing! No!" and there are attempts at words but they dissolve and the boy's voice rises into a high howl of a monotone, and the tape ends.

I can remember it all now, I have it memorized, even the sounds where there are no words we can recognize, like you will with a rock and roll song. If you have heard that kind of thing before from somebody else, that absolute, shattering clarity, it will make you clutch your heart. You remember it from another death, one you knew, and you hear it in yourself. It makes you helpless like a child and on the verge of tears. It is never, ever, ever the same, it is always as if it is happening just as you hear it.

From there it was a week of visits to Frank and looking at file

footage until we decided to collect these things and buy the rights where it was necessary, and market the collection as a home video. We put ads in some of the trade journals and got dozens of responses, usually people with the same stuff: The hijackings, the newscaster suicide, the D.C. crash in the river and the man in the water, 911 calls, the Pennsylvania Attorney-General, George Aldiss' last call to ABC from Saigon when the NVA came in, and there's one mysterious shot. Occasionally something rare turned up, but most of what we got was from stations where Frank knew people. The best stuff always made it to the networks, and was well-circulated. One that particularly fascinated me was the sky-diving cameraman who forgot his parachute. The moment where you knew his blood ran backwards, three seconds below the plane when his arms go back to feel for the pack, his glance up at the plane, his kicking, like trying to swim back up in the air, the slow rise of the earth. I watched that many times to feel safe and lucky.

It was hard, slow work editing it all, rooting out what was repetitive, and Frank took on two shifts so he could get through his work quickly and have us use the equipment when everyone was gone, which ended up getting him fired. Finally we had sixty-five minutes, forty-two clips in all and we were ready to wrap it up after five months when Frank got a call on his answering machine that sounded as bizarre and stilted as some of the audio stuff we had collected.

It was an old man's voice, that was certain, and he spoke slowly in an accent that might have been Mexican, after a long time in this country, or Canadian, because it was broad in the vowels and full of odd inflections. He said that he had seen our ad in the Home Video Tech catalog and that he had some audio tapes we might be interested in. He sounded like most of the other calls, like a small-time collector, the kind who monitored for mistakes on "Jeopardy" and recorded them, or had basketball 'bloopers'.

Then he said, and this was what brought us out to him after we had completed the master tape, "I have material I guarantee you will find nowhere else." He said it with no hard sell, like he was doing us a favor, and he didn't care whether we were interested or not. And then he added that he would be home infrequently during the



week but his son was fully able to show what he had and negotiate an agreement, and he gave directions to his house, and said we could come out at our convenience.

The house was in the desert, just east of Twentynine Palms on a dirt road that turned off the highway. Out there the land folds and buckles into slanted valleys and groups of hillocks, but the real mountains are far off, and there is the appearance of a distorted flatness to it all. It is cruel, barren country in the winter, which was when this was. At the point where all the road signs and houses are gone and the powerlines, and there is nothing to distract the eye from the two poles of opposition present, the road and the desert, (the sky is part of the desert too) there are no other influences. This is where we saw the steeple of rocks by the roadside and turned off.

There is something about the desert that diminishes a person, makes them incidental to their surroundings. Perhaps this is why the best way to escape Hollywood is to drive east. There are freaks of all kinds out here, but none of the poisonous, influence-peddling TV characters that seem to fill L.A. like rats in a bathtub. The sun is too harsh and the silence too big.

Frank wouldn't shut up, like he had to feel at home. He talked about all kinds of things he knew damn well I wasn't interested in without asking me a single question and played bad New Wave on the tape deck until I would have broken the stereo if it had been my car. He was awful, a girl I dated briefly once said, and in a way that was true. He assumed bonds between himself and me that did not exist. They had not been allowed to make themselves. He wanted you to be his closest ally, yet he never gave of his own heart. There was a shallowness there that I guess I always detected but never mentioned, and where I am from (my mother left when I was twelve; my father died three years later) friendship and the love that comes from it are the most precious things, and the hardest earned.

The place was about a mile from where we turned, a low, brown cinder-block house the size of a couple of garages, with a sheltered porch in front and cacti and spider plants all hanging in pots around the front door. We stopped the car and got out. A skinny, black-haired man who looked to be about thirty came out from the



doorway surrounded by plants, and we told him why we had come. He was the son of the man who had called, he said, and his name was Floyd Overland.

