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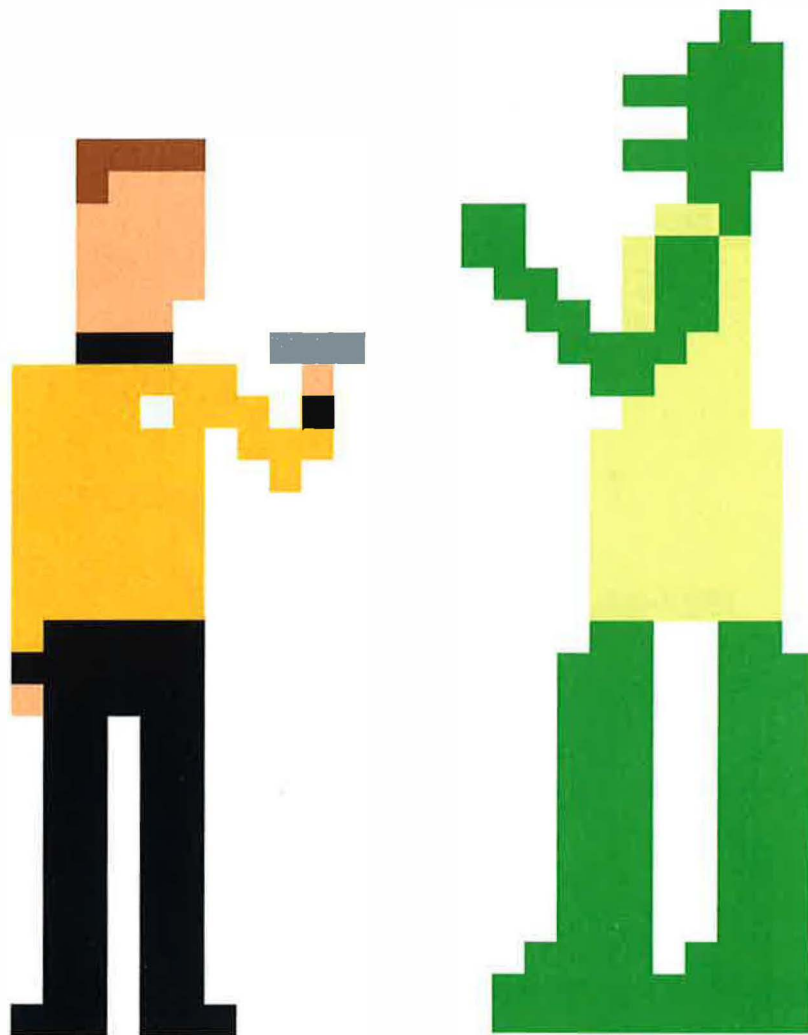
THE NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

NG78 SPRING 2002



INTERVIEW WITH CURTIS WHITE

Northridge Review



Spring 2002





עֲדִיטוֹר: טִרַאצֵי נ. בַּאֲחִמַּאן

עֲדִיטוֹר: מַאֲרְגְלִיֶרִיֶטֶ K. הִיל



סְטַאָף:



לִילִיעֵ KIM



כַּרִּיטִיא HUGHES



פַּאָכּוּלְטִי אֲדָוִיסוֹר: מוֹנָא הוֹלִיגְהִיטוֹן



**נוֹרֶה סְטַאָף: מֵילָ בֶּנֶנֶט, סִיסָאנָא
מֵסָא, כְּרִיס פַּאָרְלִיֶטֶ**



NOTES FROM EDITORS



The Eighties for me was like the demonic pounding Euro-rock classic from Killing Joke called "Eighties" which had lines that got to the heart of what the new American ambition brought forth, "Eighties—I have to push, I have to struggle/Eighties—get out of my way." The Eighties were a promise that failed in glorious unspontaneous reckless abandonment (and radical government spending) that inevitably tried to take many of us down into self-satisfying, self-gratifying Amerika—the one at war in the unseen blood-bath. I remember in the Eighties reading *Christiane F.* and trying to fall in love like a heroin addiction. I watched/read *The Hunger* and developed that love for David Bowie and Catherine Deneuve. I fell in love with Joan Jett's tough persona and the music of The Replacements, The Smiths and R.E.M.

And now the return of the Eighties way of being—a forced parallel structure imposed over the disillusioned masses...

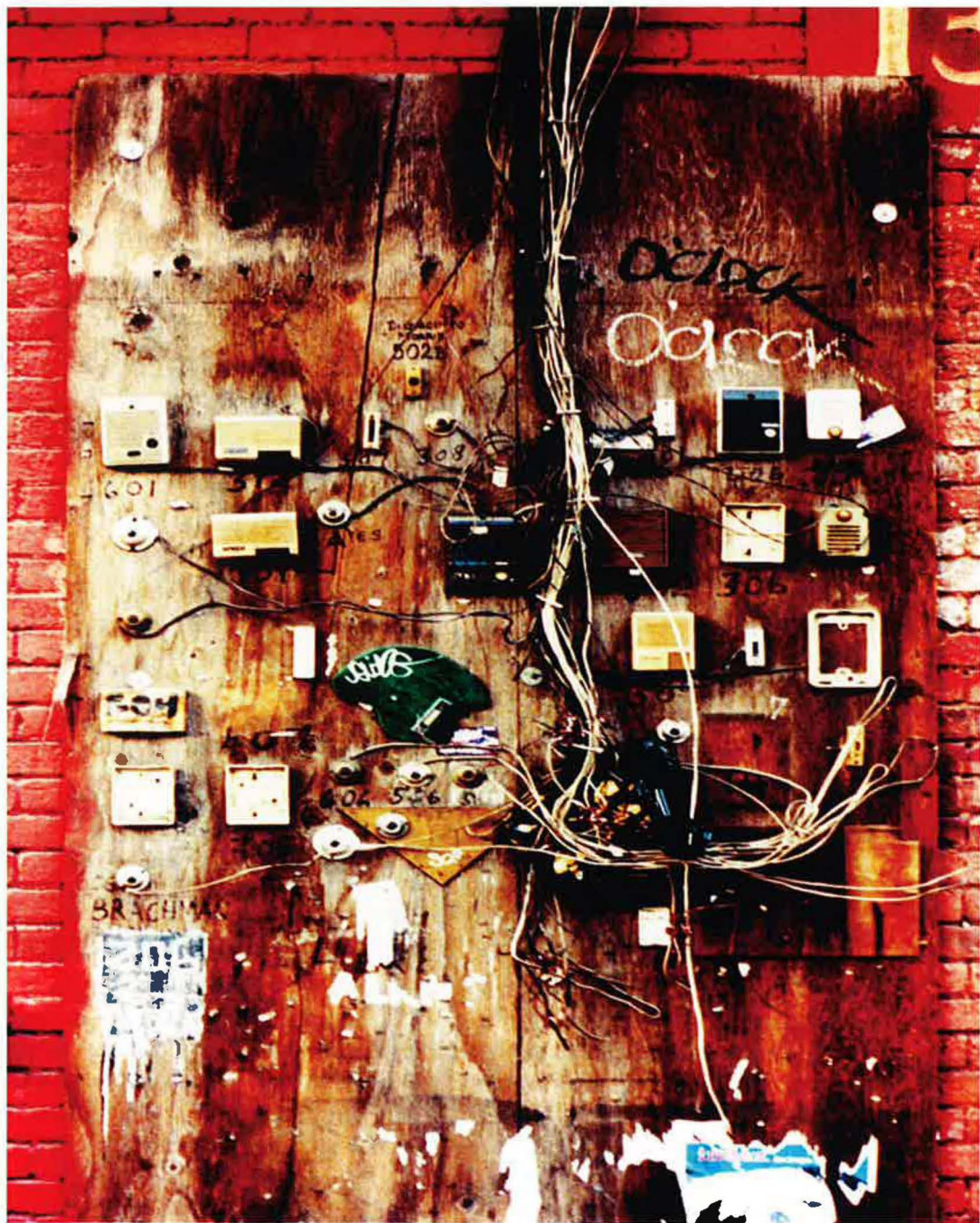
Probably, we will never make it out into liveable outer space (not all of us) (not most of us) before this world collapses or burns up (due to the sun). The space age may never come, so for a brief while you may instead read this text—which we like to refer to as a space age text—a reaction to the idea that civilization cannot last—not lasting like the computer hard drive crashing as it did while we were making this NR. It was a world collapsing which anticipated the future.

Tracy J. Bachman

I don't think anyone truly understood the madness, until I got up in class and did the robot dance. I referred to the Styx song "Mr. Roboto" to further convince them of my genius. Of course, being only half Black, I lacked the crucial combination of smooth choppy-ness that one must have in order to pop and lock correctly. I am not ashamed of my ill-refined dancing, because it got the message across. For a while I've felt like "I'm a 21st century digital boy, I don't know how to live but I've got a lot of toys..." (from Bad Religion). I wanted to create something that both reminisced in and criticized the optimism of the 1980's. As a child growing up in the 80's, I felt overwhelmed by the seemingly universal sense of a limitless future. I saw Fame and Krush Groove and I danced my way into the future. I sang with Jem & the Holograms, protected the universe with Voltron while the history of my childhood passed me by on TV. I dreamed of (and fully expected) a perfect future, ruled somehow by both Love and Technology. In June 2001, I saw the film "Moulin Rouge." It was love at first sight. Its Bohemian tenets of Truth, Beauty, Freedom, and Love superior to all things rekindled the sense of hope that was born in me in the 80's. There is proof in this text of the manifestation of that 80's dream of the future, and that is what makes me particularly proud of this magazine.

"Thank you very much Mr. Roboto, for helping me escape just when I needed to..."

Marguerite K. Hill





awards

The *Northridge Review* publishes four stories annually that are recipients of creative writing awards. The Rachel Sherwood Award, given in the Fall, recognizes student poets whose work has appeared in the *Northridge Review*. The Academy of American Poets Award, presented in the Fall, and the Benjamin Saltman Award, presented in the Spring, acknowledge excellent poetry written by a CSUN student. The Northridge Review Fiction Award acknowledges, in the Spring issue, an excellent student short story which has appeared in the magazine.

The 2001-2002 winners of the Benjamin Saltman Award are Robin Hird for her poems "Twelve Steps," "Baptism," and "Sticks and Rolling Stones," and Heather Miles for her poems "Refreshments," "The Space Between," and "Pleasure." The *Northridge Review* also publishes submissions from students whose work receives honorable mention. This fall these students are J. Luis Cedillo and Jen March.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Northridge Review* gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English Department faculty and staff for all their help and generosity. We also would like to thank Tom Murphy 7 (<http://fonts.tom7.com>) for the use of his TomBot and TomBat fonts. Special thanks to Bob Meyer and the staff at ColorTrend for their technical assistance in producing and printing this book. ColorTrend is located in the lobby of the Comerica Bank Building in the Sherman Oaks Galleria, 15303 Ventura Blvd, Suite 150, Sherman Oaks, CA 91403, (818) 380-8191.

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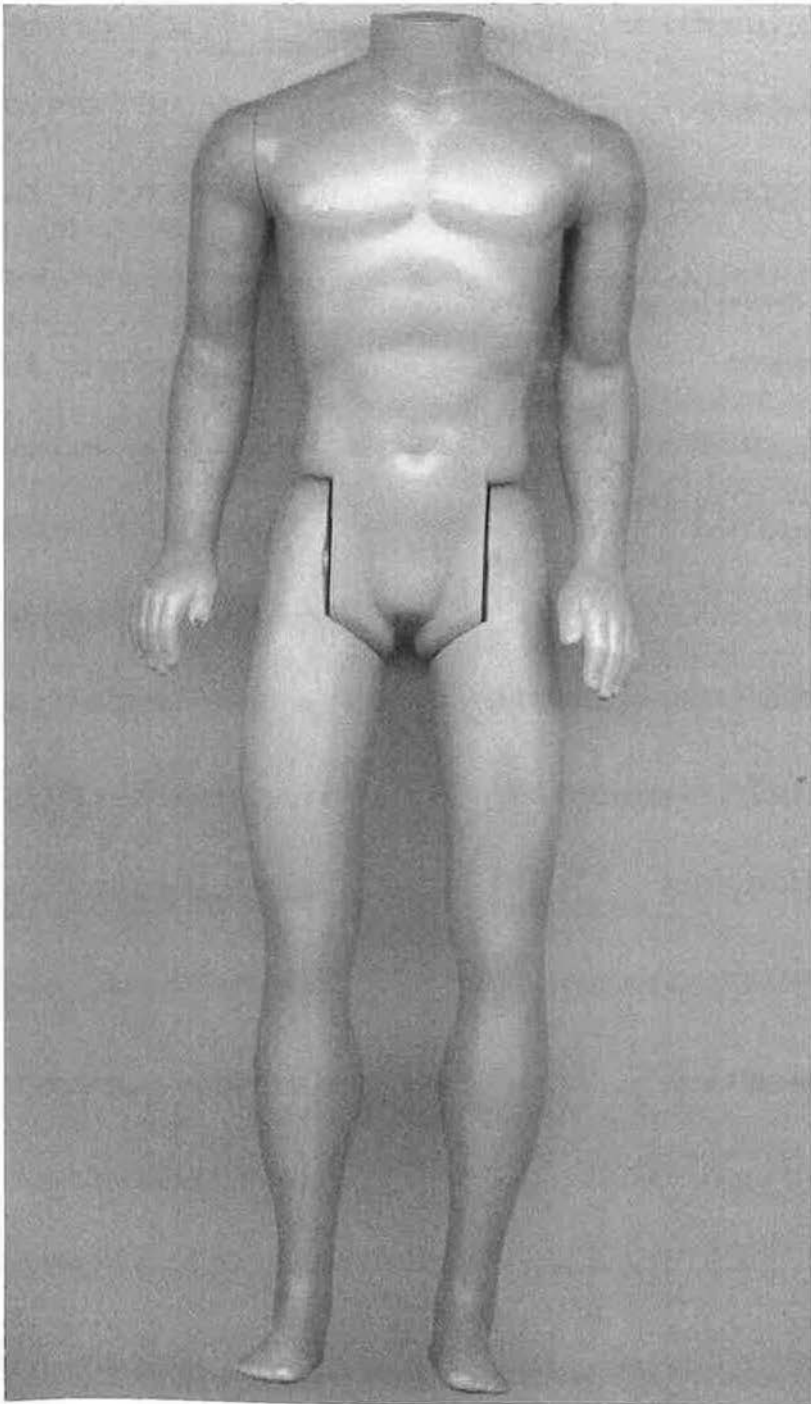
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pleasure

Heather Miles

The first time I jacked a guy off
he thanked me for scratching his balls
and I guessed my rehearsal with water weenies
was misguided. He first fingered me in the jacuzzi,
his tight-end fingers blocking my callow space,
then opening me up, chlorinating my teenage core
with water and saliva. *Duch*. He felt so bad he didn't
touch me for weeks; instead he slept with Anna Danson.
Then there was the satirist with acne who blew his wad
just looking at me, the flaxen rock star whose Jesus ring
slipped into something more comfortable, the deep down love
etched into oak with berry juice and ash, the homecomings,
the Volkswagen bus, the cervical treatment.

I only appeared to belong to my adolescent boyfriends,
to live among lockers and letterman jackets
that read '92; among keys to their hearts
and ribbed condoms in astroglide.
When I sat down to eat, it was *you* I was eating.
Your hair, a swarm of butterflies
fluttered into my sleep, tangling in my mouth
through tongue and spit. Your femaleness rapt
me like terrycloth. Your white-lilled fingertips,
the boundaries of you, already inside me.

refreshments

Heather Miles

I hear you most when it rains,
like curds of milk thickly populated
with history, conundrum, or dream.

Eating popcorn in the movies makes
you three times more likely to cry during the film.
This I hear on the radio driving to work,
my ears stained jacobean brown
from vagrant words still quarreling.
I tell myself these words no longer
belong to me and I remember
that Lincoln was shot in the Ford Theater
and Kennedy killed in a Lincoln,
but what about you?

I leave my body where it is,
on the freeway or at work,
and like a balloon float above myself.
I look big and weigh nothing
and that's how I'd like it to stay,
sweet air slipping through
the thick crust of chattering rage.

I am invisible. You may only hear my voice,
slender as a flute, but one day you see me
on the big screen and you, without applause,
you laugh tears of margarine and saline.

the space between

Heather Miles

Driving home from a C. K. Williams reading,
my husband and I fight over
the pronunciation of Rilke,
and whether the clouds are gray or colorless.

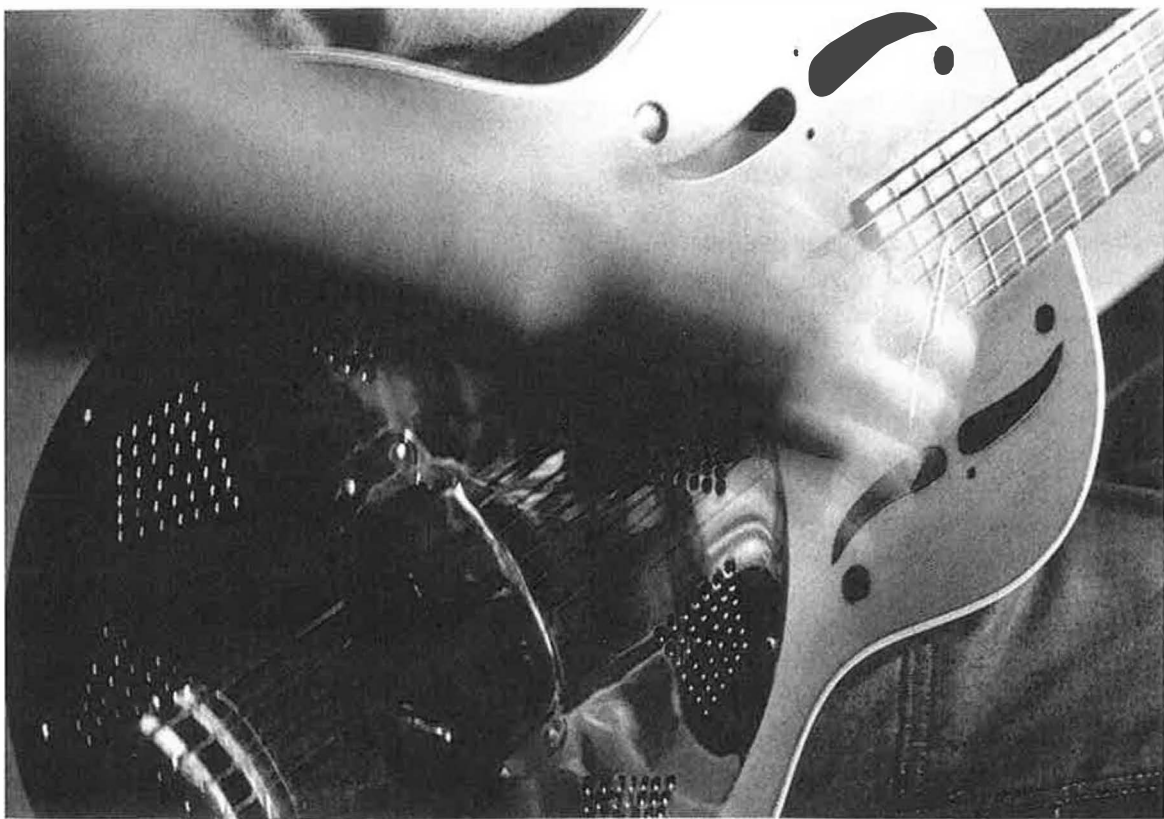
I tell him I need to write longer poems,
poems that say something, that *mean* something,
a yearning like bruises the shade of plums.

He says write the days when we ate through walls
and danced the color red. When the smell of wind chimes
rang through my hair, the days of rabid-feathered happiness.

I tell him I want to write the kind of poetry
that hands you horizon on a platter.

He says write how the fixed skyline has folded over us,
how the sediment of days turned heavy, like buckets of sand.
How love tastes like the bottom of burnt toast,
the trashcan opening its mouth like a Venus flytrap
waiting, waiting for oat, bone, soul.

I tell him it seems maybe he should be the poet,
and I, the dullard at home.



US



Ian Giatti



Boredom is why, slumped over, I have returned to idealizing glasses of cabernet and maybe flammable green. Time limps in red digital above us as he whines in hyphenates about loss or something claustrophobic. In this desk built for children half my size, I pretend he is interesting, while I get high on the hot ink from fresh copies of my own poem, briefly leaving the stale air. He puts the white flag down, declaring himself ours again, and there are no more words to hide behind (the cavalry's cue). Somewhere, trumpets burst forth, his wire-rimmed bifocals perched on that forehead in a toast to his

poem.

I shoot my hand skyward. Next door whispers a warning into my bad ear, inaudible over the smothers of praise and promissory applause. On the board is a chalk sketch of his rounded-off face, with quotation marks by his ears. That lonely girl unveils a bundt cake iced vanilla with

Really Neat

Poem

smearred pretty. Fingers crossed, the boss comes over and shakes his hand, as I stand up on my chair and scream, I don't get it. Boos buckle my knees. We all second-guess ugliness until the boss shouts an order, Don't look at me. My desk is kicked from behind, and as the whiplash starts to set in, I wonder if I can rhyme "genius" in my next poem.

My spine gives in, sliding onto the tiled linoleum. On my back, the tribe circles above me, poking with pencils, Is he dead yet? I stave them off with thumbs up, and just when I think I understand, a shark-toothed sole steps on my throat. Flattened in my adam's apple is the only air I can hold onto: Is this all there is?

First Person?



a girl from argentina

Jen March

i pursed my lips
around the thin, clear straw
sucked up my drink, and
swallowed it down.

the sparkling liquid,
magenta on my tongue,
set off fireworks against
the soft pink inside of my cheeks.

it's a shirley temple,
i told her, i always drink them.
i dipped my fingertips
below the surface, and

fished out one of the
bright red maraschino cherries.
i dangled it into my mouth
like a full red earth, and

plucked it off the stem
with my teeth.
it was her first time
in the united states.

she couldn't believe
she was here, in los angeles,
in hollywood, on the

Jen March

sunset strip.

slurping down the last
of my drink, i wiggled
my straw around in the ice,
and ate my last cherry.

she couldn't believe how big
her glass was. she held it
in both hands, and
never finished.

Friday Night in L.A.

Jen March

Walking between tall wooden sculptures
painted pink, and red, and green by an
up-and-coming Latina artist, dodging
the smoke from circling cigarettes, glancing
sideways at the mural painted on
the big blue wall, it is a series of handguns,
each three feet long, and steel gray.

I keep looking at the door.
Something might blow in.
After all, it is beginning to rain, anything
could seek shelter,
or anyone.
I don't know what I'm looking for, but
something is haunting me, dancing
at the back of my head in a flirtatious ballet.
Do I have a reason to be here?
Oh yes, to speak about this post post-modern culture,
to hold an imported beer in one hand, and
a distinguished point in the other.
I am here because I have much to say
to many people about
underground documentary films,
abstract cubism in its contemporary form,
the use of collage in *Untitled One*,
noise as music,
performance as art,
gallery openings,

Jen March



garage space converted to art studios,
cataloging projects...

