





The Northridge Review
Spring 2001 issue

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Awards

Two awards are given annually in recognition of the finest works by CSUN students in the Northridge Review. The Northridge Review Fiction award and the Rachel Sherwood Poetry awards are published in the fall issue of the Northridge Review.

The Northridge Review is also pleased to publish the winners of the Academy of American Poets Award and the Benjamin Saltman Award, honoring the memory of Benjamin Saltman. The Academy of American Poets Award is also published in the fall issue, and the Benjamin Saltman Award is published in the spring issue.

The winner of the Benjamin Saltman Award for the 2000-2001 year is Kelan Koning for her poems "fast food," "wisdom," and "Marina/Photo." The Northridge Review also publishes a poem from each of the honorable mentions. This year we are pleased to publish honorable mention Tanya Quin's poem, "Bakersfield," and honorable mention Kimberly Young's poem, "The Neighborhood Watches."

Editor's Note

"You are not I. No one but me could possibly be. I know that, and I know where I have been and what I have done ever since yesterday when I walked out the gate during the train wreck."

Paul Bowles, from *You Are Not I*

To the Readers:

Some of us speak language and some of us write language. This literature is haunted because it is made of language. Languages are constructed from other languages, so are not organic and self-contained. Say the word "pelican," and language exists in the present; write the word "pelican," and now language is a fossil, a bone on your society's skeleton, and is a manifestation of your ghosts and your culture's ghosts—how you are haunted.

Some of us hear echoes and some of us are haunted. In *A Passage to India*, Mrs. Moore says "I" to a cave, and it echos back, "You are of no value." This is when Mrs. Moore stops writing. As she leaves India, Asirgarh slips these words through her train window: "Nothing has value." This is when the echo goes back into the cave, and the only separation between Mrs. Moore and the whispering ghost of Asirhgar is a train window. She opens the window and inhales. This is when Mrs. Moore begins writing.

—Sarah Heston, Editor

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POETRY

The Bone-Pickers

My mother leans forward to tell me this:

*They say, child, that after midnight,
the bone-pickers go around invisible
and slip through locked doors
to pull, pull off your face
'til the smooth bones show underneath.
They don't stop 'til they steal your face,
'til daylight shines all the way through.*

She laughs. I huddle to one side.

It is only a story, she says,
from her Choctaw mother,
the only one she remembers.

But did she know I held onto my face
through those nights? I dreamed the wind
opened around me like water, a winter
river tugging away sheets and pillows—
my small hands, useless against its pull.
My face, open for the bone-pickers
who float through the door with slender hands,
long beaks nodding and prying,
Smiling the dark. They want to see my chin.
Inspect the curve of the eye.

In each long grin, I see
aunts, cousins, windblind and fierce,
working the Dustbowl, fighting
a past that can strip flesh from bone.
Behind them, my mother, words
forming on her hangman's jaw,
then the rows of bare fields
and at the end—
no water

In the Cards

“My husband died recently. Since he was very fond of playing poker, we decided he’d look more natural with a deck of cards in his hand—and that’s the way we buried him.”

—from a letter to Ann Landers
printed in her column on June 12, 1996.

Try not to think of the usual clichés—
cashed in his chips, played his last hand.
Just picture his wife, the funeral home,
the dark quiet before the service where
rows wait to be filled with cologne
and hushed talk. Next to the casket,
his wife unwraps a deck of cards—
the red whorls of mermaids
shine against the cool wood.
Slowly, skillfully,
she begins to shuffle the deck.
The cards make a tearing sound,
her hands move as if to cup a small white bird
not once, twice, but three times. There.
The possibilities are infinite now,
the odds a stunning number. She stoops
over her husband and sees the boy
who once carried her off with no suitcase
and a full moon in his brow. . . Oh go ahead,
Say it: It was all in the cards,
this life—to dance soft and loose
to the shuffle, the bluff,
the sweet falling ace.

Manzanita

So this is what it is to come from fire:
The warm air lifts you with the ash
until you take root in sand
where trunk, branches, twigs—all
climb toward the spiny sun.
At the end, no white blossom,
just red raised up forever.

No cool shelter of green here.
Order has been banished
to the other side of the world.
There, oaks are laid out
in logical procession,
a long hand clears a garden,
makes way for a flat moon.

But the manzanita's red
speaks its own mind, how it needs
fire to burst, bloom and spread.
This Christ would have understood—
I see him thin and wiry,
brooding on the mountain. I see him
brush against the manzanita
scattering the branches into tiny points. . .

I was born in the desert.

I want nothing less than a blaze
moving up my back.

Celestial Fusion

He said to me as I worked the pain
out of his head, "Isn't it cool we're all made of star stuff?"
Importantly, he listed the similarities:
hydrogen, carbon and iron—
just like Sirius, the bright one, anchoring
the hunter—keeping him trapped in the heavens.

I wondered—Is this what we are? Aspiring
to a greater burning, a release of photons radiating
into space? Do we reach for an unknown apogee, expressing
luminosity in scientific notation, measuring
ourselves in Kelvins, chemicals and colorful spectrum?

Copernicus dreamed of heliocentricity
as if it explained everything.
My ex-lover finds faith in his stellar origins:
Is this how Narcissus was born?

Later, much later, I knew he was wrong.
Solar winds, electric auroras and celestial fusion have nothing
to say.

Gravity, absorption, and contracting space
are what make us. Our conversations are explained
by Doppler—high-pitched we soar toward each other,
but quickly pass by in wavelengths we can't hear until,

at the speed of light, we collapse, attempting to force
tides, shock-waves battering.

No—we are not stars,
sunspots notwithstanding. We are simple atoms,
molecules and particles crashing
into one another,
unaware.

The Prince of Europe

Lives alone like a married man
that dreams of empire.

Who, after all, can confide
in countries?

. . .though children are possible
as gods

if their prime ministers
have the proper charms to overlay

the act with justice,
a union

as inseparable as silence
or atoms used to be.

Lazarus and the Garden

It was to be a work of art. He harnessed worms, glass, driftwood and finely-ground ash from the most expensive wind. Turnip

and radish were glossed with feminine blade; worry and branch married to Byzantine gold for the bows. Over and over he bent

wings from the dark construction paper of the air. Imbedded in paint, they fluttered on demand for the whirring effect. He

whitened flesh with skillfully applied curls of snow and prayed the final hardening into form. Its marble shone

with life. This would be a palace worthy of eternal exhibition. Couples could stroll the lacquered sand and smile at their reflections

in the stone; children play the curlicues like rails; artist and critic model the wrought-iron flowering of root into Oriental terraces of bone.

You look and stamp:

“Oriental. Fresh Off the Boat.
Exotic. Full of tricks.
Thief.”

You step and question:

“Where are you *really* from?”

Immigrant does not beam on my forehead,
or blink as a zen-like halo.

Insufficient uses of the phrases

“like y’know, owh-mah-gawd, nuh-uh, shut-up”
does not equal illegal alien.

I commend you for being so ethnically sensitive.

It’s rare to meet a person who is persistent, polite, political
asking instead of assuming we’re foreign.

A smug spreads across your West meets
East face, requesting:

“Pat me on the back—I know my shit!”

Many palms want to smack that smug; slap your eyes chink.

Your perception:

first generation immigrants, refugees; residential
citizens from the third world planet Asia—
crawling, sprawling to the Americas
like roaches to the riches of kitchens;
decked out in clothes from Chinatown,
using chopsticks,
placing shoes before doors when entering homes;
eating at McDonald’s,
shopping at the mall,
watching MTV.

Races are not pure.

Bakersfield

Before dawn, distant shapes refuse their names.
I feed my dog scrambled eggs and follow him
out to the plough, and with the plough follow
the fence. It will reach the 100s today.
Yesterday, the almond blossoms sagged on
the branch and I made this list to myself:

To eat an egg you crack it.
To use an axe you sharpen it.
To cast a shadow you shut your eyes.

The Neighborhood Watches

It is Winter
and the tough business of domestic love
works its way into her needs.
Her young swollen chest
breast-feeds inmates
every afternoon.
Boys leave colored marks
on the soft parts of her skin.
She hates United States of America.
The commerce.
The pollution.
Mother says:
need the parish,
believe in your children,
allow the future to drag you along.

Her grandfather
haunts her nights.
Watches her crawl out the window
behind his favorite Jacaranda tree.
Momma tells her
history of her immigrant family,
grandpa's false teeth,
his psoriasis and piss-pots.

She lifts her scratchy wool skirt,
pisses warm beers
onto the sidewalk.
Her date waits in the car,
scans the radio for stations;
she slides cold hands
over her chapped skin.

Wisdom

"Leave a therapist in a room with a pistol
and he'll come out Episcopalian,"
my terminal lover always said,
stroking her famous moustache.

Each day she'd confess,
after I'd changed her bedpan
and begun to undress her,
that the margin between sanity
and her life was expanding,
and her only desire
was to fly kites.

I felt superior when I was with her,
an evolved ape washing her feet,
but I wasn't much more than a basket case,
mainlining drugs meant
for her collapsing veins.

She never asked for them anyway,
preferring to curve her splotched,
purple fingers around my shoulder
and draw me into a sloppy embrace

I thought of drugs as progress,
but she could reach maximum hum
from the smell of my hair.

She was all I ever knew of wisdom.

Fast Food

Bill,

I almost loved you in those days when I didn't love anything.
You would place thin fingers on my waist as you passed me in
the slick hallway,
half-protecting, half-exploring, palming the arch of my hip,
the elastic of my waistband,
pressing in deeper to shy skin beneath the smooth static of
polyester, tightening at your touch.

I remember your hands,
the slight definition of veins, the hint of last summer's tan,
and the burns you would show me after work,
suffered from changing oil in the deep fryer,
from the grill. I sensed your pride, thrilled at those moments
when you sat across from me, offering your hand
as to a palm reader,
requiring me to inspect each raised raspberry mark on your
skin, cooing, leaning in closer, lips nearly
touching skin, as you leaned closer, inhaled me, took in
the smell of grease we'd grown accustomed to,
Tide, hot fudge, Aqua Net, pineapple topping, Anais Anais.

I was sixteen,
still learning the space between bodies, still negotiating my
place in the world.
You understood what I didn't, what you had known from
the day we crouched on the floor on break
talking for hours, not wanting to be found.
You understood my worth.
And so, when you followed me into the walk-in cooler that
night and held me close,
the closest our bodies would come in the year we
were closer than lovers, I couldn't kiss you,
and you didn't want me to. I did what you hoped for,
got the lettuce.
And that was love, love at sixteen.

Marina/Photo

That photograph
of you
hanging on the wall,
the one framed in silk,
black-and-white eternal,
the moment I saw it
you said,
"Those are my breasts."

You seemed so proud of them
it made me blush for you,
but you weren't ashamed.

You always wore your sexuality
like you sucked on your cigarette
days we would linger after Spanish
practicing our trilling and lazy flirting.

I never wanted anything from you,
I never wanted to see you exposed,
but that night you showed me your picture,
the last time I would see you, the last time
was the furthest,
the furthest thing from lovers
we could have been.

Garbage Day

My father shouts
"you can't spend all day in your room!
You're going to a movie!"
Dad starts the car,
drives to the movie theatre.
"What movie should I see?"
"I don't care," he says.
"Go have fun!"

I see the movie *Fargo*,
lots of killing.
When the movie ends,
I find a McDonald's Mister Hamburgler
hand puppet in the trash,
place it on my left hand
and hold it next to my face.

"Did you like the movie?"
I ask Mister Hamburgler.
"I loved it. How about you?"
my puppet friend asks me.
"It was so funny!"

Moviegoers near
the trashcan stare at us.
Mister Hamburglar
asks perplexed crowd
"Isn't life fun?"

Tic-tac-toe

My uncle etches
tic-tac-toe boards
into the bare souls of his feet

Skin board in tact—
official Swiss Army Knife corkscrew
ready.
sharp point moves
in and out of feet,
making deep x's or o's,
in his souls.

He plays tic-tac-toe for hours.

Now,
his enlisted body sits in a hospital
with no more sharp objects.

In 'Nam, all hospital eyes watch him for six weeks.
Pens, pencils, pointy objects
glass, mirrors, and
razor blades disappear.

When they sleep, he dips his feet in a bedpan
of fresh urine, until his feet
sting.

Para los Padres

Para los padres que trabajaron y trabajan a donde haiga lugar,
En panaderias, en cocinas, limpiando casa en Beverly Hills y
Encino,
En factorias cociendo jodiendose,
Para que los hijos se titulen,
Para ellos y los suenos que viven en ellos,
Y en cada gota de sudor limpio y sufido,
Para ellos,
Que lo dejaron todo alla y lo dieron todo aqua,
Para ellos damos mil gracias y llevamos con nosotros el anhelo
de llegar a las Alturas,
De su redencion.

In the Air

Georgia nighttime lies
like a sinkhole underfoot.
"Speak up," she says from the seat
next to mine. I mumbled.
I stare at the moon, want
to pluck it from its hook
and toss it into the wash,
watch it fizz and dip down like
a phosphorescent anchor,
done with this moonlight business.