"My dad is Marcus Overland, who contacted you," he said. "Would you like something to drink before you listen to what we have?"

He led us inside, where there was a kitchenette on one side of a counter separating it from the living room. On the walls were wooden knick-knack cupboards, made of chipboard, cherry, soda crates, and full of things of all kinds—machine parts, dead animals in jars of alcohol, bundles of old postcards, horseshoes and crucifixes. Floyd Overland got us all beers from the fridge and we drank. The rooms were small, but not poor: there was thick green shag carpeting everywhere, and a polished driftwood coffee table surrounded by arabesque cushions, and a big new TV set and a large, old air conditioner with paper streamers tied to it so you could watch it cooling you off, that hummed loud and had the air icy.

Floyd took us in the next room, where there was a whole wall covered in audio equipment, receivers and amplifiers and tape decks. In the racks above there were records and tapes mostly of sixties rock and folk, and home recorded cassettes that were numbered and dated, without titles. "Our family lived in Central America for several years, in fact all the time I was growing up." He put one tape in a player and adjusted knobs and dials. "Much of what we have here is in Spanish, but it is easy to translate. About ten of them my father confiscated from a Mexican gang lord when he was with the police in the Yucatan, in 1956. This man tape-recorded his hits—he had people killed and he taped their deaths. He was running guns down and cocaine up, from South America. This was before you had the violence there is now. For his time, he was the killer of killers. He had slaves down there, men who were sworn to him for life. They worshipped him like a god."

He played us a tape on a reel-to-reel deck that was evidently old, scratchy but still distinct. Three men were shouting in Spanish, and there was a hollow, fast clunking like someone juggling hatboxes. I don't understand Spanish; Frank spoke a little, but without knowing just what the people were saying, it was impos-

sible to get a bearing on what was happening on the tape. All that was recognizable was that moment—the one that makes all these tapes so interesting and draws you in even though you feel like a voyeur in someone else’s life—when the precision of the survival instinct breaks down and the person is left with the irreversibility of death and they break to make their final declaration, a shout or a whisper, or a wordless last breath which seals them into the past for us. There was quiet and the click of a gun and someone turned something metal over and there it was, softly, a long ragged vowel that might have been something mumbled in Spanish, and the shot.

For hours we listened. There were more assassinations than we could handle. Floyd went on to British emergency calls, Eskimo revenge killings, the demands of an African terrorist in broken Portuguese. We were all quiet. These people were what we thought of, these times twenty years ago and more when their lives were being decided, pointed in an irrecoverable direction, like ours were now, and how it was all past, none of it had anything to do with what went on now, couldn’t.

Floyd kept bringing us beers all through listening to the tapes. When he had played us everything, the sun was setting and he sat down in the window sill and looked up at us. I looked at Frank.

Frank said, “The 911 with the two Scottish ladies, maybe. I’ll give you fifty dollars for that.” Floyd’s eyes got big. “Hey, I can’t do anything with all that foreign audio, we’re not fuckin’ PBS.”

Floyd Overland went outside to the shade behind the kitchen, where we couldn’t see him, and it sounded like he was kicking something metal for a long time. After a few minutes of this there was quiet, all the while with Frank and I standing in this dark room with the speakers going hiss.

Then a big motorcycle pulled up out in front of the house. Through the doorways, we could see the rider get off the bike and walk over to Frank’s car, and look inside. He was tall, and muscular, but I could tell by his shape and the way he moved he was old, maybe sixty. He wore blue jeans and a red polo shirt, and his long black hair was cut in a mohawk, but combed back flat, not standing up, and his skin and the skin on the sides of his head was brown like an Indian tans, like leather. He turned away from the car

and came into the house, and looked at us in the doorway of the room with the tapes.

I said, "Mister Overland?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"We're the people you called about your recordings," I said. "Your son let us in. He's out back."

"I didn't call anybody. I don't have a telephone." He moved through the kitchen and went out the back door. Frank went back into the stereo room and put in the tape of the women in Scotland.

A woman's voice came out of the speakers with an accent so strong it was only possible to distinguish a few words of what she said. The operator's voice was quiet and clear, English. She asked the Scottish woman several times to slow down and speak clearly. The Scottish woman said, "I must know, how does one use one's hands to pump the heart?" The operator said, "Are you having a medical emergency, madam?" And then, loudly, "No. But how does one use one's hands to pump the heart?" "I'm going to send an ambulance, I think there's something you aren't telling me." From the other line, "No, no," and then banging and cursing.