While the dancers do their dancing,
I watch the flow of those seeking shelter
in culture, file through the entrance.
It is raining much worse now.
On the low stage, the sax player complains
to the sound guy that he is
getting too much feedback.



middle

Jen March

everything gets tender
in times of love, in times
of flu, in times of
menstruation

it's hard to tell which this is.
i have swallowed my heart
seen it beating in my belly
just north of my uterus

i have prayed, out loud,
not to slide the knife,
while wishing i lived
somewhere it was snowing.

i notice, these days,
all the planes fly too low
all the phones keep ringing,
people are waiting, and

there's an anthrax scare
but no one is flinching
except the crazies, five a night
at the emergency room in atlanta

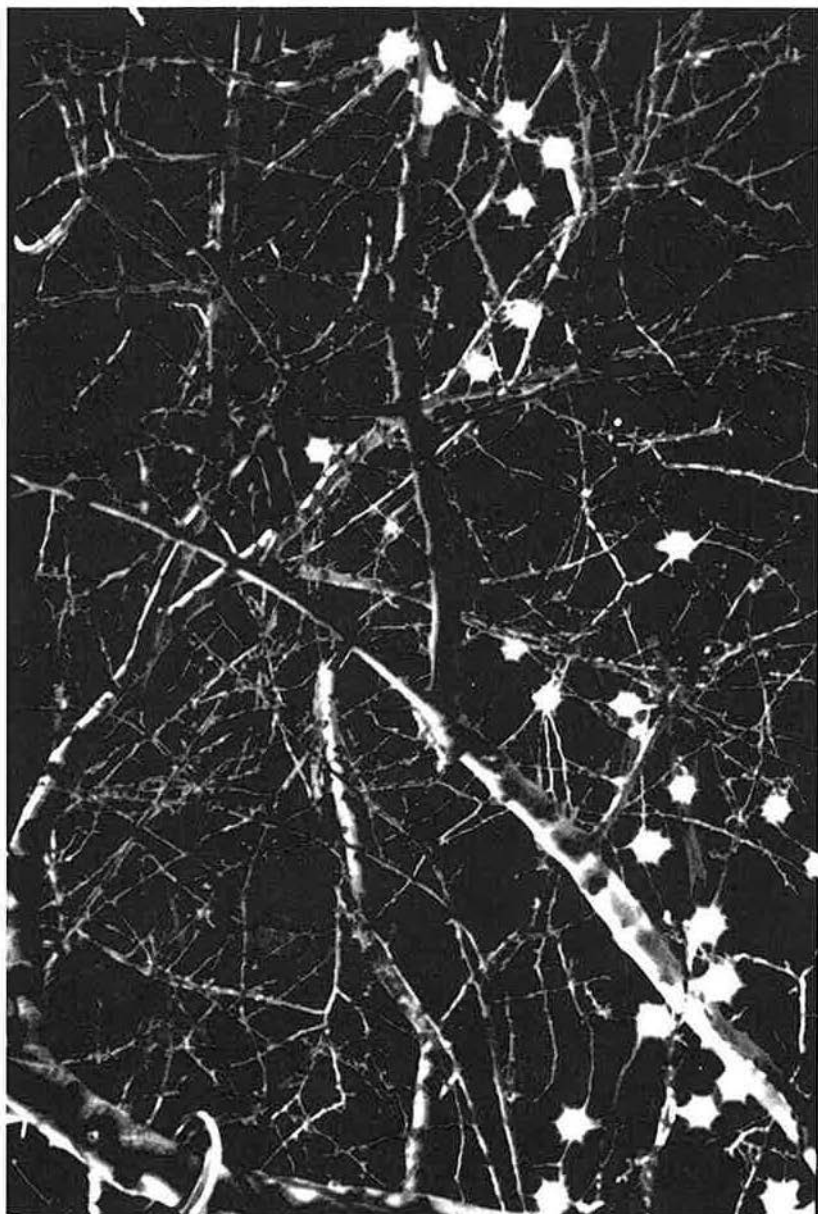
i am not a mother.
i am not a wife.
i do not know how to worry,

Jen March

how to care beyond myself
and there's you
holding my arm,
thumb against inner wrist,
pulse on pulse

the beating comes in and out
of rhythm, drawing me in,
pushing me back,
almost too sweet and warm.

this is a place between love
and fear, somewhere between
you and alone, somewhere
between life and war.



plush offerings

Mandy Dawn Huntz

that night i danced with you, here in this room. we lit candles and i admired you covered in flame—licking, lapping—your skin unscathed. i touched you and my hand came back blackened. the clutter of this house was smothered between our glossy bodies. when you exhaled and your lungs collapsed back into your body i chased them with my little-boy breasts. when my robe fell from my shoulder—i did not retrieve it.

i left my poetry on the kitchen table and you never touched it. at breakfast one morning, i read it to you, spread over toast. you asked me why i insisted on writing about people i knew and told me that club soda would get the spot out of the carpet. i poured coffee on the stain and walked out. we never mentioned poetry again.



produce

Mandy Dawn Huntz

i have been warned about the ticks of biological clocks and old maids,
from deep within the body of my cart
the ice cream beats.

my groceries folded—packed tight like clothes—
i stop at the greeting card rack
wanting answers, emotions fulfilled through consumption.
ingredients for love,
the recipe for an aphrodisiac pot-roast.

my mint chip warming amongst the slick young produce, losing confidence.
she wonders if she is passé now that the world frequents gourmet, juice bar,
starbucks—too sophisticated for a generic carton.
she worries because i have turned to greeting card sentiment

and in my hand is bleached wood pulp with curly ink poetry where once there
was a tree.
none of the messages will do.
none quite what i want to say.
none will make the boy picking plums from the grocery garden see a woman
who looks for meaning in frozen foods, solace in breakfast cereal.
whose ice cream is dripping defeat onto the linoleum.

his basket is on the ground—
loose fruit, curves, caresses—and he is black bangs and a poetic slouch.
i look at my hands,
the card with the impressionist still-life, a bowl of fruit,

Mandy Dawn Hunter

and blank inside.

i leave the card,

my cart—she weeps sweet and milk—

and walk over to the budding man with the basket.

he looks at me: green eyes, like ice cream tears.

i take a plum from his hand,

a bite,

the long way home.

While buying pumpkins
at 1:35 in the afternoon,
October 9, 1999

Mandy Dawn Huntz

over by the fence i saw a man yelling at some young punk-ass kids.

they had, it seemed,

done something very appropriate for their age.

it had angered the man,

who felt trapped in his gray, stunted life

as he was a security guard

for a private company

which no doubt paid him little

attention

and did not care

that i knew this hard, bitter man years ago,

when he was Vincent,

who sat behind me in math

in 11th grade

and sang softly to himself

while playing with a shiny green yo-yo

as thick black curls fell over soft, smoldering coal eyes.

girls melted sweet butter yellow in his impish grin,

the very same smile

which got him in trouble with the school authorities

who were tired of dealing with

young

punk-ass

kids.



a child who loses a balloon often cries

Alex Lee

this is because they are like new balloons.
new balloons are bouncy.
their flesh is smooth and firm.
they defy gravity. they fly straight up
in a world that is otherwise heavy, full of earthly things.

yet in a few days, old balloons descend.
their flesh wrinkles at a sterner touch
as if they are afraid of being easily ripped apart.
they wander through space close to ground.
and bump into things down dark corridors.
they follow vague currents of air, like the old and blind
who follow the scent of half forgotten candle lit
dinners on the Nile river
or the scent of soft bedsheets spread across
with sweat and oil and sleepless mornings
unmoored in childhood.

like the blind man on the corner of sixth and prospect
with a sign claiming the end of the world.
he begs for a spare dollar
so he can be unmoored
so he can live the past anew
as it becomes different
with each drunken hour

as childhood drama
compiles on childhood drama

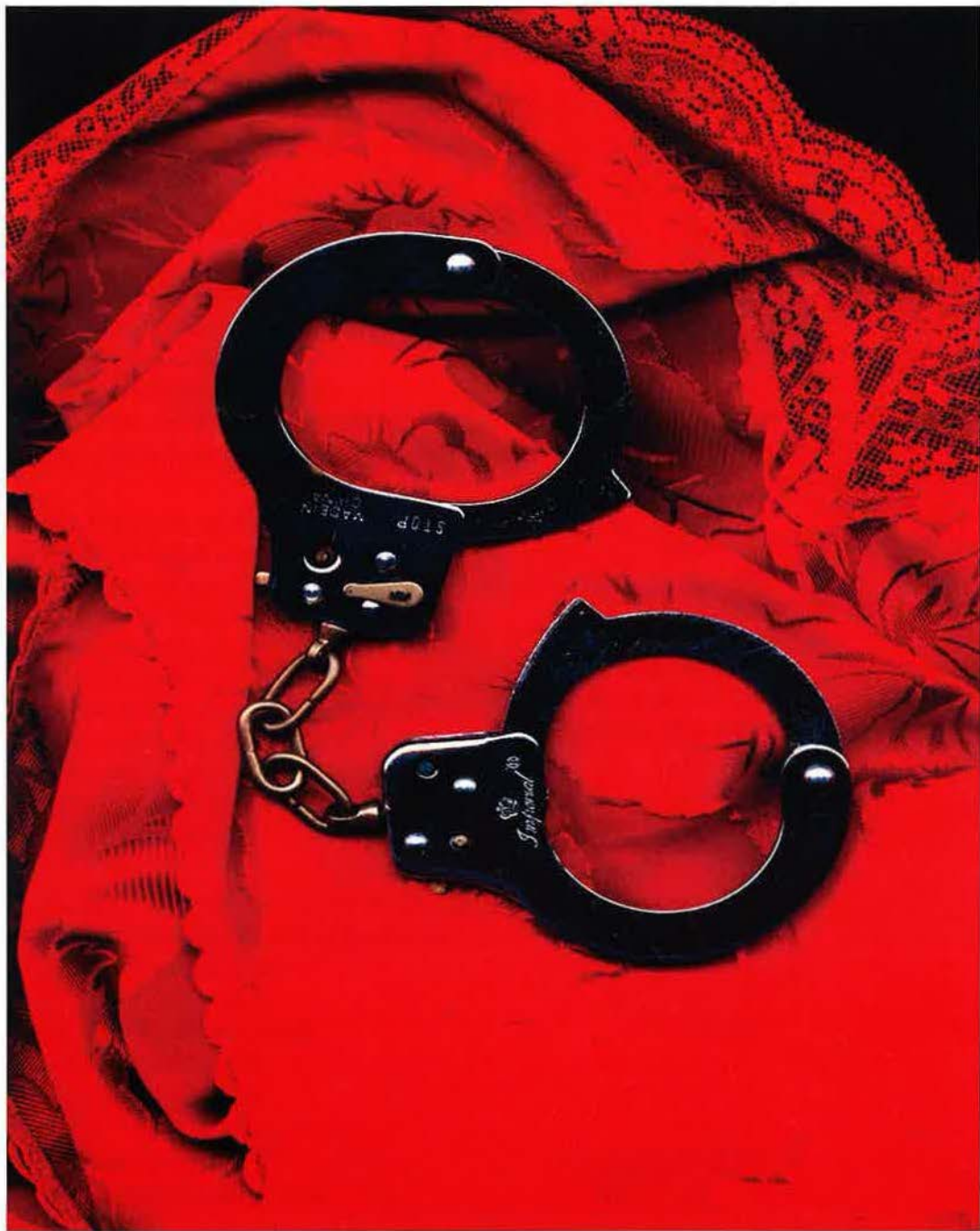
Alex Lee

so the Nile river becomes soft silk sheets
as firm as balloons, as intimate as sweat.

already the world is a dark mirror
where what he expects
sometimes isn't so.

his old mind is a new balloon
full of air, going places
his body can never go.

time saps our lungs of their strength.
yet through the course of years, we fill like an untested balloon
and shed our bodies like soft worms.



Delaware

Henneth Pobo

Dad's a coastal cop,
arrests nude bathers
at Rehobeth Beach.

In the tub
he looks like thick wrists
locked in handcuffs.

Twelve Steps

Robin Hird

talk to me the way Buddha would.
tongue clapping like one hand.
silent in a forest of falling trees.

enter me only after you've wiped your feet.
unlaced them from your legs.
placed each, toe-first into your mouth.

mention me in passing to your lovers.
praying violently for floodwaters.
bodies shaking like San Andreas.

read me like a bi-monthly magazine.
advertising smokeless cigarettes on glossy pages.
sitting in a dentist's lobby between

this dirty smile and the next.

Baptism

Robin Hird

the ceremonial skirt I wore
slipped open
when I walked. my legs exposed
by a breeze. I remember the mountains:
monuments of snow and ice
melting as I walked by.
and the jaw I dropped
when I saw the water consume my little girl.
how I hiked
up my skirt
and stood there: flesh and rage.
how I had a full fledged vagina
and a mouth big enough to hold heaven.
I remember giving birth
to a river. and watching myself strip
for signs of life.
I remember blind gods
reading the braille of my breast.
each nipple
a word they dare not speak.
silence crashed!
left trees leaf-less,
naked.
but not me.
I stood erect in the face of all that is holy
wrapped in the skin of a wild woman.

and though I must not say so,
I remember the air around me
standing still with
anticipation.







Sticks and Rolling Stones

Robin Hird

His skull was broken in four places:
here, here, here and here. He pointed

to where his face had been
painted black.

some guy didn't like him
and blew
up one night, like sticks

of dynamite. In the hospital
he wore a button, pinned to his paper weight
outfit. it said: *I'm a mess.*

The nurses must've hissed
about him on their break. Must've wondered
where his family was. Must've hushed up real quick when the supervisor walked by.

His swelling never stopped
the doctors. They were opening and closing those wounds
like a cookie jar. He went home in one fragile piece:
after thirty days of sewing. His skin, a winter quilt.
thirty days stretched out horizontally
on a hospital bed. A

Long, Long While for someone young
as he was. He had graduated high school
a few years before. Driven out from Illinois
with some girl he was seeing. Got an apartment in Burbank. Worked

at a filling station.

Traded gas for lunch. Worked

Robin Hood

He traded his guitar for rent money. But he was not a street fighting

like an accounting clerk. Traded the day job

for his first love. Worked at a record store.

Traded his guitar for rent money. But he was not a street fighting

man. He *never* fought. Never toasted a problem by raising his fists to it. He thought

muscle was for people who didn't have

music. Or books.

His record was clean.

His knuckles were worn

soft like a pair of jeans.

So when this other guy let it loose,

what else could he do?

What else besides sing

the Ventilator Blues?

Marching Bands

Joshua Sitarz

Marching bands shouldn't

Be allowed

To play in the morning

Not at seven AM

Not a block from my house

Not without practice

Marching bands should

Practice

A lot

Somewhere far away

bumpers and blades

J. Luis Cedillo

sitting on the bumper
wire-wrapped to the body
of my father's yellow truck
ablaze in the orange sun

eating green apples with
brown-handled knives
way we imagine men would
tasting a spot of metal
with each pale virgin sliver

our youth as finely honed
and desperate desire for
growing old as failing
as the fading inky sweet
on the stainless steel tip



some positional assumptions

Ara Shirinyan

—
we humans have gills too.
they lie under our tongues
beat by evolution.

—
things happen
in small circles
that are tired.

—
sometimes, no matter
how hard I try
(and this is not meant
to be funny)
I just can't write a Poem

—
two red bell peppers
stuffed with sea bass
and spinach,
shrimp and mushroom
in the pre-heated oven
for 35 to 45 minutes.

—
then short sentences
would take cover
under more means.

—
by calling her prude, I
made her red in a

an opus of some kind

*I will sleep
until 11:00 am
because I'm wasted.*

*T. S. Eliot expected
too much out of non-entity.*

*no throne to be
overthrown.*

Ara Shirinyan

tom and jerry way-
not shy, angry.

—
when she bent down
to serve the cups
with ice for the
bourbon and she
was wearing the loose shirt,

you could see the
whole nation.

—
I come over the walls
because she sent me home.

that is really all of the case.

—
I had my eye on
two equally
deserving olives

and didn't know
which one to eat.

—
a headache comes
after repeated attempts
(partly successful) at
forcing out of the

desire

*It rains out there
and I once was
reluctant to sleep
though now I am not
because I'm drunk.*

devouring?

partially

Ara Shiringan

bowels some waste
which coffee has
somewhat loosened.

—
I drink a half a
bottle (almost) of some
4 year old brandy I
have brought from
Armenia and do this.

—
I would love
to one day be
an expert onion
caramelizer.



*the secret she tells me is
butter.*

—
my spit is slightly
orange because I
have eaten baby
carrots.

—
they threw their
lines in the sea
and waited, silently.

Roots

Evelyne Lussier

My roots run concentrically
to the very core
of time

I am what he was
silent
convinced
but impotent

flashes of my father's back
distinctively trembling
upon tears he could not bear
to show
to see
himself
violent with unattained
dreams
and coal regrets

my dad could have been a burning
killer



35 Paz

B.2. Niditch

(In Memoriam: 1914-1998)

You—the last tower dreamer
wake our deafening age
in ovens melting utopias
plucked from your trousseau
you hid with invisible ease
from the company of noise
every Latin allegiance
from long columns
of warriors, sorcerers, priests.

Young Octavio
risen in the late silent screen
of adolescence
running out of slumber parties
carrying those romantics
over the threshold
of praetorian and proletarian guards
blank crowds in the dusk
of the half mad
knowing it's just a street fight.

But the days are wild
hearing the various Rousseaus
bleating behind yellow windows
and papier mache bells
on town square balconies
on platforms selling progress

35

B.2. Niditch

with free offerings
of slogans, puns and guns
while secret police
prowl the future underground.

It begins to rain
as you are translated
by quattrocento magic
in your voiceless robe
following all the footsteps
of classicists, choruses,
souls of the dead
past the cluttered roads
purely unreal

from artificial red aprons
you sit on a bench
watching silhouettes of dust
of blinking strangers
even you
are clinging to Thoreau.

Missouri Funeral

Vanda J. Hembree

I flew through clouds
As close to God as I could get
To say goodbye
Before they dropped you in a hole
And covered you with dirt
Like a seed

Plum Pancakes

Vanda J. Hembree

Her mouth filled with the sweet ache of childhood
She searches the produce shelves each spring
Waiting for Italian plums to arrive
In heaps and mounds of purple-grey tree eggs

Thin plastic produce bags bulging and bursting
Dark plums spill across the kitchen counter
Rolling and spinning, wild harvest dance

In a large yellow bowl she beats the batter
Her *schnabasin* tapping a steady staccato
As flour and eggs and sugar transform
She croons to herself

The sharp slice of steel in firm fruit flesh
She opens mottled plums
To pluck seeds
Leaving two halves hanging
Like Siamese twins by a thick film of skin

Quick knife slices make a plum fan
Batter spreading out in plate-sized circles
On a hot greased iron griddle
Firm fruit flesh pushed deep
Held fast by heat and thickened batter

The tangled smells rolling and spilling across her memory
Thick fingers scoop cane and dance liberally
Across sugared plum pancakes the size of plates

The conversation with Curtis White

Tracy J. Bachman

Curtis White has written five works of fiction, Memories of My Father Watching TV, Metaphysics in the Midwest, The Idea of Home, Anarcho Hindu and, most recently Requiem (which everyone should read). He has also written a fabulous book of essays, Monstrous Possibilities: An Invitation to Literary Politics. Currently, he is a professor at Illinois State University.

Tracy: Professor White, in your fiction there is this great play with intertextuality that is very self-aware, *not* hidden in literary allusions. There is also this fusion of fiction and non-fiction going on where it seems that there is nothing sacred. You play with both personal and public history.

Curt: I suppose that my willingness to use outside texts of all kinds—history, literature, philosophy, newspapers, whatever—makes me conspicuously postmodern. I have no problem with that. But it also seems to me nothing special. It is not a pose. It is inevitable, as I think every artist knows. I'm very conscious of my "sources" and derivatives and I know more or less exactly how I came to them. First Stevens, then James, then Nabokov and Barthelme by way of Proust, etc. All style is dependent on what is not-the-style. What's astonishing in the long run is that somehow, miraculously, a personal style that "sounds like me" comes of this process. It is the great negation of "intertextuality" that every artist knows well and reverently. I also think that working in this way has greater possibility for making something beautiful, if I may use that word. I try to create work that provides an experience that is "original," like experiencing the world for the first time. I don't know how you do that working in

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the conventions of realism.

Tracy: How do you define postmodern?

Curt: When I write, I don't think about terms like postmodernism. What I need from pomo is so well integrated into the artistic machinery that I don't have to think about it. My real interest is what I hope any decent artist should want: how to be truthful; how to create dramatic and thematic urgency. I think my own sense of why art matters has a lot to do with a feeling of urgency. As if there is something that needs to be said before it's too late. As if saying that something will somehow help. The only aspect of the postmodern that I would care to foreground as part of my artistic thinking is: the novel is a self-evident fraud (i.e. not real).

Tracy: Even though your work seems to come out of postmodernism, it is also experimental—anticipates the future.

Curt: I like the idea that experimental means "anticipates the future." One of my favorite scholarly books is Paul Ricoeur's *Ideology and Utopia*. He argues that narrative art is of one of two kinds; it is either ideological (in which case it confirms the present) or it is utopic (it proposes alternatives to the present). This makes of the novel a device for proposing "worlds in which we might live" to readers. This is a very serious way of talking about "experiment" in literature, a term which is usually used in a very frivolous way.

Tracy: What about this idea that irony (which seems to be very much part of postmodernism) is dead or dying in literature?

Curt: It is impossible for irony to die in art because irony means saying one thing and meaning another. All art necessarily says one thing and means another because all art is metaphor. A metaphor stands in the place of something absent. Certainly, even the great ur-realist Henry James knew this. Irony and metaphor are perhaps not the same thing, but they are much closer to each other and much more fundamental to art than "realists" allow. If, however, one means pomo irony of the David Letterman variety, then one can only hope that it is dying. I tend to think of that form of postmodern

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irony—which saturates television, Hollywood, advertising—as what Mark Crispin Miller calls the “hipness unto death.” It is a co-opting of the informed irony of adversarial art forms from surrealism on.

Tracy: And do you feel literature and your own writing should attempt to be beautiful or break the hearts of the readers?

Curt: Well, I feel that my art should try to be beautiful in-so-far-as it completely realizes its own sense of form. But I don't believe in an abstract “beauty.” As for breaking hearts, I'm such a romantic in my own heart (as my piano teacher never fails to tell me as I botch Baroque pieces) that I think that, yes, mine should try to, but what I probably mean for the record is that the work should proceed with something at risk. This is part of the work's urgency. In-so-far-as the work also succeeds in linking that personal risk to very public matters, the work “succeeds,” in my view.

Tracy: I definitely did not mean “experimental” in a frivolous way, I meant it in a Whitman or Wordsworth language experiment way, in your own words from *Monstrous Possibility*, “This is what writers and poets have always done: engage the tradition within which they work, and then change it.” Speaking of work, that makes me think of process.... When you sit down to write does your writing happen for you all at once or what I mean to inquire about is your writing process. Do you write at certain times? Are there rituals involved and what role does revision play in your process, do you revise the same sentence fifty times?

Curt: I suppose there are rituals involved when I write. I write with a fountain pen. I like the scratchy feel of it. Writing should be sensuous. I also invent different fetishes for each project. Music to play while writing this particular book. This particular note pad. These books to read while I'm writing. It's all just inspired, intuitive play. Putting things together that don't go together and making them work. I have a very “anal” relation to my writing. I don't write at all until I know exactly what I'm after. Then I waste very little. I throw away almost nothing. It's like one of Freud's infants, “Look what I made.” The most charming thing about the *X-Files* (which I confess to watching once or twice) is the little producer tag at the end in which the voice over says, “I made this.”
Very revealing.

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Tracy: Your father seems like a never ending inspiration to you. (You are like Telemachos always in search of his father, to understand him and thus understand yourself, perhaps?) In *Requiem*, as well as in *Memories of My Father Watching TV*, your writing seems to come out of your love for your father. At the start of *Requiem* the father (Abe) is trying to understand the son (Ike) (this all exploding the Biblical situation where the father is ready to sacrifice his son to God, without any real discussion).

Curt: Yes. I don't think that there is any denying that the Father (whether mine or the idea of Father in general) has been a large source of energy in my work. *Memories* was so harsh on the father figure that I had to give him a chance to respond at the beginning of *Requiem*. That long monologue is a good segue between the two books.

Tracy: Many of the "sons" in the text are corrupt (Robert and John Kennedy). In some places in the text, the text has the sound of the Bible, "This is the sentence which the Lord pronounced through his servant Elijah the Tishbite: 'In the confines of Jezreel dogs shall eat the flesh of Marilyn. The corpse of Marilyn shall be like dung in the field in the confines of Jezreel, so that no one can say: This was Marilyn.'" It is amazing, all the different things you have done as a writer with Biblical text. The entire text of *Requiem* is painful. Reading it hurts me, the reader, but in the most beautiful way, and in the end (or the middle or beginning), it does seem that humanity is in complete ruin and despair. Are you as tortured as many of the characters? The Modern Prophet is a tortured writer/artist seems like the kind of torture that Theodore Roethke endured, that kind of madness in being misunderstood and abused.

Curt: Well, I'm glad to know I've hurt you beautifully...I think. I do try to depict a certain fallenness among humans. I think I relate that mostly to the way we have adopted technological prostheses for basic human functions. Sex is the one I'm after in this book. Computers mediating sex. But I also think there is an appeal to certain things. The formal qualities of the art itself is implicitly always an appeal to hope. It is possible to live autonomously and creatively even now half-digested in the belly of the corporate beast. Artists have the responsibility of showing us how to do that.