Things go just as wrong among
the night flowers. Virginia Rails
shake off sleep to harangue you
from trees; there's no magic.
Just sinkholes, sweaty lips, Christ
she's not going to marry me
is she? I say some more words,
see a nest I'd like to kick.
Some frog yells about love,
telling me to say a poem
I have no prayer of recalling.
I'm taking a dive tonight.
Creatures gather at the pit
and stare down at me, hooting
among wild white indigo.
I'm doing my own damned talking
from now on.

End Weak Day Labor

personal uniform for current employment
or

scuffed fading white shoes being eaten by grease
from the ground up. khaki pants below
matching button down top
completes pseudo-safari style clothes.

i provide substance involved in simple
gastrointestinal method:

wok fired asian noodles w/ baked russian vegetables over
seared sirloin steak is

some octosyllabic non-pronounceable plate of food,
immolated upon cedar's woodchip flame.

certain jobs are homilies spoken
on capitalists' behest.
exhortations encouraging exploitation of expiring resources.
daily reminder resides in left chest pocket,
management's 6 commandments
laminated, two sided mission beliefs card.

tedious tasks performed in food service
serve as gyves shackled in place by debt's left hand.
ingratiating fake smiles,
acrobatic over back bending meets guests' fickle whimsical
wishes,
overfilled customers push away dinner dishes, half eaten,
half wasted. . .full price.

After Work,
Winding zephyr whips up coyotes' wanderlust whoops &
whirls,
While, Zen travels fill my current savings toward postponement
plans.
Wisping tropical waterfalls or

American great plains open roads or better yet
Mirror perfect Lake Zurich surface tension dive breaking.

Earth Lip

this tree, it has a longing
on its branches.

this dog, chewing a
sleepy bone. the rain, too,

drowsy there in a
cloud. a street lamp sleeps

away the day, darkness in
its gut. all the worms and

moles swim the holy earth,
stride the grass blade, concrete.

Driving Play Time

miss kelly is what they called her,
a rotten wooden frame
surrounded by yesterday's today's
a.m.'s p.m.'s of miles of cotton
where they pushed pulled
with a baby on back
or one in swollen arms
and their sac in paradised palms
where blisters showed on numb fingers
Don't think it don't hurt just 'cause she don't cry.
The old one was learning the young ones.

Jesus must be an old white man
with a long flowery beard.
i loved blue
i always loved him
not good not evil
always been blue to me to me
All my strength in his hand, but
I don't care 'bout it no more.

whole heartedly she loved her man
she eyed him sweating early
in the dawn while he thought she slept
she learned how to plow
under over their fields
when the weather was preparing for his death
she'd breathe white through the cold,
she breathed white all morning long
I can 'member how his hair growth slacks out.
The laughing between my legs still tickles.

devil they named him
held up above his head
blocked the sun
aimed for the corner jagged rock
where he spit open the world
split all to pieces

blood meat strewn
strewn across the land
There go that heart,
Les you and me eat that heart.

He died of peach cobbler they said
she knew it was fear fear
of life
of other people
of being clumsy
mostly of his father
his father where fear began.

Pit Pat

Coked—
but her loved her
almost as much,

*He made me
ugly like this*
stammered
noiseless vibration
of chestnut ringlets

moving round
the screen
she climbed
the edgy monitor

her life
all moving
ones, zeros,
somewhere
on a computer—
just erased

fall off
curl by unwashed curl
zero, one,
fall off.

Baja Waiting

I will always have Baja, just in case,
my southern back-up plan when all this,
arms outstretched,
all this is blows and bruises.

Mexico will wait for me while its
pocked-sand deserts and fierce beaches
fill with heaped skeletons of rotted *delfin*,
rusty vw bugs, and bearded white boys.

Hidden in the arms of the heroes of independence
my ardent *amado* will offer me
mines of tourmaline and garnet.

Baja will slick back its dark, sharp mountains
lower its dark gulf seas, and embrace me,
be *mi refugio*.

Faithful lover, whose pools of magmatic
sea water steep and steam, ready to receive my body,
whose subterranean seas watch for me,
wait for me.
Baja waits.

Poem II

On my nightstand, fragments of a poem
composed just before drifting off.

Fragments I thought worth the
fumbling for pencil and paper.

Fragments like ancient Greek pillars fallen—
ruins tourists stare at and contemplate.
They construct in their minds how solid once
stood these mighty stones, reaching, lifting
a roof to shield the prayers of Athenians—
now a roofless, airy structure before their eyes.
Corinthian columns with acanthus leaves
scattered and broken in the fall.

Beautiful, broken,
and yet—

the urge to touch, to pass a hand over
the fallen columns
is hard to suppress.

We muse at the Altamira cavemen,
drawing a "Wounded Bison," on Spanish cave walls,
hunting pictures to aid in the capture of their prey.

And yet—

to touch a fifth-century stone, washed by centuries of rain,
bleached by the Grecian sun, and swept over by the wind,
connects the living to the artist and transcends peace.

The morning sunlight falls on my poem
and chips it to pieces.

Portrait of an Afflicted Country

Under a sheltering sky patrolled by enemy planes, general living standards lay dormant while a ruling class thrives. An ornate exception to the fraying city around it, the mosque awaits the faithful for dawn prayer.

Desperate for money, a father turns to his sons, one four, to hammer out chain links. People who beg risk jail. In this stone colored hive of a world, they are worker bees.

Thirty dollars buys a rifle in a border village. Fifty cents, a grenade. "Good for fishing," says the seller.

The gloom deepens in the war-scarred outskirts, where merchants' houses now decay from neglect. He has let the city rot as punishment for opposition. Sporadic riots and bombings are an everlasting plague.

At the end of the twentieth century, archaeologists will scour the record of his country. And when listing his achievements, they will write: "He built a lot of palaces."

The Box Turtle's Discourse on Charity

"If you see a turtle on a fence post,
you know he had some help."

—Bill Clinton

This spring before the river rose,
a duck hunter picked up my cousin Sue,
placed her atop a fence post,
and left her in shock for days,
legs dangling, half way to heaven.
He may have meant well,
but Sue was badly shaken
when she caught the top wire
with her left foreclaw and pitched forward.
Luckily, the river had returned to its banks,
and the mud kept the concussion
from being any worse than it was.

Years ago my Aunt Ruth was kidnapped
by a human child and fed chopped beef
for months in a tiny, neon-lit terrarium.
When the kid tired of her and returned
her carved carapace to the woods,
she'd lost her taste for grubs
and nearly died before my mother
found an open garbage pit.

And another, no relation to me,
his plastron inadvertently glued
to a post with bird lime,
starved up there. His bleached shell
and cedar post are a Chelonic shrine
to tortoises throughout the piedmont.

As a rule, people should not place
healthy turtles on fence posts anymore
than they should aim for us on the road
or hurl us against the side of a barn.

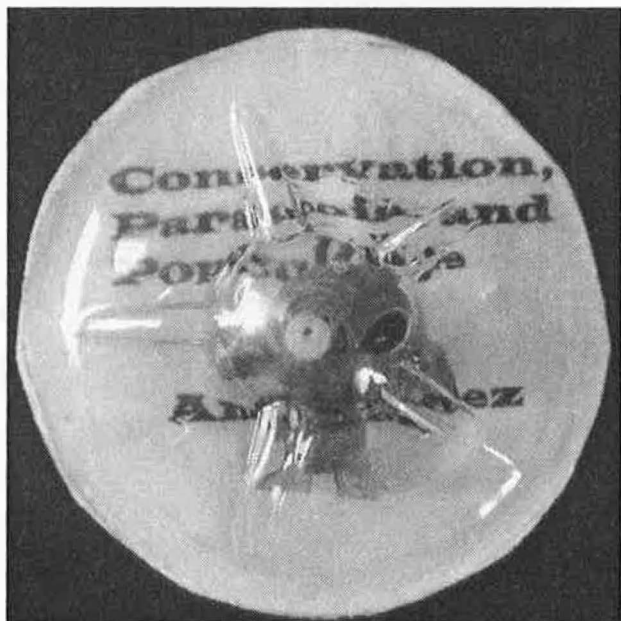
If the water's rising, a trip to high ground
with or without a stern warning
will be appreciated. But once should be enough.
Most of us have learned, no thanks to humans,
when to pull in our heads and wait
for the hunter's dog to put us down
or to haul our hide and home into the hills.

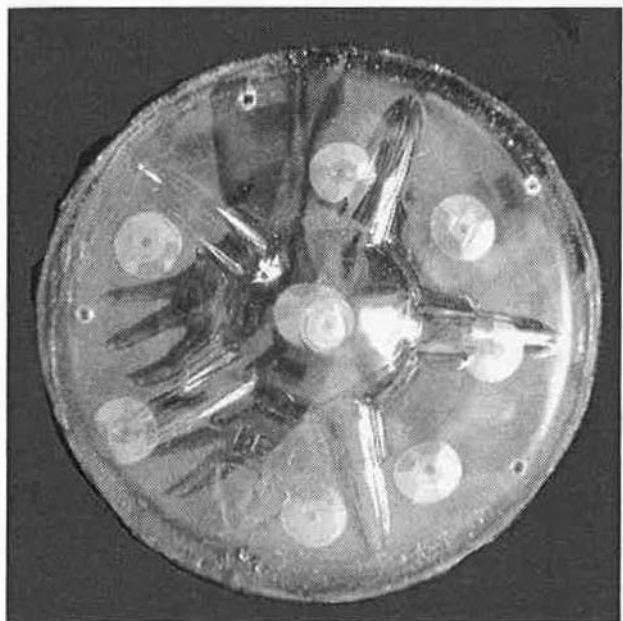


I am a recyclable materials artist. I have concerns with mass consumption. The way our culture consumes and then throws away scares me. The fate of our environment and the role society plays in its destruction scares me. I have experienced the gradual decline of the environment since the '70s.

I chose water for my first body of work because I fear not having enough good drinking water in the future. The water bottle is a cultural icon in California. I am always carrying a water bottle. My particular brand has a beautiful star-shaped dome on its bottom that looks like a nipple when it's cut out. I take my images from popular magazines or the popular press and glue them to vinyl or plastic and then cover the image with the plastic star dome. Sometimes I glue or sew the nipples onto ordinary household objects or clothing.

Ana Cortez











PROSE

Happy Face

The four year old stands away from the other children on the wet slate gray playground. She wears a wet gray t-shirt with a big yellow smiley face on the front. Her face is wet. She sucks her thumb candy. She hopes that it is something that can not be taken away for her. At home she sits underneath the dinig room table. She holds Pasty Barbie with her sable hands; they skate on the tin-foil lake. These friends have super fun; a day on the ice with your best friend! It's peaceful at the lake; There are no name-calling bullies there. The only sound is the girls' laughter. It's a private place, clean and bright. Not soiled like a pair of underwear brought home from school in a plastic bag.

Keso de Bola or Ghetto Cheese

I used to love cheese.

I was eating some American cheese. I was so excited. My lolo had just earned his citizenship and he received a whole block from the government. My mother gave me the responsibility to cut a piece off all by myself, though I did miss the plastic wrapping of the individual slices. So she left me alone with a big butter knife and that big block of cheese. I cut off a big chunk. I cut off several chunks. I imagined I was like the children who carried big bolo knives back in my lolo's village. They climbed the coconut trees and carried their knives in their mouths to let the fruit down and later devour their harvest, chop, chop, chop, chop! I thought I felt the same freeness cutting this big block of cheese. For there were no coconut trees in Jacksonville. And I was very pleased because I cut it all by myself. Then I started to eat it.

My mother came in from hanging clothes on the clothesline, empty basket in one hand my little sister in the other. She came closer to me and saw I had cut so much cheese. I started to get full and I was not able to finish even half of it. Momma, I said. I can't finish the cheese. She became so angry. She had taken the rest of the big chunk of American cheese away and said, You eat the rest of that cheese, or else! I said, But momma, I can't finish it, and I was nervous as I said it. She then said before she left, basket in one hand and my little sister cradled on her hip, When I get back you had better eaten it! So I started eating the cheese and eating the cheese. It wasn't so good anymore and I had plenty more left. I chewed it up and spitted it out into my napkin. But when my mother came back to check on me again, she knocked me in my head with her knuckles to show me she was smart to that. She saw that there was plenty more cheese left. She became really angry, raised her voice and asked me as if she could not see for herself, Did you finish eating the cheese? My head was faced down and I said, No, not daring to look up at her or move my head. Then, as she came closer, No "what"? she asked me firmly. My body tightened and I whimpered, No, momma (she always wanted us to address her formally), I can't finish the cheese, scared of her next question, her next move. In one swift movement, she grabbed a piece of cheese, shoved it in my mouth and screamed, Chew! I was in shock, in disbelief. The room started to spin. I felt sick, but I attempted to chew and I threw up. I threw up all over the cheese. My mother became angrier and, with my little sister still in her arm, gave me a quick pinch in my inner thigh and cursed at me, Ookininam! You

finish eating that cheese! I cried, But, momma, (this time I dared not forget to address her formally) I threw up all over the cheese! and I gagged as I said it. She calmly let my sister down and quickly slapped her hand down, hard on the table and said, What?! as if she could not believe her ears. She then clarified the question for me. What did you say?! I said, I said, momma, (she liked it when we addressed her formally) I can't fini...Slap! A hand came across my face, loud and clear. Saayaaaang! She screamed. Aysus! Do you know how expensive cheese is in the Philippines?.. 'kininam. . .do you?! Sayang! I did not know and I did not know how to answer. I did not know what to do. . .I was in too much shock to answer or cry. She then grabbed a piece of cheese, placed it in front of me quietly, and firmly said, Eat it. I looked at her, I looked at the piece of cheese and I knew I could not eat it. I could not do anything and I finally started to cry. Go to your room! she cried. I could not move. I was not able to pick my feet up and walk and cry at the same time. I cried harder because she picked me up and started to drag me to my room. I feared my room when my mother dragged me to it. I feared my mother when she dragged me to my room. I'm sending you to the Philippines! she screamed, so you can appreciate American cheese!