I went into the room with the sound equipment and pulled open the curtains just an inch so I could see outside. Floyd Overland was standing on the garden hose where it was coiled, with his head down, leaning up against the building on the ball of his neck. His father was standing over him, not too close but a foot taller and his big head curled over the space where his son was. Right then I saw that Floyd was younger than I'd thought, I saw the hair on his neck, fine, that you could see through like a kid's crewcut, and the way he just kept his head down while his old man talked, and he was ashamed.

Frank was playing with an equalizer, turning up the volume of one voice on the tape, then the other. "I want this one," he said.

On the tape the Scottish woman said, "There was nothing I could do. I'm at my wits' end." and then a loud thunk, and someone else, a man picked up the phone, and then you knew the other woman had passed out. The first thing the man said was "Fuck," and then it sounded like the receiver was being knocked around a bit. The operator said, "Is this two-one-seven? Hello?" The man

said, "Yes, we've got one woman here who's been stabbed in the chest. The gurney men are taking her. Okay, we've got this in our hands, now."

Marcus Overland came in the kitchen door and walked up to us. He said, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, my son misled you. These are my tapes, and I'm not selling them. I'm sorry. He has an expensive habit, and no ethics. Cars, not drugs, thank God. He was raised by his mother, not me. We make ourselves when we're young, don't we? And then there's no changing anything, not very much."

"I want this one," Frank held up the tape. "Just a copy."

"I'm sorry," He took it from Frank's hand. "These are sacred objects. My son told me what it is you're doing. Maybe you should do some thinking about it. It's not for me to judge. I was in Hollywood once, in the forties. I know how things can turn on you and you lose track of what's right, what's real."

Frank said, "I don't have any trouble with my conscience. I live in Sherman Oaks." We all laughed a little, nervously, but I knew there was something more to what Marcus was talking about but he was being polite and now Frank was going to piss him off and make him say it. "Besides, you're a collector," Frank said.

"Have you ever been a witness to tragedy, real tragedy?" Marcus asked proudly, and I felt a twinge of resentment. I had. I saw my mother leave and my father die and these things are important to me, I never forgot them, but I didn't wear them like a badge. He said, "There is that moment when we feel so strongly our tenuousness and our humanity that we are lifted up into another level of consciousness. We couldn't live like that all the time. We wouldn't be able to function. It is our survival instinct not to feel things so strongly." And then, "I am a collector, not an exhibitor." Frank looked like he wanted to leave. "Do you know the difference between sympathy and empathy? Sympathy is when you feel sorry for someone. Empathy is when you recognize them and feel their pain yourself." He looked at Frank. "Is empathy or sympathy your strong suit?"

Frank said to me, "We gotta go now." I looked out the window and there was just moon and star-light, but I could see Floyd kicking stones around in the yard, with his head still hanging down. Way

out past him, miles probably, were lights from another town. The lights in Marcus Overland's house were not on yet, so the darkness of the room we were in was even darker, murky dark where you couldn't really see the outlines of things, and the rest of the house was blue and soft-looking, in pale twilight.

Frank said, "Let's go."

"I'd offer you boys a drink," Marcus offered, "but I can see how you might want to get home. You've been here a long time." I did want to stay, but Frank was already walking out to the car, and he was upset and I didn't want him to leave without me. Marcus Overland seemed to be someone who could show me important things, and my father once said to take instruction wherever you can find it.

I looked at him in the doorway, in the yellowy headlights of Frank's car and he looked genuinely friendly and vulnerable, smiling there, and I raised my hand.

I turned around and nearly ran into Floyd, who was sitting on the big motorcycle in the drive, and he didn't say a word, and I could see that he was crying. Right then and there I felt pinned down to the very spot I was standing in, and like I could have no expression on my face but one of idiot numbness, as if I was in a physical landscape completely alien to me and my body was not mine to control or touch things with, like a person dreaming while they walk in their sleep.