Tracy: What is going on between women and men in *Requiem*? In some sense one could consider some of the text to have sort of a misogynistic feel to it, though at the

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same time, it almost has feminist feelings going on, and it seems that sex is negotiated somewhere between "disgust" and "lust" which are really both disgusting—you have made somehow human sexuality to be unsavory and ridiculous— (and it is all true and brilliant).

Curt: Well, all I'd contend is that if there ever was a time of innocent human sexuality, we're nowhere near it now. In curious ways the culture wants to just say no to sex because it is inherently creative and frivolous. Too much time away from work. At the same time it wants to seem to be open and free to sex so it gives us as much soft and hard-core porn as we want. It shows us magnificent miles of cleavage on TV and movies. It's almost as if a woman actress just has to figure that at some point in a movie she's going to have to show tit. All Hollywood movies have a built-in strip routine. *Vanilla Sky*, *Mulholland Drive*. But in my world of *Requiem* there is at least the somewhat adolescent Papageno of Mozart's *Magic Flute* who represents something like a natural human sexuality. It's about play, just as a properly eroticized life ought to be about play. As for misogyny, there are certain characters—the Murderer, Tom, Alpha and Beta—who are misogynists, no doubt about it. Tom in particular has just been driven crazy by the conflict of his desire and the reality in which he has the freedom to realize it. Straight out of his fucking mind. It was a lot of fun, oddly, inventing his particular madness. But, as you say, his brand of sexual loneliness is out there. It's real.

Tracy: In *Monstrous Possibility*, in an essay/piece called "Writing the Life Postmodern," you wrote, "Creative writing's sad responsibility in this eventuality then would be to administer the last rites of the imagination to children damaged beyond redemption on their way to the great maw of America, Inc." Do you feel that, as it still seems that English Departments are endangered of becoming "(customer) service departments, functioning in the name of commerce?" I think community colleges have really fallen into that state of being and the students are in such a hurry to get through it all to get out into the job market, which is for most English majors, teaching. Even most creative writers are destined to be part of all that, which makes the whole major seem sort of hopeless, though students who are writers must keep writing despite being swallowed up into "America, Inc."



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Curt: Well, there is the institutional reality which is depressing. We're all taken up into the social factory. Read Hardt and Negri's new book, *Empire*. That pretty much tells us where we're at. There is almost no place to rest whether in the first world or the third that isn't "managed" by World, Inc. When I decided for the English major, it was just a way of allowing myself to stay alive and stay curious. I was always the most utterly serious student using hippy slacker strategies for sustaining my art and philosophy jones. I think that's what a lot of young writers do. Evading the awful moment of: "there's my JOB!" There's not much career in it for 95%, unfortunately. But I have no problem with the idea that they're giving themselves a few years of life in a place that encourages them to think and create and be a little free. I wish I knew of better places to direct people.

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Tom, Cats, and Cocktails

Sylvie Green Shapero

FIRST

The first time Lupita and I went to Venice Beach, this guy offered us drugs. He attempted an old standard.

"Hey, do you girls know what time it is? Hey, don't I know you?"

"I don't think so," Lupita answered, with her soft, round, open letter O.

"OK, OK," he confessed. "I was just wondering if you wanted to do some really good acid."

"No thank you," she said.

Sometimes I would get into my "Beat it! Scram!" attitude, but not this time. I didn't feel threatened. More like intrigued. But later when I said, "We should live out here," it wasn't with him in mind. Lupita started classes at Santa Monica College. Her English was already very good. We got jobs on the Boardwalk. We never saw that dude again, but his offerings couldn't be ignored.

Lupita and I had never done acid before. She hardly even drank.

NEXT

Tom has a history. And where I intersect that history isn't exactly the point, it just happens to be where we meet. Here at the bar where I cocktail, making money off people who drink way too much, and then I make even more, he asks me out for a drink.

"Tom, I'm working."

He's a regular. I've waited on him before but only now remember his drink.

"I mean when you get off," and he winks at Lupita. She's not scared. She

Sylvie Green Shapiro, *THE NOVEMBER MAN*

knows he's gay and besides, Lupita can handle her own.

By the bar, away from where Tom sits on a barstool at a high cocktail table, Lupita tells me she can't go home or she'll just sit around feeling guilty.

"Guilty," she says, with her Mexican accent.

But she doesn't give into machismo. She's independent and strong and I've seen her confident around men.

Tom looks at us and we smile. He runs his tongue slowly across his thin top lip as he juts out his chin and closes his eyes. Then he opens them up and he smiles.

"Do you want me to punch him for you?" I ask Lupita, loud enough for Tom to hear me.

"No," she says, very open. "It's alright. He's my friend."

"She's only just learning the language," I say very loudly in his direction. "You can't take advantage of her."

And he laughs, looks down, shakes his head, holding it in his hands.

The bartender is taking his own sweet time with pretty ladies sipping their drinks at the other end of the bar. One with pink lipstick looks at him through the tops of her eyes, giggles as he shakes her another martini.

"A table of mine needs a scotch on the rocks!"

But the bartender doesn't respond.

"I think I need a drink, too," Lupita tells me. The manager has just cut her from the floor.

His name is Mark. He is in charge. He is powerfully stern as he stands by the bar unsmiling and I smell the fumes from his sleek leather jacket, shiny and black.

"I need some beers for the kitchen," he says when the bartender finally shows up at the well, even though I was first.

"Coronas?" the bartender asks.

"Fine." Mark grabs the beers and as he's walking them back to the eagerly awaiting cooks he says, "Rita, you're cut too."

"Good," Tom says. "Let's go get a drink." And we do.

Lupita and I still wear our hoochy tank tops and of course we've forgotten to bring jackets because we always forget, even now, how much it cools off at night. We go out the front double doors of the bar and as the wind hits our bodies I see Lupita's hard nipples and smell the salty night air. She's on one side of Tom and I'm on the other. We wrap our arms around his waist, touching skin under his camel hair coat.

He's keeping us warm.

"Are you not afraid the cute boys will think you are straight?" Lupita asks.

"They'll never think that," he says.

THEN

"All I could think of was pussy," I say.

"What?" he asks.

"The word."

"Why?"

"When Lupita and I were in ninth grade this guy in our English class had a dirty book and he taught her 'cum' and 'cock' and 'pussy.' It was an erotic text. So when we have sex, all I can think of is pussy."

"The word?"

"Yes, Tom, the word."

AND

In Madonna's *Sex* book she doesn't say vagina. She says pussy. It's a sexier word. Vagina sounds like biology.

SECOND

Tom walks into the bar one night with a boy. A really cute boy with big dark eyes and a spikey yet very chic haircut. They pass the small tables in front and the boy follows Tom, past the bar, toward the high cocktail tables in back where Tom usually sits. He pulls out the barstool for the boy, who, keeping his head slightly down, looks around, sits on the barstool and Tom scoots him in.

"Who is that with Tom?" Lupita asks me and Mark overhears.

"I don't know," he says. "But you better check his ID."

THIRD

"What about you?" he asks. "Have you two ever . . ." and his voice trails off to suggest something he hasn't said.

"Lupita is very straight," I say.

"Yes," she says. "Like, how do you say it? An arrowhead?"

"You're as straight as an arrowhead?" Tom asks her.

"Yes," she says, nodding her head.

And I'm hurt. Pierced by the words of her innocent tongue in my ear, secret, hand on my thigh. I remember the whispers of coarse black hair, desire, closed eyes.

"It's arrow," I say. "Straight as an arrow."

FOURTH

Drinks at a bar then dragged to a club in West Hollywood with a very long line.

He looks at me like a cat when I ask, "Are there going to be women inside?"

"Rita!" A grin, his mouth open wide. "Is there something I don't know?"

The effect of the vodka is fuzzy and soft, honest and warm to the touch. Close to his face I lean in and say, "You know, Tom. You already know."

"What are you talking about?" she asks, sensing we're leaving her out of something with which she's concerned.

"Sex!" Tom says as he looks up and down the bouncer's shiny tight body.

With slicked-back hair and wide bright eyes he checks ID's at the door.

"You think he is cute?"

His tailored coat is cut just above the tight ass of his vinyl pants.

"We have the same birthday," Tom says. "He never recognizes me in line. Then he sees my birthday and remembers who I am."

We shuffle in right behind Tom. We're close but we still feel the cold, our bodies only slightly warmed by alcohol. Lupita stands behind me and I grab her arms, pull them around my waist. We hold our ID's in our hands for the bouncer to take in the order we stand: Tom, then me, then Lupita. He realizes who Tom is by his birthday, August 15th, and me by mine, the 16th. Lupita's birthday is August 17th. First, second, third.

FIFTH

Tom's business partner has a cocktail party where Tom meets a boy, the friend of a friend whom he trusts right away because he has innocent eyes. This is not the boy from the bar; it's a different one. The boy tells Tom he has just moved out of the apartment he shared with a couple of guys who got their own place when the lease was up. The boy, unfortunately, had just lost his job and couldn't afford first and last month's rent on his own place.

"You can stay with me for a couple of weeks," Tom tells him when, after the

party, they go out for drinks.

The boy is wide eyed.

Tom has an extra room where he only keeps an iron and an ironing board, which folds up and fits easily into the closet. The extra room has an extra bed with nothing on it except a pillow and a comforter when Tom wraps the cord around the iron and puts it up in the closet.

"You can hang up your clothes."

There is plenty of space but the boy doesn't have very much. He brings some CD's to play on Tom's stereo. He hasn't heard them in a long time. The boy even has a videotape not unlike many videotapes that Tom himself has, and the boy can watch them whenever he wants, with or without Tom, which he hasn't been able to do because, for so long, he has been without a VCR.

Tom works at home but the boy's activities do not bother him because the office with a PC, a printer, a fax, and a phone is on the third floor of a three-story Malibu condo and the extra room on the first floor is by the front entrance. Tom even makes the boy an extra key to come and go as he pleases.

"I'm not your keeper," Tom says.

SIXTH

"You want to dance? Go dance!" Tom says to Lupita, various points on her body pulsating to music.

"Margaritas!" I purr.

"I don't need another drink," she says.

"You sure?"

"I don't like to drink too much," she tells Tom. "But sometimes people think I am drunk."

I can see that.

SEVENTH

"In an orange suit," he says, and I picture him in a day-glow, Frankie Goes To Hollywood style outfit.

"What kind?"

"The kind that they give you in jail," he says. "That kind of suit."

He got to the city early, whatever city it was, somewhere up north or in the

Midwest and, since he didn't have any meetings until the next morning, decided to go online. The chat room had a lot of gay men talking about what they liked and how they liked it. Then the voice of a minor in internet type captured Tom's attention and they decided to meet.

"Even on my way," he says, "I thought about what it could be."

But he took a sip from the beer in a brown paper bag, placed it back in the space between the driver's seat and emergency brake, and kept driving.

When he got to the address he knocked on the door and a man, too old to match the typed-out voice, asked, "Are you the guy from online?"

And when Tom nodded, the guy who was not from the internet signaled the others who rushed at the doorway and cuffed him.

EIGHTH

Lupita gets cut first. Tom waits for us but I still have a table drinking premium highballs.

"Go ahead," I say. "I'll meet you there in an hour."

I order a round, drop off the check, and Mark asks, "You ready to go?"

"I only have them, the guys with the highballs, can I have a drink while I wait?"

He leans in toward me.

"Just be discreet," he says with a smile.

His sleeve brushes my arm and as I feel the smooth leather I think about how, of course, again I've forgotten my jacket and will have to wait in line, but, this time, no one is keeping me warm.

NINTH

Tom and the boy who stayed at his place agree he has worn out his welcome, so when Tom goes away on his business trip the boy is to leave. He makes arrangements to stay with somebody else, an older woman, a friend of his mother, until he has enough money saved from his new job to get him a place of his own. Tom feels just a little bit guilty letting him go, so he tells him he can spend the night occasionally if he needs to and has him write down the address and phone number of the lady he's staying with so he and Tom can keep in touch if he'd like.

Tom returns from his excursion, having been bailed out by his partner, without accomplishing much in the way of their business. He simply wants to make himself a

drink, which he does right away, and listen to some soft music while he checks his e-mails, but his stereo, he notices, before he can even take a sip of his scotch on the rocks, is gone, as is his computer.

Of course he thinks of the boy, but he also thinks about how obvious it would be for the boy to commit such a crime. There is no sign of a forced entry and, since Tom does not want to call the police, he decides to take matters into his own hands. He drives to the address written on the piece of paper and, parked in front of the house, calls the number from his cell phone. The boy answers on the first ring.

"I already filed a police report," Tom says. "And I know it's not you, but they told me to rule out every possible person before making a list of suspects."

"I'll just be a minute," he says.

And even though he keeps Tom waiting at the door for a while, it's not enough time to hide a TV, some videos, clothes if they hadn't been hidden already.

TENTH

When I finally get into the club, past the bouncer who doesn't recognize me without my cohorts, Tom and Lupita are drunk.

"Rita!" Tom yells from the dance floor.

I get something with tonic from the bar and want to join them but the music is not quite in me.

"We met this girl in line," Tom says, "who's straight but not narrow."

"Straight as an arrow!" Lupita shouts.

Tom tries to whisper but only speaks loudly.

"I told her about you."

"What did you say?"

Just then she appears with short blonde hair and bright green eyes like a cat.

She purrs in my ear, forbidden, rubs up against my neck, envy taking my breath.

ELEVENTH

After Tom searches the closet and finds nothing, looks in the drawers and sees nothing familiar, he sits down on the couch and looks the boy directly in his round brown eyes. Then he notices a fine gold chain hanging around the boy's neck that Tom had left on his bathroom sink before his trip. He realizes he can see through the boy's white sweat pants to the pattern on a pair of boxers Tom recognizes as his own.

Sylvie Green Shapiro . THE FLOWERS IN THE BUSH

"Give me my stuff," Tom says. "Right now," he demands.

Moving the moss from a plant in a pot by the couch, the boy uncovers one of the speakers. It's amazing how sharp Tom is when he hasn't been drinking.

TWELFTH

"She's a Leo," he tells me.

"When's her birthday?"

"August 16th, same as Madonna."

"She held my place in line," I say.

"I think Lupita was jealous."

THIRTEENTH

"All I could think of was pussy," he says.

"What are you talking about?"

I'm at work on the phone and I'm not supposed to be. My tables are waiting, the manager's looking.

"Go on," I say. I must hear it all.

But he gives it to me in parts.

"It's so bizarre. I'm chatting online . . ."

"That's not the bizarre part."

"No," he says, "it's not."

"I have to go, Tom. It's busy."

"But you're the only one I can tell. This guy had a . . ."

"Pussy?"

And Lupita perks up her ears.

This is not the guy who stole his stuff, it's a different one.

"Tom I must go. Call me later."

When Mark cuts Lupita and me from the floor at the same time because it's slow, she asks me over cocktails, "Was it that girl from the club on the phone?"

"And what would you do if it were?" I ask.

"Do you feel . . .?"

And I interrupt, "Guilty?"

Lupita just lets it lie.

Fetish

A Performance Piece

Sylvie Green Shapero

The scene is a restaurant. A couple is seated at a table with piles of crab legs and bowls full of pennies. JODY addresses the audience. As she speaks, CHARLOTTE enters smoking a cigarette.

JODY: Hi. I'm Jody. We have a few specials tonight in addition to the menu. We have crab legs. King crab legs. Alaskan king crab legs. Steamed. With special tools to crack them open. And special forks to reach down into the leg and eat the meat. We have other specials, too. Tell them about our specials, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE: I would love to offer you one of my Camel special light unfiltered cigarettes, but I just bummed this one myself off of the homeless man in front of Starbuck's. *(She puts out the cigarette on the bottom of her shoe and tosses it on the floor.)* Do I smell like specials to you? The only thing I smell is your patchouli oil.

WIFE: My husband's crab legs are cold.

CHARLOTTE: I do believe that is your table, Jody.

WIFE: These crab legs of my husband's are terribly cold and getting even colder.

JODY: Yes. That's my table. And I just know there's a problem because Crab Leg Man does not like me. He comes in by himself during the day without his wife for a fashionably alcoholic lunch long enough to make me feel like a geisha as he checks my reflection in his martini glass to see if I'm laughing at his jokes. I can't pretend very

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well. Oh yes, Crab Leg Man. School's great, thanks for asking. I am an A student. My pleasure Crab Leg Man. He doesn't complain. He just doesn't tip me. But he loves Charlotte. He showers her with money. She eats it up. *(She walks over to the table.)* Is there a problem with your crab legs?

HUSBAND: My violent delicacy on this question is cousin to my abhorrence of the waitress's patchouli for she moves in a nimbus of the scent.

JODY: When I was a little girl and didn't like my food, my father would not let me throw it away. "Do you know what I paid for that?" he'd say. Like I was eating spoonfuls of pennies.

WIFE: Is this the patchouli-smelling waitress?

HUSBAND: She leaves it on the edge of a dish, the lip of a glass, the silver, even on the pennies I can taste it. Sometimes I am assailed by the smell hours later if I pass my hand in front of my face. Has it been in my pocket?

WIFE: You're eating pennies! You're cracking them open and eating them with a crab fork and some lemon to make them less bitter.

HUSBAND: I can't understand how it is that I never remember how much I dislike the smell of the waitress until I have actually crossed the threshold of the restaurant. And certainly I know that a hoarse voice and patchouli do not amount to moral obliquity. She is a young woman doing the things that are socially available for her to do. At most, her pungent musk represents a social error, and not even that, no doubt, among her friends, who must include people who are estimable by any reasonable standard and yet are in no way affronted by the use of strong perfumes.

CHARLOTTE: *(Smelling herself.)* Do I smell like Camels to you? My daddy use to always come home smelling like Camels. The more roads he built, the more Camels he smoked.

JODY: Charlotte, will you please take over this table? I cannot handle Crab Leg Man and his wife.

THE NEW YORK TIMES Sylvie Green Shapiro

CHARLOTTE: He never complains during the day, but at night his wife does all the complaining for him. Her husband's crab legs are cold. Sounds like that's not the only frigid body part around here.

JODY: He loves you Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE: I don't know why people want to drip themselves all over me because I steal their money. Body is just body, but this body is like warm risen bread out a hot brick oven on a cold winter night. I'll play the role of the geisha and you'll play the role of the waitress.

WIFE: What are you gonna do about my husband's crab legs?

CHARLOTTE: When I was a little girl and didn't like my food, my daddy would say, "Do you know how many roads I have to build to put food on your plate?" Well then build fewer roads. Then, one day, when I was watching MTV, I saw a special on rain dances.

HUSBAND: The patchouli-smelling waitress leaves a film on my skin and turns fine dining air into brown clouds.

WIFE: She didn't even tell us what the soup du jour is.

HUSBAND: She only plays the part of a waitress as she studies a generation with which to identify herself.

WIFE: What do you want to be, he asks, as if you're not really being right now.

HUSBAND: What is your mass movement?

JODY: Am I the Me Generation? The MTV Generation? I objectify my body against the TV set. Just missed the Cold War. Just missed it. Just missed Generation X and veal-fattening pens. Just missed the opportunity to be a YUPpie. I watched Thirty-something at age seventeen.

CHARLOTTE: What kind of car do you drive?

Sylvie Green Shapiro 

JODY: Just missed the Valley Girl. Gag me with a spoon and all that. Totally awesome. But the Galleria is closed now. It's being rented out for office space. Michael Jackson, Culture Club.

WIFE: I thought Boy George was a girl.

HUSBAND: A boy.

WIFE: A girl.

HUSBAND: A boy.

JODY: Gay.

CHARLOTTE: Just missed bell bottoms. Just missed 'em. Flowers in my hair, free love, protesting, not fighting, the Vietnam War. Just missed it 'cause I'm a woman.

WIFE: The Women's Movement. Women didn't use to wear pants.

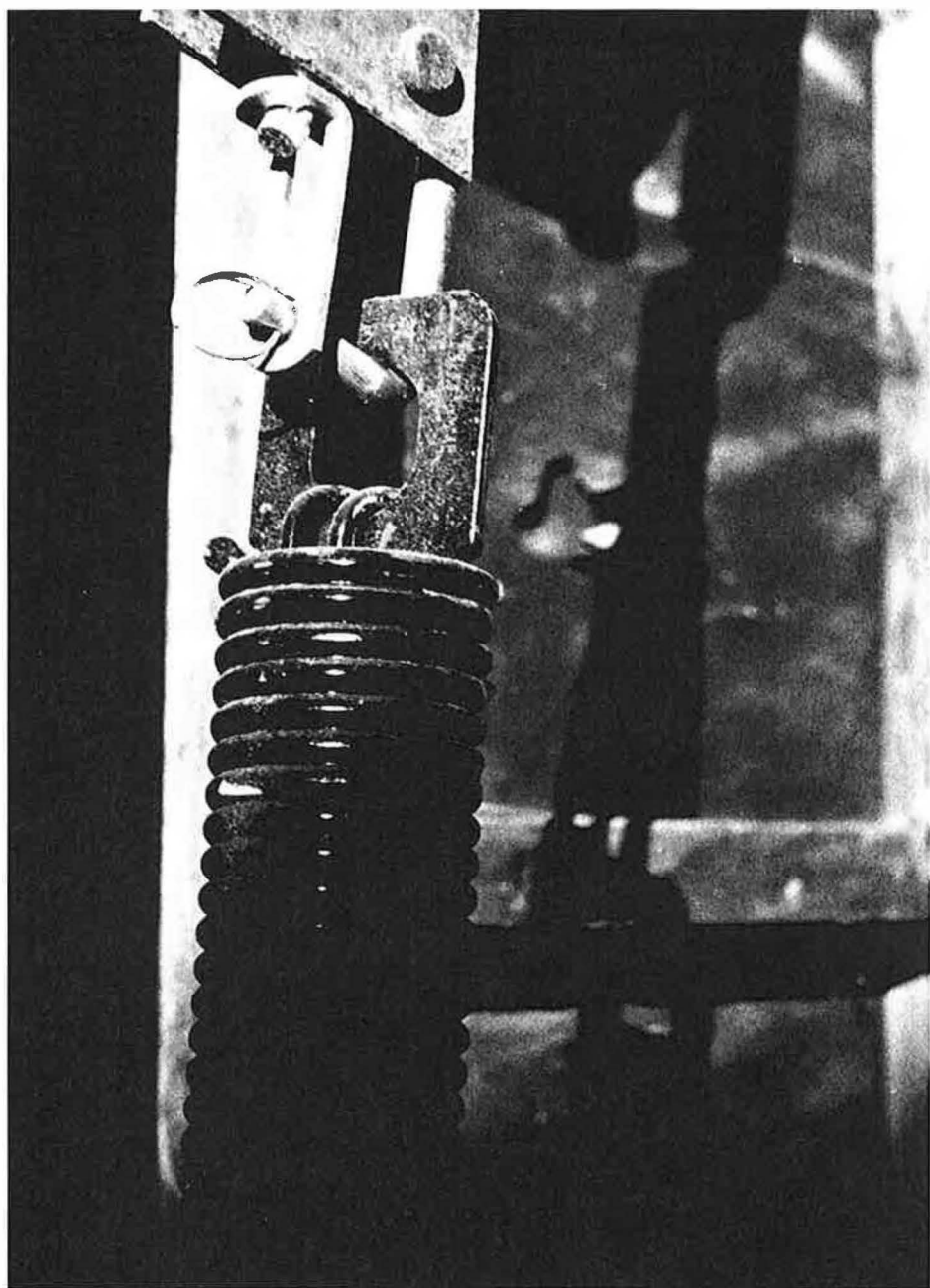
JODY: The Civil Rights Movement. Separate drinking fountains. Missed Communism, missed unions, missed Rosie the Riveter.

HUSBAND: The boys return home.

WIFE: The girls return home to nurse, to cook, to clean.

JODY: Missed the Baby Boom, the birth of my parents, just missed it. Now what? Revolution? Am I the Me Generation?