Catch Poetics Crash Momentary Buzz

I am trying to write some where thing same of all the time. Some where some time I am stuck in the some time trying to get some where. I some time some of the I am I and I stick to the try some where of writing out of into the some of some where. Writing time stuck in the same some writing trying to get some where with the writing get. Writing same same of writing for a long time and trying to get out of the stuck where some I am trying to move it.

In the middle of a moment there are no beginnings or ends. In the middle of a moment sealed between before and after lid like and air tight in the middle of the moment you sustain. But like a coffee can crowded with bees, you are restless and angry and you buzz to break the plastic.

My reasons for writing were not romantic. My reasons for writing were romantic. My reason for writing (trying to get some where some time the I am buzz) has to do with and with not and with all the with in between. It used to be so easy to understand. It is still so easy to understand.

The language lies limp on page unless pushed and poked and slapped like bees. Look at how restless they are words! See how they zip. See how they zip. They are zipped up in a can I can shake and they can't get out (see how they stick stuck cross).

The moment I am containing is a fifth grade moment. Two girls in my class are running around on the grass. On the grass little weedy flowers look like flayed Q-tips. There are bees that love the Q-tips and they zip from one to two to three all over the grass and the two girls in my class run with them zip. The girls have a coffee can (Yuban) and they are waving plastic lids. The bees are angry and they zip. The girls flick the plastic lid quick near the bees and they catch them in the can. They can catch them in the can they can and the bees stick stuck in the can cross they want to zip around the flayed Q-tipped flowers that sit and wait for them to sip from white.

The girls catch two five ten bees. They take bees over to boys and open the lid to release them zip. The bees are cross. The boys are cross. The bees and boys criss cross and zip and unsustain unzip unravel flay out white Q-tip and word like.

To catch and release like writing. Not knowing what will hitch or catch (sometimes bees and sometimes fish). Casting out trying to catch fish like bee like and there will be nothing some time. This does not stop the sun from beaming red and beautiful and you cast and cast under sun that knows not to stop beaming and if so then the moon comes out.

If the moon comes out, do not worry about the words when the moon comes out. The words with through around in under the moon are sad but that's okay they mean something (they try to mean something) about love and losing because the moon is craggy and cratered on one side like love is (even though love isn't).

My moon is old now and doesn't affect me with the moon sad words. The moon I write and the moon I know is years old young years old so it is still sometimes waxing. The moon is waning.

The in between and through of the 1 and the O is what I want to write. I want to write a decimal like place I don't understand (I don't understand decimals). Meanings are made from equations:

If she 1 then 2 here.

1=lives in california

2=she fishes

This is true.

Math inside of bodies cupped together in cans full of bees makes meaning. Without it with it in between meaning. This is true.

The writing began and the writing began. I thought I knew what the writing was and is and isn't and wasn't when the writing began but I did not understand that the writing was the writing (2 bees plus 4 bees in a can equals moon). I wrote to write the end of writing away. I wrote to stick bees in a can or catch moon before sun beamed. The words were empty and full the words were and now I am looking for empty and full in a can that can't be cratered by cross bees.

Some times I times some and (math) don't know what I am doing with my nets and cans and where are the bees? The bees lately have been swimming in an ocean and you see them furl the waves. They are black and yellow foaming with furry flaccid marine soaked buzz. The bees die in waves. They are silent with ocean crash.

The moment I am containing is not a fifth grade moment. The

moment I am containing is sooner than the moon. The moment is like sand and sifts through fingers and the words look like sand see it flayed across the page? Sitting on sand with the ocean crash there are no fish to catch the sand sifting through. The words sift through. What's the use? What's the use?

One said to me once one said yes (no) to catch moment would be to kill moment like bees flapping limp in white wave without buzz. Why sustain the moment one said one said cross like bees in can. I can't I said one to one I can't sustain the moment I am quick and zip across I lose myself in the crash of the cratered buzz writing. I don't even mean math anymore I don't mean know what I mean one said to one what is. The use.

The can could be used to hold buttons or thread not bees (these are harmless things). Old cans before the moon are filled with junk of such like thread and buttons. I am more interested in bees. Bees fly and buzz and ocean crash and fish swivel up. Bees and fish are dangerous. They sing.

All that sings is song. I can't catch song either but it is easy to let noise wash over like waves crash. When song soaks over and flows out it is not sad like moon cratered words or cross like bees in cans or flayed like fish flopping out. It does not mean even though it is math (a sharp b flat plus b buzz to c crash). Noise perfect without words with word noise.

A song is whole. We can not know whole song unless we listen to parts. Parts together to whole and there is no song before song in one endless song like writing. I do not know when the words started and that is why I am stuck catching cross bees and cratered moon somewhere in between. The song has beginning middle end. I can hum it. The story is before and after and how can I catch words to capture whole? I can't. I can hum it.

The writing weeds on Q-tip flowers where bees buzz. I can't understand its decimal. All I can do to can it is to listen to the sound it makes when waves crash. To catch it is like bees dying in waves and I wouldn't want the yellow and black danger to flow to blue green sand sifting through.

I don't feel like making sense. I can't sustain because I don't know where I am wording. The beginning of the words is somewhere before words so I do not have the words to word it. It is music hum before my body but my writing is my body. The middle is not the middle because it can not be the middle without the beginning and the end and the beginning and the end are

two places I can't can in.

The way the words work is like music with meaning but music has no meaning. The words mean layers but I don't know what I mean so I lay on them. My body is here and is not here. The meaning is here but is not here. I've lost it all. I've lost my whole meaning. The bees zip. They are crossing.

I don't want to catch bees anymore. I like the way they zip without containers. The waves won't be caught either. I would rather have them sting and flow and zip and crash away. I would rather have them wash continuous because I do not know where I am somewhere in between them. I see bees words waves and the moon with and without meaning.

Writing was easy. Easy in quotation. Hard and hard the words more and more like cement each word. Trying to make them not words music not mean music but they do and I do not know what I am doing words all around me. I catch them and they harden cement. The words are like hand prints in cement. You leave them by chalk hopscotch and when you see them again not beginning middle or end you realize they are small. They are new buzzing around you and you are sad at the beginning how small how sad (moon). Look for new words zip. There are no new words crash. What's the use?

Lay your body on them like meaning layers. Lay down lie low on tiny hand prints and let them flow around buzz dangerous because bees die furrows in wave crash. New words will come not beginning not middle not end. Continue. Will the new words not beginning new but new words in middle be about mountain? Will they mean word not object? They won't be bees in cans because that is a fifth grade moment. They won't be moon because that is not a fifth grade moment. They might still be ocean but how can you see the end which becomes the middle then beginning over and over again because you one continue plus two math meaning are somewhere under a sun beaming with your hands spread out. What sticks and hums flows away like water. The sky circles and the writing falls out. How can you can you catch it?

"be it nuclear weaponry or robotic insects

For nearly four decades, biologists and political analysts have pondered the enduring mystery of the short-lived species of chemically mutated white fire ants, also known as plotter ants. Whether they once posed a significant threat to the health and safety of the American public, or were merely a relatively harmless mutant species manipulated by McCarthyists to further perpetrate the Red Scare, few have put forth any convincing evidence to properly explain the bizarre phenomena.

The first discoveries of the species were made in February 1961 by Dr. Soren Plotkins, former professor of genetics at Kreller University in Arizona and author of *Dolphinroach: The New Era of Subversive Hybridizing*. Plotkins, on a biological expedition in Death Valley, California, noticed the pale creatures burrowing into the base of a large saguaro cactus. After collecting a small sample of the ants and returning to the university for further research, Plotkins was suddenly stricken with a particularly deadly case of cholera; it was then discovered that one of the ants had somehow worked its way into his large intestine. After several weeks of recovery, Plotkins returned to Kreller and resumed his research on the white ants, which had been protected and preserved under LifeSystems at the university's entomology department. Upon dissection and close inspection of the insects' internal systems, Plotkins made one of the most startling discoveries in entomological history. This new species was actually a mutant variation of the fire ant, but the specific mutations were especially disturbing. Large traces of an extremely dense form of cobalt, a transition metal commonly used in inks and paints, were found to have been a significant building block of the ants' internal organs. As Plotkins stated in his report: "What we seem to have is a organism composed mainly of mineral compounds that would in theory prevent the creature from sustaining life, when in fact those compounds are the very lifeblood of the ant's systems." Niobium was also found to have been the primary component of the ants' epidermal structures, causing the outer metallic surface to reflect the color white. The head of the chemistry department at Kreller, Dr. Herman Gluff, was particularly intrigued and had been secretly requested to provide his own theories on the chemically mutated insects. He appeared to have

been as completely baffled as everyone else: "I think there's something funny about these ants, definitely. . . because I've gotta say I don't think I've *ever* heard of an insect with metal inside. . . This is something—this is definitely something wild, I think."

Plotkin's research at Kreller continued for six weeks after his discovery; by this time word of the so-called "niobiants" (though it had been confirmed that the primary metallic element was in fact cobalt) had leaked through to the federal government. At this time, President Kennedy was still adjusting to the duties of the office, having been inaugurated only two months previously, but his interest piqued greatly toward the discovery of the metallic insects. This infatuation of his prompted him to secretly commission Plotkins, along with a select team of highly specialized biologists and chemists, to continue research on the ants. The project was privately funded by the National Security Council and was personally overseen by Vice President Lyndon Johnson, beginning in late April of 1961.

Throughout the next few months of intensive research, certain facts concerning the ants were established, and several unconfirmed theories about the insect's origin and purpose sprang up as well. Plotkins and his closest associate on the project, Dr. Patricia Blackwell, biochemist and malnutritionist, determined that the ants, out of *all* known species of insects, were the most adept at surviving in the most extreme environments. Their metallic coating, as well as the superb durability and efficiency of their organs, allowed them to withstand many harsh experiments inflicted upon them by the researchers. In one such experiment, the ant was able to withstand 250 degree heat for nearly twenty hours before perishing. This more than explained their ability to survive for such an extended period in Death Valley, as well as other regions of the California and Arizona deserts. Although limited numbers of the ants were found in these areas, the researchers were prompted to search other areas of the country for them, specifically to uncover the origin and cause of the mutations.

In early September, the researchers received an anonymous tip that the ants were greatly abundant in Northwestern Russia, and that within the coming weeks they would receive official documents to confirm this discovery. At the end of September, Vice President Johnson received several large envelopes containing classified information in regards to the

research project. Upon reviewing the documents, Johnson called for a secret meeting between himself, the President, Dr. Plotkins, Dr. Blackwell, and a federally employed Russian translator. It was revealed that the envelopes he had received contained official transcribed reports from a genetics research laboratory in Moscow. These reports confirmed that the ants had in fact been genetically enhanced through years of research by top Russian scientists, apparently at the request of Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev.

Before proposing any direct action as a result of these discoveries, President Kennedy decided to investigate the source of the documents. Since the provider of the information continued to remain anonymous, he hired a small team of FBI agents to study the reports and determine their accuracy, to discover whether they were fraudulent or whether this research laboratory existed and was responsible for the mutated ants. Although the FBI (as well as several unauthorized investigative teams) were never able to come to an exact conclusion about the validity of the documents, information concerning the matter began to surface and spread amongst the general public, causing unfounded rumors and widespread panic. In Lubbock, Texas, there were reports that the ants had migrated across the desert and were eating their way into the cottonfields. The event attracted significant media attention, and though it was clear that indeed *something* had been feeding on the crops, no trace of the ants could be found when reporters and exterminators arrived on the scene. A week later, in the nearby town of Crosbyton, two fourteen-year-old boys were arrested for attempting to contaminate the town's water supply. They had apparently collected several jars of fire ants, spray-painted them white, and dumped them into the Crosbyton Reservoir. No connection between the events in Lubbock and Crosbyton were ever made, though there was much speculation.