*Patrick McCord*

## Duet

Hard moonlight shimmered on the lake surface and the soft bottom sucked at Lobee's feet. It'd been a tough night, now he had a gun in his hand. He beamed the big Ray-O-Vac into the shallows, waited until a mass of minnows congregated on the glow, then K-TOW! he triggered a big hollow point into the broil sending up a spout of warm water, muck, and shock-dead fish. A step forward and his face lifted to feel the returning lake, gun arm vibrating. Then he pulled some burn and solace off the Ole Grandad in his other pocket, and sloshed along the shoreline until the tide of yearning and frustration rose bitter enough for him to blow another hole in the world.

Eloise stood in the driveway next to the ticking Pontiac. Lester had dropped her up the way so she could walk a bit, let some calm country night seep in, clear out the cabaret smog, but each time Lobee's .44'd thumped into the water she'd taken a low, bass drum ripple in her stomach. "Lobee, honey, stop that noise," she hollered toward the flicker in the cattails, her voice worn to payday sandpaper by the long weekend sets.

"The horse you rode in on," Lobee's baritone seemed to emanate from a different place than his silhouette.

Then K-TOW!

Then splatter.

Over in the bushes she heard Mr. George making worried little honks to Mother. She hated that they were too scared to come say



hello, but she'd tried and tried and it was getting to be something else and there she still was.

The screen door clacked behind her and she stood in the dark kitchen. His hands lifted the heavy hair from her nape and she filled her lungs with the weary atmosphere. What was that? She smelled a new smell. Or was she just whiffing the old house smell that usually went unnoticed? No. Among the blunt of cooking, the mildew scant, the thin fume of sulphur and the dust, something in there, a punky, animal bite in her woman's nose. Even familiar.

She groped into the darkness and switched on the radio. "It's just the three of us—" the tune cut in, "you and me and all that stuff—" and Eloise sang along as she tipped on the lights and the big, brown-yellow room jumped out of the dark: the old posters of Lobee and her fronting the band, the place where the TV used to be, Lobee's last horn with the dent in the bell, the loveseat with the slash and the stuffing coming out (no, it wasn't her hiding place), and the pistols, lying around like ash trays. She picked up a cut off leg of panty hose with a knot tied in the ankle and pulled it over her head, then leaned into the mirror. Nope. His face wouldn't be recognized. But what about the car? The plates?

"K-TOW! " blew weakly in from the lake and her insides twitched. "It ought to be easy, it ought to be simple enough—" Eloise whispered along as she pulled off the stocking, "— man meets woman and they fall in love."

The little boom waves flattened quickly and the lake was sheer and endless holding the heavens below the same as the heavens above. The hot cylinder chunked and jangled as Lobee reloaded, feeling in his pocket among the lint and toothpicks, then sliding tight the last five sluggers. Stars like a jillion-godzillion needle pricks and the big ole moon like a spoon he thought, wrist flicking the full belly home. Into his mouth he poked the round, cool Dad-bottle and inhaled the ghost of old corn. It was taking some of the edge off, but it wasn't the same. He'd waited, he'd tried. He didn't have to, no matter what she said. He'd gone down to the Pioneer Chicken stand hoping for a sandwich: crank and poison, a hot and

cold to sponge on the base of his flickering spine, a little toast to sop up the anxious rhythms warring between his brain and skull. It would feel good, that's all. Feel so good. But Jimmy Jazz had checked into Hotel Narco, at least according to Carmelita, back there with all that extra-crispy dead bird, who knew when he'd make bail? So Lobee'd taken the last of his presidents shopping, trusted a punker on Verdugo and fuckin' A, B, & C, gotten fucking burned.

The cook, the spike, the expectant leather fell from his teeth, but the vein stayed hollower than yesterday. Not a speedball, not a soft trip, not a trance or a chat buzz, just an empty plastic wrapper and Lobee'd be exploding that skinhead's snakey brains onto the pavement if only he could've found him. But ten gallons of gas later he was back lakeside with the Bourbon family, trying to put a rag on a fire that was only getting worse, flashing the last of his nerve into the dark immutable water.

The next morning it grabbed her again. But silently this time, on a string that snapped her over the side of the bed like a trick yo-yo. She was stumbling down the hall, part still in dream. She'd been astride the big red horse, pounding so fast, firm and rippling, she'd opened and leaned close over his sweat-damp mane but in midstride he crumpled away beneath her, wadding up and disappearing, leaving her falling and falling. Then the white cold wave swirled up from below and surged into the bowl in front of her face. It was time to breathe. She spit and gasped with the effort. On her knees, the sharp floor, the cold toilet, bilous sour peppered her throat and tongue. What time was it? Morning. Then she lurched again, her chin bumping the slick porcelain as she scrambled to hit the basin.