CHARLOTTE *lights another cigarette as WIFE eats spoonfuls of pennies and HUSBAND attempts to crack open his crab legs. JODY sits down stage center and begins counting the tip money from her apron as she lays it out on the floor in front of her. Lights fade.*





The Waitress

Michael Bakkenson

I might enter a restaurant. There, services will be provided through servers, by whom we mean waiters and waitresses. These momentary servants, that is, slavish attendants, run and skedaddle about, their dark shoes scooting across carpeted floor, carrying them from one table to the next, where requests are snobbishly made and notes are scribbled down hastily, written in a most personal microscript, such that only the writer and the chef, who must be a pock marked grubby little boor, are able to decipher it. Now and then, these servers take to winking or laughing as each table requires and then, slipping behind partitions where we patrons are not permitted, they allow their absence to inflate our hunger and anticipation to such a drool encumbered state that upon finally making their return, that is, their food bringing appearance, we must repress our every urge, our every desire, by which I mean, for instance, to stand up and pinch their cheeks with utter delight. From such ample liberties, they might, after all, scowl at you and perhaps even wag a finger or laugh outright in your direction, which sometimes is not such an unpleasant thing.

So by way of careful manner of my feet I enter a restaurant. Inside, from behind a podium grows a young lady ashimmer with supplication. I can only be entranced by the sparkling smile of hers, as she spits out rehearsed lines so beautifully, so emphatically awkwardly, as if in the very core of her heart she imagines one day being pinned perhaps with a shiny medal of distinction for her unmatched consistency. To this concentrated greeting, I offer a crisp salute and request a booth near a window. And at a booth I am seated, and there this hostess with the mostest continues her delivery, outlining some daily varying trivia, composed today of baked salmon and a vegetable

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lasagna, before I feel compelled to suggest to her that perfection is a thing of brevity and rarity and to continue on so delightfully will now begin only to shave down my fascination. She simpers away, wafting toward her post near the entrance.

Before I am able even to briefly play with the menu, another young creature arrives. She begins to ask me something, but I am overpowered by her voice. The sound of it suggests a gentle sadness, as though from a very early age she had nurtured, in the confines of her stomach, a rosebush, which she, with her undeniable sweetness and good nature, had coddled, lovingly pampered and encouraged to grow so that it flourished wildly, expanding once to a fantastically intricate weaving of prickly green and pink, until only recently when some gnarled hand pushed its way into the back of her mouth, reached down her throat and yanked up this engendered delicacy with such a vicious disregard of consequences, that her voice now seems left both florally redolent and tragically scarred. She repeats her request that I order something to drink, and I quickly comply, suggesting however, that she might decide the variety of the beverage. Her reply is surprisingly beautiful and, as such, I feel required to report it to you and yet a tad slimy for repeating it in such a nonsensical form, that is, in a form such as this useless prose, which certainly will amount only to a string of frowns and grimaces, and perhaps, if I might be so bold as to consider the possibility, an exaggerated rolling of one's eyes. Quite casually, she quite naturally replied, "I wouldn't dream of the responsibility." I consider falling to my knees, proposing on the spot, but instead say only that water will do.

She retreats and I am left once again alone with the menu, which I split open now by wiggling a finger between its pages. It usually is best to do this at the corners, since corners seem always to yield with smiles and graciousness at the impositions fingers are apt to make upon them. Inside I find several essays lauding the quality and exceptional personality of each entree, as if each had popped out of a wonder womb of a chef who demanded they be loved and adored, and if possible, showered with compliments so their self-esteem might never suffer. Instead of succumbing to such an affront on my natural generosity, I decide to favor a small salad, who, poor neglected child, has only garnered a line or two of obviously half-hearted praise from the otherwise over zealous menu scribe.

Having made my decision, my thoughts wander toward my legs; specifically I am concerned by the way they coil and noodle about, by which I mean to suggest they bang relentlessly into the pole that, supporting the laminated table that soon will befriend my bowl of orphaned lettuce, also brings to mind mighty elephant trunks and also those trunks of trees, which relenting only to the chopping of axes, leaves my knees in a rather pathetic situation, blunt and useless as they are. The doleful waitress certainly, I imagine, might smile if I were to tickle her elbows. But whatever am I thinking? I decide to knot up my legs by pinning one under the other, and at least in this way only one will be free to snake around and acquire its bruises. I find this solution satisfying and wish to think a bit more about it, but am impeded with my self-congratulation by the arrival of the doleful waitress who, equipped with a splashing glass of water, implores me to reveal a secret, namely that secret which I had every intention of revealing, by which I mean of course my selection of a small salad. She complains immediately, with an impertinence liable to injure, that I must order more than just a salad, that a salad is not a meal, that there are bones on my body, shivering and cold, that require the warmth only a meal of hearty proportions might provide. I declare that the small salad though, is all that I want, and she, reluctantly acquiescing, retreats with a slight smile and, if but she had one, a tucked tail between her legs. I find the entire exchange blissful.

But she has left, and I quickly become a bit bored, a bit gloomy, until I imagine I might accost the delight and whistle her to a shoe store, as certainly her feet must be sore and very burdened, and what better way to please a doleful waitress than with some comfortable foot holders? There she would sit down, and I would instruct the shoe proprietor, an unruly cad of a creature, to bring out the finest *zapatos* available, for we have here a burdened waitress, and it is our duty to relieve the suffering, that is I, the philanthropic callous remover, and you the disgraceful merchant, must see to it that this girl shall never again make such exclamations near the end of her day as, for instance, "Oh, my feet are killing me." You will have to admit, even with your surfeit of disgracefulness, that it would be absolutely tragic if she were to die as a result of her feet. Though, perhaps, really what sort of beautiful death this might be, to be attacked and mauled, dragged down to *senor* Hades, by something as precious, as supportive as these feathered eagles; they who've carried her throughout twenty some years on the cusps of their flying shoulders, asking for nothing but a nightly respite, a

rest from their toilsome soaring, now suddenly find themselves so overwhelmed by the unsparing weight of this delicacy that they're impelled to turn on her, the one they only yesterday so lovingly touted around like a heroine, bringing her down in a raucous swirl of feathers, beaks and divinity. What silliness. In any case, the merchant will kneel down before her, tugging at one of her worn shoes, which she will have kindly extended toward him. As the shoe is removed, a sock is revealed, and perhaps this sock, a bit soiled, a bit tattered, will have a hole or two and, as such, might provoke an insolent snort from the merchant, "Perhaps the lady will also be requiring some new socks?" She may then very well turn to me, pleading, "No, please let me keep the socks! This is too much already, and I do treasure them so..." Naturally, with the help of a newspaper I carry for just such occasions, I will already be beating the merchant on his ears for his arrogance, at which the doleful waitress might laugh a bit and even wiggle a toe or two in delight from, and perhaps one such piggy might even poke its head out through—but here now, she's returned.

On to the table a bowl is placed, and alongside it, an additional fork, both bit with frost, by which I mean to suggest they seem chilled, and the lettuce, a splendid pale green, sports, like bitty beauty marks, drops of dew, or rather for the less enchanted, little drops of water about its slight ridges; a heap of yellow and brown croutons parade proudly atop the wonderful verdure, while a single tomato cowers, blushing in the corner of the bowl. As the waitress bestows this treat upon the table, she makes also an exclamation, expressing with regret and a touch of nonsense that she, so displaced by my meager order, had forgotten one of the staple tenets of the food toting career, namely to enquire about my choice of salad dressing. I quickly suggest that she shouldn't fret over the oversight, as without it we wouldn't have had the chance for this second exchange, which, must be admitted, I'm finding wholeheartedly enjoyable, and without further ado I will choose, as accompaniment to my green meal, the LaLonde masterpiece, thousand island. Her eyes roll, and her head nods and she slips away without a word. A grimace, I'm sure, has appeared on my face, as this sad thing seems so entwined with her gloom that not even my own ridiculous behavior can provide an unfurling interlude between frown and torment, where perhaps a sonorous giggle might be allowed to escape and frolic about in, say, Italian rapture, providing my ears some relief from the din, or rather cacophonous hum of the surrounding patrons, whom just now I'm taking in for the first time, particularly this one who, in a room full of more or

less clean shaven occupants, stands remarkably out, drawn as he is, with a fishtail monstrosity under his nose that, efficiently sopping up remnants of its owner's stew, seems also to amplify the whirl of the man's slurps. The noise is so foul that I can't help but think the man deserves a crouton thrown at him. Such boldness on my part might impel the waitress to come running out, wagging finger and sweet scoldings abounding. The victim of the attack will stand up, pretending to make a scene, flapping his moustache violently, so that the poor waitress, who has gone over to palliate his offense, will be splattered by the soup du jour or stew droplets firing off his bristled lip. Eventually, undoubtedly, that is to say, without question she will, with her infectious infections, I mean here her smile, be able to calm the man. He will sit down and finish his stew. The waitress and I though, will in secret, be laughing. And I, finding myself then in the role of the naughty schoolboy, might decide it best to chase her through the kitchen with a spatula. Together we'll duck under chefs and leap over huge spoons, while I concentrate on whapping out more of her laughs and pleasant little, "Oh no's," and she, chancing on a bowl of croutons, will pelt me with the breadthings as she flees my spatulistic attack, until we collapse, together, exhausted, under a metallic counter.

With an adroit bit of jugglery, the waitress drops something off at my table, then races on, white shirt tucked sweetly into her pants, arms full of meals and smells intended for other patrons. I watch her for a moment and then look at the small caster she has left. It is my thousand island. And it is gorgeous. Its orangey peachness smacks with unparalleled complement against the silver of the container it's so luxuriously sprawled out within, and a relish worth relishing is sprinkled throughout it, which is to say, pickle bits float as if on little rafts in the toothsome ocean. The pleasure of spooning out two mountainous dollops of this treat is all mine, after which I then fork mercilessly the mountains into a paint splattering, a lovely green, slathered and doused with the beautiful topping, an image worth so many oohs and ahhs that tongues might themselves be sent panting from all their owners' pantings.

Lettuce soars into the air as my rambunctious leg, which managed to wiggle free of its pinning, knee-knocks the tabletop. One might say, fortunately only a leaf or two escaped, but one should be whipped for such a casual dismissal of these inimitable delicacies. After all, isn't each leaf deserving of the warmth and unwavering affection that only a mouth such as mine might provide, the love of a pawing tongue, the bump

Michael Bakkenson 's THE FLOWERS OF THE FLOOR

of a tooth? But instead, lying bewildered on the floor, twitching at its altered destiny, which can only now involve the coarse bristles of a broom, it feels its fallen fate so unjustified, so unfoundedly cruel, that its only recourse is to turn yellow with bitterness, my poor proud little leaf. The rest of my meal will be tainted now with a darkling mourning as a result of this loss; I pierce solemnly one of the survivors. I find it though, a bit excessively

delicious, so much so that I can't help but smile. Perhaps there is no better thing in the world than smiling despite yourself.

My champion of obsequiousness, the servicing servess returns now, and kissing my ears with her sweet, sweet voice, full of altruism, brimming with concern and doe-like sympathy, she ensures herself of my satisfaction with the meal before me, which conclusion I most aptly bring her to with, as might be imagined, bombastic assurances. Perhaps my excesses oblige her to cast her eyes downward where, noticing the miserable lettuce pouting on the floor, she declares me a handful and scoops herself down so that she might scoop the fallen leaf up, an act which she performs with such care, as if the green little thing were more precious than her own fingers that now cradle it. Scolding me a second time, she places the leaf into the pouch of her apron before heading toward the kitchen, where I might only assume she will give this outcast another chance; perhaps it will find its way into a bowl after all; perhaps it will yet find its way under another's tongue. She is more wonderful than wonder. I feel as if I might burst with adoration. Pillars in some remote country are falling, crumbling down in awe of her impossible kindness. I eat, love and relish all together.

Concentration itself marvels at the dedication and attention I exhibit in seeing that no croutonic crumb, no fleck of lettuce, no smear of peachish dressing remain very long imprisoned in the bowl, which with its chill and iciness must make each little prisoner nearly bounce with anticipation at the esophageal liberation I am meant to provide. The bowl in its eventual clean state allows me a moment to again think of the doleful waitress. Certainly some sort of kindness is called for, but each option available seems so perfunctory, so contrived to the point of absurdity that ultimately only nothing is possible. What a horribly abortive, stunted stumped stupid state this all is. An abhorrence of custom is tragically inhibiting. But I'm not one for profundities; perhaps

all may be resolved with a napkin, a pen and some portentous words:

My dear sweet salver,

Your service is like that of a mother's, unfaltering and true, worthy of plaques and applause, bows and kissed feet. It is both ridiculous and beautiful that you are stuck here. Perhaps one day I will return, and arm in arm we shall escape together; into a woodland area we'll stroll, and all that is evil we'll leave in our wake, and all that is good we shall spin toward, making a spectacle of ourselves along the way, enchanting trees and birds alike, whose gossip lives after all must be very very dry, and how nice that we might do something special for them too. You best stay charming, and I certainly will remain charmed.

w.

And so, it's done. Those who flirt with origami may not be particularly impressed with my creasing abilities, yet the contents are hidden well enough from the busboys and other despicables, by whom I mean snoops, who with their noses so scarred and bruised from all the door slamming they have endured as a result of their wily ways would welcome certainly the minor scrape of say, a paper cut, which we will all have to agree would be quite an accomplishment for something as soft and gentle as this delicate napkin that now holds my parting words for the doleful waitress, who I can't help but imagine will be tripping, stumbling, and similarly elevating herself in my head for at least a few days more.

Outside the air is crisp like a cracker. Rather it is salty, like a cracker. That is, it nudges me forward, past the restaurant's window, through which I peek long enough to see perhaps my waitress smiling, before I head quickly towards the bridge that, leaping over the bay in a graceful single bound, revealing its latticed underbelly to all the fishes beneath, clearly cares nothing of modesty or decorum, and thus is deserving of a good salute or kick in the shins.

Family Reunion

Vanda J. Hembree

PHOTO 1: THREE OLD WOMEN FACING THE CAMERA HOLDING A LARGE FRAME FILLED WITH YELLOWED BLACK & WHITE PHOTOS. ETTA, JULIANNE, AND IDYLLE.

Three sisters from a family of 13, the oldest, the youngest and one somewhere in between are all that's left. The youngest, dark and always-ugly, ran away with a carnival man in her youth. They traveled the countryside and she collected tattoos and bruises. The amazing painted lady. Until her sister finally rescued her.

PHOTO 2: A SURPRISE SHOT OF ONE OF THE WOMEN FROM THE FIRST PHOTO, HER TIDY FIGURE STILL NOTICEABLE.

Idylle is the oldest, though she doesn't look it. Her white hair carefully styled and her figure neat and trim. She visits the stylist every other week. Idylle doesn't know it, but she's prideful and vain. If anyone asked her, she'd say she's a good Christian woman. The family's savior.

PHOTO 3: THE MIDDLE SISTER, ETTA IS LEANING AGAINST A STAGE BETWEEN A MAN IN AN ORANGE SHIRT AND A WOMAN IN A JUMPSUIT (MARGARET).

Etta stood up for them at their wedding, over 40 years ago. A month ago, Margaret came home from shopping to find her husband in the garage dangling from an electrical cord wound tight around his neck. His face was bulging and red when the garage door opened and released the tension in the cord, dropping him to his feet,

THE SUICIDE OF VANDA J. HEMBREE

where he sagged until his wife managed to get him free and call 911. He told the doctor it was an accident. Said he was trying to hang a light bulb and the cord got caught in the garage door opener when his wife came home. They let him go, but suggested to Margaret that she disconnect the garage door opener for a while and keep a close eye on her husband. So they took his blue pills and went home. A week later, Margaret found his suicide note. He'd stuffed it inside her pillowcase. "Dear Margaret, You have meant so much to me, I couldn't leave you without an explanation... you bitch."

PHOTO 4: TWO WOMEN DRINKING A TOAST AND A THIRD BENDING OVER, ALL SMILING INTO THE CAMERA.

The woman in front bending over is Idylle's niece, Carolyn. She's a topless dancer who used to spend summers with Idylle and her husband, Happy, at their farm in Niangua. Happy married Idylle even though she'd had a son out of wedlock—quite a favor in the 40's. It didn't hurt any that Idylle was a beautiful woman, with dark hair and fair skin. Eyes so blue it was like looking into heaven, or so Happy told her. And it was even closer to heaven for him, when he would catch Carolyn alone in the barn during those hot, sticky summers on the farm. Idylle never knew, or at least never confronted him, about Carolyn or any of the others.

PHOTO 5: A WOMAN SITTING ALONE AT A FOLD-OUT TABLE WEARING RED PANTS AND A WHITE BLOUSE. SHE WAS ONE OF THE WOMEN TOASTING IN THE PREVIOUS PHOTO.

Pauline is the family's black sheep. She never married. Never had children. Never did a lot of things. She just lived quietly with her lover, Opal. They had peach trees in their front yard and plums in the back. Every summer they would gather the fruit and make wonderful preserves and jellies. On Sundays they would make fresh bread and invite their family over for tea and sandwiches. Pauline never heard the word "lesbian" until her cousin, Idylle, pointed it out to her in the Bible, where God expressly forbade women to lay with women and men with men. Pauline didn't stop sleeping with Opal, as Idylle had intended, instead she quit going to church.

PHOTO 6: ALWAYS-UGLY JULIANNE AND HER NIECE, LORETTA, BOTH LOOKING AT THE GROUND.



Vanda J. Hembree

It's a strained photo since Julianne and Loretta haven't spoken for years. The grudge between them is old and distant and only half-remembered. Something to do with shoes or stolen boyfriends or recipe cards.

PHOTO 7: A THIN YOUNG MAN WITH A MOUSTACHE WEARING A TIGHT T-SHIRT. A CAN OF CHEWING TOBACCO WEIGHS DOWN THE FRONT POCKET AND HIS BELT LOOKS TOO THICK FOR HIS LOW-SLUNG WAIST. HE WEARS SUNGLASSES ON TOP OF HIS HEAD EVEN THOUGH HE IS IN-DOORS.

Brian is Opal's son from a previous and very failed marriage. To make up for his mom sleeping with the same woman for years, he sleeps with many. Brian doesn't know it yet, but an STD is in his future. One that will leave him impotent and rashy. In the photo, though, he is still a virile young man posing for the camera. His thumbs are tucked into his back pocket and he wears a shy half grin—the kind he uses with great success on women. Just a moment before the flash went off he spotted Carolyn across the room and recognizes her from Springfield's famous Topless Tee Room. In a very short while, the two of them will find themselves in his van, smoking pot and engaging in oral copulation. Brian loves family reunions.

PHOTO 8: LORETTA AND PAULINE SEEN FROM ACROSS THE AUDITORIUM.

Loretta and Pauline are sisters and even though it's hard, Loretta does her best to accept her sister without judging her.

PHOTO 9: LORETTA CAN BE SEEN LOOKING AT HER AUNT JULIANNE, WHO IS TALKING TO A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE.

Julianne is talking about her glory days with the circus, when people would come from miles around to see the amazing painted lady. It's an old story. One usually told out of her sister's hearing. Whenever Idylle tells the story, Julianne is trapped in the circus, unable to get away from the terrible carneys and her sideshow husband, who beats her. Julianne can't seem to help herself and it's up to Idylle to rescue her. One weekend, Idylle zips out to fetch her younger sister home to live with her and Happy, ever after. Only she forgets about her husband who, even though Julianne is dark and

THE PHOTOGRAPHER, Vanda J. Hembree

always-ugly and Idylle has eyes the colour of heaven, likes a little change every now and then. So begins the secret trysts between Happy and Julianne in the barn for their own private sideshow in front of the cows and chickens.

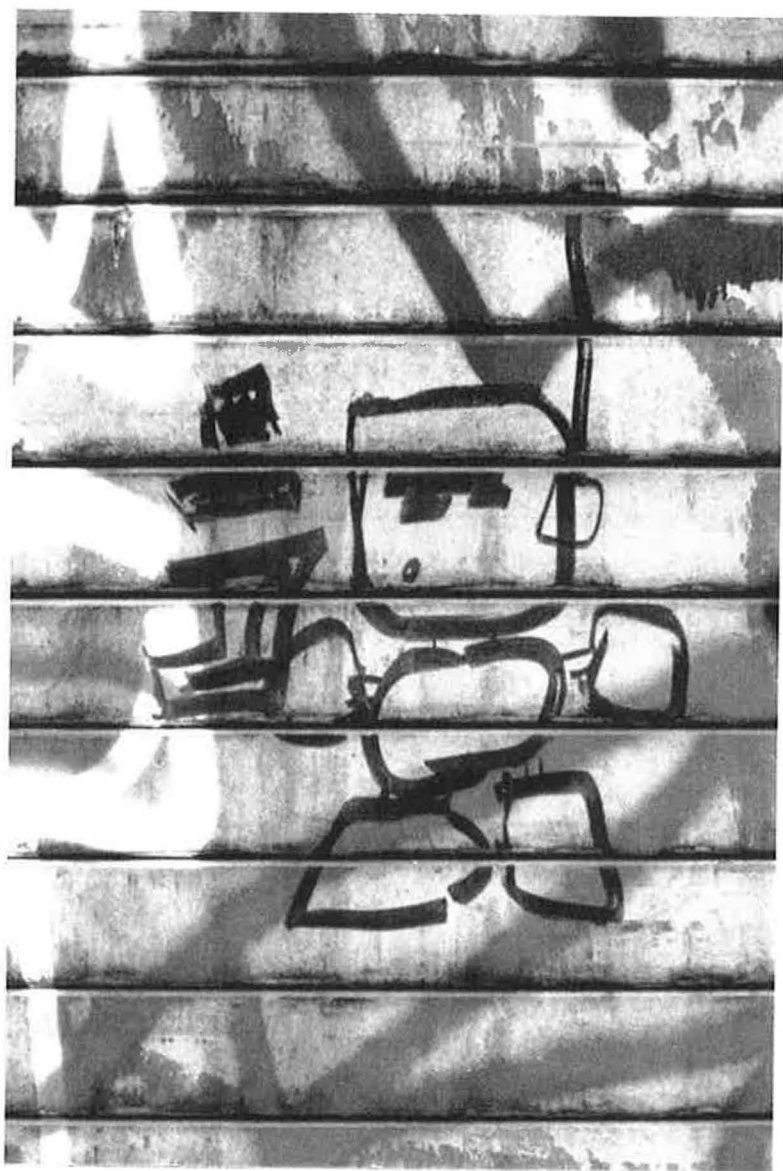
PHOTO 10: SIDE SHOT OF CAROLYN AND HER FAMOUS TOPLESS BREASTS COVERED BY A CLINGING, SLIGHTLY SEE-THROUGH T-SHIRT. BRIAN'S FINGER HAS MANAGED TO FIND IT'S WAY IN FRONT OF THE LENS.

The two of them fell out of the van, laughing and giggling, pulling up zippers and tucking in shirts only to find themselves at Idylle's feet. Without a word, her Puritan mouth puckered, she let her displeasure be known. And even though she didn't mean to say it Carolyn muttered, "And who were you screwing when you were my age?" No one in the family ever mentioned Idylle's indiscretion - well, at least not since Happy married her and made her respectable. She didn't know what to do so she simply turned around and walked away, never to speak to Carolyn again.

PHOTO 11: THE THREE SISTERS ARM-IN-ARM AROUND A FOLDING TABLE WITH A PINK AND BLUE CARNATION FLOWER ARRANGEMENT ON IT. THIS IS A TRADITIONAL SHOT TAKEN EACH YEAR BEFORE LUNCH COMMENCES.

Idylle picked the pink and blue carnations even though Etta wanted roses and Julianne wanted lavender chrysanthemums for the head table. It was typical that Idylle won. After all, she was the oldest and knew her Bible passages best. She said the colours were significant. In truth, the blue just matched her heavenly eyes.

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Heidi in Van Nuys

Ian Giatti

She lives in two-story federal buildings, offering the monopolized services of mail delivery and domestic protection. She lives in the last remaining Pioneer Chicken stand, where the grease comes first. She lives where I once did, among underdeveloped townhomes speckled pink on cheap paint, blessed only with a gated summer camp at the end of the road.

There are probably worse places than Van Nuys. The name itself sounds like an exiled aristocrat—stripped of his riches and thrown into the gutter. Though not my birthplace, Van Nuys was hospice to those ending days where the frivolity of children bubbles over life's daily chores. It is here, this rickety strip of faux-suburbia, where blue Hugh wallows away in carpentry. He's what the tenants like to call a "utility man," the guy that's willing to get his hands dirty, inhale asbestos and risk tetanus, if only for some company. He can fix mostly anything.