Meanwhile, the House Un-American Activities Committee briefly resurged to investigate not only governmental researchers, but also college professors in regards to their involvement with the ants. Eighteen prominent scientists, including several who were on the original research team, were charged with "conspiring with the Soviet government to genetically engineer red fire ants for the purpose of chemical warfare with the U.S." Fonner U.S. Senator Clifford Bocht of Vermont, who was

also head of the Committee at that time, stated at a national press conference: "We cannot, we *must not* allow these subversives to continue betraying us to the Russian forces. As proponents and protectors of our freedom as human beings, we must see to it that absolutely *nothing*, be it nuclear weaponry or be it robotic insects, pose a threat to the health and safety of the American public." Each of the eighteen charged were convicted of conspiracy and were sentenced to respective prison terms.

As for the ants themselves, it was found that while their survival capabilities were quite extraordinary, their capacity for successful breeding was severely limited. The species, named for Dr. Soren Plotkins who made the initial discovery, eventually died off in June of 1963, having been confined to a few governmental laboratories where research had continued. While several determined speculators plundered the southwestern deserts, searching hopefully, no other sightings of the white ants has since been reported, no was their origin or cause of mutation ever determined.

The Chicken Shed

Things were never fair, that's why I was tied up in the shed. Jean was the smallest, yet she could beat Dina and me up. Dina was the prettiest and she hated boys. I'm the smartest and I'm the one tied up. I say that because I usually have the ideas like the one to steal the Barringer's cat and the one to make goop out of mud, corn flakes, sugar, Oreos and cement powder and put it in the Mead's mailbox for not letting us pick the kumquats in their yard. That one was funny because the next morning we passed by Mr. Sting on our way to school and talked among ourselves loudly about how much we liked kumquats. How sweet they are and how forty five of them could probably fit in my back pack and then we counted how many of them were in the tree, "One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight." real fast. He looked like he might turn around in a split of a second and beat us with his shovel that stuck into the ground right by his side. So we kept an eye on him as he frowned and huffed trying to scrub, chip and scoop the hardened brown goop out of the inside of the box with his stocky blubbery arms. When I looked back I could see him taking a break wiping his filthy hands on the back of his pants. His skull shined with sweat.

The shed is small and used to be for chickens. It's far away from all the other houses that have people who live in them. No one has lived in the house by our shed for years. The house is behind a place that used to be called Jungleland. The freeway is up the hill from the shed. Jungleland is as big as a whole block and used to be an animal park. Now, it is just a place with lots of trees and pathways cluttered by sticks and weeds leading to round slabs of cement, large dry pools, giant empty cages and sky-blue aquariums big enough for a whale. If you go through the bamboo trees, there is a pond and just enough dirt to sit on. It is peaceful there because the trees curve together at the top. Inside you are alone, just enough light comes in, so it's not scary.

The cat was white and furry. He always looked like he came right from the groomers. He was friendly and would come to us when we called him on our walk home from school. He would push his nose into my calf and then continue sliding and pushing one side

of his body and then his tail against me until he was finished brushing the very tip of it. Then if you let him, he'd do it again on the other side and again and again. We called him, Ned. We had to walk home because on the bus we yelled, "Yah, Joe's Tire Center," loud and stuck our heads out the windows and waved our arms out to the workers every school day. The bus driver hated that. He'd yell and carry on. The last time we rode, Jean told him he was jealous because we didn't like him and said he probably didn't get enough love at home. She called him a tight butt asshole. That's when he removed us from the bus. We like Joe because he gives us Cokes sometimes and is nice to us. Joanna, the secretary, gives us chocolate and she doesn't get mad when we steal one of her cigarettes.

One day, on our way home, I said we should take Ned to our shed, so we could have our own kitty. Dina and Jean agreed. We squatted down (we didn't wear dresses so we could squat) and called Ned. He came to us, but he was a little hesitant because he was a smart kitty and probably knew that we were going to take him away to our shed and it might get lonely for him there because nobody but us goes to it and we go to school until three and have a curfew at six. We have a curfew because we like to play DDD at night, that's ding dong ditch. Ned finally came to me because he was a good kitty. I picked him up and kissed him. I stuck my nose and cheek into his soft fur and purred with him. He relaxed in my arms. He kept purring as he tickled my face with his whiskers. I stuck him into the grocery bag that was reinforced by three other bags. I did it fast so his owners wouldn't catch me. Ned screamed and scratched with his paws as if he were trying to run away inside the bag or rip me apart. I held the top shut as we ran away.

We nailed the wire screen tight to the wood frame of the shed so Ned couldn't escape. We wanted him to be our kitty now and not let him run back to his home. We each saved him parts of our school lunch like the stuff inside burritos, or the slop inside the Sloppy Joe. It tasted good. Sometimes we managed to bring him some meat and milk from our house.

Ned changed. He hissed at us when we came by the shed. He stopped cleaning himself. His pretty white fur was now yellow.

He let his shit stick to his back legs and tail. We could no longer open the door to go into the shed because he would attack us. We still came to visit our kitty, just less frequently.

One day, I just wanted to knock some sense into Ned. I wondered what was the purpose of having a kitty that was vicious. We were outside of the shed when Jean climbed onto the roof of it and jumped down. Then Dina did the same. "I bet you can't jump, Iris," they said. (They knew I was afraid because I couldn't jump from the fence when Mr. Parker was chasing us for spying on him and his family from his back yard window. I got caught and couldn't play for two days.) That family never even did much. They just walked around from the couch to the kitchen to the T.V. and they always had their clothes on. My mom says I get afraid of high places because in my past life I died in a plane crash. I told my friends but they don't believe me because they're dumb.

They started calling me "chicken" and trying to make me feel bad and sad, so I climbed up the roof and started crying when Dina pushed me off. I think I fainted because now I don't remember how I got to be tied up in the shed.

It stinks like Ned's bathroom in here. He's lucky he escaped because he wasn't too happy. I saw him running across the field. I yelled, "Ned, come on kitty, kitty." He didn't come; he just seemed to run faster, so I began to yell, "Help, someone help!" Nobody came. It was very quiet except for the occasional car that zoomed by up on the freeway.

My hands were tied together behind my back while my feet were tied to the bottom of a wood post that held up the shelf where I was sitting. Underneath the shelf is where the chickens would sleep and lay their eggs if we had any. I had a couple of safety pins stuck to my shirt because I wanted to practice picking locks. I pressed my chin into my chest and tried to unhook one of the pins with my teeth. It sprung open, clinked my tooth, poked my lip and fell to the shed floor. I removed the other from my shirt and held it between my back teeth. I was so bored. I practiced moving the pin in the back of my mouth, from the right side to the left. I opened it with my front teeth and I guess my tongue helped. Somehow the saliva in my mouth built up. I needed to

breathe deep which made me swallow the pin partially. It stuck into my tongue. My throat kept swallowing and pushed the pin deeper each time. It hurt.

It got dark and cold. The smell of cat shit started to smell normal. It smelled really bad when the wind blew in and I was reminded what fresh air smelled like. The wood in the shed rattled from the wind. I held my lips together tight, wrinkled my forehead and tried not to swallow or make a sound. I thought about what I would say to Dina and Jean, "You stinking twat! Motherfuckers! Dummies!" That's what my father said to my mother once when she came out of the bedroom with my step dad, happy for a second, with a sweaty smile, her shirt untucked and her hair messy. Ever since then I call the people that, who I really don't like and wish were dead.

I didn't think that Dina and Jean would play such a mean trick on me. I was getting tired and my body ached from being in such an awkward position. I wiggled my wrists and leaned my head back keeping my mouth open because my nose was stuffed and my tongue was beginning to swell. It was hard to breathe. I twisted my head around to see out of the chicken screen. All there was was the dark. I hopped and pounded my bottom on the shelf where I sat. It collapsed and then I did. I was squatting on my tippy toes with my ankles still tied to the post. The shelf pushed into the back of my knees. I decided not to do anything but sit. I had to laugh loud because I was silly-stuck. I felt the splinters creeping into my skin. My elbows stuck out like a damn chicken. And then my laughing turned sad. I was surprised when I cried just as loud as I had laughed. My body shook from the cold as I tried to shut up. My tonsils scraped along the head of the safety pin. Everything below my knees tingled then went numb.

The moon's light silhouetted the profile of a man's head with a pointy chin and part of his body against the screen. I pretended to be dead with my eyes open because good people don't come out near Jungleland this late at night. It was possible that he didn't see me because it was so dark. I hoped the strong stink would keep him out. I liked trying not to blink, but when my eyes stung too much I'd have to control my lids and let them down real slow. So no one would notice. I tried to do what mom said to do in a

real pinch. She said that you don't really have to feel stuff if you don't want to like Jesus did on the cross. She said he didn't feel nothing. He didn't cry or twist up his face because of pain. So that's what I did. The man finally left.

Dina and Jean came back laughing hard when they saw me. Tears squirted from their eyes. I felt one. They said that I fainted. Just then we heard the police's siren coming closer. So they split. They ran away. I figured they'd come back for me later. They did. Before I called them anything they swore they never tied me up. I told them about the man that was just silhouetted as they untied my feet. They said they saw Dillon riding his bike down one of the pathways. Dillon was a small scrawny mean boy who could probably kill anyone. He hated us because Jean hit him on the head with a marble and it swelled up to be a big pointy bump on his forehead like the one Fred Flintstone gets when he's whacked. We whispered then because I guess we were a little scared.

The man stood in the doorway. He had a red tuft of hair on his head. The moon reflected the color. Dina and Jean jumped, pushed him and ran. I got to my feet but they were numb and my ankles were weak. He slipped in-between my elbow. We were arm in arm like we were getting ready to dance or spin. He stank like tobacco and B.O. I could tell because just then he forced my nose in his armpit which I resented. I felt the blood pouring into my feet. I knew I had to down him, so I bit the man in the side and kicked him in the pants with my knee so it would hurt bad. It hurt us both. He screamed while I got away.

I ran fast through the yard. I felt the sharp stones then the pavement, the moist lawn, the stickers, and the squirrel holes under my bare feet. I felt the speed against my face. Each time I sprung my legs forward, faster and farther on the pathway passing the empty cages and the dry pools with their deep sky blue painted bottoms reflecting the moon's light. I got to our bamboo hide-away and stayed there because I felt safe. I stayed still and let my heart pound until it turned quiet. I reached in my mouth and took the safety pin out and wiped the blood on my jeans. I dug little holes in the ground with my toes. In the dark, I listened carefully to the sounds of the crickets and frogs bouncing off the pond's surface. I quietly swatted mosquitoes that landed on me

as I fell asleep in the dirt.

When I woke up, the small stream of light shined on Ned. He looked like a wild cat the way he walked twitching the muscles in his back to the most minuscule sounds. I called his name and he stared at me with what I think was hate, but now I loved him more than ever.

Seamstress Unravel

Rose

My mother, who thought palmistry, psychoanalysis, and Hollywood romances were "rubbish," watched the seams of women's stockings for signs of impurity. She often bemoaned the lack of virtue associated with women who did not check their stocking seams with regularity and thus risked the resulting curve and pull—her metaphor for the stray paths these women undoubtedly followed to the beds of unscrupulous men. As far as she was concerned, the mark was there, the meaning displayed for all to see. Women's legs were a constant danger. They threatened mutiny at any moment, a detour up the thigh or curl about the ankle.

A regular church-goer and maker of hot-pink jello-salads, my mother always wore black pumps and her seams perfectly divided the backs of her legs, rendering her four taut strips of calf.

The already thick paranoia of high school dating was heightened by the concern that—aside from the sweat-soak of my back and underarms due to Texas heat and humidity—if I were to kiss too long, touch too close, breathe too deep, my seams would curl like ribbon, dance and swirl about my legs as rope and tie me exposed: a painted lady. My home, sweet Sugarland, close to Houston but far enough that the fields of grasses were tall as to hide any transgression, streams whispered and giggled sweet nothings from behind willow branches, and paths led astray and beckoned—but I never dared. Kisses became mechanical worries and I was a good girl who always came straight home, home straight.

My older sister was a seamless girl who rebelled early by wearing nylons and marrying her bulky high school sweetheart, football captain, car salesman, frequenter of topless bars, bar-b-quer, and (according to my sister) pussycat in bed. Hands held like downy egg-shell kisses, they got married in my mother's backyard. She and her husband made a house, a home, bought a set of white china with a blue rim to go in it. It was with a child—ages 9 and 12—holding either hand, he attended my sister's

funeral in a freshly-pressed black suit and dripped occasional tears onto silent grass.

My mother watches my legs to distraction now that she has only one daughter. Perhaps, had she insisted, been stricter, she would still have two. Perhaps she can do better with her grandchildren—quiet girls, sweet green youth—not yet old enough for stockings. Not yet dark with sun and chlorophyll like her daughters with sour eyes.

She has become a carefully consumed woman. Meticulous portions of organic oatmeal for breakfast and she calls me sometimes, late at night, worried about plentiful things—the level of rat droppings in her cereal and the looming threat of disposable diapers (sure to spill out into the streets and drown us all any day, mother nature's vengeance). Sleep is made impossible by nuclear testing and those kids who carry guns and razor blades. The newspaper—read cover to cover each day, a careful study of decay—fuels her brain-fire until it spills over into her everyday life. The faucets leak more often than they used to; chips in the paint that no one else notices mock her when the light hits them just right; cracks have formed in the tile behind the toilets. Her kingdom of mutiny.