Lobee was working all his fibres of self control. Every shred of poise he had left. "Ell honey?" He called, careful to chew around the jitters. And then: "You OK?" looking in on her, naked on the toilet. Painting, a little glass dropper, iodine on her knees. Her skin was so white against the blue tiles, her black hair, bleached white, bone white. Snowstorm white and hard to look into. Big maroon



dots on her knees. And sudden blue eyes looking up at him, into him, searching his itches. Find out what he'd done. She stood and maroon dots on her chest swung at him, shiney white, film of sweat, blue veins in her breasts. An accusation? No.

"I'm scared shit to weigh myself," she half laughs, pushing past.

Lobe holds his heartbeat. OK. Soon.

"Aren't you hot?" She wants to know. "Heatwave today." Hand wipes her face, chest, belly.

He follows and flops down as the refrigerator sighs and shadows. Nonchalant. No big D. Let her see him put down the stocking. Let her think he's done a 7-11.

"What about borscht?" from behind the door. "I've got a craving. God I'm hungry." And as she swings the monolithic door bright morning sunlight washes in almost scattering everything.

Careful not to fumble, give his need away. Set it up. Letting her see. Belt. Matches. Works. Shiney tools. No secrets. "Want to get high?" polite to share. Fingers touch slip of plastic. Out of pocket. His hand calm. Blue eyes catch gun butt at waist. Just right. A-OK. Lift-off in progress.

Hand on his hand. Hot hand. Her hand. Firm. Heavy. "Lobe, you said..." she's saying. Saying and saying. He talks to her questions:

"OK Honey.

"I know Honey.

"But they won't Honey.

"I want my nod Honey.

"I need my shot.

"The one catty corner from All Martyrs.

"I took the plate off the car.

"OK?"

Wiggly ass goes away.

Matches. Matches.

Later she's opening her purse when the first crooning phrase slides through the afternoon heat. Eloise is surprised to hear him playing the horn again. That old smokey song. Arpeggios and

apostrophes, swoops of memory, his, hers, tickle up and she holds them just below thinking. Purse in lap, she sits on the bed and listens, feeling her defeated heart. Not too much smack this time she reckons, good. She swipes at her eyes and blows her nose, squeezing the soggy tissue feeling bubbles pop. Next to the pink flowered Kleenex box is the bedroom gun, a .357 automatic, dead and scaly, and heavy as a fish in her hand. She feels the weight make up her mind.

Standing by the window she watches Mother and Mr. George diving on the lake, the late afternoon sun like a burning coin above the water. "Good-bye Girl, Good-bye Boy," she whispers and starts toward the smoldering sound. The mirror on the bedroom door tells her she looks silly. A little, sweaty naked woman with a big black gun. What you gonna do with that?

Now Lobee is touching something most excellent with his noise. Growling and whirring and running away. Like he used to. Like those young afternoons when he would grin and say: "Tell me." And she would lean close and look deep and sharp in the darkest center of his eye and sing softly, her breath on his face — "Shu bob, swee bop, boodillee doodilly DEE bop, woe-de-oh-doh: hidey hi." And he would marvel and smile every tooth that it could be done so absolutely honest, so, so, so pure.

And then she would say, "Tell me."

And he would groan the warm circles of breath through the brass in such a way that she felt an alchemical melting inside, as if fluid strings of possibility were swinging out of her, and they would grasp below and above like perfect handshakes or perfect octaves.

And she notices a melting inside now as she brings the gun barrel down smartly on his shoulder the way the cops do and the horn fumbles from his paralyzed arm clunk thunk on the floor and his eyes come whites around to see that she means capital B, Business...

"I needed that money," hisses Eloise in a voice like deep chains. "I needed all of it." And saying it out loud frees the only thing left for her to feel or him to understand. Her left hand closes over the right squeezing the wide rough grip, thumbs hard to spring back the

hammer, flexing maroon knees. Lobee rolls to her left and up, stunned arm still hanging, but lefty fumbling at the .44 in his belt. Very speedy drug she notes as his eyes slide clever like an ape, but this is my forefinger. Her .357 explodes and bucks her backwards. Her ears hold on a high A flat. Fourth of July smell like old times evaporating. Lobee's eyes crouching now, glancing at the plaster hole much too close.