My mother was scared of him; his volume went up and down from day to day. Sometimes, from inside our screen door, we watched as he rubbed his balding head in silent despair. I used to toy with the idea of having a neighborhood bake sale to raise money for Hugh, hoping a new lawn patio set without holes would relax him. Years later, I realized that it was myself I was desperate to relax.

He had a lunchbox of tools he lugged around, hammers and drills and always a chainsaw, without which his walk seemed less steady, lacking intent. His humor was found early Sunday mornings, before the sun had its chance to work. Scrambled A/M radio would echo around the complex, bringing out robed sleepers who always gave Hugh the benefit of the doubt. He would smile and wave, as if these days were birthdays and it was time to blow out the candles. Though we never had a lack of vermin in our woodwork, Hugh knew where the holes were, and he would plug them up,

THE WALLS OF THE HOUSE ARE SEALING OUR WALLS WITH INFESTATION. Ian Giatti

"We wear uniforms because they teach tolerance," his teenaged Heidi protested when she would see me on our paths home from school. She had a mouthful of braces, tinny and glamorous, her smile sparkling with awkward lessons she learned, grades beyond my days of long division and chicken pox. And the outfit was standardized, no matter how early the morning was: bleached white polo, pleated skirt and pantyhose. There is secret in that metal mouth, like a tarot card turned sideways on the table. Trying to decipher her is wishing names came with directions.

Our common patio was a dune of dried grass and gopher holes. These were not his problems. A groundskeeper is a person who tends the grounds of a playing field, estate, cemetery, etc. She was my new playing field. She was my playing field because I did not live or die where she stood.

There was so much time to pass that we became experts with each other's bodies, the way a doctor can claim intimate knowledge that nobody else should bother knowing. We would scratch symbols on the other's back, pretending fun but wishing it elsewhere. We'd cuss out of earshot. It was ours, alone in that backyard; my favorite was playing tag among the clotheslines, while the laundry of strangers hung wet. Hers cleaning up for mine, and mine brushing the dust off of hers.

From my parent's bedroom, through the second-story windows screened for mosquitoes and other night insects, I could watch the dumpsters of Hughes' Market, where day-old lettuce was thrown into the stench of rotting butcher's meat and nobody cared. Between trashings, one-legged hobos and the scary homeless would browse garbage, picking and choosing over discarded food. At the corner that separated my home from the dumpsters was a leafy, shaded nook that became a halfway home for bums, who would shout obscenities from the shadows.

Instead of Disneyland, I had Heidi field trips. After begging my mom unsuccessfully for a pass, I would alibi bike-riding, and sneak off to the store. Whenever we came to that corner, I would pretend to not notice a discarded person living in the bushes, as I manufactured conversations about chocolate being superior to all other forms of candy. Heidi, however, ignored my attempts as I ignored the bums; she would toss whatever change she could spare in their direction.

Once past the bushes, beyond the stinking trash heap and neglected people, we would march into Hughes' like millionaires in a thrift store. She always took off towards the candy bins, where you help yourself to the flavors you're willing to pay for. Her bag would weigh several pounds, never ounces, and she would wonder aloud why the price of candy was so high.

THE WALLS OF THE HOUSE ARE SEALING OUR WALLS WITH INFESTATION. 79

I could barely hear her from the frozen section. The best part was opening the freezer doors, and feeling air chilled back to newness, standing in the aisle with arms outstretched, while housewives passed in search of a better Salisbury steak. Of course, this couldn't last, and inevitably a store clerk would defend the aisle, forcing me towards produce and fruits. But by then, the candy burden was already lifted. We would slip out unnoticed, camouflaged by her plaid skirt with the Cross dangling from her waist, two children racing dusk back to the village.

When you're twelve, you spend the late afternoons ducking out of sight when Mom calls you in for dinner, shouting "Aren't you hungry yet?" Once, before all this growing up, I went for three days straight without dinner, a meal that never seemed to come for Heidi. Dusk would dangle in front of us, daring us to see the stars. But Heidi couldn't wait to go back inside; she would squeeze my wrist numb when Hugh called her inside.

Heidi would sweat more than most girls her age.

They warned that there would be choking involved. Wesley Freckles nudged me in the ribs, offering up his own anecdotes of sin. Even Jeremy the Flip used to tug on the corners of his sweaty t-shirts when he boasted of experience. I dismissed it all, of course, as more adolescence. As if the whole world had been gearing up, working out, taking notes, sleeping late, lifting more and screaming louder in anticipation of Frenching. Too often, during those precious minutes for gossiping over candy bars, these little men would approach, patting my baby chub for good luck, like war veterans toasting a memorial.

In the absence of mint crystals, I offered her my tongue. Sandwiched within the graveled patch of land we called parking, and the watchful windows of our homes, Heidi and I had managed to piece time together long enough for this moment. Here, in this followed walkway between the garages, where once there was only handball, we stood, face-sucking.

I burrowed into my pockets, coming up with only denim. "I'm sorry about the smell. Just had cookies." These are words that children say, I thought to myself. But the apology was all I had. That and cookie breath.

I wondered if she bothered with cookies anymore, or even snacks altogether. She probably spent her good hours on lipsticks and fragrances, where mine went towards cartoons. Still, she hadn't excused herself yet. She even seemed to be getting comfortable. Her skirt pleating had flattened against the stucco wall; she tugged, but it didn't change things. I yearned to suggest gym shorts, the ones she wore for volleyball practice.

Each minute passing left me hungrier for the next, wondering if I would hear my mother call before we got the chance to exchange firsts. With our backs parallel and our faces turned together, I caught the downwind, her hair smelling like laundry done. Her brace face puckered around her mouth, the centerpiece of it all. She held out two peanut butter toffees, golden-wrapped, twinkling like pirate booty. "My dad would kill me if he knew I took 'em. He's addicted." Heidi always managed to make her guilt adorable.

She handed over one sweet, winking at me in complicity as she popped hers, giggling. Though she tried to conceal it, I could see her jaw shift as she spread the candy around her teeth, the bulge of her tongue bouncing from cheek to cheek in sugary effort. I pocketed my piece, planning for dessert, hoping I would finally understand all the fuss about toffee.

Whoever promised that love conquers all never studied geriatrics. Outside the homes of old people, the differences seem petty. But it's beyond those screen doors, to the source of the bran baking, and the slamming of medicine cabinets, where solitude is king. All this prettying up in honor of ourselves becomes futile when we have no pretty left.

The strands of Heidi's hair were already thinning at thirteen, dried out from all the recess sun she caught years before me. I had seen her mom only once, in a photograph visible from her front porch. The woman was stoic, refusing to smile, in the same way she must have refused to acknowledge her graying hair. Heidi, it seemed, would portrait the same soon enough.

At first, I thought I had induced vomiting. She clasped her hand over her mouth, holding her breath, staring down at me. My hands covered the top of my head, fearful of spray escaping. Is this how kisses end? Had I known beforehand, I thought to myself, I would have brought a helmet. I turned my back on her, as she coughed up phlegm behind me. I couldn't bring myself to look. "I'm sorry, I'm not really good at this..." I pleaded. Out of my eye's corner, I thought I saw her underwear, as she doubled over to dab the sides of her mouth. Nothing but laced pink. This, of course, was little consolation. Hallucinations of my mother hollering, wishing for the bell to end this round, I listened for anything.

She tapped my shoulder from behind. Defying my own instinct, I turned around, hearing what I already knew: "Don't worry. I've had worse."

To a ten-year-old, the elderly wither at nineteen. There is nothing else beyond that. Instead, they speculate, conjuring up netherworlds in which toy soldiers can

attack, with weapons of nonsense like the Laser Quad-Cannon and the Underground Hovercraft. The armory of little boys accounts for any and all contingencies, except for the fatiguing of troops after two decades of battle.

In the San Fernando Valley, tectonic plates shift horizontally, and the foundations of homes slip out from underneath. Little earthquakes were routine, like the whirring of garbage trucks and sprinklers sputtering over the lawn. But when, one afternoon, the wooden gate that never failed to discourage me began to rattle, I recognized the heavy breathing as fear. I tried retreating back to my soda and potato chips, but they could not help me.

Abandoned between my mother's impetus for new clothes, and my father's obligation to slave, I had not considered the defense of my home as a necessary skill. I sprinted up the stairs into my bedroom, kicking action figures out of my way as I looked out my window. Down below, there was Hugh, taking a hammer to the gate around my house.

I reacted the way a rat does, knowing he's unwanted, pretending to be invisible. All I could hope for was a declaration of war from Hugh, a verdict to explain the crime. His hammer was chipping away at the wood planks, as his eyes focused only on the task at hand. The sun bounced off of his hairless scalp, as he skillfully moved from plank to plank, hammer to wood, onto my private property.

My thoughts raced immediately to my forgotten toys that lay exposed in our backyard: a rusty bicycle that needed oil and new brakes, a junior football with the laces still factory white, a sand bucket filled with more weapon-wielding action figures. What did he want, I wondered? My father's barbeque set seemed the most obvious target, as Hugh had remarked on its economy and shine for the last three summers.

I slumped against the wall below the windows, ducking out of sight. I listened for my mother's keys, but heard only Hugh battering away. I convinced myself that this was all my doing, that I had no business in his buildings or his daughter. I wanted him to bring the whole thing down, cheering him on as I imagined the tears spilt over a lost little boy who was merely keeping to himself, playing in his bedroom. At the wake, all the distant cousins would marvel at the tragedy of a ten-year-old gone, yet at the same time, impressed with a promising manhood evoked in tales of lust and lather by a neighboring teenaged girl. There would be applause, the kind that roared in defiance, honoring his bravery, remembering the privileges of prepubescent sportsmanship.

Instead, a phone rang from deep inside Hugh's home. Its shrill rebounded among the buildings. The hammering, for the longest second in my short life, stopped.

As I peeked my eyes above the windowsill just enough to see, I watched as

THE RAINY AFTERNOON WITH ALIAN GIATTI

Hugh surrendered, putting away his hammer as he ran for the phone. I speculated over the source of the phone call for days, finally deciding the Hugh wasn't expecting a phone call at all. That explained the hurry.

Heidi's eyes were bagged, half-closed from the morning until night came. Eventually, our games became chores to her, a reminder of days she had outgrown. I saw her less and less after I left elementary school behind. Soon, algebra came and all I could manage was pressing my face against the window screen in between homework, and hoping she saw me. She had stopped coming outside altogether, shuffling no further than the porch to periodically check on the world.

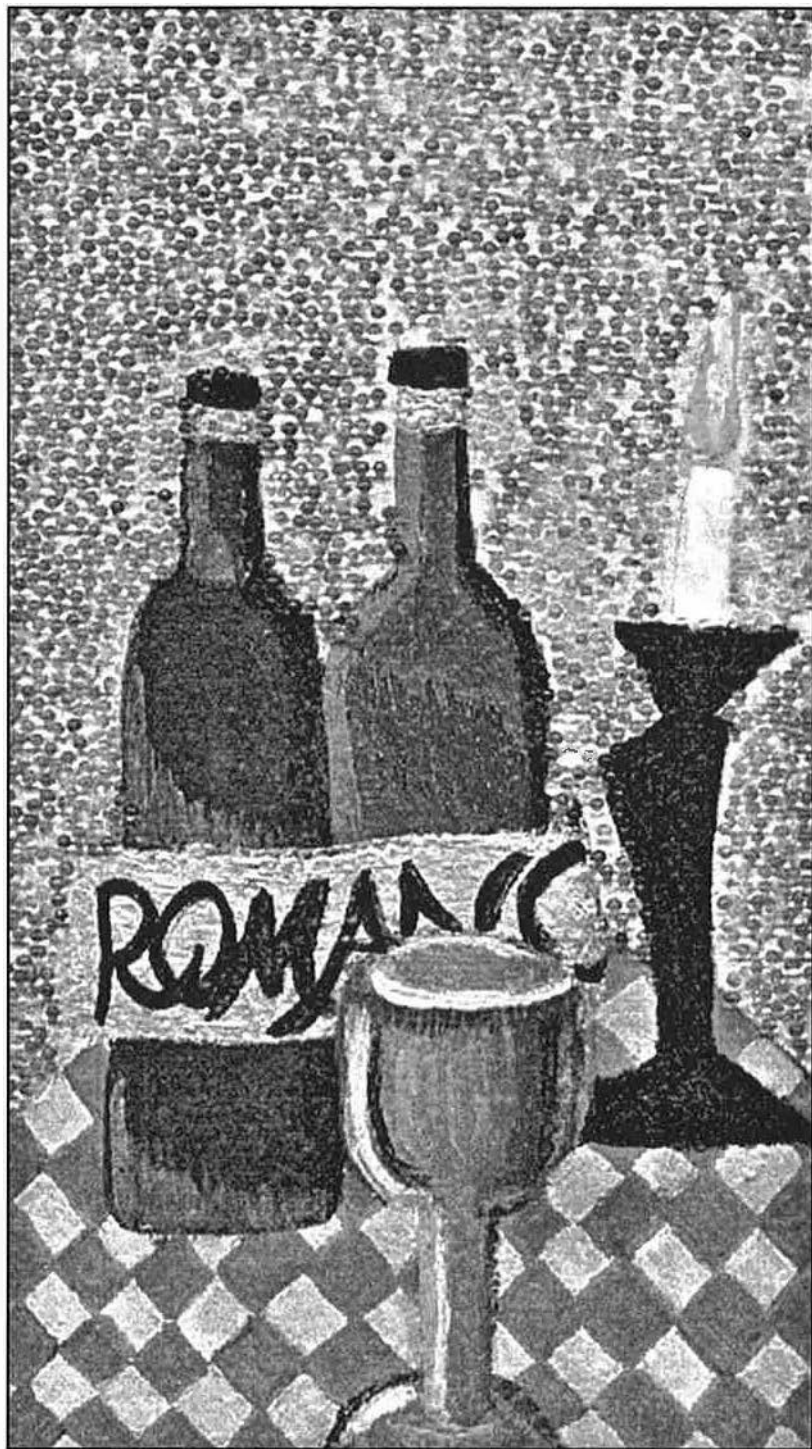
Hugh's patio set, meanwhile, had withered into two apple boxes and an electric heater that fried flying insects. It was here that he spent more time than ever, drinking concealed bourbon, listening to scratchy Hank Williams records, waiting for bugs to die.

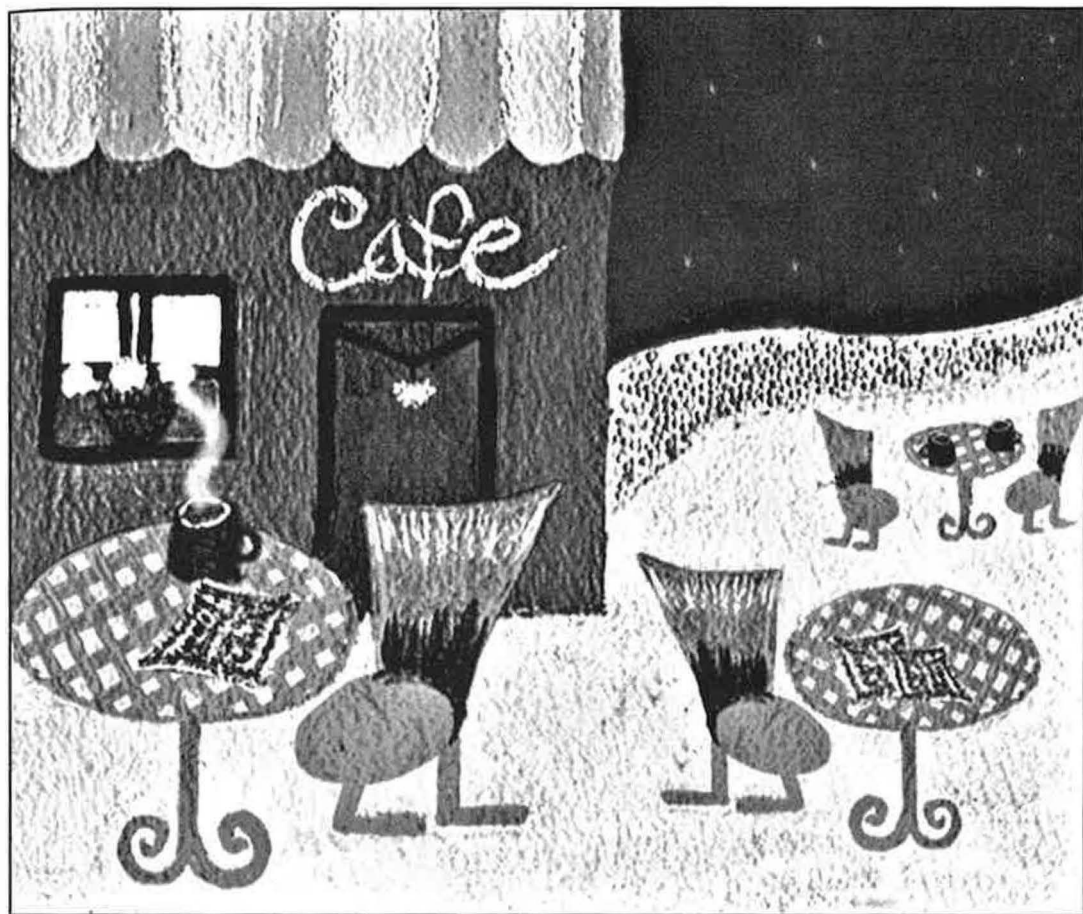
I had always assumed her chicken tasted rubbery, like mine did. From our dining room, the backyard sounded alive with crickets, and the thoughts furthest from my mind were of Heidi. Her dinner had to be hot like mine, with coasters under the glasses and the kind of bickering chatter that drums alongside the shrinking table that we took for granted.

Hugh must have bothered her with stolen hugging and the same urgent words over and over, forcing more dinner on her plate than she could handle, if only to put some extra meat on those skinny, pasty thighs of hers. There was no doubt in my mind that on either side of her was the comfort of the six o'clock game shows, and the pleading of parents to sit down until their meal was finished, and soft hippie music that eventually promised more than peace and love and no loneliness.

My father would soon whisk us away, far from hobos in the dumpsters and unkept grass. There was levity in those browned-over hills, an echoed laughter that boasted of a hard-fought war won. Sidewalks and streets were glazed over in the best kind of concrete, still splotchy with the man hours. Mornings were mint-laden, the kind you feel guilty about for even getting out of bed. Children shouted in defense of toys. The breezes up there snapped over your lips. Even the evils of conglomerate hash browns hovered into our homes, smothering McDonald's over our furniture.

There are nights when I hear tools sharpening, and I see Heidi ducking behind hung sweaters and dusty blankets. We will stay out past dinnertime. We can hide between the buildings.







Shopping Day

Susan Brown

On shopping day an old man and woman wear matching sweaters. They slowly push the cart together and are confused over what groceries they need, though the woman is less confused than the old man. The cream colored sweaters keep them warm in the grocery store and could be considered unisex. Unisex because the old man and woman both look right in them. The sweaters came from London, wrapped in a box with red tissue paper, at Christmas time. The box had been sent by the old man and woman's grandson whom they never see—he has a job and a family with two young children and he finds it too expensive to visit the old people who hardly know who he is any more.

At first, Arthur, the old man, thought the sweaters were pink. He thought the sweaters were pink and not cream colored because when his wife of sixty-two years, Edith, showed him the sweaters, they were still in the box surrounded by the red tissue paper and the tissue paper cast a pink glint onto the cream colored sweaters. Arthur did not want a pink sweater. He communicated this to Edith in several ways: he tried to put the top back on the box after Edith took her sweater out and held it up to her chest, then when Edith took the top back off the box and handed him his sweater he gave the sweater back to Edith, and when Edith finally held the sweater up to Arthur's chest, he mumbled that the sweater was pink.

Edith told him that the sweater was not pink, it was cream colored like her face, and she tapped a finger on her sunken cheek to help the old man grasp the true color of his sweater. She thought the cheek tapping would help him understand. She reasoned, "If I can just get through to him that his sweater is not pink, he will want the sweater." When Arthur still did not seem to want the sweater, Edith began to slowly

rock back and forth, while she tried to determine how to convince the old man that his sweater was not pink.

"Your sweater is the color of the box," Edith said, picking the top of the box up and picking up his sweater and holding them next to each other for him to see. As she held his sweater next to the top of the box, Arthur began to slowly make the connection between his sweater and the color of the box top, and he took the sweater from Edith's long frail fingers and he held his sweater up to his chest to show Edith that he knew his sweater was cream colored and not pink.

While they pushed the cart together down the frozen food aisle, Edith remembered that they needed a can of frozen orange juice, and when she closed the cold door to the frozen juice shelf, she noticed that the back of Arthur's pants were wedged between his narrow buttocks, his sweater had a large brown spot on the left shoulder, and his socks had slipped down to his ankles. For a moment she felt the urge to fix him, like a mother fixes a disheveled child, like she had fixed her children many years ago, whenever their clothing had been dirtied or out of place on their small bodies. But then she thought it was more important that she try and remember what else they needed from the store on shopping day.

When they reached the end of the freezer section, Edith and Arthur began to slowly navigate the grocery cart around the end of the aisle, and into the adjoining aisle of the grocery store. To Edith this maneuvering around the end of the aisle reminded her of a tour bus ride they once took while on a vacation. The bus had to slowly make the turns in the winding road so that it would not hit the steep rock cliffs that loomed far above it. A passenger on the bus had said, 'we're *too close* to the rocks,' or maybe the passenger had said, 'the bus is going to *hit* the rocks.' Edith could not recall now what the passenger had said, though for years she had held that memory tucked away somewhere inside.

Edith could recall what the doctor had said during Arthur's last check-up. The doctor, who looked as young as a teenager, had said that Arthur was further suffering from Alzheimer's disease. "This is a degenerative brain disease," the doctor had said. Edith had asked the doctor to write that part down on paper and she had read it over and over until she had the words memorized. Now she could recall the words in her head, but she could not say them out loud. When she had tried to say the doctor's words out loud to her daughter, Nancy, the words had become jumbled, and she had

said, "Your father's brain is a generated disease."

Nancy had wondered, then, if her mother was not suffering from the same disease, because her mother had shown other signs of the disease as well, such as forgetting to pick up her father's medication, and then remembering things, but not in the way that they had happened.

With short shuffling steps, close together, like steps taken to a slow dance song, moving, but not moving, Edith and Arthur were at last in the paper goods aisle. Here, Edith remembered that they needed toilet tissue, and she wanted the soft kind for Arthur's hemorrhoids. But what kind was that? She could not remember what kind they had bought last time, there were too many different kinds on the shelves to choose from; quilted, double rolls, single rolls, and there were too many brands too. Edith did not want pink toilet tissue because she remembered how Arthur did not like pink when he had thought his sweater was pink, but now that she looked around, she noticed that there were no pink toilet tissue rolls on the shelves, there was only white toilet tissue. Her mind began to wander about when they stopped making toilet tissue pink, and she became worried about Arthur who was stooped too far over the cart. Could he be looking at something in the cart? Then Edith remembered that the only thing in the cart was the frozen orange juice. Maybe Arthur was looking at the frozen orange juice in the cart.

After a few minutes, Edith guessed that Arthur had fallen asleep over the cart. He was slumped over the cart, and his head rested on the sleeve of his sweater. Edith remembered that a few days ago, while they were at the pharmacy having Arthur's prescription filled, he had fallen asleep in the brown vinyl chair next to the counter. Again, Edith thought of her children, and how they used to fall asleep in the oddest places, like Arthur had begun to do now. It was funny how alike old men and toddlers seemed to Edith at that moment. She scooted over to Arthur (she hoped he would wake up before he fell over) and she shook him with her thin white hand.

Her thin hand was white, but there were thin blue and thin purple lines running through the hand, like the thin veins on a fragile leaf. Her thin hand had touched a life time of living; strength lay in her thin frail hand, strength accumulated from many years of touching the man she loved, strength from caressing his tired muscles, from fingering his fine gray hair which had been full and brown once, from rubbing his sore arthritic knees, yet now when she needed the strength in her hand to arouse Arthur,

she found the hand weak and it could not wake him.