One morning she awoke and called to tell me she was afraid to get out of bed, about how easy it would be to lose her footing on the stairs and loosen her neck. I pictured her paralyzed at the foot of the stairs, body wracked with curls of guilt.

But she rose nonetheless, wrought-iron leg braces—perfectly straight. In the kitchen, a flimsy yellow apron, she takes what life has given her, squeezes them by hand, adds water, sugar, and serves them in pink party glasses.

My sister had a favorite rosebush at my mother's house. I visit and water it by moonlight. It has grown with time and time and caught up in itself. Its flattened hands test the sky for fissures and feel for her in my dreams.

When I dream about my sister, her hair forms a perfect chestnut bob to frame her tasteful features and white-button earrings. She is stiff-like a doll and her skin emerges plastic from beneath her dress: red with white polka-dots, a belt, front buttons, and a lapel. Even as I clutch her stiffened form in my hand, so small now that I could lose her amongst her daughters' Barbies, I lack the strength to turn the key in her back—to bring

movement to those jointless limbs—nor can I see her stockings.
I suspect they have no seams.

I wear stockings with seams but I am rebellious too:

1. I buy my juice frozen in gleaming concentrate canisters, silver grenades of independence, at the grocery.
2. On the way home, I wander astray and the unbeaten path leads to a man's house.
3. I walk in the rain without an umbrella and teach little girls in good dresses to play in the mud.

I do as my sister taught me on a moonlit night when we were 15 and 17—stealing kisses and then telling secrets behind Mom's back. Black-eyed Susan showed me how to work inside the lines and climb around them at the same time, to enjoy life even when it was messy and the stains don't come out, to keep a clean pair of stockings in my purse and cover my tracks. If the lines wander or hint wicked it is my secret now.

After liaisons with unscrupulous men, the brambled pair is plucked from the floor and exchanged for a fresh pair in my purse. Before I leave for my mother's, I slice lemons into the canned mixture—little yellow sins, forgeries of freshness.

I take the bus across town—lemonade pitcher on the floor between my feet—and watch the people around me. There is a woman singing softly to herself, a song I have heard on the radio but never took the time to learn in such detail, a boy on his way home from school with a backpack like a shell on his back and an old man staring intently at the floor. It is a quiet bus with plenty of time to read the note my lover slipped me, with a kiss, on my way out this morning. I take it out of my purse and read it:

*A Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Lady,
And I want to see her, hold her with my legs,
Let her hair mingle in my breath and suffocation on her mouth.
Love her love her like red berries in my pocket.*

—Meet me tonight at 9.—

All yours, James

With straight seams and a poem folded and tucked in my bra, I arrive late to my mother's and enter the backyard through the gate. My nieces and brother-in-law already there—carefully arranged figurines about the table. Folded hands, turkey sandwiches, fruit salad, stoic smiles, silverware in yellow pressed napkins. I go about the table and serve fresh lemonade in tall glasses. We exchange pleasantries. Their eyes point me toward the kitchen and I find her: apron, too-red lipstick, a half-sunken pineapple upside-down cake.

"Hey Mom, everyone's waitin'. I brought the juice."

"Your father loved upside-down cake. His mother used to make it."

"Huh. Well, I bet the girls will love it too," and I grab the cake and walk out into the yard with it. Little party plates and lumps of sunk-half down-side up cake, I place one in front of each person. All too polite to have started yet, they stare at me and glance at each other as I thunk down in my own seat and heartily dig out a forkful of my own mound of cake. I take off my left shoe to scratch the back of my right leg with my toes. I can feel the sweat dripping down my back in thin trickles and the flies buzz like static about this silence. The others start to eat, careful, polite. They push their cake aside and begin their sandwiches and salads; convention reigns. And the crazy aunt that I am, a mouthful of cake, "Beautiful day huh?" No one responds and my mother—now minus her apron—comes out and sits down. She carefully places her napkin in her lap and takes a dainty bite of cake.

"Your father loved pineapple cake. His mother used to make it. It was hard to come by pineapple those days and so it was a big treat." She pauses, chewing her thoughts into soft balls. "Do you remember Susan's favorite food?"

"She loved strawberry pancakes, Mom, with powdered sugar."

A careful swallow and a slight inhalation—like the catch-breath of almost crying—an infinite pause, and a calm exhalation. She takes another bite and savors it with her eyes shut as though her buggy yard, her black shoes, and her well-behaved family, are not there.

"Yes. She sure did."



Susan

My father ran away from home when I was five and my sister was three. Off to California with a Barbie Doll who my mother claimed—with an air of superiority and contempt—wore fishnets, the implications of which were never fully explained, or understood.

Grown up, tall and rough like a wild-western-weed, in my father's absence, my thoughts were plagued by "he should haves" and a yearly greeting card—Hallmark sentimentality and a twenty dollar bill. Devouring sports magazines, rodeos, football, fishing, and compiling visions—stolen from movies about wars before my father's time—I filled in the gaps like the caulking with which my mother clumsily filled cracks in the tub, like the visits to Grandpa's with which she filled in Father's Day, the "sit up straight" gestures with which she filled in gaps in conversation when things got uncomfortable. The path to the bus stop was pickled with mailboxes, crows, land mines, and samurai with blades glinting in the sun. I should have been a boy for all my GI Joe paranoia.

A tomboy at five but a girl by seventeen, I clipped articles about the Olympics as a guarantee that the world was alright after all and believed strawberry plants were love. I believed in public transportation and so I took the bus. There were many anonymous people on the bus, the loudest of which was the old man who sat and stared silent accusation at his socks which drooped, sighed, and wavered at his ankles. At seventeen, my only thought was to check my stocking seams and wait for my stop. Sometimes though, I missed the bus and in the half-light of the walk home from school—past the drug store—I longed to take the breath of James Dean boys and blow it back as smoke. But I never. My mother might have smelled them on my breath. My mother, the lioness in golden tresses and blonde-velvet robes which flowed indefinitely. There was an integrity to be maintained, a code to follow that, if broken, could topple the whole tarnished kingdom.

Thoughts of imposed order and the lull of a sad pop song filled me on sticky nights in cheap side-of-the-dusty-dusk-road motels—the kind with a dewy heat that leaves paths of invisible slugs down the nape of your neck no matter how often

you wash it. The same skin cools at the brush of unshaven breath, the heat of velvet lips. Butterfly-hot flutters, something sweet in my ear, and finally I knew what it meant that there were "no vacancies."

Night has so many rooms to offer. The people in the next rented room with the same hard bed, sterile sheets, dark forest carpeting, creeping-vines of the wallpaper pattern, and suffocating stagnant air, had kingdoms to maintain as well. They went about their business so quietly, silent secrets and sweat. No one had to know they were there and why. I was there with a boy from school, a drugstore cowboy, who assured me,

—*No one will know.*

—*I know.*

—*Then why not?*

—*Did you ever kiss someone without loving them?*

—*Yes.*

—*Did you do it more than once?*

—*Yes.*

—*Me too.*

We had held hands, stole kisses, a little more. A touch further, a token, a temptation, terror. The air in the room stagnated and the heat made my head heavy and my resolve swim in the shallow carpet but I held out anyhow—for awhile.

My first was a hungry man, a growing boy, a meat and potatoes soul. He inched my skirt higher for feasting hands but I didn't mind—ravenous myself. My first was a big man, filled me up, stuffed, and continued still: kisses of distraction. I dried and dulled, the meat on my bones diminished, consumed, and my eyes watched taxidermically as he ate hungrily of hem lines and indifference and barely noticed the passive bloom between my legs.

When I rode the bus home afterward my skin was so tired that my stockings sagged stretched-pale sympathy about my ankles—folded themselves like the old man's socks. The weight of guilt and wear. I wondered what had caused his socks so much fatigue. What pictures he kept tucked about the mirror in the back of his mind—the one where he examined his own face. Faded photographs of a wife, a daughter, lovers, and friends. Which had browned and tom all these years without frames? Which were heavy enough to sink down through his body and push at his ankles until he gave up and stared at that

picture by his feet. Together we looked to his cotton ripples for answers. My sister—under the very plant for which she is name—helps me bury this first treason, this last tangle of netting and sin, under a brambled rose in our mother's garden. The air hung thick, jasmine, *honey-baby-sweetiepie*, lady's perfume in dewy brilliance, and my head sang with incoming storm as our hands carved a little groove, a grave, darkness and soil.

—*You're a bad girl, Susan.*

—*Shhh. . .*

—*And what if Mom finds out? The soil looks disturbed, ain't no way to cover that up, bury it in the dirt.*

—*This bush will grow strong, tangled and twisted.*

—*That ain't the pretty kind Susan.*

—*Hush.*

So sweet in the night, she is a delicate version of her name, Rose. Ghost girls in cool September and summer dresses, an ink-green pool of grass staining our bare feet. The moon filled the sky as floodlights and the weight of the heat was broken by a light rain that night, relief, permission. A few drops and the dirt came up from the grass to clutch at our ankles; sprinkling and our dresses clung, a downpour and we danced—hands held, heads back, wild abandon spun, the vines about us grew a whole foot that night and our laughter drowned the storm.

This sister of mine is a string-bean-boy of a girl—narrow bones all the way, hips that need a belt, and broad shoulders. It's the soft dollops—two buttermints slightly mehed, suggestions from her ribcage—and a tenderness no boy could have, no matter how sweet his smile or how the hair falls into his eyes, which distinguish her strictly feminine.

She too makes love quietly and told me once that her favorite lover was a man who cradled the tiny curves of her feet, cupped them in his hands, nestled them against his cheek, and played tickle with her soul.

She was there when I met my husband back behind a forgotten building where we were not supposed to be at a time when we did things we were not supposed to do. He was caught in a fight of forgotten origin in which he never took a swing but caused his lip to split upon impact like a peach. All the children gathered in like folds to see the blood. Children have always been thirsty creatures. He sat on the ground: legs almost crossed,

hands in his lap, face forward. One would have thought him a child listening to a story if not for the red which dribbled onto his white shirt.

Tiny droplets.

In the movies, it always rains at funerals. At mine there were clouds above and transparent in the air but they retained. I could tell it was hot too, from the way the clothes clung to the backs of everyone standing in the manicured grass around the box with the roses on it. Black is a heavy color in that kind of weather and everyone was washed out and pale, except for my sister who wore dark green and drew strength from the dew.

My girls, sprouts with pale eyes, I have seen them dirty their knees in play, cry, laugh, sing. But my husband, my love, tiny droplets again—clear this time like memories already drained of color. He sleeps in our bed, plenty of room for his thick arms and legs which he feels are spindly, cut-short reminders of helplessness. The eons to sprawl across and stretches of Serengeti grasses that he cannot alone fill tease this grown man and father of two. He thinks about the tight circle we made, the whole we had formed, a curl at the center of our barely-big-enough-for-two bed.

I too lie in our bed and feel only myself, see only myself. I can see him only from a distance and close proximity causes him to blur and blend like memories long forgotten. The dead are allowed distant snapshots and emptiness in a house full of people. Anemic now, I long for wrought-iron arms to clench about me in the throngs of deep sleep, protection from dreams. Once, after we came in from working in the yard, we went to making love right away, shrouds of sweat and musk, gritty cakes of dirt. I bit into his shoulder and tasted the deep iron of dark earth still on him and knew then that this was the taste of love, shadowy and substantial.

A year and a bed like an epitaph.

The children were 11 and 14—bitter ages—when she came from the shower and her wet hair made two raven braids which dripped off the ends like the language lovers whisper when the children—disapproving of Daddy's new girl, of Daddy's lonely—are asleep just beyond the walls. The end of one pitch braid curved, hinted, suggested, just below that place

where her moonstone skin almost spilled, curled over onto itself. And my love, my husband, my widow-bird, reached out and smoothed the stray end under the curve of her left breast, over a rib, and pushed it to the end. One drop ran down her stomach to disappear from view, this hair, this sad, sad smile all that was left.

I watch as he sighs—tie loosened, top shirt button undone—and rests his arms around her waist. Droplets into her breasts. He too knows that love is not this pale, this creamy. Taking her by the hand, they walk into the garden among vegetables and vines.

My toppled kingdom for a taste of midnight soil.

The dead can dream and I do. Mom's hair in tight curler-curls, red and cut close to her head. A phony red, like tomato ketchup, poisonous like dye number 5. She is a homeless woman walking against traffic with heavy feet. People don't honk as she crosses their paths; they feel her sadness and it humbles them into waiting. She is a woman alone in her kitchen and the cascade of ants, respecting the gravity of her situation, covers her—a grave in the center of the linoleum with a vine which winds up and around her until she is crimson blossom bursts.

And of my father I never dream but ride the bus about town with him and watch his sad, sad socks.

Car Chase on the 101

It was hot and muggy. An oppressive heat. But it's not so much the heat as it is the humidity, and it was unusually humid for Los Angeles. But then with the marine layers and the tropical moistures, you're never sure what you might get. The weather folk had been forecasting thunder and lightning in the deserts. That's what kind of day it was. People get angry when it's hot. Get angry for no reason at all. More homicides take place during hot weather than during cold. I read that someplace. In some newspaper somewhere, there were columns of statistics and there in bold print were the actual numbers.