"Ell, baby, what's uh? What're you doing?" The .44 out now, but unsure. She lifts the smoking magnum at his middle but the swelling in her chest pushes the backs of her eyes, the A flat insisting in her ear, she jerks down too hard on the rough metal and pistol's recoil spins her toward the window, a broken ladder in the yard, the huge sun touching the lake. She missed. She's down, all fours, knees hurting again. Bleeding. Her face is wet: what was this? What did she want? What good would it do. She. A naked girl, gun in hand, lost. And lost.

And the little eye of the .44 blessing her face. She could see Lobee's heartbeat shaking the end of it. Kill or be killed informing all the muscles of his face, crooked lines of fear. And she sees the finger squeezing the trigger and the hammer falling and hears the insipid click. She is looking into an empty weapon. She is still alive.

The nerve crunch to his arm had worn off enough for Lobee to manage car keys but it'd also ripped all the drug pad from his nerves. As he revved the big Pancho he felt his skeleton starting to vibrate in that bad way, pulling away from his flesh while fear made ugly skunk high in his nose. Too close to dying. Shit, she was crazy. Coconuts. Color him his-to-ree. Slam the ledger. The three hundred and two remaining dollars still folded underneath him. More score. He'd take it. He needed it.

Gravel ka-glanged as he spun the wheel, rear end skating, nose to the highway, but there she was. Naked as Jesus, the big automatic down at her side, yelling at him but only an outline, the furious sun at her back. He swerved all his jitters to take her before she could shoot. No hesitation this time. Foot hard to the fossil fuel and the big yacht surged forward. Over the seething V-8 he heard two sharp

snaps like pool cues breaking and then he saw her fly away from the bumper, hair and arms all crazy, tits, bush, legs, white white on green grassy. Tough luck Ellie. Too bad. You pull a gun you better be OK with everything after.

But the Bonneville lurched with an iron grumble and the power steering froze in his hands as the tonnage slid stuttering to the ditch. The magnum, Lobe thought, has perforated my block with teflon ordnance. She has killed my ride. And there was another crash, pissed off fist bash rearview mirror.

And then he settled, feeling his shoes, noticing the cirrus drift of dust around the car, and in the sudden quiet he could feel the last day heat close around him, thick to the earth, clinging like magnesium fire until it burnt itself out. His right hand throbbled. I'm fucked he thought. Fucked in the neck. He caught his own eye in one square of broken rearview. A man with no dope and no car and no ammo. Three hundred and two dead woman dollars, car fare to only more junk. He sucked the oozing lacerations that jitterbugged his knuckles and gouged his lip on a sliver of mirror still embedded in the bone. The blood was pale and saline and tepid in his mouth. I'm nothing but a glass of water he thought. No zip, no protein, no tendrils. Just a sack of zero with the sun blowing through.

The window over his left ear burst apart spilling heavy sparkles on his neck, in his lap.

"Your ass is mine, Lobe!" Eloise's jagged voice rose out of the soft asphalt. "I'm gonna twist your dick off and feed it to my geese."

Oh fuck, he thought, I missed.

"Move reallll slow," her voice commands. And a dizziness rises up from the soles of his feet through the ace cold bottom of his gut and washes him with weary certainty.

So Lobe moves slow, his synapses exhausted, his teeth huge and heavy and rough textured in his mouth. He is ready, it almost surprises him. The setting sun reflects a long ripply path across the lake straight to Eloise, coloring her bronze and black against the lavender sky, like a painting he thinks. "You look pretty Ell," he says to the face behind the gun, and his knees collapse, his arms go

rubbery. There's a mean wet burn on his left leg and he remembers from childhood the feeling of wetting his pants. He recalls a dream he had when he was that age, a dream his ears had, a birthday and army tanks, and flashbulbs and outerspace, but all in sound, no pictures. And in his ear now Mother Goose and Mr George are honking good-bye to the day and in his nose the bright grass flavor and a shiver of pine on the exact breeze that moves Eloise's hair around her face. And he notes how steady the gun barrel is, closer now, like an honest word hanging on the edge of evening, true for his brain and his emptiness and the soil under his knees is sandy, he feels its tiny plants and industrious insects as the gilding light is holding everything in amber and Eloise is there, steady as a Biblical knife.