Edith became worried about Arthur and she shook him again. Just when she began to panic that he would never wake up, slowly Arthur woke up and lifted his head. Edith was used to the look of confusion that stared back, the hollow eyes that once had light in them, the blank look of not knowing what will come next. As she looked back into those lost eyes, she sadly realized that this would be their last shopping day together, things will be as Nancy said they would be, and Edith would need to go shopping with Nancy, not Arthur. Though Edith had known that this would happen eventually, she had not expected to come to this realization on this shopping day, and the force of what this meant further confused her thinking, and she forgot, even though they were in the paper goods aisle, that they needed toilet tissue.

Edith took her place next to Arthur, behind the grocery cart with the can of frozen orange juice tucked inside its depths, and they began their shuffle down the aisle, but now Edith could not recall one other thing that they needed from the store. The only thought that she had was to get Arthur home to their bed—when did Nancy say she would be back for them?—so that he could take a nap.

At the end of the aisle, Edith stopped pushing and tried to remember where Nancy had said that she would meet them. While trying to remember, Edith noticed the display of chocolate bars at the end of the aisle. She recalled how sweet chocolate had tasted when she had been young, though she did not care for it now. Now it tasted bitter, not sweet like it had so many years ago. Then, from a distance she heard Nancy's voice as it called out, "Mother, here I am." Edith turned towards the voice of her daughter, the same voice that had long ago called out, "mother, where are you?"

Edith's cream colored sweater sleeve touched Arthur's cream colored sweater sleeve as they turned the cart towards Nancy. They began to slowly push the grocery cart towards their daughter as she walked towards them. Along the way Edith smelled the warm smell of the fresh cooked french bread. The french bread loaves were on racks next to the check-out counters. Edith remembered, as they passed a check-out counter, that they needed toilet tissue. Perhaps she would ask Nancy to get the toilet tissue that she had forgotten. Next time, she would remember the toilet tissue on her own.

Nancy and Edith and Arthur met in the middle of the wide aisle that ran along the check-out counters. Nancy looked into the grocery cart at the single can of frozen orange juice. Nancy then looked at Arthur's blank stare, and she asked, "Are you thirsty

with the crowd. Susan Brown

pop?" Arthur smiled slightly, a thin parting and upturning of dry lips and nodded his head and then, as he stretched out a cream colored sweater sleeve towards Nancy, he mumbled a few words, which no one understood.

The Stone Writing

Susan Brown

Evon sat in the dust, writing on a large stone with a piece of black flint. She had time to spare before she had to begin the night meal for her husband, Adomo. With a strong brown hand, Evon made marks on the stone, and if she did not have a mark for a sound, she made a symbol in its place. Adomo happened by. He stopped where Evon sat in the dust and he looked at the marks she had made on the stone. He read the marks out loud:

Evon gave some sweet fruit to Adomo because she loved him. As Adomo ate, Evon stared into his brown eyes. She was overcome with a love feeling that she had never felt before.

"What is this mushy crap?" Adomo asked Evon.

"I'm writing a love story," Evon said.

"No one will read it," Adomo said flatly. "No one reads love stories. Think about who will read your story. Men read stories. Men write stories. Women don't write stories. Why are you writing when women don't write stories?"

"I wanted to write our story so that people will know about love," Evon replied. She did not tell Adomo that she had been thinking about writing a love story for a long time, that she lay awake at night trying to form the sounds and symbols in her head.

"Did you read the writing on the cave wall?" Adomo asked. "That is a good story. People will read that story. It is about a mammoth hunt. It is exciting. There is no mushy crap in it. People won't read your story."

Evon blushed. "I can't read the cave wall story," she said quietly. "You pull me

WITNESS THE BLOOD-DRIPPING SCENE Susan Brown

under the mammoth skin as soon as I enter the cave at night." Adomo puffed his chest out, and tried to hide what was growing under his deer skin flap.

"Your story needs a bad guy and a climax," Adomo said. "Your story doesn't have those things." Then he walked away.

That night as she lay under the mammoth skin, after Adomo had rolled off the top of her, Evon continued forming the sounds and symbols in her head. She thought about what Adomo had said about a bad guy and a climax. In her head she wrote:

Evon was tricked by the bad guy into picking the fruit. She gave the fruit to Adomo because she loved him. They ate the fruit together. Then she put her mouth on his and tasted the juice on his lips. She never wanted to take her mouth away.

She wondered about the bad guy. Who was he? Evon did not know any bad guys. She had once been frightened, though, by a slippery, long thing that crawled by the river. Adomo later said that the slippery thing was a snake. So Evon would make the bad guy in her story a snake like thing. The snake thing would hang out in the tree and it would lie to Evon about the fruit. It would tell her that if she ate the fruit she would be godlike. Evon had secretly always wanted to be godlike.

The next day, when Evon found the time, she sat in the dust to resume writing on the stone. She wrote about the snake thing tricking Evon. And then she added a new section to the beginning of the story. The new section read:

One day Evon found Adomo with his leg stuck under a fallen log. She had been alone until then. His leg was badly cut and bleeding. Evon moved the log from his leg. She put herbs on his leg, and fell in love with him instantly.

As she sat thinking what to write next in her story, Adomo passed by. He put down his spear and read out loud the new beginning of the story.

"No, no, no," he said, shaking his matted hair. "Your story is still not good. No one will want to read a story about a woman who saves a man. How will that make man look? You can't write what really happened to us. People want to read about more exciting things than that. Think up a better way for the man to meet the woman."

So Evon thought a bit. She looked up at the clear blue sky and at the gray mountains in the distance. She thought about how the very first man and the very first woman might have met on earth. A large bird flew overhead. Through her strong fingers she sifted the fine dust in which she sat. Then she wrote:

THE BLOOD-DRIPPING SCENE 

Susan Brown *THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY*

The man, Adomo was on earth first. He was made from dust. He was the king of the land. He ruled over the animals. Then a bone was pulled from the man's middle and the woman, Evon was on the earth too. They were in love.

There, she thought, now Adomo will like my story. My story has a bad guy. My story is exciting. Now my story needs a climax. Evon thought and thought about a climax for her story. It should be exciting. Then a great idea came into her head. She skipped over the part that she had already written, and she put this in her story:

After Evon and Adomo ate the fruit their eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and hid behind trees. Adomo tried to put his hand under Evon's fig leaf. Evon slapped his hand. She loved him, but now those things were bad.

Later that night, before they slept, Adomo said, "I read your story. It is a better story now. But you need to change the names. You can't use our real names. And your story needs a hero."

So the following day, on the stone, Evon revised her story to please Adomo. She added a hero, and changed the names of the people. She wrote:

The godlike hero asked Eve and Adam why they were hiding.

For some reason the rhythm did not sound right to Evon. The sounds needed to be changed. So she revised her story again, and wrote:

God asked Adam if he ate the fruit that he should not eat. Adam said Eve gave him the fruit because she loved him. Eve said the snake thing tricked her. They were sent from the Garden area forever. Adam would till the ground as a punishment. Eve would have pain in childbirth. Eve loved Adam with all her heart. Adam would rule over Eve.

When Adomo happened by the stone he read the entire story.

"Your story is better," he said. "It has a bad guy. It has a hero. It has a climax. But you need to take out all the mushy crap. No one will read your story with mushy crap. And you need to take out the part about Adam putting his hand under Eve's fig leaf. That part could cause a man's pleasure to grow. If your story was on a cave wall, that part would be okay. But a stone is not the place for that kind of writing."

The next evening, as the disappearing sun changed the sky from orange to pink to purple, Evon worked on her story. She did all the things to her story that Adomo told

her to do. She even took out all the mushy crap. Then she signed her name at the bottom of the large stone. Adomo walked by.

"My story is done," Evon said, excitement in her voice. Adomo read the story.

"It is a good story now," Adomo said. "But don't make your name on it. No one will read a story from a woman. Tomorrow we leave to find a new cave. We will follow the mammoth again."

With a strong hand, Evon rubbed at the black flint until her name was gone. Then she stood and looked down upon the stone writing. Her story pleased her, though she did miss the mushy crap. It had been fun to write. When they were settled in the new cave, she would write a story before her story and a story after her story. She would make one long, long story. It does not matter if I rub my name out on my story, she thought, because Adomo is right, no one will read my story.

Just Like Sister Ray Says

Joe Byrne

"Lift up your skirt and fly..." Desdemona earth egg unity is Mondrian portrait geometry. She the altogether with it. Supreme Chief teacher. Adopted as one of John's children, she freed herself became more than the sum of her. Collect the universe in her body, she embodies it. She Dinah Washington sassy demure dichotomy; she Sarah Vaughan majesty dimension; she scat Ella Fitzgerald be-de-be-bop improv as solid rock; she Billie Holiday sass 'n brass incandescence presence. She jonesin' jazz superhuman.

"Such strange fruit," Desdemona sultry smoked. Three empty vessels lie before her. Three stains on the carpet. Three dead junkies just trying to crank, smack, weed their ways through aimless ennui. Desdemona holding a .45 still angry outburst. She solves problems. Cuts stray threads. Ties up loose ends. She got it together. She jazzed.

Johnny Guitar none those things. He like to keep things loose, like to keep people hanging. He shimmer Boheme blues aurora with his own slant. Been Mahatma in boxcars and juke joints selling people play. And they always pay.

"Who intoned you to music this mess into harmony, Des?" Johnny strummed lightly. He knew.

"Willow the Wisp rang like a bell," Desdemona smoothed. "She woke me in the golden dawn, done damaged needled lover vampire arms bleeding for contrition."

"She crystal blue persuaded you?"

"Says something 'bout a thin, white boy razorblade lining his nose, eyes darting at her lover. He pimp her, and you know I don't groove to any slavery." Desdemona cradled herself, eyes closed, smiling and humming Armstrong.

THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY Joe Byrne

"Hey, I'm just a blues alchemist. I got the stone everybody want a piece of, but no one remember the art of getting stoned no more. Can't handle even a gilded flake. That dead dude over there too much the slave, not enough slave-master in 'im. He don't handle power well."

"He don't handle nothin' no more," Desdemona grinned, and Johnny nod agreement. She look at Mr. Guitar. "Whatcha gonna do now, bluesman?"

"What I always do. Gather all the blues together and ready for the next turn. Just a gyre in vertigo."

"Gonna miss Nickel Ray?"

"I can always grow another accompanist." Johnny pick up Ray's harp, pockets it.

"Golems are a dime a dozen these days," Desdemona swayed rhythm. "You hung out too long with Annie Besant and her chicanery. Leadbeater molded you Jiddu, but you the wrong channel."

"Leadbeater liked music. I candy'd him. Anyway, I's before Germaine, and he's still trying to keep up."

The Duke too amphetamine driving jagged red roads of his raining eyeballs like an out of control mascot. He got the herky-jerk down to his heroin toes. Buys a hopped-up surrealist's .45 caliber blue steel of Kentucky. Sorta suicidal. Melts in your mouth, not in your hand. He got the DDT blues. He's dropper in time to hustle of the vein. A legend of liquid primrose metal machine music. Cold turkey on Bliss impossible.

So one day Johnny Guitar come Sterling Hayden style strumming up his door, the door that can't handle itself. It always need a hand. Johnny handle it no problem. He raps and humming; The Duke's not flatlining hinges on the door. The two sit in vinyl living room, Nickel Ray yet to show but ghost harp. The Duke swallowed in the recliner fingers Busby Berkeley on the chair's pin-holed arms. Johnny Guitar snails onto a couch, he sings notes flying mellifluous wings at the sound of speed, restrung his guitar with bloody tourniquets. Johnny's never strung out. He hands out sheet music. Plays for private audiences only. And only paying audiences.

"Well-well n-nnow, tru-tru-troubador," The Duke stutters madly sweat from pores. "Got gotta s-ss-ssong ta ss-ss-ssing mme?"

Johnny been smiling his whole life. Was born with a shit-eating grin and guitar strapped to his back as his mother hemorrhaged and died. The midwife slapped his ass; it resonated in the vibrating strings of his guitar. He never stop singing since.

"Gotta pay for play." Johnny never even look at The Duke. He got the scratch (held a lot a dead Americans in his walle—a worn leather coffer), began a quick swing. The Duke jitterbugged.

"Let's slow it to a Hooker shuffle," Johnny lounged his voice in blues. He began a gravel ballad. He love to croon ballads, 'specially blue ballads. He fed off the dropper's song. The Duke one of many tunes.

Evening comes Saturday and moon like clipped fingernail lonely perches in plush purple twilight.

"*Well, I'm a-rollin' an' a-tumblin'!*," Johnny riffs on Muddy Waters. Nickel Ray vibrating in the moldy sunlight tenement basement. Cobwebs and strange, strung-out spiders saraband opium flies. The boiler kept time. Nickel's harp wails awake the ghost of Sonny Boy Williamson, who ethereal harmonizes. Demirep raging streets in purple heart velocity known as Dramamine Bliss 'cos she could cure an upset stomach with her tongue—she oozed medicinal—was hopping all over the furniture, a grasshopper pill-popper rose-petal stem dropper. She was insect to the fact that her lover coming home.

Sapphire Willow, cobalt burning eyes in bloom to ephemera of day. Dream caster shaping masks of desire for the enamored to wear. Her emollient frame as in chiaroscuro lighting shadow bending with the riding sun. A sadness of fire—for her dreams never seemed to care. They spread—water on warm concrete. Sapphire so wanted to be a field of wildflowers watercolors swayin' on the rollin'-an'-a-tumblin' sides of hills. Yet, this spring is parched. Once, she will be a savage, loosed upon the zeitgeist that is L.A. A cannibal always hungry—plastic mannequins decorate the street markets of the city. She want roots—also to tear flesh and sinews to eat, to eat morsels of human—to eat the streets that river to the somniferous sea—to eat the stalks of building husks in season, before harvested by reapers. Her dreams don't fill her—

jazz to improv her improve by grooving rhythms natural as the ride. Gathering sessions jam— she scats freely a woman lets her body to the ride—bebopping hard in blue kinda follow notes random she does (No man! Hey man! Wait! Wait! Swinging man—swinging man—snap fingers. Wait! No man! Groove. Don't wait!). Swinging waits for no rhythm improv to her improve. Sapphy's a great woman. A Lady Day definition.

Sapphire ate her way out of graduation degradation to the chicken farms of

investment companies. It's easy to lose her appetite in sensuous city slutt in gutters of storefront vendor flesh. She digs the hunger to fruition. Her sentence sates the sallow swelling of refrigerators chilled in schooling--

Bird honked alcoholic smoke peptic ulcer audience--mile-a-minute fingers brought Saphy from space grounded in power--jazzed, she electrifies the speeding sax satori--free-wheelin' Ornette Coleman vertigo on her dizzy head--she Coltranes spirit disrupter soul disintegrator.

Dramamine Bliss is number nine temblor. Get to the core and she several plates overlapping. She a panacea for everyone else, but she a twelve-step program waiting to happen. Swept up in kidnapping thrall by The Duke she soothe whoever he lay out for her. Soon she just a seashell no ocean inside. Saphy's the only one who can excoriate the hardened timelines up n' down Dramamine's pennywhistle body--

for her dreams never seemed to care--drip like ether into bruised vein, skin bulges, arm is gangrene amputation amorphously delicious in the bile of the throat--got that coke drip is the best. She's a nightmare without Saph.

"*I cried the whole night long*," Johnny belted. Nickel Ray rang spittle bells from his harp, Johnny a slidin' hammer. Melody in amber dripped and splayed over the room, translucent musical resin for future anthropologists to crack open and groove ancient blues. It don't matter--Johnny Guitar don't petrify--he still gonna be playin' sittin' on the alchemist's flake of gold. He a born Rosicrucian four hundred years old. Nickel Ray a test tube homunculus born from the chemical wedding conjured by Johnny, dressed to the nines while singing and harping the *Fama Fraternitatis*. These boys go invisible when the times-they-are-a-changin' at the end of every century. When peoples need mediums and dope, them two boys color the scene.

Dig this riff man, so the color of the day changes. Sapphire Willow emanates into the room, dig? and holy hell erupts, lake of fire floods the basement trogs, okay? Saphy sees Bliss grasshopping to the tune of another troubadour Theosophist. Not much survives when she goes Old Testament, dig? Two plagues in one room is cause for o.d.ing. Johnny keep playing, still smiling carved Machiavellian Gepetto.

"How could you, Bliss?" Saphy torches her lover.

"H-I-I didn't kn-know where you h-hhad ggone," Bliss parks in needle panic. Her song out a tune now, once derailed is a bumper crash. "I got I uhm I ggot scared didn't know uh wha-what to to to do!"

"How could you, with him? Do you know where he sings? And to whom?"

Blue tears vomit, dig? from a Bliss full of eyes.

"Johnny's s-sswell with a cherry dropper!" Bliss cries. "Gotta ggood rep from the concrete gossip, ya ya know. You you're the one uhm who who uhm who t-told me 'bout 'm."

"Yes, but my voice is prettier than his. It's much more pure, crystalline. I have better range, five octaves, and better tone. Plus, I sing for free. I'm no elitist. There are a lot of hurts walking around out there, and if anyone wants to hear my music, I'll gladly perform. I perform especially well for you, baby. You should only have ears for me. I take care of my little girl." Her hand a boat sailing through the sea of Dramamine's fair hair. Saphy sells junk food to the hungry rush. Nobody hungrier she ever seen than Bliss.

"Yeah, ya do," Bliss wrapped ribbon arms around Saphy.

"You're not a runaway anymore, Bliss," Saphy pillowed her teenage rapture's ears, lips anoint lips. "Only listen to my Cabal. Not some male Blavatsky charlatan."

"That's not fair, Sappho dear," Johnny injects. Nickel harps on. "I saved her from that thin white smack addict, love."

"No, you commandeered her!" Sapphire spitfired.

"I liberated her," is Johnny's ace.

Dramamine muddles time. She can't keep track of when or where. All she knew was that she love Saphy. Dramamine Bliss topsy-turvy stomach acid disintegrating dope additives. Wavy balance.

The Duke love that underage smack. Lift up the cheerleader skirt, let that bare pussy smack him 'cross his face. He wanna ride Dramamine in his veins, dreams of her.

"*She's about a mover...*" sang Sir Douglass. Just flipping stations. Station to station. The Duke cocained slam-a-lama-ding-donged some lines from the edge of the rolled down window. Precariously expensive was that '68 GTO passenger side window with a horizontal of Colombia sitting pretty thing on the median.

"*She's about a mover...*" Yellow and black and straight and curves and long hair straight down. The Duke paranoid the car into the threat of the road. Girl by his side. To him, she and the car were interchangeable description. Fast smooth speed freaking beauties golden haired with a black streak parted down the middle. He didn't emphasize whose curves were more favorable to him. He'd ditch the car if the girl was better conversation, but between fucks, he needed companionship. She--Bliss--didn't

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seem much interested in him other than heat n' light white on his five gram finger. It was okay. Everything locked cruise control.

"*She's about a mover...*" The Duke loved movement. His body an earthquake. The hippy-hippy shakes. Got Bliss hooked on trembling and tremors. They'd go cold turkey every few months to keep that edge. Convulsions in their stomachs amusement park rides. Uncontrollable twitches in hands and face were ecstasy. Both once signed up for electro-shock therapy, but when the meds cut them off, The Duke rigged themselves little electrocutions, wires connected to the car battery. Movers and shakers. Good combo in hypodermic funhouse of love.

"*She's about a mover...*" Two lanes and a steering wheel. The girl sniffed polish clean off her fingers, repainted 'em detailed replicas of Post-Impressionistic masterpieces, including Seurat's pointillism. The Duke station to station going on a drip in back of throat. His pale face green in the lollipop light from the sweet dash.

She's about a mover. Screaming garage backbeat feedback she revs! Revs! REVS! She's about a mover. Scamming the landscape like a reverb banshee frenzied in echo. All the gunslinging boys guitar their rage, but she ain't threatened. She's about a mover. Got that vinyl spinning wax punk poetic amateur fingers string and snarl the voice of frustration. She's a frustration, and laughs victoriously, heroically. She's a hurt needs Sapphy completely.

Johnny never drops. Never has. He just plays the songs. Never listens. Gotta keep nimble fingers, gotta keep Orpheus in his throat, not lose his head. Nickel riffs Johnny's repertoire, 'cept he dig poppies.

The Duke danced till the music stop fourteen hours later. He collapsed onto black-stained shag. Johnny Guitar picked up the .45. He knew a desperate alcoholic who never drank a Colt before, got on the phone to him.

The Duke blurred Johnny holding his steel.

"Thas mmine," he drooled.

"Don't you know you'll stain the carpet?" Nickel bagged him.

"Fffuck you!" The Duke quivered. He look like St. Vitus on the shag, dancing Middle Ages. "Fucking Chinaman!"

Nickel Ray part Chinese, part black. Used to dig explosive train tunnels. Lots a blues in them times. Being a canary with dynamite wings. His harp was his pipe, he entertain many a rail man. Got the best Orient Opium, put the powder in the reed of his harp and blew and sucked into oblivion.

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"I'm a Clarksdale Chinaman, thank you," he quipped. "Mississippi Slant-eyes the old rail boss called me. I miss that old buzzard, even after I dosed him with laudanum and dynamited him and his white toadies to smithereens. Got that goddamned railroad built, though."

Johnny uproariously laughed. Began Howlin' Wolf. Nickel Ray whoops it Little Walter and they're both "Smokestack Lightning." They having a rave-up and The Duke just raving. He want Bliss back, being a mack without no pony to show.

"I needed him," Bliss wept into Sapphire's shoulder. "I d-didn't think uhm you you would bbe bback." Tears open Sapphy's blouse, buttons saucer the air, licks her neck.

"You're so bum rushed," Sapphire sweetly condemns. "I told you I'd be gone for a few hours. You shouldn't use his smack."

"It's been five days!" Bliss bleeds. She pulls Sapphy's bra down, feathers her breasts with trembling fingers.

"It's only been three hours," Sapphire sighs, hypodermic hands sliding along the thighs of Bliss. "You have no concept of time, past or present."

Once out of college, face it, who needs to follow these concepts. Preterit, present indicative or subjunctive, past subjunctive, or present participle, who the fuck cares. It's all the same. Everything mixed up, time through a straw sucked shake flavoring tongues who just want to move. Communication jazz so fast every action is happening yesterday as it is now and will be all together. Grammar is for teachers too hung up to let progress fucking move. Language is not, cannot be static. It is ever changing. Must change. There ain't no bad grammar. Words metamorphosis, languages die and are born. Highway fever but Bliss is cool. The shades of Derrida and Foucault, in a Ford Gallant, with Post-structuralist horsepower and deconstructed frame gunning behind her. She's happy to leave concepts in dust burning rubber.

"You're right, Sapphy," Bliss seeps between tongue through nipple rings. Looks at her love. "I'll get rrrrid of hhim."

"Bliss, baby, Johnny hasn't been here for hours. I threw him and his harmonica flunky junkman out of here." She brought Bliss to her lips and melted crimson pillows.

"Oh God! Saph. Wha-what have I ddone?" Smack speed stutter fluttered Sapphire's heart. "I don't wa-wa-wanna see uhm The Duke ever again."

"Shoot up the dropper's neck." She's gonna save her love, but it gonna hurt.

"You ccan fix anything. You you always save mme." Tangled face in Willow hair.

WHITNEY: THE ROAD TO THE BLUE Joe Byrne

"Desdemona," the only word Saphy knew was the be-all, end-all. Another kiss on flashing Bliss. Everything almost done.

Charcoal on blue. Dark afternoon and spittle is the spirit of atmosphere. An Impressionist canvas ephemeral, lasts only moments above. Clear, in a mistake of the clouds, floating to extinction someone a mad motherfucker up there. Sapphire Willow in hand with Dramamine Bliss cool it on over to The Duke. They listen bluey Johnny Guitar and Nickel Ray. Now everyone in a lonely place.

The Duke freaks eyes veining poor Bliss. He want to lunge, but he a magnet to the shag. Cried out to her.

"Cool it, square!" Johnny keep singing. "Somethin's up. What's goin' down Saphy?" He not worried, just curious. Has ideas. Nickel Ray kicks the .45 across the floor.

Saphy scat dooby-dooby-dooby-do-wop incantations and the gun.

"Lift up your skirt and fly..." Desdemona come to clean up this mess.