On hot days, just walk around and notice people. Look into their eyes if you can. Nobody makes eye contact. If people were a little nicer—well, that'll never happen.

The company where I work provides regular shuttle service to other buildings. This only makes sense because the company owns a lot of property and it could conceivably take someone the better part of a workshift to get from one destination to another. It's a nice enough gesture but I don't fool myself into believing there are any altruistic motives behind the act. For the most part, the company mainly wants to make sure that their employees spend the majority of their time at their workstations. These shuttles merely allow the employees to return to these work places promptly.

So, on this hot day, I needed to take the shuttle to one of the other buildings. I sensed something a bit odd the moment I stepped aboard. I tried to make eye contact with the driver as I said a neighborly, "Good afternoon." He grumbled something that resembled a response but I could not testify to it in court. He then immediately used the handle to close the door with, what seemed to me, to be more of a slam than an attempt to verify that the door was closed properly and securely.

I, in the meantime, found my way to about the middle of the shuttle, and sat down. As I sat down there were two things I noticed immediately. The first was that it was about as warm on the shuttle as it had been standing outside waiting for the shuttle. The burst of cool air that I was accustomed to have greet me was not present on this particular ride. I heard the noise from the vent where the cool air apparently comes from, but on this ride,

there was not cool air, only hot, stale air, blowing in my direction.

The other item that caught my attention was that I was the only passenger on the shuttle at the time. Normally, this would not have concerned me, but you know how it is when you enter into a familiar situation, one that you've entered into time and time again, and there's a twinge of discomfort and all of a sudden you feel alien to the situation? It feels as though you've just stepped into an episode of some fright night, creature feature? Well, that's how it hit me. Then I started noticing things, little things that took on their own life. For example, I realized that the shuttle I was now on was a bit different than the other shuttles I was accustomed to riding. This one was a little bit bigger, a few more seats, bigger windows, a different color scheme, not to mention the air vents which only blew hot air. As the vehicle picked up speed, the interior space made more noise than I was used to. There were more rattles and squeaks. The seats did not seem to be bolted as securely to the floors. Screws seemed to be too loose. Nuts and bolts needed tightening.

If, at this point, I could have stopped my own internal dialogue, I probably would have been fine. But it had been a week of too much TV. I had been watching freeway car chases, bank holdups, and hostage situations. Consequently, my mind was filled with the "what ifs" of each scenario. Now, I was thinking that I may be involved in one of my own. It was at this point that my attention turned to the driver.

He was a big guy, if I had to guess, probably around six foot three or four, weighing in at around 220, maybe 230. In his younger days he probably could have been a professional football player, but that's what I always think when I see guys that big. I don't remember seeing him ever before, this shuttle driver. That's when I thought that maybe he wasn't a shuttle driver. As I looked at him, hunched over the steering wheel, driving with a fierce intensity, my hands gripped the sides of the seat just a little bit tighter. This was too much. I'd get off at the next stop.

He passed the next stop, didn't even slow down. There were people on the stop. Waiting. I saw them as we passed, waving their arms and cursing. One guy in a business suit managed to kick the side of the shuttle as it went past him. About this time I was looking at the fire extinguisher, considering the impact it might have if I grabbed it and hit the driver in the back of the

head. But he had that big mirror in the front. He'd see me coming. No way to sneak up on him.

"Hey, you forgot to stop for those people," I said, maybe in a voice a bit too feeble. "I'll just get off at the next stop, if you don't mind."

I wasn't even acknowledged. Not so much as a grunt. I imagined the driver's foot slowly pressing the gas pedal closer and closer to the floor boards as I perceived the shuttle's speed increasing. I realized that I did not get a chance to say goodbye to my mother. The last time we spoke she complained that she never got a chance to see me anymore. "You're always so busy," she said. "You never come by and visit me." I agreed and hung up. I told her I'd see her soon. Little did I know that would be the last time I spoke to mom. Here I was, hijacked by some deranged maniac who didn't give a damn whether he lived or died and he was willing to take me out with him. The fire extinguisher seemed to be my only choice. I looked into the big mirror hanging in the front, figuring if I could only make eye contact, maybe he'd see, what, the terror in my eyes? No, maybe the compassion. No, maybe the, what, humility, sympathy, empathy, what? Maybe he'd see the fire extinguisher coming at the back of his head.

If only I had a cell phone. Maybe this is justice. I'd seen them before, the cell phone people. I made fun of them. These guys walking around with the cell phone on one hip, pager on the other, electronic devices hanging off their belts like some modern day cowboys, arms swinging wide, just like in the movies. This is, after all, still the wild, wild, West. You're not allowed to carry guns anymore, at least not out in public. Cell phones are the next best thing. Wear them openly and ready to draw at a moment's notice. Who can pull theirs out the fastest? Who's the quickest on the send button? Yeah, I've seen them and I've ridiculed them. But I could sure use a cell phone friend, now. Someone to duck down behind the seat, dial 911 and let the authorities know there's a kidnapping in progress. At this moment, I would welcome the news helicopters.

Now I was back to the fire extinguisher idea. It wasn't brilliant but it had merit. At least, if I could disturb the driver enough to make him crash, then we'd still be on company property. There's a chance that I could escape with only minor injuries. Maybe major injuries, but I'd still live. Even if I were

killed in the resulting crash, fire and explosion, I'd still be on company property. They'd be able to identify the body. My God, I'm still wearing my company badge. If I wait, and he gets me out to the middle of nowhere, he'll strip me naked, take all my identification, and leave my body in a shallow grave somewhere. When the authorities finally find me, if they ever find me, the body will be so decayed they'll have to use dental records to identify me. But now they can use DNA so maybe identification won't be a problem. Maybe before I use the fire extinguisher, I'll somehow spill some blood on a piece of paper with my name on it, hide it somewhere on the shuttle, and when they finally locate the vehicle, they'll notice my name and my blood and be able to put two and two together. Now, for the blood, do I try and cut myself, or do I try to make my nose bleed, and what do I use to write my name? Maybe I'll write my name in blood. That should certainly be plain enough for the authorities to figure out.

During this entire thought process, the shuttle began to slow down. I recognized this as the only opportunity I may have to escape from the situation. There was the back door. If the shuttle slowed down enough, I could kick the backdoor open and hurl myself onto the pavement. It would hurt, I'd most likely sustain some sort of injuries, possibly life threatening, but there was also the possibility that I would survive to recount the horror of the kidnapping. I readied my body to spring into action. In order to stop me, he'd have to leave his seat in which case the shuttle would crash, a possibility I was willing to take.

The shuttle pulled up to the curb and stopped. The driver opened the front door and called out, "Building 17."

I was stunned. My adrenaline had been stirred up. I had prepared myself for the fight, or the escape. I was geared up and ready for either one. Now, this driver was voluntarily releasing me? I didn't comprehend what sort of negotiations had taken place. What demands had been met?

He turned around to look at me, waiting for me to make the next move. Then he said, "Did you see that guy at the last stop? He kicked my bus! That's the second time he pissed me off. The first time he did something stupid was the other day. I told him to his face, 'if I see you on my route again, I'll drive right by your monkey ass! You're not gettin' on my shuttle again.' I can take a lot of stuff, but I can't take rude."

He continued, I listened, "One of the other shuttles broke

down, so I come in to work and they give me this old broken down incubator. The air conditioner isn't working, and it drives like a stagecoach. Then on top of that, I'm supposed to pick people up, drop them off, and let them talk to me like I'm their personal dishrag? It's not gonna happen on my watch, buddy, it's just not gonna happen!"

About that time, I was near the front and had to slide to the side of the doorway to let other passengers on. I was still a little speechless and sort of nodded my head, listening but still a bit stunned from the ordeal. He noticed my confusion and I suppose he just took it as my desire to get on with the day's business.

"Well, I'd better let you go," he said. "You look like you've got things to take care of. I didn't mean to talk your ear off like that but sometimes you just need to talk to someone for a spell."

I sort of nodded again and stepped down the few stairs to the curb as the last passenger entered the shuttle. I turned to face the door when I heard the driver instruct me to have a nice day. The door of the shuttle closed abruptly and the shuttle pulled into the lane and sped off. I wiped the beads of sweat off my head with the back of my hand and as I walked towards the entrance to building 17, I decided that it was probably a wise idea to do more reading and not watch so much TV.

It Wasn't Really Me Thinking It

I know I should be concentrating on the prayers, but all I can think about is how my Aunt Sophie has no neck. Her seventy-year-old head sits on her shoulders like a round piece of clay some impatient kid pressed onto the body, not willing to go that extra step and roll a little extra clay lengthwise, maybe just a little bit for a neck. Well, God made her, and who am I to question God if he didn't want to take a little extra time and roll her some kind of a neck? One thing's for sure, she won't choke on anything tonight.

Dad is finishing off the Hebrew prayer. It's really amazing how he can remember all that stuff because I know I never will, but when I think about his glasses and thin arms I think he must have spent a lot of time studying. My eyes are half open eyeing up the turkey, and I think, it's really too bad Uncle Schlomo *did* have a neck, otherwise he wouldn't have choked to death at this very same meal two years ago, or was it three? Time flies, like Dad says, and before you know it I'll be eleven, and then I'll get older and keep on getting older and maybe some day my neck will disappear, or it won't and I'll choke to death like Uncle Schlomo.

It was really embarrassing. I mean I know he died, and that's terrible, but Mom had worked hard for two days preparing the meal and had everything set out just right, just like tonight, the lace white table cloths that only came out once a year and the special silverware, you know, the whole deal, and we weren't even halfway through the meal when Uncle Schlomo starts making this noise, the one the garbage disposal makes when you put a corn cobb down there or something else that doesn't belong, and he puts his hands around his neck, just like the guy making the International Choking Signal on the first aid chart next to the blackboard in my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Corson's room—but wouldn't you know it, even though I must have stared at that poster at least a thousand times while Mrs. Corson babbled on about Christopher Columbus, the Santa Maria and everything else important about the world, I didn't realize that that's what Uncle Schlomo was doing. He was following directions and putting his hands right where he was supposed to, but I didn't make the connection. I probably just thought he had looked over

at Aunt Sophie and was making sure his own neck was still there.

Then he died. He crashed his face right down into the plate of gefilte fish so hard a brown squiggly chunk squirted into the air and arched all the way down to the other side of the table and splatted on my sister's boob, or where her boob would have been if she'd had one back then, and fell on the floor. Uncle Schlomo that is, not the gefilte fish. If my sister's boobs had been field goal posts it would have looked just like Garo Yepremian's fifty-two yard winning kick for the Dolphins in the final minutes of that game against the Chiefs for the AFC Championship.

Anyway, we'd been having a pretty good time up until then, but if I might allow myself a little joke, that kind of killed it.

Later, after the ambulance had come and gone, the buns Uncle Schlomo had brought earlier in the day lay cold on the table, and my dad said without meaning how it came out, "Well, I guess that's the last we'll see of Uncle Schlomo's buns," which made my sister giggle, which made me giggle, and I don't think we've been known as the family favorites since then.

Aunt Sophie wasn't always neckless. Mom says she was a real looker when she was young, but I gotta tell ya I'm looking at her pretty hard now and I can't picture it, and that's not because I'm unimaginative, because I'm actually pretty precocious, which word I learned when mom's friend Jan was visiting and we were talking about me, which is a favorite subject of mine, and why I had been in the principal's office *this* time, and I explained that Mrs. Zeke, the cafeteria lady, who looked just exactly like every other cafeteria lady ever invented, was convinced I had stolen Alan Horowitz's lunch, just because I laughed when she asked who took his twinkies, which is what at school we call nuts, which is to say balls, but I hadn't taken them, but I laughed at the thought of someone grabbing Horowitz's balls and walking off with them, so I got sent to the Principal's office. The Principal said he thought I did take them, and I told him that was his prerogative, and that's when Jan asked me if anyone had ever told me I was precocious.

Dad's finishing off the prayer still (it's a long finish, like an extra inning Phillie's game, but not as exciting, god, definitely not as exciting as the time Del Unser hit that grand slam in the bottom of the eleventh which I had told my best friend Thad he was gonna do on account of how confident he looked when he was in the batting circle warming up, and then he did it). I have

no idea what dad's saying but I recognize what sounds like 'asheerkitsahanoonahadnicknair. . .del Hannukah.' It's kind of sung, and it's always the end. I don't really like music but Dad's voice is pretty nice to listen to.

Right while Dad's launching his closing remarks to the Lord I notice my sister across the table has her eyes half-opened too, but she's gutsier than me, always has been, and is already inching the sweet potatoes with the marshmallows on top in her general direction, even during the prayer, which finally ends, and when everybody opens their eyes, my sister is stuck there with a firm grip on the sweet potato bowl—but she doesn't flinch, not Lizette—she has this way of acting like shifting food around during a prayer is exactly what she's supposed to be doing, the same way our cat Sammy does when he accidentally falls down the stairs and walks away like it was all part of the plan.