"Tell me," he says and looks the gun in its deepest eye. And as his senses open to take in dying he smells her now, her musky twists up his nose, under his eyes, and in them a milky sweet cut opens and he smells the change in her, and finally he sees her, sees the roundness, the beginning belly, the full breasts and the gun presses its firm cool kiss on his forehead. But Eloise sees Lobee seeing, and he sees her seeing him and what he's seeing, and with a sudden moan and lurch and wheeling toss the gun sails upward, arcing toward the lake, and the evening holds the soft plash as Lobee kisses the torn purple knees, as his ragged arms wrap around her waist and he lays his stubble gently against her warm, swollen womb.

"I'll try." He speaks his mouth to her skin. "So help me, I'll try. I'll kick. This time I know."

Her fists softly punish his head. One, two, three; one, two, three; a little waltz she's learned from weakness, a little song she knows from pain. "I've heard it all before, Lobee. I've heard it all before."

## Contributors:

**Alba Adrian's** photo was taken in France in a small town Penchot. She graduated from CSUN with a major in journalism.

**Norman Buchwald** is a graduating senior and "Tongues in Earth" is his first published work. He plans to get an MFA in creative writing with an emphasis in narrative fiction. He has recently found that the best incentive to motivate a writer to revise and edit is not from a workshop, teacher, or a rejection slip, but from a computer virus.

**James Leishman Etchison's** favorite painter is Andrew Wyeth. His favorite band is U2, and his favorite decongestant is Allerest. **Carrie Etter** edits *Out Loud*, the monthly of Los Angeles area poetry events, and works as an editorial assistant at Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research. Her poems have appeared in *Alternative Fiction and Poetry*, *Chiron Review*, *The Pikestaff Forum*, and the anthology *New Line*.

**Mary Harris** won the Rachel Sherwood Award in 1987 and 1988. In addition to the *Northridge Review*, she has been published in *Amelia*, *Blue Unicorn*, and other literary magazines.

**Nomi Kleinmuntz** has taken photographs in many parts of the country, and the world. The nude was shot during a photography workshop at the Haystack Mountain school on the coast of Maine. The feet were captured in a natural hot spring in Big Sur. Nomi is also a writer, and participates in Jim Krusoe's fiction workshop at Santa Monica College.

**Patrick McCord** was born and raised in Michigan and currently abides (not sure if he "lives" in it) and works in L.A. "Duet" is his first publication. He is also a screenwriter and a big fan of African pop music.

**Kristina McHaddad** is still painting her apartment, living with her cat, and writing when she can.

**James Moore** is an English major and is interested in art in unlikely places.

**Marjan Nirou**, a CSUN alumnus, lives in New Jersey with her husband. She just finished her MFA at the Pratt Institute, and is a working artist. She is going to teach at Kent Place school.

**Kevin Owen** is eternally a senior in the writing and honors English programs at CSUN, hopes to backpack the world with his wife and that he can write great poems for Mother Earth as well as others. He has been published in the Squaw Valley Community of Writers Anthology after being selected to participate in the community.

**Ronald Pape** is now at CSUN and started writing at Antelope Valley College. He was published twice before in that college's literary journal, *Writer's Bloc*. He will go on to graduate school and an MFA to "do the writing thing". He "never wanted to play basketball."

**Scott Sandler** is a graduating senior. "What Bob Knows" is his third published story.

**Patti Scheibel** is a first year graduate student who has been previously published in the *Northridge Review*.

**Hart Schulz** teaches writing and literature part-time at CSUN. He is primarily a poet and has been published frequently as such. He will "probably go back to writing poems soon."

**Barbara Sigman** is a junior in the writing program at CSUN.

**Susan Weiner**, a "would-be" world traveler, has just graduated with a BA in English Literature. Her favorite hobbies are going to England and talking about it.

**Jennifer Wolfe** has been published in the *Best of the Northridge Review*, *L.A. Driver*, and has three interconnected chapbooks out entitled "Almost Free of the Mirror."

Notes for the following contributors were not available: **Grant Cogswell**, **Davi Loren**, **J-son Ong**, **Ken Siewert**, **Eve E.M. Wood**.



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