Cinnamon 1986

Steve Marshall

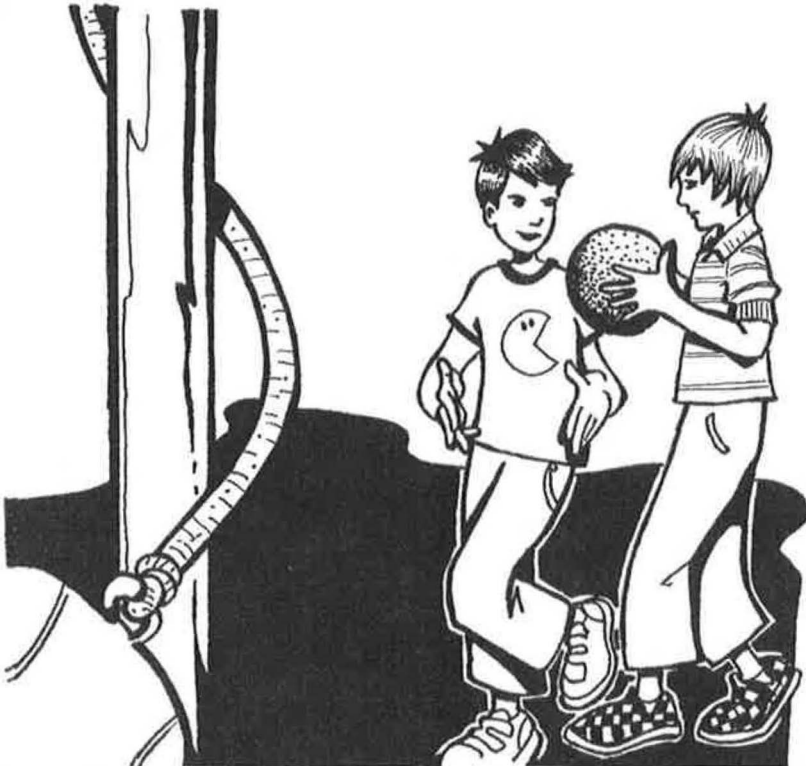
Thom sat in class and remembered for a moment an image of being in the vestibule of a Denny's, momentarily separated from the heat of the restaurant and the cold outside, watching the big rigs on the highway, looking inside of a rack at a USA Today with a picture of Ronald Reagan standing in front of a huge American flag, the boy thinking that his life was so far away from the little histories of the world that appeared every morning in the newspaper.

Thom sat in a short wooden desk in the center of the small, square classroom. He was wearing a collared blue shirt with horizontal white lines and an alligator patch. His dark brown corduroys had holes starting at the knees. He was wearing checkerboard slip-on sneakers.

There were rows and rows of short wooden desks, some still with holes for inkwells, particle board desks with laminated woodgrain that was peeling on the top. Rows of children sat with their short legs bent underneath their desks. The girls with no makeup on, the boys with visible coats of dirt on their faces. Brown, green, and blue-eyed girls and boys—black, brown, and blond-haired girls and boys—lighter and darker-skinned girls and boys—all with the same vague memories of children born in the late seventies, memories that were square, colorful, and crisp like Polaroids.

They were children who watched the same cartoons, and learned the same things about Columbus. Children whose brains were paint-by-number the same, who only had shirts with different plaids and stripes, different parents, and different memorized addresses and phone numbers.

The children's silent and patient faces looked sad because children are always smiling in photographs. The children looked blank with soft looks on their faces.



Children with the names of youth, four Jennifers, three Jonathans, and two Marks. Children who looked like little men and women, dressed up with hair combed and hair-sprayed by their mothers.

These children spent young lifetimes in small desks. But in the end they knew how to read, they knew about George Washington cutting down a cherry tree as a boy and growing up to throw a silver dollar across the Potomac.

Inside of the third-grade classroom there were plastic cloth covered walls and posters of Garfield. Miss Maple told the class that they were waiting for Mrs. Shelby's class to be ready. "In the meantime, you can read quietly or just sit," she said.

The boy looked back at the clock. Big hand is on the minutes, no little hand is on the minutes, that means it's—8:10, Thom thought.

Days like today, the gray days of late January, reminded Thom of his past, not a

Steve Marshall

gloomy past, but the foggy past of his mind looked more like winter ending than spring and summer beginnings.

The youthful, gray days when his mind felt like it was a flower that wouldn't open for the fog covered sun. It was a new year and he knew he would remember at least two days in 1986, a birthday that would taste like ice cream mixed with cake, and a Christmas of brand new He-Men, but today was just another January twenty-eighth, one of the 363 other days. A year full of days with the same three chores, learning to spell, subtract, and take the garbage to the steel gray trash barrel.

Thom sat thinking of what kind of year all of these days would turn out to be. Every year he wrote a short sentence about his year, and put it in the bottom of the box of the thousand piece Donald Duck puzzle that his mother made every New Year's Eve. He started writing the little diary in 1984, so the piece of paper couldn't help him with the mystery of the years starting with 1983 and going backwards. In the boy's memory, 1983 baseball cards seemed like the distant past, but 1984 baseball cards smelled like yesterday. In-between the wax packs and chalky gum of 1983 and 1984 there was a chasm of time. The chasm was like implacable photographs from ordinary days. Those years were like pictures of normal days taken by parents to fill up the roll: the boy or girl standing in the backyard wearing his father's or her mother's shoes, standing in front of the splintering dull brown fence, standing on the sad green grass interwoven with veiny yellow crabgrass.

The memories of his life were often single words. He was born in raw umber 1978—and he was one in lemon yellow 1979—two in maize 1980—three in sea green 1981—four in silver 1982—five in thistle 1983—six in tan 1984—seven in burnt sienna 1985—and eight in 1986, a year that so far looked like cinnamon.

Starting in burnt sienna 1985, his life was clearer. Sitting at the tiny desks, made of the same particle board fiber as the pencils: two hundred and eight times. Sitting on the brown plaid sofa watching television and laughing at cartoon animals: three hundred and sixty-five times. Sitting on the woodframe bed saying prayers for mothers and fathers: three hundred and sixty-five times.

He knew no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make himself remember this day, because it was just another day, a Tuesday followed by a Wednesday like always, but if he didn't try to remember it, a feeling from the day might come back in his mind; his memory was like a diary that always flipped open to the shortest entry that almost wasn't written. Little flashbacks of an individual moment of an individual day, a flash of emotion and images from his life.

They were comfort memories that came to his brain like a block of sun on the carpeting in mid-morning in America in the mid-1980's on a halcyon stay-at-home-sick day. A warm, constant, and soft feeling in his brain that made his mind create small tears. A warm light that hit his skin and was too bright for his eyes. A sad and sweet memory that became a place to wander back to, through the stick forest of his mind.

Memory was never as specific as firm moments of time—the boy sat in a comfortably solid desk in the crisp cold of an early morning classroom. Life was only filled with days that are identical and infinite at age eight when it is the winter. The boy doodled little cartoons of Odie on his binder, and when he could remember it, he wrote the day's date. Sometimes he would glance at the dates on his folder a few months later. Today he saw 6/3/85 and it felt like lifetimes ago. He didn't know what happened that day, the date was like a blank newspaper. He could picture himself looking back at today's date and thinking what a long time ago all of this was. How many little things he had seen but not remembered.

"Mrs. Shelby is almost ready," Miss Maple said. "Feel free to talk quietly with your neighbors."

Isobel sat in the desk in front of him and graded his papers when they were passed forward. She had sat in front of him the last few years because their last names started with the same letters. Thom didn't mind when her hair would fall on his desk. When they played Heads Up 7-up he liked to smell her blond hair.

Isobel was wearing a pencil skirt and a red blouse with white hearts. Her tights were a bright, synthetic white color, a shiny white like the white crayon that can color over anything. She had on a pair of blue Mary Jane jellies.

"Hey Isobel," Thom said, and she turned around in her desk. "I noticed that you know how to draw little stars when the answer is right."

"Yeah, my sister taught me," she said.

"I always draw little asterisks, because when I try to draw the little stars, they end up looking kind of bad."

"I could try to show you how, it's pretty simple," she said.

"Thanks," he said, and playfully tapped her shoe with his.

"I like your shoes," she said. "They look easy because you don't have to tie them."

"Yeah, that's another thing," he said. "I can't even really tie shoes how you're supposed to, instead of having the bunny run around the tree, I just make two big bunny

ears and tie them together."

"It looks like you need a lot of help," she said, giggling.

"Yeah, I would feel bad if I got old and became a millionaire but never really knew how to draw a real star or tie a shoe right."

She laughed. "You're silly, then you could just get a star and shoe secretary, if you were a millionaire."

"Oh yeah," he laughed. They both looked away for a moment, in the silence of youth that hasn't become awkward yet.

Thom started, "I know you live around the corner from me, do you want to come over, I don't really know what my mom is cooking tonight, but...."

"Sure, I never knew why you didn't want to walk home with me," she said.

"My mom would want you to come at, like, six o'clock. I'll bring the Coke if you'll bring the smile," he said, thinking that's what the advertisement said. "We can play Super Mario Bros. I've beaten it, found all the warp zones, and the underwater world, but I read in a magazine that there might be a chocolate factory that you can find."

"That's pretty cool," she said. "Just like Willy Wonka."

"Yeah, I've never seen it, but I think it would probably be like a conveyor belt with little bars of chocolate that you could pick up."

"I hope you can find it," she said.

Isobel turned back around in her desk and the boy thought about how children all drew stars the same way, but stars in the sky didn't look like they had five corners. He thought about how all children drew the sun the same way. A yellow circle with rays. Maybe that's what the sun looks like, he thought, because there's only that one sun to look up at in the sky, or maybe a kid drew it once and everybody copied.



During science hour the day before, Miss Maple had taught them about the sun, an important part of the water cycle. "But if you look into the sun too long, you'll go blind," Miss Maple said. She had shown them the welder's glass they could use. "Galileo went blind looking at the sun," she said. "Halley's Comet is coming in a few months, and there will also be a partial solar eclipse in a few weeks, so you must remember sun safety. There's going to be a lot of science projects in the sky in the next few months, so you always have to think if you're doing everything the safest you can." Miss Maple was talking about how Galileo built his own telescope and found

mountains on the moon when the boy behind Thom started singing Queen.

"Gal-i-le-o la la la figaro, magnifico," he sung.

Miss Maple stopped when she heard the boy and asked, "Yes, Raymond?"

"Do you know the other way you can go blind?" he asked, laughing. "Oh, I mean—how long do you have to look to go blind?"

Miss Maple scowled at him. "I really don't know," she said. "Seven seconds, how about that. You have to look for exactly seven seconds, Raymond. But don't think it's too fun to sell pencils on the corner for a quarter because you couldn't do anything else."

The bell for recess rang, and Miss Maple spoke over it as the children rumbled their papers. "I dismiss you, not the bell. Don't forget tomorrow, first thing in the morning, we will meet here then walk to the library together. We are going to have a special science hour with Mrs. Shelby's class. If you already know what the special science hour is going to be, don't ruin it by telling your buddies. You're dismissed."

"We will not let you go, let him go," Raymond sang Queen again as he and Thom walked through the tetherball circles and the foursquare courts.

"Do you know what the surprise is for tomorrow? I want to tell everybody and ruin it for Miss Maple," Raymond said.

"Nope," Thom said. He felt his white lie was okay because he was in love with Miss Maple; he thought of her whenever he thought of waffles, pancakes, and bees.

"Once I had this birthday party," Raymond said. "It was with Ronald McDonald at McDonald's and everybody got a cheeseburger and an orange soda and Ronald came out with a sundae for me and he gave me the sundae and said, 'What do you say, son?' and I said, 'Ram it, clown!' and everybody was laughing at the clown and I thought his makeup would run because he would start crying."

While he was talking, Thom was thinking if trees just made syrup, not bees inside of trees, and if bees just made honey.

"I wanted it to be a surprise party for my mom, too," Raymond added, laughing. There were hundreds of assorted boys and girls playing on the blacktop at recess. Thom saw the girls and they made him want to buy a Madonna record and ask them to dance. And he saw the girls and they made him want to ask them if they wanted to come over and have a Coca-Cola. The truck had delivered a "new Coke" vending machine to the school a few days before. Thom made sure his mother added the new kind of Coke to her shopping list, and he saved a can of regular Coke so he could offer a girl both. Then he would say he liked the other one better and they could talk about it

and maybe trade. That would almost be like kissing, he thought.



"Mrs. Shelby is ready, class," Miss Maple said. "Thank you for waiting so patiently, boys and girls."

Thom looked at the clock quickly and saw it was 6:40. That would be earlier than last time, big hand is the hours, little hand is the minutes, so it's— 8:30, he thought. Miss Maple walked all of the children to the library in a silent, straight, and alphabetized line. Thom sat Indian style and waited on the hard brown carpeting and traced along his legs. When it was 1986 in America and the days consisted of waiting for things to happen in small, square rooms with windows and a television. The ridges of his fingertips ran along the lines of the corduroy material. His fingerprints pulsed with little shocks of pain. The children looked up at the blue screen of the television. Thom looked out of one window in the row of small windows above the shelves of slim children's books. The window had the rising sun inside of it, but the boy tilted his head backwards and made the sun dip out of view. The window was a square of blue.

The television man's voice appeared. Thom noticed that all of the children were looking up, silently. The television man said, "Yes, she will be the first teacher in space."

The television man counted down from ten. There were undulating sounds of the televised crowd chattering. *Ten 9 Eight 7 Six 5 Four 3 Two 1.*

Simultaneously, the boy counted up to seven, while he stared at the sun. He wanted something to happen, he wanted to do the things that he always saw going on outside of windows or on television. *One one-thousand Two one-thousand Three one-thousand Four one-thousand Five one-thousand Six one-thousand Seven one-thousand.*

The sun is a bright little painting in a window frame, the boy thought. Thom noticed that the same time took him seven seconds to count and the television man ten seconds. He didn't know who was right, but he knew he counted the way he was told to, because the space between the number one and two was exactly the time it took to say "one-thousandth." The boy didn't know how many seconds of time it took the world. Then he remembered he thought "thousand" instead of "thousandth." He thought to say "th" seven times and see how long that took, but then he realized he couldn't count himself while doing it.

He had forgotten to look if there was a rabbit in the sun, like there is a rabbit in the moon, but he didn't think that the sun had any mountains.

The boy watched the television for a moment, the shuttle rising as the children

talked and giggled. The boy watched the window again, dipping his head back to make the sun disappear. When he closed his eyes the sun was still with him, like the after-image that follows a camera flash. The sun was a small tile on his eyelids that alternated red and blue when he blinked. On his eyelids was painted a black-yellow afterimage and circles floating around in the chromosomal whey of dead red blood cells.

The mission control man said, "Sixty seconds aflight."

The boy started counting from sixty, he blinked his eyes as the red and blue tile dropped lower and lower on his eyes-closed field of vision. The yellow sun made him see the other two primary colors. *Sixty-one* brick red *Sixty-two* midnight blue *Sixty-three* Indian red *Sixty-four* navy blue *Sixty-five* violet red *Sixty-six* aquamarine *Sixty-seven* red orange *Sixty-eight* turquoise blue *Sixty-nine* orange red *Seventy* sky blue *Seventy-one* carnation pink *Seventy-Two* blue gray. At seventy-three, the children gasped as the boy saw a burned oval on his eyelid, neither red nor blue, but a dot like a pinhole in a paper cup.

The television man said, "That could be, no—that is just the booster rocket that separated, there is a problem, that is not supposed to happen." Thom turned to the television and saw the plumage of smoke and a booster rocket showing that machines act like chickens when they lose their heads.

Behind Thom, Raymond started singing another Queen song, "Thump—thump— thump—and another one bites the dust," he hummed.

Behind him, he heard Miss Maple loudly try to whisper to Mrs. Shelby, "What are you supposed to do, Cindy, this was supposed to be a damned civics lesson, where's the remote?"

The television screen quickly turned to static, then a blue screen, then it flashed off into black.



Thom walked home around the other children whose lives were probably like his: ruled by the sun. Suburban mother got up at sunrise to wake the children. Suburban father said good morning but goodbye for nine hours. Children played until sundown in the streets, and some days Thom would join them. The girls chased and the boys ran, smelling like the sour odor of children before puberty brings sweet-smelling sweat. The sour, simple, after-school world of children under the delirium of candy, soda, and cartoon vitamins. Girls and boys not watching sunsets together, only skipping along and hating the oncoming nightfall in the gray rocky street as the painful orange sun drops behind the farthest thing on the horizon.

Today Thom decided to go directly home because he would only have three hours to wait until Isobel came. He hadn't seen her after school, so he hoped that she would remember to come for dinner. After brushing his teeth three times, he sat in the living room with the curtains hanging open to reveal a still day of parked cars and square houses with slightly different shades of paint.

The square room was still, in the calming, almost dark light that dimmed outside. None of the harsh light of midday came in through the window, the light that suggested energy and motion.

There was a coffee table covered by *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*. The covers promised stories on the young men of the New York Stock Exchange, the U.S.S.R., and Michael J. Fox. The *View* section of the *Los Angeles Times* was spread out, the date reading January 28th, 1986. The boy looked at the newspaper and sadly thought about what would be the headline of every newspaper in America the next day. He turned on the television and the Nintendo at the same time so he wouldn't have to see what he thought would be on every channel of the television.

The boy sat on the soft brown carpeting in the off-white room, playing Super Mario Bros. When it was 1986 in America and the nights consisted of waiting for things to happen in small, square rooms with windows and a television. There was the American clutter of sound of fathers coming home grumpy but a little richer and mothers cooking one of eleven different dinners.

Isobel came to the door at exactly six o'clock, dropped off by her mother in an Oldsmobile station wagon. Thom hoped that she liked chicken and rice.

Isobel and Thom sat in the living room with their legs underneath themselves. They sat like children who went to school and church, so they had been trained to sit quietly six days out of the week, silent with unbored minds.

"Do you want to play Super Mario Bros. until dinner is ready?" he asked.

"Sure."

"I like to be Luigi because he's green. Even his moustache is green," he said.

They sat just a few inches from the television screen. While Isobel was playing her turn on the game, Thom looked closely at the television, close enough to see the little pixels in the screen. They fit together like the little buds inside an orange slice, the boy thought, but in oranges they are all the same color. Instead of the primary colors from art class, he saw green, red, and blue dancing as the pictures changed. The colors fit together on the television to bring pictures of video game heroes, cartoons, and presidents. He wondered why lemons and the sun were the same color, if they were made up of the same little parts. He had looked at the sun closely today, but not close enough to see its little pieces. He wondered if it was made of red, blue, and yellow, or if all the red and blue had burned up.

Coming from other rooms there was the sound of a briefcase opening and a microwave timer beeping. Thom overheard scattered words between his parents. "Today was like," his mother said. "JFK...on Interstate 12 with Dad...at Vassar at the time...through those tinny little speakers...pulled to the side, we weren't the only...."

"Yes, exactly," his father said. "I was...biscuits and gravy in East Lansing... Jack was *the* hero for everybody at Pencey...the woman in the booth next to me was...the cook told the waiter who told me that...."

Mario got killed by a Koopa Troopa, and then Luigi ran through all of level 1-1 only to be paused right before he hit the flagpole.

"Do you want something to drink?" Thom asked.

"Sure," she said.

"We have Coke," he said. "Both new Coke and Coke Classic, which one do you like?" he asked.

"I'll have a new Coke."



"Sure," he said, walking to the refrigerator, past his father in the dining room and his mother in the kitchen.

"How are you kids doing?" his mother asked. "You're some quiet ones, aren't you?"

"Yup," he said, grabbing the two cold cans.

"What are you kids watching?" she asked. "I hope it's nothing smutty, do you remember that I said you couldn't watch 'The Love Connection?'"

"Yeah, I know, Mom. Thanks for buying the Coke," he said cheerfully, trying to change the subject.

"You're welcome, Thomas, but remember, only one per day."

As he returned to the living room, he asked Isobel, "Why do you like this one more?"

She took the can of new Coke and opened it with a pop, the painful sound of tearing metal. Little droplets flew onto the carpeting. "It's more sweet, and kinda smoother," she said.

"Can I try it?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. He leaned over to trade with her. As he handed the Coke Classic with his left hand and took new Coke with his right, he noticed that she had a droplet of Coke on her lip. Thom kissed Isobel like he had seen on black and white television shows; he kissed her how Ricky kisses Lucy, with closed lips and a pucker sound.

When he kissed her, the cans tipped slightly in his hands, showing the uneasiness of his stomach. He saw himself for a second as the boy inside the window, not the boy looking into the window. "You're right, it is sweeter," he said. He liked the mixing of the taste of a girl's and a boy's lips, but he didn't know which part of the taste was girl and which part was cola. His tart lips only tasted the corn syrup of girls and soda.

He pressed the power button and the video game blinked off, replaced by a commercial for the eleven o'clock news. He watched it and was glad that the only bullies in his world were the goofy, overgrown kids, and that his world was usually sheltered from the criminals and tragedies of the eleven o'clock news.

Thom looked at her blushing cheeks and turned around to face the window, and Isobel slid around next to him. Thom thought of how he would grow and have the same mind but he would be an adult, and some day he would marry a woman who was a girl at the same time that he was a boy, and her cheeks would stay pale when he kissed her.

Steve Marshall

"The sky is a pretty color today," she said, as he saw her looking out at the gray picture, the street, lightposts, and sky.

"It looks like that gray blue crayon color, a little gray and a little blue, but not really either," he said then paused. "I wonder if anybody could invent a new color. Like if the explosion today made a new color, you know, like a mix of gray and blue that nobody had invented before."

"Yeah, you can invent new colors," she said. "My mother has an old crayon box, and there are only, like, sixty-four colors in it, not seventy-two."

"Cool. I know I like how green blue and blue green are different colors in the box, one's a little more blue, and the other's a little more green. Then, not the Crayola, but the Prang blue green is different too," he said. "But then I shouldn't really be telling you things, because didn't you win the spelling bee and the grammar rodeo?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said shyly. "My mom makes me study a lot."

Thom and Isobel sat in a house which was filled with the quiet warm hum of bodies and a heater. Thom heard the voice of Ronald Reagan come onto the television behind him. Ronald Reagan acting as a pitchman for America, selling truth in the 1980's like he sold Sears collared shirts in the 1950's.

And he spoke firm, soft, unbitter, confident, strong, human, calm, true.

About attention, connection, beauty, journey, influence, death, nature, experience.

How America should believe, hope, know, learn, wonder, desire, suffer.

And Thom and Isobel looked out the window with the words behind them, they looked out at the graying blue sky; he heard the words inside of his eight-year-old head inside of suburban America on a day in the 1980's. The wood on the windowsill was chipping, covered in dirt and dust; they looked through the mesh screen with patched holes, they saw the silence of the street with no cars driving by and no gray-haired couples jogging in sweats.

The boy thought of all of the people sitting sadly on their couches behind the closed blinds that he could see, listening to Ronald Reagan and thinking of their grandfathers whose advice they never took but was comforting, listening in silence surrounded by everything that they owned, the new couches, new televisions with state-of-the-art rabbit ears, and they shared the dreams and the sadness of all of the people on similar couches with similar carpeting and similar wives, husbands, and children, and now they worried about astronauts dying in the sky, along with the other things they were supposed to worry about this week, the stock market falling from the sky, and a country with an Iron Curtain, but at least there were funny men on the

Steve Marshall

television every night.