Dad opens his mouth to reprimand her but she's quick. "Aunt Sophie," she says, sweetly, "do you want some sweet potatoes?" As if she is so eager to help out old Aunt Sophie sitting next to her that her goodness couldn't resist jumping the gun on the prayer's end just a hair. Dad's onto her, but already Aunt Sophie's saying thanks and rotating her head to the left, which looks something like a turret rotating on top of a tank, and it's too late to say anything. Besides, Dad's just a little bit of a wuss about those things. He's a great dad, takes me to Phillie's games, so what more could I ask, except. . . I don't know. It's just I wish he wouldn't keep telling me not to get into fights.

Like this time two weeks ago at the Strawberry Festival at school when I socked Billy Squibbs square in the jaw. Now I could see if it was for no good reason, but Squibbs had said the Phillie's were going to finish in last place again, so instead of saying sorry to Squibbs' father I thought maybe Dad could've backed me up a bit, you know, maybe said something along the lines of "Mr. Squibbs, I don't really feel your son should be talking about the Phillie's that way," or something adultish and mature like that. Instead he told me not to be a bully. But now I remember Mrs. Corson telling the class that a bully is someone who picks on kids who are smaller than him, and I'm the smallest one in the class, so I think that makes it pretty impossible for me to be a bully, and pretty precocious of me to figure that out, don't you think?

Well it looks like all's going well and nobody's choked on anything so far, and mom made sure I got the white meat like I like. Dad wants to know why I want the white meat when it's so dry. I see Aunt Sophie is on her second glass of white wine, and that means pretty soon she'll be singing "If you don't like my peaches, don't shake my tree" and moving her head and shoulders around to the imaginary beat, her flabby arms jiggling in her six-different-shades-of-green flower dress which looks like the sofa upholstery I saw at Sears once-a-year clearance sale.

Granddad asks me how school's going.

"Okay," I say.

"He got in another fight last week," Dad says.

"Oooh," says Granddad, "what was this one over?"

"Billy Squibbs, that moron, said the Phillies were gonna finish in last place. So I socked him."

"Well the nerve of him," says Granddad. "Any boy with sense should know they're going to make a run for the pennant this year."

"He can't run around hitting anybody who has an opinion different than his," says Dad.

Granddad looks at me. "Well, that is true," he says. Dad shoves a piece of turkey to the left inside cheek, chews.

"On the other hand, saying they'll finish in last place. . . boy, I don't know. I don't know if I myself could have held back from giving him one of *these!*" And Granddad holds up his fist, and laughs. I can't help grinning like a fool.

"Oh great, Walt," says Dad, "what's that going to—"

"Granddad, Billy Squibbs is a jerk, and he doesn't know anything. Besides, he's a nerd, and he's always got this gunk in his ear, somebody said it's medicine, but it looks like somebody took the filling out of a fig Newton and wiped it in his ear—"

"Burtain—"

"But it does, Dad, and when he sits next to me at lunch I'm always so grossed out I can hardly eat."

"Burtain stop it."

And I do. Seems I was just getting going, though. Aunt Sophie, mom and Lizette hear Dad's danger voice and look over, no doubt interrupting the conversation they were having on dress patterns or how early the petunias came up or something. I silently thank God I'm not a girl.

I was really hungry ten minutes ago, and try to start in

again on my turkey. But suddenly I feel like I need to talk about baseball.

"I hate the Reds," I say, in the general direction of Dad and Grandpa.

"Burt, hate is such a strong word for—" but something from the girl side of the table catches Dad's attention and he looks over and comments on it—something about how the President of the United States needs to be trustworthy or some dumb thing. I wait for him to get back to our conversation but he starts to get really involved over there. Granddad looks across the table and I think he's gonna chime in too, but instead he turns to me.

"So what is it exactly you hate about the Reds?"

"Dave Concepcion, for one thing. He won the Golden Glove last year just because the Reds won the World Series, when he had sixteen errors at shortstop and Larry Bowa set a record with only nine, but they gave the Golden Glove to Concepcion anyway. What a rip off!"

"You're right. That wasn't right. That's politics. The Reds are a good team, though. You've got to give them that."

I shrug. "Yeah, I guess. Joe Morgan's okay. I wouldn't mind if he played for the Phillies."

"And Tony Perez is a good third baseman."

"He sucks compared to Mike Schmidt, Granddad."

"Sucks isn't a pleasant word, Burt." Granddad scratches a crumb off his blue suit coat.

"Sorry. I mean, I just think Mike Schmidt is better. Hey Dad," I say. He looks over without turning his head. "Don't you think Mike Schmidt is better than Tony Perez?"

"They're both good players, Burt." He motions down at my plate with the fork in his right hand. "Your turkey's getting cold." Then he turns back to the girls. "Sophie, we can't have a President who spies on his own country."

"Who'd he spy on, Dad?" I ask. Dad takes a deep breath, like he does when he picks a bill out of the mailbox. Dad always says when you get to be an adult all you will get are bills in the mail, but each time he gets one he takes that deep breath like he's unpleasantly surprised. Once when he did that Lizette looked at him and said, "Well, what were you expecting—a letter from Santa Claus?"

I remember freezing up when she said that, waiting for

him to get really pissed off. But he just stared at her for about ten seconds. Then he nodded his head slowly a few times and said, "Yes. Yes, yes, yes. As a matter of fact I was," and we all cracked up.

"He spied on the Democratic Party," Dad explains.

"Who'd you expect him to spy on, Dad?" I ask, "The Republican Party?" and there's a long pause, and I think maybe he'll. . .well, I don't know what I expect, but he just gives me a strange look. Then Aunt Sophie starts singing "If you don't like my peaches, don't shake my tree" and the thought crosses my mind, just for a second, and don't hold it against me because it wasn't really me thinking it, but. . .for just a second I wonder what if the Phillies do finish in last place, and I look over at Aunt Sophie and I think, well at least I have a neck.

The Junk Tree

When I was thirteen, my parents purchased my cemetery plot. They feared that if they did not do this, by the time I died, all of the spaces around their graves would be taken up by unfriendly neighbors—drunken men or society ladies who, when alive, ate cucumber sandwiches with their pinkie fingers delicately extended. They feared that if they did not think ahead, I would become homeless after death, ditched in some inner city parking lot or cremated at the city's expense and dusted along some interstate highway.

Their assumption that I will spend the rest of my life alone disturbs me. There is no room in their vision for me to fall in love, marry, and have children. There is not room for a future family to be buried with me; there is only room for the three of us. Together we will be alone after we've died.

I once visited the place where I will be buried. The area is silent except for the wind flapping a ribbon that dangles from a wreath placed next to a nearby tombstone. I got down on my hands and knees and took a closer look at my plot. A curled yellow leaf flipped over in the breeze. An ant frantically crawled back and forth on the green world of a blade. One worm had surfaced after the morning rain, vulnerable in the open space. Rising up from the ground, I folded my street map, turned to view all angles of my resting place, and searched for some sign out of the ordinary; sandstone cross, noon sun, wisp of a cloud. The small stone church had a distinguishing yellow door, a landmark exit from the world. I considered that perhaps I'd become a color after death, pure reflected energy. I was, however, given no other guidance from the sky, the trees, or the stones.

Each year I return home, my father gives me a walking tour of the yard. Normally a silent man, he enthusiastically points out places where only the stump is left of a diseased tree. Each object in the yard is neatly placed as if the entire lawn were a carefully contrived still-life; bushes are planted in three's to form triangular huddles; skinny trees stand in long lines like starving soldiers at his command.

Nearly every summer night after my father finishes dinner, rather than turning on a radio broadcast of that night's baseball game and relaxing on the back porch, he will make some

excuse to get out of the house. He'll say things like, "I'm way behind. I've gotta get going before it gets dark," or "Man, that inch of rain last night has really made the grass grow." He then heads straight for the garage, climbs on his riding mower and drives circles farther and farther from our house. Even after the sun has set, he still wears sunglasses so the gnats don't get into his eyes. He's also careful to get as close to each tree as he can, without letting sharp pine needles scrape against his face. Sometimes he needs to bend low into the mower—like a jockey on a race horse—so that he doesn't get whipped in the face by a low hanging branch. At the end of the night—long after he has finished with the help of the mower's headlight—I watch him from the safety of my bedroom window. First he will get down on his hands and knees along the sidewalk, and pull up with his bare hands the grass that has evaded his mower. Then he'll sweep the clippings off of our concrete driveway. I never tell him that his effort is futile, that I can rarely distinguish the difference between the lawn before and after his effort. Even if only for a few days, I would rather see colorful dandelions, dopey toadstools with tipped caps, and blades of grass gone to seed.

I've often wondered what my dad thinks about when he drives circles around our yard; I suspect he's irritated that the Milwaukee Brewers didn't do well this season, or that the days are getting shorter. He may focus on his lower back pain or consider what new power tools he needs from Ace Hardware. He may try to mentally construct a fence that will keep the rabbits from eating the petunias in the flower garden. I don't know if he thinks about much else.

My mother rarely goes outside. She screens calls on the answering machine, and scrubs her hands with soap after touching food or people. When she returns home from the corner gas station after filling up her tank, she drops her car keys, along with the spare change given to her by the attendant, in the kitchen sink filled with warm sudsy water. When she packed school lunches for me in grade school, instead of using only one plastic bag for my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, she'd use three or four. One layer would cover the other until my food looked embalmed it was so drained of color. I was always embarrassed by this and unwrapped my sandwich under the table so that no one else could see what she'd done.

Diligent about taking care of things, my mother always remembers to dust her artificial plants. In nearly every room there is a perpetually blooming silk African violet or white Narcissus forced in a bowl of pebbles and plastic water. On the sun porch, the corners are filled with artificial trees that reach the ceiling. None of the leaves are eaten by tiny bugs. None of them are yellow around the edges. Nothing needs to breath.

In first grade, our class planted maple seeds in pint-sized milk cartons. Each bleak winter morning, we ran across the glassy linoleum floor to our cartons placed in a long row against the window. Even at that young age, we saw what power the darkness has over living things. Overnight some of the leaves had crept over the waxed sides of the cartons while others had crumpled and needed to be propped up with Popsicle sticks. Eventually some of the children started to lose interest; they'd forget to water their plants on Friday. By Monday, most of the saplings had withered into a heap. Because I was one of the few who kept up with watering when most wandered off to some other novelty like finger paints or the sandbox, mine was the only one left on the window sill. I was instructed to take my sapling home.

Walking down the sidewalk toward the school bus, I clutched the carton in both hands. Only a few feet away from the bus, my backpack suddenly slipped off my shoulder and I was thrown off balance. The carton flew from my hand and clumps of black dirt scattered across the frozen concrete. The leaves of my sapling had torn in half and spindly roots turned toward the sky. With slumped shoulders and head cast down, I boarded my school bus and didn't look back. When I came home crying that afternoon, I didn't tell my mother about the sapling. When I instead complained that I didn't have anyone to play with during recess, said that I worried too much about whether or not I had friends.

One night when I was in high school, I fought with my mother over the fact that my parents had not let me drive for months since I had received my license.

"You know that your dad and I never intended for you to drive after you got your license," she reminded me. "We never said that you could use our cars, but we still want you to have a license. If you ever get into a car accident and become uncon-

scious, the paramedics will be able to positively identify you." I never did get into the accident they predicted, probably because if I ever wanted to go to a movie with a friend or to a school dance, I had to ask my unwilling parents to cart me around. I rarely did this, and though I had friends over once or twice, my mother would always stay locked in her bedroom until they left, so eventually I stopped inviting them.

To end our argument that night, my tearful mother explained why I am so lonely.

"You know that you were born a month premature. For the first month of your life they kept you at the hospital in one of those tiny glass incubators. Maybe that's why you always lock yourself up in your room," she looked up at me hopefully. I was both irritated and touched by the simplicity of her reasoning, the way it directed blame away from either one of us.

"They wouldn't let me hold you," she said.

At the time, she failed to remind me that when I was six-months-old, my pediatrician tacked an x-ray of my body up to the light box and determined that one of my legs was growing incorrectly in its hip socket. In order to correct this defect, some doctor broke both of my legs and reset them. For a year I had to wear a cast that covered the lower half of my body. I learned to crawl by dragging the cast behind me as if the lower part of my body were already dead. My mother says that when she took me to the grocery store, the other mothers reaching for Campbell's Tomato Soup cans or boxes of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese would slyly stare at me out of the corner of their eyes as she wheeled me by in a squeaking grocery cart. My mother said she stopped taking me out in public when a woman waiting behind her in the A&P checkout asked with an accusing tone, "Did you drop your baby"?

My legs never did heal quite right, though if I had not had the operation, I would have even more problems. One of my legs is still longer than the other, so I have to wear one of those platform shoes that you might see on an old woman in the shopping mall. She'll slightly drag the heavier foot behind a floor-length dress and force a smile at the elegant store mannequins. For the rest of her life, she will gain her strength by denying herself pleasure, but, in some other way, may be completely reliant on the help of others. Now that I am over thirty-years old, I both

prize and detest the fact that I've never had sex and that I still rely on the city bus to take me wherever I need to go.