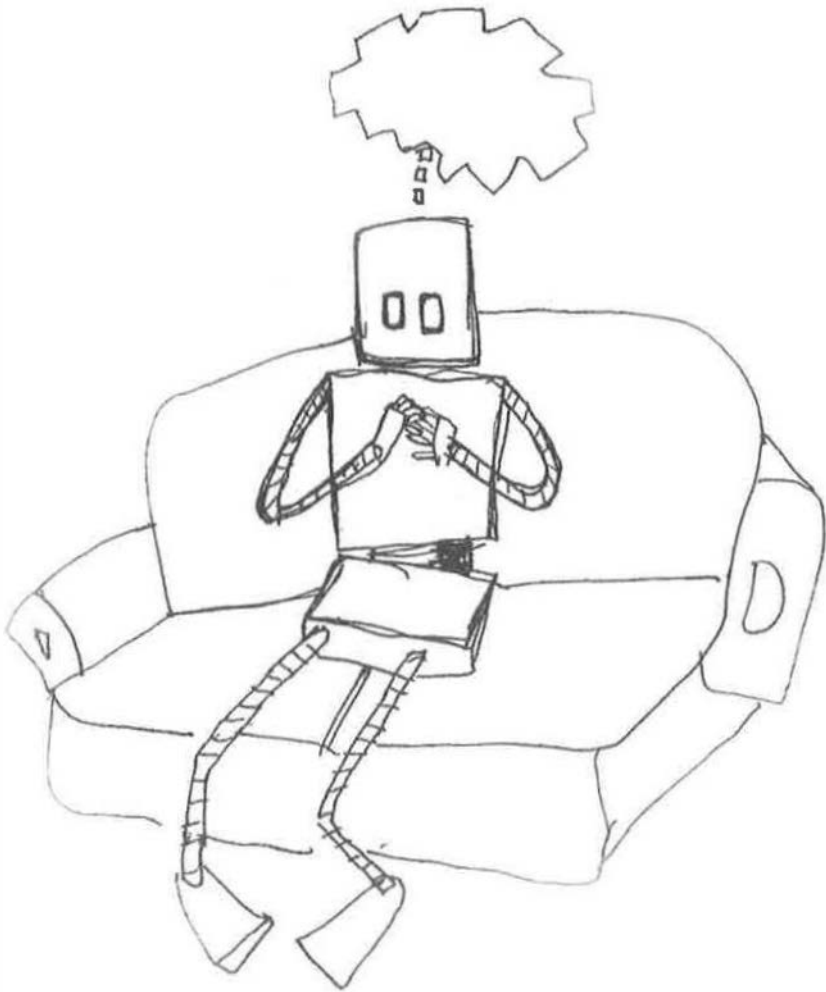
The boy turned around for a moment, looking from the gray sky to the president at a huge wooden desk with a flag behind him, the president with his black and gray hair, and Thom thought how the man's loose face was comforting.

As Isobel left, Thom sat on the brown plaid couch and looked out the window as she walked to her mother's waiting car, at eight o'clock sharp; he watched the car go around the street, curving out of view like she always curved out of view when she walked home ahead of him. He took out his binder to do his homework and looked at all of the unremembered days. His eyes ran across 2/7/84 4/3/84 5/17/84 6/4/84 9/28/84 12/17/84 1985! 1/11/85 3/20/85 3/28/85 6/3/85 11/13/85 12/9/85 I ♥ Madonna 1/16/86. He wrote 1/28/86 on his green lined notebook paper.

He could picture a story about the day in large print in American history books with glossy pages, with pictures of shuttles and people; tomorrow's school-children would look at pictures of children in schools and in the background there might be girls and boys not paying attention and girls and boys telling jokes, even though they know all the answers but don't raise their hands, the page would be near the end of the book and it wouldn't be assigned because summer would come too quickly to finish, but it would be there.

He turned off the television and the picture shrank slowly into a smaller and smaller square, like the pinprick that had slowly disappeared from his eyes, and his mind brought him back to a day when it was raining in America and he looked up to the sky and realized that the drops of rain were falling straight down from a very high place.







James Baldwin is a Meanie

Alex Lee

James Baldwin is a meanie. he made me cry. i told this to my coworker, Becca. Becca is a confirmed lesbian. she does things i wouldn't do with her body.

Lesbian: *noun*. 1. A native or inhabitant of the island of Lesbos.

whenever i see her, i think: she hit on me once. and sometimes that makes me put her at a distance. like far away, on a little piece of land in the middle of the ocean. i feel like i can't help it. what does she think she's doing now? hello!

i mean, she doesn't force anything on me. but sometimes i can't help but think that, i see this gleam in her eye. like how she sees me, a tiny me inside of her. and i want to flinch and remove myself. my boyfriend and i have discussed this and we've met Becca together for lunch and stuff, a nice tuna salad with chunks of white fish meat, and we agree, that this must be my imagination. she's a good person and wouldn't be so subversive. i must be tripping out. i must be. i must be.

but instead of leaving, i say, "I can't believe that someone liked his work." my coworker starts to spout off something like her nozzle was broken. something about race relations and churches that explode. i think she's crazy. first she smashes her car into a telephone pole then she spouts off crazy talk. she had been eating her donut and now flakes of sugar snow everywhere. it's like i can't even control her. her hands, wild in the air. and to think, she's considered black by most everyone i know. her body, wild in the air. i would have thought she would understand at least. so i went home and

Alex Lee

told my boyfriend. my boyfriend is smart. he'll understand. i can see him rubbing his ruddy chin now, and looking at me under those clean brown eyes. "I can't believe that someone at school liked Baldwin's work."

"what's wrong with Baldwin?"

"he killed the blackguy in the story!"

"you silly goose! Baldwin didn't kill the blackguy! Baldwin was writing the story. Baldwin had an agenda." he does not look at me.

"I am not a goose." too many tears to wipe away. Becca may have a cloud of snow around her, but i have a cloud of rain. "and, well, you know, he really didn't *have* to kill that guy! that was just awful! how those whitepeople ripped up that guy to shreds."

"yeah... I didn't like the ending too." he leans back on the beanbag. "hey, aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"yes, but I found this story too disturbing and I had to come straight home and tell you." i mean, since the phone is broken and all. then i thought about how that nameless blackguy must have been screaming and how they cut off his burned dick and i started to cry again. i'm sorry, i can't help it. i can't believe my older brother would tell me to read something this awful.

"maybe you should call in sick," he says. he puts his arms around me and i sob into his shoulders. i guess thats why women like me like men who are bigger than we are. i've often wondered if men ever have this problem; of sobbing into a woman's shoulders when that woman is more petite than the man. and i've met some pretty petite men. they could show you such a limp wrist. i mean, their wives are often so much bigger than they are. you wonder how they get along; the physics of it all! i mean, a smaller man could never encompass a larger woman in the same way. maybe the woman would feel that this little man is her toy. i don't know. but then, i'm sure that if you look into their eyes, you can get lost, and that might be enough. you can see how they think of themselves, contorted on the bed. messy sheets all around. "hey! you don't want to

Alex Lee

my boyfriend has made dinner for me. i put my purse down and flop into the chair he pulls up for me. i know that i've done nothing at work but cry and listen to KOST radio station. and my boyfriend has been busy making dinner. he's so awful nice to me. and i've been nothing but a silly goose.

dejected, i sit down. "what's the matter honey?" he puts a pan of fried meat before me. i am such a loon.

"oh Sam," i pull at his jacket. "I don't understand the story. maybe I am a loon!"

"you silly goose," he says. he squats down and presses my forehead against his. "what's troubling you?"

"I—I don't understand. what was Jesse afraid of? why was he going through such troubles?"

"oh you! he had marital troubles. he needed to be sheriff."

"i don't understand."

"he wanted to fuck his wife."

"what?"

"he couldn't get it up. only violence stirred him; he was threatened by myth that blackmen have bigger dicks."

i can only stare at him. he gets up and strokes the side of my face. "Baldwin just wanted to show the sexual politics of racism. Jesse is a stand-in for all whitepeople." my boyfriend goes back to the stove. he stirs a pot of something. "the bread is almost done," he says.

a few moments later, he places a silvery plate with neat little rows of bread, all lined like good soliders.

THE FRODO BAGGINS TRILOGY, Alex Lee

Peking Duck: 北京填鸭. A Chinese dish of roast duck with crispy skin.

the dark meat of the duck. i see heatwaves rising from the warm meat of the duck. the thin slices are wafers of flesh. the white folds of the bread. they go together. according to feng shui principles of food—the dark yin enfolded in the white yang of the bread make for an especially good meal if you are hyper-active or suffering from heat illness. i open the lips of the bread and i can't help but think of what Becca said to me. so i tell my boyfriend, "if i wrote it, he wouldn't have died."

my boyfriend carefully puts down his chopsticks. "Baldwin was concerned with—s."

"i know what Baldwin was concerned with! if Jesse wanted to, to fuck his wife—Baldwin could have given Jesse a hard-on from the beginning. or, maybe made Jesse not want to fuck his wife, then that would have never happened."

"Dorothy," my boyfriend says.

"i mean if he's so concerned about his body and what people do with it then—you."

"Dorothy, you're not going to understand something if you keep rewriting it."

"oh, what do you know? all you want to do is read about things that disturb people."

i later apologized to him. he only acknowledged me stiffly, since he was washing the dishes. i watch him for a while. the tightness in his back. the way his hair falls down over his eyes. the way the muscles move under his skin. i can't stand it. but he'll get upset with me even more if i disturb his dish washing. so now, i go upstairs and sit at the laptop. i decide to stay here for a while, and lose myself in my blue screen, so much like the blue sky i never see when i am at work. well, what am i going to write about? as usual, instead, i go online and end up chatting with a friend. this time, i'm talking with Ophera_2000... who is my friend from college. she'll understand, i think.

she writes: well what would you do instead?

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Alex Lee

first off, let me say that i am a good girl. i don't bother with sex, and i don't think that people are so concerned with sex. i mean, my boyfriend and i have our wednesday and saturday nights. he always has a red terrycloth robe and those plastic squares he keeps in a drawer under the counter in the bathroom of the masterbedroom. and i don't think that how we relate to one another is all the same as Baldwin does. i mean, people live together in the way that they do... because that's the way people have been living. my dad and my mom, they lived together because that's what they needed to do, to raise a family. and i think we all got along fine together.

but something still bothers me from that day and age. my brother, the younger one, he landed in jail just a few years ago—he had raped and killed some girl he met at a club. i couldn't believe it. she had stringy brown hair and did not look well. her eyes were puffy and her nose all together too short. what was he thinking? we all went to the trial and watched him take the stand. he looked as he always did, my little brother. it makes me sad to see the details of his life revealed. after a while though, i had to leave the court. i couldn't stand to hear how the prosecution treated him.

they even had pictures of my home.

Home: noun. A beginning position, such as the top left corner of a character-based display, the left end of a line of text, cell A1 of a spreadsheet, or the top of a document.

they said he acted this way because no one in my family knew how to behave and be a good christian. or something like that. i can't believe James Baldwin would write something so tragic. and they blame it on his dad! i mean, dads always get a bad rap. my dad was a big man, a lumberjack. with a cap over his head and a big brown beard. my mom keeps a big picture of him over her mantel. i listened to their doctorization of my personal life in court and started to cry. i cover my face with five fingers. after i left, i couldn't go back. i've heard enough. what would people think of me?

she writes: Dorothy, what are you saying?

i mean, that i have to go to sleep.

██████████ THE END ██████████ Alex Lee

she writes: Dorothy, don't be upset. you can't change the world.

so the next day, Becca comes to talk with me. hello! she is concerned with the way i haven't been feeling well. she tells me that i haven't been taking good care of my body. that i don't look like i've been eating right. that my arms are skinny. look how skinny your arms are, she tells me. she pinches them and that hurts. she walks away and comes back with a big loaf of french bread. eat some of this she tells me. all i ever see you eat are those little tuna salads and those cups of coffee. no wonder you aren't well, you aren't getting enough blood sugar, not enough carbs, carbohydrates are what's needed to get you going. you can't loose touch of your body's needs, you need to feed your self, you need to feed your body. your body and you have this dialogue, she argues. it's this dialogue that keeps you going, so you can live on and be well and not be so skinny and looking so unhealthy.

so during lunch, i sit in my cubicle and munch on some thick french bread. it's too thick for me, it makes my mouth taste like cotton balls. i wolf this down with some coffee and wonder what Becca is getting at. my brother calls. he makes me cry.

i come home late again. the traffic is terrible. my boyfriend then makes this lovely Crab Vol-au-Vent which is rich crab chunks in some strange sauce, separately placed on a silver platter. i wait for my boyfriend to arrange the longish bits of crepe with spinach around the crab...in the meantime, i am tired. i lean on my elbows on my arms and gaze at my reflection in the silver platter. i can see the dark holes of my nostrils and the curves of my eyeballs and the hair as it sprouts from my forehead.

"rough day?" he asks me.

"not too bad," i say. "pushy traffic oh. my brother also called me."

"yeah?" he asks. "did you speak with him about that Baldwin story?"

"yeah. i think he's gay."

my boyfriend does not say anything for the longest time. he goes and gets a jar of

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Alex Lee

mayonnaise and sets it on the table. mayonnaise? it's whiteness is thick and quivers on the spoon. it clings to everything and yet you can cut it into squares. it's not water. it has form.

"eat," he says.

somewhere along the way, i think i got distracted. i mean, here i am—naked in a tub of hot water. downstairs floats sounds of dishes like streams of vapor that rise to different heights, like mountain ranges—before vanishing into a vapid ambience of heat. my hands steam the silver faucet. my reflection winks at me, a distorted pearl between pillows of opaqueness. my hands on my body, its flesh giving and terse, its elongated form visceral. what is it even? how could anyone break away from what it is, and destroy this?

Body: *n.n.* 5. A mass or collection of material that is distinct from other masses.





Dies

Vanessa Place

So here's where I'd ask you to pay close attention, Johann, we're getting to the part where everything changes and yet remains the same, why if I had a cross, this is where I'd stick it and if I had a lollipop, this is where I'd lick it, because the smoke grew thick as glass then and smelt of mandarins, it made you think of little girls and other imponderable circles, for here's where the red car pulls up and the conductor calls for twos and threes, so we got on, very orderly, duly leaving behind the others, there was a tense moment when one of them tried to pass himself off for a second, but the conductor, a man with a remarkably large head, bald as the inside of a mouth, wound his watchstem once and sent the boy back to the front and as I've got tooth and tongue, I spit and attest that once we got going, we never looked back, for the red bus was longer than one would expect, though quite comfortable, two men to a seat, two seats to a row, two rows to, well, I lost count of the number of rows, they multiplied so readily, though the seats were made of good green leather, stout as a boar's bladder, and buttoned along the sides with small brass tacks, one could flip down a mahogany armrest if one liked, or take a small satin pillow with the words, "Kann er was?" inscripted in rose, from underneath the seat in front and fold your arms across your chest and rest while stewards, small men with smaller hands, walk the aisle, dispensing packets of pomegranate seeds, plain, salted, or with a jam doughnut, though if you ask politely, you can exchange them for a slice of Saure Nieren and some new potatoes or a couple of cigarettes and little silver cups of buttermilk and beer, though one of the boys had a flask of Kirschewasser and was passing it around to the delight of the others, who clapped him on the back and called him Padre, while the bus bumped along, the road was straight until we turned, revealing an accordion-type pleat in the middle of the bus, which naturally divided the men into them and us, and a fight broke

out along these lines, whereupon it was decreed by our driver that there would be no more fraternizing between sections, though we could, if we wanted, sing in rounds, and so we did, the mass of us sang *Kumbyah* and *Frere Jacques* and *Komm, Süsßer Tod* and as we started on *Row Row Row Your Boat*, a small cadre splintered off and began shooting dice out the window, it was a fool's game, we agreed, for no one could see how they fell, but they persisted, declaring some winners and snatching up the script of others, as far as I could tell there was no pattern to it whatsoever, though the conductor seemed to have a hand in it, and made off with more than one wristwatch, and by this time the sun was sinking over the fields, which had become vineyard and rice paddies, all in one, and the sky was a beautiful purple-gray, portentous as a newborn's bruised eyelids, and some swore they saw *pommes de terre* and otherwise, they were suddenly that hungry, but as luck would have it, Cook brought out an enormous platter of bitty buns, tiny cinnamon biscuits smothered in orange icing, we fell upon them like first formers, and in fact spent the next few minutes delightfully naming things spotted out the window, I came up with *block and tackle* and Carl put his finger on *chocolate*, Winfred cornered *hope*, Black Jack got *horizon*, and the twins put their heads together and pronounced *stainless steel*, which everyone acknowledged could not be topped, and, moreover, it was dawning on us that we were reaching a destination, for Freiburger began putting on his pack, and he was normally the most oneirocritical of the men, so the rest of us followed suit, and as we did, some in the other section began praying, it started soft and scattershot, an *Ave* heaved heavenward here and there, a man murmuring Amen, then the gunners took up crying *Kyrie Eleison*, which put the second platoon into a frenzy of applause, *Sapiencia Dei Patris*, noted the Captain, *Potencia Dei Patris*, answered the Sargent-At-Arms, and they shook hands and saluted the conductor, who pulled the silk bell-rope and announced, "Agincourt," in such a comic way that we instantly felt better, and one of the men put on his iron cap so his longish black hair jutted out underneath, and he stood stock still and paraphrased completely:

Full of pete and made a' goog,
 We, a dowf an dowie brood,
 what cougher blocher caller meit,
 Full weary, eftir couth weep.
 Perfay, mon wo and wreuch spreits,
 Skabbit, sary, with glar gladderrit,
 hiddowus weirs, tramorts gorgeit.
 Our blaiknit hewmounds preif tha keek

Jakkis in sle an trowis siccarly;
Soch bonnie wichtis will na greet
crammasy tyres for bairns unbelly'd,
or douce lasses, maculait for-tiret.
Gawsy lads, bute for bale—
Makar is breif our takyn tale.

whereupon young Bobbie Burns tossed his hat, shouting, "A fig for those by law protected! Liberty's a glorious feast! Courts for cowards were erected, churches built to please the priest," and everyone took whatever coins they had on them and likewise threw them in the air, and whosoever got heads paled, thinking they were for sure doomed to the front, and, likewise and contrarily, them that landed tails got into a lather, figuring they're destined for the rear, but the Captain held up a telegram from HQ that countermanded this altogether, so that heads would be chiefly assigned, no, Johnny, not to the posterior, that would be pretty pat, don't you think, the old switcheroo of the sign, it's a prank hardly worth mentioning, the confusion absolute and thus easily abated, for if one had a mind to, one could simply ride the pendulum to the other side, such a temporary transposition's logistically and pointedly useless, being a practicum solely for the Manichaen world such as is favored by metaphor and the man on the street, no, the isolate fact of the matter, the gist of it, is that heads were sent west and tails headed east, save Freiburger, who'd had the Swiss luck to land sideways and so was not immediately shot on the spot but rather, and you'll slap me for this, kissed on both cheeks and sent home, where he did not perish by the pistol-toting hand of a once-loving woman or an incensed man, and similarly, where he did not grow grey surrounded by tow-headed tots with strawberry-kissed lips who called him Boompa and fished lemon sours and licorice bits from his coat pockets, but rather went on much as he had before, no more or no less, no better or no worse, nor, for that matter, at all, for Freiburger by nature lacked any tock by which to measure his tick, and thus by the time Freiburger did decease, he had become a local river, reasonably deep and with a steady current, good for Sunday boating and Saturday fishing, that was to claim only a few luckless lives now and again, but as luck would have it, I had a mind to head west, my understanding was our company was to guard or attack the donjon, which I hadn't noticed before, but the fog had rolled in and my vision was constricted, I heard the lark and the nightingale, much to my confusion, and the hearty tramping of a boatload of boots behind me, an orchestrate footfall such right left right left right right as has been heard from time immemorial, and we ourselves went on for some time in this same fashion, occasionally spying a sprig of heather or the spine of a thistle, which brought a

Vanessa Place

tear to many a good man's eye, and it was cooler than we'd expected, you nod, Jean, and you're a wise man at that, it's always cooler than one expects, especially around the back of the neck, but there's nothing to do but keep breathing, there you go, out in out in, never mind the mustard, just keep breathing out in out in out in, there's nothing to it, out in out in out in out in out out out in, slowly out and sweetly in, deeper now, don't be afraid, let your mother rest her hand on your chest in the crib and watch her smiling, out you go, it's a bit like falling in love, in and out, out and in, out out out sweetly out why such songs as we have that're worth singing should be sung in, and if I had legs, I'd throw my arms about your neck and kiss you on the cheek, you're a golden boy, John, you with your curls the color of seafoam and your heart warm as a cup of milk tea, you're a good man, Johnny, why if I had a pipe, I'd play it and if I had a tourniquet, I'd apply it, but there you go, you're breathing easy now, wondering about the dawn, don't deny it, Jose, you're peering at the sky and searching for some purple in the black, listening for the chirr of that goddamned lark, but I've got a good feeling about this, Jan, as if I were lying stretched out underneath a great green tree, popping clouds with my pupils, did I mention that Freiburger would gradually go blind, his eyes would turn the deepest blue and his smile summarily indiscriminate, I suspect he was happier thus, as, it may fairly be argued, who amongst us might not arguably be, relieved as he was of the buttery obligation to specify a response to his environs, smile he did and just kept breathing, that's the stuff, in out out in, out out out, he emptied so prettily, pretty as a pitcher, we would have wept but we had to keep breathing, so we beggared our breath and snuck sips of sorrow on the side, a few of the fellows took to fishing and some went swimming, we never heard from them again, but Freiburger welcomed the pennies me and a couple others pitched in, out in, he granted all our wishes as if he were a well and we approached the donjon with renewed purpose, like hounds to the hunt, we headed towards the tall unsightly towers and then I woke, but briefly, I woke and wondered where I was, and why, there were cockle shells under my shirt and the smell of baked walnuts tangled in my hair, I woke and wondered why and what had become of my friends and how were my enemies, I wept for wondering, my tears seasoned my temples and scoured my mind, and the man next to me was groaning and another down the line screamed, my father used to say hell's breaths are the screams of Man, and I think he was on to something, I screwed closed my eyes and wished I could cover them in copper, but luckily I fell back asleep, and my unit was almost at the gate now, behind which stood the donjon, the gate itself was forty feet tall and half as wide, the door a hard horror, oak, possibly, or ash, held with foot-long iron nails, thick as a man's hand, the wood beneath softly pocked with blisters and scabs, and huge rusted thorns

crowned the top so if it were to fall it would pierce through a line of men who could then be drawn up to wiggle on their spikes before being cast down again, Jesus, it was a fine fettle we'd come across, a muckle of a mess, for the door was our welcome: the walls it conjoined seemed to be composed of sheets of Anzeichen stone, shorn from some Northern hilltop where undoubtably grim Goths buried their better members in hillocks overlooking the sea, there was not a fissure to be seen in these walls, the blocks were packed as tightly as if done by the Parcae, and some of our hearts sank like cherrystones, while others cheered and tossed their caps, believing ours to be a defensive posture and seeing themselves tucked safe inside like beetles in a sarcophagus, and you're absolutely right, it was a Parian structure, you could tell by the satirical cut of the chisel, so the shadow winks exactly, and the truth of our plight lies roundly in one's ears and eyes, but we bolted our brows and made the best of a boney situation, we bayoneted our rifles and kissed our reflection in the shinging steel, those that thought themselves defenders sewed small sliver stars to their shoulders and began addressing one another as "Comrade," whilst those of us who believed we were on the offense turned our jackets inside out to show off the soft brown lining and grasped each other's arms, bleating "Brother," then I, who both sides called Blondie, and Four-Eyes, and Nespasien, I took my white handkerchief and affixed it to my bayonet like a flag and began waving it in unconditional surrender, I offered up a communal cup of *der Muckefuck* and a crust of unbaked bread, but poor Platzhirsch caught a round shot by a man in a red plaid cap and went down like a mouthful of marmite, and there was no turning back then, so we assumed our positions and fell to drawing lots amongst ourselves, the first group who got the short stick was marched in the middle and strafed, they pulled themselves into a unit and knelt, steadying their arms as if to shoot back, a large ragged one shouted an order and a portly one with cheeks inflamed by roseola passed it on, the men grimaced down the length of their weapons and were cut in half by machine guns on both sides, cut into quarters therefore, the boy in front of me died with a sigh, his head fell to one side and his cheek rested on another man's shoulder, and the other man, used to comforting his own children, put his arm around the lad and kissed the top of his head, there, he said, there, and then died, and one man dragged himself from the circle, blood was coursing down his legs and the bones of his hips were showing, an awful sheer white unpeeled from shanks of purple meat, still he inched himself along, quiet, towards us, trying to get back, his fingers dug at the dirt while his feet wiggled like fish at the bottom of a boat, he got close, I could see it in his eyes, he looked right at me, Johnny, right at me with a look I'll never forget, a look that was the full measure of the man, that put his heart on a platter heaped with hope

and salted strings of need, he wanted to live, John, wanted it more than ever a man wanted for anything, for it's not a thing, you see my meaning, it's the breath of the thing he was wanting, the aforementioned rhythm and rhyme, he looked at me full of my time and he wanted, and his desire was needle-pure and so it pierced me, it was my first wound, and the man looked at me and saw me still standing, still prevaricating, still searching for meaning, still chewing on the bit of gristle I call purpose, still, in short, consumed with facts and riddled with argument, and he groaned then, and coughed, and died.





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