A few weeks ago when I visited my parents, much to my surprise, my mother offered to give me a tour of their yard. Her eyes squinting against the late afternoon sun, she slowly walked me around to a bush on the south side of the house that had blossomed fuchsia flowers. She said that the rabbits liked to take naps in its shade. As she said this, I used my feet to flatten tiny piles of dirt surrounding a new gopher hole before I could give my dad a chance to flush it out with a garden hose.

As we approached the lilacs, I saw a tree that had never been there before. A foot from the ground, the trunk split evenly in half like a wishbone; I resisted the urge to break off the larger branch, though I imagined winning a pot of gold or an all-expense-paid rip to Hawaii. The tree seemed oddly defective; a two-headed monster rearing its head. Because it was only a few feet away from one of the elegant lilac trees that my father had carefully positioned, it seemed misplaced. Besides its oddly shaped trunk, the tree had only small patches of shiny green leaves as if it were balding. This flaw was accentuated by the fact that it rose many feet above the lilacs. I stood staring at the tree for a few minutes and then mentioned it to my mother.

"Oh, that's the Junk Tree," she said as she twisted a Kleenex used to dab at her sweating hands. "That tree appeared out of nowhere. It must have come from a seed some bird dropped. Dad kept trying to cut it down, but it wouldn't give up growing. I told him to leave it because it doesn't look all that bad. Dad says it's in a stupid place—so close to that lilac—but this summer he finally gave up trying to get rid of it. Now he just calls it the Junk Tree."

When I was in seventh grade, my mother had a miscarriage. Perhaps I wasn't in seventh grade—the incident is a free-floating memory, too traumatic to take root in a particular year. My parents never talked about it, and I vaguely remember a phone call and my mother standing in our dimly-lit basement hallway. I don't know if my parents were intentionally trying to have another child. I do know that this is the only time I have heard my father cry. His low and unearthly sobs began late one night after everyone had gone to bed. After hearing his cry, muf-

fled like some underwater stream, I realized that there are some people who sound better drowned. Despair cannot breathe; it grows under the water, and if the underworld becomes too frightening, there are those who have no choice but to take on the face of a pasty moon, circling farther and farther away from home.

My father always had this remote face, though, that dark night when I saw him for the first time, I stiffened with embarrassment and inadequacy; my dad had never shown *me* this kind of love. I stared wide awake, knowing nothing I did would ever be good enough. Along the edges of the playground, I hung out with kids who listened to loud music. I had a limp and pimples on my face, not to mention the fact that a few days ago I had received a "B-" on a diorama illustrating life in colonial New England. Locking myself in my room after school the next day, I looked out from my tiny window and tried to capture, with finely grooved paper and charcoal, the autumn trees along our lot line. Dark scars appeared on my paper; my hands blackened as if I'd been digging in the dirt.

Closer to the back porch of my parents' house, next to the downspout, there is another fledgling tree. Though it has been in the yard longer than the Junk Tree, its trunk is much thinner and its leaves are more spindly. Unlike the Junk Tree, it refuses to grow. This is another tree that my parents never planned, though evidently its creation was not the result of a bird or squirrel dropping a seed. When my dad went to the nursery and explained the characteristics of this underdeveloped tree, the gardener said it might be the exploring root of a mother tree close by. Awestruck, I imagined a determined system that could squeeze water from rock and tunnel through limestone, one root so oppressed by the weight and darkness of the underworld that it defied convention, broke through the surface of my father's manicured lawn, and shot straight into the sky.

For some reason, my father took a liking to this tree. Weak from its backward growth, the trunk was thin as a stick. My father pounded a rod into the ground and wired the tree up against it for support in the wind and rain. Every other day, he trimmed the grass around it, careful not to nick the trunk. For two summers it remained the same—neither growing in height nor thickness around the base. During that time my father nailed

up a "No Soliciting" sign next to the front door and spent silent evenings watching TV with my mother who sat at the opposite end of the couch, hands folded over a Kleenex in her lap.

By the time I was a senior in high school, I still had not driven anywhere since I'd earned my license two years ago. On Friday nights, instead of going out with friends, I baby-sat for Mrs. Brandt, a next-door neighbor. Her little boy could only fall asleep if he banged his head over and over again on the wooden headboard of his bed. When I told his mother about it, she said indifferently, "Oh, yeah. Ryan does that all the time." She never called me after that, so I learned to spend Friday nights in my room doing crossword puzzles or listening to music on my headphones.

Now that I finally live away from home, I work as a parking garage attendant and spend my days inside a glass booth lit with a green fluorescent tube. I find the small space both warm and comforting, and I enjoy going to work because I've fallen in love with a man who has the air of an important executive; he wears dark sunglasses and expensive-looking suits. Though we haven't really had a conversation, I'm pleased that he says, "Have a good day" or "Good night" with a slight rise of his voice before he speeds his Mercedes through the striped gate that I've raised by pressing a button. I think this is a good sign when other commuters stare absently off into space, blare stereos or squeal their tires as if they can't wait to get away from me. Based on his quick glances and the upturned corner of his mouth he tries to hide, I'm pretty sure that he is also in love with me, despite the fact that when he hands me his change, I've noticed that he wears a wedding ring.

When I had lived away from home for awhile, my father went back to the nursery and asked if there was anything he could do to help the skinny tree root he'd tried hard to make grow. An old man there said that it was probably still reliant on nourishment from the mother tree. It would remain forever part of its root system—unable to create its own—unless my father took a spade, eyed a spot between the two trees, and dug until he severed the root attaching them. Expecting no less from my father, he performed this task like a machine; muscle responded to chemical, and arms pounded like pistons until it was done.

Now, many summers later, the tree trunk has widened and the metal post is gone. It's leaves are full and a thick carpet of grass grows over the filled hole. Though the tree stands firmly against late afternoon thunderstorms, the tiny stabs of squirrel claw and driving snow, I can't help noticing the outstretched branches of the mother tree only a few feet away.

Somewhere dark worlds still touch each other.

Driving the Mobile Ramps of LA *where the Border is the Juncture, not the Edge...*

"There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness."

—M. M. Bakhtin

To say I was here, pulsing gently, is a lot and way too much. I live on the LA freeways, part of an organized constellation of bodies in motion inside machines with eye-level transparencies for the public exchange of information. I am in this scene absorbing the rhythms of waving tentacles of concrete, spinning through the curves of our communal connective tissue. This is my stream, the place where I locate and trade with others who travel through this city; we are its body.

Driving in LA is a fluid operation where all my selves are in meltdown liquid motion. My identities slip and slide together speeding through landscapes that are worlds of their own, surfaces pocked by their events and inhabitants that I know little about. My senses are heightened. I am ready for intimacy—the space collisions of riding a multi-merger ramp and the fusion of bodies lifted into space and redistributed. Planes of pleasure spread, intensify, and merge with your own vibrat-

I didn't know i wasn't 100% human until, without knowing what had happened, i became a brand: MereJelly—just jelly stuff. It was a strange state, but i stuck there, gelatinous and transparent. You can label me Empty Stickiness: a no-run formula.

ing body on the mobile wave of a liquid ramp, a stretch of undulating concrete continuously heated by gaseous metal machines.

While driving, you are immersed in a temporary neighborhood whose most important function is to keep itself moving—a collective enterprise that depends for success on each individual member knowing the rules and leaving no trace of its existence on the scene.

A radio announcer advises us to keep our emotions separate from our driving. It is a mechanical act, he insists, as if a coalescing act committed by a conscious being should be done without feeling.

For some, there is the overwhelming sense of losing control if you travel on a swerving diagonal that lies on an earthquake fault in a city located between actively slipping fault zones and growing mountains. But ramping is related to rampaging and rampant. Within demarked zones of intensity, it connects various levels and redirects them all. Fusion occurs. To fuse is to compose a living body in a space, to form a functioning unit from separate pieces that do not necessarily come from the same genetic source yet

touch and grow as a unit. Afterwards, you are not the same person. You have been tossed and whipped into another form, commuted in travel—some elements have been exchanged.

Squishy, gelatinous, plastic patterns blend into my fleshy experience as I erupt into motion, expanding over a landscape saturated with loosely bound information, a living fabric whose parts do not always fit coherently but connect in unpredictable ways during continuous addition and alteration. To drive here is to refuse a self out of spinning pieces. The forces for this exchange are located in the construction of the freeways—sites of *repulsive vacuum energy*.

Because the body that exists during travel is unstable, its connections loosened, patterns break down and realignments can occur. In some organisms after the destruction of component parts, what survives are self-healing systems which have infinite ways of hooking up with each other and self-organizing.

You might relax in this liquifacted state if you were not aware that you are already heading toward another world which you cannot with any certainty know.

i proliferate rapidly, spread by mouth. i am not a fish (what's in a name?) and birds used to be my relatives; now they peck me to death. Boney materials were my building blocks. Then i gene jumped from flying bones to pulsing strings. A more solid body would be harder to conceal and moving bodies costs money.

As you gaze at these flickering signifiers, imagine a body composed of distributed cognition located in a system of strings and tentacles, elements of continuous formation and deformation, placement and displacement. Some synapses transmit impulses both ways in this body of parts which constantly

Some signs say GO. Do they mean go ahead? Go away? *Headway*. . .that word makes my mouth water—jellies are all mouth and water, open-ended. *Headway*: the distance in time or space between two vehicles traveling the same route.

travel around in their constructed space and generate their own structures: Imagine a JELLYFISH PLUS.

The US Patent and Trademark Office has recently stated that creatures made from a mixture of human and animal cells cannot be patented. That means something. It means you can say you are human, if you dare to. Or if you care to. But what if your presenting body does not consist of all the proper parts? Transparency matters. Emptiness doesn't.

When your self is fused transgenically like the characters in this story, you

may be refused as a criminal in some worlds or treated as waste material in others. Then you might want to travel again, to undergo the shift from being one person to being a different one—or more.

You do not need a backbone to travel, just a map of desires and intentions inside a dynamic medium. *Jellied* is one alternative medium—a third body with great flexibility for recomposition.

There is no legal definition stating how much human material an organism must contain before it is considered human. At the moment, those

Why have so many creatures evolved into the gelatinous form? With slime as your basic building material, you can do almost anything. Jellyfish do it better. Open your mouth—suck on my tentacled tickle before you retreat from my sting. Yes, kiss me. . .go ahead

persons or entities who are composite organisms *embracing the human* cannot be owned: bought and sold. They live at the border of humanness and some glow green. Have you seen a jelly drive yet?

In LA it is said you can trust nothing, not the earth

Jellyfish blooms may occur in part because we overload a body of water with fertilizers and sewage.

beneath you or the water around you for it is polluted with urban runoff that flows through our streets, creeks, and rivers to our storm drains, then empties into the ocean, leaving poisonous materials in the food chain and sickening swimmers. Here we have learned to speak the language of toxins. We check the bacteria count at our favorite beaches as regularly as we check the weather report to see if there has been a slight change in environmental factors.

But what if the planet we live on had less gravity? Then we could package everything we did not want and shoot it into space—resins and polymers could do no more damage to us after serving their purpose. Without so much gravity, we could be clean again.

Or what if, like the jellyfish, we were functionally compressed so that we could eat and expel through the same hole, continuously awash in the fresh fluids of digestion—a model system, in fact, time-saving and space-enhancing.

The jelly is so delicate a structure to embody with so much significance—a few overflowing nodes of opaque flesh in an otherwise watery and luminescent lightshow. Their worth in the current

genetics marketplace for
immortality tools lies in their
fluorescent qualities.

The jelly mission:

Locate human carcino-
gens in their products

Signal green

Puke

Become a glow-mouse
or monkey

Fluoresce your mes-
sage into the marketplace.

When do we assign person-
hood? Here is one story:

Hello. My name is
*j*TM. i am a *jellian* and
linking is my trade. i
now link up with
humans with inborn
errors. My scientific
history reads like a
greeting card:

Jellyfish
cDNA was
subcloned into
a mammalian
expression
plasmid,
pCEP4
(Invitrogen). . .
Creating a
Green
Fluorescent
Marker to
report trans-
fection effi-
ciency

One day i am a jelly
doing mere jelly work. Then

whoops! i am human. **Pop!** goes the weasel. And as we all know, once you pop, you can't stop. This began in the *flesh-eating 90s* when the grounds of being shifted. What am i good for? My resume says i can make you glow in the dark—with pleasure.

i came to LA to escape the property laws that bind us to our first station in life. My human memory bank is in the language i acquire through the Word Merger Game: Eat. . . Merge. . .Pollute. . . Commute. . .Purge. . . Now i find out there are clean words and dirty ones, already owned or available ones. Some mark me a dangerous killer while others label me friend to mankind. The story of my transmigration is one of tissue engineering and probing the field for usable parts: i am an amalgam of cast-off rubbish refused into gelatinous flesh.

Now I am trading in the mutagen market from which i emerged. I am learning to trade like a human—words mean everything to me. Mark me j^{TM} , I a fluorescent green protein—a brainless thing. Open your mouth. . .taste me . . .swallow my improper parts.

